

The year was 1973 and art historian Pablo Macera had heard from an artisan, Hilario Mendivil, about the existence of extraordinary mural paintings within a suite of churches south of the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco. Following up on the tip, he embarked on a journey to see them first hand. So impressed was Macera by what he saw that on his return to Lima he implored his friend, book publisher Carlos Milla Batres, to join him on another visit to explore the possibility of publishing a book on these fantastic but little known works of Andean colonial art.

Of his visit to the first of the churches, in the town of Andahuayllas, Milla would later write in the prologue to *La pintura mural andina siglos XVI-XIX* (Andean Mural Painting from the Sixteenth through the Nineteenth Centuries), "I could not shake off the sense of awe that took hold of me while contemplating these astounding works of art.... We hadn't even gone through half of the church, yet we were spellbound. My friend Macera said to me with that inimitable smile of his: What do you think of all this? I didn't really know how to answer. I said, Pablo, I swear to you on my honor that

# VISIONS OF HEAVEN AND HELL

## RESTORING AN EXTRAORDINARY MURAL CYCLE IN THE PERUVIAN ANDES

by JEREMÍAS GAMBOA  
photography by RUPERTO MÁRQUEZ



I will create a great book about these extraordinary murals. He responded. But, you have yet to see Huaro.... Of his visit there, Milla wrote, "I was gripped with emotion, unable to find words to express my great sense of wonder."

Despite the importance of the murals and Milla's seminal publication on these works of art—executed in large part by the Mestizo painter Tadeo Escalante at the dawn of the nineteenth century—they would remain largely unknown to the outside world. That is until now. Today, the main doors of the Church of San Juan Bautista at Huaro, some 40 kilometers south of Cuzco, open quite effortlessly, revealing a stunning artistic program, recently restored through the efforts of the World Monuments Fund and Peru's National Institute of Culture (INC).

It is a sunny July afternoon and I have come to see for myself what so impressed Milla and Macera



more than three decades ago. As I enter the sanctuary, restorers from the INC in Cuzco have moved all the sculptures in the sanctuary and opened all the windows and doors so that we could get a clear view of this artistic miracle—1,371 square meters of mural painted by various artists, including Escalante. “We launched this program in 2004,” says Ada Estrada, coordinator of the restoration work for the Huaro project. Eight skilled technicians, who have spent the past two years working by her side each day from 7:00 in the morning until 2:45 in the afternoon, smiled with satisfaction. “The work on the murals and altarpieces has been completed. We will now be focusing on sculptures and paintings for the next year.”

Walking through this church is like embarking on a voyage through the minds of the people who inhabited the Andean region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Upon merely entering the

A DETAIL OF EL INFIERNO (HELL) THAT GRACES THE SANCTUARY OF SAN JUAN BAUTISTA IN HUARO, PERU. NOTE THE PRESENCE OF ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITIES ALONG WITH THE SINNERS IN THE CAULDRON.



A CONSERVATOR CAREFULLY CONSOLIDATES  
A RENDERING OF THE DEVIL WITHIN THE  
SCENE DEPICTING HELL.

main door one is immediately enveloped by six magnificent paintings, which together form one of the most original and emotionally haunting creations in New World colonial painting. In this group, Tadeo Escalante—who also recorded on these walls the date this masterwork was finished, 1802—creates a truly apocalyptic vision starkly contrasting with the section depicting *La Gloria* (Ascension) in which saints, angels, and devout figures, including the painter himself, are seen floating toward heaven accompanied by God. The other sections of the mural depict a far more ominous vision marked by death and darkness. In *El árbol de la vida* (The Tree of Life), *Las dos muertes* (The Two Deaths) and *Las postrimerías* (The End of Times), the image of the skull reigns supreme over a series of scenes culminating with the magnificent *El infierno* (Hell). Here, a group of contorted Hieronymus Bosch-like figures writhe in agony among the cauldrons and other tortures of hell's abyss.

