

# ‘China-ware in the skies’: overlapping identities in the ornamental use of plates in Uruguay

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*SUMMARY: This is the study of a church where tableware manufactured in Great Britain was used to decorate the façade in the early 19th century. An argument is made that this one surviving case points to a larger regional tradition, now lost, whose greatest exponent was Montevideo Cathedral, Uruguay. The hypothesis presented here is that the use of British plates in religious façades shortly before the South American Wars of Independence was part of a search for identity in a region trying to break away from Spain, and in the process of becoming a small republic between the two larger countries of Argentina and Brazil.*

## INTRODUCTION: MONTEVIDEO CATHEDRAL

In 1825 the British merchant ship *Nautilus* came to the shores of the River Plate. One crew member was a sailor who was also a poet. His name is unknown, but he provided an interesting account of the expedition, leaving a travel journal written entirely in verse, describing the details of the risky journey and giving a picture of the ports which were visited on the way to the city of Montevideo (Fig. 1). Here he was especially interested in the cathedral, observing an atypical phenomenon:

The *grand* cathedral strikes unequal rise,  
With unmatch'd summits pointing to the skies;  
The dome of one being plaster, soil'd by time,  
The other (though the lowest, most sublime!)  
Blue plates and dishes! British porcelain!  
This piece of work remains, to prove their skill  
In architect'ral symmetry — until  
The other (as with that) some shot may strike,  
They'll p'rhaps then *try* to have them both alike;

When, lo! our china-ware again may rise,  
If not in price, at least towards the skies.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of his text, he added a note regarding the fifth line of the above stanza:

It appears that during the bombardment of Monte-Video one of the spire domes was knocked down, and was some time afterwards rebuilt, but not so high as the other. Staffordshire ware being rather cheap (large stock being on hand at the time), they covered the top with blue plates and dishes — it has a whimsical effect.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand it is possible to detect the poet's surprise both in finding tableware decorating a religious building and the interesting effect they produced. On the other hand it is also still possible to detect, nearly 200 years later, the astonishment of a merchant concerned about the prices of the same wares he was transporting in the South American market, and the impact of the flood of foreign goods.

These decorative Staffordshire transfer-printed earthenware dishes have not survived due to multiple modifications subsequently undergone by the building, but we do have other local stories and images of this unusual form of decoration that confirm the sailor's description. In the middle of the 19th century, a French traveller,



FIG. 1  
Map of Uruguay  
and River Plate area  
showing the location  
of Montevideo and  
San Carlos (drawing,  
F. Girelli).

Just-Jean-Etienne Roy, alias Armand de Brossard, referred to the exterior lining of the dome and the cupolas of the church in his diary: '... and above all that, the imposing mass of the Cathedral, the *Matriz* (the mother church), as it is called, with its porcelain domes shining in the sun'.<sup>3</sup> He had previously referred to the two towers as being covered in '*faïence peinte et vernissée*',<sup>4</sup> that is, painted and glazed earthenware.

Another important witness who noticed the use of dishes (instead of more traditional tiles) was Isidoro De-María.<sup>5</sup> Referring to the first works carried out in the cathedral, he dated the completion of the dome and the tower cupolas to 1809, sixteen years before the arrival of the anonymous English sailor. Regarding the surface decoration, he wrote:

Seeing the difficulty arising from the absolute lack of tiles to dress the dome and the main tower, and as need is the mother of industry, according to the popular saying, the employment of coloured crockery, dishes and plates was resorted to. For this, much was used as it was found in the tableware

shops they were taken from, and it was also ordered to bring some quantities from Buenos Aires, and with this [decorative] element, and no little expensive and meritorious work, it should be assumed, was formed the enamelled dome and the left bell tower in which our Pepillo lay north of a Saint Joseph figure, invisible to the naked eye, but which is discovered with the help of a telescope as a kind of yellow stain.<sup>6</sup>

In order to know what became of this now-missing decorative motif, it is necessary to review the architectural history of the cathedral. It was designed *c.* 1780–90, following a typical Jesuit layout with three naves, a transept, a dome and a façade framed by two slender towers. What is atypical of this church is its imposing size for its time, considering the expense for the Spanish Crown in building in a city whose hinterland produced no gold or other precious metals, but only leather and meat.<sup>7</sup> The building's consecration took place in 1804, although it was decades before it was completed. The anonymous sailor's poem shows that by 1825 the tower cupolas and



FIG. 2

Montevideo Cathedral. Detail of the lithograph of the original watercolour of Adolphe D'Hastrel, *General view from the new cemetery*, c. 1840 (from D'Hastrel 1960).

