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VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES IN MESOAMERICA

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Abstract

This essay surveys recent trends in studies of Mesoamerican visual culture. Visual culture is defined here as more than an inclusive art history. I outline a tradition of approaches and methods in visual culture studies, arguing that this tradition pays particular attention to the reception and use of objects, as well as to their place in ancient economies. Several current trends in Mesoamerican studies, especially Postclassic period world-systems approaches and Classic period Maya courtly studies, have been particularly fecund strategies for visual culture studies. Other major trends in the field include studies of the symbolism of architecture and urban planning as well as performance studies. The insistence on economic contexts, the desire to capture indigenous visualities, and the need to situate the visual experience in larger cultural phenomena all bode well for future interdisciplinary work in visual cultural studies.

Mesoamerican visual culture encompasses all the region's objects, monuments, and architecture, making the study of visual culture more ecumenical than art history, the latter traditionally interested mainly in elite products. In this sense, Mesoamerican visual culture studies have caught up with one of its founders, George Kubler, who in 1962 began *The Shape of Time* by asking what would happen if "the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world" (1962:1). Visual culture's inclusion of non-elite objects in the corpus mirrors the increasingly sophisticated analyses in numerous recent studies of Mesoamerican material culture.

It is too simple, however, to define visual culture studies as a more inclusive and populist art history or to give Kubler too large a role in that definition. Current visual culture studies have complex relationships both with Kubler's original project and with recent art historical and anthropological studies. Kubler (1975:759) wanted to expand art history's (not anthropology's) purview to all man-made objects where art history meant a particular attention to the structuring power of aesthetic choices. Further, Kubler emphasized the dynamic history of elite art styles played against the "slow happening" of non-elite traditions, a thesis steeped in the avant-garde formulations of the time. The best recent scholarship on these questions of high and low visual culture tend to treat the relationship as dialogic, rather than hierarchical (Pasztory 1997).

Thus, on one front Kubler saw the battle for Mesoamerican visual culture as between those who were attentive to the details of making things as constitutive of culture, and those who saw those details, if they saw them at all, as indexical of other (anthropological) concerns. And yet there was another front in his campaign: as Kubler already lamented in 1962, art historians were becoming less interested in the structuring effects of aesthetic systems while studies of iconography were ascendant (Clancy 2001:56). Few heeded this lament in Mesoamerican or other visual culture studies. Indeed, art historians' more recent studies of visual culture (Alpers et al. 1996) trace their lineage not to Kubler, but to Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1972). This slim volume has been so important to later studies of visual culture that it bears examining here. Baxandall was interested in iconography, certainly, but the real importance of the work was in combining the classic art historical techniques of stylistic and iconographic analysis with studies on the history of visuality, or what he memorably termed the "period eye." Baxandall argued that defining the period eye was important not only for understanding an audience's reception of an object, but also for understanding the object's creation. The texts in which he sought the period eye treated not only the visual, rhetorical, and aesthetic, but also the world of geometry, measurement, and general perception (Baxandall 1972:86–102). Such specifics of visuality are indeed difficult to come by for many ancient Mesoamerican cultures, but recently deciphered Classic period Maya texts give us at least one ancient vantage point from which to begin a history of Mesoamerican visuality.

Baxandall (1972:1–27) also saw the visual in complex economic terms. Like several important recent studies of the circulation of Mesoamerican objects, Baxandall was vitally interested in the specifics of the market exchange systems for objects and believed the mechanics of these systems had something important to tell us about the object. Recent similar Mesoamerican examples are highlighted by those employing the Postclassic period world-systems approach (Smith and Berdan 2003), in which increasing commercialization, the proliferation of small polities, and an explosion of long-distance exchange formed an important context for the rise of a related series of styles and iconographic systems.

This same Postclassic period world-systems approach tackled a long-debated problem in Mesoamerican visual culture: the nature and function of the "Mixteca-Puebla" sphere. Such classic problems in Mesoamerican visual culture reveal the ebb and flow of scholarly interests and trends. Vaillant (1938) first identified the basic characteristics of Mixteca-Puebla artifacts and related them to a proposed culture based in the namesake region. This culture was seen to spread northward to the Valley of Mexico and there formed an

