Cathryn Smith

Dr. Dufresne and Dr. Burmeister

March 15, 2015

The Ritualistic Significance of the Human Body in Pre- and Post-Colonial Mesoamerican Art

Long before Spanish colonists ran aground in what would be later known as Central and South America, the history and traditions of the indigenous peoples of these regions had already reached the zenith of their respective golden ages\(^1\). Art, government, and religion existed interdependently as each were heavily rooted within the social structure of every Mesoamerican culture\(^2\). This is not too farfetched from the attitudes held by European colonizers, although the bridge between secular knowledge and faith were beginning to widen with the onset of the Renaissance. The notion that Mesoamerican discoveries and technology were lesser in comparison to those found within the European mainland is obscenely biased in denying that two continents separated by the Atlantic could develop at their own pace within the same time frame while still adhering to traditional practices and best utilizing the resources available to them.

This erasure of Mesoamerican learning spanned from enforcing European customs onto the local populace to devastating genocide. The artifacts that survived those centuries of purges provide tangible primary sources that codify the visual traditions of the civilizations that spanned the lower portion of the Americas. In spite of the undue reputation as purported savages, Mesoamerican arts and sciences were advanced enough to provide a thoroughly detailed, yet mystified, outlook towards the human form. Artwork recovered from sites across Central America offers historians clues as to how physical and mental conditions intermingled with the

---

\(^1\) *Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.*

\(^2\) Ibid.
spiritual, how anatomical knowledge developed, what was used to treat common ailments, and why certain beliefs emerged in an attempt to explain how the sacrosanct was made flesh.

When examining representations of the body from ancient Mesoamerican cultures, one of the things that tends to be noticed is how identifiable the form is. Generally speaking, human bodies remain uniform in shape even when heavily simplified by a regional style or abstraction. The naturalism in Mesoamerican art varies from culture to culture, however the signifiers surrounding the common perception of what constitutes the body remains more or less the same. Even deities are portrayed as having assumed the shape of people, barring specifically animalistic attributes that draw upon mythological hybrids like the were-jaguar. Most of our understanding about artistic presentation of the body exists through sculpted clay figures that date back to the earliest civilizations such as the Olmec and Mayans. It is fortunate that so many specimens exist as intact as they are since most other artwork was looted or destroyed following European contact. Still, the extensive collection present within the Art of the Ancient Americas exhibit offers a varied assemblage of sculpture that exemplify their respective beliefs and origins.

As early as the Preclassic period in Mexico starting at approximately 1800 B.C.E., ceramics portraying anatomical anomalies were commonplace in societies such as the Colima people. While the exact purpose of these sculptures are unclear, their literal meaning is not so obtuse as to escape their original context. An attitude prevalent throughout much of the region was that those who bore congenital abnormalities held a greater connection to the divine

---

3 *Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.*

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

7 *Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.*
than their non-afflicted counterparts\(^8\). Conditions that would be shunned in most other societies as a punishment for some form of sin instead became telltale signs of the gods’ favor, which meant that whoever bore the required traits were entitled to certain social and religious privileges\(^9\). For instance, this statue of an individual with a spinal deformation was discovered buried within a tomb on the West coast of Mexico (Fig. 1)\(^10\). The squat figure also doubles as a vessel, although its original contents are no longer present. It has been speculated that the role of those with exaggerated back curvature, likely caused by spina bifida, within the Colima civilization precede the similarly deformed peoples found amongst the Aztec\(^11\). These individuals enjoyed certain privileges as entertainers for the court in addition to serving as purely ceremonial figures during events like the ballgame, and were treated considerably well in spite of their malformation\(^12\) (Fig. 2). It is also worth mentioning that people who bore analogous growth defects were treated in much the same way in European courts during the Renaissance since they were viewed as prized entertainers\(^13\) (Fig. 3). Other deformities can be seen within the arts of neighboring cultures. A kneeling figure recovered from Jaina Island bears visible deformations to the chin and face, which could be identified with the venerable Old God or as an individual who lived to be an important elder\(^14\) (Fig. 4). A Peruvian portrait vessel from the Early Intermediate Period shown earlier gives incredibly specific detail in regards to the man’s condition that his disease has been confirmed to be caused by *leishmanesis*, an infection that

---

9 Ibid.
10 Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
causes the rapid degeneration of facial tissue around the nose and mouth. The incredible attention within these ceramic sculptures given their heavy stylization allows paleopathology to gain a foothold in the arts by providing valuable evidence through material culture about the frequency and distribution of certain diseases from this period.

