

# Adaptation and Accommodation

## *The Transformation of the Pictorial Text in Sahagun's Manuscripts*

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*It is very difficult to get a notion of what it was to be a person of a certain kind at a certain time and place.*

*It is here that pictorial style is helpful. A society develops its distinctive skills and habits, which have a visual aspect, since the visual sense is the main organ of experience, and these visual skills and habits become part of the medium of the painter: correspondingly, a pictorial style gives access to the visual skills and habits, and, through these, to the distinctive social experience. An old picture is the record of visual activity. One has to learn to read it, just as one has to learn to read a text from a different culture, even when one knows, in a limited sense, the language: both language and pictorial representation are conventional activities (Michael Baxandall).'*

### *Introduction*

THE WORKS OF the Spanish Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagun, are known today as records of pre-Conquest central Mexican religion, culture, and language. Yet, they are post-Conquest documents and are equally useful as records of the dramatic changes occurring in Mexico (New Spain) in the sixteenth century. Some of these are readily apparent to scholar and non-scholar alike in the illustrations of Sahagun's two profusely illustrated manuscripts: the *Primeros Memoriales*, completed in 1561, and the *Florentine Codex*, completed between 1578 and 1580.

The illustrations provide us with primary evidence of the change in pictorial style, those distinctive visual skills and habits that give us access to the social experience of sixteenth-century Mexico. Because the 'texts' in pre-Conquest manuscripts were exclusively pictorial, Sahagun's illustrations take on added importance. Illustrations and written texts derive from information Sahagun and his assistants gathered orally from native informants and pictorially from the indigenous manuscripts the informants showed Sahagun.

In 1557 Sahagun was ordered by his Franciscan provincial to compile information on the Indian religion and culture for use in converting them to Christianity.

In his work , Sahagun was assisted by four young native men who were fluent in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl (the Aztec language) and who had been his students at the Indian school of Santa Cruz, Tlatelolco, where they were given a humanistic education. Sahagun approached his task systematically and objectively: he interviewed elderly informants, studied pre-Conquest pictorial manuscripts, studied the Nahuatl language , spoke of laying the groundwork for a dictionary, and presented the information he gathered in an orderly fashion.'

In previous work, I have presented an overview of the extent to which European style, format, and function are present in the drawings of Sahagun's two illustrated manuscripts.' In the present brief study, I am initiating an examination of the significance of those Europeanizations with regard to the manuscripts' artists, their perception of the world in which they lived, and the audience for which each manuscript was created.

#### *Pre-Conquest Mexican and Sixteenth-century European Pictorial Styles*

It is fairly easy to recognize the basic differences between pre-Conquest Mexican and sixteenth-century European pictorial styles. Pre-Conquest style has been described most simply as 'conceptual' (figure 1). The two-dimensionality of the image and the surface on which it is painted are asserted . Human figures are composed of separable units and are often posed unnaturalistically in order to present the significantly informative elements of the figures or their accoutrements as clearly and unambiguously as possible. Architectural and geographical forms are conventionally represented as signs. Two-dimensional space is often used to convey the passage of time, as in a sequence of actions, the intervals between generations, or elapsed travel time between geographical locations.'

In contrast, sixteenth-century European painting is characterized as 'perceptual' (figure 2). Human figures and architectural and geographic forms are represented in a naturalistic and convincingly illusionistic manner . Artists use devices such as contour line, modeling, and hatching to create the illusion of three dimensions. The two-dimensionality of the surface is denied through techniques that create the illusion of depth of space: overlapped images, diminution in size, relative placement of the figure on the pictorial plane (figures that are smaller and higher are read as more distant than those that are larger and lower on the picture plane ), and aerial (or atmospheric) and linear perspective. Indeed, artistic creation of illusionistic space is one of the hallmarks of Renaissance art . Developed by the fifteenth-century Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi, linear perspective was a 'new geometric construction which could give a sense of unity and consistency to any illusionary picture.'" Scenes are focused and unified both in space and time.

