

David M. Kowal

Because so much of the architectural structure is lost and because surviving documentation reveals so little about it, a comprehensive art historical assessment of the Jesuit-built collegial complex of Madre de Deus – popularly known as St. Paul's -- has remained rather elusive. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Guillén Nuñez's study brings together what is known about St. Paul's from surviving Jesuit letters, contemporary descriptions and recent excavations, and provides cogent explanations regarding the authorship, the stylistic evolution, and the iconographical meaning of the complex. In essence, this handsome book is a multi-dimensional treatment of the subject, firmly situating St. Paul's within the context of Jesuit ideology, building tradition, and missionary activity in Asia.

Introductory chapters set the stage. A summary of the foundation and guiding principles of the Society of Jesus is followed by a synopsis of Jesuit building activity that charts the evolution of the Order's architecture from an early, unembellished, Counter-Reformation style to the later exuberance of the Baroque, noting that embellished designs were typically reserved for churches rather than other Jesuit structures. In turn, a survey of Jesuit-sponsored architecture in Portuguese India demonstrates that edifices like Goa's College of St. Paul and the church of the Bom Jesus are direct precedents for Macao's collegiate complex. Among the observations regarding Goan churches, is a reminder that the elevated placement of some harks back to the *sacra monte* tradition of Portugal as well as forward to the setting of Macao's St. Paul's.

Shifting discussion to Macao, the reader is provided a summary of the Jesuit's presence there and specifically the decision in 1594 by Alessandro Valignano to create the College of Madre de Deus. Valignano's own words are effectively employed to explain his motives in founding this educational and administrative base for the favored Jesuit missions in Japan and China. In a somewhat abrupt transition, the text then turns to a hypothetical configuration of the Macao complex derived from contemporary descriptions and excavations, which reveal that the main buildings of the college were arranged around an inner courtyard with the church set to its west and approached from the south by stairs ascending the hillside. As best we know, the plan of the collegiate church – attributed to the Italian Jesuit, Carlo Spinola, and begun in the early 17th century after a fire destroyed the previous church – more mirrors Portuguese models than Italian ones; it serves as a reminder that the typology of this structure -- situated in a Portuguese enclave -- pays allegiance to this national authority, as do the previously mentioned structures of Goa. It might also be noted that the three-aisled plan parallels the early Christian basilica and likely was intended to allude to past and present missionary activities of the Church; this is more probable than the author's suggestion that an "ideal of martyrdom could have inspired Spinola's plans for the church." Regarding Spinola, undue attention is focused upon his birthplace rather than what can be surmised about the sources that shaped his architectural design, including not only familiarity with structures in Goa but knowledge of late sixteenth-century Roman and Milanese architecture, the latter convincingly cited by others as inspiration for the mannered treatment of Macao's St. Paul's.

Among other things, the final chapter explores the redecoration of the church's interior—which probably occurred in the 1620's—into an elaborate ensemble of carved and gilded wooden ceilings and altars, those very embellishments that gave the structure its “glimmer of the Baroque” referred to in the subtitle of this tome. A reconstruction of the main altar dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, provides the author a bridge to his contention that the facade of St. Paul's is configured both formally and metaphorically as a “retable-facade.” While its classical compartmentalization is unquestionably retable-like and its sculptural program appears to have mirrored the lost altar of the church interior, the extent to which a Eucharistic connotation is intended or conveyed on the facade remains a hypothetical proposition among the many iconographical complexities embedded within this imposing frontispiece. Its didactic decoration—clearly a program devised by a theologian, perhaps Diogo Correa Valente, as Guillén Nuñez suggests—“speaks” in the sermonizing manner of Jesuit rhetorical practice. And while highlighting the Virgin (though not exclusively in an Assumptive role), the imagery also includes references to the Passion of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and allegories of damnation and salvation; collectively, they reference the triumph of the Heavenly Church. They are balanced by images of recently canonized and beatified Jesuits whose inclusion alludes to the successful outreach of the Church on earth and specifically to the Society of Jesus' missionary activities in Japan and China, both administered from the Madre de Deus in Macao.

Although literary sources for a selection of the motives on the façade are discussed, as are stylistic and iconographical references to Asian art, more might be said regarding the Jesuit practice of visual accommodation and particularly, the contextual relationship of the building and its decoration to the unique enclave of Macao itself, where western culture flowed outward as eastern culture emanated inward. But whatever the need for additional clarification or tighter organization in places, Guillén Nuñez's tome obviously constitutes an important contribution to the English-language literature on Macao's most significant ecclesiastical complex. Well-illustrated, well-referenced and well-written, this study offers interesting interpretations of a once majestic edifice and the Jesuit sponsors who shaped it.