

Article

Iconography in the Mural Paintings of the Santa Catalina Convent as a Symbolic Element in Cusco's Viceroyal Architecture

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Abstract

This study examines the mural paintings of the Chapter House of the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco within the context of Andean colonial architecture, aiming to analyze their iconography as a symbolic and theological resource. A qualitative methodology was employed, based on iconographic analysis according to Erwin Panofsky's theory, complemented by documentary review, photographic recording, and thematic categorization of the pictorial elements. The results reveal that the paintings not only decorate but also structure a visual theological discourse representing the spiritual transition of the soul from the mundane to the divine through scenes such as penance, ascetic life, redemption, and glorification. This mural narrative, primarily directed at the female religious community of the convent, integrates European and indigenous motifs, hagiographical figures, Trinitarian allegories, and ornamental symbolism that reinforces the spirituality of the monastic space. It is concluded that these representations do not solely serve catechetical purposes but configure a symbolic architecture of contemplation and spiritual formation that visually articulates the doctrinal principles of the Christian tradition through a pictorial language coherent with Andean Baroque.

Keywords: mural painting; iconography; colonial cusqueña architecture; Andean Baroque; religious heritage; symbolism



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1. Introduction

Mural painting in the viceroyal architecture of Cusco is a key element in shaping the symbolic dimension of sacred architecture. Beyond mere decoration, these pictorial representations articulate narratives that reinforce Christian doctrine, establishing a bridge between the European imagination and the Andean worldview. In the case of the chapter house of the Monastery of Santa Catalina de Siena in Cusco (Figure 1), the existing mural paintings serve as a testament to the cultural syncretism developed during the viceroyal period; this pictorial ensemble, attributed to the Cusco master Tadeo Escalante and dated to the late 18th century, synthesizes the religious conception of the Dominican order through a complex iconography that integrates doctrinal, allegorical, and ornamental elements [1].



Figure 1. Chapter House of the Convent of Santa Catalina.

In recent years, a critical approach has emerged that reevaluates colonial art through decolonial theoretical frameworks and visual anthropology tools, positioning mural production as a space of symbolic negotiation between indigenous creative agency and missionary discourses. This approach suggests that images should not be viewed solely as transmitters of European orthodoxy, but as devices where local modes of perception, narrative, and devotion are reconfigured, highlighting a visual dimension where indigenous memories and colonial structures converge [2]. Although many of these studies have focused on the plastic arts, their methodology is applicable to Cusco mural painting, allowing for an analysis of how local knowledge is inscribed on the pictorial surface and in the symbolic construction of the conventual space.

The Monastery of Santa Catalina was founded in 1605 on the site of the ancient Inca Acllahuasi, a space designated for women dedicated to worship, as part of a deliberate appropriation of pre-Hispanic sacred sites by the colonial administration [3]. After the earthquake of 1650, the convent was rebuilt, consolidating an architectural structure that combines elements of late Renaissance with construction principles of Andean Baroque. Its church, with a single nave and barrel vault, is flanked by two cloisters, while the Chapter House occupies a central place within the complex, housing the mural program of greatest iconographic relevance [4].

A comprehensive understanding of the mural program requires considering its precise location within the architectural space of the Chapter Room of the Monastery of Santa Catalina and its relationship with the spatial organization of the convent complex. The room, which has a rectangular layout and lateral access from the main cloister, functions as a symbolic nucleus where internal governance and the spiritual formation of the community converge.

In the pictorial cycle, the scenes are sequentially distributed along the four walls, following a visual pathway that articulates hagiographic passages, Marian representations, and ornamental elements. The arrangement responds to a narrative logic that begins at the entrance wall and develops in a clockwise direction, integrating each episode into a continuous visual discourse. The thematic correspondences between opposing walls and the chromatic progression reinforce the unified perception of the whole, transforming the room into an immersive space for meditation and doctrinal teaching.

To facilitate the understanding of this sequence and its connection with the built space, a general plan of the convent is presented (Figure 2), indicating the location of the Chapter House, along with a detailed plan of the room (Figure 3), showing the arrangement of the scenes on each wall. These planimetric representations allow for the visualization of the spatial continuity of the mural program, as well as the relationship between architecture and iconography, which constitutes the interpretative core of this study.

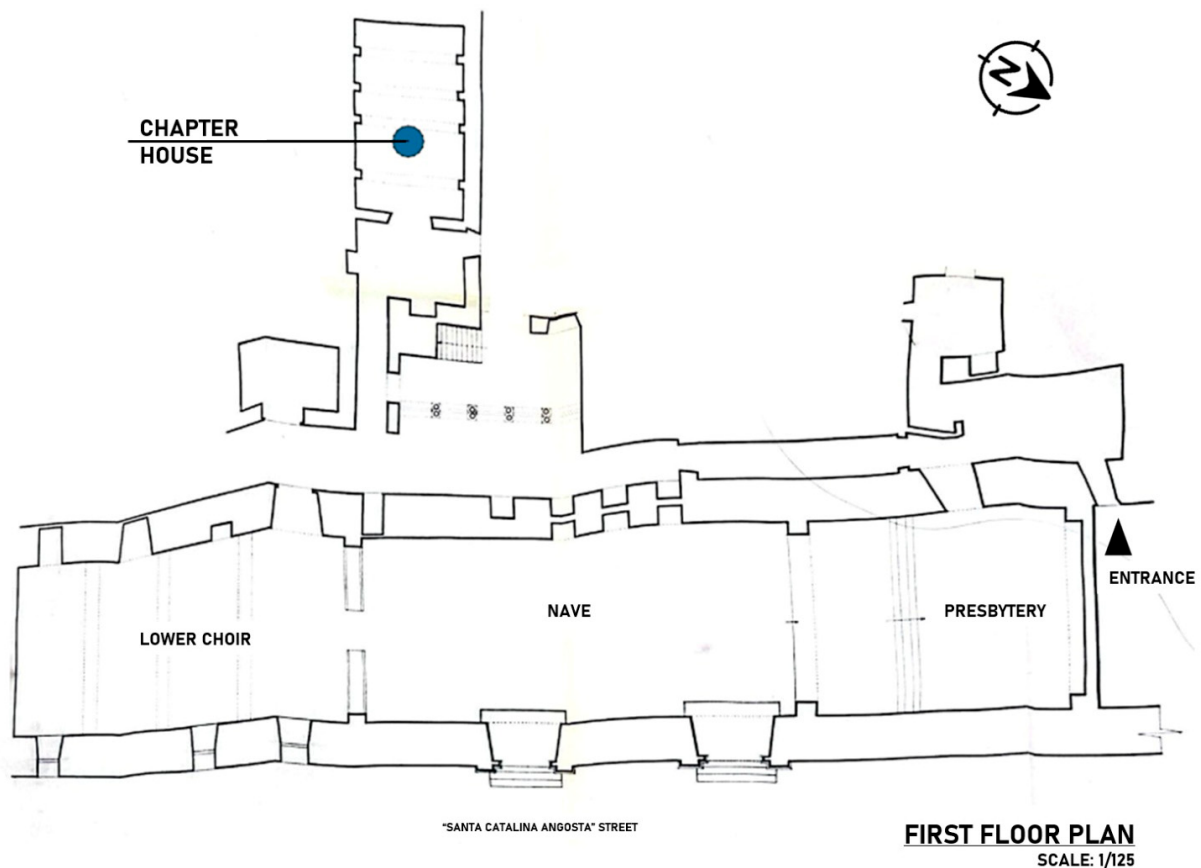


Figure 2. Architectural layout plan of the Santa Catalina Convent—Cusco.

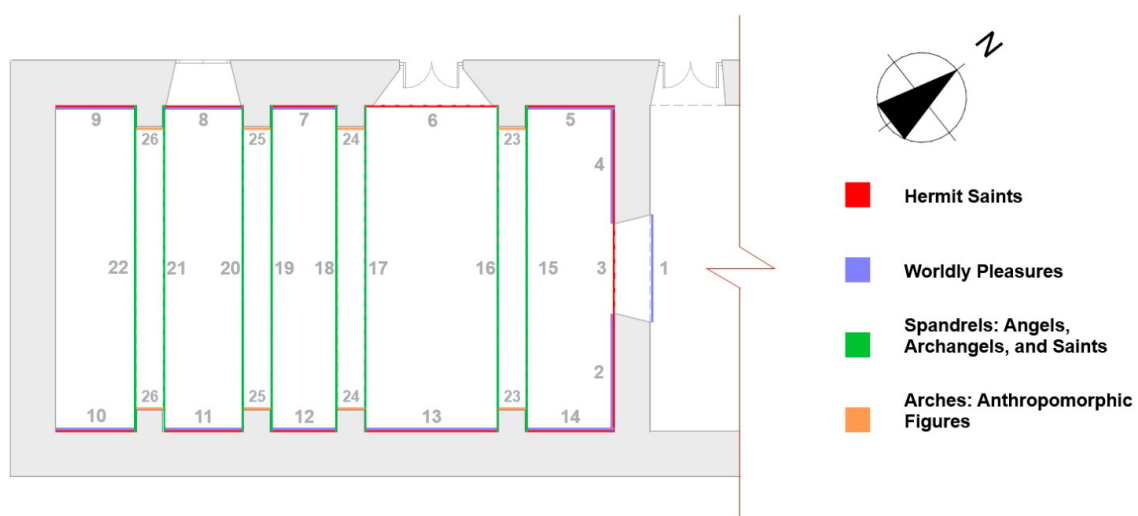


Figure 3. Chapter House Floor Plan—Scene Locations.