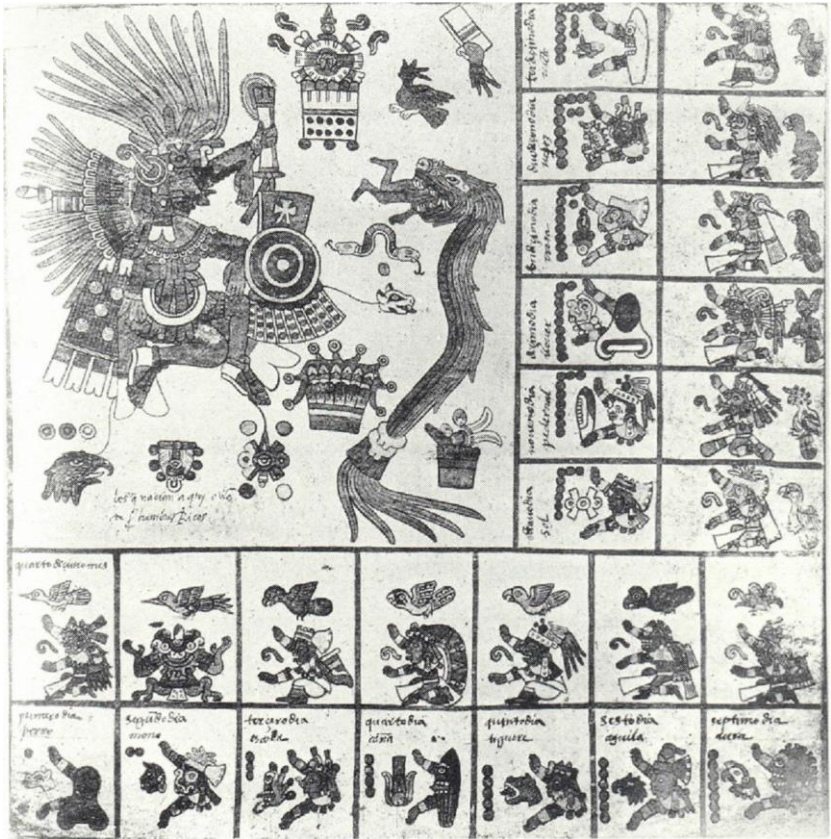


Figure 1. Codex Borbonicus, folio 12. From George C. Valliant ,  
*A Sacred Almanac of the Aztecs (Tona lamatl of the Codex Borbonicus)* (New York, 1940 ), plate 33.

The role of pictures in books was also different in Europe and pre-Conquest Mexico . The pictures *are* the text in pre-Conquest ' books.' The most common formats are the screen-fold and the *tira*, both of long, relatively narrow strips of paper or animal skin. The pictorial text is read as a continuous narrative spread out across many pages that unfold or unroll, respectively. In sixteenth-century European books, an alphabetic text conveys information and the illustrations may serve a secondary, even purely decorative, role. Predominant is the codex form, in which leaves of paper are sewn together and the pages are read front and back in singular, sequential order.



Figure 2. Albrecht Dürer , *Saint Jerome in His Study*, 1514, engraving. Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1990, The Art Institute of Chicago, All Rights Reserved.

After the Conquest of Mexico, European influence soon began to be evident in Mexican manuscripts. By copying, Indian artists learned the forms of European art; through both observation and formal education they assimilated European style, iconography, and an increasingly perceptual form of representation. However, the post-Conquest Indian artists cannot be characterized as merely imitative, for they often changed things; imitation was often tempered by innovation.'

*Primeros Memoriales*

The *Primeros Memoriales*, the first of Sahagun's extensively illustrated manuscripts, is a codex with a Nahuatl text. The pages are most commonly laid out in two columns with the text on the left and the pictures on the right (figure 3); however, there are numerous exceptions to this pattern. Although the format of the book is European, the drawings are predominantly native in subject matter, motifs, and style. Very few indications of European style are present and European influence is primarily limited to conventionalized representations: a European crescent moon is juxtaposed with a pre-Conquest type sun; conventionalized European clouds are used; and the melancholy chin-in-hand pose (with its origins in classical antiquity) is also employed for several figures. Although these do not look pre-Conquest, they too are all conventions: regularized, simplified ways of representing things that in nature are complex forms. In addition, the drawings often convey information that is not in the text and therefore retain their pre-Conquest function as pictorial texts.

