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## BENEATH THE SIGN OF "OTHERNESS"

Beatriz DE LA FUENTE  
INSTITUTO DE INVESTIGACIONES ESTÉTICAS  
UNAM

### 1. *Universal Points of View: Philosophy and Culture*

Part of the approach of this paper was conceived, perhaps, under the light of Octavio Paz's *Privileges of sight* (1978). An artist himself, he distinguished three "constituent characteristics of Mesoamerican civilization", namely: originality, isolation, and "otherness". Moreover, he applied the concept of "expression" to Mesoamerican art:

what it says is said with such a concentrated energy that that saying is always expressive... A Maya deity covered by attributes and signs is not a sculpture that we can read as a text, but as a sculpture/text. Fusion of reading and contemplation, two acts dissociated in Occident (Paz, 1978: 50).

Through art, humankind translates the Universe into a language harmonically constructed of materials, spaces, forms, lines, colors, textures, proportions, images plentiful of symbols and meanings.

Thus, works of art are extraordinary media to know cultural developments, whether of an epoch or a region. Comprehension of artistic expressions is the principal vehicle to understand a culture, its origins, evolution, influences, decay and collapse. This is also true, and most important, when we lack written sources to approach human past, as it happens with pre-Columbian art.

Besides, we face here a crucial difference: pre-Hispanic art falls apart from Western canons. My intention is to offer a summary of some opinions about Mexican conception of Mesoamerican art, aiming to find out the differences between West and Non West. If to date we consider it art, the path of

understanding has been long and troubled. I think one reason deals with several predominant ideologies born at the main centers of political power or of artistic production: Spain, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and recently the United States. This assertion includes approximately the time span between XVIth and XXth centuries.

## 2. *Initial and Long Steps*

The origins of such comprehension go back to the XVIth century, when soldiers and friars expressed their opinions about Indian societies and their cultural achievements. At the same time, two main routes for the proper understanding of pre-Columbian art born: one of acceptance and one of rejection. Similarities, obviously, were accepted, namely artistic forms close to naturalism, to "beauty", but those that differ did not have the same luck; I mean unintelligible, confusing or "monstrous" forms.

Naturalism in Renaissance art was one of the most pursued purposes. So, the New World puzzled refined Europe. News arrived of almost naked inhabitants but of complex social and urban life —almost as Europe herself—. They worshipped "Satan and his cohorts" with assassin, bloody rituals, and under any circumstance they cut their flesh to pour blood. Nevertheless they were capable of creating magnificent works and crafts, as well as poetry, and theatrical plays.

European conquerors thought contradictorily about Indian works of art. Architecture, metal and feather works received laudatory commentaries. Sculpture and painting were condemned to silence and repudiation; for they were "things of Satan". Through chronicles of conquerors and friars, we appreciate the first amazement about the *rei publicæ* and harmony in which Indians lived, expressed in several levels of emotion and appreciation; but these qualifications completely oppose to the values assigned to the artistic works, and consequently reject them.

Yet let us bring to mind the enthusiastic description by Albrecht Dürer, written in 1520 at Brussels: he welcomed American works of art. However other factors intervened, particularly the dreadful question about the "humankind of Indians". After long debates, they "obtained" humankind, but their æsthetic production was doomed during almost three centuries. 4

During XVIIth century there were few efforts to understand American art and its authors. The general feeling about Indians moved from the "diabolical wild man" to the "tamed, idyllic wild man. A series of linked events occurred in XVIIIth century. Discussion and study on Pre-Columbian past and art get renewed intensity into the spirit of Enlightenment, dealing with the discovery of Pre Hispanic monuments. 5

Among 1750 and 1770 the ruins of Palenque were discovered. In order to know who inhabited the city, Ramón de Ordóñez y Aguiar, ecclesiastic of Ciudad Real de Chiapa, wrote the *History of the creation of Heaven and Earth according to the system of American gentility* (De la Fuente, 1965: 69-72; De la Fuente and Schávelzon, 1976: 149) where he denied the Maya roots of Palenque, assigning them to ancient near east, idea followed by several explorers. 6

In 1790 the vicerojal government ordered to repair the paved-stone streets of the Plaza Mayor at Mexico City. Workmen found the colossal statues of Coatlicue, the Stone of the Sun or Aztec Calendar, and the Stone of Tízoc. One year later José Antonio de Alzate published the *Description of the antiquities of Xochicalco* —recently discovered—; and the following one Antonio de León y Gama published the *Historical and chronological description of the two stones* (1792), that is to say Coatlicue and the Stone of the Sun. Both texts glorified the artistic skill of ancient Mexicans. 7 8

Some years earlier, in 1767, Jesuit Order was banished from Spanish domains. Jesuits in exile spoke of ancient Mexican past as an element of identity. This is what happened with friar Pedro José Márquez, who published in Rome in 1804 *Due antichi monumenti di architettura messicana* (Gutiérrez, 1988: 178). He placed Pre-Hispanic art at the same heights that Greece's.

