

San Francisco in Quito, Ecuador: A Union of Old and New World Sources in a Sixteenth-Century Convento

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Colonial Quito became listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1978, but despite this significant recognition there remains only a limited amount of in-depth scholarship on the colonial city, its history, and above all, its art. The artistic center of colonial Quito had tremendous influence over the establishment of colonial art and architectural styles throughout Spanish South America during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Quito School of art had its foundations in the convent complex of San Francisco, the earliest church in Spanish Quito, whose influence can be seen in churches and decoration throughout Spanish South America. An understanding of San Francisco is thus crucial to a thorough understanding of South American colonial art, but is problematic because the church has not been extensively studied. The current historical and physical evidence also raises many questions, the answers to which have not yet been fully fleshed out. San Francisco is often viewed as almost purely European in influence, which conflicts both with parallel situations in Spanish America and with the documentary evidence for large contingents of native artisans at work in the city. This raises the questions of why European influence was so strong and readily adopted, what some of the European sources for San Francisco were, and what evidence of indigenous influence, if any, is discernible in the church and its decoration.

Quito has a tangible history dating back over 10,000 years, the majority of which is known only through fragmentary archaeological evidence. Perhaps one of the most tumultuous periods in Quito's history, however, began only 500 years ago. During the fifteenth century, the Inca Tupac Yupanqui began his conquest of Quito, a center that at that time was inhabited by various highland tribes and served as a trade crossroads for several pre-Hispanic cultures. Tupac's son, Huayna Capac, completed the conquest of these highland peoples in 1495, establishing the northern Inca capital of Tahuantinsuyo at Quito, and later built a large palace complex there for himself. Inca rule provided a centralization of power in the region, and enforced the universal adoption of the Quechua lan-

guage. Large numbers of natives were also resettled in the area so as to maintain hegemonic control, and eventually Huayna Capac made the center his preferred place of residence. Upon Huayna Capac's death a rift emerged in the empire as his two sons, Atahualpa and Huascar, struggled for power, an event that coincided with the arrival of the Spanish in South America. Atahualpa was ruling Quito when Francisco Pizarro arrived in Peru, but was soon kidnapped by the Spaniards and held for ransom. The Inca was executed by the Spaniards in 1533, and Quito was subsequently burned to the ground by a contingent of Indian resistance. When the conquistadors Alvarado and Sebastián de Benalcázar reached Quito in 1534, the Inca capital was in ruins. It was upon these ruins that Spanish Quito was founded on December 6, 1534.¹

The foremost Franciscan figure in colonial Quito, the Flemish friar Joos de Rycke, arrived in the city in late 1535. Rycke, an Erasmusian humanist from Ghent—and allegedly a cousin of the Emperor Charles V—was sent from Toulouse to South America with three companions in 1532, and was the only one of his company to survive the journey to Quito, which he reached more than two years later. The Cabildo of Quito had already awarded the site of Huayna Capac's palace, at the base of the volcano Pichincha, to the Franciscan Fathers, and it was here that Rycke soon began to oversee the construction of the convent of San Francisco. Rycke's life and work in Quito paralleled that of Pedro de Gante's in Mexico in many ways;² he was an advocate of mass conversions, and established within the convent complex the Colegio de San Andrés, a school dedicated to the training and education of the native class.³ Rycke worked on the construction and decoration of San Francisco with two Europeans, known only as German and Xacome, or "Fleming," in addition to two native master craftsmen, the Peruvian Jorge de la Cruz and his son Francisco Morocho.⁴ Teams of workers were trained in a variety of techniques and crafts at San Andrés, managed by the friar Pieter Gosseal, and were put to work assisting the builders and craftsmen.

The exact dates of construction for San Francisco are dis-

¹ Ernesto le Orden Miracle, *Elogio de Quito* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispanica, 1975) 209.

² Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, *America, Bride of the Sun* (Brussels: Imschoot Books, 1992) 64.

