

The Latin American database of underground watermarks

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Abstract

The demand for paper in Spanish America became urgent in the 16th century, mainly to comply with administrative functions in New Spain, and it worsened with the imposition of the documentary validation tax.

The economic policy followed by Spain in the colony was characterized by hindering logical progress in all its aspects. All the laws issued by the Council of the Indies regarding industry were prohibitive for New Spain. The Crown did not promote the construction of paper mills in America since this product was, for long periods, a royal monopoly, especially due to the establishment of the stamp tax, which was a significant source of income for the economy.

Almost all the folios documenting the colony were made on European paper, imported from Spain but not necessarily produced there. A small portion was made using amate or bark paper, or paper from Mexican mills, which could have included wheat mills, fabric mills, or later, paper mills.

This situation encouraged and increased the clandestine production of paper in other types of mills, as well as paper smuggling, which persisted throughout much of the Crown's rule.

From November 7th to 9th, 2024, the International Seminar on Paper Conservation was held in Santiago, Chile, with participants mostly from Latin America and Spain. During the seminar, I invited the attendees to create a new Latin American project to identify underground watermarks in each of our countries. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and we are now beginning to organize the project. It will be distinctly Latin American, and together, we aim to create a database of underground watermarks found in each of our countries.