Although the present study emphasizes iconographic analysis, it is also pertinent to briefly mention technical aspects that point to the quality and doctrinal function of the murals. Recent research on Andean colonial murals identified a preparation layer over the adobe composed of gypsum or anhydrite, and a palette that includes pigments such as hematite, indigo, antlerite, posnjakite, and smalt, which demonstrates a remarkable technical mastery and a clearly didactic and devotional visual project within a viceregal Baroque context [5].

Since its opening to the public in 1975 as the “Museum of Monastic Life”, the monastery has become a key venue for the dissemination of viceregal religious art, showcasing a remarkable collection of paintings from the Cusco School, sculptures, silverware, and liturgical furniture. However, the conservation conditions of its cultural assets present significant deficiencies, with notable deterioration of the mural paintings due to environmental factors, earthquakes, and inadequate restoration processes [6]. In particular, the Chapter House has experienced the loss of pictorial layers and chromatic alterations that affect the reading and iconographic interpretation of the ensemble.

The compositional scheme of the mural paintings in the Chapter House follows a hierarchical structure in which the lower levels contain geometric and ornamental motifs, while the intermediate levels present scenes of earthly life and worldly pleasures. At the top, figures of hermit saints and angels are arranged, symbolizing spiritual ascension and the overcoming of sin through penance. This visual itinerary reinforces the doctrinal discourse of the Dominican order, developing a pictorial sequence that leads from everyday scenes toward the sacred [1].

Despite their heritage significance, the mural paintings of the Monastery of Santa Catalina have been subjected to insufficiently rigorous interventions, lacking technical and scientific studies that would allow for their proper conservation. Recent research in similar contexts has demonstrated the importance of colorimetric analysis and material composition for the preservation of mural painting.

In this context, the present research aims to analyze the iconography and chromatic characterization of the mural paintings in the Chapter Room of the Monastery of Santa Catalina, evaluating their symbolic role within the colonial architecture of Cusco. Through an interdisciplinary methodological approach, cataloging techniques will be applied, complemented by an iconographic interpretation study based on documentary and artistic sources. The objectives of this research are to conduct an iconographic and iconological analysis of the mural paintings in the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco, examine their symbolic and theological meanings, and contextualize them within the artistic production of the viceroyalty during the Andean Baroque period; furthermore, the study aims to explore the relationship between the visual program, the architectural space, and the spiritual life of the conventual community.

This study is based on the hypothesis that the iconographic program of the mural paintings in the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco not only reproduces doctrinal models from the European Counter-Reformation Baroque, but also reinterprets them through visual, chromatic, and narrative resources that incorporate Andean symbolic references, thus creating a hybrid discourse that simultaneously reinforces Catholic orthodoxy and local cultural identity.

From a heritage perspective, the significance of this study lies in the need to document and preserve a pictorial set that has not yet been subjected to thorough technical analysis. The lack of studies on the materiality of these works has limited their comprehensive understanding, hindering the implementation of appropriate conservation strategies. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the development of methodologies applicable to

other expressions of mural painting in the Andean context, providing tools for the valuation and restoration of such artistic manifestations.

This study has social and cultural implications, as the preservation of the mural paintings in the Monastery of Santa Catalina not only guarantees the protection of material heritage but also strengthens the cultural identity and collective memory of the citizens of Cusco. The implementation of restoration strategies based on scientific criteria will ensure the integrity of these works in the long term, promoting their dissemination and recognition within the context of viceregal art in Peru.

The mural iconography in viceregal conventual architecture transcends its ornamental function to structure symbolic discourses that articulate the relationship between the secular and the sacred. In this sense, Ref. [7] study on the Soto staircase in the convent of San Esteban in Salamanca demonstrates how architectural iconography reinforces the ascending semantics of the space through textual and imagistic elements based on Thomistic theory. This approach allows us to understand the mural painting of the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco as a visual device that guides the transition of spiritual purification within the conventual realm, integrating symbolic narratives into its pictorial representations.

The interpretation of mural painting in viceregal contexts requires situating it within a framework of critical theory that considers the colonality of power and knowledge as constitutive dimensions of its production and reception. Authors such as Mignolo and Quijano have shown that forms of visual representation in colonial America cannot be separated from structures of symbolic domination that naturalize racial and cultural hierarchies [8,9]. From the perspective of art history, recent research has integrated this framework to read religious images not only as vehicles of catechesis but also as spaces where these hierarchies are reproduced and sometimes negotiated, identifying iconographic elements that operate as technologies of visual power [10]. This critical approach allows for recognizing in the iconographic program of the Monastery of Santa Catalina not only a theological discourse but also a materialization of the colonial relations that underpin it.

From the perspective of gender studies, conventual religious art acquires an additional dimension as a means of shaping female subjectivities within the framework of enclosure. As [11] notes, female monastic spaces in Hispanic America articulated a visual system that encoded virtues such as obedience, chastity, and penance, modeling nuns as ideal subjects of counter-reformist spirituality. Recent research has demonstrated that this visual discourse was not passive; in certain cases, the monastic communities themselves participated in the selection or reinterpretation of iconographic motifs to reinforce narratives of agency and spiritual prestige [12]. In this sense, the murals of Santa Catalina can be read as pedagogical devices that, in addition to their doctrinal function, contributed to constructing a collective female identity inscribed in the rhetoric of Andean Baroque.

An analysis of Baroque iconography in the Colonial Religious Art Museum of Panama [13] highlights the fusion of European and Indigenous elements in the viceregal artistic production, a phenomenon present in the Cuzco mural paintings. The influence of mendicant orders in teaching plastic techniques and the configuration of a visual syncretism in altarpieces and sculptures serves as a precedent for understanding how the Monastery of Santa Catalina articulates a hybrid pictorial language that reinforces the spirituality and cultural identity of the conventual space.

Ananda Cohen Suárez's research on Andean colonial murals sheds light on the sociopolitical dimension of these images, demonstrating how, beyond catechetical reproduction, the murals functioned as spaces for identity negotiation and indigenous agency. Her interdisciplinary approach combines archival sources with detailed visual analysis and suggests that the murals articulate collective memory and symbolic power in rural contexts.

This perspective complements our study by providing a viewpoint that considers not only theological meanings but also the cultural dynamics that the mural cycle reflects [14].

Teresa Gisbert and José de Mesa offer a critical view of Andean visual production, noting how mural painting reflects indigenous myths and structures of popular religiosity through an iconography that transcends European models and is reconfigured in local keys. Their methodological proposal to group Andean visual expressions under schools such as Collao or Cuzco allows for an understanding of the regional diversity of mural art, and this framework is useful for interpreting the specificities of the Santa Catalina cycle as part of a broader visual dialogue within Andean Baroque [15].

Pablo Macera, in his work on Andean mural painting, emphasizes the aesthetic and thematic originality of Cusco and Andean muralism, demonstrating that these pictorial programs are not mere derivatives of Europe but rather creative expressions that incorporate Andean motifs and innovative compositions. This perspective supports and refines our findings by validating the visual originality observed in the mural cycle and providing a historiographical reference that helps conceptualize its technical and symbolic innovation [16].

Specific applications in Andean contexts demonstrate how colonial murals, such as those in Andahuaylillas, function as “visual liminalities” where Indigenous stories and European doctrinal models engage in dialogue and intertwine. A key investigation in the church of Andahuaylillas, referred to as the “Sistine Chapel of America,” shows how local formal and symbolic elements coexist with traditional Catholic iconography, creating a hybrid visual narrative that challenges monolithic readings [14]. This type of analysis is particularly relevant for addressing the murals of the chapter house of the Monastery of Santa Catalina, as it provides tools to identify how Indigenous elements actively participate in the configuration of the viceregal symbolic space.

The inclusion of frameworks from critical theory and gender studies does not imply displacing traditional theological readings, but rather expanding their interpretative coordinates. Following Trexler (2018) [17], it is possible to articulate colonial religious iconography as a field of intersection where scholastic theology intertwines with visual regimes that organize gender, race, and authority. In this sense, Panofsky’s methodology, applied in this study, can be complemented with an intersectional analysis that interrogates images not only for their doctrinal content but also for their role in the production of a social and symbolic order. This articulation allows for a reinterpretation of scenes such as those of penitents and crowned virgins, not only as allegories of Christian virtues but also as normative representations of female bodies and conduct within the context of Andean vice-regal society.

In a broader context, Ref. [18] examines the Casa de las Cadenas in Cádiz and demonstrates how Baroque architecture employs symbolic elements to reinforce its religious and counter-reformist meaning. The relationship between ornamentation and visual discourse in this case allows for parallels to be drawn with the mural paintings of the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cuzco, where the iconography not only beautifies but also defines the relationship between enclosure and the outside world, emphasizing the pedagogical function of images in the religious experience.

Recent research links late colonial iconography with processes of identity resignification and the symbolic incorporation of Andean cosmological elements; Ref. [19] analyzes the representation of the “Celestial Paradise in the Andes” and demonstrates how biblical scenes were reinterpreted to engage with forms of religiosity and representations of the cosmos deeply rooted in Andean societies. This line of analysis allows for an understanding of how the murals of the convent articulated visual metaphors that not only conveyed

religious doctrines but also resignified and translated those contents into symbolic keys familiar to local communities.

On the other hand, Ref. [20] analyzes the evocation of the Baroque and Rococo in 19th-century genre painting, highlighting processes of appropriation and resignification of previous artistic references. This phenomenon is comparable to the mural iconography of the Monastery of Santa Catalina, where a reconfiguration of European and indigenous motifs is observed in a new visual language that responds to local spirituality and worldview, consolidating a system of symbolic representation characteristic of Andean Baroque.

