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ARCHITECTURAL MOTIFS OF ST. AUGUSTINE CHURCH (PAOAY CHURCH): AN ANALYSIS OF THEIR CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the architectural motifs of St. Augustine Church (Paoay Church) and their cultural and historical significance within the Ilocano context. Employing a qualitative ethnographic design and guided by Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the research analyzed motifs as visual signs that convey layered meanings. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis involving heritage experts, cultural workers, and local community members. Findings revealed that motifs such as the Royal Coat of Arms, Augustinian emblems, rosettes, shells, celestial symbols, and foliate patterns function as symbolic representations of colonial authority, religious belief, environmental adaptation, and indigenous artistic expression. These elements demonstrate a synthesis of European and local influences, reflecting the values, identity, and lived experiences of the Paoayños. The study concludes that Paoay Church serves not only as a heritage structure but as a living cultural narrative sustaining community identity and artistic continuity.

Keywords: architectural motifs, cultural symbolism, Ilocano identity. Paoay church.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture functions not merely as a physical structure but as a cultural narrative through which communities express identity, belief systems, and historical experience. In heritage sites, architectural motifs serve as symbolic markers that communicate values embedded within a society's collective memory. In the Philippine context, colonial churches stand as enduring testimonies to the intersection of indigenous traditions, Spanish religious influence, and localized cultural adaptation. Among these structures, the Church of St. Augustine in Paoay, Ilocos Norte—

commonly known as Paoay Church—emerges as one of the most iconic and culturally resonant landmarks in Northern Luzon.

St. Augustine Parish Church has long been recognized not only as a defining landmark of the municipality of Paoay but also as a symbol of the entire province of Ilocos Norte. Beyond its breathtaking setting and monumental scale, the church is globally admired for its massive and distinctive buttresses, which have come to symbolize strength, resilience, and unity—values deeply associated with the Ilocano people. These buttresses, originally engineered as a response to seismic conditions, have transcended

their structural function and evolved into powerful cultural symbols reflecting collective endurance and communal solidarity.

As a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the “Baroque Churches of the Philippines,” Paoay Church has been widely studied for its architectural style, construction materials, and earthquake-resistant design. However, scholarly discussions have largely emphasized its engineering and historical attributes, with comparatively limited attention given to the symbolic meanings of its architectural motifs and their influence on local cultural expression. Architectural elements such as façades, ornamentations, and structural details are often appreciated aesthetically, yet their deeper cultural and historical meanings remain underexplored.

Notably, the influence of Paoay Church extends beyond its physical presence and into the everyday cultural practices of the Paoayños. The church has inspired not only visitors and scholars but most profoundly its primary custodians—the local community. This influence is evident in traditional Ilocano crafts, particularly inabel weaving, where certain architectural motifs of the church are subtly embedded into textile patterns. As shared by Ms. Roselyn T. Rico, a Sinukitan inabel weaver, some motifs incorporated into her woven designs are drawn from the church’s architecture, carrying personal, cultural, and symbolic meanings that are deeply significant to her and to the community. These adaptations suggest that architectural motifs function as living symbols, continuously reinterpreted and preserved through local craftsmanship.

The architectural motifs found in Paoay Church are therefore not mere decorative or structural elements; they are intentional symbols that embody religious beliefs, historical narratives, and cultural values. To fully appreciate the church’s architecture in a holistic manner, it is essential to understand the historical and cultural significance of these motifs and how they are perceived and interpreted by the community. Such understanding allows heritage structures to be viewed not only as monuments of the past but as active sources of cultural identity and meaning.

