‘A Natural and Voluntary Dependence’: The Royal Academy of San Carlos and the Cultural Politics of Art Education in Mexico City, 1786–1797

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In this article, I explore the controversies that characterised the foundational years of the Royal Academy of San Carlos of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in Mexico City (1786–1797). They provide provocative insights into questions of competing agendas and ambitions among the artists and bureaucrats of the royal academy. They also illuminate contemporary understandings about the hierarchical relationships between a metropolitan power, Spain, and its American colonies and their visual culture and artistic production, which mirror broader political hierarchies and relationships of power and subordination.

Keywords: Mexico, colonialism, academy, art, visual culture, Bourbon Spain.

Introduction

Recent scholarship on art academies has emphasised three important lines of argument. First, that art academies are inherently political in nature: art as ‘matters of state’ (Hoock, 2003: 233; Boime, 1994). Second, that conventional wisdom about academies’ centralised authority and academic values requires qualification. As Cardoso Denis and Trodd (2000: 6) suggest: ‘academies provided not a monolithic locus of institutional authority and control but, rather, sites of contest and struggle’. Finally, if the arts can be conceived as ‘matters of state’, they can also be conceived as ‘matters of empire’. A cluster of recent works has focused attention on the critical role of art academies and schools in the expansion of imperialism (Mitter, 1994; Sundar, 1995; Cardoso Denis, 2000). As Sundar (1995: 9), argues, ‘arts policies became an instrument of cultural conquest to reinforce political domination’. It is this question of the production of visual culture and Spanish colonialism—the Royal Academy of San Carlos (RASC) of Mexico City as a site of contest and struggle and how ‘academic art gets written into the imperial policy’ (Mitter, 1994: 29) – with which I am concerned in this article.
The basic narrative of the RASC’s foundational years (1786–1797), characterised by conflict and dissension, is well known (Charlot, 1962; Brown, 1976; Báez Macías, 2001). Yet this turbulent period merits closer scrutiny for what it reveals about contemporary understandings of the purposes of arts academies, about academy artists’ competing agendas, and the political forces that shaped the RASC on both sides of the Atlantic. The first part of this article provides a brief overview of the RASC’s administrative structure. The second part examines the causes of the acrimonious disputes that developed shortly after the RASC’s official opening. The third part explores a consequence of those disputes: the foundation of a satellite school for advanced scholarship students of the Mexican academy in Madrid (García Saíz and Rodríguez Tembleque, 1987).

Although individual personalities and rivalries (Brown, 1976; Báez Macías, 2001) and aesthetic differences (Charlot, 1962; Uribe, 1999) contributed to the controversies that erupted within the RASC, I argue that they cannot be understood without consideration of the following. First, the conflicts that emerged reflected divergent opinions about the objectives of arts academies and about the artists’ status. Second, such conflicts were shaped by contested understandings of the power relationships between the matrix art academy in Madrid, the Royal Academy of San Fernando and the Mexican academy. Third, the policy-making process that resulted in the foundation of the school for Novohispanic students in Madrid demonstrates the convergence of several political and cultural agendas that reflect broader metropolitan-colonial relationships of the late eighteenth century.

The Royal Academy of San Carlos: Rationale and Organisation

By the early 1800s, Spain boasted three royal art academies: San Fernando in Madrid (1752), San Carlos in Valencia (1768) and San Luis in Zaragoza (1793), supplemented by numerous schools of drawing (Bédat, 1989). The foundation of the RASC in Mexico City in 1783 constituted the fourth arts academy to be founded under royal patronage and the only one of its kind established in Spain’s American colonies. The training of artists and artisans responded to the imperatives of the Spanish Bourbon monarchy focused on Spain’s political and economic resurgence as a global power (Mackay, 2006). Influenced by the utilitarian dimensions of Enlightenment thought, education of Spain’s subjects – metropolitan and colonial – became central to the Bourbons’ reforming impulses. Academies of varying specialisations, including those of the fine arts, played an integral role in such education and in the dissemination of ‘useful knowledge’. At the same time, if the ‘arts’ were increasingly perceived to be part of a solution to economic and social malaise, they also reflected a nation’s wealth and power. As Hoock (2003: 129) eloquently argues:

The quality of the visual arts provided an index of the civilisation of past and present societies. Art was relevant to the polity and nation: as evidence of the nation’s character and the polity’s moral health, as a national economic resource, an asset in the international competition of cultural display, or as the nation’s cultural patrimony. These assumptions underlie the politicisation of art.

The RASC originated in the school of drawing established within the Mexico City Mint in 1778 under the directorship of Jerónimo Antonio Gil, a renowned engraver and academicián of the Madrid academy. With the support of the powerful Superintendent
of the Mint, Fernando José Mangino Fernández de Lima, Gil’s proposal to transform the school into a fully fledged academy received support from the Mining Tribunal, the Merchants’ Guild, the Mexico City Council, and in 1783, the king.¹ The nexus between art and mercantilism and the RASC’s commercial utility is reflected in José de Gálvez’s (the Minister of the Council of the Indies) commentary that ‘The useful employment of men . . . is the only method by which to make the Treasury wealthy and the Nation powerful . . . if the arts and the crafts depend on drawing, then herein lies the usefulness of the Academy for this capital [Mexico City]’ (Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Instrucción Pública y Justicia 5, Gálvez, 18 November 1784, ff. 147–151).

