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Representation and Reflexivity: Paradoxes in the Image of Christ from Sixteenth-Century Mexico

PER FINIRE

In qualche parte del mondo
c'è chi mi ha chiesto un dito
e non l'ho mai saputo. La distanza
di quanto più s'accorcia di tanto si allontana.

TO FINISH

Somewhere in the world
there's someone who asked an inch
and I never knew it. The shorter
the distance becomes the farther it gets away.

E. Montale

Even before the fall of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, in 1521, a date that is usually taken as the beginning of the colonial period in Mexico, miraculous images had already been making their way into Mesoamerica,² since they accompanied Spanish conquistadors in their military campaign.

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² Mesoamerica is a cultural and geographic area that comprises modern central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and part of Honduras and El Salvador.

Catholicism in Spain on the eve of the New World's conquest was at a critical moment. A political tool in the hands of the monarchy, it was at the same time undergoing profound reform, partly due to the religious and cultural ferment of the time and changes in the thinking of the missionary orders, principally Franciscans and Dominicans. Combining medieval scholasticism with Renaissance humanistic principles, they had become increasingly preoccupied with the state of Catholic practice and belief outside, as well as within, the religious establishment.³ The military and spiritual Reconquista, which forcefully assimilated Jews and Moors in the Castilian Kingdom, found its counterpart in the New World, where Hernán Cortés and his men, closely allied with the Franciscans, displayed their devotion in banners representing the cult of the Virgin, as a clear sign of the divine approval of their cruel and destructive actions.⁴ Achieving salvation for the indigenous peoples of the New World by converting them to Christianity was an essential and inextricable component of the enterprise of the conquest.

A generation after those bloody events, many indigenous towns in New Spain⁵ were already active in promoting local cults and their images, in a strategy of religious and political appropriation that continued the ancient Mesoamerican tradition of casting community affairs within the context of a wider supernatural cosmology.⁶ The present essay is concerned with specific images representing Christ during the most dramatic moments of the crucifixion, deposition and entombment. These images, painted and sculpted, are evidently linked to rituals and other related activities carried out during Holy Week. While all the works discussed belong to the second half of the sixteenth century (roughly from the 1560s to 1580s), the sources I use for interpreting them are both old and new. Missionary accounts and pictographic documents contemporaneous with the images in question accompany data gathered during my personal experience in observing and participating in contemporary celebrations in Mexico between 2007 and 2014. My point of view is that of a trained pre-Columbian art historian and archaeologist, who, although born and raised in Italy, a predominantly Catholic country, did not

³ For an appraisal of the complexity of this period in Spanish intellectual and religious history, see Lu Ann Homza, *Religious authority in the Spanish Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁴ John H. Elliott, "The mental world of Hernán Cortés", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17 (1967): 54-58; Robert Ricard, *The spiritual conquest of Mexico*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 15-23.

⁵ New Spain was a vast administrative territory that in the sixteenth century comprised the modern southern United States, Mexico, and a large part of Central America.

⁶ For a classic introduction to late pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican political ideology, see Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre-Dios: Religión y política en el mundo náhuatl* (México City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1989).

receive a religious upbringing. Poetry and, sadly, witnessing the death of my father after a long illness are the only 'supernatural' experiences I can draw on.

I apply a *longue durée* perspective in my study, precisely to take into consideration changes in experience and interpretation. How did the peculiar religious and political climate of the latter sixteenth century affect the way foreign images and cults were incorporated into the life of indigenous towns? What part did these historical events play in the way indigenous Catholicism was born and evolved in Mexico? What was the relationship between New World evangelization and Catholicism in post-Reformation Europe? The image of Christ conflates the idiosyncrasies of different visual and religious cultures through time.

All the works discussed in this essay belong to what used to be, up to the mid nineteenth century, *conventos*, missionary establishments in indigenous territories, which became important economic, social and cultural centers whose influence extended well beyond their religious functions almost immediately after they were founded in the sixteenth century.⁷ The art produced within the *conventos* has attracted increasing attention among art historians, becoming a preferred *locus* for discussing the complex intercultural dialogue between friars and indigenous communities in the early colonial period.⁸

Yanhuitlan and the Deposition Ceremony

The *Santo Entierro* (Holy Sepulchre) in the church of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlan in the state of Oaxaca is an animated sculpture of Christ that most likely dates to the early period of the church's construction in the late 1570s, based on technical and stylistic evidence.⁹ **Figure 1** shows a picture taken by technicians of the National Conservation Institute during the restoration

⁷ The Mexican government, under President Benito Juárez, expropriated almost all Church estates in the country beginning in the 1860s.

