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On “The insertion of the new into the old” by Cesare Brandi in a Mexican monument

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Translation by Valerie Magar

Abstract

Based on the case of the conversion of the Roman Pantheon in the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres, referred to in the essay “The insertion of the new into the old” by Cesare Brandi, this brief essay presents some elements linked to the conversion of the Basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe in Expiatory Temple to Christ the King, and the proposal of insertion of a Monumental Eucharistic Manifestator.

Keywords: *Insertion, conversion, historical conscience of a monument.*

In the essay “The insertion of the new into the old”, Cesare Brandi illustrates a part of his reflection with a very interesting case: the Pantheon, which was built in Rome by the emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century. The uniqueness of this monument is that its dome was an innovative constructive solution and the composition of the building complex, represented a successful combination of spaces and architectural beauty. It was also the first classic building transformed into a church in 608, that is, the ancient temple “dedicated to all the gods of Rome”, became the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres, dedicated to the Christian martyrs of persecution. And even more, the Pantheon was considered by Gian Lorenzo Bernini “as the most perfect of the classical monuments” (Brandi, 2019: 61), so much so, that he was inspired to design the church of Santa María Assunta in Ariccia.

Despite Bernini’s admiration for this building, in the mid-17th century, he added two bell towers on the sides of the pediment. This was an incomprehensible decision, which popular opinion decried, calling the bell towers “donkey ears”.

Thus Brandi criticized this act: “[Bernini] ... reinvented the Pantheon in baroque spatiality, unraveled it plastically in those spatial directives that only his imagination saw implied, where they were not at all implicit” (Brandi, 2019: 61). However, he explained it in this manner:

Bernini had not yet accept considering the Pantheon as a monument, so to speak “behind closed doors”, which should only be preserved. From the 7th century, when it became Santa Maria ad Martyres, preserving the Pantheon meant activating it or reinserting it into the religious consciousness of the time and, only then, could it be preserved, but not preserved as an immutable idol, because the historical consciousness of the monument as intangible [untouchable] testimony had not yet been developed (Brandi, 2019: 61).



THE ROMAN PANTHEON. *Image: Public domain.*



CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA AD MARTYRES WITH BELLTOWERS, ca. 1760. *Image: Public domain.*

In the last decade of the 19th century, the two belfries added a century and a half earlier were eliminated, which motivated Brandi to make this comment: "(...) if we eliminate the ears of the Pantheon, we modify forever the historical text of a work, including if this is to return to the original lesson."

And then it is worth asking when does the historical awareness of the monument emerge as an untouchable witness?

In fact, the historical consideration of the monument itself and for itself is a fairly recent conquest, and it is a conquest due to the great historicism of the 19th century. At the very moment when the vital impulse of Renaissance art was extinguished in the Neoclassical morgue, the attitude of looking at the past arose, no longer as a source of inspiration, but as a science (Brandi, 2019: 61).

This historical awareness of the monument, once acquired in our civilization, can no longer be invalidated. Precisely because it is not a transitory appreciation, but a form of scientific approach to consciousness towards the monument (Brandi, 2019: 61).

In this way, the new insertions will only be possible, as long as they are "necessary for the structural stability of the work or for a continuity in the legibility of the figurative text" (Brandi, 2019: 61).

The Basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe

In light of Brandi's reflections on the insertion of the new in the old, I propose to revise an insertion project in the Ancient Basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe, which changed its dedication to become the Expiatory Temple of Christ the King.

The history of the Ancient Basilica of Guadalupe is extremely rich, but for the purposes of this text, I will concentrate on the directly relevant data. It was the fourth temple to house the sacred image of Santa María de Guadalupe. Its construction was completed in 1709 at a short distance from where, according to the account of Antonio Valeriano in the so-called *Nican mopohua*, the apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe took place. Unlike the three previous chapels, the Sanctuary of Guadalupe is a monumental building whose construction obeyed the importance that its cult had acquired both for Mexican Catholics and for the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Although the property remained without major changes until the second decade of the 20th century, a period in which a new section was built to the north (in order to expand the site for the celebrations of the Fourth Centenary of the Apparitions), the layout of the interior and the many objects that the temple contains were continually changing. This was always due to two purposes: the first one, to enrich it, and the second one, above all, to create works of art directly related to the *Marofanía* (apparitions of Saint Mary of Guadalupe) and the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Among the latter, I would like to highlight the marble altar made expressly to frame the image of Santa María de Guadalupe, flanked by the sculptures of Juan Diego (now San Juan Diego), the Indian bearer of the venerated image and Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the bishop who witnessed one of the apparitions. In the upper part of the altar, one can see the angels carrying the crown of the Virgin, which was a modification imposed on the image in 1895.



ALTAR OF THE IMAGE OF SAINT MARIA OF GUADALUPE.

Image: Sergio Alemán Escamilla.

Other very significant objects are composed by six large-format paintings that cover the east and west panels of the interior of the temple —“Ships clad in history” as Jaime Cuadriello calls them. They represent a series of themes associated with the sacred image. “The conversion of the Indians”, protected by the image of our Lady of Guadalupe. “The first miracle” of the Virgin of Guadalupe “The information of 1666”, where the native Indians of Cuauhtitlán exposed, in front of Antonio de Gama and three judges, the oral testimony about Juan Diego and the Guadalupean event (Cuadriello, 2003: 171). “The oath of the stewards” of the town council before the archbishop and viceroy, again with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe “presiding” the scene. “The pontifical proclamation of the stewardship”, when the Procurator Juan Francisco López presented before Pope Benedict XIV the copy of the Guadalupean image, painted by Miguel Cabrera, and the pontiff exclaimed “Non fecit taliter omni nationi”, a sentence which has remained attached to this sacred image. And finally, “The delivery of the pontificate’s brief”, through which Pope Leo XIII authorized to crown in his name the image of Saint Maria of Guadalupe.



PAINTING OF "THE CONVERSION
OF THE INDIANS" BY FELIPE S.
GUTIÉRREZ, 1894.

Image: Roberto Ramírez Vega.



PAINTING OF "THE FIRST MIRACLE"
BY GONZALO CARRASCO, 1895.

Image: Roberto Ramírez Vega.

There are other numerous elements in the basilica, including a Venetian mosaic decorating the walls in the central dome, where there are a series of representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe presiding the evangelization process in, with the Basilica located at her feet, and scenes of angels flying above Mexican landscapes.



MOSAIC OF THE MAIN DOME.
Image: ©Antonio Pompa y Pompa (1938). Álbum del IV Centenario Guadalupeño, Editorial Cultura México.

In short, it was the temple built to Santa Maria de Guadalupe, but also one that gradually incorporated important artistic works which made direct allusion to her.

But here comes into play a factor that jeopardizes the structural stability of the monument. The Sanctuary of Guadalupe was built on the shores of what was the Lake of Guadalupe in 1709. The Convent of the Capuchin Poor Clares, built a few meters from the eastern side of the then Collegiate Church of Guadalupe, was completed in 1797. Since then, the combination of the weight of the convent and the muddy subsoil of the area have affected the Basilica, causing constant cracks in its walls and vaults and a differential subsidence of its foundations, which reached 3.80 meters on the southern side.

Faced with this serious situation, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities made the decision to build a new basilica for the increasing number of worshippers, and to stop the collapse of the ancient building, through the use of stakes. In 1976, the new Basilica was inaugurated and the sacred image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was transferred to it. The ancient Basilica closed and soon after work began to stop its collapse, in what was a slow process to revert the sinking. In 2000, the ancient Basilica was reopened to the users, but with a new dedication, now the Expiatory Temple for Christ the King, destined to prayer.

Following this brief explanation to the background situation, I would like to state the problem, and I will go back to the example of the Roman Pantheon.

1. Can a temple created to worship the Roman gods adapt to a different cult, such as the Christian? Following Brandi's proposition, in the sense that "From the 7th century, when it became Santa Maria ad Martyres, preserving the Pantheon meant to activate it or reinsert it into the religious conscience of the time.."; this case exemplifies it clearly. There seems to be no contradiction in it; even more, by dedicating it to the martyrs that the Roman persecution perpetrated against the Christians, it would seem to symbolize the triumph of the Christian faith over paganism.

Now, as for the interior architectural design of the rotunda, the niches destined for the sculptures of the Roman gods were simply occupied by the images of Christian devotion, without this implying a forced situation.

