Conversion and Cosmological Confluence: Nahua-Christian Art of the Sixteenth Century

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'Burning the Idols', *Descripción de Tlaxcala*, fol. 242 r., c. 1595
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The contact between the Spanish conquistadores and the Nahua of central Mexico in 1518 was not merely a clash of cultures, but an unprecedented encounter, resulting in paradigmatic shifts on both sides of the Atlantic. The Nahua with their monist view of the world as supremely ordered and supernaturally animated, and the Christian Spaniards with their dualist appreciation of a natural world that was fundamentally Fallen and distanced from the perfection of the Divine, came into contact suddenly and without time for preparation or cultural reconnaissance. The Aztec Empire was at its height during the fifteenth century; the city of Tenochtitlan (modern-day Mexico City) was one of the most populous and urbanised cities on the continent, with a complex social hierarchy and system of trade. Hernan Cortés, the leader of the Spanish expedition, and his entourage were astonished by the apparent wealth and sophistication of the Aztecs. One among Cortés' group, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, wrote on entering the city of Iztapalapa in late 1519:

It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before.

There is no doubt that the Nahua response to the strange bearded men on huge deer-like beasts was one of equal astonishment. It is difficult for us to provide evidence of

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1 By using the term 'Nahua' to describe the native people of New Spain at the time of the Spanish incursion in 1518, I am following the trend of recent scholarship that has rightly turned away from the more problematic terms of 'Indian' and 'Aztec'. Nahua was the lingua franca of Mesoamerica at the time of the Aztec reign, and the term can be used to include all peoples who were a part of or tributaries to the Aztec empire in the area that is now modern-day Central Mexico. For further justification of the term 'Nahua', see Louise M. Burkhart, The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 4-5; and James Lockhart, The Nahua After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 1.
this astonishment, however, because the Nahuas didn’t produce any written records like those of Bernad Díaz dating from the first encounter.

The Spaniards brought with them much more than their horses and cannons; and while Cortés was a ruthless conquistador in many regards, he was also a devout Christian. Having recently vanquished the remaining Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, the Spaniards set off to the New World with a vision to promulgate the catholic Truth across all the nations in eager anticipation of Christ’s second coming. The Christian belief was that Christ’s return would only occur once all people on earth had been converted; an urgent culture of conversion erupted in the New World, resulting in one of the most comprehensive and concerted evangelising missions in history. A Franciscan friar, Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta, wrote a history of the ‘spiritual conquest’ of Mexico towards the end of the sixteenth century. He described the initial reactions of the first missionary friars to arrive in New Spain: ‘They praised God with the greatest joy at seeing the bounteous harvest He had placed before them’.4

In an age when images were widely acknowledged as the illiterate person’s book, it is no surprise that the key tool of proselytation in the New World was the didactic use of devotional images and sacred art imported from Europe. There was a belief, common to both medieval and Renaissance Europeans, that images served as a universal language. The friars established indigenous schools for the ‘bounteous


harvest' of heathens, and the Nahua very quickly became proficient in European-style art. Much of the Mexican art and architecture from the colonial period is heavily influenced by the involvement of the indigenous peoples in its production. Since pre-Columbian beliefs and practices often extended well beyond the indigenous peoples' nominal conversion to Christianity, the apparent hybridity of this religious expression has often been remarked upon, and indeed it is one of the most fascinating consequences of the European incursion into Mesoamerica.

The purpose of this essay is to add to the current scholarship on the topic of colonial Mexican art, and propose a new point of departure for further studies that would use the traditional view of art as the foundation for any cross-cultural analysis. The traditional view is one that sees a culture's art as a completely integrated manifestation of their essence of being — it goes beyond identity, beyond aesthetics, and beyond epistemology. Without this solid understanding of the traditional view of art, any appreciation of the apparent hybridity of Mexican religious expression in the colonial era is missing at least half the story. For this reason, a large portion of this essay will be devoted to an explanation of what is meant by the traditional view of art, and will go on to offer some illustrative examples of the way in which colonial religious artworks can be appreciated from this basis. The focus of this essay will be confined to the sixteenth century, before the near-complete decimation of the indigenous population, at a time when the immediate results of the first encounter were at their most salient.