³ Valerie Fraser, *The Architecture of Conquest: Building in the Viceroyalty of Peru 1535-1635* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990) 96. San Andrés was not just a place for teaching catechism, language, and literature to native

children, but for teaching trades, from blacksmithing and shoemaking to painting and sculpture. Artists as well as bricklayers, stonemasons and carpenters were trained there, free of charge, and many were put to work on the church itself.

⁴ José Gabriel Navarro, *Summary of Ten Lectures on Ecuadorian Art* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Pedagógicos e Hispanoamericanos de Panamá, 1935) 13. Navarro names a third native craftsman, Quito-born Fra. Antonio Rodriguez, though he is the only one to do so.

puted, although it is generally accepted that the construction of the church took approximately eighty years.⁵ The entire complex occupies four city blocks, or a plot of more than 30,000 square meters, and consisted of, over time, a convent, three churches, thirteen courtyards and cloisters, several orchards, and the San Andrés school. San Francisco's main church faces out on a large, sloping plaza, and is fronted by a long, low-walled atrium that extends across the entire front of the complex and that was used for mass outdoor conversions prior to the completion of the church.⁶ Three stairways lead from the plaza to the atrium, the central one of a concave-convex design. The stairways, atrium wall, convent entrance and lower part of the church façade are all built of gray stone, which contrasts with the long, whitewashed brick walls that stretch out to either side of the façade. George Kubler called the façade of San Francisco "the archetype for subsequent façades in western South America," and even a cursory investigation provides much support for this statement.⁷ The façade consists of two stories and two towers,⁸ with a central doorway flanked on either side by iron-grilled windows, and a larger grilled window directly above. The main door and second-story window are flanked in turn by pairs of columns on either side, Doric with exaggerated entasis on the first story and Ionic on the second. Both orders are raised upon a horizontal base that runs across the bottom of each story, and the upper story is capped by a band of perforated stonework. A broad arch sits atop the large second-story window, which is framed in stone diamonds, and broken pediments are found above the false windows to either side. The entire façade is marked by horizontal bands of rusticated stonework that run across engaged columns and pilasters on both stories, and is punctuated by ball finials and a few sculptural pieces on the second story (Figure 1).

The interior of the church is known for its profusion of art and decoration, which covers "the whole range of Spanish art in the Americas" according to J.M. Gonzalez de Valcárcel.⁹ The layout of the interior, the ceiling decoration,¹⁰ and the wall paneling date to the sixteenth century, though much of the painting and sculpture dates to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A seventeenth-century account of the interior describes it as "stretching beautifully into three naves,"¹¹ although according to Bayón the interior "is formed by one aisle, not three...with deep lateral chapels which communicate with each other by means of low arches."¹² The interior is also famous for its cedar mudéjar ceiling (Figure 2), and walls richly adorned in extensively carved and gilded wood paneling.

The scholarship on San Francisco devotes as much attention to the façade as to the entire interior, but is most notable for a dissent of opinion on the sources from which the unnamed author or authors of the façade design must have drawn.¹³ The pioneering scholar on San Francisco in this century, José Gabriel Navarro, saw the "cold architectural art of Herrera"¹⁴ in the façade, and caused a subsequent trend in scholarship that drew parallels between the church of San Francisco and Herrera's Escorial. Pál Kelemen referred to the "late Renaissance design" and "Baroque touch" of the façade,¹⁵ and Bayón described the façade as "simply the adaptation of classical orders to Flemish mannerist tastes."¹⁶ Kubler claimed that "no American façade of the sixteenth century is more Italianate," and called the "accumulation of Italian forms... Flemish in profusion."¹⁷ He also invoked the influence of Serlio, though he limited the evidence for this to the concave-convex staircase (Figure 3). Valcárcel concedes to some Herreran influence, provides further evidence for the influence of Serlio, but above all considers the façade to be "clearly Vignolesque."¹⁸

⁵ Jorge Enrique Adoum, "Quito, a City Near to Heaven," *UNESCO Courier* (48.3; 1995) 34-37. According to Adoum, the building of the church reportedly took so long and cost so much that Charles V would emerge nightly onto the terrace of his palace in Toledo, expecting to see the two rising towers of San Francisco in the distance.