the dome had been completed and these already had the chinaware decoration. These stood out in contrast with the rest of the all-white building in a watercolour painted by Adolphe D'Hastrel in the 1840s (Fig. 2). In an 1840 photo-lithograph it is possible to see, although without much detail, the location of the dishes in the already-finished north tower cupola and the large central dome; here the dishes were placed in double rows on each of dome segments (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup>

The completion of the building, including the finishing the south tower and the rendering of the façade, took place between 1858 and 1859 under the supervision of the architect Bernardo Poncini.<sup>9</sup> He was in charge of defining the exterior appearance of the church. An unpublished photograph taken in 1862–63 by Rafael Castro y Ordóñez,

photographer of the journey of the *Scientific Commission of the Pacific*,<sup>10</sup> is a testimony to the changes introduced by Poncini (Figs 4–5). The photograph shows the final aspect of the cathedral, and it is possible to observe for the first time, and in detail, all the lining of dishes in the tower cupolas; it is also evident that those dishes visible on the central dome in the 1840 lithograph had already been removed. Each cupola was composed of eight segments and in each we can identify nine dishes of 250mm in diameter arranged in a row, which gives a total of 144 dishes between both towers.

In 1867 there was a call for bids for 'Renovation works which should be carried out in the church', including plastering, tiling and painting the façade, towers, dome and roof. It was required that 'the tiling of roofs will be of good Marseille

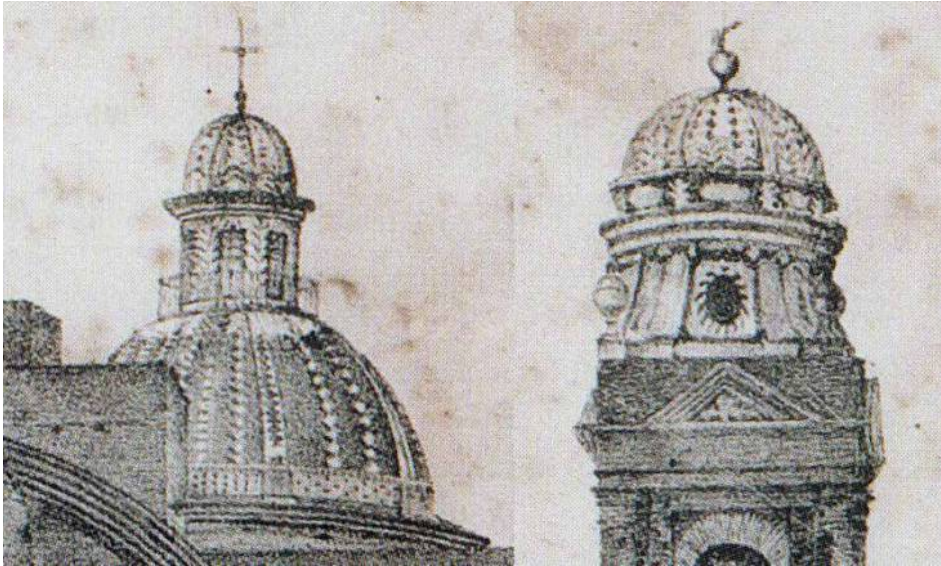


FIG. 3

Detail of the photo-lithography of 1840 showing decoration of ceramics and tiles on the dome and cupola of the north tower, Montevideo Cathedral (from *El Talismán* VII, October 1840).



FIG. 4

Unpublished photograph, Montevideo Cathedral in 1862-63 (Archivo del Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales, CSIC, Madrid, Spain).



FIG. 5

Detail of the dome and cupola of the north tower of Montevideo Cathedral in 1862-63, and reconstruction of the arrangement of dishes and tiles in a section of the cupola. The tiles are 'Cartabón' pattern, c. 130 × 130mm, and are possibly Catalonian and 18th-century in date.

floor tiles, and those from Le Havre to be used in the choir floor', later it was noted that 'the tiles used for the central dome, as well as those used for the roof and dome of the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, will be glazed and placed on mortar equal to that used for roofs'.<sup>11</sup> It was at this point that the Staffordshire plates and the old Spanish 18th-century tiles were removed, and the lining of the dome and the cupolas was undertaken using French tiles from Desvres (rather than the planned Marseille roof tiles). An American traveller named Frank Vincent who passed through South America between 1885 and 1887 described Montevideo Cathedral, now with the new tiles:

The great square towers of the cathedral, with its tile-covered cupola, held the center of the view, rising high above the surrounding buildings ... The situation of Montevideo, therefore, as it inclines gently back from the water, with the bright morning sun lighting up its various tints, and glancing from the tiled domes and tower-tops, makes altogether a very attractive picture. In general position and aspect it reminded me of Constantinople.<sup>12</sup>

He later wrote: 'My hotel I find on a corner of the Grand Plaza next the cathedral, which is

a very large edifice, with two towers and a huge dome covered with green, blue, and yellow tiles'.<sup>13</sup> It is this Desvres tile surface which can be seen on the towers today. The tiles on the dome, however, were replaced by copies in 1958.<sup>14</sup>

Another intervention for the general renovation of the façade and atrium, carried out by Antonio Llambias de Olivar, took place in 1905; no major changes were implemented at this time.<sup>15</sup> Between 1941 and 1952 the façade and towers were restored, modifying some of the changes which Poncini had introduced in an attempt to return the building to something closer to its 18th-century appearance. The outstanding feature of this intervention, undertaken by the architect Rafael Ruano, was an archaeological study of the walls, looking for evidence of the original building.<sup>16</sup> Between 1952 and 1961 the last substantial modification of the cathedral took place; the structural problems in the dome were resolved by demolishing the original version and replacing it with a reinforced concrete equivalent.<sup>17</sup> The original French 19th-century tiles were replaced with copies of such bad quality that they have now completely faded.

It might well be asked where this unusual 18th-century River Plate-region idea of using British earthenware as a means of decorating a major metropolitan cathedral came from. Though assigning



FIG. 6

Façade of the church of San Carlos and detail showing the decoration of the towers (photograph, F. Girelli).

precise credit is difficult, three architects were associated with the early building of the cathedral. The first of these was José Custodio de Sáa y Faría,<sup>18</sup> a military engineer of Portuguese origin, who is credited with the building's original design. However, initial construction did not begin until 1790 and de Sáa y Faría died two years later, possibly leaving the building work in the hands of Tomas Toribio, an architect trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Spain, and who had previously worked as a curator of the Escorial monastery.<sup>19</sup> Toribio is credited with certain changes in the design of the cathedral in line with his Neoclassical preferences — what was then a very modern architectural style for the Spanish *ancien régime*.<sup>20</sup> While Toribio was in charge of the project, the artisan and craft works or 'manual relations' (as mentioned in a document dated to 1809)<sup>21</sup> were the responsibility of Bernardo Lecocq, another military engineer; Lecocq was involved in most of the Montevideo building works until his death in 1820.

#### THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL MOTIF: THE CHURCH OF SAN CARLOS

While it was likely the most prominent example, Montevideo Cathedral was not the only building in the River Plate region of South America to be decorated with British ceramics. Another church in Uruguay still preserves decorative dishes and

jugs in its tower. This is the church of the city of San Carlos (Fig. 1), finished shortly after the consecration of Montevideo Cathedral at the beginning of the 19th century, and also built under Spanish rule.<sup>22</sup>

At San Carlos, the entablature frieze that surrounds the central body of the towers is covered by 20 large plates, five small plates, and jugs encased in each corner (Figs 6–7). Size is not the only variation in style between the plates; their decorative motifs, factory of manufacture and date are also different. Analysing differences between the dishes, it is readily apparent that the building has been altered significantly through a series of interventions, including some restoration work that changed its original appearance. Several of the dishes are therefore no longer the originals; they were instead replacements installed as substitutes for missing dishes. Unfortunately, there is no documentary record describing the timing or specific nature of this restoration work. The lack of documentation means that it is not easy to determine which vessels were changed and when the changes occurred.

All the large plates are *c.* 210mm in diameter and are decorated with the Willow transfer print pattern, although they are not all identical. Those at the front of the towers are different to those on the sides. The first group (Fig. 8) have a blue transfer-printed design and appear to date to the late 19th century, while the others (Fig. 9) have an unusual fabric colouring. The latter appear to be made from lime in imitation

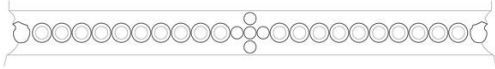


FIG. 7

Outline sketch of the distribution pattern of plates and corner jugs on each side of the towers (drawing, F. Girelli).



FIG. 8

Large plate *in situ* from front of the towers; see Figure 10 for scale for tower plates (photograph, F. Girelli).

of transfer-printed whiteware, but painted and unglazed; they may be copies installed during restoration in the second half of the 20th century. In other words, if there were any 18th-century dishes on the towers, as the authors suppose was originally the case, none remain *in situ*.

