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Subject: Encyc: Mural painting

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Instituto de Investigaciones EstÈticas, Universidad
Nacional AutÙnoma de MÈxico.

L.A.D. RON DE GUEVARA, Sara
1992 "Pintura y escultura", en: Tajìn, Citibank, MÈxico,
p. 99-132.

LOMBARDO DE RUIZ, Sonia; Diana LOPEZ DE MOLINA, et al.
1986 Cacaxtla: el lugar donde muere la lluvia en la tierra,
MÈxico, Gobierno del estado de Tlaxcala, Instituto
Nacional de Antropologìa e Historia.

MATOS MOCTEZUMA, Eduardo
1988 Obras maestras del Templo Mayor, MÈxico, Banamex,
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NAJERA, Martha Iliã
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SELER, Eduard
1895 Wandermalerei von Mitla: eine mexicanische Bilderschrift
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aufgenommenen Zeichnungen herausgegeben und
arl%utert, Berlin.

SOLANES, Marìa del Carmen
1992 Los murales de Cholula, Puebla, Miniguìla, MÈxico, Consejo
Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de
Antropologìa e Historia.

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mural painting

The ruins that we see today are earth-colored, but in ancient times, Mesoamerican cities large and small were brilliantly colored in simple vivid tones that covered most building façades, while richly painted narrative scenes were found in interior spaces such as patios, porticos, niches, hallways, rooms and alcoves. The natural environment provided the model for the greens of the valleys and woods, the blues of the mountains, the placid lakes and raging rivers. White and blue tonalities evoked the firmament.

Colors were compounded of various organic and inorganic materials, achieving coloristic effects that even today, with chemical colors, are difficult to equal. Mural paintings were one element of this world of color, visually perceived in the cities and their buildings, in the statues that ornamented them and objects offered in the markets, on the documents that preserved sacred wisdom, in costume and cosmetics.

Our knowledge of mural paintings is relatively recent. Until 100 years ago, the only known references to murals were to those of Teotihuacan (Valley of Mexico), Mitla (Oaxaca), and Maya sites of the Yucatan peninsula. Since then there have been numerous discoveries showing the variety of pictorial styles. Olmec-style wall paintings were discovered in Guerrero, at Oxtotitlan, Juxtlahuaca and Cacahuiziqui, and showed a previously unknown Olmec influence in that area. Wall paintings from the Maya sites, Río Azul (Guatemala) and Bonampak (Chiapas) extended our knowledge of Classic Maya culture; Cacaxtla (Tlaxcala) murals showed the warlike presence of peoples from the nearby Central highlands, and those from the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco (Mexico City) revealed change and continuity in Mesoamerica's mural tradition.

Common language of pre-Columbian mural painting: techniques, themes, and style:

While, in general, Mesoamerican murals feature flat areas of color, the mural traditions of several regions, particularly the lowlands and tropics (such as Veracruz and the Maya lowlands) produce the illusion of superposition of dimensions and of volume by varying pigment saturation. Most figures in murals are outlined, providing the images with visual structure that is enlivened by varying the width of the line. The other generally shared element is the absence of perspective, with increasing distance indicated by diminished size and relative spacing (for example, the portico of the "Diosas Verdes", Tetitla compound, Teotihuacan), but on not a few occasions murals succeed in giving the impression of depth and the sensation of distance. There is an exceptional example of intentional foreshortening in the reclining image of Room 2 at Bonampak.

Technique and procedures

The essential character of mural techniques in Mesoamerica was affixing colored media to the surface of the buildings decorated. Always stucco plaster served to support the application of pigments extracted from the earth, oxidized in diverse proportions. For those of mineral origin, with the exception of the blues and greens that one sees in tropical earths and that has organic components. In this way they created a type of tempera, bound by gummy plant fluids, such as the sap of the nopal cactus, and a fresco that was applied over still-damp walls.

Themes and deeds represented

Themes of the murals varied according to the function of the architectural spaces that supported them--funerary in the tombs found in Oaxaca, symbolic repeated figures in interior murals in the apartment

complexes of Teotihuacan and heroic narratives in the buildings of the Maya region. There are also narrative murals in the Gulf lowlands (at Las Higueras) and murals depicting mythic and real history of the Basin of Mexico after the fall of Teotihuacan, as seen at Cacaxtla.