Guided by a qualitative ethnographic approach and anchored in Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic model, this study examines the architectural motifs of St. Augustine Church by identifying their forms, interpreting their symbolic meanings, and analyzing how these motifs reflect the values, beliefs, and identity of the Paoayños and the Ilocano people in general. By engaging heritage experts, church authorities, cultural workers, and community members, the research foregrounds local interpretations alongside historical accounts. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to architectural semiotics, heritage studies, and cultural education by highlighting the intimate connection between built heritage and living cultural practices in Ilocos Norte. Specifically, it sought answers to the following:

1. What are the architectural motifs present in Paoay Church?
2. What is the historical and cultural significance of each architectural motif found in St. Augustine Church (Paoay Church)?
3. How do these architectural motifs reflect the values, beliefs, and identity of the Paoayños and the Ilocano people in general?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic approach to examine the cultural and historical significance of the architectural motifs of St. Augustine Church (Paoay Church). Guided by Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic model, the research analyzed architectural motifs as signs to interpret their symbolic meanings within the cultural context of the Paoayños and the Ilocano people. Thematic (Bustamante and Villanueva, 2024; Villanueva and Agustin, 2022) and semiotic analyses were used to derive meanings from participants’ narratives and observations.

Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of heritage experts, church authorities, cultural workers, architects, and selected community members of Paoay, Ilocos Norte. Purposive sampling was employed to select informants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to Ilocano heritage, church history, architecture, and traditional crafts. This sampling method ensured the richness and relevance of qualitative data.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed structured interview guide, designed to elicit information on the architectural motifs of Paoay Church and their perceived cultural and historical significance. The instrument included open-ended questions focusing on motif identification, symbolic interpretation, and cultural relevance. The interview guide was validated by experts to ensure content clarity and relevance.

Data Gathering Procedure and Tool

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted at St. Augustine Church and within the local community of Paoay. Interviews were conducted in-person and documented through note-taking and audio recording, with participants’ consent. Observational data supported the interview findings by providing contextual and visual insights into the architectural motifs. All collected data were systematically coded and analyzed using thematic and semiotic analysis techniques.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Façade as Memory, Faith, and Cultural Identity

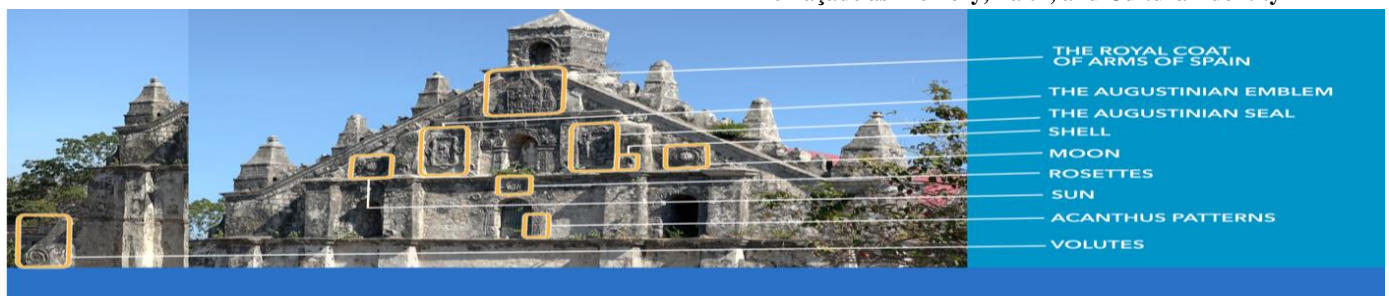


Figure 1. The Façade of the St. Augustine Church

The façade of St. Augustine Parish Church of Paoay stands not only as an architectural achievement but as a visual memory of the people who built it, worshipped within it, and lived under its presence across generations. More than an exterior surface, it functions as sacred art designed to guide the faithful toward spiritual reflection and encounter with God (McNamara, 2002; Viladesau, 2000). Its stones embody theological meaning, historical memory, and cultural identity woven into a single visual narrative.

Constructed during Spanish colonization yet built through local labor and craftsmanship, the church represents the meeting of

worlds: European Christianity, Asian artistic influences, and indigenous Ilocano sensibilities (Galende, 2007; Zialcita & Tinio, 1980). While scholarship often highlights its earthquake-resistant engineering, the symbolic language carved into its façade reveals how faith was communicated, interpreted, and rooted within the community.

Using semiotic analysis informed by Charles Sanders Peirce and supported by ethnographic insights, this study interprets the façade's motifs as visual signs that communicate religious belief, historical transition, and Ilocano cultural identity.