⁶ J.M. Gonzalez de Valcárcel, *Architectural Conservation and Enhancement of Historic Towns in South America* (Barcelona: Editorial Blume, 1977) 126.

⁷ George Kubler and Martin Soria, *Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal and their American Dominions, 1500-1800* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1959) 87. According to Kubler, aspects of San Francisco were copied at Tunja and Sucre, and extensively in Lima. San Agustín in Quito is considered by others to be a direct copy of San Francisco; Santo Domingo in Quito and San Francisco in La Paz bear strong resemblance to the church as well.

⁸ Pál Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1951) 158. The original towers of the church were nearly twice the height of the present towers (Figure 2), but fell during an earthquake in 1868.

⁹ Valcárcel 126.

¹⁰ Damián Bayón and Murillo Marx, *History of South American Colonial*

Art and Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1989) 37. Most of the original mudéjar ceiling was lost during an eighteenth-century fire; what remains of the original is now found above the choir and the transept.

¹¹ Gabriel Iriarte, ed., *Colonial Quito* (Quito: Ediciones Libri Mundi, 1991) 8.

¹² Bayón and Marx 37.

¹³ Fraser addresses the considerable problems that the sources for the façade have caused, listing a number of scholars' contributions to the debate in a brief note to *The Architecture of Conquest* (185).

¹⁴ José Gabriel Navarro, *Religious Architecture in Quito* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1945) 7.

¹⁵ Kelemen 158.

¹⁶ Bayón and Marx 39.

¹⁷ Kubler and Soria 87.

¹⁸ According to Valcárcel, the interior portal of San Francisco is an exact copy of Vignola's portal for the Palace of Caprarola (125). Kubler wrote that the doorway of the Villasis chapel within San Francisco was "based upon an engraving of Caprarola" (Kubler and Soria 88).

The attribution of the façade contributions to Herrera and the Escorial by Navarro and others is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that Herrera was born in 1530, only a few years before the church was begun. Further, Herrera's plans for the Escorial were published in 1588, seven years after the accepted completion date for San Francisco's façade.¹⁹ Serlio, however, had his first architectural treatise published in 1537, and his subsequent books were all published, translated, and distributed by the middle of the sixteenth century.²⁰ San Francisco's façade borrows a number of architectural elements from Italian mannerist architecture, including the models found in Serlio's books. The façade's two towers, central portal, and double columns raised on a horizontal base recall such sixteenth-century Italian churches as Galeazzo Alessi's Santa Maria in Carignano, and Cola dall'Amatrice's San Bernardino at L'Aquila; the rustication in particular recalls Florence's Pitti Palace; and the façade also resembles the two-towered churches published by Serlio in Book V. Many of the decorative elements, both inside and out, seem to stem from precedents set by such mannerist architects as Pirro Ligorio and Giacomo da Vignola, who published his own treatise in 1562. Paired, banded columns upon a raised base appear throughout Vignola's work, and in Serlio's published drawings. Serlio's books include drawings of Bramante's work, whose Belvedere complex and Santa Maria Nascente at Abbiategrosso show rustication, and double columns on two levels. Many of the architectural elements of the façade in fact seem to have direct models in Serlio's pages. The main door frame, for one, finds several models with Serlio; there are also striking similarities between the doorways from Serlio's *Libro Straordinario* and the stonework surrounding San Francisco's first-story windows (Figure 5). The central stairway, mentioned previously, is an exact copy of Bramante's design for the stairs of the Belvedere cortile in the Vatican, as published by Serlio in Book III (Figure 3). The stonework in the top right window of Folio 37, Book III, Chapter 4 (Figure 4) resembles the decoration of the walls of the atrium, and the banding here and in many of the drawings of doorways from his final book resembles the banding on both stories of the façade. Ornamentation seems taken in part from Serlio as well; the diamond stonework in Book IV is a likely model for the second-story window frame, and the profuse ornamentation illustrated in this chapter could have served as a general model for the church's interior wall decoration.

It is indisputable that the sources for the spare façade were wholly European; that the façade is predominantly Italian mannerist, especially Serlian, in inspiration has only begun to emerge in more recent scholarship. The influence of Serlio is

plausible not only due to the timing of the publication and translation of his work into Dutch, but also due to the tendency of friars in the New World to base their constructions on European designs found in transportable form, such as prints and books. San Francisco also seems to have no single model in Old World architecture; the façade rather appears as an unexpected amalgamation of architectural forms—the use of diamond stonework as a window element, for instance, is unusual, for such stonework had been primarily used as a base decoration, as in sixteenth-century Venetian architecture. Such details would have been the likely outcome of a building effort made by non-professional architects pulling together fragmented images to create a decorated whole.

While there is more agreement on the sources of decoration for the interior of the church, the variety of influences named by scholars is both vast and disparate. Elements of the interior have been labeled Moorish, Flemish, Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and indigenous. Italian mannerist contributions are found in the interior as well; for example, the twisted-leg pulpit figures in San Francisco directly echo forms found in Ligorio's work, such as those on the Villa d'Este's Fontana dell'Organo in Tivoli. The mudéjar ceiling is an element taken from Spanish Moorish architecture, and Navarro cites a number of other Moorish features within the church as well, including the ogival arches in the crossing, and the inlaid decoration of the ecclesiastical furniture. Navarro also describes an interior frieze of Christian saints as "Byzantine," certain "niches of Flemish Renaissance type," and chapel retables with "astonishing Indo-Chinese cappings."²¹

On the subject of native influence, Navarro asserts that it is "only slightly discernible," a conclusion that is echoed by the lack of attention given to the subject in the majority of the scholarship on the church. The evidence for so many native workers at San Andrés, however, suggests that there is either more native contribution than has been thus far acknowledged, or that there must have been other factors that made Quito a prime setting for what Kubler referred to as the "pure transfer" of European forms.²² Both situations seem to be the case. In addition, San Francisco displays a number of innovations that reflect that the transfer of forms may not have been completely "pure." Among these are the unusually stubby columns found in the cloister, the full gilt paneling of the interior, the exaggerated entasis of the Doric columns, and the unique combination of styles and forms that the complex displays.

Sixteenth-century elements of the church's decoration do in fact show the expected influence of native beliefs and techniques. The most general of these is the gilding that covers nearly every inch of wall and ceiling, reminiscent of tech-

¹⁹ Valcárcel 125.

²⁰ Sebastiano Serlio, *The Book of Architecture* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1970). Serlio had originally intended to publish seven books, but published only five, between 1537 and 1547. (A manuscript for a sixth book was prepared but never published.) Book IV appeared first, in Venice in 1537, followed by Book III in 1540, Books I and II published as a joint volume

in Paris in 1545, and Book V in 1547. The first translation in Dutch was issued at Antwerp in 1549.

²¹ Navarro, *Religious Architecture* 7.

²² Kubler and Soria 88.

niques used in Inca temples with gold-leafed interiors.²³ The carving of the gilded panels also displays a number of indigenous motifs, though many may seem less than obvious upon first glance. Figures in the narthex decoration (Figure 6), with their distinctive cap-like head ornamentation, recall such indigenous portraits as those of figures attributed to the pre-Hispanic Jama Coaque culture of Western Ecuador, or the gold female figurines found at the Inca site of Isla de la Plata in Ecuador; their appearance also recalls the native cult of the Sun god, revered by both the Inca and pre-Inca cultures. Suns appear in a variety of forms throughout the decoration of the church, nearly always in anthropomorphic form. A section of ceiling in the lower gallery of the cloister shows human-faced suns with gold cords emanating tusk-like from their mouths (Figure 7). The chain-tusks are reminiscent of the sharp-fanged feline creatures also of the Jama Coaque culture, which occupied a central role within the mythology of the Sun cult.²⁴ Thus, a seemingly meaningless decorative motif takes on a significance that would have been missed by the average observer lacking an informed knowledge of native cults and beliefs. The abundance of sun motifs, in conjunction with the documentation for many indigenous workers on the church, suggests that a significant amount of native influence does in fact lie well-hidden within the church's interior decoration.

