

Baroque fusion and cultural adaptation in the Jesuit missions of Bolivia: compositional guidelines and territorial permanence

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Abstract

During the 17th century, the Jesuits focused their mission on evangelizing frontier territories that had not yet been Christianized. Their foundations were primarily based on an ideology that sought to convert indigenous peoples, while also promoting the protection of their culture. The case of Bolivia is evidenced by six missions located in the eastern region bordering Brazil, declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, which present a fusion of the compositional principles of the Baroque developed in Europe, but mimicked with features of indigenous culture. This syncretism is recognized as mestizo Baroque. The objective of this study was to identify the religious and compositional guidelines that shaped the earliest constructions at urban, architectural, and aesthetic scales, and to evaluate their persistence through the appropriations and interpretations made by local inhabitants. To achieve this, the historical method was first employed to understand the initial intentions behind this architecture, followed by the descriptive method to identify the elements that reflect all or part of its Baroque heritage. The study determined that this Baroque fusion is present not only in the original mission towns but also in newer communities that replicate these characteristics on a smaller scale.

Keywords: baroque, mestizaje, society of jesus, jesuit missions, adaptations

INTRODUCTION

The Baroque, as an artistic movement, began in Italy in the late 16th century and later spread to Spain and, later still, to Latin America. For Armella, this style represents a new way of seeing the world and understanding God, where earthly activity is more active and free. The spread of Baroque in the Americas occurred through three main channels: royalty, the bourgeoisie, and religious orders. Among these, the Society of Jesus played a decisive role, leaving a significant mark on the architectural sphere. Its construction projects became a fundamental tool for evangelization, drawing on the expressive resources of Baroque aesthetics (Gordillo Condori, 2015). This style managed to penetrate even the most remote areas of the continent, where important religious monuments that embody this formal language are still preserved. The Baroque presence also extended to painting, sculpture, and even other forms of expression such as music, dance, and crafts, whose legacy remains in various Latin American countries. When we speak of Baroque as an artistic category, we understand it as a unique way of understanding life; therefore, it encompasses all activities: political, scientific, social, lifestyle, and religious influences (Parejas Moreno, 2011).

For the Jesuits, the more complex the evangelizing work was, the more meritorious it became in the eyes of God. They believed they had to confront great hardships in their mission, especially when the territories they chose had not been previously indoctrinated by other religious orders and were located in border regions. For Sánchez, territorial expansion was a way of spreading global awareness, driven by the Catholic worldview of the Ignatian order. “Totus mundo fil nostra habitatio (the whole world becomes our home)” (Sánchez Medrano). The method of evangelization was through the well-known reductions or missions, which, according to Camacho, were “undertakings by the Church

to expand the frontiers of Catholicism, especially in non-believing regions and where there were no natural evangelizers” (Camacho Cardona, 2017). Under this condition, the indigenous people were gathered together and assigned common lands (Ortega Noriega et al., 2010) so that they could abandon their nomadic lifestyle and be indoctrinated by staying in one place.

Baroque in Spanish America was highly decorative, applying a more visible language in ornamentation, while construction systems merged, generating a fusion that incorporated cultural aspects of the local population. Hence, the Baroque style used in the Jesuit missions of Bolivia takes on a different connotation, where syncretism becomes evident in the monumentality of its religious buildings, decorated with indigenous motifs inspired by the flora and fauna. In this way, the Jesuit missionary Baroque constitutes for Moreno-Suárez a meeting place for two cultures, revaluing the space as a place of exchange between the public space and the Baroque man, that is, moving from the sacred to the earthly (Parejas Moreno & Suárez Salas, 2007).

In this context, evangelization reached the Chiquitanía region, which is geographically located in the Amazon region of Bolivia, on the border with Brazil. Its mission began at the end of the 17th century, just as the Baroque period was coming to an end in Europe. The Jesuits founded the first reduction in this region on August 31, 1691, under the patronage of San Francisco Xavier, followed by San Rafael, San José, San Juan Bautista, San Ignacio de Zamucos, Concepción, San Miguel, San Ignacio, Santiago, Santa Ana, and Santo Corazón, remaining in the region for sixty-six years-(Moreno). During this time, the number of Chiquito speakers fell by around 24,000, but so did other indigenous peoples belonging to groups classified in other linguistic families, such as Zamuca, Guaraní, Chapacura, Otuqui, and Arawak (Martínez, 2015). The strategy of the missionary project was shaped by Jesuit ethics and Baroque aesthetics. Due to its openness to creativity and absence of rules, the Baroque acquired different characteristics in both Europe and America, depending on climatic conditions, available materials, local traditions, and existing labor (Arranz, 2021).