I. Authority, Evangelization, and Historical Transition

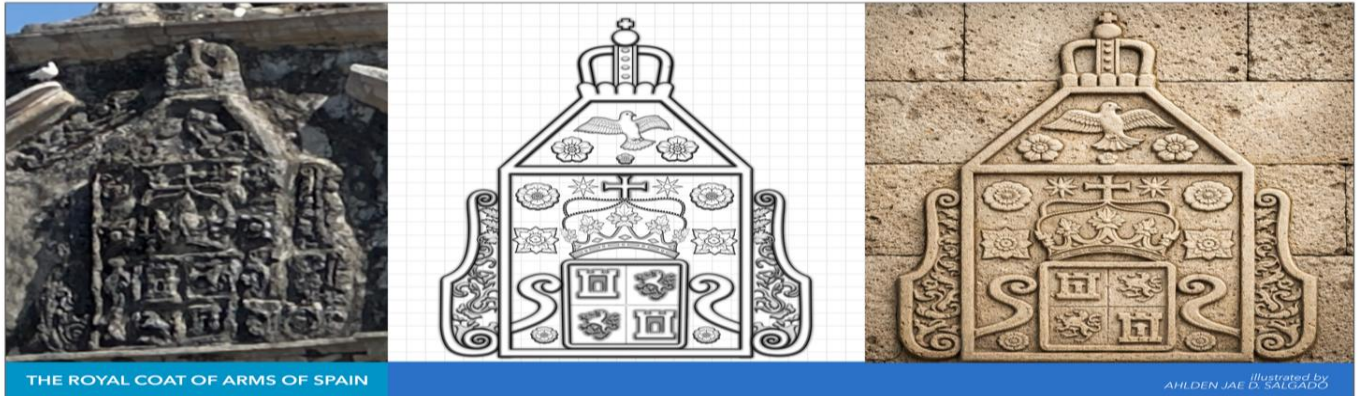


Figure 2. The Royal Coat of Arms of Spain Motif

The Royal Coat of Arms of Spain prominently displayed on the façade serves as a visual assertion of Spanish sovereignty and the political framework within which Catholic evangelization was conducted in the Philippines (Javellana, 1997; Zialcita & Tinio, 1980). Composed of heraldic devices representing historic Spanish kingdoms and crowned to signify royal authority, the emblem communicates the legitimacy of imperial rule. Its placement on ecclesiastical architecture reflects the historical union of Church and State, underscoring how missionary expansion functioned alongside colonial governance.

Carved into locally sourced coral limestone by indigenous artisans, the emblem acquires material and cultural specificity within the Ilocos region. The porous texture and hand-chiseled quality of coral stone soften the rigid formalism of European heraldry, situating imperial symbolism within local building traditions. This material translation demonstrates how colonial imagery was not merely imposed but mediated through local craftsmanship and environmental context.

Beyond political authority, the façade functioned as an evangelizing interface. Missionary architecture employed visual hierarchy, symmetry, and recognizable symbols to facilitate the reception of Christian teachings (Galende, 1996). Positioned prominently, the coat of arms framed the church as both a sacred and institutional center, guiding viewers toward the intertwined structures of spiritual and civic authority.

From a semiotic perspective, the emblem operates as a multilayered sign: as a signifier of monarchy and governance and as a signified representation of sovereignty and divine sanction. Within its localized rendering, however, it becomes a hybrid cultural marker reflecting the community's transition into a new religious and sociopolitical order. The motif thus reveals how colonial authority, evangelization, and local agency intersected to shape a distinct architectural and cultural landscape.