Elsewhere I have hypothesized that the artists of the *Primeros Memoriales* were Sahagun's Europeanized native assistants, 'who were well-schooled in the humanistic tradition. The sixteenth-century library of the school at Tlatelolco contained the works of such classical authors as Pliny, Quintilian, Plutarch, and Cicero. Vocabularies, grammatical and rhetorical treatises, and works on natural philosophy and history are also listed in the inventory of 1572.<sup>10</sup> Irving Leonard points out that 'contrary to beliefs still prevailing, sixteenth-century Spanish America was able to acquire the finest products of European as well as Spanish book manufacturers.'<sup>11</sup> Exposure to and understanding of European pictorial motifs from books and prints is clearly indicated by the European conventions that are used in the *Primeros Memoriales*.

The adherence to pre-Conquest style and format in the *Primeros Memoriales* is then, I think, related to the function of the manuscript, as will be seen. The information for the *Primeros Memoriales* came from Sahagun's interviews with elderly native informants. They answered his questions 'by means of pictures, which was [sic] the writing they had used of old, and the assistants explained them in their language, writing the explanation at the foot of the picture.' Sahagun went on to say, 'Even now I have these originals.'<sup>12</sup> The textual function and indigenous



Figure 3. Primeros Memoriales, folio 250, Palacio de! Oriente.

From Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva Espatia por Fr. Bernardi.no de Sahagun*, VI (Madrid, 1905), 1.

appearance of the *Primeros Memoriales* drawings reflect these sources (native informants and native manuscripts) and the way the information was gathered. One wonders then why European motifs, however limited, appear at all. They may have been used when there were no pre-Conquest prototypes to fulfill the pictorial need; they may suggest a deliberate introduction of 'Europeanisms' in an effort to please and meet the expectations of the Spanish friar for whom the manuscript was made; or they may reflect the humanistic education of the artists and their inclination to use models with which they were most familiar.

#### *Florentine Codex*

In sharp contrast to the *Primeros Memoriales* drawings are the highly Europeanized drawings of the *Florentine Codex*, created some twenty years later (figure 4). The transformation is unmistakable. Both the scribes and artists were Indian; the scribes were Sahagun's former students, but the identity of the artists is uncertain. In the *Florentine Codex* many of the drawings are in European style, and European motifs, objects, and pictorial models are clearly discernable. The *Florentine Codex* is much more ambitious than the *Primeros Memoriales*. It is divided into twelve books, follows the organizational pattern of a medieval encyclopedia, is itself encyclopedic in scope, is in two languages - Spanish and Nahuatl (with some Latin) - and contains approximately 1,846 drawings. "European exports to Mexico are depicted, as in the scene of a tailor shown using scissors, a European tool. The true arch and other European architectural features unknown in pre-Conquest Mexico are frequently illustrated.

Classical and biblical references are found throughout. In the text of Book I the pre-Conquest Mexican deities are referred to as being like classical deities. In the Spanish text the god Huitzilopochtli is said to be another Hercules, Tezcatlipoca another Jupiter, Xiuhtecuhtli another Vulcan, and the goddesses Chicomecoatl, Chalchiuhtlicue, and Tlazolteotl are likened to Ceres, Juno, and Venus, respectively." According to John Keber, 'Sahagun's paralleling of Greco-Roman to Aztec deities has deep roots in tradition.'" The drawings of the deities do not, however, reflect the classical references of the text.

In Book IV (*Soothsayers, Book of Days*) the topic is the names and significance of days and the naming of children according to the days on which they were born. Although calendrical manuscripts, *tonal amatl*, were common in pre-Conquest Mexico (for example, *Codex Borbonicus*, an early Colonial native style example; figure 1), they were deliberately rejected as models for the illustrations of Book IV. The 'diabolical' nature of the pre-Conquest calendar led to this rejection, as is clearly indicated in Sahagun's prologue to the book.



