

The Invisible in Early Modern Nahua Art

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This dissertation research examines the structure of imagery depicting invisible essences in early modern central Mexican art. Spanning the postclassic to early colonial periods from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, the project focuses on the representation of breath, the sensorium, and the divine in Nahua image production. How did postclassic Nahua artists represent the intangible in visual media? How did the iconography of invisible concepts relate to spoken language? When did Nahua artists incorporate new European ideas into their image production? This project focuses on the postclassic Borgia Group manuscripts (Figure 1) and associated mural paintings such as those found at Tizatlán, and Ocotelolco (Figure 2) as well as early colonial manuscripts such as the *Florentine Codex* (Figure 3) and mural cycles like those at Malinalco, Ixmiquilpan, and Casa del Dean (Figure 4). This historical research is complemented by ethnographic sources and my own oral history research in the Huastecan Nahuatl-speaking region of Chicontepec, Veracruz.

Breaking down representations of sound and scent from postclassic images into their component iconographic elements reveals an indigenous understanding of categories of perception distinct to Mesoamerica and quite different than the European, originally Greek, model of five senses. Analysis of component iconographic elements in tandem with Nahuatl semantic groupings trace the relationships between these invisible concepts. Rather than groupings centered on the organ of perception, Nahua categories are instead based on the qualities of an emanation. This emphasis on quality is likewise reflected in an analysis of the *lingua franca* of the region, Nahuatl. An agglutinating language, root words are modified by the addition of prefixes and suffixes that elaborate on a central concept in Nahuatl. For instance, emanations themselves are described by the verb *ihíyoquiza* constructed from an adverbial prefix based in the noun *ihíyo(tl)* “breath” added to the verb *quiza* “to emerge.” For when breath emerges it is evident as steam or fumes, i.e. emanations. Iconography is structured similarly where modifications to basic elements communicate specific qualities (as in Figure 1). The idea of a “Grammar of Art” goes back at least to the nineteenth century (as in Owen Jones’ 1856 *A Grammar of Ornament*) and has been more recently discussed by Mesoamericanists such as Elizabeth Boone (*Stories in Red and Black*, 2000; and with Walter Mignolo in *Writing Without Words*, 1994). A central question my work considers is to what extent the visual structures of Central Mexican writing can be considered a grammar in the formal sense when pictographic texts often illustrate concepts rather than phonemes replicating speech. This interdisciplinary approach to visual media breaks new ground by comparing visual metaphors to those present in language.

The arrival of Europeans in Mesoamerica initiated a dramatic shift in philosophical notions of the sensorium and the divine as well as in visual media. The second portion of this study will focus on this transformation of indigenous artmaking in the violent integration of a radically different culture (Figures 3 and 6). A central question in the second half of the project considers how and when Nahua artists choose to incorporate European modes of representation or notions of the sensorium and the divine into their own image making. The dissertation’s final section engages with questions of survival, resistance, and integration in contemporary Nahua communities; considering best practices for creating archival accessibility with the goal towards strengthening, emboldening, and revitalizing language and cultural practices through connections to ancestral traditions of philosophy and mark making.

Project Outline:

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Part I: Introduction

Vision and the sensorium

Grammar

semantic groupings and etymologies

visual grammar

categorization and colonialism

Part II: Scrolls of Smoke and Sky: Rendering the Invisible

Icon - Design - Color

Scrolls

Tethers

Flows

Part III: Invisible Agency: the Power of Emanations

Nemahuitiliztli (“fear” in 16th cent. central Mexican Nahuatl)

Tlakahuepan (“wooden-beam man”)

Yohualtepoztlī (“night axe”)

Nemauhtilli (“fear” in present-day Huastecan Nahuatl)

Ehecatl axcualli (malos vientos / bad winds)

Chichahualiztli (strength, balance, wellbeing)

Part IV: Concluding remarks

Animating forces Mesoamerican versus European traditions

Geist - souls - the divine

Time - Culture - Displacement

Figures



Figure 1. In this image, the figure's speech is represented by an elaborate scroll, modified by inclusion of iconography representing the smoky (painted gray with black spots) night sky (indicated by red and white stars). As night is associated with the supernatural realm of the dead, the figure's already dark, portentous speech is made dangerously sharp by the inclusion of a hooked jaguar's claw. *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* 14 (before 1521). Pigment on deerskin, 3.85 m folded into 23 pages (16.2 x 17.2 cm each). World Museum (12014 M), Liverpool.

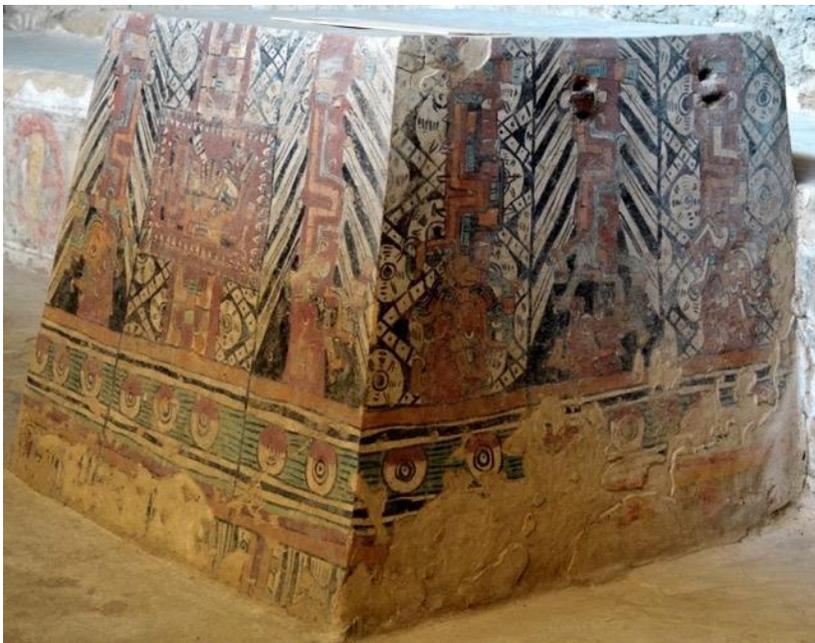


Figure 2. Detail of left side of the altar painting, Ocotelolco, Tlaxcala (Jansen and Perez J 2017-473 7.16).



Figure 3. Illustration of Yohualtepoztlī, *Florentine Codex* (book 5, chapter 3), folio 6v. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 218-220.



Figure 4. Detail, murals of the Convento Augustino de Malinalco, Estado de México.



Figure 6. Detail, murals of the Convento de San Miguel Arcángel Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo.