

Material Culture – Images: Dana Liebsohn

1) How did you first get interested in this image?

I first saw this document when I started to study pre-Columbian art as a graduate student. It's a painting that often shows up in classes because it was made so early after the Conquest, just about 20 years or so. It shows the mixing of traditions and how both pre-Hispanic things were remembered and yet changed when European things were introduced—European graphic conventions were introduced. It represents the founding of Tenochtitlan, the large imperial capital of the Aztecs, which is one of the things that people interested in pre-Columbian art and architecture are very interested in studying.

The painting shows a number of events which are important for our reconstruction of pre-Columbian history. Not only does it show us the rough geography of the city of Tenochtitlan, but it also shows us its first political leaders, the men we see sitting on mats towards the center of the painting. It also shows us the economic and political viability of the Aztec Empire, viability established through conquest, which we see towards the bottom of the map, or the painting. And it reminds us of the importance of mythic history and legends that were passed down among Aztecs from person to person and generation to generation.

The eagle on the cactus refers to mythic history of the Aztecs because the Aztecs were told by one of their war gods, Huitzilopochtli, who became an important figure in the history of the Empire, that they should settle and found their capital city where they found an eagle resting on a nopal, or a prickly pear cactus. So because this painting conflates and combines so many different threads of Aztec history, it often surfaces as a key document.

2) What did you first notice about this image?

This is a painting from a book called the *Codex Mendoza*. It's a manuscript painting, so it's part of a larger group of paintings that were originally accompanied by written text in Spanish. It's a painting that fills the entire page. It is a painting that is surrounded with a frame of what we call "year glyphs." These are calendrical glyphs or signs that the Aztec people used, and then after the Conquest, they continued to use to count the years in their calendar.

This frame of glyphs starts in the upper-left-hand corner with the *year two house* and then continues in sequence all the way down the left side of the page, across the bottom of the page, up the right-hand side. And it ends not quite completing the whole frame at the upper edge of the painting.

The center of the painting is what really catches our eye first. We see an eagle sitting atop a cactus, above a rock, above a shield. Behind him is a cross of blue, which actually represents the lakes of Mexico City, the canals of Mexico City that were used to connect the various parts of the city. And then we see a number of leaders and warriors

distributed across the page. The men sitting in the various quadrants of the cross area, the center of the image, represent Aztec leaders at the time of foundation and down below we see two Aztec warriors standing with spears and shields, defeating nearby communities—communities that they defeated as they were expanding their empire.

So one of the things that I think is important to notice about this painting is that it has a firm border. It has a strong center. And that within the middle part of the composition we have a relatively geometric pattern of quadrants and then down below, you have a pair of nearly identical figures each standing in front of slightly different, but again nearly identical, representations of burning temples and small little green hills, which represent place glyphs—the names of the towns that were conquered by the Aztecs.

The size of this painting is just larger than a size of notebook paper, so maybe about 15 inches by about 10 inches. Large enough to not exactly hold on your lap, but as part of a book. You can imagine putting it on a table and turning the pages easily or peering closely at the images that you wanted to read about or see in detail.

The colors are something else that we should probably notice about this painting. The bright blues represent not only the years of the Aztec calendar, but they also represent the canals of Mexico City. Mexico City was an island city built on top of a lake and canals were one of the primary ways that people navigated through the city. We see the blue canals joining at the very center of the city. Reds, greens, yellows are also prominent here and we presume that many of them actually had a meaning for the people, the Aztec people, at the time this was painted, although the specific meaning of each color is no longer known today.

3) How might someone new to analyzing images begin to understand this image?

I think the first place to start is with what catches your eye and what stands out to you. So I would ask somebody new to this image to make a list, a simple outline, of the things that seem most notable or most noticeable. For some people, it might be the eagle on the cactus. For others, it will be the tiny little skull rack that'll catch their eyes. For others, it will be the boundary or the frame at the outside of the painting. From there I think, once you have the list, it becomes important to look at the whole composition of the image—how the painting is laid out on the paper.