For the Jesuits, it was a matter of using signs and symbols to convey a catechetical reality that would guarantee the conversion of the indigenous peoples. It was a question of evangelizing the peoples, “especially those who had not undergone the experience of conquest and subjection to the encomienda, that is, the Indians who lived in the jungles of the Orinoco, the Amazon, and Paraguay”(Echeverría, p. 72).

Studies on missions have been approached from various perspectives. Virgilio Suárez and Alfredo Moreno have conducted research focusing on historical, cultural, and architectural aspects (Parejas Moreno & Suárez Salas, 2007), while Lasso Varela (2010) documents the dynamics of life in the missionary context. A relevant contribution comes from Kühne (2022), who interprets the relationship between architecture, symbolism, and meaning in missionary churches. For his part, the analyses of Aspe Armella (2010) and Parejas Moreno (2011) delve into the Baroque period, although it is necessary to link these studies to the Baroque philosophical principles specific to each community and the way in which they have survived over time. In this sense, the objective of this work is to articulate and examine these Baroque patterns in urban planning and original architecture to determine their permanence through the reinterpretations and appropriations made by the inhabitants of the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jesuit Baroque in America

The art developed in America during the 17th and 18th centuries was shaped by three factors: firstly, a conservative inertia that sought to literally transfer from the metropolis

that which was considered its own and universal; secondly, an equally protective attitude on the part of smaller cultures, forced to seek autonomous forms of expression in the gaps left by the dominant culture; and finally, the incorporation of external innovations, inherent in the sociocultural dynamics of colonial spaces. The result fully reflects New Spain society, of which it is a refined manifestation, since it encompasses both the conservative force characteristic of the colonial order and the impulse for change inherent in any society, both linked to the specific historical process of New Spain, where the study of art becomes a key element (Fabelo Corzo & Torrija Aguilar, 2015). Latin American Baroque is fundamentally a viceregal art form that, in most cases, was produced by the creative genius of Creole artists. But these artists were not isolated; art is the result of that “fracture” between the European and indigenous worldviews (Fabelo Corzo & Torrija Aguilar, 2015).

Although the European Baroque was an art form that expressed the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, some even define it as Jesuit art because of its inherent connections to Martin Luther (Fabelo Corzo & Torrija Aguilar, 2015). In America, it is defined not only as an architectural and artistic style, but also as a cultural system that combines symbols from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Counter-Reformation with those from the pre-Hispanic era and other distant cultures (Arriarán Cuéllar, 2016). The Baroque functioned as a system that absorbed contradictions and rules, allowing Spanish hegemony to cross borders (Molina, 2016).

From its inception, the Society of Jesus conceived its Christian Republic project as a utopian model, distinct from the republics of the Old World (Del Rey Fajardo, 2001). To realize this ideal, the Jesuits established processes of dialogue and direct interaction with the communities they sought to evangelize, implementing the reduction or mission method. This system allowed them to concentrate diverse ethnic groups in the same settlement, forming a new indoctrinated population center, which was assigned the name of a saint. The ultimate expression of this order was evident in the construction of the church, designed to stand out from other buildings. This temple was to be a visual space laden with Christian symbolism, persuasive enough to replace the spiritual iconography linked to beliefs in pre-Hispanic divinities (Robles Mendoza, 2017).

Architecture inherits the features of the Renaissance, modifying its proportions, transforming space into a *theatrum sacrum* in which painting and sculpture are elements of representation, as for Báez (2011):

One of the most characteristic features of Baroque architecture is its taste for curves; shapes become undulating, walls and entablatures are warped and dynamized, pediments are split and resolved in curves and counter-curves until classical norms and proportions disappear completely. This dynamism contributes to the configuration of a new concept of space, which is another characteristic feature of the Baroque: the interdependence of the building's units in a coherent whole, endowed with internal and external unity (p. 3).