"I see these paintings as an attempt by their creators to serve specific didactic or catechistic purposes," emphasizes José Alfonso Baigorri, a Spanish priest who has ministered at the Huaro church since March 2006. "I often use these works to illustrate certain commentaries during my own sermons."

The possible catechistic applications of the Huaro images seem nearly infinite. The entire nave of the church is lavishly decorated with monumental altarpieces depicting various saints. Representations of courtly life, caryatids and ornamental motifs, images of the church fathers and the life of the Virgin soar above our heads, finally fusing with animal motifs, coats of arms from unimaginable countries, as well as fruits and flowers, which extend to the very arches of the sanctuary. All of these details are rendered in the most astonishingly vivid colors. Incredibly, we are left

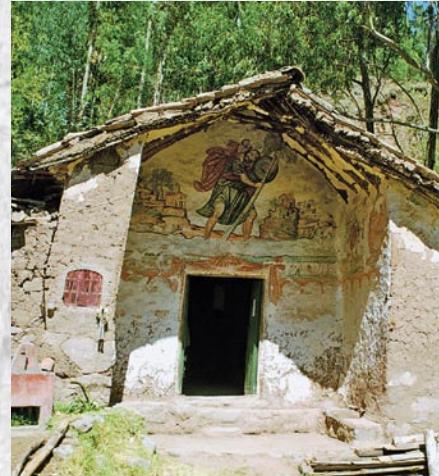
# Tadeo Escalante

THE MYSTERIOUS WORLD OF  
A MESTIZO PAINTER

Seated in a café on the Plaza de Armas in Cuzco, historian Jorge Flores Ochoa ended our interview saying, "Tadeo Escalante is a character in search of a biographer." Born in this city, Flores Ochoa is the joint author, with Elizabeth Kuon and Roberto Samanez, of *Pintura mural en el sur andino* [Mural Painting in the Andean South], one of the most important books on Peruvian Colonial art. He believes that the most significant work on the Mestizo painter remains to be done: "The truth is that we know very little about him, in spite of how much he painted: the entire Church of Huaro, two mills, a church that looks more like a bakery, and possibly two interiors of the churches in Papres and Corma."

So what do we know about this character who for countless years decorated walls, friezes, and the most remote recesses of the ceiling in the Church of Huaro? In fact, not much. That he was born in Acomayo, Cuzco, possibly in 1770 and that he died perhaps in 1840. That he was apparently Mestizo, a descendant of the clan or family of the Inca Atahualpa. The images the painter left of himself also add to the elusiveness of his profile. Each one shows him in a different way: as a Spanish eighteenth-century knight with an emblem of the Acomayo Mill, as an Indian in Bethlehem Chapel, and finally as a seraphic figure at Huaro, among a group of saints ascending to heaven.

Escalante's work is spread around Cuzco and the southern villages of Acomayo and Corma. At the Convent of Santa Catalina in the city center, part of what is now a busy museum, there is a chapel open to the public that is completely decorated with a mural painting attributed to Tadeo Escalante. "I don't know if this is Escalante's work," says Flores Ochoa. "I believe we have not reached that level of certainty. The style is rather different. Also, the work at Santa Catalina is very Catholic. What we have here are religious scenes." A response of this kind stirs up a number of questions: "Couldn't the message of the paintings at Huaro be considered Catholic? Isn't it possible that Escalante painted Santa Catalina with some intentions and Huaro with others? What are these 'anti-Catholic' messages in the paintings at Huaro? Was Escalante irreverent?"





A RENDERING OF ST. CHRISTOPHER GRACES THE FAÇADE OF THE SO-CALLED MOLINO DE LOS INCAS, FACING PAGE, WHILE A SCENE DEPICTING THE TREE OF LIFE ADORNS THE INTERIOR.

