CULTURAL METISSAGE – THE DESCRIPTIVE CONCEPT OF HYBRID PHENOMENA ON THE PERIPHERIES OF CULTURES

Abstract: The term “metissage” in its original meaning had racial character. Later, the term estilo mestizo came into use, describing Latin American art in the period of Spanish domination, which appeared on the peripheries of the modern world, and whose features were acknowledged to be a mixture of European and Native American influences, particularly in reference to the architectural sculpture of the Peruvian highlands. I believe there are more phenomena within colonial art which can be described as “cultural metissage”, not necessarily due to their stylistic, formal features. One of them is the long-lasting tradition of creating objects decorated with feathers, which is probably echoed in the modern times. Finally, the concept of metissage has been adapted by experts on French culture and used to describe the phenomena which are typical of liminal zones, with hybrid features. Thus the notion of “cultural metissage”, separated from its originally racial connotations, began to describe marginal phenomena, mixtures which occur on the peripheries of cultures, regardless of their location. Finally, “cultural metissage” is a term denoting a kind of reflection and consideration, rather than the formal features of culture and art.

Keywords: cultural metissage, Andean Baroque, mestizo style, hybridity of culture, feather art.

The term “metissage” was used for the first time in the Spanish and Portuguese languages in the times of conquest and colonisation, and it functioned in its original meaning as a word with racial overtones. It was the period in which the biological makeup of the new societies took shape. Genetic blending resulted in phenotypes with characteristic physical features (such as the shape of the nose, eyes, mouth, body outline, hair structure) and chromatic ones (skin colour), which were perceived as stigmatizing. The term “mestizo” (derived, like “metissage”, from Latin mixtum “mixing”), was used to describe
a genetic cross\(^1\), initially the descendant of the white and American Indian parents, then generally, the descendant of any parents of different races. The Latin American society, formed as a result of the conquest and colonisation, had a diverse social structure and a strong caste hierarchy. One division line ran along the race categorisation\(^2\). The whites played a dominating role (their position supported by the Spanish Crown), the mestizo society developed more slowly\(^3\), the Native Americans and Africans were marginalized\(^4\). With time, the mestizos became the basis of the American “ethnic landscape”.

Legally, they had the same position as the creoles, which was not, however, reflected in everyday life. Since the middle of the 16\(^{th}\) century, their number grew significantly, but their reputation considerably worsened; they were commonly regarded as morally degenerate and inclined to commit offences.\(^5\) Various “ethnic types” became models for casta painting, which appeared in the early 18\(^{th}\) century and became extremely popular during the reign of Charles III (1759-1788). Artists painted whole series of little genre scenes, depicting not only the skin colour, but also the typical elements of the outfit worn by the representatives of the particular castes as well as the character traits attributed to them. Although the paintings were usually anonymous, some of them were created by famous painters, such as Miguel Cabrera from

---

1. F. Laplantine, A. Nauss, Le Métissage. Una exposé pour comprendre. Un essai pour réfléchir, [Ré]édition, Paris 2011, p. 7; the authors write about the “etymological fantasies” about the word of “métissage”, which are very interesting in the French language. The word “tissage” means weaving, thus intertwining and mixing. A kind of linguistic game consisted in placing “métissage” on the cover of their next book as two words: “métis” and “sage”. The words meant “mestizo” and “wise” (probably as a descendant of two races); this graphic form, a wordplay, aimed at changing the pejorative overtones of the term; F. Laplantine, A. Nauss, Le Métissage. De Arcimboldo à Zombi, Fayard, Paris 2001; see also: S. Gruzinski, Planète métisse ou comment parler du métissage, in: Planète métisse, ed. S. Gruzinski, Musée du quai Branly, Paris 2008, p. 17.

2. The most important position belonged to those who came from Europe (peninsulares), then the whites who were born in America (criollos). Each blood mixture had its name: Mestizos, descendants of mixed Spanish and Native American relationships, became a more and more numerous group; another group worth mentioning was zambos – descendants of Native Americans and black slaves, C. Mesa Gisbert, J. de Mesa, T. Gisbert, Historia de Bolivia, Editorial Gisbert y Cia S.A., La Paz 2012, p. 130; even these days, a notion of zambo functions in the culture of Peru.


Mexico or Manuel Samani from Quito. Such works were also sent to Europe as examples of American “curiosities/curiosité”.