Beyond that, once you have a sense of how things are placed, then I would ask you to talk about, or to begin to grapple with, how those pieces that were noticeable to you appear within part of a larger whole. Ultimately, I think it becomes important to be able to translate the language of the painting. What is it that that eagle on the cactus refers to? What are those two conquest scenes down below the square of the Mexico City's canals? What is that little fire drill? But I think it's important first to begin to ask yourself, "What are the elements of the visual representation?" before one begins to ask, "What do they all mean?"

The other thing that's important to realize is that what these things mean will change over time and from person to person. For the man who painted these elements, no doubt the eagle on the cactus or the conquest of Tenayuca over on the right side of the painting, meant something quite different than it did to the Viceroy who commissioned it or the French pirate who stole the manuscript as part of a large group of Spanish treasures. So I would ask somebody, or help somebody, begin to find sources for examining all the different ways a single work of art may have made meaning because it's important to realize that there's no such thing as a single meaning for any particular object, any work of art, that there are always competing ones.

Skulls, sacrifice, those are always big topics in the Aztec world and people are very curious about why there is a skull as part of a representation of the founding of Mexico City. And I think actually that's a very good question, one that opens onto a lot of very important things about the way the Aztecs actually behaved and the way they understood their role in the universe. So I would not say that it is important to notice one specific part of this painting any earlier or before you notice any other part, but that actually any place you start can lead you towards a good understanding of what the Aztec artist was trying to convey, or at least what we understand today, what he was trying to convey in the past.

4) What other information would help you make sense of this image?

This one stands out as particularly interesting for two reasons. It represents, if you will, a scene from memory. It represents the founding of the Aztec capital, the founding of Tenochtitlan. By the time it was painted in 1545 or so, the Aztec capital no longer stood. It had been largely devastated by the war of Conquest and was under reconstruction to become a Spanish city, the capital of the colony of New Spain, Mexico City, so this painting represents a memory that the man who created this would not have had himself. He wouldn't have been alive when Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325. But he would have remembered stories about its founding and the mythic events that were important at that time.

The other thing that I think is important about this painting is it does something which is very important for understanding the way that native peoples created images, both before and after the Spanish Conquest. And that is it combines both geography—Mexico City—with a notion of time, the calendrical glyphs that you see around the outside. So this relationship between time and event and space, it's a conflation or a juxtaposition that is very characteristic of representations that were made both before and after the Spanish Conquest. Eventually native people learned to make images that were very much in a European landscape style but this is well before that so it represents an interesting moment of transition when fully pre-Hispanic ways are still remembered but starting to be shaped by things that were introduced from Europe.

The painting was made as part of a large encyclopedia of Aztec history that was initially commissioned by the first Viceroy of Mexico as a gift to the King of Spain and initially

the painting was prepared as the front page—this is the front painting for that book. The book was finished and sent from Mexico City to the coast of Vera Cruz and after that loaded on ship to be sent to Spain. However, the King of Spain never saw this painting. In fact, he never received the gift that the Viceroy had sent for him. It was instead stolen by pirates and taken to France, where it became part of an important French collection and then later moved to England, where it became part of an English collection, and today the document, the whole *Codex Mendoza*, the book itself with this painting, resides in Oxford in the Bodleian library.

In order to read an image like this in the way that it would have been intended, one needs to bring to it a fair amount of understanding of Aztec history and history about the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. One can get information about that from a number of secondary sources: books about the Aztecs, about their visual representation, about the Conquest. There are also a number of other primary sources: documents that were written at the time that explain what happened. Obviously, all of these are biased in particular ways. But one could choose to read, for instance, the Spanish writing that initially accompanied this painting in the *Codex Mendoza* in order to begin to piece together the meaning of the images. One could also read Conquest accounts written by people who had been eyewitnesses to the Spanish Conquest. One could as well read something called the *Florentine Codex*, which was an encyclopedia produced late in the 16th century, maybe 30 or 40 years after this painting, in which indigenous people and a Spanish friar worked very closely to record all sorts of Aztec modes of knowledge and memories of the past. I would also encourage students to compare this image to other works of pre-Columbian art works that are wall paintings perhaps, or other modes of representation that have survived the Conquest.