New Spain’s viceroy, Matías de Gálvez–José de Gálvez’s brother—also expressed confidence in the RASC’s potential to solve the viceroyalty’s social and economic problems as ‘the only efficacious method by which to destroy idleness, poverty and misery’ (Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Indiferente General 103, Gálvez, 31 July 1783). The new academy would also remedy what he viewed as the under-development of the arts in New Spain (unlike the sciences) as a result of ‘a lethargy of two and a half centuries’ (AGI, Indiferente General 103, Gálvez, Arenga . . . 1 June 1783). In a single phrase, the viceroy dismissed the past 250 years of Mexico’s artistic production. A portrait of Matías de Gálvez captures the desire to inculcate buen gusto (or ‘good taste’) – defined as neoclassicism – in the academy’s students through its public instruction (see Figure 1). As Michael Brown observes: ‘According to the language of the portrait, the academy represented a means of transformation from street urchin apprentice to skilled professional’ (Brown, 2004: 49). The juxtaposition of the two groups of students in the painting, however, may also represent the training of both artists and artisans in the fine and applied arts without any hint of the contradiction and controversy that such objectives would produce within the RASC.²

Modelled on the 1757 statutes of the Madrid academy, which were, in turn, modelled on those of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the RASC’s administration consisted of a vice-protector (the viceroy), a president (the official substitute for the vice-protector) and four committees, the two most important of which were the junta superior de gobierno (the academy’s governing board composed of the viceroy, president, councillors, secretary and honorary academicians) and the junta ordinaria (the ordinary committee composed of members of the junta superior plus the director-general, directors of painting, sculpture, architecture, engraving and mathematics, their assistants, and the academicians or artist members and honorary academicians) (Estatutos de la Real Academia de San Carlos de Nueva España, 1785).

While a detailed analysis of the academy’s administrative organisation is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to keep in mind the following. The academy came under the Spanish monarch’s direct patronage and protection mediated through the Minister of State and the Despacho Universal de Indias. Formally responsible for the RASC’s governance and development, the incumbent viceroy, as vice-protector, constituted the highest authority in New Spain. In practice, however, the academy’s daily management fell to its president and secretary who consulted with its councillors,

¹ For a discussion of artists’ previous attempts to establish an arts academy in Mexico City see Deans-Smith (2009).
² For discussion of this controversy in academies in general see Pevsner (1973); Goldstein (1996).
Figure 1. Don Matías de Gálvez y Gallardo as Viceprotector of the Academia de San Carlos, 1790–1791. Oil on canvas, 89 × 61 inches (226 × 155 cm). Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepoztlán, Mexico. CONACULTA-INAH-SINAFO-MEX. (Reproduction authorised by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)
director-general and academicians. The president’s position was usually held by high-ranking colonial bureaucrats such as Ramón de Posada y Soto, the fiscal de hacienda (Crown attorney) for the Audiencia of Mexico City. The junta’s councillors (who ranged between five and nine in number) represented a cross-section of the most important economic and political interests of New Spain and combined both local and metropolitan interests. Positions were specifically reserved for a representative from the Mining Tribunal, one from the Mexico City Merchants’ Guild, and one from the Mexico City Council. ‘Distinguished’ individuals who demonstrated an interest in the arts and sciences, and their development in the viceroyalty filled the remaining positions.

While the positions of secretary and the councillors proved to be stable with minimal turnover, those of the ministers of state, vice-protector and president introduced an element of instability. Between 1786 and 1797, the RASC had four ministers, six vice-protectors and three presidents. The position of honorary academician offered the recipient the kudos of recognition by an institution under royal patronage, while providing the academy with an infusion of potential influential donors. Appointees reflected a cross-section of New Spain’s elites, including nobility, clergy and the military, and who were increasingly appointed from provinces outside of Mexico City.

The junta ordinaria focused on all matters related to the teaching of art, assessment of students’ works, review of architectural projects and election of new academicians. The director-general headed the teaching faculty. As stipulated in the academy’s statutes, the appointment as director-general would rotate among the directors of the different sections of painting, architecture, sculpture and engraving for three-year periods. The exception to this rule, however, was the king’s appointment of Gil as director-general for his lifetime, and which he held from 1785 to 1798. Sixteen pensions or scholarships supported gifted students for a training period of twelve years: four each in painting, sculpture and architecture; two in print engraving and two in medal engraving. Whereas access to the beginners’ classes was open to anyone who wished to attend them, only talented but poor Spaniards (from Spain and its American colonies) were eligible for academy scholarships. Four of the sixteen scholarships were specifically reserved for Indios puros (pure Indians), who also had to meet the qualifications of being talented and poor. Night classes offered five days a week provided the opportunity for Mexico City’s artisans and aficionados to improve their skills in drawing, perspective, and mathematics.