The abundant murals of the Classic period (A.D. 300 - 900) had as their iconographic antecedent the presumably Olmec-influenced cave paintings of Guerrero, perhaps contemporaneous with the apogee of the Gulf lowlands centers, 1000 - 600 B.C. True mural painting, that is to say the application of colors to stuccoed walls prepared to receive polychromes, was first recognized at Teotihuacan (A.D. 300-600), at such sumptuous buildings as Tetitla, Zacuala, Atetelco, La Ventilla, Tepantitla, and many others that have been partially reconstructed, as well as those that remained permanently hidden. In Teotihuacan one appreciates the sensitive use of the distinctive exterior walls of building, with two-dimensional painted scenes depicted on the sloping "talud" walls, as well as in the vertical "tablero" walls, always delimited by an enclosing line. The precise repetition of the lines suggests the use of a stencil to outline the figures. In Teotihuacan there are several recurring themes, always expressed in an abstract mode with an essential concept: agriculture, war, or mythology, components of a cosmovision which seems to exclude individuals as historic characters. One can identify representations of deities and sacred principals, animals of different kinds, combining references to natural features or of fantastical appearance, like plumed serpents or were-jaguars. These, as sacred mediators, distinguish themselves by their accoutrements and their attributes, but not by personal characteristics. From among all the buildings embellished with murals, Tetitla stands out as a kind of painting museum for Teotihuacan: there one finds 120 painted walls, in all styles of Teotihuacan painting.

While Teotihuacan maintained its hegemony over the Central highlands, other cities continued to develop. Cholula, situated in the Puebla-Tlaxcala region, was built in a strategic spot on a route that linked the Basin of Mexico with the Gulf lowlands and with the Oaxaca region. Cholula's Great Pyramid and its first construction phases feature polychromed figures facing front, with their bodies in profile. Another mural at this site, dating from ca. A.D. 200-350, is known as "The Drinkers" and features 100 anthropomorphic figures painted in diverse colors. Garbed in loincloths, turbans, earrings and other adornments, they are grouped in pairs, standing or squatting. Some raise vessels and others drink the liquid. It has been suggested that this represents a libation, the pulque (agave beer) ritual, or the celebration of a harvest. There are also depicted floral forms, lozenge shapes with volutes and braids. The scenes occupied a surface 56 m long. To date, due to its iconographic content, the mural is unique in the pictorial art of Mexico.

Another style and function one appreciates from the painted tombs of Oaxaca, principally Monte Alban and Suchilquitongo (Huijazoo). In style they include elements of other Mesoamerican paintings, particularly those of Teotihuacan. They are more narrative, and their scenic quality is reinforced by the presence of glyphs of names and toponyms. Depersonalized human and animal figures were painted, in general, in profile; ornaments and features of clothing were painted frontally. In Tombs 112, 103, 104, 105 and 123 of Monte Alban, as in that of Suchilquitongo, rigid postures symbolize deities in scenes of religious ritual; never does one find realistic portrayal, but a reality founded in religious ceremonial and beliefs. Oaxacan tomb murals show corteges that accompany the deceased, and also cosmological beliefs; celestial skybands with stellar eyes, and processions of deities that set upon the dead on the road toward another dimension.

The tomb at Suchilquitongo (Huijazoo), near Monte Alban, is magnificent, with two large rooms. Its very well-preserved mural paintings cover an area of 40 m² with a representation of a funeral involving 60 people: priests with great capes, priestesses with huipils and bags of incense, warriors, nobles, old chiefs in mourning. It is an exceptional example of Oaxaca tomb painting.

In Maya art, mural painting is outstanding, distinguished by its naturalism and historic and cosmological content. Until now the oldest

known murals were found in funerary contexts, e.g. Tomb 1 at R̄o Azul (Guatemala). On its red-painted walls is found the date A.D. 417, and figures of deities, serpent and aquatic symbols allude to the underworld. At Uaxact̄n (Guatemala), a mural found in Structure BXIII has historic scenes expressed in a mode common in Maya mural painting: groups of personages on foot and in profile, perhaps nobles, accompanied by hieroglyphic inscriptions arrayed over horizontal registers.

Late Classic period (A.D. 600-900) murals share this thematic tradition. The ancient Maya were famous for expressing cosmological and political concepts and activities of the powerful elite, depicted on interior and exterior walls, lintels, jambs and cornices. In the scenes, the rulers narrate their participation in war, obtaining captives, rituals of autosacrifice and sacrifice, their relation to and communication with their ancestors and with gods, themes that stress their power and dynastic legitimacy. This is the content of the scenes that cover all of the interiors of the three rooms of Structure 1 of Bonampak (Chiapas). These paintings, dated to A.D. 792, show events in the life of the ruler Chan Muan II. Other Maya sites, Mulchic and Chacmult̄n (Yucatan), have murals with scenes of war and processions of personified deities.

A regional characteristic of the R̄o Bec, Chenes and Puuc zones of the Yucatan peninsula were the capstones of vaults. Of scenes painted in the central stone of the vault covers of Maya buildings, most of them depict gods, particularly God K, relating the ruling lineage to supernatural power.