These events made clear the increasingly deep feeling of difference between Spain-born people, and Americans or New Spain-born people. Archaeological discoveries and ancient works of art proved a close past in which to find the roots of a new spirit of identity.

In XIXth century pre-Columbian art was considered "exotic", "primitive", and even "barbarian". Of course its meanings remained hidden to Western eyes; there were neither explanations nor awareness of who, when, how and why developed such cultures and their artistic manifestations. For they broke the European canons, and understanding became useless.

To change this idea, it was necessary the visit of Alexander von Humboldt. Through several years he collected many data for his grand task book *Kosmos*. Part of his data appeared at Paris as the *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1814-1825), and *Vue des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1816). Thus Europe knew of Palenque, Teotihuacán and Xochicalco (cf. Zea and Magallón, 1999: *passim*). Von Humboldt was also the first one to differentiate Mayas and Mexicas, based upon the style of painted codexes. Furthermore, he declared that Coatlicue could compare to Greek statuary, but Humboldt was a classical european. Few years later, in 1831 Lord Edward King, Viscount of Kingsborough, published in London nine elegant volumes called *Antiquities of Mexico* (De la Fuente and Schávelzon, 1976: 149).

Western world, therefore, disposed to accept ancient America and to look inquisitively at Mesoamerican art. Attempts of explanation and comprehension turned once again to the disjunction West-Non West, Art-Non Art, no matter Renaissance precedents. Discussions favored one conception or another. One of numerous examples is that of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood. They argue that pre-Columbian civilizations were autochthonous, original, and not savage, as demonstrated by the Mayas. 10

Meanwhile, in 1825 President Guadalupe Victoria ordered the creation of the National Museum at the University; yet it had to wait until 1831 to exist. The years 1846-1848 and 1862-1867 saw Mexico involved in two wars, respectively against the United States and France. It is also pertinent to note that Emperor Maximilian tried to revive the National Museum, for that he provided the apartments of the old *Casa de Moneda*. 11

### 3. *The Astonishment of "Otherness" among Mexicans.*

Later, during the government of President Benito Juárez, the political and cultural goals were to create a sense of unity against the invaders and their own cultures, to look for emblems that unified the whole country, rather as an emotional defensive project than as a clear identification of national feeling. The logical path was at hand throughout Mesoamerican past and art, mainly Mexica.

Under the government of President Porfirio Díaz, the revaluation of pre-Columbian past became an important task. For example, Mexico's Pavilion at the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1889 showed architectural features of Indian monuments (Xochicalco and Mitla). The walls displayed modern bronze reliefs of Mexica deities as well as historical heroes. The whole conception replied the nationalist and centralist zeal of Antonio Peñafiel and Alfredo Chavero, as represented by Aztec culture (Ramírez, 1988: *passim*). 12  
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I sustain here that Aztec culture became a model. Ruins and monuments found at Mitla, Tajín, Tula, Teotihuacán, Xochicalco, Tenochtitlán and many sites were considered "Mexicans"; better said "Toltecs or Teotihuacanos", the noble precedents of Aztec culture. All formed a cultural group, far from bloody rituals, that were one of the chief obstacles to understand Mexica aesthetics. Mayas were a clearly different and little known civilization. Anyway, ancient art became solidly accepted. It received a new impulse during the first decades of XXth century. 14

As part of the celebrations of the first centennial of Independence War (1910), President Díaz wanted to inaugurate a new National Theater —actually the Fine Arts Palace—. According to the eclectic *Art Nouveau*, the architect, Adamo Boari, included several ornaments inspired on Mesoamerican designs; among them serpents, masks, and a modern interpretation of the head of the Eagle Warrior. 15

As part of a personal aesthetic language, and also as a research, Saturnino Herrán painted several "decorative panels". One of the greatest is "Our gods" (1915), in which central section Herrán masterly and insightfully merged the images of Crucified Christ and of Old Mother Coatlicue. This is, to my knowledge, the most eloquent portrait of the birth of our nationalism. 16

After the battles of Revolution calmed down, the Mexican State searched for elements that recalled a feeling of unity. Music, literature, architecture, painting, and sculpture developed different ways to denote it. Let us name as an example the *Indian Symphony* of Carlos Chavez in the field of music, and recall for the purpose of this paper the ones who played a significant role in the visual arts for the mid century: Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco choose to depict Mesoamerican past from two utterly different points of view. David Alfaro Siqueiros joined them. 17  
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As can be noticed, nearby the end of XIXth century and the beginning of XXth century, Mexican intellectual milieu did not concern with defining the separation between West and Non West. The main affair was to delineate the elements of national feeling and identity through Mesoamerican past.

