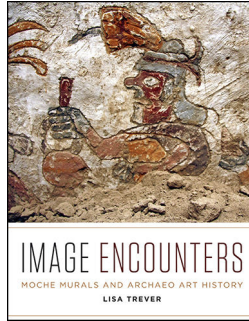


# LISA TREVER, *IMAGE ENCOUNTERS. MOCHE MURALS AND ARCHAEO ART HISTORY*

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Reviewed by  
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Despite its antiquity and prominence in many ancient Andean settlements, mural painting has not seen much comparative synthetic work. The first, and last, major volume in this vein was *Ricchata Quellccani* (1974)<sup>1</sup> and its enlarged and English-language version (entitled *Mural Painting in Ancient Peru*, 1985)<sup>2</sup> by the late eminent archaeologist Duccio Bonavia.<sup>3</sup> His book was effectively a compendium of all major examples and also a culture history, with magisterial description, tireless poring over of the literature, and stylistic comparisons over time. In the search for representativeness and accuracy, Bonavia repeatedly decried the compromised dataset;<sup>4</sup> most of the cases he described were based on mural fragments

<sup>1</sup>  
Duccio Bonavia, *Ricchata Quellccani. Pinturas murales prehispánicas*, Lima 1974.

<sup>2</sup>  
Duccio Bonavia, *Mural Painting in Ancient Peru*, Bloomington, IN 1985.

<sup>3</sup>  
J. H. Rowe, foreword, in: *ibid.*, vii, ix.

<sup>4</sup>  
Bonavia, *Mural Painting in Ancient Peru*, 6, 187.

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL  
#1-2023, pp. 135–139

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fitfully revealed by looting, secondhand reports, and imaginative reconstruction, by and large shorn of contextual information.

One of the great contributions of Lisa Trever's *Image Encounters* is the new coverage of what has arisen over the interim. By the mid-1980s, stunning objects from ancient Peru flooded the antiquities market and drew looters and archaeologists alike to the north coast and its large adobe mounds, or *huacas*, for their treasures; terrorism that flared up elsewhere in Peru also had the effect of concentrating work in the region. In the process, many astonishing murals since have been revealed on the walls of *huaca* temples, preserved because of the region's desertic conditions. A colossal literature on north coast archaeology now exists, but its mural painting has remained surprisingly neglected.

Nearly a half century since Bonavia's classic, *Image Encounters* takes up the challenge and offers a vibrant and compelling study of Andean mural painting, especially for the Moche (or Mochica) culture. It revels in the complexity that the subject demands. Bonavia's book remains seminal and may still be the most complete survey of pre-Hispanic muralwork styles (*Image Encounters* does not really emphasize developments of later/other regions – e.g. Lambayeque, Pachacamac, Chimú, Paracas/Nasca). But as a highly original study of the medium in Moche culture, not to mention its innovative theoretical apparatus to consider the logic, understandings, and experience of Andean mural painting more broadly, Trever's volume is absolutely essential and there is much to recommend.

For one thing, *Image Encounters* is gorgeous, presented in large format (21.5 × 28 cm) and having many exceptional colour images and maps, heavy glossy paper, and also comprehensive notes, and an index and bibliography. There are also original reproductions, digitally made as well as hand-painted, of many buildings and their surviving images. Besides the improved sample, advancements in technical analysis and related data sets (e.g. pottery, C14, pigments) and coverage of mural reliefs and visual markings (not just flat painting) also distinguish the new volume.

Bonavia's reporting was even and measured, often attending to dry, handwringing minutiae. Trever's tone, meanwhile, is no less authoritative, but rollercoasters between cool detachment and flashes of interpretive flourish and abandon. These put a stamp on the book's uniquely hybrid approach, "grafting" (p. 29, my emphasis) art historical inquiry with archaeological data and outlooks, christened as "archaeo art history". Importantly, it treats image, image-making, and image-reception ("encounters") on a par with archaeological context and patterning. All this is to author "a humanistic history of meanings, values, creative acts, and things done" (p. 31) in Andean antiquity, long before the impact of understandings wrought by the Inca and Spanish.

That history zooms in on Moche culture (ca. 200–800 CE). Effectively, the book adds muralwork to the culture's signal achievements, especially in pottery and metalwork. Bonavia had teased out the exceptional place of Moche muralwork: their artisans

produced the “best results” in all of the Andes.<sup>5</sup> The premise of achievement is not lost in *Image Encounters*, but it is hardly the goalpost for this volume. Trever raises the stakes considerably.

An introduction and short conclusion straddle four themed chapters. The chapters themselves are relatively brief, but are packed with textual and visual content. Now while the medium and data set are never in doubt, the core arguments are more submerged and sometimes elided across chapters. Different chapters might reflect on the same image or mural programme, so there’s considerable visual back-and-forth and rummaging through the book to keep up with notes, figures, and previous mentions. By the end, the author concedes,

I have explored interrelated aspects of corporeality, materiality, archaism and revival, mediality and the aesthetics of replication, proxemics and phenomenology, geopolitics, situated narrative, materialized temporality, the forensics of image response, and multisensoriality [p. 182].

That all this heady stuff is dealt with at all, much less as skilfully interwoven as it has been in the book, is a testament to the book’s scholarly breadth and persuasive choices in argument and editing.