⁸ A now classic study is George Kubler, *Mexican architecture of the sixteenth century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). A more recent appraisal is Eleanor Wake, *Framing the sacred: The Indian churches of early colonial Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010). In Mexico, Elena Isabel Estrada de Gerlero, *Muros, sargas y papeles. Imagen de lo sagrado y lo profano en el arte novohispano del siglo XVI* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 2011); Constantino Reyes Valerio, *Arte indocristiano* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000).

⁹ The Mixtecs, primarily settled in the north of Oaxaca of southeastern Mexico, are one of the several indigenous peoples of Mexico, with roughly 400.000 speakers, although many more identify themselves as Mixtec even though they no longer speak the language, as is the case in Yanhuitlan.

works carried out in 1997.¹⁰ Featuring Christ lying bare on a table, the image's iconography recalls the famous *Dead Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Holbein (1521-22), now in the Kunstmuseum in Basel, long understood, by many academic and non-academic observers, as a non-believer's depiction of the dead body of Jesus.¹¹ Because of its scientific objectivity, the act of taking the picture desecrates the image. At the same time, because of the very scientific nature of the picture, we can clearly observe how badly the image has indeed been desecrated since its inception. The face is dark and dirty. The neck is crackled and the shoulder damaged. The image was tortured, in cyclical and repetitive gestures ritualistically carried out during Holy Week. Icon and iconoclasm, contested topics among Christians of all periods are indissoluble, because intrinsically associated with the story of the Passion itself.¹²



Figure 1. *The Santo Entierro* (Holy Sepulchre) in the church of Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca, Mexico.

The *Santo Entierro* lies dead during the entire year, resting in its glass coffin under a Passion altarpiece inside the church. It does not receive any attention until Holy Wednesday, when around noon it is taken out in procession, still inside its coffin, and eventually put on display, by the entrance of the church, where vigils are carried out until the end of Holy Week. On the morning of Good Friday, volunteers prepare a Golgotha several meters high made of freshly cut branches. Eventually, behind a curtain, they take the *Santo Entierro* out of the coffin, secure it on a wooden cross by use of a long white cloth, and place it in front of the mount, with images of Saint John and the Virgin of Solitude on either side.

The ritual of the descent from the Cross is performed at night, in a manner strikingly similar to the one described by the Dominican chronicler Agustín Dávila Padilla in the sixteenth century.¹³ According to him, in the church of Santo Domingo in Mexico City an image of Christ made of cornstalk paste

¹⁰ Documentation is available at the Archive of the Coordinación Nacional para la Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural, Mexico City. See also, Blanca Noval Vilar and Francisco Javier Salazar Herrera, "La restauración de dos Cristos de pasta de caña como parte de los trabajos del proyecto de conservación integral en Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca", in *Imaginería indígena mexicana: Una catequesis en caña de maíz*, ed. Antonio F. García-Abásolo, Gabriela García Lascrain, and Joaquín Sánchez Ruiz (Cordoba: Publicaciones Obra Social y Cultural CajaSur, 2001).

¹¹ Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the late medieval church and the modern museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 237-44.

¹² Joseph Koerner, "The icon as iconoclasm", in *Iconoclasm*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe and Cambridge: ZKM and MIT, 2002).