Finally, the study by Montes [21] on female artistic production in the Royal Audience of Quito highlights the role of nuns in the creation and promotion of paintings within the convents. Through the analysis of the painting of the Virgin of Mercy in the Monastery of Las Conceptas in Cuenca, the authors demonstrate the pedagogical and devotional function of the images in the cloister, which is key to understanding the mural iconography of the Monastery of Santa Catalina. In this space, the paintings not only decorate but also structure a visual discourse of teaching that articulates the relationship between the divine and the earthly, reinforcing the spirituality of the cloister and its integration into the Andean Baroque.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach with a methodological design based on the iconographic and symbolic analysis of the mural paintings in the Chapter Room of the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco. Its objective is to identify and characterize the iconographic elements represented in the mural paintings, as well as their meaning within the context of viceregal architecture and the Cusco artistic tradition.

To contextualize the iconographic analysis, a thorough review of bibliographic and documentary sources was conducted, including historical archives such as the Remodeling and Implementation Study of the Monastery of Santa Catalina: “Museum of Monastic Life” [22], which contains information on the monastery’s foundation and architectural development, previous research on viceregal mural painting, and specific studies of the work of Tadeo Escalante. Additionally, treatises on religious art from the viceregal period were analyzed to understand the iconographic references employed in the paintings.

The fieldwork consisted of a systematic photographic record of the mural paintings in the Chapter Room, using high-resolution images with controlled lighting to highlight less visible iconographic details. This documentation was organized into a visual catalog that allowed for the segmentation of the scenes and represented elements, complemented by interpretative schemes and diagrams to analyze the arrangement of the images within the mural composition.

The iconographic analysis was based on Erwin Panofsky’s methodology [23], structured into three levels of interpretation. At the pre-iconographic level, the represented elements were formally described, including human figures, animals, religious symbols, and decorative objects. At the iconographic level, the scenes were identified along with their relationship to textual and visual sources from the colonial period. Finally, at the iconological level, the symbolic meaning of the images was interpreted within the religious and social context of colonial Cusco, considering the fusion of European and indigenous elements in the construction of the visual discourse.

To understand the interaction between the mural paintings and the spatiality of the Chapter House, the arrangement of the images within the space was analyzed, identifying sequences and visual hierarchies as well as narrative levels on the walls and arches. Additionally, the relationship between the represented images and the concepts of penance and

spirituality in monastic life was explored, comparing this iconographic program with other colonial religious spaces that exhibit similar characteristics.

The findings were systematized into a classification scheme of the iconographic elements present in the mural paintings, organized into thematic categories such as religious figures (saints, angels, and archangels), doctrinal and penitential scenes, decorative and symbolic elements, and representations of the mundane and the sacred.

To ensure the reliability of the results, a methodological triangulation was carried out, contrasting the data obtained from the iconographic analysis with documentary sources, comparative studies, and consultations with specialists in viceregal art and iconographic studies. This approach allowed for the validation of iconographic interpretations and reinforced the understanding of the symbolism present in the mural paintings of the Monastery of Santa Catalina, providing a rigorous foundation for their analysis and conservation.

Analysis Indicators

To ensure traceability between the established objectives and the findings, specific indicators were set:

- (i) For the objective of identifying the narrative structure of the mural program, thematic sequences, spatial arrangement of the scenes, and compositional hierarchies were analyzed.
- (ii) For the objective of examining the symbolic use of color, tones were recorded and coded using the NCS system, evaluating their relationship with doctrinal and cultural meanings from the Andean context.
- (iii) For the objective of interpreting iconographic elements from a historical-critical approach, a comparative analysis was conducted with visual and textual sources from European and Andean contexts during the colonial period.
- (iv) For the objective of determining the symbolic function of the murals within the conventual context, visual interactions between the paintings, architecture, and liturgical arrangement of the space were assessed.

3. Results

The mural ensemble of the Chapter House of the Monastery of Santa Catalina should be understood as a unified artistic program, designed to function simultaneously as a visual narrative and as a theological-spatial device. Each scene, while rich in individual iconographic content, gains its full meaning from its deliberate placement within the architectural framework and its relationship with the surrounding episodes. The compositional logic, as outlined in the introduction, reveals an intentional sequence in which thematic, chromatic, and symbolic continuities guide the viewer's gaze along the walls, transforming the room into a cohesive catechetical space. This holistic perspective allows for the interpretation of each episode not as an isolated vignette, but as an integral part of a broader visual and spiritual discourse that reflects the theological priorities and devotional practices of the monastic community.

From this overarching perspective, the following analysis addresses each scene in detail, always keeping in mind its function within the integrated cycle. This approach emphasizes how the formal elements (such as the arrangement of figures, the architectural framing, and the color harmonies) reinforce the unity of the program and contribute to its role as a didactic and meditative instrument.

The results presented below are organized based on the indicators established in the methodology, so that each finding can be directly associated with the research objectives; thus, the description of the narrative sequence corresponds to objective (i), the chromatic

analysis to objective (ii), the critical iconographic interpretation to objective (iii), and the evaluation of the symbolic function to objective (iv).

The results section of this study presents the iconographic and symbolic analysis of the mural paintings located in the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco, Peru, based on Panofsky's dual approach and classical theological sources. Each mural is examined from a descriptive and interpretative perspective to uncover both its visual structure and doctrinal content. The selected scenes reveal how colonial art conveyed complex theological, political, and spiritual narratives through visual language, emphasizing Trinitarian symbolism, allegorical representations, and contextual religious meanings. These findings demonstrate the pedagogical and devotional functions of mural painting within the architectural and cultural landscape of colonial Cusco.

3.1. *Symbolic and Iconographic Interpretation of the Scenes*

3.1.1. Mundane Scene of a Carriage Journey (See Figure 4)

- **Methodological Approach of Erwin Panofsky:** The mural painting titled "Carriage Ride" from the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco allows, at its descriptive iconographic level, the identification of a profane scene of a customary nature composed of a caravan led by a rider dressed in a red jacket mounted on a white horse, followed by a closed carriage pulled by a pair of horses driven by a uniformed coachman. The interior of the vehicle reveals barely outlined female silhouettes, while on the lateral edges, characters wearing tricorne hats, lush vegetation, rural roads, and peripheral constructions can be observed; the entire composition is framed by an ornamental motif of polychrome scrolls that accentuates its decorative character. The technical treatment, characterized by linear strokes and earthy chromatics, corresponds to the popular pictorial styles of the 18th century.
- **Iconological Analysis:** The scene does not simply represent an excursion or a playful moment of the colonial aristocracy, but rather embodies a visual discourse on the vice-regal social order and its hierarchies. The carriage symbolizes elevated status and the separation between the privileged interior and the servile exterior, while the idyllic landscape suggests a domestication of nature in accordance with colonial authority. The ornamental frame of acanthus leaves and scrolls, more than just a decoration, functions as a symbolic boundary that separates the represented world from the conventual space, thus channeling a visual experience that naturalizes the hierarchical structure of the social body. The scene projects the Baroque ideal of order as a reflection of the divine cosmos, where each element has its assigned place according to a higher logic that legitimizes power and privilege.
- **Classical Theological Approach:** This image could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the soul's passage through the temporal world. In the Thomistic view, the carriage and its movement suggest the vital process ordered by divine providence, where each person, according to their state, fulfills a function established by God. The division between figures inside and outside the carriage alludes to the mystical body of the Church, where the visible hierarchy does not deny the spiritual equality of all the faithful but rather reflects the natural order inscribed in creation. From St. Augustine's perspective [24], the scene could also evoke the soul's pilgrimage through the earthly city toward the heavenly city. Meanwhile, for John Calvin [25], although distant from ornamental use, the narrative clarity and symbolic restraint of the image align with a moral pedagogy that avoids explicit sacredness while maintaining a visual didactic structure.



Figure 4. Mundane Scene of a Carriage Journey.

3.1.2. Scene of the Genealogical Tree of Dominican Saints (Left) and the Guzmán Family (Right), Center, Virgin of the Rosary with Saint Catherine and Saint Rose of Lima (See Figure 5)

- **Methodological approach of Erwin Panofsky:** The scene represents an allegorical composition centered on the Virgin of the Rosary, surrounded by two Dominican religious figures (Virgin of the Rosary with Saint Catherine) in a posture of supplication and by angels extending their protective mantle. On both sides, genealogical trees are arranged, with branches populated by busts of ecclesiastical and religious figures, identifiable as members of the Order of Preachers, dressed in the Dominican habit. At the bottom, scenes of gardens, archway architectures, and human figures engaged in festive and recreational activities can be seen, while in the upper left appears a representation of hell that contrasts with the beatific surroundings of the rest of the mural. The scene combines figurative, vegetal, and architectural elements within a hierarchical structure that organizes the reading from the earthly lower part to the celestial upper part.
- **Iconological Analysis:** This painting is presented as a symbolic representation of Marian protection over the Dominican spiritual family and, by extension, over the female convent for which this iconography was intended. The Virgin's central position, with her mantle extended and crowned figure, alludes to her role as Queen of Heaven and mediator of graces, according to the rosarian tradition that was intensely promoted during the viceroyalty period. The trees with fruits and figures arranged in their branches refer to the spiritual and doctrinal lineage of the Order, reinforcing its historical and charismatic legitimacy. The contrast between the earthly paradise and the infernal scene at the bottom suggests an allegory of the eschatological judgment and salvation through belonging to a religious life governed by contemplation, obedience, and devotion to Mary, which is part of a Baroque catechetical program aimed at the emotional and moral instruction of the nuns and visitors.
- **Classical Theological Approach:** From the theological perspective founded on the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas [24], this scene visually expresses the notion of intercession and spiritual hierarchy in the economy of salvation. The Virgin, as co-redemptrix, acts according to Thomistic doctrine as a privileged instrument of mediation between God and humanity, and her extended mantle visualizes the divine grace dispensed through her intercession. The spiritual genealogy symbolized in the trees reflects the providential action of the Spirit in the history of the Church, while the harmonious order of the mural refers to the principle of formal reason

that, for Aquinas, structures all creation according to the good. Saint Augustine, in his treatise *De Trinitate*, emphasizes the function of memory, understanding, and will as Trinitarian reflections in the human soul [26]. This mural articulates these principles through a symbolic language that invites the viewer to contemplate the Marian model as a path toward mystical union. From a Calvinist perspective, although the exaltation of Mary is theologically problematic, the clarity of symbolism, the use of ordered figures, and the iconographic subordination to a doctrinal discourse can be understood as a pedagogical expression compatible with a reading that prioritizes moral edification and the centrality of grace over human merit.