Significant in the RASC’s institutional organisation is that its statutes did not include any explicit statement about its relationship to the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. This is in marked contrast to the situation of the Valencian academy. The Madrid academy mediated its creation, evaluated and approved its statutes, and made clear the hierarchical relationship between the two institutions (Bérchez, 1987; Bédat, 1989: 398–405). Although the RASC’s statutes were modelled on those of the Madrid academy (with some modifications), their final approval occurred without any intervention from, or consultation with the Madrid academy. Another distinction focused on the practice of sending talented students to Rome or Paris. Although the RASC’s junta superior originally hoped to fund such scholarships, Charles III made it clear that he did not wish the Mexican academy to be burdened with the significant costs of supporting students in Europe. Rather, all students should be trained in Mexico City, for which everything necessary to facilitate such a comprehensive education would be provided (AGN, Instrucción Pública y Justicia 5, Gálvez to viceroy, 18 November 1784, ff. 147–151). A particular ‘privilege’ of the RASC is made clear in Article 29 of its statutes, which ordered that no institution for the study of the arts could be
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established in New Spain without prior notification to the king by the junta superior. Any new art schools that received royal approval would be subordinated to the RASC in Mexico City (Estatutos de la Real Academia de San Carlos de Nueva España, 1785). This particular statute is virtually the same as that of Article 33 in the Madrid academy’s statutes (Estatutos de la Real Academia de San Fernando, 1757: 91). It endowed the RASC with comparable powers, in theory at least, as arbiter of taste and control over artistic production and training within New Spain. One qualification to the RASC’s regulatory powers, however, merits attention. In 1786, the Madrid academy created an Architecture Commission to act as a central supervisory body based in Madrid. Architectural plans for major ecclesiastical and secular buildings from cities and towns throughout the Spanish empire were to be submitted to the Madrid academy for final assessment and approval, regardless of whether they possessed an academy or not (Berchéz, 1987; García Melero, 1992; Gutiérrez, 1994).3

‘Like Wild Trees Without Direction or Cultivation’: Conflict and Controversy, 1788–1795

If Viceroy Gálvez took a dim view of the state of the arts in Mexico, so too did members of the RASC’s junta superior. Advised by Director-General Gil, they agreed that the resident artists, mainly creoles (some of whom were currently employed as correctores or instructors in the academy), lacked the skills and training required for the positions of directors of painting, sculpture and architecture. The junta superior recommended generous salaries of 2,000 pesos each for the new directors in order to attract the best candidates (Archivo Histórico Gráfico de la Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas – Antigua Archivo Academia de San Carlos (AHG-ENAP-AAASC) Planero No XI, Gaveta 2 Lote 8, 14 July 1785, ff. 51r–52). Gil’s choices included Mariano Salvador de Maella (painting), Isidro Carnicero (sculpture), Juan de Villanueva (architecture), and Gil’s brother-in-law, Fernando Selma (engraving) (AGI, Mexico 1395, Gil, 18 July 1782). Probably as a result of the combination of the king’s desire to retain his best artists and José de Gálvez’s intervention, appointed instead to the directorships were Ginés de Andrés y de Aguirre and Cosme de Acuña y Troncoso (first and second directors of painting respectively); José Arias, (sculpture) and Antonio Velázquez (architecture). Like Gil, all had trained at the Royal Academy of San Fernando and graduated as academicians. The Catalan Miguel Costanzó, resident in Mexico City since 1764, a captain of engineers in the Royal Army and a cartographer, was appointed as director of mathematics. José Joaquín Fabregat, an academician of both the Madrid and Valencian academies, joined the RASC’s faculty in 1788 as director of metal engraving.

The source of the conflicts that developed soon after the directors’ arrival is to be found in the definition of their teaching responsibilities. On 3 October 1786, the junta ordinaria recommended that the directors be required to teach the academy students during the days and evenings once the new academy building was completed. In the interim, however, they need only attend the evening classes; during the day students should study in the directors’ houses. Six months later, the junta ordinaria revised its ruling because of the problems that such an arrangement created. Although

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3 The commission’s ability to enforce its regulatory will over the design and construction of architectural works at home and throughout the empire requires much more research.
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the exact nature of such ‘problems’ was not specified, the most likely issue was the limited numbers of students who the directors could—or would—train in addition to the pensioners (AGI, Mexico 2793, Mangino to Porlier, 29 December 1788). In this, presumably the directors followed the model practised in Madrid, where students studied with a particular professor during the day, and attended the academy in the evenings. The junta recommended that even though the new academy building remained unfinished, classes should be open daily ‘as is customary in all public instruction’, and at which the directors must be present. Daily classes would be offered from 9 am until noon, and from 3 pm until 5 pm; evening classes from 7 pm until 9 pm. Since the directors received a salary specifically for this task, they should dedicate themselves to the education and progress of their students ‘wherein lies their honor . . .’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, 10 April 1787).

The junta’s ruling set off a series of bitter disputes between Gil and the junta superior on the one hand, and the directors on the other. Such a state of affairs lasted effectively for the duration of Gil’s tenure as director-general, fuelled, no doubt, by his lifetime appointment in the position. The directors used a variety of channels to press their claims that ranged from their exchanges with the junta superior, the academy president and its vice-protector, the viceroy of Mexico, to those with the president of the Madrid academy and the ultimate authority, the king.

In one of the directors’ earliest petitions to the viceroy, they requested exemption from attendance at the academy’s daytime classes. They asserted that such an obligation violated the academy statutes that clearly stated that they need only attend evening classes. They criticised what they perceived to be lax governance of the academy and disregard for many of its statutes. The directors denounced Gil’s ‘despotic authority’. They blamed him for the RASC’s current problems and also implied that he was culpable in the deteriorating health of their colleague, José Arias, the director of sculpture, who, shortly after arriving in Mexico, began to suffer from a variety of illnesses, culminating in his death in 1788. They ridiculed Gil’s selection of ‘modern’ foreign prints for academy students, when he should have requested works of the ‘great professors to whom all nations have paid tribute to their sublime genius’. Finally, they pointed out that compliance with the requirement made it impossible for them to accept commissions from the public (Antiguo Archivo de la Academia de San Carlos – Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (AAASC–UNAM), doc. 287, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to Ex Sr, 13 April 1788).

