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Toasts with the Inca: Book Review

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The connections between material culture and historical change is the subject of this meticulous study of Andean queros by Thomas Cummins, Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago. Queros are wooden drinking containers used by Andean people in drinking rituals since pre-Colombian times. Always used in pairs, queros and their silver and gold counterparts, aquillas, were essential objects in these drinking rituals which played an important role in validating the reciprocal social order of this region. Cummins begins his book with a discussion of the place of these vessels in pre-conquest Andean society. Feasts, sponsored by an ayllu’s curaca were a way to demonstrate social solidarity, reciprocity and the status of the curaca. Drink was always more important than food at these feasts, and the drink consumed was aqha or corn beer. With the imposition of the Incan empire, ceremonial feasts became a way to validate Incan authority at the imperial level. Just as the acceptance of aqha validated curaca’s power over the ayllu, so did the curaca’s acceptance of drink from the Inca demonstrate the Inca’s authority over the village chiefs.

The conquest brought profound changes to Andean life and power structures. Cummins shows how queros and aquillas continued to be used to demonstrate and validate the new system under Spanish rule through the continuation of drinking ceremonies in which Spanish authorities took part. In addition, among the Spanish, queros and aquillas were transformed from ritual objects into commodities as they became collector’s items for wealthy Spaniards with a taste for the exotic. As a result, unlike other aspects of paganism which the Spanish worked vigorously to eradicate, the production and use of queros in drinking ceremonies survived, even though queros were recognized as an important aspect of pagan culture.

Cummins argues that changes in quero iconography demonstrate the historical changes that were taking place in Andean life. During the colonial period, quero artisans replaced pre-conquest abstract designs with European-style paintings depicting Spanish and Inca authority figures. Because the queros were produced and used by natives, they provide a rare instance of native representation of colonization to a native audience, but one that is informed by European as well as Andean iconographic symbols.

This book, which includes numerous plates of both pre-conquest and colonial queros and aquillas, will be useful to specialists in Andean art history and to historians of the region and of the colonial period.

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