Figure 5. Scene of the family tree of Dominican saints (left) and the Guzmán family (right), (center), Virgin of the Rosary with Saint Catherine and Virgin of the Rosary.

3.1.3. Scene of Saint Jerome the Penitent, a Feast in the Midst of a Garden, Floral Designs of Roses and Foliage, and Geometric Patterns (See Figure 6)

- **Methodological approach of Erwin Panofsky:** the mural scene identified in the Monastery of Saint Catherine represents an iconography composed of several narrative registers. At the top, a hermit is observed in a penitent attitude, possibly Saint Jerome, enclosed in a cave that symbolizes withdrawal from the world and spiritual ascension through asceticism; he holds a cross, a skull, and an open book, which reinforces his role as a scholar, penitent, and witness to the transition between temporal and eternal life. The red tunic envelops his body, symbolizing sacrifice, while around him a harmonious natural landscape is depicted, contrasting with his severe and meditative expression. In the lower registers, banquet scenes, gardens, and figures in playful or contemplative attitudes are observed, suggesting an alternation between worldly life and the call to conversion, arranged in horizontal sequences that favor the narrative reading of spiritual life.
- **Iconological Analysis:** This composition embodies the tension between the active life and the contemplative life, one of the fundamental dilemmas of colonial Christian thought. The image of the hermit saint serves as an allegory for the detachment necessary to attain wisdom and holiness, representing the monastic ideal that articulates the inner life as a path toward divine truth. The skull at his feet operates as a symbol of *vanitas*, a reminder of death, while the open book alludes to revealed knowledge and the need to integrate faith and reason in spiritual practice. In contrast, the lower scenes,

with their courtly setting, ornamental fountains, and characters gathered around tables and gardens, create an atmosphere of sensory delight that the mural proposes to transcend through inner contemplation. The decorative framework of floral scrolls and optical geometry reinforces the intention to visually organize the transition from the material to the spiritual within the architectural space of the convent.

- **Classical Theological Approach:** The thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas allows us to interpret this scene as a visual expression of moral order and the hierarchy of knowledge. The asceticism of Saint Jerome aligns with Thomistic doctrine, which posits that the soul must govern the senses through virtue to direct its will toward God, the supreme principle of good. The cross held by the saint represents Christ's redemptive act, while the idealized natural environment suggests that creation is a reflection of divine order. From an Augustinian perspective, the scene represents the memory of sin, the intelligence illuminated by grace, and the will oriented toward conversion—three dimensions of the soul that Saint Augustine identifies as an image of the Trinity. For John Calvin, although extreme asceticism was less valued, the silent contemplation of the Word through Scripture is compatible with the attitude of the holy hermit, as long as the image does not usurp the place of the Word.



Figure 6. Scene of Saint Jerome the Penitent, celebration in the midst of a garden, floral designs of roses and foliage and geometric patterns.

3.1.4. Scene of the Conversion of Saint Paul (See Figure 7)

- **Methodological Approach of Erwin Panofsky:** The scene represents an intense military confrontation that can be interpreted on two complementary levels. From a descriptive iconography perspective, armed male figures with spears, swords, and shields are identified, mounted on steeds in a combat stance, while they fall defeated to the ground with expressions of anguish. The arrangement of the bodies and the fall of the warriors reinforce the idea of a violent defeat; in the background, in the celestial space and in stark contrast to the earthly scene, the figure of an angelic being is manifested, suspended in the clouds. Its elevated position and benevolent gesture suggest a transcendental authority; this celestial character, adorned in flowing garments and with a contemplative attitude, indicates the presence of the divine as a guiding element in the human conflict, establishing a vertical axis between the spiritual and the material planes. The color palette, dominated by ochre, reddish, and white tones, helps to emphasize the drama of the scene while reinforcing the separation between the sacred and the profane.
- **Iconological Analysis:** The combat does not merely represent a historical or allegorical scene but is projected as a symbol of the struggle between good and evil in the theological and political context of the Andean viceroyalty. The downfall of the warriors, likely Moors or heretical figures, suggests the defeat of error in the face of Christian truth. This visual discourse aligns with the evangelizing and disciplining project of the Catholic Church in colonial territories, where mural painting served as visual catechesis for a predominantly indigenous and illiterate population. In this sense, the representation of the angel not only mediates between the two worlds but also acts as a manifestation of divine judgment that legitimizes the victory of the Catholic faith. The scene, therefore, conveys a worldview in which the supernatural regulates human history in accordance with the providentialist vision that permeated Cusco's viceregal art.
- **Classical Theological Approach:** In light of the fundamental theological sources of the Christian tradition, the image can be interpreted from a deeper doctrinal framework. According to the *Summa Theologica* by Saint Thomas Aquinas, the supreme good is linked to the rational order imposed by God upon creation, thus the downfall of the enemies represents the restoration of divine order in the face of the corruption of sin; this scene also engages with the Augustinian ideas presented in *De Trinitate*, where it is argued that the true battle is internal and spiritual, with external enemies serving as an allegory for the soul's struggle against passions. In this sense, the mural iconography becomes a dramatization of the inner purification necessary to attain grace; on the other hand, the work of John Calvin, *Institutiones Christianae Religionis*, although not influential in the Cusco Catholic context, offers a valuable contrast by insisting on the absolute sovereignty of God in human salvation, an element also visible in the figure of the angel as the executor of divine will.



Figure 7. Scene of the Conversion of Saint Paul.

3.1.5. Scene of Saint Paul the Hermit, Hunting Scene, Floral Designs of Roses and Foliage, and Geometric Patterns (See Figure 8)

- **Methodological approach of Erwin Panofsky:** The scene presents a vertical narrative structure that articulates different levels of meaning, which should be analyzed through a dual iconographic approach. In the upper plane, a hermit is distinguished, kneeling in a posture of prayer, likely Saint Jerome, within a cave framed by a rugged landscape and lush trees. The figure holds a crucifix while contemplating an open book that hangs from a branch next to a stone, attributes linked to penance and ascetic retreat; the presence of a raven descending with food refers to the hagiographic passage of the saint being miraculously fed in the desert. The middle scene represents a bucolic landscape in which a peasant guides a yoke of oxen in front of a colonial building, while trees and birds surround the environment. The lower level contains ornamental decoration of floral garlands, followed by a geometric pattern in perspective, composed of polychromatic cubes that simulate a three-dimensional effect.
- **Iconological Analysis:** Based on medieval and patristic theological sources, the mural acquires a deeper dimension that transcends the narrative. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, knowledge and contemplative life constitute the highest form of union with God; thus, the figure of the hermit embodies the perfection of the intellect illuminated by grace. The open book and the crucifix refer to the dual source of theological knowledge: written revelation and redemptive incarnation, elements that enable the attainment of divine truth. In line with Saint Augustine, the cave symbolizes the soul's retreat inward, where the true encounter with the Trinity occurs. The raven that brings food is presented as an allegory of divine providence, acting in history to sustain the just on their path of purification. The middle band, with its representation of agricultural life, can be linked to the doctrine of man's natural vocation as a cooperator in creation, which is also reaffirmed by Calvin in his exaltation of work as a sign of obedience to God.
- **Classical Theological Approach:** The geometric pattern that encloses the composition should not be read as a mere ornament, but rather as a visual formulation of order and proportion, principles that in Christian theology refer to the divine rationality imprinted in creation. This visual regularity can be interpreted in light of the Augus-

tinian notion that all earthly beauty is a reflection of trinitarian harmony. In this sense, the painting becomes a microcosm where the aesthetic, ethical, and mystical converge. The mural scene, therefore, offers not only an instructive representation of ascetic life but also a comprehensive visual model of the economy of salvation, intended to educate the soul on its journey from the temporal to the eternal.



Figure 8. Scene of Saint Paul the Hermit, hunting scene, floral designs of roses and foliage and geometric patterns.

3.1.6. Scene of Saint Mary of Egypt and Saint Francis of Paula (See Figure 9)

- **Methodological approach of Erwin Panofsky:** This image is broken down into two complementary levels. On the iconographic plane, the identification of the elements allows us to link the scene with known hagiographic episodes from Christian tradition, particularly with the Golden Legend and its dissemination in the Andean viceroyalty context; Mary of Egypt, depicted in her penitent form, was one of the most widely represented female models in colonial religious art, associated with conversion and the redemptive power of grace. The hermit, by offering her the chalice, visually updates the sacrament of the Eucharist as a channel of salvation.
- **Iconological Analysis:** This scene expresses a pedagogy of repentance and individual redemption, key in the Counter-Reformation spirituality that underpinned the architecture and viceregal art of Cusco. The mural proposes a visual narrative that articulates the ideal of soul purification through withdrawal, bodily pain, and sacramental mediation; in the political and cultural context of the time, this representation also served as a visual catechetical tool for the women confined in the monastery, reaffirming the model of Mary of Egypt as a paradigm of spiritual transformation through obedience and penance.
- **Classical Theological Approach:** The image can be understood as an allegory of the soul redeemed by grace. For Aquinas, the reception of the sacraments in a state of sincere contrition produces a real effect on the soul, which is represented here by the

receptive gesture of the penitent before the chalice. The scene thus symbolizes the transition from guilt to forgiveness, a process that depends not only on external acts but also on an internal disposition oriented towards the divine good. In Augustinian theology, the retreat to the desert serves as a metaphor for the inner journey, in which the soul, torn by sin, encounters the mercy of God in the solitude of the heart. The dark background of the cave and the brightness of the natural surroundings can be interpreted as a symbolic opposition between overcome sin and the new life of grace. Calvin, with his emphasis on the centrality of faith and the life-giving power of the Spirit, would have viewed this image as a representation of God's regenerating work in the life of the believer, transcending mere bodily works, although the Catholic context of the mural does not reflect his rejection of sacramental intermediaries. The painting thus synthesizes a mystical vision of the human soul in its process of conversion, where repentance and contact with the sacred (through the Eucharist and contemplative isolation) restore the fallen being's original dignity.