¹³ Agustín Dávila Padilla, *Historia de la fundación y discurso de la provincia de Santiago de México, de la Orden de Predicadores* (Mexico City: Editorial Academia Literaria, 1955), 561-65.

belonged to the Confraternity of the True Cross. This admired Mesoamerican technique was employed for images in the colonial period and exported to Spain. It was also used locally, as in Yanhuitlan's *Santo Entierro*.¹⁴ Corn, the Mexican staple, had a widespread cult in ancient Mesoamerica, where it was accepted that humans are made of maize, because this is what we eat. The invention of maize was, according to legend, achieved through the sacrifices of a variety of culture heroes in differing regions of Mesoamerica. After descending to the underworld and defeating the gods of death, these heroes were finally able to return to the world of the living to offer precious corn seeds to the people, but most often by becoming a young maize plant themselves.¹⁵ The symbolic associations of the sacred cornstalk paste image of Christ with the ancient maize gods is evident. Undoubtedly, this basic Mesoamerican metaphor is operating in the case of the crucified Christ presented here: Mesoamerican people eat corn as European Christians eat bread. In both cases, the staple transforms into the body of Christ, the image, the Eucharist, in specific ritual moments.¹⁶

A closer reading of Dávila Padilla's account opens up a more complex picture of the image in Yanhuitlan and other contemporaneous ones in Mexico. The friar recounts that the enactment of the descent caused a great emotional reaction among those attending the ceremony. Once the nails had been removed from the hands and feet of Christ, nothing held the body in place but a long cloth, placed under the arms of the image. The head, arms, and legs were left dangling.¹⁷ This was due to the fact, as the author earlier explained, that the sculpture's joints at the shoulders and knees had a sphere hidden inside, so that the image could move easily, "as if it were a real body" (*"como si fuese de cuerpo natural"*).¹⁸ He is explicit in accounting for the trick that moved the image, but does not seem to feel that it weakened the emotional and pietistic rhetoric employed throughout the text. The fact that the descent was evidently only a re-enactment, with the use of special effects, did not undermine the ultimate truthfulness of the episode depicted. This seems

¹⁴ Pablo F. Amador Marrero, *Traza española, ropaje indiano: El Cristo de Telde y la imagerie en caña de maíz* (Telde: Ayuntamiento de Telde, 2002).

¹⁵ Because this tradition is widespread in Mesoamerica, many sources relate the same story, with only slight variations. The best-known version is in the Maya book *Popol Vuh*. See, Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan book of the dawn of life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁶ Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo, "Cristo, su sangre y los indios: Exploraciones iconográficas sobre el arte mexicano del siglo XVI", in *Herencias indígenas, tradiciones europeas y la mirada europea*, ed. Helga von Kugelgen (Frankfurt: Vervuert-Iberoamericana Verlag, 2000); Hans-Jörg Witter, "Die gefiederte Schlange und Christus. Eine religionshistorische Studie zum mixtekisch-christlichen Synkretismus" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, 2011), 34-55.

¹⁷ Dávila Padilla, *Historia*, 564.

¹⁸ Dávila Padilla, *Historia*, 563.

contradictory, as does the movement of the image itself, which occurs when the lifeless body of Christ, without the nails keeping it in place, falls down. The movement of the body, in fact, signifies the death of Christ. It moves not because it is alive, but because it is not. The movement is purely mechanic (the product of gravity) and does not express intent or volition on the part of the image/person/body. The animation of the sculpture, meant purportedly to enhance realism and convey the illusion of actual presence, takes place to signify death. The material presence of the body is deceptive, because Jesus is no longer in this world but in another one, an unreachable beyond. The closer it comes, the farther it gets away.

In semiotic terms, the paradox of the dead-but-moving Christ exemplifies a slippage between the signifier and the signified. It renders acutely and emotionally the mere arbitrariness of the sign. This confusion between the image and what it represents is also, of course, the age-old problem of idolatry, a seemingly constant threat among lower and illiterate Christian classes that has worried the clergy through the centuries. In Dávila Padilla's account, however, it is clear that staging does not equal disillusionment. On the contrary, the moment of the deposition is a moment of realization. It is not only transitional in its moving composition, but also in its conceptual implications. What is the status of the image? What is it supposed to signify? The mechanics of the movement deconstruct the iconicity of the image of Christ and raise doubts about what we are actually looking at.