The profusion of European forms and relative lack of native motifs within the church require further explanation, especially in light of San Francisco's tremendous influence upon South American religious art and architecture. Motifs, forms, and designs were transported from San Francisco to the rest of Quito, and to Colombia, Peru, and as far away as Bolivia, though the Franciscan churches in these countries often display more indigenous contributions. The façade of San Francisco in La Paz, for example, echoes San Francisco's form but is notable for a profusion of sculptural decoration that is strongly indigenous in influence.²⁵

A number of factors may account for the unique situation at Quito. Prior to the Inca conquest, Quito served as a trade crossroads, and the region was inhabited by a diverse range of communicating cultures. The Inca conquest served to bring overarching uniformity to these cultures, but had only begun to provide material culture in the form of art and architecture when the Spaniards succeeded in the second conquest the region experienced inside the span of half a century. Quito was thus a geographical area marked by a fragmented and abused cultural identity when the Spanish colonial city was founded. Natives of the Quito region accustomed to living at a trade center were likely used to adopting foreign cultural aspects; the Inca conquest had also served to squelch pre-existing cul-

ture in the interest of creating a uniform empire. By the time the Spanish arrived, what remained in native memory may have been little more than diminishing remnants of pre-Inca beliefs. The presence of Inca motifs in a general sense, as in the full interior gilding of the church, is in line with what the Inca had established at Quito: an opulent impression that turned out to be fleeting when the city was burned—by its own inhabitants—during the Spanish conquest. The variety of allusions to the Sun god evident in the church's decoration, on the other hand, is explained by the cult's popularity among both Inca and pre-Inca cultures.

The sequence of events suggests a confusion of allegiances, and a loss of cultural identity, which, together with the destruction of the pre-Hispanic city, left the region ripe for the construction of a European metropolis. The Spanish conquest itself further compounded the multicultural mix in the area, introducing not just Europeans, but Spaniards, Flemings and Germans—or an additional number of independent cultural identities. The organization and order that the Europeans brought to the new colonial city was also a continuation of what the Incas had begun to impose fifty years earlier.²⁶ For these reasons, native Quiteños were in a sense primed for what the Spaniards and the friars had in store for them, and rather easily adopted the organizational systems, urban building projects, schools and material culture that were introduced by the Spaniards into their region.

San Francisco's location also contributed to its acceptance and success among the native population. The convent complex was founded upon the site of Huayna Capac's palace, which, as the location of a former ruler's residence, would have been considered a *huaca*, or place of local worship in Inca belief. The site was also located at the base of Pichincha, and mountains themselves were objects of worship among Quechua cultures.²⁷ The ground upon which San Francisco was built was therefore likely revered by different resident cultures, and the sacred aspect of the site, in keeping with native tradition, would not have been altered or diminished by its development. San Francisco's success as a place of worship and an artistic center is best understood in light of the city's history and demographics at the time of conquest. The confluence of ideas and influences that occurred at Quito is manifested in San Francisco, which drew from a vast array of traditions and became the basis for a school of widespread influence. The dissent within the scholarship on the topic of sources and contributions is therefore understandable, but a careful reading of the church illustrates that certain influences have been largely overlooked. Scholars accept Serlio's design for the central staircase, though an examination of his *Five*

²³ Navarro, *Religious Architecture* 8.

²⁴ Hernan Crespo Toral et al., eds., *Arte Ecuatoriano*, 1st ed., 4 vols. (Quito: Salvat Editores, 1977) 158.

²⁵ Academia Nacional de Belles Artes de la Republica Argentina, "El Templo de San Francisco de La Paz," *Documento de Arte Colonial Sudamericano, Cuaderno IV* (Buenos Aires: Academia Nacional de Belles Artes, 1949) 24.

²⁶ John Leddy Phelan, *The Kingdom of Quito in the Seventeenth Century* (Milwaukee: U of Wisconsin P, 1967) 50.

²⁷ John Howland Rowe, "Inca Culture at the Time of the Spanish Conquest," *The Handbook of South American Indians*, ed. Julian H. Steward (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963) 296.