The Traditional View of Art

The scholarship on the topic of colonial Mexican art has been dominated by a Eurocentric and post-Renaissance understanding of art that has obscured a thorough
analysis of what was at stake and what was experienced when the Nahuas came into contact with the Spanish Europeans and their art. Art Theory, and by extension Art History, are very modern disciplines that rely almost entirely on the language of the post-Renaissance era. This is strongly evident in the treatment of the so-called "hybrid" art of colonial Mexico, and inevitably means that despite some scholars' best intentions at reclaiming the voice or perspective of the 'conquered' peoples, they often gloss over the prickly issue of artistic expression by assuming that art functioned in essentially the same manner across both cultures. It is patently evident, however, that by the sixteenth century the Nahuas and the Spaniards had very different conceptions of the role and nature of art.

The problem is also one of language. When we (modern, Westerners) think of art, we generally associate it with ideas of beauty; it is supposed to be pleasing to the eye, and to stimulate an emotional response. Ananda Coomaraswamy has explained that the modern understanding of art stresses the importance of aesthetics above all else and gives primacy to the emotion that is expressed or evoked by a particular work. By this, we '... have substituted psychological explanations for the traditional conception of art as an intellectual virtue and of beauty as pertaining to knowledge.' Before art became merely a means for emotional catharsis or evocation, it was considered by traditional societies as a means of manifesting basic truths. For post-Renaissance western minds, this is a difficult and complex idea to grasp. Frithjof Shuon, philosopher and metaphysician, has expressed it well in the following way:

Sensible forms... correspond with exactness to intelllections [regarding the Intellect, the faculty directly pertaining to understanding Truth], and it is for

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this reason that traditional art has rules which apply the cosmic laws and universal principles to the domain of forms, and which, beneath their more general outward aspect, reveal the 'style' of the civilisation under consideration, this 'style' in its turn rendering explicit the form of intellectuality of that civilisation.7

In trying to grasp how the Nahuaas understood and adapted to the art of the colonising Spaniards we are not merely dealing with the surface disturbances of culture, or a superficial shift of artistic taste, but with the very core of these civilisations and the way in which they understood the cosmic order and their place within it. Art in the Nahua culture was not a mere exteriorisation of sentiments, but rather a central and dynamic expression of the 'cosmic laws and universal principles' of which they understood themselves to be a part. Nothing is accidental. In this light, the study of aesthetics acquires a new depth: it becomes not only a matter of what something looks like, but, more importantly, what is divinely represented through the sensible form. It becomes less about surface and more about substance.

Since art in traditional societies is wholly integrated, the modern compartmentalisation of 'art' or 'writing', and 'religious' or 'civic' is, therefore, grossly inappropriate to the study of traditional art; there is no sensible way to discern where religion ends and civic governance begins. The Spaniards, on the other hand, had already begun to compartmentalise their world in this way. The modern view of art, of which we are the inheritors, has its roots in the European Renaissance, and we should bear in mind that the sixteenth-century Spaniards had, therefore, only relatively recently begun to lose touch with the traditional view. The scientific 'advancements' of painting in perspective, the widened range of colours in the artist's palette, the use of shading to create a modelling effect, and the interest in imitating

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nature in perfection were all pushing art in the Renaissance period away from the
traditional through humanism and towards the modern, with its emphasis on
psychological evocation and sensory stimulation.

These ideas associated with Renaissance art and thought would have been
completely foreign to the sixteenth-century Nahuas at the moment of encounter. Their
traditional view of art would have had an enormous impact on the way in which they
apprehended and adopted the art of the Europeans. Importantly, we can surmise that
they would have had no reason to think that the Spanish relationship to their sacred art
was different from their own; indeed, the veneration shown by the Spaniards towards
their religious images was genuine. It is my belief that at the first moment of colonial
encounter, and for some time after, the Nahuas would have believed that the religious
art imported from Europe was inextricable from the Spaniards’ whole identity, as it
was for the Nahuas themselves, and that it was a genuine and intellectually coherent
manifestation of the beliefs at the base of their civilisation (although it is debatable
whether they would have clearly conceptualised the Spaniards as an-Other civilisation
in the sense that modern ethnographers can).

It is unclear how long this first perception lasted, or whether indeed the
Nahuas eventually forgot their traditional understanding of art through the process of
adapting to the European Renaissance; a kind of paradigmatic imperialism, that went
to the core of the Nahuas understanding of their place in the cosmos. What is clear is
that the impact of the encounter for both parties had profound ramifications and was
to change their understanding of the world irrevocably. Fernando Cervantes sees
significance in the ‘coincidental’ timing of the Renaissance and dramatic changes of
the early modern period in Europe with the discovery of the New World. He asks,
'How could we not wonder whether such coincidence was not linked to the encounter itself?" No matter which side of the encounter one is observing, it is clear that a people’s art holds a wealth of information, just beneath the tactile surface, that can enlighten the historian to complex processes of acculturation and accommodation taking place at the moment of the work’s construction.