Figure 4. Goldworker, Florentine Codex, Book IX, folio 53. From Sahagun, *Hi.storia general de las cosas de Nueva Espaiia, Cadice Florentino, II* (Florence and Mexico, 1979).

Sahagun says of the Mexican 260-day ceremonial calendar,

This manner of soothsaying can in no way be valid, because it is based neither on the influence of the stars, nor on any natural thing. Neither is its cycle in accordance with the year cycle, as it contains only two hundred and sixty days; which ended, begin again. This trick of reckoning is either a necromantic craft or a pact and invention of the devil which should be uprooted with all diligence. "

It is thus not surprising that the scenes that depict the naming of children are based on the Christian Nativity which would have been familiar and recognizable to a European audience and considered 'safe.'"



At the same time, in other sections of the manuscript, there are drawings that are clearly pre-Conquest in style and form even though pre-Conquest prototypes probably did not exist. Donald Robertson has suggested that these illustrations are examples of a conscious revival movement which he has termed the 'Aztec Revival' style.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to note that although the subject matter and motifs of these drawings are pre-Conquest, the use of perspective to imply three dimensions is also present. In describing a drawing of musicians from Book IX, Robertson points out that,

the legs of the drum are pre-Conquest with no suggestion of perspective, but the head of the drum is drawn in European perspective. In this one object the new artistic knowledge conflicts with the older, traditional forms in a manner indicative of a revival movement.<sup>1</sup>

The Florentine Codex, unlike the *Primeros Memoriales*, was designed to be read and used by Europeans, particularly those who were charged with converting the Indians to Christianity. The text and pictures are often set within European frames of reference with their allusions to biblical and classical figures and narratives. During the 1570s, when he began working on this project, Sahagun's manuscripts came under increasingly critical scrutiny. In 1570, they were dispersed for examination and not returned to him until 1575. In 1572 a royal decree ordered that all books concerning native religion be confiscated, saying, 'you will be advised not to permit anyone, for any reason, in any language, to write concerning the superstitions and way of life these Indians had. Thus it is best for God our Lord's service and for our own.'<sup>2</sup>

Considering this atmosphere, the Europeanizations present in the Florentine's illustrations cannot be considered as just the result of artistic acculturation, nor are they just the result of the expectations of the European friar who employed the artists. They also reflect, I think, the necessity of the times to put the illustrative material in a form that would be more understandable and more acceptable to the Europeans for whom the manuscript was intended, not to mention the censors.

The difference in pictorial attitudes between the *Primeros Memoriales* and the Florentine Codex can be seen clearly in comparing the same subject in both manuscripts: a monthly ceremony to honor the god Xipe Totec. The ceremony, *Tlacaxipehua liztli*, 'Flaying of Men,' features a captive tied to a circular stone, the *temalacatl*, and forced to fight well-armed warriors with an ineffective weapon. Heart sacrifice is then performed and the victim is flayed. In the *Primeros Memoriales* scene, several actions take place within the same framed area (figure 5). The actions are read in a zig-zag direction going from the bottom of the scene to the top. This type of reading pattern is commonly found in pre-



Figure 5. Tlacaxipehualiztli, Primeros Memoriales, folio 250, Palacio del Oriente (detail).  
From Sahagun, *Historia general*, VI (1905), 1.

Conquest manuscripts and the spaces that separate the activities on the page are to be read as time between the actions. Space and time occupy the same continuum and each action is visually tied and thematically related to the next.