For Echeverría (2013), baroque has several meanings: ornamental, extravagant, ritualistic, or ceremonial, which can display decorative elements with spirals or reverberations, clashes of opposites and paradoxes, exaggerations and sensationalism, repetitions and variations, with this decoration inspired by classical elements from the Renaissance. Whereas for (Parra, 2016), “The shapes reverberate when their constructions often feature windows within windows, and there are oval, spherical, square, arched, and rectangular shapes in the fragment of the same facade.” (p. 15).

The geographical location influenced both the natural and cultural conditions; this is why this naturalness is another characteristic of the Baroque (Arranz, 2021). Each place developed a local identity because European ideology and practices were linked to the cultural interpretations and meanings of indigenous peoples (Valdés-Garcés & Lugo-Plata, 2021). All of this was harmoniously combined with lighting effects, using skylights to create chiaroscuro effects inside. Although Solomonic columns were highly prized, they were mainly used as decorative elements in tabernacles, altarpieces, portals, and church facades, as well as in chapels and bell towers, but rarely as structural elements (Kühne, 2011).

The Baroque is stylistically complex and sometimes contradictory. Its purpose was to evoke emotional states, stimulated by the senses, ultimately leading to a climax of intense and moving drama. The qualities most frequently associated with the Baroque are grandeur, sensual richness, drama, vitality, movement, tension, emotional exuberance, and a tendency to blur the boundaries between the art forms: architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, and music (Del Pilar López & García, 2016).

The Baroque period adopted two types of temples, centralized and longitudinal, since the temple is a center and a path where the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic religion are manifested. It should be borne in mind that the fundamental feature of American society was religious sentiment, essentially Christian in nature. This society had emphasized its religious vocation since the 16th century. A century later, with the arrival of the Baroque period, the Christianization of the Indians was largely complete. Together with the Creoles and mestizos, they participated fully in the liturgy and devotions of Catholic life, becoming integrated into brotherhoods that followed Spanish models, especially those of Seville (Fabelo Corzo & Torrija Aguilar, 2015).

Colonial Mestizaje and Transculturation

For Echeverría (2013), the strategy of cultural fusion is undoubtedly baroque, perfectly matching the characteristic behavior of the baroque ethos of European modernity and the baroque attitude of the post-Renaissance period toward the classical canons of Western art. The expression of “no,” of negation or opposition to the will of the other, must follow a convoluted path; it must be constructed indirectly and by inversion (p. 56).

Whereas for Pizarro Gómez (2003), this style is known as mestizo due to the incorporation of iconographic elements ranging from indigenous to a mixture of European structures. Art historiography has identified Hispanic American art using various terms - such as Hispanic-Indigenous, Iberian-Andean, Creole, Hispanic-Aboriginal, or mestizo—to indicate its relationship with European stylistic models. However, cultural mestizaje, beyond physical or organicist interpretations, can only be properly understood from a semiotic perspective, as it is an essentially baroque condition (Echeverría, 2013; Bailey, 2010). It is, therefore, a European-Andean cultural mix, but also evidence of a process of adaptation, negotiation, and reinvention of identity in different contexts; in other words, it does not have a rigid identity (Molina, 2016).

Artistic fusion is linked to an indigenous decoloniality, nourished by the persistence of indigenous myths, whose symbolic efficacy depended less on the materiality of idols, altars, pyramids, or cities—many of which were destroyed—than on their existential and historical content. This meaning was preserved and transmitted by individuals in transit through collective relationships, pedagogical territories, and spaces of belonging, which enabled the liberation of the imagination and previously repressed subjectivities. The Baroque in Latin

America, also understood as an aesthetic product of miscegenation, requires an ontological exercise around being and duration, as well as the emergence of the selective and mimetic capacity of indigenous cultures as a survival strategy (Costa et al., 2022). Indigenous religious syncretism is an expression of the Baroque game, through which Christian rites are reinterpreted as a strategy for cultural survival, giving rise to a mestizo drama of a Baroque nature in the colonial context (Parra, 2016).

For Suárez-Salas (2011), it goes much further and speaks of a missionary Baroque, referring to what happened in Bolivia, since in this place the Baroque simultaneously addresses the concepts of ritual, identity, and belonging, which, although centered on ritual, is structured around these principles. That is why the learning of practices and trades was largely done by imitation; the way of learning was not through rules or explanations, but by the master doing it first and the apprentice imitating him (Lasso Varela, 2010). Whereas for Parra, all forms of cultural mixing involve the forced and violent integration of one code of civilization into another dominant one (Parra, 2016).