II. Divine Love and Inner Spiritual Transformation



Figure 3. The Augustinian Emblem Motif

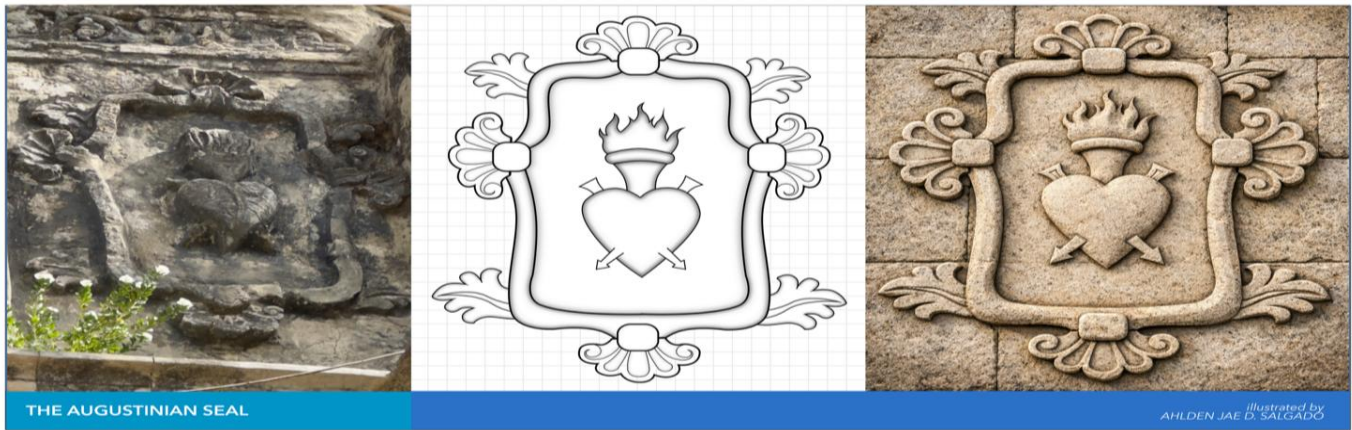


Figure 4. The Augustinian Seal Motif

The **Augustinian Emblem** and **Augustinian Seal** visually articulate the spirituality of St. Augustine and the missionary identity of the Augustinian Order. Central to these symbols is the heart, representing divine love and the restless human longing for union with God; the book signifies sacred wisdom and the pursuit of truth; and the crozier denotes pastoral authority and spiritual guidance (Galende, 1987). Together, these elements communicate a theology rooted in intellectual illumination, pastoral care, and transformative love.

From a semiotic perspective, the flaming or pierced heart functions as the primary signifier. It refers to Augustinian spirituality, particularly the concept of the heart inflamed by divine love, while its interpretive meaning points toward faith as an inward process of conversion and renewal. In this sense, the symbol transcends decorative function and becomes a theological statement: Christian faith is realized through interior transformation rather than external observance alone.

Sacred symbols within missionary architecture were intended to deepen spiritual awareness and cultivate a more intimate relationship with God (Viladesau, 2000). The recurrence of heart imagery reinforces the thematic emphasis on interior faith, communicating that conversion involves a reorientation of the inner self. This visual theology supports the Augustinian pastoral

approach, which sought to guide believers toward personal spiritual reflection and moral renewal.

Within the local cultural context, this emphasis on interior transformation resonates with Ilocano values such as moral discipline, perseverance, and inner strength. The motif therefore illustrates how evangelization was framed not solely through doctrinal instruction but through an appeal to personal transformation, enabling the integration of Christian spirituality within existing cultural ideals.

III. Harmony with Creation and Cultural Adaptation

A third thematic cluster highlights harmony with creation and cultural adaptation, reflecting the integration of Christian symbolism with environmental familiarity and indigenous artistic expression. The façade's nature-inspired motifs demonstrate how missionary art was localized through visual forms drawn from the natural environment and translated through indigenous carving traditions. Rather than functioning as mere ornamentation, these organic and celestial elements articulate theological meaning through a visual language that resonated with the ecological awareness and cultural sensibilities of the local community.