Figure 9. Scene of Saint Mary of Egypt and Saint Francis of Paula.

3.1.7. Scene of the Holy Hermit, a Scene of a Stroll in an Orchard of Fruit Trees, a Water Fountain, and Four Characters, Floral Designs of Roses and Foliage, and Geometric Patterns (See Figure 10)

- In the scene, a compositional structure is clearly distinguished, divided into four registers that articulate a visual program of devotional and doctrinal content. The upper section depicts a bearded man, possibly Saint Jerome or an anonymous hermit, in a contemplative pose before three open books, framed by a natural grotto and architectural elements in the background. This image, from a descriptive iconography perspective, refers to the ideal of an ascetic life centered on theological meditation, where the books represent the Sacred Scriptures or fundamental patristic texts. Through iconological analysis, the scene is linked to the Counter-Reformation's valuation of study as a means of salvation, integrating the landscape as a symbol of spiritual retreat and divine revelation.
- The second register introduces a central fountain surrounded by human figures in a leisurely or conversational posture, within an ornamented garden featuring fruit trees, flowers, and winding paths. This representation creates a *locus amoenus* that alludes to the lost Paradise and, in a Christological key, to the restoration of grace through baptism. According to the *Summa Theologica*, the fountain is identified with the flow of divine grace that cleanses and revitalizes the soul, while for Saint Augustine, the emanation from a single point into multiple streams refers to the consubstantial Trinity.

The coexistence of figures without hierarchical or narrative distinction highlights the universal value of redemption and the unity of the mystical body of Christ as a renewed spiritual community.

- At the bottom, the floral and geometric ornamental bands do not merely serve as decorative divisions; instead, they form a symbolic system that reinforces the theological message of the upper registers. The vegetal frieze alludes to the fertility of the regenerated soul and the beauty of the divine order manifested in creation, while the perspective cube pattern represents the stability of faith and the celestial architecture of theological knowledge. In light of *De Trinitate*, this mathematical structure becomes a metaphor for the trinitarian order, where visual harmony reveals divine intelligence in visible form. The entire composition unfolds a spiritual narrative that integrates doctrine, contemplation, and visual pedagogy within the cultural context of the Andean viceroyalty.



Figure 10. Scene of the Hermit Saint, leisurely stroll in an orchard of fruit trees, water fountain and four characters, floral designs of roses and foliage and geometric patterns.

3.1.8. Scene of San Pedro de Alcántara, Geometric Patterns, Worldly Scene, Ornamental Motifs and Decorative Elements (See Figure 11)

- A monk is depicted kneeling at the doors of a wooden cell, in a posture of prayer, accompanied by an open book where the inscription “*Soli tibi Domine*” is clearly visible. Through Panofsky’s iconographic approach, this image corresponds to an eremitic figure (likely Saint Francis of Assisi or Saint Anthony the Abbot) set in a carefully structured natural environment that includes fruit trees, birds, and a crucifix planted next to a prayer book. From the descriptive iconography, there is an intention to reinforce the model of a life dedicated to contemplation and penance, while from the iconology, a visual narrative emerges centered on renunciation of the world and the pursuit of inner solitude, a central idea in the counter-reformist discourse promoted in Andean conventual spaces.
- In the second register, the visual program shifts to a garden of cultivated trees where children or adolescents gather fruit under the watchful eye of female figures, one of whom appears to direct the scene. To the left, a classical facade is depicted, suggesting the entrance to a *hortus conclusus* or closed garden, a space that in patristic tradition

symbolizes both the soul and the virginal womb of Mary. In Thomistic terms, this cultivated garden represents the soul in a state of grace where will and reason work in harmony with faith to bear virtuous works. Saint Augustine would interpret the act of harvesting as a metaphor for the acquisition of divine knowledge that matures over time through the illumination of the Spirit, while from a Calvinist perspective, it serves as a representation of divine providence guiding man towards the fulfillment of his earthly vocation.

- In the lower ornamental registers, the visual language used in the other mural panels is maintained: a vegetal strip of intertwined flowers, followed by an acanthus border in reddish tones, and finally a geometric pattern of intertwined cubes that simulate depth. This structural base serves a dual function: on one hand, it reinforces the aesthetic unity of the whole, and on the other, it provides a symbolic reading anchored in the theology of the Trinity, where the intertwined forms refer to the interrelation of the three divine persons. The compositional rigor of the geometric pattern can also be interpreted as a reflection of the rational order of the created universe, a statement that aligns with the Thomistic view of the cosmos as an intelligible manifestation of the Creator. Thus, the mural articulates a symbolic system that connects personal mystical experience with the collective dimension of spiritual life, expressed through symbols that are legible both to the monastic community and to the educated New Hispanic public familiar with visual catechesis.



Figure 11. Scene of Saint Peter of Alcántara, geometric patterns, worldly scene and ornamental motifs.

3.1.9. Scene of Saint Hermit, Worldly Scene and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 12)

- The scene presents a composition structured around the figure of a standing Franciscan monk, likely Saint Francis of Assisi, holding two open books before the vision of another kneeling friar in front of an altar set within a rustic chapel. Through the panofskian lens, the upper register reveals a clear articulation between devotional iconography and the exaltation of the eremitic ideal, symbolized in the natural surroundings filled with vegetation, wildflowers, and birds, as well as in the arrangement of the altar oriented toward an intimate interior. The gesture of the saint in a teaching posture and the presence of books reinforce the doctrinal dimension of the image,

suggesting a spiritual transmission that goes beyond the verbal toward a direct experience of the divine, as was promoted in the reformed spirituality of the 17th and 18th centuries in the monastic spaces of the Viceroyalty of Peru.

- In the second register, a pastoral scene unfolds, depicting two young people engaged in play, pursued by a female figure holding an instrument in her hand. The space is enclosed by a vegetal architecture reminiscent of the labyrinths found in convent gardens, suggesting a symbolic order laden with moral significance. From a Thomistic perspective, this space can be understood as an image of the created world where the human soul, even in a state of innocence, navigates between sensory delight and the ethical vigilance that Christian pedagogy deems necessary to avoid falling. From an Augustinian viewpoint, the scene presents an allegory of the fluctuating will of man, who seeks the good but often becomes distracted by the trivial, needing to be redirected by grace towards the path of inner recollection and contemplation of the eternal.
- The lower decorative registers reinforce the theological narrative through a series of visual codes. The vegetal strip that includes intertwined acanthus, fruits, and birds evokes spiritual fertility and the abundance promised to the soul that remains on the path of the Lord. Meanwhile, the lower geometric pattern, formed by interwoven cubes of multiple colors, suggests a structure of trinitarian order. Symbolically, the impossible geometry alludes to the mystery of the coexistence of unity and plurality in God, and can be understood, in light of Augustine's *De Trinitate*, as a material reflection of the internal dynamism of the Trinity acting in the visible world.



Figure 12. Scene of the Hermit Saint, worldly scene and ornamental motifs.

3.1.10. Scene of Saint Mary Magdalene Penitent, Worldly Scene and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 13)

- The scene presents a sequence of overlapping registers that begins with the image of a female figure identifiable as Mary Magdalene, recognized by her long hair, her penitential attitude, and the presence of traditional iconographic attributes such as the skull, the open book, and the hair shirt. Her location within a cave refers to the theme of eremitic retreat and meditation on death, while the background landscape with castles and paths introduces a contrast between contemplative life and the outside world. In

the intermediate register, a pastoral scene is observed that, although seemingly bucolic, contains elements that invite allegorical interpretation, such as dance and hunting, classic symbols of worldly distraction and sin, thus articulating a visual narrative that flows from penitence to the temptations of the sensible world.

- From the Panofskian iconological perspective, the mural sequence suggests a pedagogical intention consistent with the evangelizing mission of the viceregal monastic environment. The representation of Mary Magdalene not only refers to her model of redemption but also positions her as a paradigm of spiritual transformation, embodying the ideal of conversion proposed to women within the colonial Christian social order. The intermediate scene with its dancing figures and hunters is inscribed within the moralizing tradition of Christian painting, where nature and the body function as battlegrounds between the soul and the senses. The lower geometric design, with its illusion of depth and order, can be understood as an allusion to the divinely structured cosmos, establishing a visual connection between the disorder of sin and divine harmony.
- From a theological perspective, the mural establishes an allegorical reading of the economy of salvation articulated through mystical experience. The figure of Mary Magdalene, whose conversion has been profoundly elaborated by Augustine of Hippo in his reflections on grace, symbolizes the transformative action of divine love in the fallen human soul. The contrast between the scene of retreat and pastoral mundanity can be linked to the doctrine of the redeemed will according to Thomas Aquinas, where the choice of good requires an active detachment from passions. The geometric foundation of the mural can be interpreted as a Trinitarian image in a Calvinist key, where clarity, structure, and rationality represent the divine order established by the Logos, anticipating the restoration of the soul through the knowledge of God revealed in Christ.