Fig. 1. *Las castas*, detail, *Tente en el aire con Mulata. No te entiendo*, 18th century, Anonymous, oil on canvas, 148x104 cm, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico (phot. E. Kubiak 2009)

ANDEAN BAROQUE AND ESTILO MESTIZO

The term *estilo mestizo* is the most important notion used in the literature of the subject for characterizing the different stylistics of the baroque art of South America. It appears most frequently in the description of forms and motifs of church decorations and the description of the painting of the upland Andean areas in the territory of the former Viceroyalty of Peru. It is where the most expressive images, manifestations of merging cultures, can be found. The term *estilo mestizo* was used for the first time by Ángel Guido in an academic work from 1936, published in 1945\(^7\), titled *Redescubrimiento de América en el arte*\(^8\). The notion arouses a lot of controversy, and the discussion (more or less intense) on the rationality of its use is still unsettled. In the initial chapter of his book, *The Andean Hybrid Baroque*, Gauvin Alexander Bailey presented the history of this debate, characterized the views of the main opponents (Graziano Gasparini, Ilmar Luks\(^9\)) and supporters (José de Mesa, Teresa Gisbert\(^10\)) of the concept, and described certain positions situated between these extremes. The author divided the discussion on the topic into three stages: early studies on the *mestizo* style in architecture (1925-1938), the great debate (1958-1980) and the studies “after the debate” (1980-2010)\(^11\). Bailey believes that the term “*mestizo* style” is not the most accurate one, particularly in relation to his research subject, i.e.

\(^7\) Á. Guido, *Redescubrimiento de América en el arte*, Imprenta de la Universidad del litoral, Rosario 1940.


architectural decoration in the region of Callao, in Arequipa, in Caylloma and Cotahuasi or in La Paz and Alto Perú. The author proposes his own term, namely “Andean hybrid baroque”, considering it to be more appropriate (as a tool of historical research) than wide-ranging estilo mestizo. The term specifies the time period (Baroque), geographical boundaries (the Andean region) and the character of the forms (hybrid)\textsuperscript{12}. However, I believe that it is not necessary to specify the style of each region (including this one) separately; the term has not gained a wide acceptance in the academic community. A similar repertoire of forms of hybrid character can be also found in other Latin American areas, e.g. in some regions of New Spain, the current Mexico.

At this point it should be remembered that the “hybrid” character of the American baroque art as a distinctive feature had already been noted by literary theorists\textsuperscript{13}. Three researchers, José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier and Severo Sarduy, began to rehabilitate the Latin American baroque literature, which had been depreciated in the 1940s, mainly owing to Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Maraiano Picón Salas\textsuperscript{14}. The concept of diverse and hybrid baroque art of the New World was rehabilitated between the late 1950s and the 1970s. Roberto González Echevarría wrote that the Baroque is an exceptional period in Latin America’s sensitivity; thanks to its cultural and geographical spreading it included America in its sphere of influence as one of its important and

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 2. Bailey refers here to the concept presented by Pablo Macera in 1973 (rather in 1993, when his work on wall painting was published, although Macera declares in the introduction that he wrote it in 1973, mentioning further problems with its publication, “resistance, hostility, sabotage and blocking”/“resistencias, enemistades, sabotajes y bloqueos”)/P. Macera, La pintura mural andina, siglos XVI-XIX, Editorial Milla Batres, Lima 1993, p. 1. In the book, the author introduces a term “cultura andina colonial”, determined, to his mind, within the area and time limits; ibid., p. 59.


\textsuperscript{14} The authors should be counted among philologists (A. Reyes, Letras de la Nueva España, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1948; P. Henríquez Ureña, Literary Currents in Hispanic America, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-Massachusetts 1945; M. Picón-Salas, De la conquista a la independencia, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1944), contrary to defenders of artistic values of American baroque culture, who were mainly poets, writers and essayists, not having classical education, but rather “eclectic” one (C.A. Salgado, Hybridity..., p. 320); their most significant works associated with the topic: J. Lezama Lima, La expresión americana, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1957; A. Carpentier, Tientos, diferencias y otros ensayos, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México 1964; S. Sarduy, Ensayos generales sobre el Barroco, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires 1987.
original elements. Interestingly, the uniqueness of the Latin American baroque was much sooner accepted in the fine arts, which appreciated individuality of forms, and literary theorists drew on the works by the art historians – Manuel Toussaint, George Kubler, and particularly Pál Kelemen. Both Lezama Lima and Carpentier are fascinated by the space of the colonial cities, which became the zone where European architecture encountered creole literature and mestizo craft, the sphere of multicolour public performance – bilingual religious arts, triumphal arches decorated with the motifs from Nahua, processions and masquerades with the use of traditional Native American or African musical instruments and dances – in the highly