Nevertheless, there are vessel fragments attributed to the church that seem to have been removed (or have fallen from) the façade at unknown dates in various phases. Fragments of one 18th-century vessel (Fig. 10), apparently removed during restoration, are preserved in the Historical Museum of the city of San Carlos. These have a bluish fabric typical of the Chinese porcelain of the time and bear no seal or mark of origin on their reverse sides, only residue of the lime mortar used to attach them to the church. This vessel is unusual in originating from China, as all other examples appear to be British. Another dish (Fig. 11), also recorded as originating from the church towers, belongs to a private collector.<sup>23</sup> It has a blue fabric, with mortar on the back together with



FIG. 9

Large plate *in situ* typical of those on the sides and back of the towers (photograph, F. Girelli).



FIG. 10

Large 18th-century Chinese porcelain plate, preserved in the Historical Museum of San Carlos (photograph, F. Girelli).

an unknown mark.<sup>24</sup> The pattern is 'Wild Rose', though a painted version rather than transfer-printed, and likely dates to the end of the 18th century.

The small plates are earthenware, 135mm in diameter, with blue monochrome decoration in the 'Adam's Rose' painted pattern (Fig. 12). Several of those dishes are broken and also feature signs of wear and tear from being exposed to the elements. Only four of those located in the front of both towers are old, and the authors



FIG. 11

Large plate that would originally have been on one of the towers, preserved by a collector (from Seijo 1929, 58).



FIG. 12

One of the four original saucers surviving *in situ* at the front of the towers; see Figure 14 for scale for tower saucers (photograph, F. Girelli).



FIG. 13

Local copy *in situ* replacing a missing saucer on the tower (photograph, F. Girelli).



FIG. 14

Saucer from one of the towers, from a private collection in Buenos Aires (photograph, F. Girelli).

do not believe that they are original. The other dishes (Fig. 13) are clearly local replicas placed during the restoration of the church in the second half of the 20th century. Fragments from another dish are located in a private collection in Buenos Aires (Fig. 14). The size, shape and decoration are an exact match for the first dish mentioned

above. The glaze is also very worn. Although this dish may also belong to the church, we cannot be certain of its provenance due to the lack of any accompanying documentation.

The jugs located at the corners of the towers are all similar in form and decoration, but they are not identical (Fig. 15); nor are they original.





FIG. 15

Jugs placed at the corners of the towers; locally manufactured copies; see Figure 16 for scale for tower jugs (photograph, F. Girelli).

There are differences in the decorative design of the leaves and flowers; in the case of the jug to the right of Figure 15, the central flower and the bottom branches have been omitted altogether. It is possible that these are also of local manufacture, like the small dishes mentioned previously. Fragments of the original jugs used in the church are now in the Historical Museum of San Carlos (Fig. 16); we can see residues of lime mortar on these too. Areas of the back and the handle which had been inlaid in the wall were broken when the jug was removed, although fortunately the jug itself was preserved.

#### MODIFICATIONS TO THE CHURCH OF SAN CARLOS AND ITS DECORATION

The San Carlos church was inaugurated on 1 January 1801, after nine years of construction work. The exterior was not rendered (and so was without pottery) until 1824.<sup>25</sup> It is very likely that the dishes were inserted at the time of the plastering, following the example of Montevideo Cathedral. As mentioned above, the currently visible dishes are later in date, and were possibly replaced on more than one occasion.

By 1868 the building was badly damaged and at risk of collapse due to a series of cracks and water leaks. Tenders for remedial works were called for, and Ulises Condestabile was hired to carry out a total renovation. Metal brackets were used to reinforce the walls, new plaster was applied, the building was repainted white and other repairs were made.<sup>26</sup> It was probably during this phase that French tiles from Desvres were used in the cupolas of the towers. Other minor changes to the upper part of the church were the placement of a clock and the wall that houses it, as seen in old photographs.<sup>27</sup>

In 1928 the historian Carlos Seijo was commissioned by the *Sociedad Amigos de la Arqueología* of Uruguay to study the San Carlos church and its history.<sup>28</sup> Of interest is his description of the condition of both church and pottery in late 1928 and early 1929. He says 83 dishes were missing out of the 200 dishes that should exist:

... the circular depressions left by the dishes when they were taken by collectors are visible. My guess is that they were taken at different times and, almost certainly, during the following occasions: when the church was whitewashed, when ties were inserted into



FIG. 16

Original jugs from the church of San Carlos preserved in the historical Museum of San Carlos (photograph, F. Girelli).

the walls, and when the clock was added. In the area of easiest access, over the choir, 37 dishes are missing. Luckily the rows on both sides fronting the square are intact.<sup>29</sup>

Years later, an iron tensor was placed between the towers, as seen in a photograph published in 1955; this caused further disruption to the church fabric.<sup>30</sup> Shortly after, the building (especially the façade) was again in disrepair. A photograph taken in February 1961 (Fig. 17) shows that several dishes and almost all the corner jugs were missing. A new restoration of the church in the 1970s tried to return the building to its primitive appearance: the belfry was returned to its original form, a new clock was installed and the iron cross was again placed in the centre. It seems that it was at this point that the remaining original dishes were removed and replaced with modern copies.