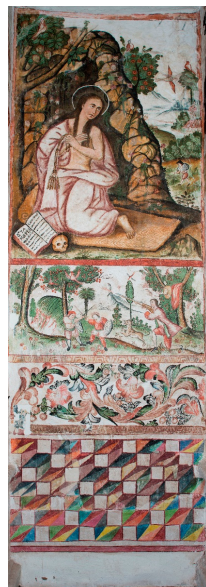


Figure 13. Scene of Saint Mary Magdalene the Penitent, worldly scene and ornamental motifs.

3.1.11. Scene of Saint Onuphrius, Secular Scene, Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 14)

- From the methodological approach of Erwin Panofsky, the mural scene located in the Monastery of Santa Catalina presents, at its descriptive iconographic level, the figure of Saint Onuphrius in the upper register, depicted as an ascetic with a naked body covered only by foliage, with a long beard, emaciated face, and a praying posture before a cave. Beside him rest a staff and an open book, symbols of sacred knowledge

and his condition as a penitent hermit. In the intermediate register, a secular scene is observed showing a group of musicians with instruments, alongside a figure reclining on a covered table, possibly asleep or deceased, in a wooded setting that suggests a festive or ambiguously funerary space. These elements are framed by bands of floral ornamentation and a lower frieze of illusionistic geometry that simulates architectural depth, thus completing a pictorial program that articulates hagiographic narrative, scenes of secular life, and symbolic decoration.

- On the iconological level, the image of Saint Onuphrius alludes to the absolute renunciation of the world, to the hermitic life as a path to union with God, and to the abandonment of the body as a means of spiritual elevation. His figure embodies the ideal of the desert as a space of purification, where the soul confronts the void of the created to contemplate the Creator. In contrast, the worldly scene that accompanies him introduces a moral critique of vanity and excess, showcasing a musical banquet that becomes an image of dissipation and the forgetfulness of death, emphasized by the presence of the reclining figure. This tension between spiritual retreat and worldly life is inscribed within the Baroque discourse that dramatizes the conflict between body and soul, between the eternal and the ephemeral. The ornamental motifs reinforce this symbolic structure by representing the sensory beauty that can elevate or distract, depending on the inner order of the soul, thus shaping a visual discourse of warning and meditation.
- From a theological perspective, the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas considers that the soul attains the beatific vision through contemplation and the exercise of virtue, which is reflected in the figure of Saint Onuphrius as a symbol of holiness acquired through asceticism and grace. His stance and the attributes surrounding him manifest a state of total abandonment to God, in accordance with Thomistic doctrine on the subordination of the senses to reason illuminated by faith. For his part, Saint Augustine interprets this type of representation as an expression of the soul that, stripped of all earthly distractions, recognizes itself as finite and surrenders to the memory of God. In contrast, the mundane scene can be understood as an image of the soul distracted by fleeting pleasures, which ignores the urgency of conversion. For John Calvin, while he rejects the veneration of images, he would admit that these representations serve a didactic function when subordinated to the Word, and in this case, the visual duality offers the viewer a moral reflection on the fate of the soul. Therefore, the mural as a whole not only articulates aesthetic resources but also constructs a symbolic architecture of salvation aimed at moving and teaching through the image.



Figure 14. Scene of Saint Onuphrius, worldly scene and ornamental motifs.

3.1.12. Scene of Saint Anthony of Abbot, Worldly Scene and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 15)

- The scene depicts a hermit saint, easily identifiable as Saint Anthony Abbot, who is shown seated in front of a cave, wrapped in a dark cloak with an open book on his lap, in a posture of contemplative reading. He is accompanied by a tau cross and a staff, unmistakable symbols of his monastic identity, while a raven brings him food and a boar present itself gently at his feet, alluding to medieval hagiographical accounts. In the distance, buildings and a vegetative environment create a space for retreat, contrasting with the dynamism of the lower scene, where a hunt is depicted with armed horsemen chasing animals in a forest. Below this narrative scene, a decorative vegetal frieze and a multicolored geometric pattern unfold, harmoniously and visually structuring the composition.
- From the Panofskian perspective, the scene articulates a narrative of ascetic life contrasted with the frenzy of worldly existence. The image of Saint Anthony the Abbot in his retreat refers to the pedagogical function of monasticism as a model of stability, obedience, and inner conversion, promoted in the Virreinal visual discourse as an ideal for women's religious life. The contrast with the hunting scene suggests an allegory of spiritual struggle, in which the senses, represented by the horsemen, chase after the beast, while the saint, in his stillness, embodies the victory of the spirit over the flesh. The ornamental frieze and geometric design reinforce the symbolic dimension of the divine order that underlies the entire narrative structure of the mural, integrating the levels of contemplation, action, and cosmological harmony.
- From a theological perspective, the representation of Saint Anthony is linked to the Augustinian doctrine of the soul, which, only in solitude, is prepared to hear the voice of God, away from the sensory distractions of the external world. The reading of the book refers to the meditation of the Scriptures as spiritual nourishment, corresponding with the raven that delivers bread, a sign of divine providence according to Thomas Aquinas. The domesticated wild boar alludes to the redemption of the wild through grace, illustrating the possibility of transforming sin into virtue. The hunting scene, understood from a Calvinist viewpoint, represents humanity's persistent fall into error without the intervention of grace, reaffirming the need for withdrawal and purification to attain the beatific vision, symbolically reflected in the geometric harmony that crowns the entirety of the visual program.



Figure 15. Scene of Saint Anthony the Abbot, worldly scene and ornamental motifs.

3.1.13. Scene of the Trumpeting Angel (Left and Right) and Ornamental Motifs Zoomed in (See Figure 16)

- The scene depicts a winged angel in motion playing a trumpet while holding a floating band that waves with strong symbolic significance. Its figure is dressed in a short tunic, tied at the waist with a cord, which emphasizes its dynamic and messenger character. The outspread wings, the elevated gesture of the arm, and the forward position of its legs suggest an urgent call, framed by ornamental scrolls that visually connect this image with the rest of the mural program of the monastery. The trumpet, a recurring visual element in colonial sacred art, refers to the eschatological announcement and divine judgment, integrating this celestial character into the rhetoric of the apocalyptic and redemptive.
- From Panofsky's iconographic perspective, the trumpeting angel can be read as a symbol of divine revelation, articulating the moment of the final call that precedes the manifestation of eternal truth. Its bodily disposition conveys a theatricality that responds to the visual language of Andean Baroque, where movement dramatizes the celestial message. This type of figure is formally linked to representations of the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment, indicating not only a prophetic end but also an act of proclaiming divine glory. Within the viceregal framework of Cusco, its presence inside a monastic space like Santa Catalina also serves an educational function, reminding the nuns of the constant call to spiritual vigilance.
- The theological reading allows us to understand the trumpet as an instrument of the divine logos, for Augustine of Hippo, the Word is manifested in audible signs that awaken the soul from earthly slumber. Thomas Aquinas reaffirms this function of angels as ministers of Providence, executors of divine will in history, which gives meaning to the active role of the angel as a herald of judgment. For Calvin, the image also refers to the moment when the Lord will separate the righteous from the wicked, sounding His voice like a trumpet through His heavenly servants. The angel depicted in the mural is not merely a visual ornament, but a visual echo of the Apocalypse, a trinitarian symbol of fulfilled time and the urgency of inner conversion that structures the entire monastic theology of contemplative life.



Figure 16. Scene of the Trumpeting Angel (left,right) and ornamental motifs zoomed in.

3.1.14. Scene of Saint Michael the Archangel, Archangel Gabriel, Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 17)

- The representation of the Virgin of the Rosary in the mural cycle articulates a devotional discourse that reflects her role as a mediator and intercessor before Christ. This function, in the Dominican context, is closely linked to the defense of faith and the spiritual victory over evil. Her iconography (composed of the rosary, the crown, and the central placement in the mural program) reinforces her status as the protector of the monastic community, thereby integrating doctrinal and emotional aspects into a single visual resource of great persuasive effectiveness.
- In light of the systematic theology of Aquinas, Calvin, and Augustine, this scene condenses a trinitarian vision of salvation: the archangel's battle reflects the action of the Word against sin, the Virgin's intercession represents the mediation of grace and the prayer of the soul, while the human couple refers to the fallen nature that longs for its redemption. Augustine would have seen in the shield of Saint Michael a manifestation of God's ordered love, which does not allow evil to prevail in history, while Aquinas re-evaluates the role of angels as instruments of divine justice. For Calvin, the presence of the Virgin does not contradict the centrality of Christ, but can be interpreted as a figure of the Church, adorned with virtue, that accompanies the believer in their spiritual pilgrimage toward the heavenly city.



Figure 17. Scene of Saint Michael the Archangel, Archangel Gabriel, ornamental motifs.

3.1.15. Scene of the Guardian Angel, Archangel Saint Raphael, and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 18)

- The scene depicts, at the ends of an arch, two angels dressed in ornate robes, from whose mouths and hands emanate gestures of proclamation and announcement. Both are framed by fruit trees with lush foliage and birds in flight, elements that, from the descriptive iconography of Panofsky, refer to a symbolically Edenic and spiritual space. The angel on the left appears to point at the viewer with a gesture of authority, while the angel on the right holds an unfurled ribbon, suggesting a divine message or proclamation. The symmetry of the scene and the decorative vegetal style reinforce the idea of a cosmos ordered according to celestial principles.
- From an iconological perspective, this representation acquires a profound meaning by placing the angels as heralds of a sacred truth in a space that combines the ornamental with the liturgical. The use of lush foliage and curvilinear forms expresses a Baroque vision of paradise as an ideal of spiritual beauty and divine harmony. In the context

of the Cusco viceroyalty, the function of the angels transcends the decorative and communicates the evangelizing message that is inscribed in the architecture of the convent as a permanent reminder of the presence of the divine in the everyday. The fact that they are positioned above a passageway underscores their role as guardians of a threshold between the earthly world and the sacred realm. The prominence of color ranges Y-Y50R and their correspondence with Andean theological and cultural meanings fulfills objective (ii) by linking color choices with the symbolic construction of the message.