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important foundation for the rise of Aztec visual culture. Nicholson (1960) later argued for a style/iconography sphere centered on the region without a necessary connection to a single culture. Even this localization bothered some researchers who found that the distribution patterns of the artifacts were not indicative of a nucleated, center to periphery distribution. Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) proposed that not only were the distribution patterns weak, but the basic characterization of the visual culture tended to lump several independent elements: religious iconography, codex style, and ceramic complexes. Only Robertson (1970), an art historian, limited his comments to the art style, which he showed was part of a larger Mesoamerican stylistic phenomenon he dubbed the "Postclassic International Style." Recent work has been careful to differentiate the components that went into the making of Mixteca-Puebla communication: an Early Postclassic period symbol set, a Late Postclassic period symbol set, and a Postclassic period international style that was often the vehicle for the symbol sets. In general, analyses of the Mixteca-Puebla sphere have become more attentive to the fluid and contingent nature of visual culture; style and iconography are no longer merged as a single unit of analysis and are not automatically associated with a single culture. Further, advances in our understanding of the Postclassic period world-system, such as the nature of intensified elite interaction across linguistic and cultural boundaries, goes far in explaining certain choices in the constitution of the style and symbol sets (Boone and M.E. Smith 2003b; Pohl 2003b).

For the Classic period Maya, a similarly fecund approach has been developed in courtly studies, which is loosely defined as a concentration on the spaces and practices associated with the ruler and his or her entourage. Here elites vied for the products of particular artists filtered through an economic system heavily weighted towards programs of feasting, gifting, and other courtly activities (Inomata and Houston 2001; Miller and Martin 2004). The specific economic and social environments in which elite objects circulated are sometimes recorded on the objects themselves (Reents-Budet 1994, 2001), giving us a limited but valuable view of visual culture practices such as the presentation of gift objects and the display of fine ceramics inside the palace. These practices are rarely, if ever, recorded in the archaeological record, making the images all the more valuable.

Recent decipherments of Classic period Maya texts offer us further insight into indigenous visuality, at least as it was recorded by the literate elite. Stuart (1987) first noted a pattern of artist signatures on Late Classic period Maya ceramics; their very presence indicated a singular, public appreciation of the artist's hand rare in the archaeological or textual record elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Inomata 2001; Pasztory 2005:192–193). Other texts speak directly to Classic period Maya concepts of representation (Houston and Stuart 1998). Richer still are Maya conceptions of visuality, or the period eye of the literate elite, referred to in texts (Houston et al. 2006; Houston and Taube 2000). Visuality is seen here in relation to other sense experience, an avenue of investigation rarely touched on by previous scholarship (but see López Austin 1980). Among several important conceptions discussed by the authors, it seems placement and gaze had much to do with notions of political rank and oversight: to "see" an event, especially from on high, was to legitimate or authorize that event (Houston et al. 2006:174–175; Houston and Taube 2000:287).

Perhaps the most ambitious study of Mesoamerican visual culture in the tradition of Baxandall is Herring's (2005) book-length treatment of Late Classic period Maya elite visual culture, which includes detailed notes on the period eye (2005:54–61, 167–169) and the rise of calligraphy as a key elite art practice. Much of the evidence for the period eye comes from the epigraphy cited above, and yet Herring goes much further when he draws out a rich panoply of visual cues and practices that allowed a vast and dispersed elite to identify each other and communicate among themselves—to create what the author calls elite sociability. Herring's ability to call up the environment of elite courtly existence and show how it produced meaningful sensory experiences—especially visual experiences—is exemplary of the best analyses of visual culture.

The Classic Maya visual studies cited above would be difficult if not impossible to replicate throughout Mesoamerica. The richness and breadth of the data set allow scholars of Classic Maya visual culture to attempt fine-grained analyses not possible for other times and areas, with the important exception of Late Postclassic period central Mexico. That said, cultural interaction in Mesoamerica suggests that a judicious search for comparable visual forms and practices across Mesoamerica will lead to viable hypotheses on the nature of other Mesoamerican visual cultures, from which we can begin to sketch a history and geography of Mesoamerican visuality. A particularly important episode in this history is the emergence of the Postclassic period symbol sets from earlier Mesoamerican visual cultures (including the Classic period Maya). In addition to the world-systems approach discussed above, work on this transitional period has produced some of the most innovative approaches to iconography in recent scholarship. The central "Feathered Serpent" symbol of the Late Postclassic period symbol set has been the center of much debate (Nicholson 2001; Pohl 2003a). Two related hypotheses have come to the fore on the emergence of this central symbol: Ringle and colleagues (Ringle et al. 1998; Ringle 2004) delineated the rise of feathered serpent iconography and related practices with the transformations in political imagery in the Epiclassic-Early Postclassic period; while López Austin and López Luján (1999, 2002) focused on the ethnohistoric documents that contain the "Language of Zuyuá," an esoteric knowledge system that may contain information on elite languages of power and legitimacy, both visual and textual, developed during the Epiclassic period. While both of these efforts are clearly indebted to a handful of fundamental iconographic studies (Schele and Miller 1986; Berlo 1992; Diehl and Berlo 1989), they are important for their ability to sketch central aspects of Mesoamerican visual culture (especially symbol systems) over long periods of time while meaningfully addressing change. Parallel to these Mesoamerican studies and often providing crucial information to them, two recent *tour de force* studies of Maya iconography map continuity and change over more than a millennium of Maya imagery (Freidel et al. 1993; Taube 1992b).