The introduction and Chapter 1 supply the first principles of the approach, identify dissatisfactions, and orient us to its general flow and argumentation. Thick with diverse references and important theoretical framing, it is also an introduction to muralwork and the ancient Andes, crossing archaeological regions, and by obligation, millennia of developments and cultural change. The rapid itinerary is helped by many photographs and illustrations that walk us through regional features and patterning of figurative mural imagery. What is distilled out of this initial text is that muralworking of the north coast, by the time the Moche themselves took up the medium, already had invented traditions of treating bodies and imaging their corporeality. This was triply focused on “re-creating ancestral presences”, “divine predation”, and “martial masculinity” (pp. 36, 61). It might be noted that there is not much coverage of formative period murals showing mainly polychrome “geometric” designs. These were probably the palace-based counterparts of those murals adorning *huaca* temples, so there may be distinct traditions or pathways for elite mural making.

Chapter 2 then proceeds to focus on Moche practices (between 200 and 650 CE), particularly the mural programmes and built spaces of the spectacular temple complexes of Huaca de la Luna and Huaca Cao, revealed by long-term archaeology and heritage projects. This chapter discusses formal replication (as related to technical orientations owing to textile making; on renovation/painting programmes of the monuments; and across regional space)

<sup>5</sup>  
Ibid., 193.

and the role of this patterning for political ideology (attributed to enchantment and multiplicity). The de facto aim is to establish the canons of Moche monumental art that underscore ancestral divinities and chimerical beings and the more mundane (and lower) human relations over which they preside, both metaphorically and literally.

Chapter 3 discusses changes to previous pictorial habits in muralwork (proliferation of martial imagery; disappearance of ancestral/divine presences and painted relief, in favour of storytelling) beginning around the seventh century CE and lasting a few centuries. Trever newly discusses the “Revolt of the Objects” theme and also the discovery of remarkable new Moche murals by her team at Pañamarca. She argues that political dynamics and increasing socio-cultural unrest spurred the changes. Wari state encroachment and conditions of competition at least partly fuelled the militaristic imagery and related developments. This is to locate, socio-historically, how muralwork responds to the exigencies of the time: the mindset of worried nobles (and their artists) increasingly reflected in their tenuous power for others.

Chapter 4 concerns the activities of people around the murals, specifically as part of their reception and sensorial engagements with their very local and unique settings. The discussion focuses on offerings (including of objects and libations, liquid splatters), reuse/renovations, and graffiti. The latter topic has seen very little comparative work in the Andes, and this chapter details the distinctive and innovative ways in which audiences responded to – e.g. how they saw and interacted with – murals, including over time.

For most readers, I suspect that *Image Encounters* will be challenging, in both senses of the term. Myriad kinds of methods inform the author’s approach and lines of argumentation – art historical and visual culture theory, anthropology, linguistics, and, of course, various archaeological methods. There are also varied sets of evidence and their technical vocabularies (e.g. pigments, techniques, textiles, colonial accounts, etc.), and a rapid presentation pace.

The book also challenges existing understandings. Dominant wisdoms are questioned and some are elegantly reframed or rejected: art as text or language-like; the legibility of iconography; Inca culture as prototype/model for the Andean; art as measure of civilization and cultural achievement. If some distancing on these is achieved, Inca analogies and Quechua semantics still crop up, as does the imperative of narrative legibility in art. Maybe additional explorations regarding image-making practice and reception (e.g. the ephemerality of graffiti), not to mention the mythic and performative basis of the imagery, associated with Isthmo-Colombian and lowland Amazonian groups, may also be profitable. Tello pioneered this for Moche, and subsequent fruitful forays include work by Hocquenghem, Polia, and Karadimas.

*Image Encounters* paves a pathway of great importance: the role of Andean monumental arts and geopolitics. As granular, site-spe-

cific studies of mural programmes, like those of Pañamarca<sup>6</sup> or Huaca de la Luna,<sup>7</sup> continue to improve the record of variability, study of the medium will have much to add to the debates concerning the cultural relations *within* and *between* Moche polities. This will oblige additional integration with more established lines of evidence, like ceramics, architecture, and bioarchaeology. But like these media, the mural arts can now serve as one revealing (but ultimately intermediated) index of cultural elaboration pegged to ruling and noble factions jockeying for position during a time of intense interaction and dynamism – say, similar to Bronze Age Aegean, Late Classic Maya, or Renaissance Italy – where regional collectives set many of the terms for local aesthetic programmes and engagements. Like these cultures, there was conforming but also unconforming (fashion? resistance? replacement?). Trever manages to garner new evidence about how monuments worked for their patrons and ritual communities, as conscious choices in a geopolitical landscape. One can argue that much more than ceramics or metal accoutrements, painted walls featured as the social surfaces for tomb and temple rhetorics, unfurled to extol nobles and their emplaced cosmic polities. Because the murals were for large, often heterogeneous and sometimes exogenous publics, the medium cannot be more located or more sizeably embodied. It is there, complementing the traditional (but embattled) focus on pottery, that we might hope to find more sense of political rivals and interregional power and stylistic relations through time, something to which the periodic renovation of murals and their *huacas* also seems pegged. Like the Aztecs and Maya, and indeed the Inca or Chimú, the monumental skins of their buildings may be one extra line of evidence to examine for variability in the rise and expression of complexity.

Trever's *Image Encounters* affords a breath-taking tour of this least studied of Andean monumental arts, and extends guidance to consider Moche imagery, image-making, and society anew. Demanding, eclectic, and thoughtful throughout, a concerted commitment to go along with its archaeo art history will reward the effort.

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The volume under review; also Lisa Trever, *The Archaeology of Mural Painting at Pañamarca*, Peru, Washington, DC 2017.

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Véronique Wright, *Étude de la polychromie des reliefs sur terre crue de la Huaca de La Luna Trujillo*, Pérou, Oxford 2008.