Rosettes (Floral Variations)

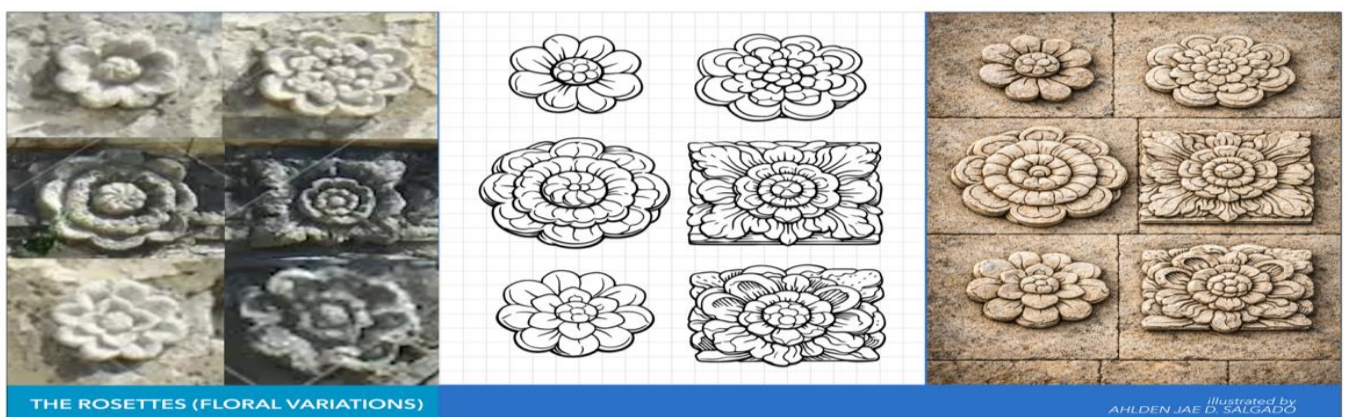


Figure 5. The Rosettes Motifs

Rosette carvings appear as symmetrical floral forms framing niches, panels, and architectural divisions, contributing to both structural rhythm and decorative unity. In Christian symbolism, rosettes signify divine harmony, beauty, and the perfection of creation (Metchell, 2017). Their radial symmetry evokes cosmic

order and unity, reinforcing the theological belief that creation reflects divine design.

Based on close observation of the façade, variations of rosette designs can be seen rather than a single standardized floral pattern. Some display tightly arranged petals with geometric precision, while others exhibit more open, radiating forms or stylized petal layers. These variations may reflect several factors: the hand-

carving process of multiple artisans, evolving stylistic influences during different construction phases, and the adaptation of European ornamental templates to local carving techniques and material constraints. Coral limestone, being porous and relatively soft, encourages simplified yet expressive carving, allowing artisans to interpret floral forms rather than replicate rigid models.

Within the Ilocos context, floral imagery resonates with agrarian life and the community's intimate relationship with cultivated landscapes. For Paoayenos and Ilocanos, flowers symbolize growth, renewal, and the cyclical rhythms of planting and harvest that sustain community life. The presence of varied floral rosettes may therefore reflect not only decorative intent but also a cultural sensitivity to natural diversity and abundance. By rendering multiple floral interpretations, artisans visually echoed the richness of the natural environment familiar to the community.

Local artisans executed these forms through simplified geometric carving suited to coral stone, reflecting both European ornamental influence and indigenous decorative aesthetics. The rosette thus functions as a visual affirmation of harmony between divine creation and everyday life, allowing theological ideas of divine order to be understood through familiar natural forms. At the same time, the motif embodies Ilocano values of harmony with nature, appreciation for subtle variation, and resilience expressed through adaptation to environmental and material conditions. Through these floral forms, the façade communicates a theology grounded not only in divine beauty but also in the lived ecological and cultural realities of the community.

