

ALESSIA FRASSANI (ED.), *VISUAL CULTURE AND INDIGENOUS AGENCY IN THE EARLY AMERICAS*

The Early Americas: History and Culture 10, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2022, xviii + 256 pages, ISBN 978-90-04-46745-3 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
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The anthology *Visual Culture and Indigenous Agency in the Early Americas*, edited by Alessia Frassani, offers a rich array of essays that explore the visual arts of ancient (i.e., Pre-Columbian) and colonial-era Latin America. The contributions are not focused on a common theme or issue, but all make the claim that artistic expression was a crucial bearer of information and mode of expression in pre-Hispanic or colonial society. This insistence counters the textual epistemology imposed after Spanish colonization and equally applied by modern scholarship to pre-contact cultures. The authors gathered to honor Eloise Quiñones Keber, who taught pre-Columbian and colonial Latin American art at the City University of New York. All of the contributors except for Marcus Burke were her doctoral students, and they appear to have been deeply molded by Quiñones Keber's particular form of visual culture studies. It is wonderful that the volume came together in time for Quiñones Keber to appreciate the tracks of her scholarly legacy, and it now stands as a posthumous tribute due to her recent passing in May 2023.

The volume offers an excellent sample of how one school of thought (the Quiñones Keber New York School, we might call it)

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
#3-2023, pp. 557–562

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2023.3.99110>



applies visual culture studies to a range of materials. The essays illuminate the potentialities of the method, navigate some of its pitfalls, and call attention to crucial historical problems. Ultimately the method relies on the premise that in a particular time and/or place, there was a shared visual discourse, one that was so commonly understood that it had the power to influence thinking broadly across the culture in question. This perspective obviously supports the volume's claim for the centrality of the visual arts, and it also underplays two crucial foci of traditional art history: the roles of individual art creators and the motives for historical change. Despite, and indeed *because* of this, I find the visual culture method intriguing as applied by these authors as a potent challenge to the art history discipline's status quo.

The book's brief preface by editor Alessia Frassani highlights a few of the volume's critical stakes and situates visual culture studies in between art history and anthropology. Frassani notes that Quiñones Keber's way of challenging the primacy of text, a necessity being that she mainly studied manuscripts of the Aztec Empire and early colonial Mexico, was to take a critical approach to written sources and combine that with analysis of visual materials (p. VII). Here we find the legacy of post-structuralism, which understands texts as the product of multiple sources and historically contingent. But I also find in visual culture studies the traces of structuralism proper, as the book's other authors seek to identify the (visual) elements of human culture as part of broad systems, and consistently strive to identify the roots of power.

As post-structuralism stressed intertextuality it also downplayed the role of the single creator (e.g., Roland Barthes's "death of the author"). Art history, initially founded on the biographical approach that lionizes individual (and usually white male) creators, has embraced visual culture studies as one antidote to that problematic bias. Nevertheless, questions remain about who or what has the agency to drive social cohesion and historical change. One response is found in the work of Alfred Gell, whom Frassani cites. For Gell, art itself has agency, through which society at large acts. I find this approach problematic due to its abstraction and effacement of the individual, especially for art of the colonial era that was created by historically underrepresented people, namely Indigenous and Black artists. Yet surely no one patron, artist, or viewer can be the sole inventor of a culture, and any artwork is to some extent the result of its broader social context. I thus find a productive tension that the book's essays highlight.

A second productive tension within visual culture studies, and to which (post)structuralism certainly has contributed, is how to negotiate the axes of time and space. This is especially evident in a volume that encompasses a thousand years of history (from the Mesoamerican early Postclassic to the present) and looks at the Caribbean, Mexico, and the Andean region. The essays offer a mix of synchronic and diachronic approaches, and I will organize my discussion of each in that order, to bring forth other insights and

future potentials. While several essays purport to be synchronic in focus, they also bring in diachronic insights, and vice versa.

Keith Jordan's is the first essay and one of the most dominantly synchronic, offering a take on the knotty Mesoamerican problem of how ideas with their attendant iconographies traveled from place to place. He reprises the pan-Mesoamerican method (or "broad approach") often employed to address the challenge of a lack of site-specific cultural information. In this method, information from geographically and temporally distant sites is used to inform interpretation based on the idea that there was a shared set of concepts throughout the macro-region. The work in question is the *El Cerrito Stela* from the site of the same name near Querétaro, considered to be affiliated with Tula, the capital of the Toltec culture. Jordan applies the pan-Mesoamerican concept of Flower World/Flower Mountain introduced by Karl Taube to argue that the stela depicts a deified solar warrior in a verdant afterlife paradise. He acknowledges that more particular local meanings were surely present, but his approach allows for an approximation to the stela's broader meaning.

Frassani's essay is also focused on a single work, and clearly builds on Quiñones Keber's particular subject matter since it examines the Codex Laud, a relatively little-studied and perplexing codex in the Borgia Group of preconquest manuscripts. Frassani compares the Codex Laud to other better-studied codices, the Borgia and Borbonicus, highlighting the importance of an intertextual perspective since she finds that the Laud used fragments from other works but was also creatively invented to stand on its own for a future (though largely unspecified) use. Her iconographic insights are profound, but she could have speculated more on the codex's possible antiquarian significance – that is, its meaning and function as a recycled sacred text in the Late Postclassic Aztec world and even in the colonial era.

In an essay that would be more approachable to non-specialists including undergraduates, Angela Herren Rajagopalan remains in central Mexico but takes us roughly a century ahead to consider European-style depictions of the devil scattered throughout the Florentine Codex, the illustrated encyclopedia of the Nahua world compiled by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún. She shows that the images, much more than the text, express Sahagún's conviction that all Mexican deities were demons and thus the images further the European contempt for Aztec religion. By isolating Sahagún's perspective as found in a small group of images, Herren builds on Quiñones Keber's critical and detail-oriented approach.