Narratives in all media have been a major focus of interest for students of visual culture (Boone 1994, 2000; Kristan-Graham 1993; Reents-Budet 1989). Martin (2006) has cogently outlined the analytical problems associated with ancient American narrative. That author focuses us on the "textscapes" that surrounded all ancient narratives and the problems inherent in their reconstruction. These problems differ according to the mode of presentation; iconographic (image-based), semasiographic (highly conventionalized image-writing like that found in the Mixtec codices), or glottographic (script that records spoken language). While the iconographic mode requires a significant knowledge of the surrounding textscape, the other two narrative systems require less. While on the surface it may seem that semasiographic and glottographic modes contain more directly apprehensible information, it is also

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true that in Mesoamerica these texts were not meant to be anything like a "thick description" of historical events or other narrative data.

Brumfiel's "figured worlds" (2004)—a useful shorthand for the entire array of figures and narratives employed in a specific image system—is used to analyze group worldview. This is especially interesting in a comparative perspective, as Brumfiel shows, where different figured worlds are created for different social contexts, driven especially by the need for group cohesion via adherence to a particular worldview. Feasting becomes a key stage for the display of these figured worlds and the creation of a shared worldview. While ceremonial feasting can often be used to tease out social hierarchies and the worldviews that support them, it is also true that much can be done with more humble foodways and the material culture that serves as their trace (M.L. Smith 2008). In an especially important example, Rosemary Joyce (2000) makes the argument that some Formative period feasting was primarily the venue for performances of gender and lifecycle rites, inside of which some early political maneuvering could be done.

While Brumfiel's categories of worldview are general enough to be widely applicable and generate little controversy, other analyses base themselves on a more detailed reconstruction of the textscape surrounding religious practice and associated mentalities. Given the rich and varied scholarly archive on which Mesoamericanists draw to reconstruct indigenous mentalities, it has been stressed that such scholarship must take into account current agendas and scholarly tendencies (Klein 2002; Klein et al. 2002; Pasztory 2005:17–18) as well as the state of the art in indigenous textual studies (Boone and Mignolo 1994; Houston 2000).

Studies of the importance and meaning of precious materials have given new depth to economic themes in visual culture (Klein 1986; Luke and Tykot 2007; Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007). Pohl (2001) has synthesized the case for an extensive macaw trade between Mesoamerica and the American Southwest in the Postclassic period; more importantly, that author has shown how rites and visual cultures played a central role in the economic exchanges. Guernsey (2006:143–155) argued that avian cults in the Late Preclassic period served a similar function, forging elite identities and trade routes with the exchange of the precious feathers necessary for the cult. Taube (1992a, 1999) argued for a continuous tradition of Mesoamerican warrior cults with objects based on shell and obsidian replaced in part by turquoise by the Postclassic period.

Studies of Mesoamerican codices have long held a privileged position in visual culture, both in historiographic and theoretical terms (Caso 1949; Robertson 1959; Smith 1973). Here scholars have developed a particularly rich discourse around the problems of continuity and change (Boone and Cummins 1998; Umberger 2007) where the hybrid nature of indigenous Colonial period documents and the multiple audiences for whom they were intended have emerged as central themes (Diel 2008; Douglas 2003). Pohl has done much to bring attention to the complex social data provided by the Mixtec codices (1994b), as well as highlight the function of documents as "social contracts" in a wider Mesoamerican sphere (1994a). Both Byland and Pohl (1994) and Joyce and colleagues (2004) combined sophisticated analyses of the codices with detailed archaeological data.