In response to the directors’ petition, the junta superior asked for Gil’s evaluation of their arguments and of the academy’s progress to date. Not surprisingly, Gil argued strenuously against granting the directors’ request to be exempted from daily attendance at the academy. He concurred that the academy was in a state of ‘shameful decay’ and that student attendance had declined. Responsibility for such a state of affairs, however, lay with the directors who, Gil argued, privileged their private interests over their public duties to teach academy students and to nurture their progress. The director-general insisted that it was pointless for the directors to invoke the junta’s instruction of 3 October 1786, because it was never intended to be permanent. The academy’s statutes made clear that continuous attendance at its day and evening classes was required (Estatutos de la Real Academia de San Carlos de Nueva España, 1785: art 29/9; art.

4 They may have been alluding to what they perceived to be Gil’s continuing taste for the Rococo. See Uribe (1999).
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14/8; art. 14/13; art. 19/10; art. 9/2; art. 8/1). Gil concluded that the most useful course of action for the benefit of all concerned – the king, the public and the academy – would be for the directors to return to Spain (AGI, Mexico 2793, Gil to junta superior, 31 May 1788).

The junta superior unanimously voted to reject the directors’ petition and informed them that they must attend the academy classes at the indicated hours. Guided by many of Gil’s arguments, the junta ordered the directors to focus on their teaching and on the students’ progress and development (AGI, Mexico 2793, 31 May 1788). Frustrated, but undaunted by the ruling, the directors appealed directly to the secretary of the Madrid academy, Antonio Ponz (Archivo de la Academia de San Fernando (AASF) 36-3/2, 26 May and 21 June 1788), and subsequently to the king. In their lengthy petition to Charles III, they insisted that the academy statutes continued to be ignored, and that the king’s subjects remained ignorant of the formal principles of art ‘like wild trees without direction or cultivation’ (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 22, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 July 1788). It appears to be this letter that resulted in an escalation of the conflict.

Although the animosity between Gil and the directors – especially with Acuña – appears to have been severe, their respective positions cannot be explained simply in terms of mutual loathing and explosive personalities. Taking into account the directors’ subsequent petitions and Gil’s rejoinders, combined with what has already been noted, several issues of contention surface repeatedly: divergent understandings about the relationship between the Mexican and Madrid academies, and of the objectives of an arts academy, the teaching of art and of the artists’ status.

Threaded throughout the directors’ statements are references to and comparisons with the Madrid academy’s practices and statutes. Such references suggest that they assumed that the RASC was subject to the same conditions of subordination to the Madrid academy as other provincial academies in Spain, and should follow the same method of instruction. This is clearly demonstrated in their repeated requests that the Madrid academy should assess their complaints. As for the modification of statutes to take into account the local conditions in New Spain, they commented: ‘It is painful to see the chaos and disorder in the academy which originates from the junta wishing to reform our wise statutes without acknowledging that to them is owed the happy progress that other nations view with envy and admire in our Royal Academy of San Fernando…’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 June 1789).

The directors drew on the prevailing prejudice among artists against engraving – ‘an inferior art’ – and engravers in general within the hierarchy of the fine arts. Although they acknowledged Gil’s accomplishments as an engraver, they observed that no other academies in Europe had ever appointed master engravers to the position of director-general (AGI, Mexico 2793, directors to viceroy, 30 May 1794). Implicit in their comments is the view that the appointment of an engraver as director-general compromised the Mexican academy’s integrity and reputation, and by extension their own status as artists. As such, the directors repeatedly requested that Gil’s tenure be suspended and the ‘alternativa’ be implemented, whereby the position of director-general would rotate among the directors for three-year periods (AAASC-UNAM, doc. 877, Ximeno, Tolsá, Aguirre to Ex Sr, 29 April 1793).

As for the vexed issue of teaching responsibilities, the directors argued that the practices of the Madrid academy should be implemented in the RASC: faculty were required to attend classes for only a few months each year for a few hours, and only during the evening. Although faculty received a small salary, the arrangement provided them with much more time to work on their royal and private commissions.
The issue of teaching hours also exposed different views about the objectives of an art academy and how and what to teach. In a particularly damning statement, the directors charged that Gil was ‘ignorant of what an academy is . . . and as such does not understand that our intentions are the most sincere and directed to the best teaching . . . ’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 June 1789). From their perspective, art academies should work as a supplement to, not a replacement for individual artists’ studios and workshops. Acuña, in particular, expressed very strong opinions about the individual artist’s autonomy in relation to the academy. He defended the practice of students conducting their studies in the directors’ houses because it permitted ‘the intense meditation that theory and practice demanded to achieve true perfection that is impossible within the academy’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 June 1789). The directors rejected the junta superior’s invocation of Anton Rafael Mengs’s theories on the teaching of art to justify the need for both day and evening classes. As they remarked to the king, Mengs’s views could not substitute for the academy’s statutes and had no legal validity (AGI, Mexico 2793, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 June 1789).5

The directors’ sense of superiority as artists over Gil manifests itself in their repeated critiques of the teaching methods in place. Particularly lacking in their view was attention to theory: students were subjected to servile imitation, limited to ‘copying copies of copies and designs’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 June 1789). As for Gil’s selection of models and teaching materials to be requested from Spain, his choices simply confirmed in the directors’ minds that Gil was ‘out of his depth in our specialities’ (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 22, Aguirre, Acuña, Velázquez to S.M., 26 July 1788).