Books on Architecture suggests that his influence may have been even greater. The success of the Quito School, begun at San Andrés, in creating a far-reaching, recognizable, and commercial art in the seventeenth century, has probably overshadowed the sixteenth-century art within the church, which remains largely in the form of wall and panel decoration. It is here that many of the subtle indigenous motifs are to be found, and it is their subtlety combined with this overshadowing that has led them to be largely ignored. Whereas some of the sources of influence within the church cannot be denied—such as the Spanish Moorish influence seen in the mudéjar ceiling—a number of the sources require reassessment and further study. The Italian mannerist influence in the façade is undeniable, and the presence of a native aesthetic within the early decoration of the church is similarly strong, though more scrutiny is required to identify its precise sources.

Kubler wrote that the convent complex of San Francisco “is the most important edifice of the sixteenth century in South America.”²⁸ Scholars have discerned the influence of San Francisco in churches throughout Spanish South America, but the contributions to San Francisco itself remain the subject of much debate. As “the most important edifice,” San Francisco becomes a critical block in the foundation of South American colonial art. Quito’s unique history explains much about the character of its colonial art and architecture, but the sources for this anonymous, influential and unique façade, and the contributions of its indigenous artisans remain at the core of a more complete understanding of this church, and of an entire branch of art history.

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²⁸ Kubler and Soria 87.



Figure 1. San Francisco, view of façade. (Photo Credit: Eloise Quiñones-Keber)

