Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Ojeda, Almerindo E., project dir. PESSCA: Project on the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art. Database

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Citer ce compte rendu

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PESSCA: Project on the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art. Database.
Davis, CA: University of California, Davis, 2005. Accessed 30 August 2022. colonialart.org.

The transition between print and material cultures is one of the vocations of emblems: since Alciato's inaugural work, images and texts from emblem books have been used as a source of inspiration for paintings, sculptures, festival decorations, frescoes, medals, and other media.

PESSCA is an extraordinary collaborative database that collects over 6,000 correspondences of artworks and their printed sources—frequently emblematic—with an emphasis on early modern Spanish America. The project was launched in 2005 by Almerindo Ojeda at the University of California, Davis, and was first hosted on Princeton's Almagest platform (now apparently discontinued). Currently, PESSCA is hosted by Fulvio Casali from Soliton Consulting, a private company, with a mirror at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (artecolonial.pucp.edu.pe).[1]

The website navigation is straightforward: beginning from the PESSCA homepage (Fig. 1), users can either use the search bar in the upper-right corner (which searches the entire website), or they can browse the "Archives," located on the navigation bar. The "Archives" are divided into two main categories, "Subjects" and "Locations," which are designed as drop-down menus. "Subjects" has 16 subcategories, which can also be expanded, and, as one might expect, at least 12 of them are dedicated to Christianity. The subcategories are not based on a controlled or hierarchical vocabulary: for instance, there is a subcategory for "Old Testament" (with 540 occurrences), while the subject of the New Testament is dispersed into other categories such as "Jesus Christ" (1,179 occurrences), "Virgin Mary" (642 occurrences), and so on. Also, not all of these subcategories are subject-based (e.g., "Architecture," "Design," "Ornamentation," and "Inscriptions").

1. More information about the history of the project can be obtained on the "Us" page, accessed from the site's main navigation bar.

Fig. 1. A screen capture of PESSCA's home page.

The "Location" menu corresponds to the current (i.e., last documented) location of an artwork produced after a print—not necessarily the place of production of said artwork. The menu is hierarchically structured as "country" > "city" > "collection" (i.e., place). One cannot help but see a missed opportunity here: by documenting and mapping the place of production of the print, the artwork, and its circulation, PESSCA could further attest the global scale of the phenomenon of remediation between prints and the material culture.

For this review, I followed the path "Home" > "Archives" > "Subjects" > "Old Testament" > "The Old Testament: General" > "2044A/2044B," and I landed on what I will call the "Correspondence-Level" page (Fig. 2). On the top of this page, there is a gallery showing other matches in the same subcategory ("The Old Testament: General"), and, below it, one can see the correspondence between a printed source (*Genealogy from Adam to Christ*, anonymous) and the painting that it inspired (under the same title). From there, users can click to see the next correspondence, or click on either of the two entries to access the object's metadata, which opens as a pop-up.

Fig. 2. A screen capture of the "Correspondence-Level" page, showing the thumbnails of items 2044A/2044B.

By clicking on the print on the left, the "Object-Level" page pops up (Fig. 3) showing the image and six metadata fields: "Artist," "Title," "Medium," "Photo Source," "Item" (which displays its unique identifier in the database), and "Correspondence" (where all the known correspondences for this same item are noted). When users click on the image on the right, the pop-up shows the corresponding artwork, this time with nine fields: "Artist," "Title," "Date," "Medium," "Location," "Photo Source," "Correspondence Credit," "Item," and "Correspondences."
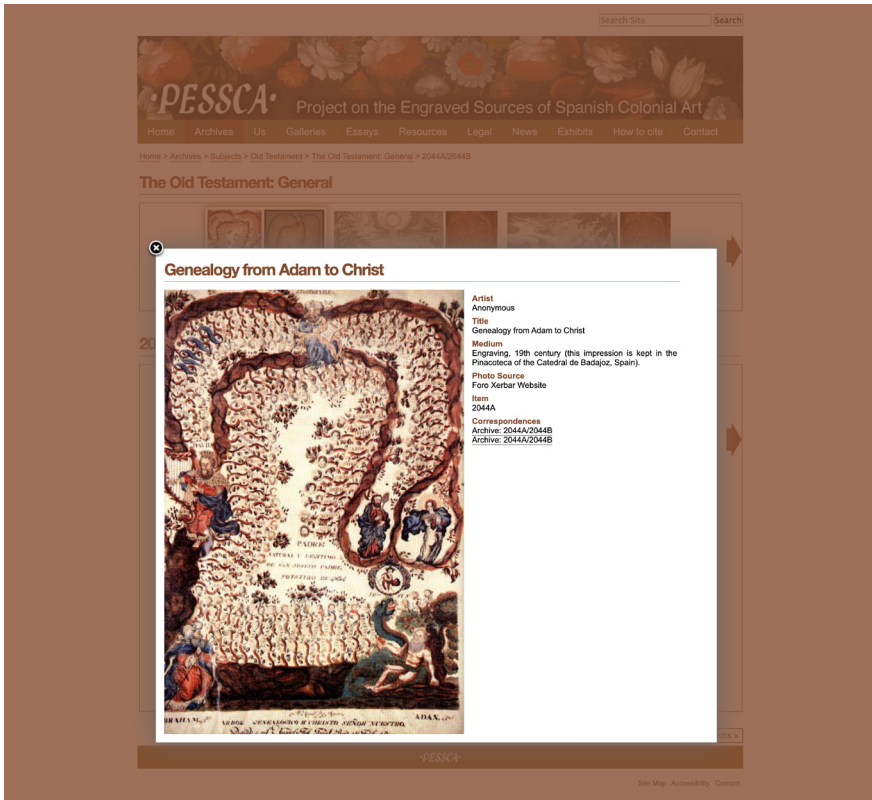
Fig. 3. A screen capture of the "Object-Level" page, showing item 2044A, *Genealogy from Adam to Christ*.