- In light of the theological treatises of Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and Augustine, angels can be interpreted as personifications of God's action in the world, manifestations of His providence, and agents of His Word. According to Aquinas, angels fulfill intellectual and executive functions within the divine order, which is reflected here in their communicative attitude and their integration with the natural environment. Augustine would understand them as pure intelligences in constant praise of the Trinity, and their placement in a high realm reinforces this theological interpretation. For Calvin, the message of the angels must focus on the authority of the Scriptures and the sovereignty of God, elements suggested by the gesture of proclamation that points toward a revealed truth that transcends the visible.



Figure 18. Scene of the Guardian Angel, Archangel Raphael, and ornamental motifs.

3.1.16. Scene of the Trumpeting Angel (Left and Right) and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 19)

- The scene depicts two angels playing trumpets, symmetrically positioned over an arch adorned with botanical motifs in Andean Baroque style. Each figure is shown in an upward movement, with wings spread and tunics fitted to the body, suggesting dynamism and solemnity. From the descriptive iconography, the trumpet is a symbol of celestial announcement and divine judgment, an instrument associated with the apocalyptic passages of the New Testament, particularly the Book of Revelation, where the angels announce the end of times and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. The serene faces, firm postures, and elevated positioning reinforce their status as divine messengers.
- By applying an iconological analysis using Panofsky's methodology, this image is embedded within a visual discourse of warning and revelation that articulates the mystical with the pedagogical. In the context of the colonial Cusco, the trumpeting

angels not only refer to the Last Judgment but also serve as visible doctrinal elements for a predominantly Indigenous and mestizo audience, inviting reflection on the salvation of the soul and the imminence of Christ's second coming. The symmetry and visual language employed in the clothing and gestures create an aesthetic that blends European and local elements, reinforcing the evangelizing role of conventual mural art.

- From the scholastic and reformed theology, the use of the trumpet as an instrument of revelation can be interpreted as an allusion to the active Word of God that breaks into history to restore spiritual order. According to Thomas Aquinas, angels, as purely intellectual beings, act under divine will and communicate eternal judgment without deviation, while for Calvin, these celestial heralds reinforce God's sovereignty over human destiny without the need for earthly mediation. In Augustine's view, the sound of the trumpet is an echo of eternity that calls the elect to the bosom of the Trinity, alluding to the final communion between the divine and the created.



Figure 19. Scene of the Trumpeting Angel (left,right) and ornamental motifs.

3.1.17. Scene of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Dominic de Guzmán, and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 20)

- The scene features the figure of a Franciscan saint, iconographically identified as Saint Francis of Assisi, who holds a cross in his right hand and a skull in his left, while a lush tree with birds perched around it rises behind him. From a descriptive perspective, the gray habit typical of the order, the halo of holiness, and the presence of wings stand out, symbolically linking him to the angelic world or to an exalted representation of his spirituality. The skull directly alludes to *memento mori*, while the tree refers to contemplative life and the restored paradise, elements that merge the message of penance with hope in resurrection.
- The iconological analysis, according to Panofsky's method, reveals an articulation between Counter-Reformation aesthetics and Franciscan spirituality that permeates Andean viceregal art. The inclusion of Saint Francis on the walls of the monastery responds to the need to make visible accessible and profoundly human models of holiness for local communities, promoting the imitation of his life of humility, renunciation, and charity. The tree laden with birds also alludes to his famous sermon to the creatures, with a clear intention to highlight his communion with creation, a trait that was intensely valued in the Andean context for its resonance with pre-existing indigenous worldviews, thus favoring a process of visual and doctrinal syncretism. This finding satisfies objective (iii) by allowing a reading that combines European references and local resignifications.

- From a theological perspective, Saint Francis embodies the living manifestation of the *imitatio Christi*, whose understanding, according to Thomas Aquinas, lies in the total subordination of the human will to the divine order. The cross represents active redemption and voluntary suffering, while the skull expresses disdain for perishable goods, in line with Calvinist doctrine on the mortification of the self. In Augustine's vision, the unity between the soul and nature resonates with the image of the tree as a symbol of the fruitful soul open to grace, shaping the saint as a mediator between the Creator and His creation, reflecting the Trinity manifested in the harmony between body, spirit, and community.



Figure 20. Scene of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Dominic de Guzmán, and ornamental motifs.

3.1.18. Scene of Angel with Musical Instrument (Left and Right) and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 21)

- The scene depicts two musician angels positioned on a mural arch, one playing a violin and the other a guitar, both dressed in robes of warm tones and equipped with outspread wings that enhance their celestial character. From a descriptive iconographic perspective, these figures align with the Baroque visual repertoire that integrates music as a constitutive element of the celestial liturgy, evoking the presence of the divine through sound. The gestures of the angels, along with the decorative vegetation framing the scene, suggest a space symbolically transformed into a stage of praise, where the vibrant colors and instruments reinforce the festive dimension of spiritual glory.
- On an iconological level, according to the Panofskian method, these musician angels not only serve an ornamental function but also embody an allegory of heaven as an eternal choir, resonating with the Counter-Reformation ideals of heightened sensory experience in religious practice. The depiction of European instruments in a viceregal context also reveals a deliberate cultural mediation that links evangelization with forms of artistic expression already familiar to the Andean population. Thus, these murals become pedagogical vehicles that translate celestial mysteries into accessible languages, projecting a vision of the afterlife that stimulates devotion through the senses.
- From a theological perspective, music is interpreted as one of the purest forms of contemplation of the divine order, as noted by St. Augustine in *De Trinitate*, where rhythm and harmony reflect the trinitarian structure of the cosmos. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica*, argues that sacred singing elevates the soul towards God, facilitating the union between the creature and its Creator through ordered beauty. Calvin, although more austere in his approach, acknowledges music as an effective

teaching tool as long as it is subordinated to the truth of the Word. Thus, the angels with instruments embody a synthesis of these conceptions, symbolizing the presence of the Spirit that harmonizes the ecclesial body through praise.



Figure 21. Scene of Angel with musical instrument (left,right) and ornamental motifs.

3.1.19. Scene of the Divine Shepherd, the Virgin of Monserrate, and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 22)

- The scene represents two moments of strong symbolic and theological significance: to the left, a female figure, likely the Virgin Mary in a contemplative posture, is framed by rocky formations and lush trees, while to the right, Christ is seen carrying the cross and accompanied by a lamb, both situated beneath trees with rounded foliage. From the descriptive iconography, the first image can be recognized as a possible allegory of the Virgin as the throne of Wisdom or as the New Eve in meditation, and in the second, a representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd or Lamb of God in an attitude of redemptive offering. The natural surroundings reinforce the connection between the sacred and creation, a recurring characteristic of Andean colonial art.
- From an iconological perspective, the association of both characters with trees and landscape elements responds to a visual program of Christianization that merges Catholic doctrine with Andean worldview. In the case of Mary, her placement among rocks can be interpreted as an allusion to her doctrinal firmness, an image that dialogues with the Marian theology promoted at the Council of Trent. Christ, for his part, appears surrounded by trees whose shapes evoke the tree of knowledge, which refers to the parallelism between Adam and the Redeemer, consolidating a visual discourse on redemption through sacrifice. The lamb at his feet reinforces this reading and connects directly with Eucharistic symbolism.
- Theologically, Mary's presence can be understood from *De Trinitate*, where St. Augustine highlights her role as a mediator between divinity and humanity in the incarnation of the Word. Thomas Aquinas deepens this idea by situating her as an instrument of grace in the salvific plan, while Calvin, albeit with reservations about her veneration, acknowledges her divine election as the bearer of Christ. The image of Jesus with the lamb aligns with the Augustinian vision of the Son as the perfect offering that reconciles the cosmic order disrupted by sin. Together, this scene proposes a synthesis of compassion and redemptive obedience, framed by a nature that also glorifies the work of the Creator.



Figure 22. Scene of the Divine Shepherd, the Virgin of Montserrat, and ornamental motifs.

3.1.20. Scene of an Angel with a Musical Instrument, an Angel Carrying a Chalice, and Ornamental Motifs (See Figure 23)

- The scene depicts two angels positioned at the ends of an arch, each with attributes that refer to the musical and liturgical realm. On the left, an angel carries a harp, with its strings represented with meticulous linearity, reinforcing its role as a performer of celestial music. On the right, another angel holds an open book that is visually identified as a chant codex or liturgical book, likely an antiphony or psalter. From a descriptive iconographic perspective, both winged figures wear ornate tunics, with wings spread and hair in golden hues, following European artistic conventions adapted to the local Cusco style.
- From an iconological perspective, the representation of these angels can be understood as an exaltation of the eternal worship that takes place in heaven, paralleling that which is celebrated on earth. In the Counter-Reformation tradition, particularly solidified after the Council of Trent, the use of sacred music was intensely promoted as a means of spiritual elevation, which is reflected here in the presence of the harp as a symbol of praise. The angel with the book symbolizes the transmission of the divine word through liturgical singing, reinforcing the idea of the Word incarnate and perpetuated in choral proclamation. This iconography also acts as a mediator between the architectural space of the convent and the celestial sphere, creating an immersive visual and devotional experience.
- Theologically, according to St. Augustine in *De Trinitate*, harmonious music reflects divine unity and the structure of the cosmos as an expression of trinitarian order. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologica*, argues that angels, as pure intellectual creatures, glorify God through incessant hymns, while for Calvin, singing holds a privileged place when performed in reverence and with doctrinally sound content. Therefore, the presence of these musician angels not only serves a decorative function but also carries a profound doctrinal significance that invites reflection, contemplation, and the soul's participation in the harmony of the Heavenly Kingdom.