Another image found in the same church in Yanhuitlan and produced around the same period raises similar questions. In a side chapel known as el *Sagrario* (Tabernacle), a sculpted relief depicts the theme of the Deposition (**Figure 2**). Now painted with vivid colors, up until the middle of the seventeenth century it displayed its natural stone grey surface.¹⁹ The stone seems to be alabaster, a white mineral with an exquisite translucency and texture. Known by different names and variations in both ancient Europe and Mesoamerica, it enjoyed great popularity in both continents, used for producing tomb effigies and other funerary objects deemed useful in the afterlife of the deceased. In the European Middle Ages, the material was adapted to the representation of Passion scenes, renewing the special relationship between alabaster and death.



Figure 2. *Deposition.* Relief from the side chapel known as el *Sagrario* (Tabernacle) in the church of Santo Domingo, Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca, Mexico.

¹⁹ Francisco de Burgoa, *Geográfica descripción* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1934), 295.

In Yanhuitlan's alabaster *Deposition*, a crowded composition still shows many gold details that may have been part of the image even before it was colored, as was indeed common in white sculptures. These details enrich the clothing of the participants of the scene, many of whom display quite elaborate Moorish costumes, such as turbans and doublets. While this could be a reference to an exotic Middle East, it was quite common in Renaissance Spain to wear Moorish clothing.²⁰ A painted manuscript from Yanhuitlan itself, dated to the 1550s, for example, shows a Spaniard engaged in a lively conversation with a compatriot who sports a turban.²¹

We can only imagine the effect of the whiteness of the relief by turning to examples that have survived from Renaissance Spain, such as the altar table with depictions of the Entombment of Christ, the Veronica, and the Ecce Homo, now in the National Museum of Sculpture in Valladolid or the carved relief of the Entombment in Palencia's Diocesan Museum. In both cases, gold details on garments, oil jars carried by women to anoint the body of Christ, and tree leaves enrich the scene. The dramatic gestures and the contorted position of the lifeless body of Christ are colorless, changing in tones and intensity as one walks closer to or around the sculpture. The change, however, is subtle, and one is always aware that something is missing from this otherwise naturalistic depiction. The pure white is a regression to the potentiality of animation, to that moment in which dead and raw material seems to become alive and transform into something else, the real presence of what the picture claims to be.²²

The transitional quality of the picture makes its status ambiguous. Perhaps elegantly dressed Spaniards did re-enact the descent in Yanhuitlan and were represented as historical actors in Sagrario's *Deposition*. In this case, the carved relief, in a very self-conscious manner, would represent not the deposition itself, but rather a representation of it. The contemporaneous viewer would have been aware of the fictional quality of the representation. Thus, intellectual self-reflection comes to play a great role in the act of viewing, even in an image that surely compelled an emotional and

²⁰ Maria Judith Feliciano Chaves, "Mudejarismo in its colonial context: Iberian cultural display, viceregal luxury consumption, and the negotiation of identities in sixteenth-century New Spain" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 177-86.

²¹ Codex Yanhuitlan, plate 8. See, Wigberto Jiménez Moreno and Salvador Mateos Higuera, *Códice de Yanhuitlán* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional, 1940). The illustration is accessible at www.bdmx.mx/detalle/?id_cod=27.

²² Frank Fehrenbach, "Coming alive: Some remarks on the rise of "monochrome" sculpture in the Renaissance", *Source: Notes on the History of Art* 30, no. 3 (2011): 50.

empathetic response. The lack of color contributes to the deep awareness that what seems to be happening in front of us is not the real thing, but just a representation (a sign) of it.

The Image of Christ in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Mural Art

Among the many art forms that flourished in the conventos, mural painting occupies an important place, because indigenous artists practiced it long before the arrival of the Spaniards and were therefore able to transfer style, iconography, and techniques of their ancient tradition into the new context. However, a peculiar and rather ubiquitous trait in convent murals is the use of grisaille, a technique that was most certainly absent from the pre-Hispanic repertoire. From the relatively little material that has survived from the pre-contact period, it is safe to say that ancient murals boasted bright and flatly applied colors. Perhaps because of the lack of a pre-Hispanic antecedent, most scholars consider dependency on print models as the main reason for the use of grisaille in the colonial period, according to an interpretative paradigm that considers colonial Mexican art unoriginal and derivative from its onset.²³ Quite the contrary, however, the use of a grey-scale palette in colonial mural painting is highly original. While European artists mastered the grisaille technique in oil painting on either canvas or panel and applied it to smaller portions of larger works, entire mural cycles with a total lack of color are almost unique to New Spain. Grisaille in mural painting was indeed so common in sixteenth-century Mexico that it raises the question of why this visual strategy was so successful.