In the Peruvian classic *Buscando un inca: identidad y utopía en los Andes* (*In search of an Inca: Identity and Utopia in the Andes*), the historian Alberto Flores Galindo analyzes the work at Huaro. His study is based on the revolutionary dreams of rebel leaders such as Gabriel Aguilar, whose revolt was put down three years after work on the church was completed, in 1805. To Flores Galindo, the paintings in the space below the choir are subversive. Images in which death appears to be dominant, in which we must confront the crossed destinies of the poor and the rich, represent the binary order associated with Andean utopia. Half smiling, Flores Ochoa adds: "In themselves, these images did not contradict the idea of whomever ordered them to be painted. In this same Catholic church it is said that we are all sinners; what is disturbing is that the images admit two readings."

However, the theories of Flores Ochoa, Kuon, and Samanez take a different tack. To them, there were hidden messages at Huaro, like an encrypted code, directed toward members of pro-independence ritual societies. For these scholars, this would be the consciousness of death, so important in a person's passage from ordinary life to a life of esoteric, philosophical, and patriotic speculation in that period. "Societies organized in that way were more numerous than is believed," points out Flores Ochoa. What is the basis for the theories of these scholars? They find it in the characteristics of one of the artist's last and most personal works, which he rendered on the walls of several mills in and around his house in Acomayo. There, Escalante, already an old man removed from the haste and pressures of contracts, let his personal imagination loose. Thus, he rendered a series of images of the creation of the universe in the so-called "Molino de la Creación" [Mill of Creation] and of the Inca lineage in the more famous "Molino de

los Incas" [Mill of the Incas]. We think they held secret meetings in these mills."

After a long day of travel, we arrive at Acomayo, in search of the mills and the disturbing images. Was Escalante a conspirator? The house in which these secret meetings may have taken place is still in perfect condition, up the hill in a peaceful, almost uninhabited village. Deployed in a line, the Inca figures appear to flank the site, and in the background, there is an image of the four elements of the earth and a table that has an official look. The painting allows us to imagine Escalante presiding over these meetings. A shiver goes down my spine.

Evening is falling, and we head off in search of the artist's other works. After almost two more hours in a van, we reach the village of Corma. Enormous and on the verge of collapse, the huge church seems to rise over us with great effort. Now abandoned by the Catholic Church, its fate is left to the villagers. Today, the village has opened its doors and is cleaning up its environs because we are approaching July 25, the date for celebrating its patron saint, James. A community group—villagers who have left their fieldwork for this day only—is trying to bring order to the vast nave in which some sculptures and ancient altarpieces are barely standing. The tremendous walls are all painted white, but in some interstices we can make out the presence of mural painting. Estrada confirms that mural paintings appear to be hidden on all the walls. She calculates that it is about 1,000 square meters. We are shocked. Who ordered all these paintings to be covered over? Leon Huallpa, a young villager in the community, has the answer. "According to our grandparents' stories, it was the priest, Ángel Canal. He had the paintings covered with white paint. That would have been more than 100 years ago." What could have been his reason?, I ask. The answer stops us cold: "People weren't paying attention in mass because of the walls; instead of paying attention to the priest, they were distracted by looking at the figures on the walls. Our grandparents told us they were beautiful; there were wonders on those walls."

Is anyone out there brave enough to try to restore them?



**THE FACADE OF SAN JUAN BAUTISTA IN HUARO, ABOVE. BELOW, BERTRAND DU VIGNAUD, PRESIDENT OF WORLD MONUMENTS FUND EUROPE; MARCELA TEMPLE DE PÉREZ DE CUÉLLAR; MEMBERS OF PERU'S NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CULTURE (INC); AND OTHER DISTINGUISHED GUESTS MARK THE COMPLETION OF THE MURAL RESTORATION ON JANUARY 28.**



with the impression that Escalante finished these murals only a few days ago. Comparing the work of the Peruvian technicians with the photographs appearing in books on colonial painting is even more surprising. The restoration has proved a tremendous success.