Gil’s responses, endorsed by the junta superior, were undoubtedly shaped by a proprietary sensibility toward the RASC given his role in its foundation and the investment of ten years of his life in its development by the time the new directors arrived in Mexico City. Influential also may have been his experience and memories of the conflicts that beset the Madrid academy in the 1760s focused on Mengs, and the latter’s criticisms of its teaching methods and organisation (Úbeda de los Cobos, 1987, 1992). Gil believed the practice of allowing students to study in the directors’ houses would undermine the academy’s main objective to provide public instruction and the future benefits it would produce for New Spain’s inhabitants. He observed that the directors did not possess the books, prints, models or original works that were indispensable for effective teaching. Finally, Gil contended that many students did not wish to study in the directors’ houses, not only because it was more honourable to attend the academy, but also because they did not wish to be restricted to the style of only one master (AGI, Mexico 2793, Gil, Informe General, 31 May 1788). At the core of these positions was the fundamental issue that the majority of European art academies confronted and debated at one time or another what constituted the main purpose of an art academy. Was it fundamentally to provide a forum in which to discuss and develop the theory and rules of art and to train artists in the fine arts, was it to

5 The junta superior cited folio 399 from Mengs’s Carta de D. Antonio Rafael Mengs a un amigo sobre la constitución de una academia de las bellas artes, in which he argued that night classes were ‘far from being sufficient for those who dedicate themselves to the Fine Arts . . . ’ (1780).
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educate artisans and mechanics in the basics of drawing and design, or could it do both (Pevsner, 1973; Úbeda de los Cobos, 1992; Goldstein, 1996)?

Unable to resolve the conflict, the junta superior appealed to Antonio Porlier, Minister of Grace and Justice in Madrid (AAASC-UNAM, doc. 436, 27 August 1788) for a ruling on the contentious teaching obligations. After numerous exchanges among the respective institutions in Spain and Mexico, fuelled by additional protests from the directors, the viceroy, on 20 August 1790, informed the junta superior of the king’s will that the directors must comply with their teaching responsibilities during the day and evenings (AAASC-UNAM, doc. 490). The king’s order should have settled the matter but it did not. Following the replacements of Arias by Manuel Tolsá as director of sculpture in 1791 and of Cosme de Acuña by Rafael Ximeno y Planes as second director of painting in 1794 (Giner, 1989), the reconstituted faculty of directors submitted additional petitions to advance their case in 1794 and 1795.

‘Where Are Their Models of Antiquity?': Academy Reform and the Mexican School in Madrid

Although Gil and the junta superior prevailed over the directors’ protests about their teaching responsibilities, the disputes exposed the RASC to increased internal and external scrutiny. Such scrutiny not only reveals a level of uncertainty as to the academy’s future, but also a critical rethinking of its relationship to Madrid. Antonio Porlier, the Minister of Grace and Justice, in response to the junta superior’s appeal for a ruling on the directors’ obligations, requested several evaluations of the academy including one from its vice-protector, the viceroy, the second Conde de Revillagigedo. The viceroy recommended that the RASC should provide only basic and intermediate classes in arithmetic, geometry, osteology and, most fundamentally, in ‘drawing the proportions of the human body’ to be copied from both the antique and the live model. After completion of these classes, talented students who wished to pursue careers in the fine arts could travel to Spain to train with ‘the most famous professors of the Court’. In effect, Revillagigedo recommended a scaling back of the academy’s curriculum and redefining it as a school of drawing that primarily served artisans. His plan also called for a reversal of Charles III’s order that the RASC should not fund study of the fine arts by its students in Europe. Implicit in Revillagigedo’s proposal is the argument that the RASC would never possess the cultural resources and expertise to train students in the fine arts, which could only be accomplished in Madrid (AGI, Mexico 1879, Revillagigedo to Porlier, 11 November 1789).

Although it is unclear whether the junta superior received a copy of the viceroy’s report, it embarked on its own internal assessment of the RASC’s progress or lack thereof. Despite the directors’ assertions that the junta favoured Gil, it did not reject out of hand all of the issues they raised. The junta requested Gil and the directors to make recommendations on how to improve teaching and the RASC’s method of studies (AHG-ENAP-AAASC, Planero XI Gaveta 2 Lote 8, 19 January 1790). Closely linked to this internal assessment were intensified efforts to develop the academy’s

6 A previous royal order issued in 1788 ordered the directors to attend day and evening classes but it is unclear whether the junta superior received it (AGN, Reales Cédulas 141, exp. 178, 12 December 1788).

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collections of paintings, books, prints and plaster casts. The junta requested portraits of the academy’s former president Mangino (now a minister on the Council of the Indies), and its founder and patron Charles III, to be painted by academicians from the Madrid academy – Francisco Bayeu, Mariano Salvador de Maella or Francisco Goya – because the academy ‘possessed none from which good copies could be made’, and that would help students to develop their ‘buen gusto’ (AHG-ENAP-AAASC, Planero XI Gaveta 2 Lote 8, 29 August 1789). Tolsá, as the newly appointed director of sculpture in 1790, supervised the shipment of a large number of plaster casts that formed the foundation of the academy’s antique collections (Bargellini and Fuentes, 1989).