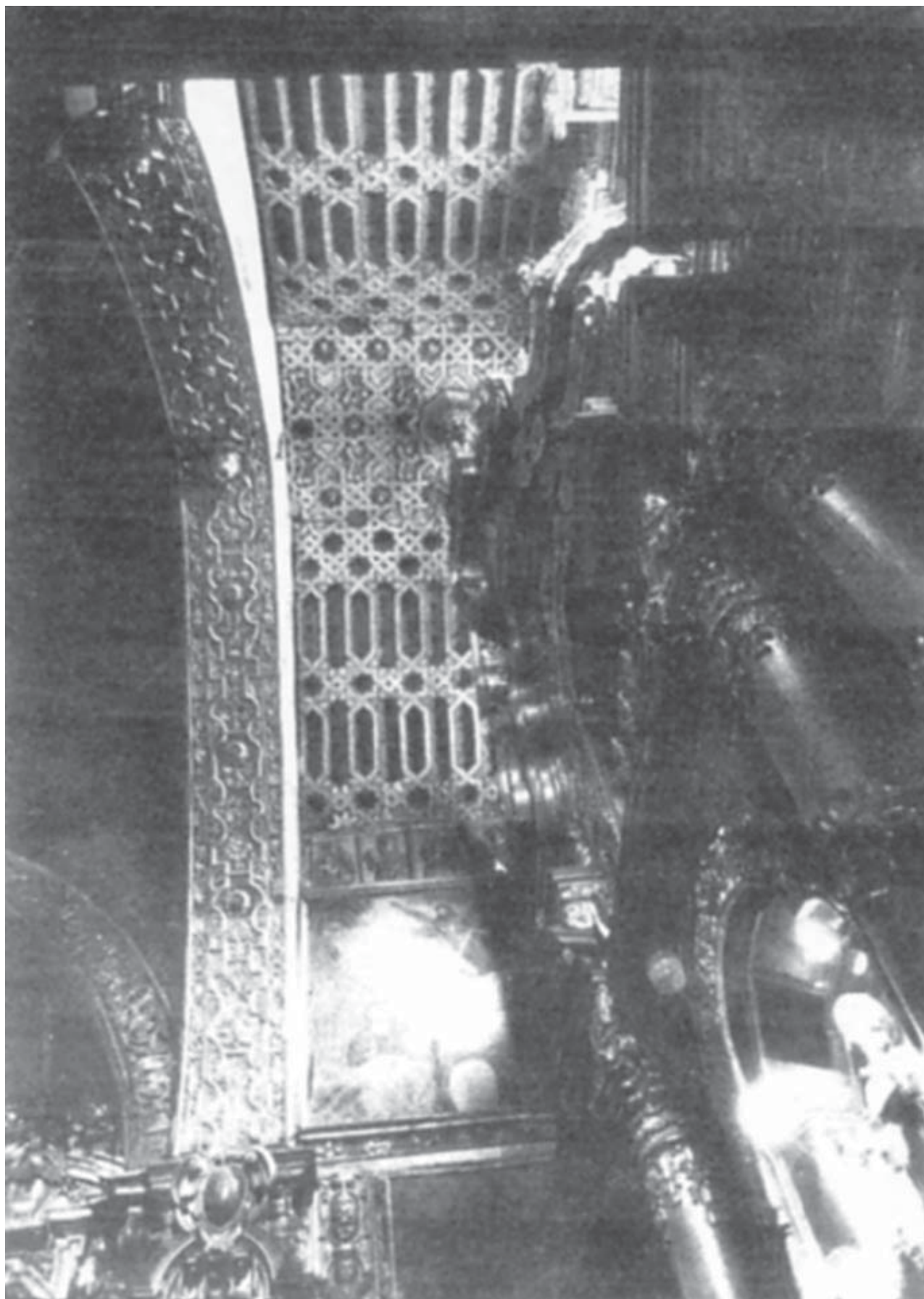


Figure 2. San Francisco, detail of mudéjar ceiling. (Photo Credit: Valerie Fraser)

[right] Figure 3. Serlio's perspective drawing of Bramante's Belvedere concave-convex staircase, from Book III. (Sebastiano Serlio, *Book of Architecture*. Mineola: Dover, 1980.)

[lower left] Figure 4. Serlio, cornices, window and doorframes, from Book III. (Sebastiano Serlio, *Book of Architecture*. Mineola: Dover, 1980.)

[lower right] Figure 5. Serlio, Portale Tuscanico, from the *Libro Straordinario*. (Sebastiano Serlio, *Book of Architecture*. Mineola: Dover, 1980.)