Shell Motifs

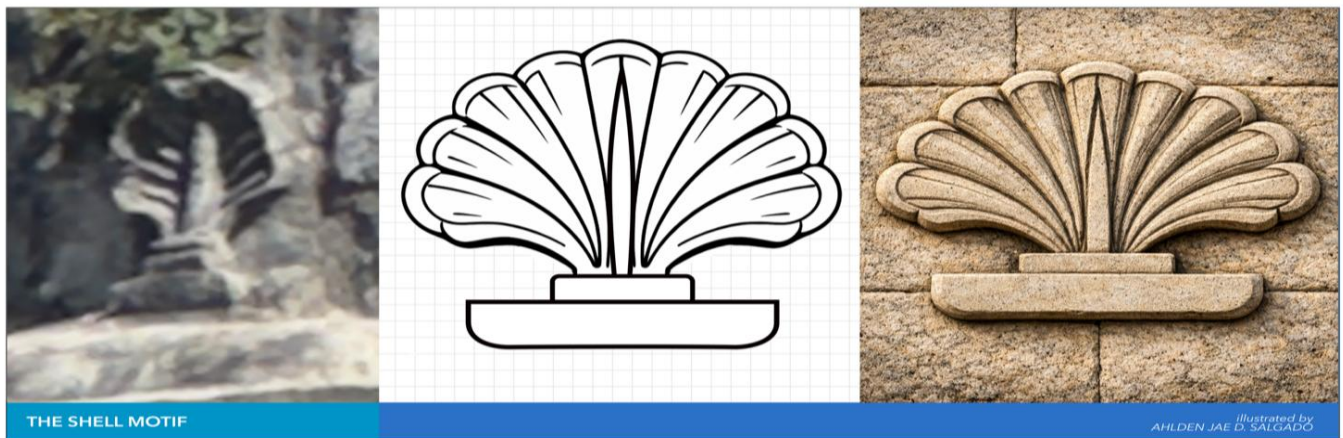


Figure 6. The Shell Motif

Shell motifs appear as scallop-like carvings integrated into relief bands and decorative accents along the façade. Their curved, radiating form contributes to the decorative rhythm of the architectural composition while conveying symbolic meaning. In Christian iconography, the shell is traditionally associated with baptism, spiritual rebirth, and pilgrimage, recalling the sacramental initiation into Christian life and the believer's journey of faith (Ferguson, 1954; Viladesau, 2000). The shell's historical association with the pouring of baptismal water makes it an appropriate visual reference within church architecture where themes of purification and renewal are central.

At the same time, the motif resonates with the coastal environment of Ilocos. Communities in Paoay and nearby areas have long depended on the sea through fishing, coastal trade, and the gathering of marine resources. Shells are therefore familiar

elements within everyday life, symbolizing livelihood and the rhythms of the coastal landscape. By incorporating shell imagery into the façade, local artisans embedded a symbol that carried both sacramental meaning and environmental familiarity. Such localization reflects a broader strategy in missionary architecture, where recognizable natural forms were used to communicate religious ideas to newly converted communities (Galende, 1996).

This dual symbolism bridges theology and environment. The shell motif communicates spiritual renewal through baptism while grounding that message in imagery recognizable to coastal communities. In doing so, the carving demonstrates how Christian teachings were conveyed through symbols rooted in the ecological and cultural realities of the Ilocano community, allowing the faithful to interpret spiritual transformation through elements of their everyday environment.