Paradoxically, the only change made to this monument that resulted in a forced architectural insertion, an intrusion, was the erection of the bell towers on the pediment, probably with the intention of giving it a characteristic component of the Catholic temples since the Romanic period. But Brandi did not disapprove of this insertion "because the historical awareness of the monument as intangible [untouchable] testimony had not yet been developed" (Brandi, 2019: 61).

2. Convinced that the case of the Ancient Basilica of Santa Maria de Guadalupe converted into Temple Expiatorium of Christ the King, which I have brought to here, is not similar to the one of the Roman Pantheon turned into the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres, I want to contrast between these two examples some of the above-mentioned aspects.

Dedication

The change of dedication from one saint patron to another, in a Catholic temple, should not imply any difficulty, except regarding the devotion of the parishioners and the uses and customs derived from it. But this is one aspect that I will allow myself to ignore.

The issue I want to put on the table is the following. Can a temple built expressly for the veneration of an image and whose second historicity is consubstantial with that devotion, change its name because the venerated image has been destined for a new temple?

From the point of view of the episcopal prelatry, there seems to be no doubt. The problem for "the historical consciousness of the monument" is that we are left with a temple that, from its own architectural creation to its artistic works, exterior and interior that have historically shaped it, alludes to an image that is no longer there; it alludes to an empty space.

Insertion

Precisely, to materialize the invocation of Expiatory Temple of Christ the King, and fill that void, there was a proposal to replace the altar of the image of Santa Maria de Guadalupe — one of the most allusive works to this devotion—, by a Monumental Eucharistic Manifestator, designed by Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora, the most creative architect and artist of contemporary religious works in Mexico. In the justification, there is the following statement:

The considerations taken to determine the suitability of a "Monumental Eucharistic Manifestator" are of a liturgical and functional order, since they highlight the centrality of Jesus the Eucharist, to whom the Expiatory Temple to Christ the King is now dedicated (Rivera, 2009: 5).

While it is true that the “Monumental Eucharistic Manifestator” is a 21st century design, it is in total harmony with that of the “Baldachin of 1895”, respecting the liturgical and artistic norms and in accordance with the norms of conservation and restoration of historical monuments (Rivera, 2009: 6).



DESIGN OF THE MONUMENTAL
EUCCHARISTIC MANIFESTATOR, BY
FRIAR GABRIEL CHÁVEZ
DE LA MORA.

Digitalization: Sergio Alemán Escamilla.

However, this proposal obviated the presence of all the other artistic works integrated to the monument. After being expressive works of the cult to the *Mariofanía* and of the history of the cult to the Virgin of Guadalupe, they were placed on the foreground, to be a scene without relation with the represented work. After being a temple that, in itself and through the works that composed it, as an eloquent book on the history of religion in Mexico, it has now become a silent temple of prayer.

The civil authorities responsible for cultural heritage did not approve the project of the Monumental Eucharistic Manifestator, and the solution of endowing it to the Expiatory Temple of Christ the King with an image alluding to this new dedication, was solved by placing a painting representing Christ on the altar of Saint María of Guadalupe, designed by friar Gabriel Chávez de la Mora.



THE ALTAR OF SAINT MARY OF GUADALUPE WITH THE PAINTING REPRESENTING CHRIST, DESIGNED BY FRIAR GABRIEL CHÁVEZ DE LA MORA. Image: Roberto Ramírez Vega.

Final considerations

In my opinion, the monument of the ancient Basilica of Guadalupe was not resolved from the conservation point of view. There was no willingness to document or to devise creative proposals for solutions, on part of the ecclesiastical authorities or on those responsible for cultural heritage, which would be at the level of the religious, historical and aesthetic importance of such a singular monument.

In 2017, the priest responsible for the Expiatory Temple, placed an image found in the common market representing Saint Mary of Guadalupe, on one side and below the presbytery. Visitors to the ancient Basilica line up to be photographed next to that image.

I finish with the final paragraph of Brandi's essay:

Have new monuments made, but allow the ancient ones to be preserved as the authentic historical tradition passed them on to us: and this is not the imperative of the conservators, but the imperative that is respectful both of the autonomy of our time and of the historical tradition to which we owe who we are (Brandi, 2019: 63).

*

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