#### INTERPRETATION: THE MEANING OF THE CERAMICS

Past discussion has explained the use of ceramics to decorate the domes of Montevideo Cathedral

as a practical response to an 18th-century lack of wall tiles,<sup>31</sup> but we do not think this is the case. Tiles were both available and used in other areas of the church; in other words, this was a conscious decision. With San Carlos, past studies have focused on the precariousness of resources in a small and isolated town located away from major urban centres at the beginning of 1800; plates and jugs were used to decorate the façade as they were the only readily available materials.<sup>32</sup> Again, this seems an inadequate explanation given the available evidence. The use of ceramics other than wall tiles as decorative elements already existed in the *mudéjar* architecture of medieval Spain, as in Teruel Cathedral with its green plates.<sup>33</sup> This type of decoration had a strong tradition in the south of the Iberian Peninsula, and possibly reached the River Plate area when churches were being built in the Spanish colony. It is, however, interesting that a peninsular tradition made use of British wares at a time when colonial trade with the United Kingdom was forbidden.

The monopoly imposed by Spain only allowed colonial trade with Seville and Cadiz — and initially through Lima, Peru, since ports along the



FIG. 17

Facade of the church of San Carlos in 1961, with detail of the tower showing the poor condition of the surviving dishes (photographs, Alejandro Ruiz Luque).

River Plate were forbidden to trade directly with Spain for much of the colonial period. Legitimate imports were few and expensive, and local products were not exported; smuggling was the only solution available for overcoming these rules. Spain also regulated the register ship system, or those 'ships that were independent from the navy, visited certain ports with a special permit in order to trade with goods not included in the normal trade'.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of the 18th century, Spain instituted some concessions which eased trade restrictions, but these were limited. For example, it gave France the right to undertake the slave trade to Buenos Aires; this later became an English monopoly. Ships travelling from Africa via Brazil were also allowed to bring goods for the needs of the slaves, though in reality this was a cover for smuggling.

This situation remained more or less static until 1776, when the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata was created, closely followed by the 1778 decree permitting free trade between Spain and the Indies. This granted permission to trade colonial goods among the colonies, abolished some taxes, and opened trade with new Spanish ports such as Alicante, Málaga, Barcelona, Santander, Gijón and Coruña. Initially there was a marked improvement in trade due to a growth in exchange with different Spanish ports, but eventually the volume expanded to the extent that European goods flooded the local market.<sup>35</sup> Letters written by traders from this period frequently complain about this situation. Gaspar de Santa Coloma wrote to colleagues in Spain about the abundance of goods, the difficulties in selling them

and the consequent decrease in prices. In 1794 he said, 'In the 26 years that I have known this city, I have never seen its market as it is now and it is the same for all the neighbouring provinces. There's no demand, sales are very low everywhere'.<sup>36</sup> In short, the international trade encouraged by the implementation of new free trade ideas swamped the market with consumer goods in a society that was still very traditional and economically dependent on Spain; the area was rich in silver from the Potosí mines, but had little available cash.

Another important change in this period was the opening of trade from both European and Asian neutral ports (such as Manila). A royal decree of 1797 authorized trade with neutral ports in times of war. There was virtually no peace between Spain and Great Britain for several decades, and many groups benefited from this measure. This included English industrialists who used other ports and flags, such as those of Hamburg or the United States, to flood the region with their goods even during periods of conflict.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that authorities in Spain, in London and in the River Plate region preferred to ignore this situation, since smuggling was not only very profitable for all parties, but was also impossible to stop. The presence of British products in Montevideo towards the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries is therefore not surprising; likewise the low price of those goods given their abundance in local markets.