Additionally, civilizations as early as the Olmec believed in an entity known as the were-jaguar, which according to legend took the form of an infant with feline facial features. It has been speculated that children born with Down syndrome were revered as incarnations of the were-jaguar baby due to their propensity to bear a cleft palate, pointed teeth, and flat face. Although this is still a theory as the were-jaguar could have equally been the product of a specific aesthetic rather than based on actual infants. The fact is that symptoms of Down syndrome are not limited to those handful of outward qualities, and encompass a greater spectrum of identifiers that extend beyond phenotypical displays. Sculptures produced during this time bore a striking resemblance to the most intense symptoms exhibited by these babies which served to fuel the cult of the were-jaguar. Since the were-jaguar was irrevocably associated with warriors, its image appears on protective equipment used in ceremonial ball tournaments, most notably the hacha (Fig. 5). Used to keep the player’s abdominal area safe, these axe-shaped stones were also likened to the heads taken from human sacrifices.

---

15 *Arts of the Americas*. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
18 Ibid.
21 *Arts of the Americas*. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
22 Ibid.
The role of a healer in ancient Mesoamerica was one that bore many shared responsibilities as a spiritual and medicinal guide\(^\text{23}\) (38). Physical illnesses were perceived as the handiwork of malevolent spirits, and thus could only be combated on the metaphysical plane by one who specialized in communing with otherworldly entities\(^\text{24}\). Shamans underwent a multifaceted ritual that involved the consumption of hallucinogenic substances in order to transcend this world and the constraints of their physical form\(^\text{25}\) (105). Once thoroughly inebriated, healers assumed the guise of a protective animal—usually the fearsome were-jaguar—and confronted the affliction once fully invested in their altered state\(^\text{26}\). Ceramic vessels from this period confirm these processes as an essential aspect of the many indigenous religions that inhabited the surrounding areas. The interpersonal dangers of these rituals can be understood through this Colima figurine of a patient reclining on a pallet with his limbs restrained between wooden poles in order to prevent harming himself or the healer, indicating what precautions were taken to ensure the safety of all involved in these types of rituals (Fig. 6)\(^\text{27}\).

Medicine has an extensive history in Central America, one that continues even into the present day with traditional healers residing in both cities and rural areas who specialize in healing clients using both ritualistic and biomedical methods that have been prescribed for centuries\(^\text{28}\). The use of natural cures recovered from the environment was a common means of staving off anything from minor pains and broken limbs to contagious diseases\(^\text{29}\). The most common cures were taken from local vegetation that was available to everyone who had access


\(^{24}\) *Arts of the Americas*. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.


\(^{26}\) *Arts of the Americas*. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.


whether it was harvested from the jungle or bought at a market. Based on the physical evidence recovered from tombs, it has been verified that coca leaves, alcohol, as well as certain species of plant and animal life functioned as readily available medications. For instance, chewed coca leaves provided one’s daily amount of calcium and marigold flowers help stave off viral infections. Low level poisons, alcohol, and natural anticoagulants were frequently used in rituals to stimulate both the mind and the body. This vessel depicting a Moche warrior holding the partially intact head of a captured enemy indicates the inevitable sacrifice that comes with victory. Slung across his neck is a string of *ulluchu* pods, which were most commonly used as an anticoagulant during sacrifices or bloodletting. There is no known equivalent to this fruit that survives, and has been considered extinct by farmers in the region for quite some time. Coca leaves remain a traditional form of medicine to hundreds of thousands of people across Central America who consume the leaf as a tea or chew it for the mild side effects. Andean cultures placed high esteem on the coca plant’s properties as it has been portrayed in ancient pottery as a commodity of the wealthy, as seen in this portrait bottle of a Peruvian nobleman crouching while chewing coca leaves.

Although at first resistant to the Mesoamerican medicinal practices as a conduit for non-Christian activity, the Catholic Church was unable to fully eradicate traditional healing customs (230). Taking notice of the intoxicating effects of a certain species of flora found across Central America, missionaries worked fast to tack on carefully chosen epithets in order to give the

30 Ibid.
33 *Arts of the Americas.* Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
ensuing hallucinations a Christian basis. This Nazca bowl bears a simplified version of San Pedro cacti, which when consumed was said to allow one to find their purpose in life through divine illumination (291-2) (Fig. 9). Spanish physicians were initially antagonistic towards the plant, seeing it as a tool of the Devil, but acknowledged its usefulness as a light anesthetic.