Esther Pasztory (2005) echoes Kubler's desire to encompass all objects, and not just those labeled "art," in her analyses. Following Kubler, the author believes that the difference between "art objects" and all other manmade things is a product of the European Enlightenment and is unhelpful in understanding traditions outside the modern West. Also like Kubler, the author believes that attention to details of making and presentation are especially important in any analysis of the visual. Unlike Kubler, Pasztory does not believe that the movements of form *qua* form are the chief vehicle of that analysis. Instead, she assigns a cognitive function to the creation and manipulation of things, although this cognitive function is admittedly nonverbal. Put another way, the forms and relations of things are "good to think with" in the structural sense pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The author emphasized that all things, and the aesthetics used to manufacture and display those things, are part of a communicative technology that has played an enormous role in the past and continues to be important today. In locating this work in the cognitive sphere, Pasztory's work poses a serious challenge for future visual culture studies: how to make apparent and explain these nonverbal discourses in productive ways.

Related recent studies have attempted specific social readings from careful analyses of artistic structure in elite ceramics (Loughmiller-Newman 2008). Pasztory (1998) uses fundamental artistic techniques (graphic- versus weaving-based cultures) to discuss general artistic and cultural principles across pre-Columbian America, while Boone (2006) provides a necessary cautionary tale by revealing how the data sample itself structures our thinking on the fundamental lineaments of pre-Columbian aesthetic systems.

Although not specific to visual culture studies, studies of gender have long employed innovative analyses of visual materials to tease out matters of interest (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; Miller 1988). Recent studies of gender have highlighted two aspects of cultural practice that have also proved central to other visual culture studies: 1) that gender is not given by biology but constructed through discourse (Klein 2001a:371) and 2) that the discourse around gender is performed as much or more as it is defined through language (Joyce 2001a). In the end, one would hope that a gendered visual culture would enhance the conceptual integrity of the enterprise by checking facile or naïve assumptions on the relationship of gender and visual culture, just as a gendered archaeology has been argued to do for that discipline (Wylie 1992).

Inomata (2006a) focuses on the archaeological traces of performances—especially the plazas that must have served as stages—and how those performances constituted community. The argument rests on the glyphic and iconographic evidence for such performances, including glyphs for "dance" and "plaza" (Grübe 1992; Stuart and Houston 1994). Freidel and Suhler (1999) reread a Maya pyramid as a stage for scaffold sacrifice in an analytical *tour de force* combining archaeological trace and iconography. Other stages, long overlooked, have recently been brought into focus as key places for the display of visual culture. Work on the interpretation of caves and the imagery driven by their meaning has recently become an integral part of Mesoamerican studies (Brady and Prufer 2005; Hays-Gilpin and Hill 1999; Stone 1995). Urcid (2005a) has developed a holistic, multidisciplinary program for recording and interpreting the Ndaxagua (Oaxaca) tunnel epigraphy and art.

It is a truism that the great recording and cataloging projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries serve as the foundation for many studies of Mesoamerican visual culture. In such a young field, however, major new additions to the corpus are made at a regular pace, continuing the need for high quality publications. Add to this the problems of conservation and the need to adequately publish what has long been available for study, and it becomes clear just how important this aspect of publishing is for studies of ancient Mesoamerican visual culture. Mural paintings are some of the most fragile artifacts of visual culture, so the current efforts by the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas (de la Fuente 1995, 2005;

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de la Fuente and Staines Cicero 2001) to publish an enormous corpus of mural painting, alongside important and focused studies, will certainly prove invaluable to future scholars of the region's visual culture.

Architecture is a chief element of visual culture with much communicative potential, a fact not lost on many Mesoamerican elites. Kowalski (1999) edited an overview of the state of the art in the analysis of architecture and its meanings, while the Aztec Templo Mayor and surroundings have provided a rich environment for the investigation of rite and narrative in the heart of the city (Boone 1987; Broda 1988; Matos Moctezuma 1988). Staging narratives in the center was a very ancient practice, it seems: Cyphers (1994) argued that some early Olmec sculptural ensembles were *tableaux vivants*, creating permanent stage sets in the heart of the polity. Large areas of Classic period Maya central precincts have been considered to be works of visual culture, with complex compositions integrating architecture, decoration, and space (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002). Although concerns have been raised about the validity of such large-scale analyses (M.E. Smith 2003b), others have developed arguments based on the Mesoamerican urban center as a readable composition (Koontz et al. 2001; Reilly 1999; Tate 1992) containing important indications of social structure and practice (Sarro 2006).