The Minister of Grace and Justice also received an unsolicited proposal related to the Mexican academy in 1792 from none other than Cosme de Acuña, who had returned to Spain after resigning from his position as second director of painting of the RASC. In his proposal, Acuña made the case for the foundation in Madrid of a school for advanced students of the Mexican academy that would also operate as a satellite school of both the Royal Academy of San Fernando and of San Carlos. Acuña remained outspoken in his conviction that, despite the RASC’s recent acquisitions of plaster casts after the antique, prints and teaching supplies, they were insufficient to allow talented students to successfully develop as artists given the lack of original models and monuments of antiquity in Mexico, ‘but which exist in abundance in Spain’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘ Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, ff. 52–55). Acuña requested that he be appointed as the school’s director; the costs of the students’ travel, their maintenance in Madrid and the director’s salary to be paid out of the RASC’s budget. Ample precedents for such schools existed such as the school in Madrid for advanced students from the Valencian academy and the Rome scholarships for students from the Madrid academy (Bédat, 1989: 266–270). Acuña appears to have taken this initiative based on his own ambitions. Although his former colleagues continued to criticise Gil and the RASC’s teaching methods, there is no evidence that they actively supported Acuña’s proposal. Acuña’s motivations may have been influenced by Gil’s blistering criticisms of him as a teacher, but two additional motivations must be considered. First, he needed to re-establish his position and status within the Madrid academy and to build up his clientele. Second, his return to Spain occurred at precisely the same time that the Madrid academy became increasingly wracked by its own conflicts focused on the theory and practice of art, on the teaching of art and the academy’s role in society (Úbeda de los Cobos, 1992, 2001; Whistler, 2001).

The main bureaucratic bodies involved in the assessment of Acuña’s proposal were the Ministry of State (Grace and Justice) in consultation with the Council of the Indies, and the Royal Academy of San Fernando. Although officials in the minister’s secretariat and the mesa (Mexico desk) offered their opinions on the RASC’s case, it is not always clear from the documentation consulted whose opinions were being expressed and which influenced final policy decisions taken between 1792 and 1797. However, taking into account evidence in some of the opinions offered of an informed knowledge of art, and familiarity with New Spain and the RASC, the most likely suspects include Ramón de Posada, fiscal for New Spain on the Council of the Indies, and Fernando Mangino, Bernardo de Iriarte, and Ignacio Agustín de Hermosilla y Sandoval, all ministers de

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7 Appointed as assistant director of painting in the Royal Academy of San Fernando in 1795, Acuña replaced Goya, who became the new director of painting; in 1798 the King appointed Acuña as one his Court painters (Arnaiz, 1991).
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capa y espada on the Council of the Indies (Burkholder, 1982). The overlap with membership of the Royal Academy of San Fernando is significant given that all of the aforementioned officials were members of the Madrid academy in some capacity, either as part of its governing bureaucracy, or as honorary academicians and/or artist members (Bédat, 1982, 1989. Of the three ministers who oversaw the deliberations of Acuña’s proposal, only one – Pedro de Acuña (1792–1794) – was not a member of the Royal Academy of San Fernando. Both Porlier (1787–1792) and Eugenio de Llaguno Amirola (1794–1797) were honorary academicians.

After considerable discussion with his advisors, Pedro de Acuña forwarded Cosme de Acuña’s proposal to Bernardo de Iriarte, vice-protector of the Madrid academy, for his assessment. In his request to Iriarte, the minister made several observations about the Mexican academy’s current state.⁸ Despite a natural inclination towards the arts by Mexico’s inhabitants, especially painting, they had made minimal progress. Students had little practice in the rules of colour and worked with inferior prints and models that were far inferior to the originals, and which lacked ‘elegance, proportion, chiaroscuro and perspective’. Moreover:

even though students can be taught the rules [of art] nothing contributes to learning them as much as a meditative study of the works of the most celebrated paintings and of the practice of the most able and skilled professors . . . There are none in Mexico, nor will there be works of quality or painters of skill any time soon . . . If those [academies] of San Fernando, Valencia, Paris, and others, their proximity to Rome notwithstanding, have adopted the practice of supporting students to acquire the best education from the best professors, how much more necessary is it to adopt this method for Mexico that is so far away from such resources, that lacks directors of renown, and the works of the old masters [autores antiguos].

The minister concluded that the training of Novohispanic students in Madrid would enable the RASC to fulfil its mandate as set out in its statutes, and more than justified the expenses such a programme required (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, ff. 56–57).

A high-ranking and seasoned career bureaucrat, Bernardo de Iriarte’s response to the minister reveals not only his views on Cosme de Acuña’s proposal, but also on the RASC and the logic of Spanish colonialism. In so doing, Iriarte blends almost seamlessly aesthetics and Bourbon absolutism. Iriarte supported Acuña’s proposal but he appears more intent in using his discussion of it as a pretext to launch a stinging attack on the Mexican academy. He observed that if the RASC did not already exist, it would be better not to create it, or at least not in its current form (thus echoing Revillagigedo’s recommendation for academy reform). Iriarte complained that the Mexican academy’s existence was opposed to the system and order that ought to govern the relationship between the colonies and the metropolis, a relationship that should preserve ‘the rigid dependency which according to incontrovertible and elemental principles, the first [America] should have on the second, [Spain]’. He concluded that ‘having already committed a political error [the academy’s establishment] that is too late to remedy, it is important to appropriate as much as possible . . . [from the RASC] for Spain’s benefit

⁸ There was no family relationship between Pedro and Cosme de Acuña.

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... whether it be in the form of financial support for the scholarship students in Madrid or in the acquisition of current works of art by Spanish faculty. Finally, Iriarte focused on what for him was the central issue that Acuña’s project had unwittingly (perhaps) allowed him to address: the question of power and authority between the Madrid and Mexican academies. He advised the Minister of Grace and Justice that it would be important ‘to secure connections between both bodies such that the Academy of San Carlos will be placed in a natural and voluntary dependence on the Academy of San Fernando, Mother of those of its class, and located where the sovereign resides’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, 8 October 1792, ff. 58–61).