If the domes of Montevideo's Cathedral were decorated in 1809 when Uruguay was still a Spanish colony (as stated by De-María), it is striking that

objects of illegal origin originating as smuggled goods were placed in public sight in the most prominent point of the city. Perhaps this is the first evidence of the coming British economic triumph in the River Plate area; it could well mean, metaphorically, that they managed to succeed ideologically where two British attempted invasions of Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807 had failed militarily. But the British invasion in the region was not just military: ‘Together with the English forces seventy merchant ships arrived at Montevideo and around 2,000 merchants who installed stores in Montevideo ... In three months goods worth 756,000 pounds sterling entered in Montevideo customs’.<sup>38</sup>

Following the Argentine declaration of independence in 1816, the new government legalized trade with all nations; but far from creating a new situation this simply legalized the existing order. The use of these objects in the cathedral to some degree therefore symbolizes the regional triumph of the Industrial Revolution and the British ideology of free trade. What the anonymous sailor poet would see in 1825 was not simply unusual; it was the symbol of the economic conquest of the region in which he was arriving.

#### CONCLUSION: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A DEPENDENT ECONOMY

The Montevideo cathedral domes, with their plates and jugs, are both a product of illicit trade and a symbol of modernity. This does not just apply to the trade and production issues mentioned in the previous paragraph. Modernity here also applies to modes of consumption, and — particularly importantly — to the symbolic use of these objects within a search for identity that was taking shape in the River Plate region, and culminated in the freedom and independence of both Argentina and Uruguay.

Archaeology and history frequently deal with the special relationship between nations and national identity. Much has been written and debated on this issue, and the contribution of archaeology — including the study of 19th-century ceramics in South America, and the shifting ideological meaning of British ceramics within a South American context — has been particularly important for understanding the growth of national identity in this period.<sup>39</sup> In the context of the River Plate region, one of the present authors has previously described a potential connection between the popularity of blue-coloured British transfer-printed and shell-edged pottery and the dominant blue on white colour scheme of the Argentine flag (shared by the Uruguayan flag), symbolically associating

both forms of material culture with independence, liberty, and anti-Spanish sentiment.<sup>40</sup>

As a result of the dissolution of the colonial viceroalties, Latin America went through several wars which helped to build national identities in territories suddenly divorced from both the colonial identities of the Spanish Empire or the pre-existing ethnicities of the indigenous populations.<sup>41</sup> Uruguay had originally formed part of the Spanish Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, ruled from Buenos Aires, but the boundary between Spanish and Portuguese territory was never well-defined. The country came into existence through a sequence of conflict disputes, initially between Portugal and Spain, culminating in the 1825–28 Cisplatine War between Argentina and Brazil over control of what was then still known as *La Banda Oriental* (‘the eastern strip’), following which Britain mediated a treaty instituting an independent Uruguay as a buffer state in the disputed region.<sup>42</sup> The process of differentiation of a national identity separate from the neighbouring states was not a simple matter since Uruguay had previously been ruled from Buenos Aires and traded in the same European goods, particularly British ceramics, also traded to the Argentinian ports along the River Plate.<sup>43</sup>

Uruguay is nonetheless an important case study for the post-colonial history of countries born on the 19th-century periphery of European colonial empires. It managed to maintain independence despite its location between two large countries that had a historical claim on its territory, creating a society which largely eliminated indigenous groups, reduced its population of African descent, and greatly encouraged European immigration (in the 2011 census, over 90% of Uruguayans claimed to be of white European descent).<sup>44</sup> Uruguay presented itself to the outside world as a white, Western and Christian country, a consumer of European products and adopter of French and English fashions — both these latter countries, significantly, being the historical enemies of Spain.<sup>45</sup> Both the degree of penetration of British ceramics into the River Plate region (including Uruguay) and the sometimes not too subtle symbolic value of those ceramics can be illustrated by the 1825 observations of an English traveller in the region. His comments show great surprise at finding such goods in a remote rural area, but the message of the decoration is also significant:

A little girl had given me some water, and I put my straw hat on the ground while I sat down to drink, and with feelings of very great pleasure I was looking at the mug, which was an English one, and on which was inscribed — No power on Earth / Can make us rue, / If England to her- / Self proves true.<sup>46</sup>

These points considered, the presence of British tableware in the decoration of regional churches is neither unusual nor strange. The need to reinforce the new national identity was very strong, erasing prior memories and projecting the new nation(s) towards the modern world as a part of a broader, no longer specifically Spanish, Western civilization.<sup>47</sup> This initially took place before the actual independence of the country, during the growth of the local bourgeoisie who were so important to the break from Spain, and who were responsible for the local process of nation-building. Dishes from Great Britain, a product of the Industrial Revolution, and thus a symbol of modernity, initially arrived through illegal trade, and later through the large-scale expansion of legal British trade in the River Plate that turned much of the region into a dependent post-colonial economy. In the process, British ceramics became a symbolic means of undermining Uruguay’s connection to the Spanish Empire. Nonetheless, the population remained Catholic despite its change in political status.<sup>48</sup>