I will here consider a few examples that directly relate to our theme: the depiction of the deposition of Christ, the way in which this transitional moment is captured, and its implications for the status of the image.²⁴ In the church of San Juan in Teitipac, in the valley of Oaxaca, the *portería* (porticoed entrance to the convent) displays one of the best mural cycles in the state of Oaxaca (**Figure 3**). Along a lateral wall of the *portería*, a two-tiered depiction of the procession of the Holy Sepulchre follows the Deposition from the Cross found in the entrance wall to



Figure 3. *Procession of the Holy Sepulchre and Deposition of Christ* – mural cycles in the *portería* of San Juan Teitipac convent, Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico.

²³ See, for example, Jorge Alberto Manrique, "The progress of art in New Spain", in *Mexico: Splendors of thirty centuries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Little, Brown, 1990).

²⁴ Most mural cycles deal with the Passion of Christ. Other themes such as events from the lives of the Virgin or other saints are less common.

the cloister.²⁵ The grey-scale painting is interspersed with a few colored details: the wood of the cross, ladders, and banner poles is naturalistically brown. Schoell-Glass has rightly noted that the introduction of colors, an aspect I already emphasized in the case of Yanhuítlan's carved *Deposition*, is essential to the 'functioning' of the grisaille because it demonstrates that this technique does not denote a lack of something, but rather a difference.²⁶ In Renaissance Italy, for example, the monochrome reproduction of classical works of art reveals a new 'distanced', (i.e., philological) rediscovery of the Greco-Roman heritage.²⁷ Ancient sculptures are no longer 'idols' in need of analogical or scholastic reinterpretation to be accepted into the Christian world, but rather objects that can be studied to discover and study the past. In fifteenth-century Dutch painting, the grisaille contributed, in pure visual terms, to the endless debate of the *paragone* between the arts: masters of the oil technique painted marble sculptures to demonstrate the superiority of painting over sculpture. In the first case, the grisaille image is no longer what it was said to represent; in the latter, it never really was. The conscious ambiguity of the image transfers it into another level of reality: theoretical object, theoretical debate.

In Teitipac, several clues indicate that the same heightened awareness of the theoretical implications of the image is at play. The friars (not Moorish-looking men) enact the descent: the image is a representation of a representation. The retinue that follows the image of Christ is eclectic. Indigenous men and women are recognizable by their vestments that are typically Nahuatl (i.e., central Mexican): the men are wearing a *tilma* (a long cape draped around a shoulder), while women sport a two-horned hairstyle typical of Nahuatl married females. This is a rather odd depiction in the Zapotec town of Teitipac, far away from the Nahuatl of central Mexico.²⁸ While we do not know who painted the murals, it is clear that the artist did not depict from life what the indigenous peoples of Teitipac wore, rather he or she relied on a model, and as such produced an image that was twice removed from reality

²⁵ The wall opposite the procession deals with the apparition of the image of the Virgin (possibly of the Rosary), also found in the frontal wall, pierced by the entrance door to the cloister.

²⁶ Charlotte Schoell-Glass, "En grisaille: Painting difference", in *Text and visuality: Word & image interactions* 3, ed. Martin Heusser (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

²⁷ As it is well known, this led to the artificial whitening of a once brightly colored art, a visual distortion that persists to this day.

²⁸ The Nahuatl can be considered the most direct descendants of the Aztecs and amount to about 1.5 million people in the central Mexican states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, and the Federal District. The Zapotecs have the largest native population in central and southern Oaxaca, roughly 800,000 people.

(the depiction of a model). Again, the ambiguity is evident. Friars, indigenous people, and Spaniards walk side by side with John and the Virgin. They converse and interact with them. How is the viewer supposed to understand the image? Are they actors who are just temporarily serving as models, or did this 'really' happen? And if the Virgin and John were there side by side with the Spaniards, Nahuas, and Dominicans, what is inside the coffin? The dead body of Christ or an image of him? This ambiguity, in my opinion, undercuts any possibility of an immanent representation of the sacred, as you would expect in an icon. Rather, the more props and tricks are used to deceive the eye, the clearer it becomes that this is indeed an illusion, a mere representation.