In the Florentine Codex the visual continuity is broken and the episodes of the ceremony are presented as discrete units following European notions of unity of time, place, and action. Tlacaxipehualiztli is depicted in two places: in Book II (Ceremonies) and Book IX (Merchants and Craftsmen, where Xipe is the patron of goldworkers). In Book IX, the first illustration of the mock battle is in 'Aztec Revival' style (figure 6). The double view of the *temalacatl* (both from the side and the top), the overlapping of the warriors on the right, and the use of the frame to cut off part of a warrior to suggest that his body exists beyond the frame are all European spatial devices revealing the artist's knowledge of European style, even though most of the other elements are quite native in appearance. In the second scene, where the flayed victim's body is presented to the ruler (figure 7), the figures stand or sit on a tiled floor that is rendered in perspective. A European arched doorway forms part of the background and the building on the left is depicted in isometric view as though seen at an angle. Depth of space is used, however awkwardly. The last illustration associated with Tlacaxipehualiztli is, to me, quite revealing. Depicting 'Offerings to Totec,' a landscape has been introduced (figure 8), but the figures and building, rather than being part of the landscape, are apart from it; they float on the surface of the scene seemingly suspended in space in front of the rolling green hills. Although there are scenes in which the artists have quite successfully incorporated figures and things into spatial views, this scene accurately reflects the discontinuity between pre-Conquest and sixteenth-century European conceptions of pictorial space. In many ways, I think it also reflects, metaphorically, the native artists' cultural suspension in space and time between their own cultural heritage and the imported European culture.

#### *The Implications of Illusionistic Space*

The treatment of space is one of the most obvious differences between pre- and post-Conquest central Mexican pictorial art. As indicated above, changes in this respect are evident in comparing the Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex. Only occasionally do the figures in the Primeros Memoriales appear to penetrate or emerge from the surface. In sharp contrast, in the Florentine Codex the illusionism of sixteenth-century European art is frequently found, and attempts at creating the illusion of three-dimensional objects within a measurable volumetric space sometimes occur, although, strictly speaking, linear perspective is not used.



Figure 6. Mock battle , Tlacaxipehualiztli , Florentine Codex, Book IX, folio 7.  
From Sahagun, *Historiageneral*, II (1979 ) .



Figure 7. Flayed victim , Tlacaxipehua liz tli, Flo re nt ine Codex , Book IX, folio 6 verso.  
From Sahagun, *Historiageneral*, II (1979 ) .



Figure 8. Offerings to Totec, Tlacaxipehualiztli, Florentine Codex, Book IX, folio 49 verso.  
From Sahagun, *Historia general*, II (1979).

What significance did the importation and imposition of Western pictorial spatial traditions have in the New World? The use of illusionistic space in post-Conquest Mexican art was, I think, related to the audience for which the art was intended and was a means of systematically ordering the way 'reality' was represented in order to be best understood by that audience. In addition, there were philosophical and religious implications. Franciscan interest in optics, vision, and geometry extends back to the thirteenth-century monk, Roger Bacon. According to Samuel Edgerton, in his *Opus majus*,

Bacon included a section on optics, whose geometric laws - he wished to show - reflected God's manner of spreading His Grace throughout the universe ... Bacon wanted to demonstrate in his section on mathematics proper that painters should also become skilled in geometry. With this knowledge, Bacon argued, they could truly 'make literal the spiritual sense.'<sup>21</sup>

This link between geometry, illusionism, and the revelation of the divine continues into the sixteenth century. In his study of the Renaissance rediscovery of linear perspective, Edgerton also says,

Linear perspective, then, with its dependence on optical principles, seemed to symbolize a harmonious relationship between mathematical tidiness and nothing less than God's will. The picture, as constructed according to the laws of perspective, was to set an example for moral order and human perfection."

The link between mathematical order and God's will has implications for other forms of spatial order and control imposed by the Spaniards, such as the forced relocation of Indians into new towns (with grid plans), as decreed by the First Mexican Church Council."

### *Conclusion*

In the *Primeros Memoriales* drawings, the sequential actions depicted in two-dimensional space artistically and conceptually imply continuity with the pre-Conquest past and its rich, complex heritage. In the *Florentine Codex*, discontinuity with the native past is suggested in both the Europeanization of the images and, quite specifically, in the introduction of illusionistic depth of space with its Christian, moralizing overtones. Furthermore, individual actions are isolated and presented as discrete units rather than as part of a continuum. The subject matter of the *Florentine* drawings then was adapted to accommodate the changing circumstances of post-Conquest sixteenth-century Mexico. The transformation of style from the *Primeros Memoriales* to the *Florentine Codex* reflects not only the acculturation of the artists and the sources available to them, but also the different (that is, European) audience for whom the *Florentine* was intended. For Europeans (and especially Franciscans), the introduction of a systematically derived illusionistic space had religious significance, revealing 'the complexity of God's master plan for the universe.'"