Periodization, a source of important contention earlier (Kubler 1970; López Austin and López Luján 2000; Rice 1993), is a less central concern of current scholarship. Terms such as Epiclassic (central Mexico) and Late Classic (Maya area, Classic Veracruz) are almost interchangeable in the scholarship, with the current nomenclature simply highlighting different rhythms at the beginning and end of the Classic period. While there will always be a certain amount of productive debate around these issues, they no longer drive the shape of Mesoamerican history. Other, more specific historical problems, such as the nature of Teotihuacan's role in Mesoamerica (Braswell 2003) or the transformation of elite iconography and trade networks during the Epiclassic/Late Classic period (Kowalski and Kristan-Graham 2007; López Austin and López Luján 1999, 2002; Ringle et al. 1998; Smith and Berdan 2003)—problems with more specific data and locations—tend to be more interesting for visual culture studies than the general problems of the nature of a period.

In addition to the fecund areas of world-systems approaches, courtly studies, and other trends useful to the formation of visual culture studies noted above, recently there has been an important historiographic turn in Mesoamerican visual culture studies (Boone 2006; Kristan-Graham and Kowalski 2007; Miller 2006). This is a promising and productive development, for it goes without saying that the artistic, archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnological richness of the region has few parallels, and yet the field continues to be mainly a borrower in terms of visual culture theory and method (including the opening section of this essay). While it is true that Mesoamerican art history is a very young discipline still coming to terms with its own characteristics and problems (Quilter 2001), other disciplines contain mature and robust traditions in Mesoamerica. It is this full range of Mesoamerican studies, and not only art history, that visual culture studies purports to engage, and future studies would do well to wrestle directly with the historiography of earlier Mesoamerican studies, for it is here that the particular texture of the problems of *Mesoamerican* visual culture may be most firmly grasped.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the study of Mesoamerican visual culture was once viewed as a matter of (art) history *or* anthropology (Kubler 1975). However, others have noted that it is precisely this meeting of anthropology and art history that has characterized the strongest studies of visual culture (Dikovitskaya 2005:5; Jay 1996), and not only in Mesoamerica. The fear from the art historical side was that objects would be used chiefly as evidence for anthropological concerns and thus lose their ability to be a record of their own making. This was and remains a legitimate concern, but few would argue that we have gone down that slippery slope. Instead, the tension between the art historical and anthropological vantage points has created a particularly vibrant interstitial area that is Mesoamerican visual culture studies, where neither the experience of the visual nor the cultural phenomena surrounding its making and reception may reign analytically supreme. In its ability to remain fully aware of both the visual nature of the material and the sociocultural elements that are of interest to us all in the fabrication, circulation, and reception of the visual, the strongest Mesoamerican visual culture studies will continue to create an important interdisciplinary space. Their particular strengths, especially the insistence on economic contexts, the desire to capture indigenous visualities, and the need to situate the visual experience in larger cultural phenomena all bode well for future interdisciplinary work.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo examina las tendencias recientes en los estudios de cultura visual. Resumo una tradición de enfoques y métodos que se remonta al trabajo influyente de Michael Baxandall, *Pintura y vida cotidiana en el Renacimiento*. Esta tradición presta atención a la aceptación y utilización de objetos en términos indígenas. Especialmente importante es el concepto de "ojo del período," que Baxandall define como el mundo de la visualidad visto y entendido en los términos indígenas del período. El lugar del objeto en la economía es el otro tema central en los estudios de cultura visual de Baxandall. Los estudios de cultura visual han heredado un interés vital en las características específicas del mercado para los sistemas de intercambio de objetos. Recientes ejemplos similares de Mesoamérica se destacan por los que emplean el enfoque "sistema mundial" para el Postclásico, cuando el aumento de la comercialización, la proliferación de señoríos y ciudades-estados y una explosión de intercambio a larga distancia formaron un contexto importante para el surgimiento de una serie de estilos e sistemas iconográficos relacionados.

Además de los enfoques centrados en el sistema mundial, los estudios de las cortes de los mayas del período clásico han sido especialmente fecundos para los estudios de la cultura visual. Otras tendencias incluyen los estudios del simbolismo de la arquitectura y la planificación urbana y los estudios performativas. Un problema iconográfico especialmente importante, la transición del periódo clásico a sistemas de símbolo del postclásico, ha producido varios enfoques sintéticos tratando el motivo del Serpiente Emplumado. Al fin, los estudios de cultura visual crean un espacio interdisciplinaria importante, gracias a la insistencia en el análisis de contextos económicos, el deseo para captar el mundo visual indígena y la necesidad de situar la experiencia visual en los fenómenos culturales más amplios.

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