Nahua Renaissance Artists in Colonial Mexico

We know that indigenous labourers were employed in the erection and decoration of Christian buildings in the colonial era, and that very soon after the initial contact, schools were set up by the friars to educate los naturales in the arts and crafts of the Europeans. Many Spaniards at the time, and modern scholars up to this era, have frequently marvelled at the readiness and capability of the Nahuas to accurately imitate and adopt European artistic techniques. Fray Toribio de Benavente, known as Motolinia, was one of the first Franciscan friars to arrive in the New World. On the topic of art in colonial Mexico, he wrote with some amazement that ‘After the arrival of the Flemish and Italian models and paintings which the Spaniards brought, excellent artists developed among the Indians’. Historian Serge Gruzinski has estimated that it only took one generation, from the 1540s to the 1560s, for Nahua painters to turn away from the stylized figures of their pre-Columbian art and adopt a ‘cursive, more expressive line’ more closely aligned to the Renaissance style.  

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Given what we have established regarding the role of art in traditional societies, this adoption of European artistic modes alerts us to a process that would have had a profound impact on the entire cultural paradigm of the Nahuas, and affected what Gruzinski has called the ‘deepest and least explored sediments of a culture, those which, never explicit and never questioned, make up the singularity of a cultural configuration’.  

It would be absurd, however, to suggest that the adoption of these techniques signified the complete conversion of the Nahuas to the faith and Christian paradigm of the Spaniards. Gruzinski in fact warns against this assumption, since an accurate copying of artistic form doesn’t necessarily correlate to an understanding of the ‘principles ordering the composition’. There may be other explanations. Stephanie Wood has explored the way in which the Nahuas readily adopted the dress and accoutrements of the Spaniards very soon after the initial contact. She puts this down to an aspirational striving on the part of the Nahuas to attain, at least outwardly, the same power that these strange men from across the ocean enjoyed. These attempts to share in some of the material signifiers of colonial control demonstrate, as Wood sees it, a pattern of Nahua-Spanish relations that was essentially constituted by power contestations and negotiations. Should we read the adoption of European artistic techniques and styles in this same way? It is certainly true that in the pre-Columbian culture of the Aztecs, the making of art was a highly regarded practice that required

11 Gruzinski, The Conquest of Mexico, 53.
12 Gruzinski, The Conquest of Mexico, p 51. Not surprisingly, Gruzinski leaves the ‘principles’ of European religious art un-discussed, since the modern reader is assumed to understand the ethos of the Renaissance and its accompanying art forms of which we are the inheritors.
great training within the context of an elite *calmecac* (school); associating social status with the production of art was probably not, then, an entirely foreign concept.\(^{14}\)

Perhaps a look at language would be helpful here. James Lockhart has given us a fascinating insight into the appreciation of sacred images by looking at the words used to describe them over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He maintains that the Spanish word ‘*imagen*’ was not used by the Nahuas for long, which indicates that they were not convinced by the European conceptual separation of ‘representation’ and ‘thing’, and thus reverted to their pre-conquest habit of seeing images as the things incarnate – that is, wholly integrated manifestations of stable beliefs.\(^{15}\) Importantly, the Nahuatl word for the making of art and architecture by the indigenous people for the Christian newcomers is *tequitqui*, which means ‘one who pays tribute’.\(^{16}\) In light of what we have said regarding the inextricable enmeshment of ‘civic’ and ‘religious’ in traditional societies, however, we cannot take for granted that this payment of ‘tribute’ was a purely political act devoid of spiritual significance.

In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, the paying of tribute to more powerful neighbouring groups was systematic. This was the source of the Aztec’s wealth and power at the time of the Spanish invasion, as they received tribute from the neighbouring peoples surrounding their island-state of Tenochtitlan.\(^{17}\) Coupled with the material tribute that was paid – in the form of cacao, gold, feathers and other material products – was the common adoption of the victors’ specific gods. So, when

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\(^{17}\) See Rudolph van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement.*
the Mexica people came down from their nomadic life in the northern hinterlands and
deposed the Toltecs, they brought with them their gods and sacred histories.
Importantly, the traditional religions of Mesoamerica seem to have been peacefully
accumulative – that is, no great disturbance was caused by the addition of a
neighbouring people’s gods to the ‘pantheon’.\(^\text{18}\) And so, when the Spaniards wrested
control from Moctezuma II, and a new order was established, the indigenous populace
seemed to adopt the new faith very quickly. In looking at the Mayan peoples’
reception of Christianity, Nancy Fariss has argued that the native populace did not see
the new faith as mutually exclusive to their own beliefs, and that they in fact sought to
reconcile it and draw it in to their own belief system\(^\text{19}\). The same appears to be true of
the closely related Nahuas, and may help to explain the apparent hybridity of the
colonial religious art.