## Notes

1. On the connection between pictorial and social history, from *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy* (Oxford, 1974), 152.
2. For the Primeros Memoriales and its drawings, see Ellen Taylor Baird, *Sahagun's 'Primeros Memoriales': A Structural and Stylistic Analysis of the Drawings*, PhD dissertation (University of New Mexico, 1979). A translation of the Nahuatl text and reproductions of the illustrations of the Florentine Codex can be found in Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, translated by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe and Salt Lake City, 1950-82). An excellent facsimile of the Florentine Codex has also been published: Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España, Códice Florentino*, (Florence and Mexico, 1979).
3. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, I, 54, 82.
4. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, I, 50, 53-56, 82.
5. Ellen T. Baird, 'Sahagun's Primeros Memoriales and Codex Florentino: European Elements in the Illustrations,' in *Smoke and Mist, Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, edited by J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin (Oxford, 1988), 15-40.
6. For more detailed descriptions of central Mexican and related pre-Conquest pictorial styles, see, for example, Donald Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period* (New Haven, 1959), 12-24; and Elizabeth H. Boone, 'Towards a More Precise Definition of the Aztec Painting Style,' in *Pre-Columbian Art History: Selected Readings*, edited by Alana Cordy-Collins (Palo Alto, 1982). Baird (*Sahagun's 'Primeros Memoriales'*, 39-48) provides a brief comparison of European and pre-Conquest pictorial styles.
7. Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr., *The Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York, 1975), 129.
8. Donald Robertson, 'The Pinturas (Maps) of the Relaciones Geográficas, with a Catalog,' in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, XII, edited by Robert Wauchoppe and Howard F. Cline (Austin, 1972), 261-62.
9. Baird, *Sahagun's 'Primeros Memoriales'*, 219-20; Baird, 'The Artists of Sahagun's Primeros Memoriales: A Question of Identity,' in *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagun, Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-century Aztec Mexico*, edited by Jorge Klor de Alva, H.B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quinones Keber (Albany, 1988), 212-20.
10. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México*, V (Mexico, 1941), 254-57.
11. *Books of the Brave* (Cambridge, 1949), 205.
12. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, Book I, 54.
13. Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting*, 169-72.
14. Sahagun, *Historia general*, I (1979), Book I folios 1, 1 verso, 3, 5, 6 verso, 10.
15. 'Sahagun and Hermeneutics: A Christian Ethnographer's Understanding of Aztec Culture,' in Klor de Alva and others, *Work of Sahagun*, 58.
16. Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, Book I, 61.
17. Ellen T. Baird, 'Nativity Scenes in the Codex Florentino,' manuscript in author's possession; and Baird, 'Sahagun's Primeros

- Memoriales and Codex Florentino,' 17-20.
18. *Mexican Manuscript Painting*, 176-78 .
19. Jeanette F. Peterson, however , argues <sup>6</sup> the uninterrupted continuation of native style and suggests that the artists' 'decision to use native style sources was very conscious ... [and] was dictated by the textual material and facilitated by the retention of the practices and iconography associated with the *tlacuilo* profession' ('The Florentine Codex Imagery and the Colonial Tlacuilo ,' in Klor de Alva and others , *Work of Sahagun*, 290).
20. Arthur J. O. Anderson , 'Sahagun: Career and Character,' in Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 1, 36-37.
21. *Renaissance Rediscovery*, 16.
22. *Renaissance Rediscovery*, 24.
23. John McAndrew , *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-century Mexico* (Cambridge , 1965 ), 91-120.
24. Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr, 'The Art of Renaissance Picture-Making and the Great Western Age of Discovery,' in *Essays Presented to Myron Gilmore ( History of Art, History of Music*, 11 ) , edited by Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus (Florence, 1978), 140.