5) What did you first notice about this portrait?

This is a portrait of three men. The portrait itself is made of oil paint on canvas. It's a relatively large canvas, almost life-size. These men stand before us. There are three of them here, each with their names written in Spanish above their heads, as well as their ages. At the center, we see don Francisco de Arobe. He's 56 years old. To our right, we see don Domingo, who is, we believe, 18 years of age, and on the other side, we see don Pedro, who is 22 years old. We believe that these two men are the sons of don Francisco de Arobe. All three men come from the northwest coast of Ecuador, a place called Esmeraldas, and today this painting is called the *Mulatto Gentlemen of Esmeraldas*. What this painting was called in the 16th century, we're not exactly sure.

The painting was made in 1599 by a relatively well-known indigenous painter who was working in Quito at the time, a man named Andrés Sánchez Gallque. The small plaque on the painting in the gold frame with the writing over on the far right explains that the painting was commissioned by an official working in Quito as a gift to Philip the Third [III], the King of Spain. So we know that this painting was made as a kind of gift, perhaps a coronation gift, for the King of Spain. It is a portrait of three men who are, we

know from historical documents at the time, of mixed ancestry. They are part indigenous or Indian and part African American: the sons of people who were once slaves brought to the Americas to work, perhaps in Quito, perhaps elsewhere, and native people. They appear before us here dressed in some of the finest clothing that we can imagine for native people at the time.

We see the three men standing. Each one holds an iron-tipped spear, a spear probably made of hardwood from the jungles. They also appear before us wearing some European-style clothing as well as some indigenous-style clothing. We see them with fancy ruff collars of lace, imports clearly from Europe, as well as cloaks of fine silk and damask. They have lace at their wrists from their shirts, and two men hold European-style hats—don Francisco at the center and don Domingo over at the side. Underneath their cloaks and above their ruffled collars, we see the men wearing indigenous-style ponchos that have been cut in a style that would have been traditional in the Americas prior to the Spanish Conquest. The material of these robes, however, these ponchos, was all imported, probably into Quito from Asia. So there's a connection here between trade with Asia as well as Europe and the Americas.

The shell jewelry, the necklaces, that the men wear identify them as people of the coast, people of the coast of Northern Ecuador, as does their gold jewelry—the nose rings, the earrings, the lip plugs—that they wear. These are all typical kinds of jewelry known in Ecuador from pre-Hispanic times through the Colonial period. So that the outfits they wear are probably not outfits that they would have worn in the coast of Ecuador. Nor probably outfits that they would have worn even when they came to Quito to visit, the occasion upon which to have their portrait painted. But rather, these are most certainly—or most likely—clothes that they would have donned specifically for the painting of this portrait.

Beyond this, the dark color of their skin makes it more than clear that these are hardly-European people—that they would have to be residents of the New World. The background of the painting is a little bit ambiguous and maybe even in some ways mysterious. There seems to be a cloudy sky that drops behind these men, but that because there's not much that happens in that background—we don't see mountains, we don't see coasts, we don't see trees, we don't see landscape—it's very difficult to say where, in pictorial terms, these men actually stand. Certainly they were painted in a studio of sorts, but where they are meant to be in geography in this painting is unclear.

6) What else would you look at in the portrait?

What's especially interesting to me about this image is the way that don Francisco, the man at the center, expands. His shoulders really fill the space and he dominates this painting in a very dramatic way. He takes up more room than either of his sons. He's broader than his two sons and he looks straight at us, so there is a way in which his gaze engages our gaze as viewers that is almost confrontational, or questioning, if you will.