Following colonization, the Spanish were quick to incorporate New World substances into their fold, importing stimulants like coca leaves to enjoy along with bits of tobacco snuff. An exquisite silver caddy from Bolivia currently on display in the latter portion of the Arts of the Americas exhibit shows how much these plants were valued for their medicinal and recreational properties (Fig. 10).

Spiritually speaking, the soul was also seen as vulnerable to attacks by evil spirits and could be warded off by a combination of chemical and religious treatments. As stated before, shamans were tasked with both the spiritual and physical health of their community, and could be of any gender. The most powerful shamans were the priests who resided in temples; they made a living invoking the powers of the gods to bless individuals or communities, and to protect them from harm (105). Incredible power was placed on sacred chants that were passed down through generations of healers in order to formalize the rituals necessary to please the gods. After the introduction of Christianity to Mesoamerica by the Augustinians, Franciscans

---

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
and Jesuit missionaries, a similar belief was enforced. According to Catholic doctrine, priests were responsible for the souls of their charges, and could act as an intermediary for God on earth\textsuperscript{44}. These beliefs, laid over existing indigenous religious principles, assisted greatly when appealing to Mesoamericans about converting\textsuperscript{45} (39). When tales of miracles began to circulate through the missions, legends surrounding the appearances of holy figures traveled rapidly. One among the multitude of saints was San Martin de Porres: a mixed race, 16\textsuperscript{th} century priest whose unyielding compassion towards needy humans and beasts reportedly allowed him to continue servicing his flock long after his death\textsuperscript{46}. A full-length portrait of Saint Martin hangs in the Spanish Colonial art corridor, painted by an artist from the Cuzco school during the latter half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{47} (Fig. 11). His gaze is directed upward, with a halo behind his head and his hand over his heart in gratitude. Behind him are a cat, a dog, and some mice feasting on soup—undoubtedly a reference to his devotion to peace and equality. On his left is a simple hearth with a small pot boiling on the surface which alludes to the event where he ignored an altar fire until completing his prayers. Resting against his torso is a broom that symbolizes his dedication to all forms of work no matter how basic. Saint Martin’s status as a racially mixed holy figure helped popularize him with both African and indigenous people, which is understandable considering that most artists within the Cuzco school were comprised of both demographics\textsuperscript{48} (44-5).

The frequency with which bodily functions and specific organs are referenced throughout Mesoamerican art attests to the fact that each civilization had an acute awareness of the natural placement and purpose of each part. One of the most recurrent motifs across any form of media

\textsuperscript{44} Damian, Carol. \textit{The Virgin of the Andes: Art and Ritual in Colonial Cuzco}. Miami Beach: Grassfield, 1995. Print.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Arts of the Americas}. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
is the depiction of blood. Red paint and slip make for a dramatic splash of color against the rich orange clay; although the abundance of blood is not simply for shock value as much as it is to represent the power of life\textsuperscript{49}. Throughout the Classic and Postclassic periods, war and ritual went hand-in-hand, with human sacrifices being the most assured way of garnering blessings from the gods as well as security from neighboring kingdoms\textsuperscript{50}. Blood was also spilled as a means of penance as the blood-letting ceremonies performed by the ruling class are present in both architecture and pottery\textsuperscript{51}. Ceremonial ropes often had stingray barbs woven into them in order to lacerate the flesh and draw more blood\textsuperscript{52} (110). An example of this can be seen in great detail on this vessel that illustrates a warrior drawing blood from his earlobes using the aforementioned ropes. Acts such as these would be performed on the ears, tongue, and genitals as demonstrations of extreme humility and self-sacrifice to deities\textsuperscript{53} (111). During these ceremonies, herbal stimulants would sometimes be ingested in order to hasten the circulatory system and make the subject bleed out faster\textsuperscript{54}. This fascination with self-inflicted exsanguination would be echoed within later Christian parallels drawn from the suffering of the crucified Christ. The theme of the “man of sorrows” arose in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century as an uncensored and often gruesome portrayal of Jesus’ choice to suffer for the sins of the world\textsuperscript{55}. An 18\textsuperscript{th} century silver and polychrome crucifix of Bolivian origin is currently on display in the Spanish

\textsuperscript{49} Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.


Colonial art section, and bears characteristics derivative of the Northern European “man of sorrows” aesthetic (Fig. 12).