Sun and Moon Motifs

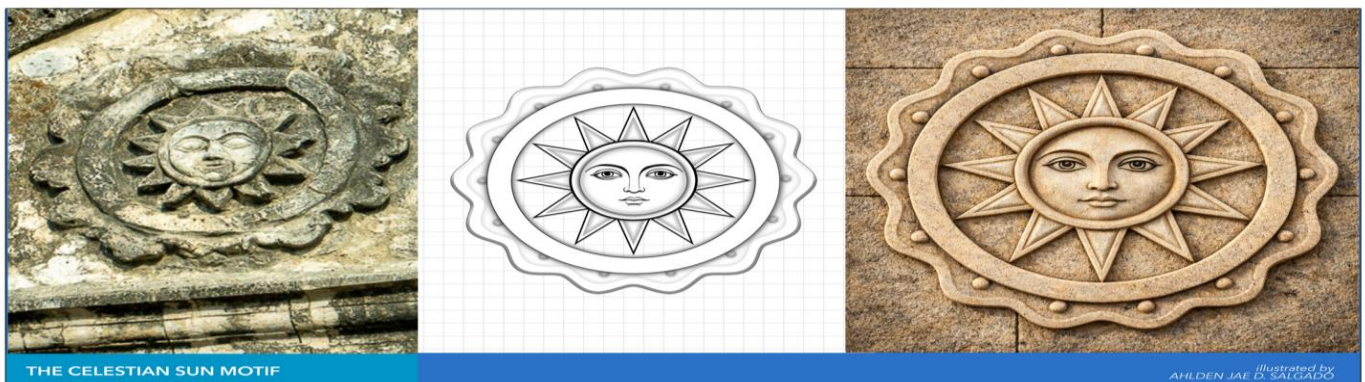


Figure 7. The Celestial Sun Motif

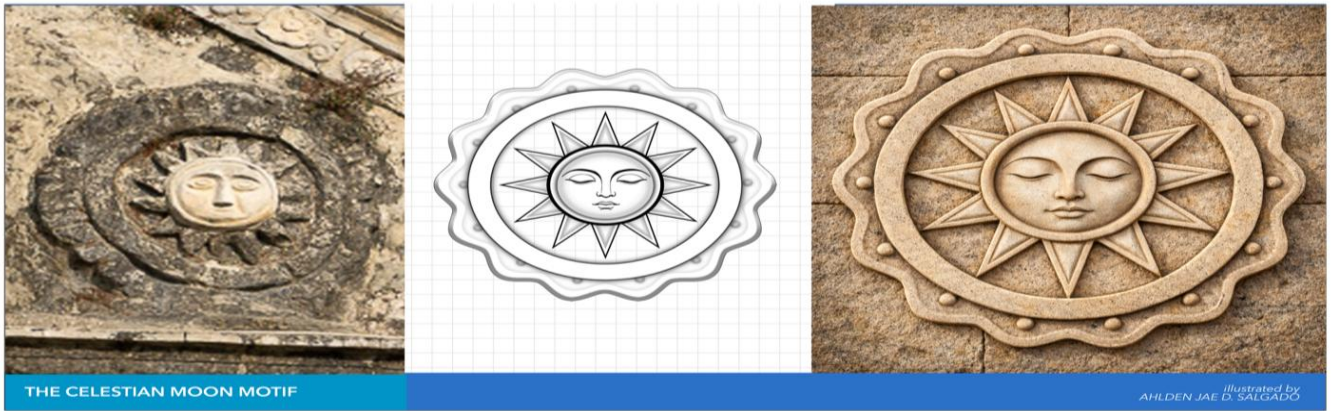


Figure 8. *The Celestial Moon Motif*

Celestial symbols such as the sun and moon appear on the façade as radiating and circular carvings that visually represent cosmic order and the governance of time. The sun is typically rendered with radiating rays from a central disc, while the moon appears as rounded or crescent forms complementing the solar imagery. Within Christian symbolism, these celestial bodies represent divine sovereignty over creation and the ordered rhythm of sacred time. The sun is often associated with divine illumination and the presence of Christ as the “light of the world,” while the moon symbolizes reflection and the reception of divine light within creation.

Beyond their Christian meaning, celestial imagery also resonates with precolonial Filipino cosmological beliefs. Early Philippine societies recognized celestial bodies as manifestations of powerful spiritual forces and deities connected to the natural world (Jocano, 1968). In several mythological traditions, the sun and moon were personified as divine figures—such as Apolaki, associated with the sun, and Mayari, associated with the moon—who symbolized balance within the cosmic order. These celestial bodies therefore

functioned not only as markers of time but also as sacred elements within indigenous belief systems.

The presence of sun and moon motifs on the façade may therefore reflect a visual synthesis between Christian cosmology and indigenous celestial symbolism. By incorporating imagery already meaningful within local cosmological understanding, missionary architecture could communicate theological concepts through familiar symbols. For Ilocanos and Paoayēños, whose livelihoods historically depended on agricultural cycles and environmental rhythms, celestial movements were closely tied to everyday life.

From a thematic perspective, the sun and moon motifs illustrate how Christian symbolism was localized through environmental and cultural references. They demonstrate how architectural ornamentation functioned as a medium of cultural translation, allowing communities to interpret divine order through the familiar language of celestial balance and natural cycles.