From the perspective of transculturation, the Baroque style should be understood as the result of successive processes of cultural transfer, adaptation, and reinterpretation, in which European architectural forms and languages—already previously transculturated—are reinterpreted by local agents, giving rise to hybrid expressions that do not reproduce original models, but rather generate new cultural syntheses (Sheren, 2011). In the approach of New World Baroque, Neobaroque, Brut Baroque, transculturation is understood as the process by which European Baroque, when introduced to the Americas, is appropriated, altered, and ultimately subverted by indigenous, African, and Creole cultures, giving rise to hybrid aesthetic forms that transform a colonial tool into a postcolonial language of resistance, excess, and identity reconfiguration (Zamora, 2009).

In this sense, mestizo Baroque emerges as a situated transcultural expression, shaped by the local reinterpretation of previously hybrid architectural languages and by the appropriation and critical re-signification of Baroque as a colonial form. Far from reproducing European models, this missionary Baroque functions as a socio-spatial system in which architecture, ritual, and ornamentation articulate transfer, adaptation, and symbolic subversion, establishing an identity language capable of mediating between catechesis, territory, and cultural memory.

The Baroque in the Jesuit missions of Bolivia

The Jesuits' interest in developing a long-term sustainable social project among an indigenous population that they believed needed to be controlled to achieve salvation “could not find a better spatial model to implement than the Baroque” (Ortiz, 2008, p. 237). Symbolic representations of death in the Baroque style include mirrors, relics, and tombstones. These are symbols of Western Christianity, hence the presence and abundance of crosses not only in the square but also along the roads leading up to a procession (Arriarán Cuéllar, 2016).

The processions, accompanied by music and prayer, were religious events that dominated and regulated the route along the main missionary axis stretching from the Chapel of Bethany to the Temple, as seen in the image of Jerusalem. This led to the sanctification of public space as a way of consolidating this religion and corporate control (Monteros Cueva, 2015).

For Suarez, the city plan represented an alternative way of organizing territory and urban space, and it stands as one of the earliest and most distinctive examples of American Baroque urbanism (Suárez-Salas, 2011). It is consolidated as the setting for religious rituals, public events, festivities, and theatrical processions (Molina, 2016).

The urban layout was organized around the central plaza. Next to it were the town center, the indigenous council, and the chiefs' homes. Behind them were the indigenous dwellings. Growth occurred except toward the town center, where there were productive vegetable gardens and fruit trees (Querejazu, 1995). Baroque urban planning organized space as a ritual setting oriented toward the sacred. Squares, temples, and schools formed the backdrop for social, religious, and festive life. Architecture, gardens, and landscapes expressed symbolic dominance, and a Baroque culture was integrated into everyday life.

The European Jesuits who arrived in this region of Chiquitanía were mainly German and Italian, who imbued these buildings with their knowledge of carpentry, architecture, and urban planning, adapting architectural models with basilica floor plans, balanced facades, and classical orders to the abundant wood available in the region (Escobar, 2016). Martín Smith, a Swiss national, was one of the central figures in the material and symbolic consolidation of the Jesuit missions in Chiquitos, designing the churches of San Javier, Concepción, San Miguel de Velasco, and San Ignacio de Velasco, characterized by their mestizo Baroque style.

The temples of Chiquitos show how the Baroque operated as a flexible language, allowing for hybrid indigenous identities. Their wooden architecture and mestizo iconography demonstrate cultural appropriation and reveal the Jesuit mission as a space for negotiation, evangelization, and community cohesion (Escobar, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed is exploratory in nature, as it sought to gain an approximate understanding of the Baroque style that emerged in the Americas from a historical perspective, drawing on primary sources as well as existing scholarly literature. This phase involved selecting architectural, urban, and aesthetic data that would inform the next stage of the study.

In contrast, the descriptive method guided the second phase, which consisted of outlining the characteristics of the Chiquitos region. These descriptions then served as the foundation for the subsequent comparative phase.

The analogical methodology allowed us to compare Baroque parameters and philosophy with what exists in each urban architectural complex in order to determine those Baroque constants as well as the interpretations, modifications, or adaptations that they will present in these missions. This comparative phase was fundamental to better understand the relationship between the European Baroque style and its adaptation to the Chiquitano Baroque mestizo and to determine the forms of adaptation and mestizaje in the Chiquitanía.