The use of plates to decorate these churches therefore ultimately combines multiple thematic traditions in a single symbolic whole, drawing on the use of ceramic vessels in the *mudéjar* architecture of medieval Spain, a public and overt display of British material culture symbolically tied to the modernity and liberty with which the new governments wished to associate themselves (while simultaneously disassociating themselves from Spain) and the traditional Catholicism of the overwhelming majority of the people. In this sense, the use of these ceramics as architectural motifs lies wholly within the new nation’s understanding of its place in the post-colonial world, however unusual it must have seemed to the anonymous sailor on the *Nautilus*.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anonymous 1829, 66–7.
- <sup>2</sup> Anonymous 1829, 117–18.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘... et par-dessus tout cela la masse imposante de la cathédrale, la *Matriz* (l’église mère), comme ils l’appellent, avec ses dômes de porcelaine scintillant au soleil’ (De Brossard 1863, 103).

<sup>4</sup> De Brossard 1863, 100.

<sup>5</sup> Furlong 1932, 123.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Tocóse la dificultad de la falta absoluta de azulejos para vestir la media naranja y la torre principal, y como la necesidad es madre de la industria, según el dicho vulgar, se recurrió al arbitrio de emplear la loza de color, de fuentes y platos. Se tomó, para el efecto, cuanta loza se encontró en las lozerías, y aún se mandó traer algunas partidas de Buenos Aires, y con ese elemento, y no poco costoso y meritorio trabajo, como debe suponerse, se formó el enlozado de la cúpula y de la torre izquierda del campanario, en la cual nuestro Pepillo dejó embutido primorosamente al Norte un San José, que no se percibe á la simple vista, pero que se descubre en una especie de mancha amarilla á favor del antejo’ (De-María 1888, 71).

<sup>7</sup> Montemuiño 2005.

<sup>8</sup> This is the first daguerretype taken in Uruguay; it was published in the newspaper *El Talismán* VII, October 1840.

<sup>9</sup> Ruano 1949; Giuria 1955, 34–5; Furlong 1932.

<sup>10</sup> The Commission visited Montevideo between 7 December 1862 and 16 January 1863.

<sup>11</sup> Furlong 1932, 129–32.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent 1891, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent 1891, 146.

<sup>14</sup> De Santiago 1961.

<sup>15</sup> Furlong 1932, 141–4.

<sup>16</sup> Ruano 1949; Giuria 1955, 35–6.

<sup>17</sup> De Santiago 1961.

<sup>18</sup> Furlong 1946, 246–55.

<sup>19</sup> Rey 2006; Mariluz Urquijo 1987, 523.

<sup>20</sup> Furlong 1946, 293–306.

<sup>21</sup> Furlong 1946, 306.

<sup>22</sup> For the history of San Carlos and its church, see Fajardo Terán 1953; Seijo 1929; 1945; 1951.

<sup>23</sup> Seijo 1929, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Seijo 1929, 222.

<sup>25</sup> Seijo 1951, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Seijo 1951, 33–6.

<sup>27</sup> Seijo 1929, 192.

<sup>28</sup> Sociedad Amigos de la Arqueología 1928, 388–9.

<sup>29</sup> ‘... se nota la concavidad circular que dejaron al ser desprendidos para pasar a manos de los coleccionistas. Yo supongo que han sido sustraídos en diversas épocas y, casi con seguridad, en las siguientes ocasiones: al blanquearse la iglesia, al ponérseles llaves a sus muros y cuando se colocó el reloj en su frontón. De la parte más accesible, o sea de la que se encuentra sobre la azotea del coro, faltan, sólo allí, 37 platos. Por fortuna, las hileras que corresponden a ambos frentes de la plaza, se conservan intactas’ (Seijo 1929, 222).

<sup>30</sup> Giuria 1955.

<sup>31</sup> De-María 1888, 71.