Volutes and Foliate Patterns

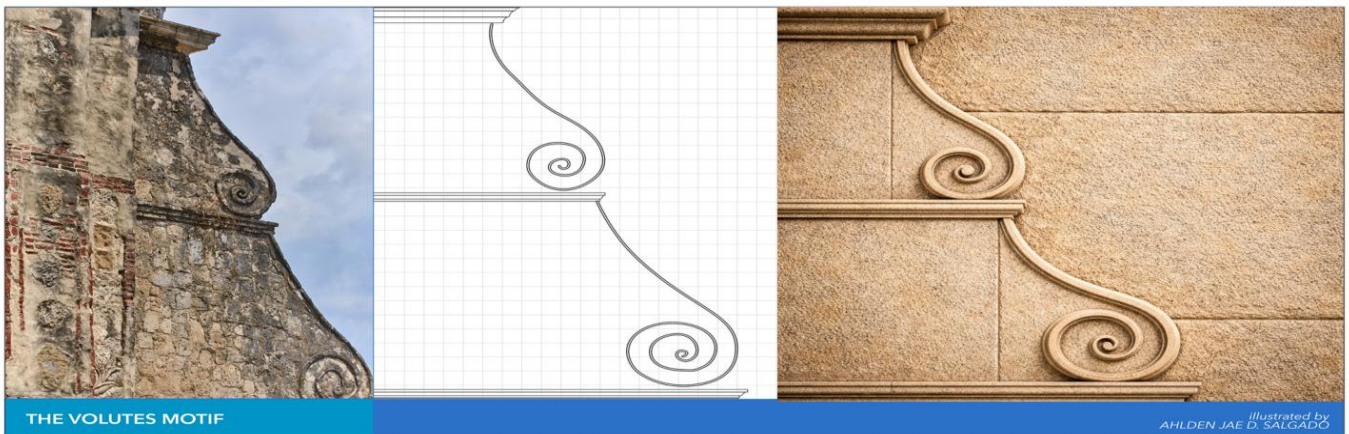


Figure 9. *The Volutes Motif*



Figure 10. *The Acanthus Ornaments Motif*

Volutes and foliate scrollwork appear on the façade as flowing ornamental carvings that link architectural elements and frame decorative fields. These curving patterns, often resembling vines, leaves, and spiraling tendrils, create a sense of visual continuity across the façade's surface. In Christian symbolism, vegetal and vine-like motifs represent life, growth, and spiritual renewal, reflecting the theological understanding that creation unfolds in an ordered movement toward divine purpose. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that creation reveals divine goodness and harmony (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994), a concept frequently expressed in ecclesiastical ornament through organic forms.

Within the Ilocos context, these flowing patterns also resonate with indigenous artistic traditions. Similar vegetal rhythms can be observed in Ilocano weaving, woodcarving, and decorative crafts, where repeating curves and plant-inspired forms symbolize continuity, abundance, and harmony with nature. Their translation into coral-stone carving suggests how local artisans incorporated familiar aesthetic patterns into church architecture while adapting them to the structural and material qualities of coral limestone.

From a thematic perspective, the presence of volutes and foliate motifs illustrates the integration of Christian symbolic meaning with local artistic expression. These carvings visually communicate spiritual growth while simultaneously reflecting cultural continuity, demonstrating how indigenous craftsmanship played an active role in shaping the architectural language of the church façade.

CONCLUSION

The architectural motifs of St. Augustine Church ultimately affirm that the structure is a powerful cultural text that embodies the intertwined histories of colonization, evangelization, and local identity formation. Rather than functioning as mere decorative elements, these motifs collectively express how religious and political meanings were embedded into the built environment to shape and influence community consciousness.

More importantly, the church represents a dynamic site of cultural negotiation, where imposed colonial symbols were not passively received but actively reinterpreted through indigenous knowledge, materials, and craftsmanship. This synthesis reveals the agency of Ilocano artisans in transforming foreign iconography into localized expressions of faith and identity, resulting in an architectural form that is both colonial and distinctly Ilocano.

Ultimately, the enduring presence and continued cultural influence of these motifs demonstrate that the church is not just a historical monument but a living symbol of identity. Its visual language continues to inform local traditions and artistic practices, reinforcing cultural continuity and collective memory. Thus, the significance of Paoay Church lies not only in its historical and architectural value but in its ongoing role as a vessel of meaning that sustains the values, beliefs, and identity of the Ilocano people.

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