Three parameters were defined for a comprehensive analysis covering architectural, urban, and aesthetic aspects, starting from the origins of the European Baroque.

Findings and Analysis

Baroque in the field of religious architecture

The temples are the main buildings in the reduction, both in terms of height and ornamentation, as they were intended to represent the grandeur of a new religion that the reduced were to embrace. The presence of the religious complex was such that the visuals had to focus on this building; no other building could be taller. The size of the squares varied depending on how many the mission was to have (Tonelli Justiniano, 2006). Each church became an image of the Temple of Jerusalem, both the historical Temple of the Bible and the imaginary heavenly Jerusalem (Kühne, 2011).

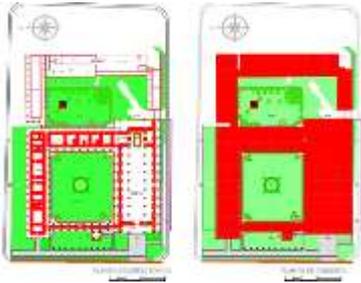
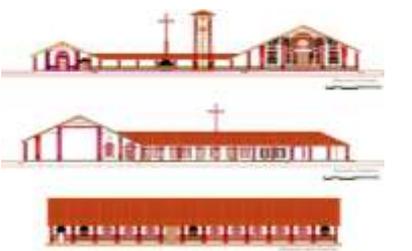
Externally, they also feature a bell tower that does not have a defined orientation; it can be freestanding or attached, but it does serve as an urban landmark within each town (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Missions of Concepción, Santa Ana, San Xavier, San José, San Rafael, and San Miguel (source: researcher’s documentation, 2019).

The body of the church ranged from 1,100 to 1,600 square meters, with a capacity of approximately 2,200 to 3,200 people (Lasso Varela, 2010). Since it represented “God's house and the gate of heaven,” the indigenous people accepted God's call just as Jacob accepted his commandments (Kühne, 2011). These features can be found on the altarpiece façades of churches, through a scenographic treatment that displays paintings of the saints of the order as well as biblical or catechetical scenes (Table 1).

Table 1. Baroque architectural criteria in the Concepción mission (source: researcher’s analysis, 2026)

Architectural plan	Facade of the complex	Photograph of the Concepción mission
		
<p>Jesuit Baroque sought to “bring order to the Indigenous world” through the use of established models such as symmetrical floor plans, the clarification of functions, and a spatial hierarchy defined by the basilica-style layout of the church, with its three naves separated by rows of wooden columns. This configuration emphasized the longitudinal axis leading toward the altar.</p>	<p>The religious complex is linear and includes the church—taller to emphasize its hierarchical importance—a wooden bell tower, galleries, an atrium, and the former workshops, school, and Jesuit residence. The bell tower’s verticality beside the church reflects a European Baroque feature reinterpreted in wood to meet local needs. The repetitive portico supported by columns is an Indigenous adaptation of the Baroque atrium, serving both functional and ceremonial purposes.</p>	<p>Solomonic columns in the tower and exterior gallery of the temple are associated with movement and theatrically. Abundant pictorial decoration with plant motifs, volutes, floral elements, and figures of angels. Curved finish on the main door.</p>

Urban features

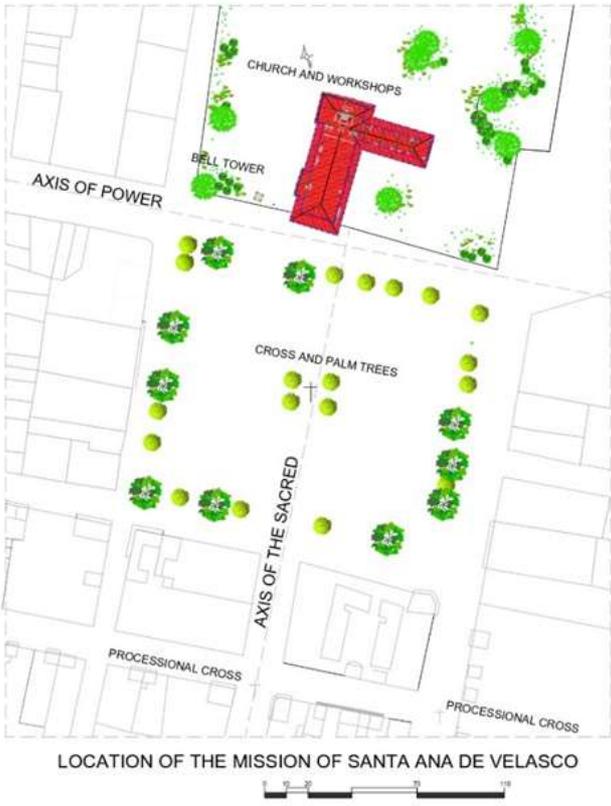
An important aspect of Jesuit missionary urban planning was its alternative nature to the Spanish urban models imposed during the colonial period. This urban order expresses control and Christian civility.

