

**Lara, Jaime.**

***Birdman of Assisi: Art and the Apocalyptic in the Colonial Andes.***

Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies / Bilingual Press Editorial Bilingüe, 2016. Pp. xiii, 353 + 220 colour ill., 2 maps. ISBN 978-0-8669-8529-1 (hardcover) US\$79.95.

Several decades ago Luis Weckmann noted how Latin America—in both the past and the present—has been profoundly shaped by medieval legacies. The history of Saint Francis in the region clearly confirms this observation, but nothing transported across the Atlantic ever remains the same. In *Birdman of Assisi* Jaime Lara provides a tour de force of the iconography of the Poverello in the colonial Andes, illuminating processes of cultural transfer in the Spanish world through an analysis of one of the most cherished figures of the Middle Ages. To follow the reception of the Italian saint in Peru, he investigates an array of media but centres on one important transformation in vice-regal art: when the angelic Saint Francis of Europe acquired wings in America, he became more birdlike and apocalyptic in both the colonial imagination and in visual forms.

To account for these iconographic shifts, Lara rightly argues that one needs to consider traditions of flying creatures and eschatological thinking in both European and Andean cultures, together with their multifaceted intersection in Spanish America.

The *Birdman of Assisi* is divided into two general parts, the first of which lays the necessary groundwork for the entire study. In two chapters Lara reviews not only the life of Saint Francis but the literary and visual images of the Poverello during the late medieval and early modern periods. Franciscans associated their founder with birds and angels and transformed him into an eschatological figure, interpreting him as both an eagle and the Angel of the Sixth Seal from the book of Revelation in the New Testament. But they also associated the Italian saint with the prophecies of the twelfth-century theologian Joachim of Fiore, who, according to Lara, helped paved the way for the acceptance of a flying Saint Francis in Peru.

Lara ventures into the heart of his study in the second part, turning his attention to the reception of the Poverello in the Andes. His analysis is guided by new findings in archaeology and ethnohistory, which enriches his fascinating overview of flying humans, spirit birds, and other avian deities in pre-Hispanic legends, myths, and the visual arts. Aerial creatures were central to the prophetic practices of Andeans, be it a winged messenger delivering an oracle or a shaman transforming himself into an eagle to interpret a dream. The Incas built upon these avian traditions by incorporating ornithological myths and feathers into their modes of conquest and other forms of amusement. So when the Spaniards arrived preaching about angels and birds as biblical heralds, Andeans had no trouble incorporating them, along with the Christian saints, into their larger religious imaginary. Andeans were less dogmatic and not entirely antagonistic to new religions, which is why Lara argues that Saint Francis acted as a “cultural bridge” (59) and, as a result, was welcomed not as a stranger but as a bird, birdman, and shaman within their own cultural framework.

In chapters 5 and 6 Lara leaves behind the sixteenth-century theatre of conquest and evangelization for the mid-colonial period, a time of uncertainty in the Andes as a result of several earthquakes and other natural disasters. These types of violent episodes encouraged apocalyptic thinking, which for Lara helps to explain the rise of both apocalyptic and angelic art in the seventeenth century. It is also within this context that he locates the origins of

the winged Saint Francis as Andeans looked to the visual arts as a therapeutic and communal response to post-traumatic stress. Native artists, in particular, disseminated images of a flying Poverello, seeing him as a heavenly messenger, warrior archangel, and as a second Christ. Lara also suggests that Saint Francis became an angelic and winged defender in art as a result of conflicts between the Dominicans and Franciscans, specifically over competing visions of the Immaculate Conception.

Lara ends his study in the eighteenth century by following further changes to the iconography of Saint Francis as a result of the Bourbon reforms and increasing native rebellions. During this time, images of a flying Saint Francis began to appear in the visual arts of other parts of Latin America, and the peaceful Poverello was transformed into a militant figure capable of using violence to conquer his enemies. The mendicants turned to visual mediums to oppose royal policies, specifically the secularization of their Indian *doctrinas*, and indigenous rebels, like Tupac Amaru II, used icons as a form of propaganda to further their causes. Lara specifically traces an indigenous revival of images of birdmen with militaristic connotations, suggesting that a flying and sword-carrying Saint Francis may have influenced rebels and justified their acts of righteous violence. By way of conclusion, he briefly traces the apocalyptic Poverello and other gun-holding angels in Peru today, reminding his reader that the artistic images in his study are not “museum pieces or the outdated curiosities of the Baroque era” (254).

*Birdman of Assisi* is a wonderfully illustrated text of 219 figures that guides the reader through a complex study of transatlantic transfer by way of several contributory narratives that flow into one larger argumentative stream. This complexity is partly rooted in Lara’s insistence on employing viewer response and reception theory, which means indigenous peoples are not “passive receivers” in his account of colonial art. Readers will appreciate the contextual scaffolding he employs to achieve this end, both for the medieval period and, especially, for the colonial Andes. *Birdman of Assisi* will be of interest to art historians and others who research cultural change and transformation in the early modern Spanish world.

JASON DYCK

University of Toronto