A similar illustration in the Franciscan mission of San Miguel Huejotzingo, in the modern state of Puebla in central Mexico, offers a different example. Along the main nave of the church is a representation of Good Friday rituals (**Figure 4**). The long and winding retinue that follows the procession depicts a series of hooded penitents, some of whom are carrying images of Saint John, the Virgin, and other saints on platforms. In this case, the ambiguity is gone. This is clearly a somewhat documentary representation of a re-enactment of Holy Week rituals, very different from what we have just seen in Teitipac.²⁹ Nonetheless, we can ask ourselves: Does the apparent objectification of the Passion events detract from their emotional appeal? Are believers ever really fooled into thinking that the object is inherently sacred, or is the conscious choice to suspend disbelief and participate in the act what finally 'does the trick'? Grisaille, as Philippot argued, has the ability to collapse different levels of reality on a single surface.³⁰ The ability to move from one level to another and partake in the illusionary act of representation, on the other hand, is the task of participants in the ritual.³¹ In a way, all these representations are iconoclastic, in that they question the status of the image. Intellectuals, old and new, are really



Figure 4. Good Friday procession, mural in the Franciscan mission of San Miguel Huejotzingo, Puebla, Mexico.

²⁹ An interpretation of both Huejotzingo's and Teitipac's murals that is more indebted to the social history of art is found in Susan Verdi Webster, "Art, ritual, and confraternities in sixteenth-century New Spain: Penitential imagery at the monastery of San Miguel, Huejotzingo", *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* XIX, no. 70 (1997): 5-43.

³⁰ Paul Philippot, "Les grisailles et les 'degrés de réalité' de l'image dans la peinture flamande des 15e et 16e siècles", *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, núm. 15 (1966): 225-42.

³¹ Religious reflexivity as employed here refers to the apparent recognition of others' perception of oneself during ritual and ceremonial actions. Michael Houseman, "Dissimulation and simulation as forms of religious reflexivity", *Social Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (2000): 77-89.



Figure 5. *The Passion: Preparation for the Crucifixion.* Grisaille painting from Augustinian convento, Malinalco, state of Mexico, Mexico.

the only ones who believe that ‘simple folks’ mistake the image for the real thing.³² The importance of the mental predisposition in understanding such images becomes quite clear in another grisaille painting from Malinalco, in the state of Mexico. In the upper cloister of the former Augustinian convento, there are several scenes from the Passion (Mount of Olives, Descent from the Cross, Resurrection, etc.). A very distinct and interesting one consists of a complex and stratified picture of the Preparation for the Crucifixion (**Figure 5**), a peculiar devotional image that breaks with the narrative of the Passion cycle. Almost no background detail has survived. All that has remained are a large brown cross that cuts diagonally through the composition and two figures, Jesus and a nun, sitting to the right and left of the cross, respectively, who are deeply involved in their own thoughts. Jesus rests his legs on the cross. His head rests on his upright right hand, clearly showing a mental state of suffering (or at least preoccupation), while his body displays no wounds one might expect after a night of torture. The nun, on the other hand, has her gaze lost in a vision. The striking brown color of the cross invites the viewer to meditate directly on this object, even if the diagonal position undermines its status as an icon. The viewer could also follow the example of the nun. We look at her while she is meditating on the image of Jesus, who, in turn, is meditating on his own fate next to the cross. The distancing, far from diluting the emotional effect of the image, seems to enhance it. Suffering becomes a stratified emotion that grows as more people pass it on to one another. There is no action, but rather a suspension of all external and dramatic events that turns the viewer’s attention to a mental state. The picture is wholly imaginary: it never really happened or existed.

The painted and sculpted Christ and other Passion images we have seen during the crucifixion, deposition and entombment are transitional representations. They are moved and manipulated, physically and figuratively, to express an ontological shift from life to death, human to supernatural, object to sign. What it represents then, is the transition itself: not Christ alive or dead, human or divine, but rather an undetermined state, which opens up the possibility of an interpretative role on the part of the participant/observer/believer in the ritual act.