The streets were wide, measuring 45 meters, to prevent fires that could occur due to the fragility of the materials used. The houses had galleries facing both exits to the street and lacked courtyards. When the republic was established, this layout gave way to new patterns of urban growth, opting for more regular, square blocks without losing the main sacred axis that identifies them (Escobar, 2016).

Urban growth was organized around an axial structure that defined functions and symbolism. The vertical axis concentrated the religious complex, limiting expansion and separating the sacred from the civil. The classic city block disappeared, replaced by collective indigenous residential blocks. The architectural core guaranteed cultural, economic, and spiritual infrastructure in a ritualized society. The axes organized processional, work, and scenic routes, integrating architecture, plaza, and landscape. Thus, urbanism expressed an absolutist order where space, ritual, and power structured daily life (Suárez-Salas, 2011) (Table 2).

Table 2. Trace of the Mission of Santa Ana (source: researcher’s analysis, 2026)

Trace of the Mission of Santa Ana	Square, cross, and palm trees	Processional crosses
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 <p>LOCATION OF THE MISSION OF SANTA ANA DE VELASCO</p>		
<p>In Santa Ana, Baroque principles were implemented in the Jesuit missions, faithfully reflecting the ideal model in their design and organization. The sacred axis divides the square in two and ends at the religious complex. The axis of power divides the sacred from the dwellings.</p>	<p>The plaza is the heart of the mission, serving as a community gathering place that caters to both religious and civic functions. It preserves the cross and four palm trees in the center. The dimensions of the plaza differ from the model.</p>	<p>In Santa Ana, these crosses are strategically placed at the entrance and around the square, symbolizing the continuous presence of faith and marking the paths of religious processions</p>

Baroque aesthetics in religious buildings

The Baroque image was created using specific techniques and materials such as gold, silver, and mica laminates. Openings, walls, and altars were decorated with gold leaf, plaster, and reinforced clay moldings to emphasize the spatial modulation (Suárez-Salas, 2011).

Decorative elements painted on the façade, including acanthus leaves, filigree with geometric motifs, and combinations thereof, are used in relief elements, wooden figures, allegorical murals, and decorative paintings. The most commonly used geometric shapes are dots, lines, patterns, zigzags, braids, geometric leaves, and figurative leaves, due to their ease of repetition for indigenous laborers. So as they copied, they repeated the motif without knowing its meaning, although sometimes its naturalistic model has been deduced. That is why a fusion can also be identified in terms of Aboriginal elements, representations of local flora and fauna, and the presence of mythical figures and unknown animals (Monteros Cueva & Soto Toledo, 2021). Some temples also allude to the temple in

Jerusalem with the presence of cherubim on both walls and altars, which can be made of wood or painted and gilded ceramic (Kühne, 2011).

The Baroque carving used on the Solomonic shafts of the columns, and in some cases, the use of connecting arches, demonstrates the knowledge acquired in the workshops founded by the Jesuits, which serve not only a structural function but also a decorative one (Table 3).

Table 3. Decorative elements in the mission of San Rafael (source: researcher’s analysis, 2026)

Element	Description	Mission of San Rafael de Velasco
Decorative painting	Representation of acanthus leaves, filigree with geometric motifs (dots, lines, patterns, zigzags, braids, geometric and figurative leaves). These motifs are combined to create a rich visual texture characteristic of the Baroque style.	
Relief	Carved in earth and wood, the themes represent religious figures, biblical and symbolic scenes, adding depth and dimension to walls, altarpieces, and facades.	
Mural painting	Religious iconography is rich in allegorical representations of virtues, saints, and biblical scenes. These paintings convey religious and doctrinal messages, creating an overloaded texture characteristic of the Baroque period.	
Solomonic column	Columns with spiral shafts add dynamism and movement to the structure. Decorated with plant motifs and other ornamental elements.	
Rosettes	A decorative element used extensively, it includes floral elements, adding visual interest and balance to the ornamentation.	