Fig. 2. Jesuit Church of Arequipa, detail of facade, 1698, Peru
(phot. E. Kubiak 2010)

ceremonial society of the Viceroyalty\textsuperscript{16}. Prominent examples of “estilo mestizo” are the decorations on the façade of the Jesuit church in Arequipa and Santo Domingo in La Paz or the cathedral church in Puno. The motifs on the church façades of the Peruvian \textit{Altiplano} include maize, cactuses, \textit{sanaccaio} flowers; the portal of the Puno cathedral features stylized reed mace, \textit{cantuta} flowers and local flowers known as \textit{misicu}, \textit{panti-panti} and \textit{pinaguara}.\textsuperscript{17}

Even in the context of South American fine arts, the notion of the \textit{mestizo} style begins to exceed the limits of literally understood metissage. The analyses of the sculptures by Aleijadinho (Antônio Francisco Lisboa, a Brazilian artist from the turn of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries) not only emphasizes the regional features of his art, which are considered by researchers to be unique and national, but also contend that they are a manifestation of the \textit{mestizo} style. This opinion is represented, among others, by Lutuf Isaias Mucci, who attempted to use the term to define the specificity of Aleijadinho’s art in the context of the mixture of European and African arts set in the Brazilian reality\textsuperscript{18}.

"FEATHER ART" AS A MANIFESTATION OF CULTURAL METISSAGE

One of the important techniques in Mexico, adapted from Aztec art, has been “feather art”. Creating feather mosaics was laborious and costly, and it required significant skill. Aztec royal houses had special aviaries with exotic birds, whose feathers were acquired for various artistic productions. The art of creating from feathers is described in the \textit{nahua} language as \textit{amanteca}, after Amantla (currently part of Mexico City), a settlement neighbouring Tenochtitlan, which was inhabited by numerous craftsmen-artists who practised this craft. In his work known as “Florentine Codex” (from the place where it is pre-served), the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún illustrated and de-scribed the work of the Mexican artists who specialized in feather art\textsuperscript{19}.

\textsuperscript{16} C.A. Salgado, \textit{Hybridity...}, p. 320.
\textsuperscript{18} Lutuf Isaias Mucci held a lecture on the issue, \textit{O Aleijadinho, mestiço barroco}, during the congress in 2006 (IV Congreso Internacional de Barroco Iberoamericano), which took place in Brazil, in Ouro Preto in November 2006.
In the pre-Columbian period, feathers had great value; functioning as coins, they could be used for paying a ransom or sacrificed. Fifty four pages of *Matricula de Tributos* in “Codex Mendoza” from ca. 1540 contain a “de-

---

Fig. 3. Amantecas, „Codex Florentino“, IX-20, folio 62, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana
scription” of the payments, mostly in the form of feathers, made by 370 tribute-payers.20

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 4. *Feathers as a part of tribute*. „Codex Mendoza”, folio 47, ca. 1540, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library

After the arrival of the Spaniards, works made of feathers entered the orbit of the European world. Gospel preachers made use of the skills of the feather artists (*amantecas*) and commissioned them to create religious representations, using European graphic works as models for their composition. Liturgical vestments were also decorated with feathers. In the colonial period, feather art centres developed in the areas where the tradition had existed before, i.e. in Mexico City, in Patzcuaro (Michoacán), in Puebla and in Tlaxcala. The mosaics were also admired by chroniclers; they were mentioned by Bernal Díez del Castilla, Pedro Martir de Angleria, Bartolome de las Casas, Francisco de Gomara.23 Some of these objects were sent as gifts to Europe; there, they were added to the collections belonging to famous families, such as the Medicis or the Habsburgs; today they can be admired at Palazzo Pitti in Florence or in the Kunsthistorisches Musem in Vienna. Even the Chinese Wanli Emperor, ruling at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, received a feather mosaic as a gift; according to Gauvin Alexander Baily, he probably preferred “this delicate art to the crude oil painting”, which most of the Europeans brought to China.22 In Europe, the interest in feather products increased along with the fashion for creating Cabinets of Curiosities. Apart from ostrich eggs, corals and other natural wonders, they also contained feather mosaics. The objects brought from Mexico compelled the admiration of Renaissance collectors, including the popes and prelates of the Roman Catholic Church. Amateurs mistook them for paintings, deluded by the natural reflections on the feathers of tropical birds. In Rome, as in the whole of Italy, scholars and collectors remained delighted by this perfect manifestation of the natural world. Lorenzo de Anania devoted a great passage of his “Fabrica del mondo overo kosmografia divisa In Quatro trattati” (Venecia, 1576 and 1582) to feather mosaics.23 A Mexican feather mosaic was also described by a Bologna naturalist, Ulises Aldrovandi, in his *Ornithologiae*, where he mentions that cardinal Paleotti had “a well-made Saint Jerome” in his collection in Bologna and he persisted in admiring the work.24 In the 17th century, feather mosaics exerted greater fascination in Europe than in the New World itself. A New Spanish treaty on painting, which is actually (as established by Paula Mues Ortis) a translation of an Italian version of the work by the Jesuit Francesco Lana, “L’ Arte Maestra sopra l’arte della Pittura.