³² Bruno Latour, “A few steps toward an anthropology of the iconoclastic gesture”, *Science in Context* 10, no. 1 (1997): 63-83.

To Finish: The Death of Motecuhzoma II and the Cosmic Tree

The examples presented so far, coming from different indigenous towns in New Spain, seem to betray little of the native worldview and understanding of the events surrounding the Crucifixion, but rather express a wholly internalized Catholic practice. In order to explore, as a final interpretative turn, a possible link to Mesoamerican visual and religious practice, I will analyze an illustration from the so-called *Florentine Codex* (*General History of the Things of New Spain*), which dates to the 1580s and is now held in the Laurentian Library in Florence. It was compiled by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and a team of indigenous assistants while at the Imperial College of Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, now part of Mexico City.³³ The *Florentine Codex* reflects the knowledge the friar had acquired through various sources in many years of evangelical labor among the Nahuas of central Mexico.³⁴ It consists of twelve books spanning all aspects of indigenous culture, from religion and ritual to the natural world, from rhetoric to history. Rich illustrations are interspersed throughout the Spanish and Nahuatl texts, and run parallel to it in columns throughout the pages. The images are brightly painted up until the eleventh book, folio 178r, when the painters seem to have run out of colors or time to apply them. From that point on, only carefully rendered ink-lined drawings appear until the end of the manuscript.³⁵ In Book Twelve, however, which relates the history of the conquest from the arrival of Cortés in Veracruz in 1519 to the fall of the last Aztec stronghold in Tlatelolco in 1521, the painters resumed briefly and unexpectedly the use of color in a few vignettes.³⁶

Folio 40v has a fully illuminated drawing, representing the disposal of the bodies of Motecuhzoma II, ruler of Tenochtitlan, and Itzquauhtzin, ruler of Tlatelolco, in one of the city's canals (**Figure 6, top**). As Magaloni Kerpel has pointed out, the use of color here takes on a symbolic significance, possibly related to the passage of a new cosmic era.³⁷ As shown in the trio of scenes, after the Spaniards discarded the bodies of the two rulers in such a merciless way, Aztec priests recovered them to give them a proper burial

³³ El Colegio Imperial de la Santa Cruz was the first centre for higher learning in the Americas reserved to indigenous nobility.

³⁴ Since its publication in modern times, the *Florentine Codex* has become the most important source for the study Aztec culture at the time of Spanish invasion. See, Bernardino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: General history of the things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City and Santa Fe: University of Utah Press and School of American Research, 1950-1982).

³⁵ It should be noted that Book Six, dealing with rhetoric and moral philosophy, is also painted in grisaille.

³⁶ These are found in folios 18r, 34r, 40v, 48v, 49r.

³⁷ Diana Magaloni Kerpel, "Imágenes de la conquista de México en los códices del siglo XVI. Una lectura de su contenido simbólico", *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, no. 82 (2003): 39.



Figure 6. *The Death of Motecuhzoma II.* Folio 40v of *The Florentine Codex* (*General History of the Things of New Spain*), 1580s, now at The Laurentian Library, Florence, Italy.

(**Figure 6, middle**). This illustration, which goes back to pure line drawing, depicts the body of Motecuhzoma being removed, in a scene that is strongly reminiscent of the entombment of Jesus in European Renaissance art. The third illustration shows the subsequent cremation of the ruler's body, although in a manner not totally consistent with pre-Columbian practice.³⁸ What we see again here is not simply lack of color, but a transition from a state to another. The top illustration is fully colored, yet the turbulent water of the canal is grey and the details in the cloak and headdress of the ruler are black and white. The displayed body of Motecuhzoma II in the water is stiff and seen from above, reminiscent again of the iconic and frontal position of Christ, who, after the ultimate sacrifice, is depicted in scenes of the Lamentation (or Pietà), and is symbolically present in the Eucharist. In the middle scene, the Tenochca ruler's body is deceptively moving in a manner similar to that recounted in the discussion of Yanhuitlan's *Santo Entierro*: Motecuhzoma's limbs move when he is dead, the movement signifies the absence of life.