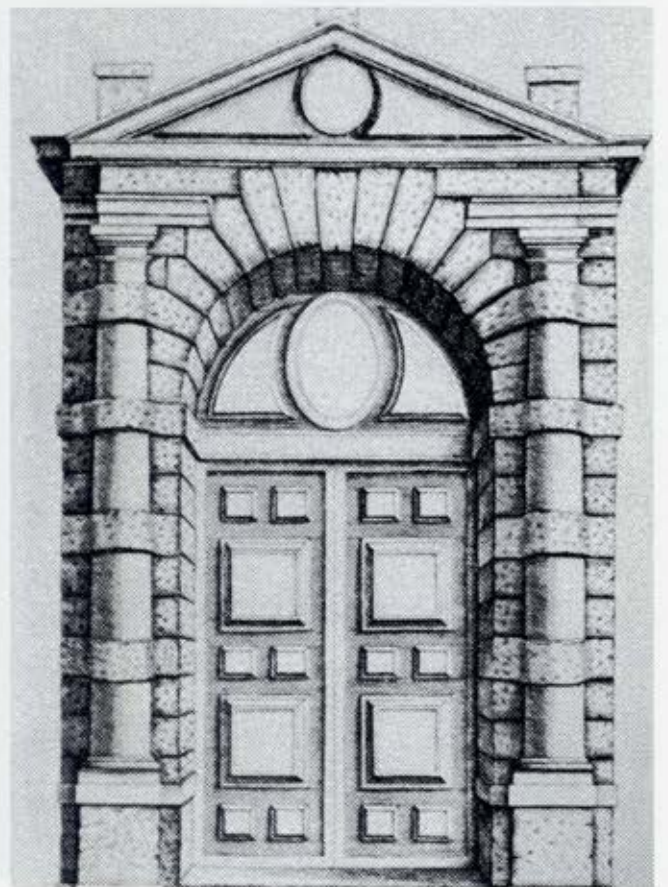
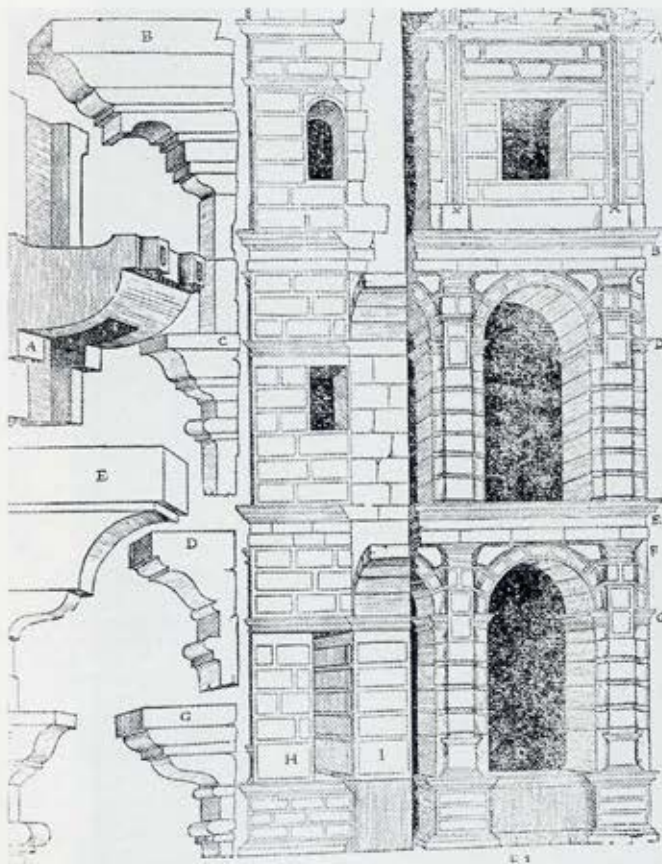
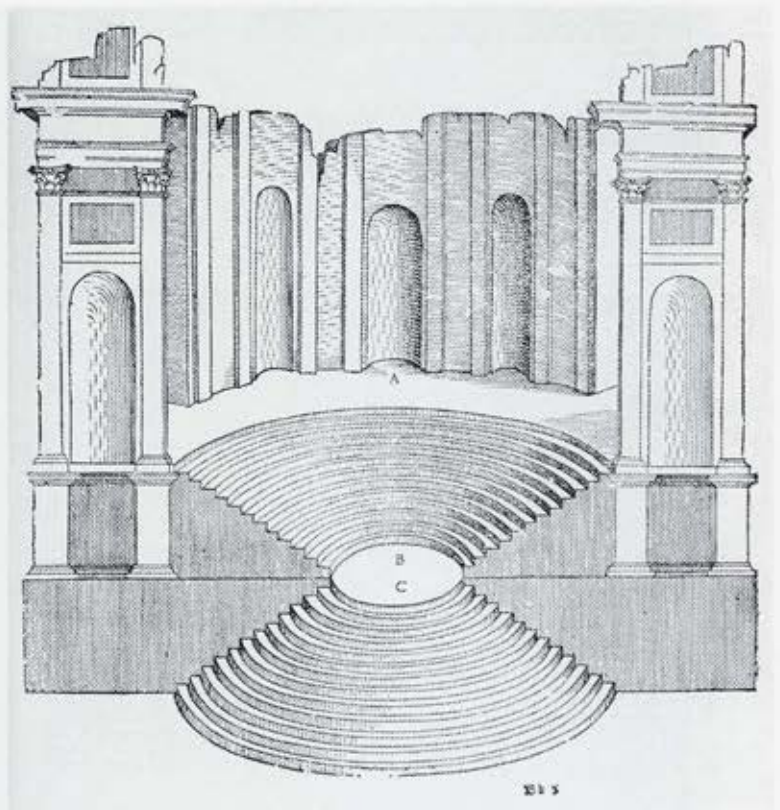




Figure 6. San Francisco, detail of narthex decoration. (Photo Credit: Eloise Quiñones-Keber)



Figure 7. San Francisco, detail of lower gallery of the cloister with ceiling decoration. (Frank Scherschel - *Life Magazine*)