"It all began with a phone call from Marcela Temple de Pérez de Cuellar," says Huaro project coordinator architect Edwin Benavente in his office at the National Institute of Culture in Lima, where he serves as director of the National Heritage Office. In 2001, Bertrand du Vignaud, president of the World Monuments Fund in Europe, had decided to organize a trip to Peru for some of his organization's supporters. Temple, the wife of former UN Secretary General Javier Pérez

de Cuellar, was helping to organize the trip. Among other things on their itinerary, she wanted the group to visit some of the colonial churches between the former Inca centers of Cuzco and Pikillacta. Their stop at Huaro, says Benevente, was pivotal. "We spent a long time in the church," wrote Temple in a correspondence, "We admired each detail as if it were a great work of art. When we left, I sensed that everyone had been truly impressed at having found a church that guarded such beauty in such a remote and desolate place."

For local residents, the church has always served as the town's focal point, having been built only a few years after the Jesuits arrived in Cuzco in 1571. From there, their religious domination would extend to neighboring indigenous communities on the orders of Viceroy Toledo. Some believe it was the oppression of the native population under the Spanish that influenced the naming of the church—San Juan Bautista de Huaro, patron saint of the meek and the dispossessed. To facilitate the evangelization of the area's largely illiterate indigenous population, various local artists commenced work on the structure's ornamentation sometime around 1675. This work continued over the years, with paintings gradually being inserted one on top of the other. Limited ornamentation began first in the chancel, then proceeded on the walls of the nave and the choir loft. Finally, decoration was applied to the vestibule, extending to the upper part of the nave and the flat ceiling. The entire space became enveloped in dazzling color. In time, however, this outstanding legacy had fallen into a dangerous state of disrepair.

Ada Estrada remembers that the crew's initial objectives did not include a global intervention. The work would consist of cleaning the paint surfaces and replastering some sections before proceeding with reintegrating the images. However, a concentration of *kikullo* grass (*Pennisetum clandestinum*) had caused a great deal of humidity to filter into the church's adobe structure. This, together with damage wrought by previous restorations—slipshod structural consolidations, excessive use of cotton and polyvinyl acetate, a retouching adhesive—as well as vandalism, had destroyed a considerable portion of the paintings. Representative sections of the *Infierno* and even arch decorations were virtually lost.

The work was organized in a series of stages, including different levels of intervention based on the specific deterioration of the paintings, which in some cases required research of the original materials used by Escalante and his predecessors to improve maintenance and restoration techniques or adapt them to a Highland Peruvian context. "We performed a chemical analysis and found that the original technique used for manufacturing the walls often omitted certain essential materials: in many sections little straw was used in the adobe, while in others the straw content was excessive," Estrada explains. This led to partial disintegration of the adobe walls, as well as an alarming level of cracking and support deterioration. The restorers particularly encountered problems in the choir loft, which extended to the friezes along the gospel and epistle sides (left and right) of the nave, as well as along wall bases. The greatest challenge was undoubtedly posed by the friezes of the chancel. Unlike the paintings in other parts of the church, which could be

treated directly on the wall, mural fragments had to be removed like delicate bits of canvas from this crucial section and then reset after treatment.

"The first thing we did was to cover the wall paintings with a protective layer of paraloid, a highly stable adhesive, and then with gauze," Estrada explains. Once the surface had been removed, the structure of the wall itself was directly treated, filling in cracks and fissures until a smooth surface was achieved. The same process was also applied to the reverse sides of the separated fragments. In order to reset the wall, local materials had to be used. "In Cuzco, we were trained in European restoration techniques, which were designed to deal with conservation of mural painting in the form of frescoes



THE CHURCH REMAINS A CENTER OF  
CIVIC LIFE FOR THE VILLAGE OF HUARO.