In the late Classic (A.D. 600-900 or later) were painted the battle scenes on the interior walls of the Temple of the Jaguars at Chichen Itza. In these we recognize certain compositional features similar to those of the Central highlands of Mexico, foreign to the Classic Maya pictorial tradition. Murals from the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1521) are located in sites of the east coast of the Yucatan peninsula. There are representations of Maya deities, but the importance of individuals, so characteristic of Classic Maya murals, declined. Predominant iconographic themes are agriculture, the cosmos and its three levels: heaven, earth, and underworld. It has been said that stylistic characteristics of Tulum and Santa Rita Corozal are related to Mixteca-Puebla style, present in this epoch in the Central Highlands of Mexico.

Along the Gulf lowlands were important cities with mural painting that covered much of the structures. The murals of Las Higueras were painted A.D. 800-900. In Structure 1 there were 19 superimposed levels of painting. In the mural fragments (now in the Jalapa Museum) are birds and serpents, processions of personages with lances, standards, and long trains; other individuals play musical instruments, personifying dancers or ball players.

The murals at El Taj̄n recall the paintings of Structure 1. In this case there appear human faces at times covered by masks and carrying a bunch of plumes, symbolic elements within cruciform designs and the famous intertwined motifs. Zoomorphic figures are highly ornamented, having diverse outlines of quadrupeds, clawfooted and jaws with canine teeth.

In the 1970s the site of Cacaxtla was discovered in the Puebla-Tlaxcala region. The first versions of the "Battle" mural and the paintings of the Jaguar-Man, Bird Man, and Dancer date from ca. A.D. 650. In 1984 new paintings were discovered in the Red Temple and the Temple of Venus. Ethnohistoric sources attribute the painted images have been attributed to the Olmeca-Xicalanga, the ethnic group in that region. In the murals one recognizes elements that form part of the iconography of older cultures, Teotihuac̄n, Xochicalco and Monte Alb̄n, along with similarities to the pictorial tradition of the Classic Maya, and these elements indicate that Cacaxtla was a multicultural community. The theme of war is characteristic of this period and in the Battle Mural the principal element is the human figure, expressing the scene with natural proportions and positions.

Polychrome decorating the architecture of Xochicalco (Morelos) only remains in symbolic elements like borders and blue lines that may refer to water, a sacred liquid. Other Late Postclassic (12th through 15th centuries) paintings of the Central Highlands have been found in Tizat̄n

and Ocotelulco, two cities that formed part of the four-city Tlaxcalan capital ("cuatro seÑorios").

Mixteca-Puebla style was radically important, expressed in the style of the Borgia Group codices. The different images painted in both settings depict deities, sacrifice, and the underworld, through skulls, hearts, stringray spines, knives, and aquatic symbols.

In the northern Gulf lowlands, in Huasteca, mural paintings at Tamuln, represented in the frieze of a building, show local characteristics, as facial features and headdresses on human figures, but they show elements of Mixteca-Puebla style, by the adornments and objects the figures carry, and by the appearance of certain gods represented here.

In the Northwest periphery region, home of Chalchihuites culture and the site of Alta Vista, mural painting is evidenced by red and blue painting over mud plaster. Other mural fragments have been found in Postclassic cities of the Central Highlands of Mexico. The mural of Tenayuca depicts crossed bones and human skulls, now removed from its original place. The mural of Malinalco, attributed to the Matlatzinca ethnic group, shows warriors, shields and lances.

Mexica or Aztec mural art is known from magnificent examples dating to the 14th and 15th centuries, uncovered in excavations of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), 1978-1982. In them was emphasized the Aztec concept of duality. On top of the Templo Mayor were two shrines, one dedicated to the Mexica patron god, Huitzilopochtli, and the other to the water and agriculture god Tlaloc. The exterior of Tlaloc's shrine was painted with concentric circles, horizontal red and blue bands, and vertical black and white bands, symbols that allude to the deity. On the interior of this wall were the remains of a mural, the feet of a figure on a stream of water. Within the complex of structures that surround the Templo Mayor are various altars and shrines. The Red Temple on the south side of the Templo Mayor, retains traces of red, white, and black paint depicting paper strips, and over the moulding circles of red-painted stone. The exterior walls were decorated with designs bearing Teotihuacan features, like the "weeping eye" motif and elements shaped like cross sections of conch shell, and similar art survives from Tlatelolco (Mexico City).

Beatriz de la Fuente
Leticia Staines Cicero

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See also Cacaxtla; Caves of Guerrero; Painting; Teotihuacan;