

# The *Romance Mudo*<sup>1</sup>.


## A Game of Symbols

The Baroque, in its various expressions, is a playful style: a game of forms and sounds, a game of rules of etiquette, a game of words and images.

*Icones symbolicae*, or the symbolic image, having been foreshadowed in the previous century, becomes in the the seventeenth century a slick diversion whose seeming futility concealed at times profound spiritual, moral, and political meaning. From a constructed image, composed of a series of **emblems** [symbols] apparently not related logically, one would decode the picture — which is also a de-struction of the iconic set — until arriving at a precise concept of a philosophical-religious tendency. Without the help of the author, a certain so-called morality hid itself within an intricate game of hieroglyphics to which only the initiated had access.

The interest in hieroglyphics arose at the beginning of the sixteenth century and with Humanist thought. This important thrust forward prompted, in 1499, the publication of the treatise *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* at Aldo Manúcio's Venetian workshop. This work was the result of the tremendous impact which archaeological discoveries made in Italy had at the time. It was all a code of images, symbols, that obscured the real meaning of a text which had to be

deciphered. Thus, for example, the inscription *Divo Julio Caesari semper Augusto totius orbis gubernatori* was denoted by an **eye** representing *divo*, **sprigs of wheat** representing *Julio*, a **sword** representing *Caesari*, a **circle** representing *semper*, and **two flails** representing *Augusto*. This system conveyed a type of esoteric message so pleasing to the adherents of Neoplatonism.

But, above all, it was with the publication of *Emblematum Libellus* by Andrea Alciato in Augsburg in the year 1531, that the use of images with symbolic intent had enormous success among a clientele ranging from the erudite to the mystic. This whole strange system of signs would later be popularized  through loose papers which, as in the case under study, permitted a type of game in which the miraculous and exemplar lives of the various saints (especially those which were directly related to religious orders) could be narrated. It should be noted that these engravings were conceived within the tranquility of monastic life and for the use of the monks, yet with the possibility of extending their use to the laity.

<sup>1</sup> Mute Poem [literally translated from the french, *Poésie Muette*] refers to a type of narrative consisting of a series of icons, or pictographs, needing to be decoded.



This type of work was particularly well-received in Spain, France, and Italy. France was, by far, the place privileged in disseminating the work of Alciato. Apart from the publication *prin-*  
*ceps*, aforementioned, one was known to exist in Paris in 1534 and another was known to exist in Venice in 1546. The number of copies increased in Lyon in 1550 and in 1566. The *Emblemaes* [symbols] were published in Spain in 1549 from an engraving made in Lyon entitled *Los Emblemas de Alciato Traducidos en Rhimas Españolas* by Bernadino Daza Pinciano.



It is important to highlight the Spanish situation since we are analyzing a work of art published there. In reality, the *Llaves* [keys] of the *romance mudo* depicting Saint Anthony's life, completed in 1768 and 1769, are a curious example of the use of hieroglyphics in a tradition that, already in decline, hints to a golden period established in the seventeenth century. *Romances mudos* are included within a group of engraved works of art to which *Juegos de Nochebuena, moralizados a la vida de Christo, martirio de Santos y reformación de costumbres* — printed in Madrid in 1625 by Juan Gonzáles and conceived by Alonso de Ledesma; and, which the historian Julian Gállego [1984] views as being “*la profanación de lo religioso*” [“the secularization of the religious”] and “*la popularización de lo sagrado*” [“the popularization of the sacred”] — somehow belongs.

This entire collection of texts, largely illustrated, is


of Jesuit origin, and we will find throughout the 1600s a Spain marked catholically by the solid presence of the all-powerful Inquisition. Consequently, Nicolás de la Iglesia publishes *Flores de Miraflores, Hieroglíficos sagrados, verdades figuradas, sombras verdaderas del Mysterio de la Concepción de la Virgen y Madre de Dios, María, Señora Nuestra* in Burgos in 1659; and, Francisco Cubillas produces *Vida simbólica del Glorioso S. Francisco de Sales... escrita en cinquenta y dos Emblemas* in Madrid in 1688, a work adapted from the book by the Frenchman, Adrien Gambart.

Belonging to the Museum of Évora, the engraved sheets from *Llaves* [keys], already a work in decline, are from the genre being discussed here. It is, therefore, of great importance that a study of the influences this class of engraved stories had on Portuguese art not only be conducted in the near future, but that, above all, it also be widely circulated. These pages from *Llaves* were engraved by Bernardus Alviztur — the *Llave del Primer Romance* perhaps having been published in 1768. The remaining five were of the authorship of Joseph Giraldo and are dated as follows: from the second to the fifth, the date is 1768; and, the sixth is from 1769. On the left-hand side of the page, under the generic title of *COMO ESTA PINTADO* [How It is Painted], the key objects — true hieroglyphics — are presented for the purpose of decoding the enigma. On the right-hand side, under the title, *COMO SE DEBE LEER* [How It Should be Read], the icons are decoded. At the



bottom of the page, aided by a reading of the symbols, the life of Saint Anthony can, then, be narrated succinctly and symbolically.

By analyzing the six pages, one discovers how the narrative is constructed — not only does the narrative function like a modern-day comic strip, but it also functions like a game designed for the discerning eye of the initiated as well as... for amateurs. Similar to an esoteric alphabet or group of ideograms, the set of symbols is repeated with regard to meaning. In this way, the drawing of two **wings** (*alas* in Spanish) should be read *a las* (**to the** or **for the** in English).

Each story obeys a general basic theme which can be summarized in the following manner: 1) Eulogies to Saint Anthony, 2) The Adolescence and Vocation of Saint Anthony, 3) The Activity of Saint Anthony in the Franciscan Order, 4) The Various Miracles of Saint Anthony, 5) Continuation of Miracles of Saint Anthony, and 6) The Death, Canonization, and a  New Eulogy to Saint Anthony. This last one could be

said to be the *Vida Gloriosa* [Glorious Life] of the saint. In order to better understand this game, let us look at an example. In the first engraving of the *Primer Romance* one finds two **suns**, a **wing**, a **church**, and **Saint Anthony**. The reading, in Spanish, proceeds in the following way: *Soles, Ala, Iglesia*, and *San Antonio* (The sun is, for the church, Anthony). This convoluted game of symbols offers us a real exercise, which for the monks must have been a truly

spiritual diversion. Consequently, we are before a work of art, or a group of them, which conveys an important aspect (about to be studied) of Baroque art and the fondness of a society which, truly advanced in the eighteenth century, still maintains in this part of Europe a unique spirituality — thus, a reflection of a mentality which insisted, with rare exception, on being measured by ecclesiastical rhythms.

In the meantime, the *romance mudo* continues its course — at times presenting itself as a true game of signs and signification in which muteness opposes the word, creating, thus, ambiguities much in the same way René Magritte does, where words contest the object as in Plato's venerable *Cratylus*.

And, in speaking of ambiguities, we return, symbolically, to our initial idea of the Baroque period's playfulness — a time in which the ambiguous is the *leit-motif* in contradicting lines which, antagonized, create rich forms in a plastic sense.

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