For example, in the church of San Rafael, there are paintings depicting the Annunciation and the Ascension of Christ. The flowers accompanying this ensemble are based on a rosette with a central bud crowned by petals and inserted into a larger base, that is, a double

rosette. It is also interesting to see the figures of fish and birds, shells, flowers, and angels in the interior decorations. This type of decoration abounds in elements and details similar to the art of the Bolivian valleys and highlands in carvings and decorations.

As for the paintings, practically all of them contain religious iconography, which is scarce in comparison with the abundant ornamentation of the walls of the six missions. It seems that the pedagogical message was unified with the aesthetic message. The painting in the Chiquitano missions extended beyond the temple, integrating itself into the architectural complex. Historiography recognizes the limited European influence in these churches and highlights their unique typology, the result of a creative fusion between Baroque models, American construction traditions, and local material (Sánchez Medrano, 2016).

DISCUSSION

The Baroque of Chiquitos

The results indicate that mestizo baroque in Bolivian Jesuit missions transcends its definition as a formal style to become a comprehensive study that structures the urban, architectural, aesthetic, and ritual aspects from a very broad spatial scale that responds both to liturgical requirements and to a symbolic conception of the church as the “house of God and gate of heaven,” inspired by the model of the Temple of Jerusalem (Lasso Varela, 2010; Kühne, 2011). A spatial articulation that structures territory, urban fabric, and buildings: proportions (1:2, 1:3), sequences of porticos, a processional axis, chapels, and a bell tower that sacralize public space and ritualize mobility (Parejas Moreno & Suárez Salas, 2007).

The architectural form operates as a pedagogical and performative infrastructure capable of organizing religious experience and community sociability in continuity with worship. This leads to a mutation of the spatial regime: the religious acts by governing the urban layout formed by the atrium, galleries, and chapels along the route, but at the same time, functions as a catechetical pedagogical device, reinforced by music (Monteros Cueva, 2015; Parejas Moreno & Suárez Salas, 2007).

The missions of Chiquitos do not follow a uniform compositional scheme, which is particularly significant when contrasted with the more normative and regular pattern observed in the Guaraní missions (Gangui, 2022). For example, the orientation of the temples was determined by specific contextual factors, including the layout of the main square, the location of Betania, and the need to adapt to the topographical characteristics of the terrain, as in the case of San Miguel, which is the only temple with steps at its main entrance.

The adaptation of the European Baroque in these missions transcends the merely decorative and manifests itself fully in construction techniques, materials, spatial organization, and iconography, revealing an Indigenous co-production that challenges the notion of a simple stylistic transfer. The use of Solomonic columns with a structural function reveals a profound hybridization between Baroque grammar and local construction knowledge, blurring the boundaries between ornament and structure (Kühne, 2011). The use of the altarpiece façade and processional chapels operates as a catechetical mechanism that extends the liturgy into the public space and enhances Baroque theatricality, while the basilica floor plan, with its elevated central nave and hierarchical proportions, organizes the procession and leads the spatial experience toward the ritual climax. On an ornamental level, the incorporation of indigenous writings, pastel glazes, and

abstract motifs of flora (isipó), fauna, and mythological characters reflects a clear symbolic agency and processes of identity reinterpretation within the catechetical program (Monteros Cueva & Soto Toledo, 2021).

Spatial theatricality is an architectural and urban strategy in which space transcends its utilitarian function to become a stage for sensory and symbolic experiences. Through the organization of routes, visuals, and light, architecture articulates relationships between body, ritual, and collectivity, activating a performative dimension of built space (Gutiérrez, 1999). The articulation between temple, atrium, and plaza extended this theatricality to the exterior space, where ritual and festive practices transformed the mission complex into a symbol of appropriation of the territory. The mission churches of San Javier, Concepción, San Miguel, and San Rafael feature wide longitudinal naves that lead axially toward the altar, creating a spatial dramaturgy reinforced by the symbolic use of natural light, filtered laterally and emphasized on the main axis.