Iriarte’s opinions provoked a mixed response from the Minister of Grace and Justice that illuminate disagreements among Spanish officials about the nature of Spanish colonialism refracted through the debates about the Mexican academy. The minister noted that the Madrid academy resented the RASC because it had never been consulted about its foundation. He pointed out the level of Spain’s dependency on other countries for manufacture and commerce and that: ‘the works of painters and sculptors in Spain [do not] comprise even the smallest part of commerce with the Indies’. He also noted that the RASC and a well-trained population in the viceroyalty of New Spain, far from becoming Spain’s competitors, would contribute to the development of the Americans’ buen gusto who ‘in appreciating the beauties of Art, there may come a time when they will solicit works from professors in these kingdoms’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, ff. 61–64). However critical the minister and his advisers may have been of Iriarte’s indictment of the Mexican academy and his broader conception of Spain’s relationship to its colonies, they nevertheless approved Cosme de Acuña’s proposal and recommended his appointment as the new school’s first director (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, f. 65).

Two developments in Spain that converged while Acuña’s proposal was under deliberation undoubtedly facilitated its approval: Bourbon administrative reform to enhance centralised government control that included uniformity of governance of Spain and America, and internal reform and debate within the Madrid academy. In 1787, the Ministry of the Indies was divided into two secretariats: Grace and Justice, and Finance, War and Trade. Three years later, in 1790, the Ministry of the Indies was abolished and its functions incorporated into the appropriate Spanish ministry, each of which exercised authority over the American colonies in its own field. Intended to centralise government according to the principle of ‘one king, one law’, it also reinforced an unequal, hierarchical relationship between Spain and its colonies. As Jacques Barbier has argued, if ‘union and equality’ on one level meant the end of colonial status, it could also imply the destruction of the ‘individuality of the overseas dominions ... and a desire to increase American dependence’ (Barbier, 1977: 68; Bernard, 1972).

The second development related to a period of crisis experienced by the Madrid academy in the 1790s. In addition to debates that generated challenges to Mengsian neoclassicism and the academy’s curriculum, the proliferation of academies and drawing schools in the peninsula placed the Madrid academy increasingly on the defensive with regard to its effective authority as arbiter of the arts and its control over provincial art institutions. Iriarte criticised not only the RASC, but all of the provincial academies in Spain, ultimately arguing that only one academy ought to exist: that of San Fernando (Bédat, 1989: 405). Thus, the debate over the need for the Madrid school for gifted students of the RASC became incorporated into a broader issue of the Madrid academy’s corporate interests and the potential dilution of its power as a result of the foundation of regional academies.
The Madrid academy’s situation effectively mirrored on a smaller scale the Spanish state’s efforts at uniformity and centralisation. Such a policy is manifested in several clauses of Cosme de Acuña’s *Reglamento* for the Mexican school that was vetted and approved by the Madrid academy. Combined, the clauses placed control of future appointments of the RASC’s directors and their assistants in the hands of the Madrid academy. They did so by restricting the right to hold such appointments to graduates of Acuña’s school (who would also be qualified as academicians of San Fernando). In the case that none of the students appeared qualified to take up the positions, the new directors should be selected only from academicians of the Madrid academy, thus excluding any academicians trained in the RASC (AAASC–UNAM, doc. 776, 23 December 1792). Although the Madrid academy’s claims that the RASC should be formally subordinated to it were rejected, approval of the *Reglamento* for Acuña’s school implied that the minister and his advisers agreed with Acuña and Iriarte that students of the fine arts could only be properly trained in Madrid.

The RASC’s first formal notification of the Madrid school’s establishment and its financial obligations to support the school arrived in two royal orders of 20 November and 25 December 1792. Ordered to select six students to travel to Madrid to continue their studies with Acuña, the *junta superior* complied. For varying reasons, all of the students selected requested that they not be sent to Spain. Two years later, no students had been selected to replace them. In response to queries from the Minister of Grace and Justice about the delay in sending students to Madrid, the *junta superior* reminded the minister of the RASC’s embryonic state. As the junta observed:

> it is not something to be proud of to admit that there are no students ready to travel to Court and who would benefit from such training. In future, the students’ progress will be much more rapid because they have the appropriate models to imitate, but time and care in their teaching is necessary. The Academy of San Fernando functioned for more than 30 years before being able to send pensioners to Rome even with its greater resources.

The *junta superior*, concluded, however, that it was convinced that the Madrid school would have ‘useful effects’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, *junta superior* to Revillagigedo, 17 June 1793).

Although the minister appears to be correct in his observation that the RASC presented no formal protest against the new school in Madrid, he was mistaken in his view that no criticisms were made about the Madrid school’s *Reglamento*. In a rare instance of unity, Gil and the directors recommended to the *junta superior* several modifications to the regulations. Quite what happened to them, and why they appear not to have been considered, is unclear. One of the most important revisions suggested focused on the controversial question of eligibility for future appointments to the directors’ positions of the RASC. The directors challenged the statutes that would have made appointment of graduates from Acuña’s school and from the Madrid academy to directorships in the RASC virtually an automatic process without the need of formal election. Such a regulation not only violated the RASC’s statutes that required open competition and election, but it would also devalue the status of being an academician of the Mexican academy if eligibility for the directors’ positions were restricted to those artists trained in Madrid (AAASC-UNAM, doc. 776, Gil, Tolsá, Velázquez, Fabregat, Aguirre, Guadalajara to RASC, 15 May 1793).
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Unpersuaded by the junta superior’s account of the difficulty in finding students to send to Madrid, the Minister of Grace and Justice noted what he perceived to be multiple contradictions in its explanations. In a devastating critique that clearly conveyed the minister’s opinion of New Spain as a cultural backwater, he reiterated his previous observations that even though the students had access to classes in life drawing and to plaster casts and busts after the antique, this was inadequate for their complete advancement and training. Where, he queried, ‘would the painters and sculptors find original models of antiquity? Where will the architects find buildings constructed according to correct rules? Where are the professors of merit and reputation from whom they can learn their professions? Will they advance more in Mexico without these resources, than in Madrid, where they exist in abundance?’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, ff. 97–99)