The three illustrations in folio 40v are almost diagrammatic of the process recounted so far. Only here, Motecuhzoma II has replaced Jesus, or better, the parable of Jesus' life has replaced that of the Aztec ruler, and possibly those of other culture heroes in the minds and hands of the indigenous painters of the *Florentine Codex*.³⁹ A world once brightly colored, where the gods and the sense of the divine were immanent and present in the everyday world, has led to a world where the gods belong to another world, inaccessible if only representable though the paradox of impossibility.

Perhaps the iconoclastic representation of the figure of Christ during Holy Week and its numerous grisaille variations are a way of expressing that a new religiosity has arrived, one that has forever broken the bond that existed between humans and gods in the pre-conquest world. The icon must be deposited, disposed of, burnt and made to disappear, replaced by a transitional, mediated, ambiguous, and self-conscious representation of

³⁸ Ibid.: 40.

³⁹ Ibid.: 37.

an event (the deposition) in order to express the new *status quo*.⁴⁰ Jesus is not the maize god, Quetzalcoatl, or Motecuhzoma II; rather something has violently replaced them.

Do these events, however, belong only to the linearity of history or can they be assimilated into the cyclical time of religion? Ritual memory has its own peculiar way of addressing historical trauma.⁴¹ Considering this, I offer a new interpretation. In the Mesoamerican liturgical calendar, Holy Week always falls within the dry season.⁴² In indigenous towns, celebrations intensify during the period between May and November, with the Feast of the Holy Cross (May 3) and the Day of the Dead (November 1) marking the beginning and ending of the cycle, respectively⁴³. The first feast celebrates the coming of rain and the rebirth of fertility after many months of apparent death of the earth. If Jesus is a metaphor of the corn god, his triumph occurs during this festivity and not Holy Week. In Mesoamerican terms, the Passion is an expiatory and transitional moment, a sacrifice that awaits its successful outcome at a later stage. The feast of the Holy Cross, rather than the Resurrection, symbolizes the restoration of the natural order of things by placing emphasis on the cross itself, rather than the body of Jesus. The cross is in fact a cosmic tree, a pillar of the world that points to the four directions, while extending from its roots and branches to the earth and sky, and in the fifth direction, the center.⁴⁴ The image of the cosmic cross thus takes back its status as an icon, present and tangible in the many chapels and altars on the cloudy mountaintops of Mexico and Guatemala, casting its presence from there onto a wide horizon. The breach of the conquest becomes rational and conceivable once placed within a system that transcends the many centuries of colonization and reaches back to the foundation of Mesoamerican conceptions of time and space.

⁴⁰ For a similar interpretation within the context of Dutch painting at the eve of the Reformation, see Powell, *Depositions*.

⁴¹ See Carlo Severi, "Cosmology, crisis and paradox. On the image of white spirits in Kuna shamanistic tradition", in *Disturbing remains: A comparative inquiry into the representation of crisis*, ed. M. Roth, Ch. Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities Publications, 2001), and other studies by the same author.

⁴² The latest possible day for Easter Sunday is April 26. Rainy season begins in May.

⁴³ Witter, "Die gefiederte Schlange und Christus", 24.

⁴⁴ This again is a basic metaphor in Mesoamerican cosmology, whose iconography dates to at least a few centuries before the Christian era. The literature on the topic is therefore vast. See, for example, David A. Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, *Maya cosmos: Three thousand years on the shaman's path* (New York: W. Morrow, 1993). The celebration of the Holy Cross is also of paramount importance in Yanhuitlan, where it revolves around another corn-stalk paste, but not animated, image of the crucified Christ. Alessia Frassani, "At the crossroads of empire: Urban form and ritual action in colonial Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca, Mexico", *Getty Research Journal*, no. 4 (2012): 31-44.

Most murals painted in the first decades after the conquest were whitewashed sometime in the seventeenth century, only to be rediscovered in the 1980s. The *Deposition* in the Sagrario of Yanhuitlan suffered a similar fate by being painted in bright colors that nullified its ability to question the imposition of the new image-making from within. The image of Christ, so idiosyncratically represented in the Passion cycles of sixteenth-century New Spain, belongs to the specific historical moment that generated it, but finds its final solution within the culture that has nurtured it for centuries.

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