#### 4. *Towards a Philosophical Comprehension.*

Philosophy rendered another tendency of study. Alfonso Caso published in 1917 his "Essay on a Classification of Arts". Caso arose his ideas from Kant's philosophy, and applied it to the analysis of Mexica art compared with written Colonial sources. He assembled artistic manifestations in three groups: visual (architecture, decorative, sculpture, painting), hearing (music and poetry) and visual-hearing (drama and dance). As a result he opened a new way to classify most of pre-Columbian works, as well as new focuses and possibilities in its study.

During the 1920-1940 decades, analysis of art moved to descriptions of specific examples. One reason was that Archaeology and Ethnology acquired great advances in their own fields.

Under such circumstances, José Juan Tablada wrote his *History of Art in Mexico* (1927). He was the very first modern Art Historian to grant real importance to Mesoamerican art, and his view deals in some way with actual aesthetics.

Eulalia Guzmán followed the steps of her predecessors. She joined their ideas with her own and with the modern criterion of national renewal. In 1933 she published an extraordinary and crucial essay, "Essential Traits of Ancient Mexican Art. Its Fundamental Way". Among her many statements, she considered the cultural unity of Mesoamerica and argued of "beauty" in terms of "significant expression" or "meaningful forms". In doing so, Guzmán revived the analysis of expressive forms, ignored since long ago. She also pointed out the main features



of pre-Columbian art: accentuated rhythm, repetition of motives, sophistication, ornamentation, symbolism, religious and magical means.

In 1940 Edmundo O'Gorman set up a quite new path of comprehension. He wrote a brief but thoughtful article: "The Art or on the Monstruosity". There he expressed the transforming necessity of art taken as "the clearest manifestation of actuality and strength of our mythical conscience". O'Gorman discussed topics as "the proper nature of what is called Ancient Mexican *art*", and settle its links with Occident. To achieve his purposes, O'Gorman records the difference between "simple meditation" and "critical-historical meditation". Consequently he suggests scholars to dismiss "one's selfhood" (Occident) to understand "strangeness" (pre-Columbian America). Only in this way, scholars can dialogue with ancient American cultures and their artistic manifestations.

No wonder that in those years Manuel Gamio founded the National School of Anthropology and History. This School displayed the awareness about fulfilling, in the academic fields, the quest for national identity.

I must add a peculiarity of Mexico's history since Independence. Our country struggled between two paths: to bind to, or to free from the image presented by Europe as a cultural canon. In other words, challenges were "not being Occidental" or "being Occidental". Thinking of artistry of æsthetic expressions implies to accept or to reject a diverse artistic reality (*cf.* Manrique, 1977; O'Gorman, 1940). Mexico looks for and supports its own being through artistic manifestations. Acceptance of Mesoamerican art shows that the difference between West and Non West is old-fashioned.

The fields of philosophy and literature were once again step on by Miguel León-Portilla and Justino Fernández. León-Portilla used Colonial sources to investigate wisely the náhuatl concept of *toltecáyotl*, its importance to artistic

creation and historical progress. His findings appeared in *Náhuatl Philosophy Studied in its Sources* (1956) and the now revised *Fifteen Poets of Náhuatl World* (1997). Fernández analyzed the *Mexican Art Aesthetics* (1958) from three models: the pre-Columbian, the colonial and the modern. He retrieved not only the æsthetic meanings derived from the artistic prototypes he chose, but equally their merit as important emblems of Mexican nationalism.

In recent years Miguel León-Portilla has been worried about the preservation of náhuatl literature as one kind of culture expression.

### 5. *A Theory on National Identity.*

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Since long ago, Mexico accepted Mesoamerican art without further debate. Pre-Hispanic cultures and history are fairly included into our national legacy as an intrinsic element.

I want to recall a remark of Francisco de la Maza, my art professor, —a prominent Colonial Art scholar— referred to the National Museum of Anthropology. He said that the building and its space arrangement resemble a three-aisles-Cathedral, which main altar is the Mexica room. We ought to remember that Mexican people are profound catholics. Would this explain the similarity with spaces secular but nevertheless national buildings? *to others more accurate felt in catholic population?*

The Museum echoes the importance and understanding given by the government to pre-Columbian past, and offered to the world as reinforcement to political unity. May two examples serve. In 1825, Aztec Calendar was removed from Mexico City's Cathedral to the above mentioned Museum established by President Victoria. In April 16, 1906, 75 years old President Porfirio Díaz —of Zapotec ascendant— accompanied by Justo Sierra, Ministry of Education and Rector of the University, and also by archaeologist Leopoldo Batres, then in charge of excavations and reconstructions at Teotihuacán, went up the Pyramid of

the Sun as a remembrance to Díaz's ancestors, as he did in boyhood at native Monte Albán and Mitla.

In my opinion, the Museum portrays the most painstaking State conception of Mesoamerican past, for it reveals the idea of a system of national culture, provides a theoretical shelter to guard "Mexican Selfhood", and mirrors, a hundred years later, the "emotional defense" pursued by Juárez and his successors. Despite Mesoamerica turns metaphysical, godlike, prevailing essence is to honor that past as principal root of identity. Moreover, this was, and actually is, the axis of the official feeling and discourse of national identity.

So, of course, the new Museum —inaugurated in 1964 by President Adolfo López Mateos, and now being remodeled— opens its doors to speak the truth about the heritage of Mexican people.

Many events symbolizing such recreation of the past have had scenarios all over the world sponsored by Mexican governments. Among examples, let us remember the exhibits at the United States *Mexico: Splendors of 30 Centuries*, and *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico*, as well as something rather amazing: the incredible pavilion at the British Museum, that keeps the major treasures of Mesoamerican art taken out in late XIXth century. President Zedillo has witnessed at least 24 events so far to august in this year, related to Mesoamerican past. In brief, all presidents of Mexico have paid tribute to native past, and they have been present at archaeological discoveries and pre-Columbian exhibits.

What does this mean? I think that there is a deep belief that we have the privilege of inherit one of the primary civilizations in the world. It is certainly a universal cultural patrimony. Nevertheless, in this Western world of globalization, Asia, Africa and pre-Columbian America have their sign of "otherness". Mexico's indigenous past is not West to study and comprehension, because we are not truly

Occidentals; we entered late into Western tradition. Maybe we might be included as Non West, which is partially true, considering that our origins go back beyond the centuries and mixed to create a new identity: that of Mexicans.

I also perceive an essential peculiarity. I have said that in Mexico the break between West and Non West is old-fashioned. Pre-Columbian past is an intrinsic part of our life; so there is no need to establish links between past and present, between West and Non West. Indeed, countries like Mexico (and others in Latin America, Asia and Africa) does not mark such a distinction. Our concern seems until now, to pursuit a proper and actual emblem of identity.

Furthermore there have been changes, new viewpoints that sustain such idea but with a slight shift in the conception. Recent studies are focused on multidisciplinary approaches; historical and specialized subjects that converge in various disciplines. We are assembling a new kind of comprehension rooted in our common historical memory, trying to conceive pre-Columbian civilizations as a coherent unity, but distinguishing differences among elements.

Study of Pre-Columbian art supplies one of the means, as I have tried to demonstrate. History shows it in the writings in Spanish aimed to one of the largest languages in the world (over 400 million speakers). To Mexicans Pre Hispanic past is one of the strongest basis of identity. As José Moreno Villa —a refugee Spanish scholar, and Mexican by adoption— wrote sixty years ago, "the history of Mexico is on feet. Here no one is dead, despite assassinations and executions ... This is Mexico's originality. All her past is palpitating actuality. Past is not dead" (1992: 223).

Rescue and expansion of Mesoamerican history have a powerful ideological motivation. Both delineate new focuses on self knowledge and new efforts to constantly define self identity and aspirations: thinking of culture

expressions involves to embrace or to refuse "otherness". So pre-Columbian art appears upsetting, and moves hither and thither, from "being" to "not being" Western to outsiders.

I also find here one of the ineluctable traits that permeate our comprehension of Mesoamerican art. I do emphasize it is a history of fighting midway admitting or excluding "the other one", pre-Columbian America, but to European and North American scholars. To them, recognition is a recent topic, an affair of mind-opening to different cultural systems. It is an effect of knowing "others", inasmuch as it happened with African and Islamic arts through XIXth century. To Mexican scholars such antagonism is fruitless. It is rather a result of epochs of crisis, of overthrow of traditional values, besides our political, economical, and social development, as implied by Independence, Reform, and Revolution wars.

I have no reticence to assert that modern progression toward intellectual and emotional understanding of pre-Columbian art had led to coexistence of different canons: those of Occident and those of the native New World. The aim is to multiply studies helping to spread the acceptance of different ways of being. One direction is the study of art. Pre-Columbian art mirrors our psyche with universal meanings, and shapes a fairest image of the world we live in, beneath West.