DECORATIVE DETAILS FROM TADEO ESCALANTE'S WORK INCLUDE FROM TOP, MUSICIANS IN THE CONVENT OF SANTA CATALINA, CUZCO; AN ORNAMENT FROM THE CHURCH IN CORMA; AND SCENES AT HUARO. FACING PAGE: MEMBERS OF THE RESTORATION TEAM FROM LEFT, TANIA ALVAREZ TINTAYA, VIRGINIA BELLIDO HUARCA, TERESA MARQUEZ GAMARRA, JORGE ORTIZ JARA, ADA ESTRADA IBERICO, JULIO NINANTAY LOAIZA, GINO PRIETO GONGORA, GRIMALDO PONCE DE LEON VILLACORTA



on concrete supports. We thus had to apply new technologies that were compatible with the Andean environment, as well as with the church's adobe construction and the techniques employed by Tadeo Escalante. We used local materials, including mucilage from the *jahuancollay*, a thorned plant with a powerfully adhesive sap that works quite well as a replacement [for polyvinyl acetate].” I asked Ada if this technique was used in the most representative areas of the church, for example the remarkable vestibule. She said it was not. Of the 1,371 square meters of wall painting, only about 300 required this form of “intensive surgery.”

On our third day at Huaro, after viewing and revisiting each of the restored areas and their paintings, the inevitable questions arose concerning the future of this magnificent project.

Despite its proximity to Cuzco, which sees thousands of visitors a year, Huaro is seldom frequented by tourists, who tend to venture north of the Inca capital to better-known sites on the Inca trail such as Machu Picchu and Ollantaytambo. “Now that the church has been restored, we are hoping it will become part of a new tourist corridor, so that the world can begin to know something about us,” says Juan Carlos Rivero Escobar, mayor of Huaro, who is banking on the restoration serving as a catalyst for community development. But there are a number of obstacles to overcome if his visions of urban renewal are to come to fruition.

One of the most critical problems facing the INC in Cuzco involves the destruction of heritage by the locals themselves. The problem can be attributed in large part to a lack of education, says David Ugarte, director of the INC in Cuzco, noting that future activities at Huaro will be geared specifically to addressing these issues. “The restoration provides an articulated starting point, one which we believe is beginning to kindle a sense of collective consciousness among the people,” says Benavente. “What we have done is to involve the parish, the community, local teachers, so that they will use the building for workshops aimed at teaching children about the historic and artistic wealth that surrounds them. The first thing we need to do is generate a consciousness to safeguard what we have, and then to isolate particular iconography, so that a series of images can be made using various materials—such as cardboard, wood, and paper. Tourists could then purchase these items as souvenirs.” Luis Ochoa Palomino, director of the town’s Narciso Aréstegui School for nearly 14 years, looks out at an asphalt ballcourt where several students are playing. “The paintings are undoubtedly the most beautiful thing we have in Huaro,” he says. Fourteen of his students have enrolled in the “Defenders of Our Heritage” program, which is part of the Pikillacta Masterplan, an initiative of INC Cuzco that seeks to identify a corridor of towns in south of the Inca capital. Katherin Castro and Efraín Alegria, institute technicians involved in drafting the plan, explain its objectives: “The students will bring the training and information we provide back to their own schools, districts and communities, thus fostering understanding and protection of their own cultural legacy,” says Castro.

Can collective consciousness be solidly built using this church and its treasures as a foundation? There is certainly a precedent. The Museo de Piedras Sagradas (Museum of Sacred Stones), which operates out of the town’s municipal building, was spearheaded by Renato Dávila, an anthropologist who began collecting Inca and Pre-Inca lithic pieces as a hobby. The project has attracted the efforts of the entire community. “At first we couldn’t believe it,” says Luis Ochoa Palomino. “Now we fully understand its value.” In a room containing more than 300 stones, which he polishes, cleans, and classifies, Dávila watches his museum collection grow with each passing day. “Now the people of Huaro knock on my door,” he says, “and bring me more and more stones.” ■