Mostrando il modo di perfettionarla, con varle inventioni, e regole pratiche appartenenti á questa materia” from 1670, only mentions “Pintura de Plumas de Nuestras Indias” among other techniques of painting,\(^{25}\) while the Italian original devotes a whole paragraph to feather mosaics. Francesco Lana attributes the vividness of their colours to the physical structure of the feathers, which are a good “medium” for producing air and colour effects,

while their own natural texture gives specific light reflections. Iconographically and functionally, these objects were deeply embedded in the world of European Catholicism, yet the technique was thoroughly indigenous. The representation of “Salvador Mundi” from the Museo Nacional del Virreinato in Tepotzotlán, being one of the oldest known feather mosaics presenting a religious topic, dates back to the 16th century. It was probably based on a drawing. Interestingly, its border is decorated with letter-like forms, some of which can be identified as Cyrillic. The creator of the composition must have regarded these signs as senseless but decorative elements which he attempted to reproduce, apparently not very accurately. Creating a mosaic took Native Americans about 5-6 months.

Fig. 6. St. Francisco with the Pope Innocent 3rd, 17th century, feather mosaic on the copper sheet, Museo de Puebla, Mexico (phot. E. Kubiak, 2009)


27 M. Martínez del Río de Redo, La plumaria…, p. 125.
Today, this technique has come back into favour. One of the people interested in “feather art” is Professor Juan Carlos Ortiz from Puebla in Mexico. At first, he created mainly theatre props, such as Montezuma’s Headdress, and other commercial objects made on request. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, he has been producing artistic items; calling on the colonial tradition, he has created the effigies of the Mother of God and of saints. Characteristically for feather mosaics from the 18th century, he paints the faces or cuts them out from lithographs and pastes them in. His works display high quality, they may be mistaken for having been created in the 18th or 19th centuries. In his work, the artist uses traditional amate paper, on which he draws a sketch. Then he pastes the feathers directly onto the paper using
hand-made glue. He uses only natural feathers acquired from tropical birds; “Following Aztec rulers”, he even has his own aviary. Apart from J.C. Ortiz, there are about 50 amantecas in Mexico. The story about the work of modern feather artists may be summed up with reference to examples from the world of fashion inspired by nature: the most spectacular instance is a bolero decorated with parrot feathers, presented in the Summer-Winter 1997 collection of Jean-Paul Gaultier.

Fig. 8. The Bolero of parrot feathers, Nelly Saunier, Jean-Paul Goutier, the collection spring-summer 1997, Paris (http://e.toile.over-blog.com/35-index.html)

29 http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/03/24/cultura/a07n1cul.
30 S. Gruzinski, Planète..., p. 19.
CULTURAL METISSAGE AS A FORM OF REFLECTION

Both “hybridity of culture” and “cultural metissage” are terms which should not be treated literally or formally; these two concepts determine a way of thinking. The former appears most frequently in the context of modern art, referring to the enormous variety of the media allowing for its creation and existence. The methodology of it research has also changed: modern visual objects are studied not only from the traditional perspective of art history, but also in the context of cultural studies or post-colonial theories. I believe that mestizo art is a method of establishing the mechanisms for creating forms which are typical of border zones, not the forms themselves. Cultural metissage may become a notion which will be understood in this way in other cultural zones, not only in Latin America. In French-language literature, the term métissage appears with increasing frequency in reference to the literature of the borderlands. Serge Gruzinski describes the process originally in the context of the Native culture in America, in relation to the globally viewed “renaissance civilization”. However, he also understands the notion of “cultural metissage” much more widely. He was a curator of the exhibition titled “Planète métisse”, held at the Musée du quai Branly in 2008. The exhibition featured exhibits from the areas of various “cultural junctions”, and the topics of the essays included in the catalogue were impressively diverse: from the most obvious ones, discussing the Latin American culture, to those concerning modern European, American or Asian cinema.