The Christian officials of New Spain were commonly horrified to find pagan
idols in the churches alongside their own saints. A particularly zealous missionary,
Hernando Ruiz de Alarcon, felt enough cause to write an entire Treatise on Nahua
‘heathenism’, seeking to ‘open a path for the ministers of Indians so that... they may
be able to become acquainted with this corruption in order that thus they may be
better able to deal with its correction’.\(^\text{20}\) The second, perhaps unintentional, outcome
of de Alarcon’s treatise would have been to provide exotic titillation for Western

\(^{18}\) This Greek term is highly problematic when used in relation to the indigenous religion of
Mesoamerica. Unlike the Classical Greek and Roman conception of gods, each with specific
characteristics, powers, and place in the ranking of deities, the Mesoamerican peoples appeared to have
a more fluid and dynamic understanding of their ‘gods’, with certain character traits being shared
across a range of divine personages, and the natural rhythms of the planet being guided by a whole host
of gods.

\(^{19}\) Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya society under colonial rule: the collective enterprise of survival*, (Princeton:

\(^{20}\) Hernando Ruiz de Alarcon, *Treatise on the Heath Superstitions that today live among the Indians
Native to this New Spain*, 1629, J.R. Andrews & R. Hassig, trans. & eds., (Norman: University of
readers, thrilled in horror by the detailed accounts of strange and mystical Nahua ritual and superstition.

Quite apart from the pious horror at Nahua ‘corruption’ of the faith, however, was an ever-present, and I believe stronger, undercurrent of constant negotiation and confluence on both sides that enabled a unique manifestation of Christianity to emerge in the New World. By looking at the hybridity of the emerging Mexican art we can gain a unique and poignant insight into this progress.

Cosmological Confluence and Artistic Adaptation

In the sixteenth-century, the Spaniards encouraged the perpetuation of native art forms and techniques, so long as they were thenceforth focussed on Christian iconography.21 This separation of Form from Meaning would probably have alarmed the Nahua more than the supposed marvel of seeing images in perspective and three-dimensional modelling for the first time. Would the artistically untrained indigenous labourers working as stonecutters and builders on the flourishing churches, convents and cathedrals of New Spain have considered it a great privilege that the Spaniards were inviting them to share in the production of this seemingly sacred art? Or did they recognise the already quite un-traditional conception of art that the Spanish and other Europeans had developed over the century preceding their voyage to the New World?

Despite the Europeans’ rapid movement away from a wholly traditional view of art, the Spaniards of the early sixteenth-century would still have had at least a formal knowledge of sacred iconography, and a strong understanding of Christian cosmology, which would have continued to permeate their religious art. The

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foundations of this knowledge are to be found within the traditional view of art, and which allowed for a conceptual bridge between the Nahuas and the Spanish in their artistic endeavours. James Lockhart has demonstrated that there were strong similarities between the Nahuas and the Spaniards, and that it was this cultural and structural confluence that enabled the rapid conversion and acculturation to take place.\(^{22}\) There seem to have been a number of moments at which the cosmology and artistic manifestations of both civilisations were complementary to the extent that works of incredible poignancy were able to emerge even at the earliest stages of colonial incursion and conversion. Images and artistic expression functioned as ‘permeable membranes’ across the cultural and religious divide\(^{23}\).

Feather-painting (amantecayotl), the art of arranging feathers into a mosaic, was seen by the Spaniards as a truly exotic and marvellous innovation, and it was not long before this traditional art of the Nahuas was turned to producing Christian devotional images. The earliest surviving example of such work is the 1539 ‘Mass of St. Gregory’ (Figure 1). The date of this piece is significant, since it is coincident with the arrival in Mexico of a papal bull from Pope Paul III that explicitly forbade the enslavement of the indigenous people and proclaimed their innate humanity and subsequent capability for reason, and therefore their right to receive the sacraments, including the Eucharist\(^{24}\). This work was in fact intended as a gift for the Pope, perhaps as a dramatic compliment and thanks for his support of the native neophytes in Mesoamerica\(^{25}\). Through its symbolic use of the Arma Christi (weapons of Christ and symbols of the Passion) and the central subject of the Mass of St Gregory, the

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25 Ibid. 99.
artist/s of this piece is/are demonstrating a knowledge of some of the most important aspects of the new faith; the centrality of Christ’s suffering, and the doctrine of transubstantiation (through the bodily presence of Christ on the altar).