In effect, the minister accused the junta superior and the incumbent directors of dissembling and influencing their students against Acuña’s school. In order to make his point completely clear, he informed the viceroy as vice-protector that not only must the RASC cooperate with the new school in Madrid, but that it should not be allowed to waste any more time in complying with a project so ‘necessary for its own advancement’. The academy was given several choices: if it could not find qualified students in Mexico City, efforts should be made to recruit appropriate candidates from Puebla and Veracruz; failing that, the scholarships would be opened to eligible applicants from throughout the empire ‘where there are many who desire and would appreciate this opportunity’ (AGI, Mexico 2793, ‘Expediente relativos a los Pensionados’, ff. 104–105). Here again are echoes of Iriarte’s ambitions, because the minister’s policy implied a form of subsidisation of the art education of subjects from other parts of the empire by the Mexican academy, thus redirecting resources from the viceroyalty of New Spain back to Madrid.

A new round of complaints by the directors against Gil and their request that the Madrid academy be asked to draw up a new plan of studies for the RASC compounded the increasingly tense relationship between the Mexican academy and the minister. The king rejected yet again the directors’ request to replace Gil as director-general. In response to their request for a new curriculum, however, he ordered that samples of students’ work – beginners to the most advanced – be sent to Spain for evaluation by faculty of the Madrid academy to determine the efficacy of the existing methods of instruction (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 18, viceroy to president of the RASC, 25 April 1795). Examples of paintings, medals, engravings, small sculptures, bas-reliefs, architectural designs and 87 drawings – the work of 61 students – arrived in Madrid in July 1796 (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 18, president of RASC to viceroy, 1 February 1796). Concern about the implications of the Madrid academy’s evaluation of the students’ progress is reflected in the RASC’s president’s letter to the viceroy that accompanied the shipment of samples of their work. His letter emphasised the students’ progress and the directors’ commitment to their teaching obligations – a statement undoubtedly intended to deflect further criticisms of the RASC and additional modifications of its programmes. The president concluded with a request that the viceroy convey to the king the academy’s continued advancement and to point out its ‘usefulness’ (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 18, 1 February 1796). As a follow-up to the president’s letter, one of the junta’s councillors, the Conde de Contramina, also wrote to the viceroy to assure him that the academy’s statutes were fully observed and that evidence of the development of buen gusto was plainly evident ‘in many things’ (AGN, Historia 160, exp. 18, 18 April 1795). Both letters suggest anxiety about the RASC’s future.
Although academicians from the Madrid academy gave mixed evaluations of the students' work submitted by the RASC (undoubtedly a reflection of the internal debates among the academicians themselves), their overall assessment indicated that the pieces submitted demonstrated both talent and progress. They recommended that the individual assessments should be given to both teachers and students of the RASC in order to learn from the criticisms offered. Framed within a continued endorsement of Mengsian classicism, the major recommendations emphasised continued focus on copying from the antique (particularly the ancient Greeks) and from the live model, on the imitation of good originals, and the counsel to avoid 'invention' (AASF 36-3/2, junta particular, 4 December 1796). The academicians, in their evaluations, omitted any opinion regarding the need for Acuña’s school in Madrid.

Conclusion

The establishment of Cosme de Acuña’s school in Madrid to facilitate the completion of the fine arts education of talented students from the RASC resulted from a combination of agendas: the directors’ efforts to implement the model of the Madrid academy in the RASC; Cosme de Acuña’s individual ambition, Bourbon reformist impulses designed to enhance centralised political control throughout Spain and its empire; and the internal politics of the Royal Academy of San Fernando. The Mexican academy emerged from these turbulent foundational years with its institutional privileges intact. The cultural politics that swirled around the creation of Acuña’s school in Madrid, however, underscore the RASC’s vulnerability to efforts to reduce its quasi-autonomous position as arbiter of artistic production and as the premier institution in the viceroyalty for professionalisation in the fine arts. They also highlight the relationship between the establishment of visual and intellectual regimes – in this case neoclassicism and academicism – and the social and political hierarchies that provided the foundations on which the Spanish empire rested (Mitchell, 1995: 294). Such a relationship was expressed in discourses that, on the one hand, acknowledged the innate predilection for the arts among New Spain’s inhabitants and, on the other, claimed that serious students of the fine arts could never receive adequate training in Mexico City because of the lack of original models of antiquity and accomplished teachers. In so doing, they provided justification for the ‘voluntary dependence’ sought by the vice-protector of the Royal Academy of San Fernando. The satellite school’s establishment in Madrid injected a level of ambiguity with regard to the RASC’s institutional relationship to the Madrid academy that would inevitably shape its politics, policies and dissemination of neoclassicism in the next decade. As it turned out, no scholarship students from Mexico ever attended the Madrid school; that outcome was, however, by no means clear in the mid-1790s.

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