

JOHANN  
JACOBS  
MUSEUM

The  
Family  
Silver



A film and various silver coffee services are the centrepiece of this exhibition.

Harun Farocki's film – entitled "The Silver and the Cross" (2010)\* – is about 15 minutes long and looks at a painting from the Andean Baroque period that hangs in a museum in Sucre, Bolivia. Completed in 1758 by indigenous painter Gaspar Miguel de Barrió, it shows the Cerro Rico, the "rich mountain", which was famed for its silver deposits. At its foot, and located at an altitude of around 4000 metres, is the mining town of Potosí.

At that time, the "Villa Imperial" was the largest city of the Americas and one of the world's greatest metropolises. The Spanish colonial empire owed a substantial portion of its immense wealth to the "rich mountain" (also known as the "Mouth of Hell"). The treasures it produced drove Spain's global trading prowess and financed its wars.

Farocki's camera scrutinizes the picture with a detective-like rigour. It searches for evidence of the forced recruitment of the indigenous population as mine workers, which the Spanish conquistadores introduced from 1573; for traces of the pre-modern technologies with the help of which the silver was separated from ore; and, finally, for indication of the urban social structure, with its clear divisions into rich and poor, together with the key role played by the church.

But like many crime scenes, the subject depicted refuses to yield all its secrets. Farocki, therefore, presents us with comparisons between the Potosí of yesteryear and now. To this end, he splits the screen into two halves, a left and a right, and inserts his narrative voice to create a bridge over the cuts in the cinematic image or the separation between the present in photographs and the past in paint.

This bridge is less a demonstration of knowledge than a series of tentative questions. Farocki wrests no more from the surface of the painting than it is willing to give. He resists the temptation to be consumed by the greed and power or by the project of total appropriation exercised by the colonial regime. Not everything can be shown, not everything can be said or retained. If there is such a thing as historical truth, it emerges briefly in the caesura between voice and image, painted image and cinematic image.

The exhibition illustrates another form of caesura: the one between things and their appearance. The silverware is an answer to the projected image and vice versa. The silver glitters in the cinema's cavernous interior, but at the same time, those highlights are the blind spots concealing the historic origins of European prosperity.

\* Farocki's film was commissioned for "The Potosí Principle" (2010), an exhibition curated by Alice Greischer, Max Jorge Hinderer and Andreas Siekmann.

## Reflection and Misery