In the introduction to their dictionary, Métissages. De Arcimboldo à Zombi, and through its wide and diverse choice of entries (which is evidenced by the title), François Laplantine and Alexis Nouss also confirm that the notion is perceived as something much wider than the phenomena resulting from the cultural Native and European mixture of Latin America. Other French publications on the topic include an earlier book by the authors, Le Métissage, and two collections of articles – one edited by Dominique Berthet, and the other assembled by Roselyne de Villanova and Geneviève Vermès – in which some essays concern the notion in its cultural context, and others – the

32 S. Gruzinski, El pensamiento....
33 F. Laplantine, A. Nauss, Le Métissage. De Arcimboldo....
34 One of numerous French publications on the topic is earlier book by both authors: F. Laplantine, A. Nauss, Le Métissage. Una exposé....
issues associated with art, architecture, aesthetics and art theory. It is worth mentioning the notion of “creolisation”, which is used in similar context and appears in the abovementioned publications.  

Today, we live in the reality of constant modifications, world junctions, exchanges. As Michel Foucault pointed out in his lecture from 1967, the crucial relationships in the near future (so in the early 21st century) would be spatial ones, since we live “in the times of simultaneity, the epoch of transfer and juxtaposition, the period of closeness and distance, approximation and dispersion”. This mode of functioning favours interweaving, hybridisation, metissage. James Clifford claims that the presence of enormously diverse cultural forms as well as the great mobility of people, and consequently of the material world, has relativized the notion of exoticism. The phenomenon of hybridisation and metissage may be discussed in the context of the whole culture, not only the areas where different cultures and ethnic groups coexist. It is particularly visible in the two spheres of culture and identity. We may observe the process of cultural metissage from the external perspective and attempt to analyse the cultural forms – and the artistic ones as well – which undergo transformation. Dariusz Czaja, interpreting a vision of the world conjured by Clifford in his later book Routes. Travel and


Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, writes that the author “depicts the modern world in constant movement, in transfer, in permanent change of place, in never-ending oscillation of formerly alien worlds, in their collision and stumbling over each other, in their mutual distance and interweaving. He portrays modernity as a space of travelling and transferring cultural areas, travelling cultures”, in other words, he sees the world of omnipresent, constant metissage. It must be remembered, however, that not only the notion of space has been modified, but also the perception of time favours the phenomenon of metissage. It has nothing in common with modern or even contemporary understanding of time perceived as continuatum (continuum); today we are dealing with permanent simultatis (simultaneity).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Guido Ángel (1925) Fusión hispano-indígena en la arquitectura colonial, Rosario: Editorial „La Casa del Libro“.

Guido Ángel (1940) Redescubrimiento de América en el arte, Rosario: Imprenta de la Universidad del litoral.


Henríquez Ureña Pedro (1945), Literary Currents in Hispanic America, Cambridge-Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.


Luks Ilmar (19980) *Tipología de la escultura decorativa hispánica en la arquitectura andina del siglo XVIII*, Caracas: Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela.


Picón-Salas Mariano (1944) *De la conquista a la independencia*, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.


METYSAZ KULTUROWY – POJECIE DESKRYPTYWNE ZJAWISK HYBRYDYCZNYCH NA PERYFERIACH KULTUR (streszczenie)

Termin „metysaż” w pierwszym znaczeniu funkcjonował jako określenie o charakterze rasowym. Potem terminem *estilo mestizo* zaczęto opisywać sztukę Ameryki Łacińskiej w okresie dominacji hispańskiej, która pojawiła się na peryferiach nowożytnego świata, a jej cechy uzna- no za mieszankę wpływów europejskich i indiańskich, szczególnie rzeźbę architektoniczną peruwiańskich wyżyn. W moim przekonaniu w obrębie sztuki kolonialnej istnieje wiele więcej zjawisk, które można opisać jako „metysaż kulturowy”, nie koniecznie tylko ze względu na cechy stylistyczne, formalne. Jednym z nich jest długotrwałąjąca tradycja wywarzania obiektów ozdobianych piórami, która znajduje pewne echa i w dzisiejszych czasach. Wreszcie pojęcie me- tysazu zostało zaadaptowane przez francuskich kulturoznawców do określenia zjawisk typowych dla stref liminalnych o cechach hybrydycznych. I tak termin „metysaż kulturowy”, odes- wany od swych pierwotnych rasowych konotacji, stał się deskryptywny w stosunku do zjawisk marginalnych, mieszane obecnych na peryferiach kultur, bez względu na ich lokalizację. Fi- nalnie „metysaż kulturowy” określa nie tyle cechy formalne kultury i sztuki, ale jest raczej pojęciem charakteryzującym rodzaj refleksji i namysłu.

Słowa kluczowe: metysaż kulturowy, barok andyjski, styl *mestizo*, hybrydyczność kultury, piórmietwo.