From this perspective, architecture organizes routes, establishes visual hierarchies, and regulates light to activate a performative field in which the ritual dimension sustains community practices and modes of symbolic appropriation of the territory (Alvarado-Borgoño, 2016). This evidence supports the argument that mestizo Baroque cannot be understood as a simple regional variant, but rather as a process of transculturation in which indigenous populations actively participate in shaping the spatial, technical, and symbolic language of architecture. From this perspective, the notion of mere adaptation is overcome, giving way to an operational mestizaje in which technique and meaning converge in architectural systems that are both functional and loaded with meaning (Del Pilar López & García, 2016; Kühne, 2011). This fusion is evident in the construction techniques, in the iconography associated with the local culture, and in the architectural setting.

Continuity and permanence

The continuity observed does not respond to a strictly conservationist heritage logic, but rather a creative persistence that rearticulates memory and belonging, and that demonstrates the inherited validity of Baroque missionary features. This requires that the analysis of permanence consider not only material traces, but also practices and performances—processions, music, dances, and uses of the plaza—that update the meaning in the present (Monteros Cueva & Soto Toledo, 2021).

These missionary towns have preserved their religious complexes almost intact; however, this heritage is also reflected in a culture of appropriation of decorative elements that has become a defining feature of their tradition. This decoration has spread to domestic architecture, highlighting door and window frames and using galleries with Solomonic columns. Key symbols remain embedded in the urban fabric and are associated with the missionary complex. The church and its link to the plaza exert a strong sense of orientation and redistribution. The villages generally maintain this proposal for growth on the three axes of the plaza, except the religious one (Fernández & Guzmán Ramos, 2013).

Evidence of replication on a smaller scale in contemporary villages confirms that mestizo baroque survives as a reinterpretable language of identity. Such is the case of the communities of the parish of San Francisco Javier, dating from the early 20th century, where they have revived the urban, architectural, and aesthetic model of the mission (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Rural chapels of San Antonio, Santa Marta, San Javierito, Carmen de Ruiz, Ascensión del Carmen, and San Juancito of San Francisco Javier (source: researcher’s documentation, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

The mestizo baroque analyzed in this document shows that it is not a style applied orthodoxy or mimically with respect to European models, but rather responds to a process of creative adaptation, becoming a socio-spatial system that articulates the urban, architectural, aesthetic, and other arts such as music, sculpture, and dance, with the catechetical purpose as the common thread, understood not only as an instrument of evangelization but also as a strategy for the symbolic and social organization of the territory. In this context, indigenous labor is fundamental, as it reproduces construction and religious iconography in an artisanal manner, generating the form of mysticism commonly referred to as “mestizo.”

This Baroque style is revealed as an expression fully integrated into the architectural dynamics of 17th-century Europe, characterized by the dissemination of ideas, contextual adaptation, and creative interaction between cultures. In this sense, the Chiquitano missions confirm that architecture was a global project, capable of absorbing local traditions and producing original aesthetic solutions without losing its link to the imposed models, but rather reinterpreting them, demonstrating that cultural mixturity is possible.

The continuity of this urban-architectural model is visible in the preservation of the missions, as well as in the smaller-scale replicas of new settlements that confirm its validity as a language of identity in the region, even though its ritual effectiveness coexisted with forms of excessive control characteristic of the missionary system. In this sense, the mestizo ship can be understood in its dual meaning: cultural integration and as an instrument for organizing the territory and indigenous life.

Finally, the missionary experience in Chiquitos offers an important pedagogical lesson for the region. From the beginning of the reduction process, the Jesuits understood the need to respect the indigenous worldview. This recognition fostered a process of respect, learning, and adaptation—reflected in both the construction system and domestic decorations—allowing the transformation to unfold gradually.

Teaching was built around resources close to everyday life - architecture, music, images, and rituals—which made it possible to communicate complex ideas in an accessible and sensitive manner. These elements not only helped convey doctrine and rules of coexistence but also served as bridges between two different cultural worlds. Spaces, sounds, and celebrations spoke a language that could be felt before it could be understood, and in that process, forms, symbols, and practices specific to local communities were integrated.

This way of teaching, based on shared experience and the repetition of gestures, journeys, and ceremonies, shaped a deeply rooted collective memory. Rather than imposed learning, it was a gradual process that became part of people's daily lives, shaping their habits, relationships with space, and sense of belonging. As a result, the missionary model endured over time, leaving a visible mark not only on the architecture and the territory, but also on the regional identity, which still echoes that historical experience lived in community.

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