In the example selected here, there is no metadata field for "Date" or "Location"; instead, the information is added to the "Medium" field: "Engraving. 19th century (this impression is kept in the Pinacoteca of the Catedral de Badajoz, Spain)." The "Medium" field is also used to provide the full bibliographic information about an item. For instance, for item 2981A, this field contains the following details:

> Engraving. Plate 1 of 45 (plus a title plate) of Hermann Hugo S. J. (1588–1629), *Pia Desideria*. Fifth Edition. *Lutetiae Parisiorum, apud Io. Henault Bibliopolae. Iurati Via Iacobaea, ad Insigne Angeli Custodis.* 1670.

Moreover, the information in the "Photo Source" and "Correspondence Credit" fields also varies: sometimes it is a name, other times a link to a bibliographic entry where the correspondence is established (a piece of information that is incredibly helpful to scholars working in a field that often has little by way of documentation). In any case, the acknowledgement of the intellectual work required to identify the printed sources of artworks is a great service to the field,[2] and it provides a practical (albeit likely unconscious) response to a superficial criticism at times voiced against art historians in Latin America: that is, that they tend to be overly descriptive and too focused on finding the sources of artworks. I refer to this criticism as "superficial" because it ignores two indisputable facts: first, that the acknowledgement of the artistic qualities of artworks (paintings, in particular) produced in Latin America is a recent phenomenon when compared to those produced in Europe and therefore lacks the centuries of iconological discussions that have been produced around European objects of art; and second, given the colonial reality in which Latin American works were produced, the search for iconographic sources is an inescapable quest for identity. But I digress.

One of the main issues with the metadata at PESSCA is therefore the inconsistency in the use of specific fields, which is understandable given the collaborative nature of the database. However, one would expect PESSCA to hold the same regard for the "Photo Source" information as it holds for the "Correspondence Credit" field. For instance, images of materials preserved by the John Carter Brown Library (JCB) are found in 39 PESSCA records. The "Photo Credit" in these records mostly states "John Carter Brown Library / Internet Archive," although the Internet Archive is just a repository where the JCB collection is made available. No reference is made to call numbers, and no link is provided to the catalogue record or digital object—as if the work of

2. PESSCA includes a web page that provides detailed information about how to cite material found in its database. There, it states the following: "It might be thought that the correspondences found in this website do not need to be cited because they are easily available online. Or because they are mere facts you chanced upon while carrying out online research. Although we appreciate the recognition implicit in regarding our correspondences as factual and easily accessible, we would much rather be explicitly recognized for our efforts at discovery, presentation, and dissemination. Correspondences are scholarly discoveries that must be recognized and cited as such. That is why PESSCA provides full citations when it draws correspondences from other scholarly publications" ("How to Cite").

cataloguers, curators, and digitization specialists did not also require "years of painstaking scholarly effort" (cf. "How to Cite").

Emblematic content

Until recently, the presence of emblems in the Americas was regarded as a derivative phenomenon because few actual emblem books were produced in the continent (in comparison to the profuse publication of emblem books in Europe), and because "applied emblems" were regarded as subordinate cultural artifacts in relation to printed emblems. In this sense, PESSCA can be regarded as an essential tool for emblem scholars, as it provides indisputable evidence of the circulation of emblems in the Americas.

Because emblem books or artworks are not identified as such in the metadata, it is almost impossible to quantify the emblematic content of PESSCA without a full reassessment of the records. The best way to find known emblematic works is to search for authors, artists, or titles; for example, "alciato" (11); "alciati" (7); "emblemata" (9); "emblemas" (67); "nadal" (141); "wierix" (319); "sadeler" (317); "bolswert" (204); "pia desideria" (118); and so on. However, there are extraordinary examples of emblematic artworks that are yet to be acknowledged (e.g., 5499A/5499B, in which a printed poem is transformed into a painted emblem).

Subject-based searches are limited to browsing by general themes, with no metadata fields for iconographic information or tags. Moreover, frequently the textual component of a painting—which would characterize its emblematic nature—is totally or partially cropped out of the image, even when it exists (e.g., 2225A/2893B). PESSCA is not to be blamed, however, as these images are obtained mostly from secondary sources or collections.

Impact and future

The impact of PESSCA in the scholarship is very well documented and speaks to the importance of this project.[3] Working with emblems in the early modern Americas, I have often used PESSCA to discover iconographic repertoires

3. See the "News" page, accessed from the site's main navigation bar. Use of the database is certainly wider than its citations, however; searches for "PESSCA" or "colonialart.org" will retrieve hundreds of matches on scholarly aggregators such as Google Scholar or academia.edu.

circulating in Peru or Mexico during a specific period. The relevance of PESSCA for the study of the visual culture in the Americas is one of the factors that secured its remarkable longevity and its continuous growth.

The decision to establish a mirror of PESSCA at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú plays a major role in the sustainability of the database—although it may rely too heavily on the support of current projects and departments. The version preserved on Internet Archive (archive.org) does not display the object page (probably an issue of compatibility), but the version kept at the University of California, Davis, Web Archives collection works well.

PESSCA would benefit from a new front end, with new functionalities that would allow users to tag content, transcribe texts, and enter new matches. Technically speaking, it would not be too difficult to geotag items and display the content on maps. But above all, PESSCA could partner with other projects and/or institutions (such as Emblematica Online, Arkyves, or John Carter Brown Library) to harvest information that would dramatically improve its metadata and object visualization. Standards of interoperability (for example, IIIF) would be key for the success of such an initiative.

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