- <sup>32</sup> Nadal Mora 1949, 9.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibáñez González 2013.
- <sup>34</sup> Villalobos 1986, 38.
- <sup>35</sup> Foreign goods include both those from Spain and other countries, considering that 'two thirds of the shipments sent from Spain included foreign goods' (Villalobos 1986, 16).
- <sup>36</sup> 'El estado en que esta plaza se halla no lo he visto en veintiséis años que la conozco y lo mismo todas las provincias que nos rodean. Nada piden, muy poco se vende en todas partes' (Villalobos 1986, 57).
- <sup>37</sup> Villalobos 1986, 85–6.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Junto con las fuerzas inglesas llegaron a Montevideo setenta naves mercantes y alrededor de dos mil comerciantes que instalaron tiendas en Montevideo ... En un periodo de tres meses entraron por la aduana de Montevideo mercaderías por un valor de 756.000 libras esterlinas' (Villalobos 1986, 123).
- <sup>39</sup> See Díaz-Andreu 2001 for a broad discussion of the role of archaeology in national identity issues; see Rodríguez & Brooks 2012 and Brooks & Rodríguez 2012 for a discussion of the role of 19th-century ceramics in South America.
- <sup>40</sup> Schávelzon 2013, 16.
- <sup>41</sup> Nahum 1993; Pivel Devoto & Rainieri 1945; Acevedo 1933.
- <sup>42</sup> Achugar 1992.
- <sup>43</sup> Schávelzon 2013.
- <sup>44</sup> Barrán 1974; Cabella *et al.* 2013, 15.
- <sup>45</sup> Barrán *et al.* 1996.
- <sup>46</sup> Head 1826, 270–1.
- <sup>47</sup> Bertola 2000.
- <sup>48</sup> Barrán 1998.
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## SUMMARY IN FRENCH, GERMAN, ITALIAN AND SPANISH

## RÉSUMÉ

**‘Porcelaine dans les cieux’: croisement d’identités dans l’utilisation ornementale d’assiettes en Uruguay**  
L’article traite d’une église dont la façade était décorée avec de la vaisselle de table fabriquée en Grande-Bretagne au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L’exemple qui nous est parvenu témoignerait d’un style traditionnel régional plus large désormais disparu, dont le plus grand représentant était la Cathédrale de Montevideo, en Uruguay. Les auteurs suggèrent que l’emploi d’assiettes britanniques dans des façades religieuses peu de temps avant les guerres d’indépendance sud-américaines révèle en partie une volonté de se détacher de l’Espagne et la recherche d’identité d’une région qui devient une petite république entre deux grands pays: l’Argentine et le Brésil.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

**‘Porzellan aus dem Himmel’: überlappende Gleichheit in ornamentaler Benutzung von Tellern in Uruguay**

Diese Studie behandelt eine Kirche, in der im frühen 19ten Jahrhundert in England produzierte Teller zur Dekoration in die Außenfassade eingelassen waren. Es wird vorgeschlagen, daß dieses einzig überlebende Beispiel auf eine weiter reichende regionale Tradition hinweist, deren größtes nun verlorenes Beispiel die Kathedrale in Montevideo, Uruguay, gewesen ist. Die Autoren schlagen weiter vor, daß der Gebrauch von britischen Tellern in religiösen Fassaden kurz vor den Unabhängigkeitskriegen in Südamerika Teil einer Suche nach Identität einer Religion war, ein Versuch sich von Spanien zu lösen und eine kleine Republik zwischen zwei viel größeren und mächtigeren Ländern, Argentinien und Brasilien, zu werden.

## RIASSUNTO

**‘Porcellane nei cieli’: sovrapposizione di diverse identità nell’uso di piatti ornamentali in Uruguay**  
Proponiamo qui lo studio di una chiesa in cui del vasellame da tavola prodotto in Gran Bretagna fu usato per decorarne la facciata dei primi dell’Ottocento. Sugeriamo che quest’unico esempio superstite è spia di una più ampia tradizione regionale, in seno alla quale la cattedrale di Montevideo in Uruguay rappresentava il più importante esempio di questo stile, ormai perduto. Gli autori si spingono oltre, suggerendo che l’impiego di piatti Britannici in facciate di edifici religiosi, poco prima dell’inizio della guerra d’indipendenza in Sud America, è riconducibile alla ricerca di identità di una regione che cercava di rompere con la Spagna mentre diventava una piccola repubblica confinante con Argentina e Brasile, stati molto più grandi e potenti.

## RESUMEN

**‘Loza en los cielos’: identidades superpuestas en el uso decorativo de platos en Uruguay**

Este artículo estudia una iglesia en cuya fachada se utilizó vajilla británica de principios del siglo XIX y propone que este ejemplo, el único que sobrevive, fue parte de una moda regional más amplia que cuenta como máximo exponente la Catedral de Montevideo, capital del Uruguay. Se plantea la hipótesis de que el uso de platos británicos en las fachadas religiosas poco antes de las guerras de Independencia sudamericanas formó parte de la búsqueda de una identidad propia en una región que intentaba separarse definitivamente de España y convertirse en una pequeña república entre dos grandes países: Argentina y Brasil.