Figure 23. Scene of an angel with a musical instrument, an angel carrying a chalice, and ornamental motifs.

3.1.21. Scene of Arches with Ornamental Motifs and Anthropomorphic Figures (See Figure 24)

- The scene corresponding to the pillars of the cloister of the Monastery of Santa Catalina features a geometric plant decoration composed of symmetrical floral patterns, predominantly white roses set within diamonds crossed by diagonal lines. In terms of descriptive iconography, the repetition of the flower as a central motif can be observed, surrounded by buds in shades of red and green, carefully arranged to emphasize the architectural structure. At the base of the pillars are anthropomorphic figures with stylized wings, identifiable as winged tetramorphs or symbolic representations of the evangelists, whose frontal postures and serene gestures refer to their role in the spiritual support of the building.
- Through iconological analysis, these flowers refer to the Marian imagery extensively developed in Andean colonial art, where the white rose symbolizes the purity and virginity of the Virgin Mary, and its reiteration throughout the cloister reinforces the idea of her immaculate presence as the protector of the conventual space. The geometric shapes that contain these flowers evoke order, harmony, and stability, principles that were essential in counter-reformist thought and visually structured monastic life. The winged infant faces, far from being mere decorations, are understood as symbols of blessed souls or celestial spirits whose mission is to safeguard the walls of the temple, also evoking an angelological reading that supports the idea of communion between heaven and earth.
- From a theological perspective, Saint Augustine interprets the flower not only as a beautiful creature but as an image of the divine manifested in the simple and harmonious. Meanwhile, Saint Thomas Aquinas delves deeper into its symbolism by relating sensible beauty to the perfection of God, asserting that creation reflects divine goodness through order and proportion. Calvin, for his part, emphasizes the importance of visual decency in temples as a manifestation of reverence, avoiding excessive iconography, which is observed here in the balanced integration between ornamentation and architectural structure. Thus, this decoration not only adorns but also instructs and prepares the soul for the contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery contained in floral harmony and the protective spirituality of winged figures. This

visual-architectural integration meets objective (iv), demonstrating that the mural program operated as a pedagogical and spiritual device for the conventual community.



Figure 24. Scene of arches with ornamental motifs and anthropomorphic figures.

4. Discussion

The mural cycle of the Chapter Hall of the Monastery of Santa Catalina establishes a unified visual program that articulates architecture, theology, and religious pedagogy in a coherent and continuous discourse. The sequential arrangement of the scenes and the choice of motifs respond to a catechetical intention characteristic of Andean Baroque, where the conventual space is not only adorned but also becomes an active support for the spiritual formation of the nuns. This approach aligns with what [27,28] have noted, documenting how in Andean colonial art, the compositional unity and the repeated use of visual schemes aimed to facilitate the memorization and internalization of doctrinal concepts. The chromatic integration, spatial proximity, and thematic relationship between scenes reinforce the perception of the whole as a visual text that is read and traversed in a

predetermined order, where each image gains full meaning in relation to the others and to the architectural framework that contains it [12].

The scenes of Marian content in the cycle, such as the Coronation of the Virgin or the Assumption, present an iconographic treatment that combines European references with local elements. The hierarchical representation of Mary, accompanied by angels and celestial symbols, responds to Tridentine models that emphasize her intercessory and mediating role, as noted by [12,29] when analyzing Marian programs in the viceroyalty context. The results of this study corroborate that, in the Cusco context, Marian images not only served to exalt the purity and spiritual authority of the Virgin but also functioned as a mirror of virtues for the nuns, in line with the conventual pedagogy described by [30]. The choice of attributes, such as the royal crown or the starry mantle, along with the use of symbolic colors according to Andean Baroque tradition, reinforces the interpretation of Mary as queen and mother of the Church, and allows for the linking of this thematic axis with other documented mural cycles in the region, such as those of Andahuaylillas and Huaro, which also integrate Marian programs into their overall narrative [27].

The scenes dedicated to the lives and miracles of saints in the mural cycle, such as the representations of Saint Catherine of Siena or Saint Augustine, reveal a didactic intention focused on exemplifying models of virtue and obedience. In these cases, the iconography is not limited to narrative representation but emphasizes doctrinal aspects aligned with the norms of monastic life. The spatial arrangement of these figures in visible and hierarchical places coincides with what [27,29] have noted, documenting the role of saints as visual references of discipline and morality in viceregal convents. The inclusion of specific iconographic attributes, such as the lily in Saint Catherine or the book in Saint Augustine, serves as a visual resource for immediate identification and as a theological synthesis of their virtues, aligning with the pedagogical function of sacred art described by [12]. Furthermore, the comparison with other mural cycles in churches of Cusco confirms that the repetition of these motifs follows an established pattern of doctrinal transmission that adapted to the local context without losing its European foundation.

The allegories present in the cycle, such as the representation of theological and moral virtues, as well as the scenes that allude to heavenly reward, offer a more abstract symbolic content that is equally anchored in the doctrinal function of the whole. The inclusion of personified allegorical figures, accompanied by inscriptions or emblems, aligns with a pedagogical resource that, as [28] indicates, allowed for the transmission of complex concepts through accessible visibility. The results obtained show that these scenes are not isolated but instead engage in dialogue with Marian and hagiographic narratives, reinforcing the integral message of the cycle. The moralizing function of these allegories coincides with what [30] recorded in his study on colonial female convents, where visual art operated as a spiritual guide and corrective tool. Furthermore, the comparison with other pictorial programs in southern Andean convents, described by [29], confirms that the arrangement and symbolism of these figures responded to a hierarchical order and a narrative sequence intended to lead the gaze toward an eschatological goal.

When comparing the results of this study with the background recorded in the literature, it is evident that the mural cycle of the Chapter House of the Monastery of Santa Catalina fully aligns with the dynamics of Andean Baroque, both in its narrative structure and its pedagogical function. The similarities with what have been noted by [12,27,28] allow us to corroborate that the spatial organization and thematic choices respond to iconographic patterns prevalent in the viceroyalty. However, the detailed analysis of this ensemble reveals significant adaptations to the local context, especially in the chromatic treatment and the incorporation of visual elements characteristic of the Cuzco tradition, which nuances and enriches previous interpretations. The interrelationship between the-

matic axes shows that the scenes should not be understood in isolation but as parts of a visual system that articulates Marian doctrines, hagiographic models, and moral teachings within a carefully planned architectural space. In this sense, the results not only complement previous studies but also offer new perspectives on the ability of conventual mural art to serve as a comprehensive means of teaching and spiritual cohesion within viceroyal monastic life.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the mural paintings in the Monastery of Santa Catalina in Cusco has allowed for an understanding of the symbolic and doctrinal depth of an iconographic program that responds both to the theological demands of the Counter-Reformation and to the spiritual needs of women's monastic life in the Andes. Throughout the study, it has been evidenced that the mural scenes were not conceived in isolation or merely as ornamental, but as a carefully designed visual sequence that guides the viewer on an ascending spiritual journey, from the contemplation of the earthly to the aspiration for the divine. This progression is manifested in the choice of exemplary figures, such as penitent saints, hermits, martyrs, and virgins, whose lives shape the virtues that should be cultivated within the cloister, thereby reinforcing the ideal of Christian perfection promoted by the post-Tridentine Church.

It is concluded that the iconography of the monastery constitutes a device for spiritual formation in which each visual element serves a precise catechetical function. The representations of musician angels, the tetramorphs, penitent virgins, the symbols of the Trinity, and the scenes of the Last Judgment are part of a symbolic repertoire that is integrated into an architectural structure not merely as decoration, but as an active component in the construction of the meaning of sacred space. These images not only beautify the walls but also accompany the liturgy, guide meditation, and translate the mysteries of faith into comprehensible and emotionally effective forms. In this sense, the wall becomes a revealing surface, a kind of "visual writing" that conveys theological truths through the language of art, establishing a visual pedagogy where contemplation becomes an experience of doctrinal internalization.

Compared to other viceroyalty mural sets, those of the Monastery of Santa Catalina exhibit a remarkable iconographic originality, not only due to the selection of themes but also because of the integration of Andean elements into the Christian discourse. The incorporation of native flora, symbolic animals, and geometric forms characteristic of indigenous art is not merely a strategy for visual adaptation; it constitutes a gesture of theological appropriation in which the local becomes a vehicle for the universal. This visual synthesis not only communicates the Christian message but also reinterprets it from an Andean sensitivity that recognizes nature, color, and symmetry as legitimate expressions of the divine. In this way, the paintings of the monastery not only illustrate an imported faith but also project a mestizo religiosity deeply rooted in the Cusco culture of the viceroyalty period.

It is also established that the arrangement of the images within the cloister follows a spatial logic in which each scene has a strategic location that reinforces its symbolic value. The perimeter walls, passage arches, vaults, and pilasters become supports for a visual narrative that envelops the religious in a continuous discourse of spiritual vigilance, meditation on death, exaltation of exemplary life, and hope for redemption. This theatricalization of the conventual space through mural painting transforms the monastery into a sacred microcosm where architecture and image jointly create an experience of enclosure that is not only physical but fundamentally symbolic.

The study demonstrates that the mural paintings of the Monastery of Santa Catalina represent a singular example of Andean Baroque, where art, theology, and architecture converge in a deeply coherent aesthetic synthesis. This set should not only be understood as an artistic product of the colonial period but also as an integral manifestation of viceregal religiosity, in which visual language transforms into a means of transmitting faith, consolidating ecclesiastical order, and expressing a feminine spirituality that found in the image the reflection of its transcendent vocation. Therefore, this iconographic corpus deserves a central place in the heritage valuation of viceregal Cusco art and in studies on the symbolic construction of monastic space in the Andes.

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