St. Gregory’s miraculous mass, during which a vision of Christ appeared above the altar at the moment of consecration, was a popular devotional image in medieval Europe. In this feather rendering of the scene, however, there are some important considerations to be made that may help us to understand the manner in which the Nahuas approached Christianity and its art. Instead of the usual European symbol of wheat among the Arma Christi, the bundle to the left of the altar seems to be composed of corn stalks — an understandable substitution for the people of Mesoamerica for whom corn and maize were the staple crops, with their own long-held sacred significance.

Other elements alert us to the Nahua culture of the artist: the Good Thief (to the left of Christ) has volutes issuing from his mouth that are the pictorial Nahua glyph for speech. The incredibly stylised droplets of blood issuing from Christ’s wounds would be more suited to a Byzantine icon than a Spanish Renaissance work, and one can detect similarities in representation to the blood of sacrificial victims that appear in the manuscripts and codices that have come down to us. This sombre attention to the blood of Christ indicates a profound understanding of its sacred significance. In the pre-Conquest Aztec religion, the spilling of blood as an offering to the gods was the highest form of worship and absolutely central to the maintenance of

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26 Such as the ‘Sacrifice to the Sun’ from the Codex Florentino, as shown in Bradley Smith, Mexico: A History in Art, (London: Phaidon Press, 1975), 147.
the cosmic order. It is highly probable that the Nahuas would have understood the crucifixion of Jesus in this manner. In this feather painting, the wound in Jesus’ side is a lot higher on his chest than in canonical European depictions, closer to the location of his heart. Is the Nahua artist rendering Jesus as an Aztec sacrificial victim?

Adding levity to this scene is an offering of what appears to be pineapples on the altar directly beneath Christ. The offering of bouquets and fruit to sacred altars was a practice common to both pre-Columbian Nahuas and European Christians. Given all this evidence, we cannot blithely assume that this artwork is simply a canonical European picture made with Nahua techniques and materials. In traditional art, nothing is made without proper intellectual consideration of the relation between form and meaning. That the Nahuas turned their traditional feather painting to Christian imagery so soon after the conquest of their lands makes a striking case for their sincerity of respect for the new faith.

The effects of the cosmological confluence are also evident in much of the sculpture and relief carving from the colonial era. The crosses in the grounds of the convento church at Acolman (Figure 3), and that at the Church of Atzacoalco (Figure 2), are both rich in detail and symbolism. They are made in the likeness of a tree, with relief carving of foliage on the crossbeam, and leaf-like adornments at each end. The idea of the Cross as the Tree of Life was a common trope in Christian medieval

thought, and in Mesoamerican cosmogony, there is a recurrent story of a Tree of Creation from where all humanity was born (see Figure 4).28

In both crosses, the skull of Adam appears at or near the base, and the Arma Christi are present throughout their relief. In fact, almost all aspects of these crosses are in keeping with other representations in the Christian tradition from Europe. A number of Nahua-inspired elements, however, are of interest. The relief carving of the Virgin Mary at the base of the cross at Acolman (Figure 3) has a decidedly pre-Columbian flavour to it, as does the rendering of the cock that crowed at Peter’s denial in the cross at Atzacoalco (Figure 2). Most importantly, however, is the placement of the face of Christ in both of these examples. He is not on the cross, but actually part of it — that is, Christ is the Tree of Life. When we consider the skull of Adam at the base of both crosses, and the fact that at least one of the Mesoamerican myths regarding the Tree of Creation has its roots steeped in the skull of a dead warrior (Figure 4), we are confronted with an astounding instance of symbolic confluence, which reminds us once again of the way in which Christ is rendered in the feather painting above.