Also looking at an extensive manuscript for a particular kind of information, Elena FitzPatrick Sifford takes us into the Andes just a few decades later to examine how people of African descent were depicted by Indigenous artists. She first looks at illustrations from the 1615 chronicle by Indigenous author/artist Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, which offer subtle assessments of the active role of Africans in Andean society. She then turns to paintings of the

seventeenth (and even nineteenth) century, then ends with Adrián Sánchez Galque's 1599 portrait of Afro-Indigenous elites. The analysis is valuable in showing the agentive role of Africans from the point of view of Indigenous artists. Yet it could have been more diachronic, placing the works in chronological order and more clearly periodizing ideas about race (which were quickly evolving from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century).

Lawrence Waldron's essay provides an overview of the historiography of the ancient Caribbean that serves as an excellent resource for people beginning to look at that region and time period. Synchronic in the sense of being a "where we stand" of current scholarship, Waldron also considers the historical dynamics that have grown out of the colonization of the region to explain the current state of things, one in which "the study of pre-Columbian Caribbean history is just beginning" (p. 92).

Ananda Cohen-Aponte considers a relatively fixed time and place, the era of rebellions in the late eighteenth-century southern Andes, to explore the relationship between the visual arts and insurgency. Contemplating the materiality of visual culture and the agency of physical objects, she explores how both royalists and rebels mediated objects to express urgent political meaning. By thinking of visual culture broadly and looking not at objects uniquely created but instead already-existing objects that were manipulated, she opens up new avenues of inquiry. She also shows that in responding to their revolutionary moment, royalists and rebels reinstated and/or contested the visual legacy of the past three centuries.

Jeremy James George brings us to the present in the Andes, showing how today the Inca style of stonework is constantly re-presented to communicate "a return to power" (p. 228) to both local and international audiences. He pauses on the 2010 *Monument to the Founders* situated in a prominent roundabout of the city's historical center, arguing that it "re-inscribes multiple signs of Inca-ness, real and fabricated" (p. 227). I find this argument convincing and welcome, but his treatment of the monument also highlights the hazards of visual culture studies. George does not identify the designer of the monument, nor does he identify the civic officials involved in its commission. Residents of Cusco continue to debate which stories they wish to tell about the city: the fountain in the center of the Plaza Mayor has been a particular site of contestation, since in 2011 a golden statue of an Inca emperor was placed on its nineteenth-century neoclassical foundation. An argument that the city's monuments collapse myth and history should not perform the same elisions.

Other essays in the volume look more directly at progress over time and are thus enlightening as to how historical change occurs. Miguel Arisa discusses Mexican *enconchado* paintings, inlaid with iridescent mother of pearl. He looks to the pre-Hispanic meanings of shells and to the importance of light in Baroque aesthetics to explain why this particular art form emerged in late seventeenth-century New Spain. His brief mention of an *enconchado* painting

of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe extends the argument to the eighteenth century and would have benefited from further visual and cultural analysis.

One of the best demonstrations of the benefits of the visual culture approach is offered by Lorena Tezanos Toral, who traces the evolution of the *bohío*, the house used by Indigenous people and enslaved Africans in Cuba. This architectural unit can certainly be understood as something that developed at a culture-wide level and changed gradually over time in response to historical dynamics. Tezanos Toral carefully analyzes visual sources by Spanish chroniclers and later travelers to demonstrate the *bohío*'s Taíno roots and show how it changed during the colonial era with both Spanish and African influences.

Mary Brown returns us to the Andes, considering the evolution of bird imagery in the embroideries from ancient cemeteries on the Paracas Peninsula. She shows clearly that while Paracas iconography likely derived from the religious tradition known as Chavín, over time it abandoned Chavín's focus on felines in favor of prioritizing birds of all types. She makes good use of the previously established chronology of Paracas art to focus on one "unwritten narrative", but does not fully engage with other scholars' work on Paracas narratives and taxonomies.

Orlando Hernández Ying considers the uniquely Andean genre of paintings of archangels in ostentatious contemporary military dress. While this topic has already been studied by many, his contribution lies in the periodization of the theme. He traces its early roots to the Italian émigré artists who came to Peru and shows that its engagement with Indigenous cosmology allowed it to reach fluorescence by the late seventeenth century. In a move characteristic of visual culture studies, Hernández Ying opts to disperse agency, in this case to "indigenous patrons, painters, and the general population" (p. 161). Yet his visual analyses lead to a causality dilemma. He notes the similarity of the painted angels' clothing to that worn by military companies in Peru and Indigenous leaders known as *curacas*. But it becomes unclear whether the actual costumes inspired the paintings, or vice versa. While we will likely never know what the very first *arcángel arcabucero* painting was, not to mention who painted or commissioned it, more careful studies into the history of costume might help resolve the dilemma.

The concluding essay, by Marcus Burke, offers a helpful synthesis of the volume that also stands as a lucid snapshot of where art history on the Americas stands today, from the perspective of someone outside the Quiñones Keber New York School. (Burke, in contrast, received his advanced degrees from the more traditional Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.) He rightly notes that the volumes' authors offer dynamic histories of arts of the Americas, where time, place, and transregional linkages are all taken into account.

The volume is produced in a small format with glossy paper and full-color illustrations. The breadth of topics probably makes it

unsuitable for classroom use as a whole, but each chapter features a stand-alone reference list so it can be used individually. In sum, the anthology is a remarkable set of essays that offers a current state of the field for visual culture studies of the Americas.