Reproductions of anatomical components pervade Mesoamerican art considering each civilization’s fascination with the body as it was believed to be within a constant transitional state between life and death. Two examples of pottery from the Early Horizon and Late Classic periods showcase how the Mayans and Chavín people understood the fine details of internal organs and skeletal system. The Mayan vessel depicts the Water Lily Jaguar offering a bowl of eyes and a severed arm to the Death God, who is portrayed as a walking skeleton (Fig. 13). Upon closer examination, one can clearly see the junction where the radius and ulna bones form the crux of the elbow. The Elderly Woman bottle likewise illustrates a stylized but recognizable rib and spinal structure (Fig. 14). While undoubtedly graphic, the honesty with which Mesoamerican artists treated the body gives such detail that an independent structure is easily identifiable upon first glance.

A significant ideological crossroads between indigenous religion and Spanish Christianity was the propensity towards self-sacrifice. As previously mentioned, ancient Mesoamerican cultures placed great importance on ritual blood-letting and human sacrifice in order to garner the favor of their gods. There exists a number of statues of Remojadas origin that depict priests adorned with rows of human digits, and were once dressed in the skins of sacrificed women (Fig. 15). Fired clay figures stand with their arms outstretched and mouths open as if chanting, half naked save for a floor-length cloth wrapped around their waist.

---

56 Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
60 Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
Residual black paint can be seen if observed closely, with traces of patterns still visible in places despite the wear of time. Although the skin has long since decayed, that was the intention of the shamans. The degradation of the skin around the statue was interpreted as a metaphor for rebirth, akin to a reptile shedding its skin in order to grow. These statues, apparently grotesque without context, are in fact symbols of the cycle of life, death, fertility, and renewal.

While Christian doctrine explicitly forbade the killing of people as tribute, the practice of offering up parts of oneself as proof of devotion was acceptable throughout a great deal of Europe. Spanish art in particular had a propensity of incorporating human material into artwork meant to adorn churches. Hair was among the most commonly used organic resource of human origin, as one was encouraged- but not required- to give as generously as one was able. Statues of holy figures like the Virgin Mary were especially well cared for by church members. Clothes, jewelry, and wigs would be provided for statues as if they were the actual Church Mother. A splendid example from 18th century Peru attests to the amount of attention lavished within Marian cults to devotional statues (Fig. 16). Standing at a little over three feet tall is a polychrome wooden sculpture of Mary. Almost doll-like in complexion, she is clothed in a sumptuous white and gold dress dotted with pearls and gold chains. On top of her head is a white lace veil and an ornate silver crown. All of those are artificial productions, however, as the only human product on her is her dark brown wig. The locks are pulled into loose curls that extend to her waist, and is for all intents and purposes identical to actual hair save for its inability to grow. There is another Mary who greatly resembles this figure on the adjacent side of the

---

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Arts of the Americas. Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.
64 Ibid.
hall, except she is accompanied by sweet-faced figures of the Christ Child and Joseph\textsuperscript{65} (Fig. 17). It is due to these similarities that caused the Virgin Mary’s story to resonate with the indigenous population since she greatly resembled a moon deity or a mother goddess in both word and deed\textsuperscript{66} (39). The Apocalyptic Virgin, who is commonly shown standing on a crescent moon in the heavens, only aided in strengthening the connection while simultaneously allowing the Mesoamericans’ to channel their established spiritual and artistic traditions into an outlet approved by the Church\textsuperscript{67} (35). The syncretic blending of Catholic dogma and Mesoamerican beliefs ultimately created a distinct religious identity that subverted complete assimilation through the incorporation of indigenous storytelling customs. While the religious sources differ greatly, the similarities between the Marian statues and Remojadas ceramics echo each other in both symbolism and accessories.

If there has been one constant theme throughout Mesoamerican art, from its ancient past to the Westernized present, it is that change occurs without fail. The variety of representation present in ancient art that exhibits the attitudes towards spiritual influences and physical manifestations has continued in spite of foreign influence and hostilities. As time pressed forward, the people of Central America have gone as far as adopting traits from the Spanish into their own cultures to create an identity that is as colorful and proud of their heritage as they have been since the beginning. By addressing and embracing the body, in spite of its flaws or perhaps because of them, Mesoamerican artwork continues to inspire and create a bodily tradition that exists both in the home and in galleries across the world.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
Bibliography

*Arts of the Americas.* Art of Ancient and Modern Mesoamerica. Mint Museum on Randolph Road, Charlotte, NC.