On a more abstract level, the cross functions as a symbol of the structure of the universe. Importantly, both the sixteenth-century Christians and their indigenous Nahua counterparts had a solid belief in a cruciform universe with a central vertical axis.29 Just as the medieval Christians arranged their cathedrals on an East-West axis, commonly with a cruciform layout that reminded the faithful of the four cardinal

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directions of the earth and of the vertical axis of transcendence, so too did the pre-Columbian Nahuas arrange their built environment aligned with their fundamental cosmology. As Nasr states, traditional societies are single-mindedly concerned with the manifestation of metaphysical principles and sacred truths in every exteriorised cultural aspect. Again, the purpose of arranging Christian cathedrals or Nahua temples in this fashion was not to satisfy an urge for symmetry or neatness — it was in fact a material manifestation of core cosmological principles. The quadripartite arrangement of Nahua cities was a way of faithfully reflecting the cruciform cosmic order. This confluence in an understanding of sacred geometry is often evident in the Mexican architecture of the sixteenth century. The great courtyards of the convents of the regular religious orders now take on a much greater significance, as their greatest innovation — the four posas in the corners of the space where the faithful would pause along a procession — can be clearly linked to this sacred appreciation of the cardinal directions.

Let us consider one final and illustrative example. The pre-Hispanic festival of the New Fire would occur at the conclusion of each 52-year cycle, and was the high point of sacred ritual. The traditional Aztec ‘knot’ glyph, representing a sacred cycle of 52 years, is strikingly similar to the indigenous representation of the Franciscan friars’ cincture (belt) in the various post-conquest codices. The Aztec priests who were responsible for tying the bundle of 52 reeds together at the end of the 52-year period to signify their passing were practitioners of a sacred and indispensable duty.

Were the Franciscans recognised as holy men worthy of this sacred association? We know that the Nahuas generally adopted European-style representations for foreign objects, such as the horse, that were unfamiliar in their own culture. Does the use of the traditional 'knot' glyph in representing the newcomers' attire signify a loss of traditional significance, or a superimposition of indigenous sacred meaning onto the new object?

While these examples may serve to raise these important questions, and illuminate the links that can be established when one takes the traditional view of art as the starting point for analysis, we have barely scratched the surface on this topic. This paper raises a great deal more questions than it answers. Perhaps the most important thread running throughout is the very real need for scholars working in the field of colonial Mexico to understand that they are not merely dealing with two different cultures, but with two entirely different ways of understanding the cosmos and Man's place within it, and that this process of transformation was most eloquently expressed in the art that was produced during this era.

A look back on conversion and acculturation

The cathedral in Mexico City was built on the site of, and with the same orientation as, the Nahua temple that had been there before the conquest. The benefit of historical hindsight ineluctably reminds us of the Christian missions to pagan England, when Pope Gregory instructed the evangelists to not destroy the pagan temples or sites, but to sprinkle them with holy water and adapt whatever is 'good' or 'useful' from the heathens' beliefs to the glory of the Christian God. Regarding the pagans' places of worship, he ordered that:
...it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the
service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not
destroyed, may remove error from their hearts.\footnote{Quoted in Bede, 'CHAP. XXX. A copy of the letter which Pope Gregory sent to the Abbot Mellitus, then going into Britain. [601 A.D.],' Ecclesiastical History of the English People, via Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history.v.i.xxix.html.}

Despite the missionary zeal of the first friars who arrived in New Spain in the
sixteenth century, we can see from the types of hybrid artistic expressions that
emerged that a similar process of adaption and re-orientation occurred, as it had in
medieval Britain. The focus on the violence and intolerance of the \textit{conquistadores},
which is certainly not denied, can often result in overlooking many of the more subtle
negotiations that were being conducted on a daily basis as these people from opposite
sides of the known world strove to grapple with what this unprecedented encounter
meant for the way in which they understood themselves, others, and the nature of the
cosmos.

From all of this, it is clear that the ‘surviving’ indigenous elements in the
Christian art of colonial Mexico should not be seen as a kind of insurrectionary
flourish, or an attempt to assert their waning culture and religion within the dominant
paradigm. Given what we know about Mesoamerican belief systems and the
willingness to absorb the victor’s gods, and what we now know about the role of art in
traditional societies, there is clearly much more going on within these Nahua-
Christian artworks. The complex appropriation and adaptation of Christian
iconography to indigenous artistic modes demonstrates a process of profound
transformation. Once we understand the role of art in traditional societies, we can
come closer to understanding the importance of the historical questions raised in this
essay, and more deeply appreciate the lasting impacts of the sudden European
entrance into the Mesoamerican cosmos.
Figure 1: Mass of St. Gregory, 1539, Valley of Mexico (Musée d'Auch, France)
Figure 2: Cross of the Church of Atzacoalco, 16th – 17th centuries.
Figure 3: Patio cross, convento of San Agustin, Acolman.
Figure 4: The Mixtec World Tree, Codex Vindobonensis, Staatsbibliothek, Vienna.
Primary Sources


Artworks and Art History


Secondary Sources