The two sons, however, look at him and not at us. So there is an interesting way in which the gazes of the figures in this painting both deny our presence—the sons aren't really interested in the fact that we're outside the painting looking at them—yet invite us to become part of their history in that don Francisco looks straight at us.

This posing of the figures, the different gazes of these men, is not specific to this particular portrait. This is something that one can see well when one compares this image with other portraits of the time, not only in Europe but also from Latin America. So that this posing of the figures—the gestures that they make, the glances that we can determine—are, in fact, part and parcel of a language of portraiture. They're part of a larger portrait tradition that transcends these particular men at this particular moment in space and time.

The other thing that I think is unsettling about this image is the way the gold jewelry of the men, jewelry that marks them as clearly indigenous, is juxtaposed with those incredible ruff collars. We just don't expect Dutch-like lace collars to be worn in the city of Quito with that kind of gold jewelry. So there's a kind of jarring juxtaposition, one that we're not taught to expect when we think about what was going on either in Europe or in Latin America in the late 16th century. And that, I think, is something that also draws us into this image. Maybe in some cases, more so, perhaps in a different way even, than don Francisco's gaze that invites us to think about who he is and what he's doing there.

8) What other questions would you ask?

It would be fantastic to know how it was that these men came to own these clothes and who encouraged them to put them on. It's almost certain that they would not have worn these clothes when they went home to the jungles of Ecuador. It would have been much too hot and much too impractical. There is a tradition of dressing for portraits that we know today. You can imagine going to Sears and having your portrait taken on Christmas, for instance, or for a Christmas card. And we know that the idea of dressing for portraits has a long history. Whether these people, don Arobe, don Domingo, and don Pedro, were dressed at the request of the official who commissioned the portrait or of the studio painter, we don't know. We don't have the documents that would confirm the details of the event specifically of how this painting was made.

One can imagine that this kind of clothing would have been a little bit uncomfortable, but one can also imagine that this kind of clothing would have bespoke or appointed to a kind of privilege and high status that would not have been available to every indigenous person—certainly in Quito and definitely also on the coast. So there's a way in which this clothing, even though it is unusual even for these men, in terms of their own day-to-day lives at home, sets them apart from the average person and the average indigenous, or even mixed-ethnicity person, that they would have encountered, both on their visit to Quito as well as when they went back home.

9) How would you compare these two images?

One of the things that is interesting about these two paintings and a little bit invisible is a similarity in the training of the artists who made them. The artist who made, or the painter who made, the *Codex Mendoza*—the painting with the eagle, represents Mexico City at the moment of its foundation—would have been trained by Spaniards in a special school associated with a monastic complex or a main cathedral, perhaps in Mexico City. Likewise, the indigenous man who painted the three men from Esmeraldas would also have been trained by friars in Quito perhaps, probably in an art school as well as a school where he would have learned reading and writing in a Spanish tradition. So that both of these paintings were made by indigenous artists in the Americas. Both with, not identical kinds of training, but similar kinds of training under the tutelage of friars—in one case Franciscan, in another case probably Dominican. But nevertheless a strong schooling aspect links these two paintings.

In terms of their compositions, their language, their modes of representation, I think they're very different. One, the *Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas*, owes much more to European style, European graphic conventions and modes of representation. If we were to paint the faces of these men a different color and remove the gold jewelry and the shell necklaces, we could imagine them coming from many other places in the world. Even if we didn't know the Spanish, or even if we couldn't read the Spanish writing or we couldn't read the plaque that bears the inscription identifying the painting. We could conceivably imagine them being Africans. They don't necessarily tell us that they are from Esmeraldas.

The painting of the *Codex Mendoza* represents individuals in a way that tells us very little about their physical characteristics or their physical features. We can't look at Tenoch or either of these conquering warriors and actually get a sense of what they really looked like. These are much more conventionalized, much more abstracted modes, of representing the human form. Like the three gentlemen though, every one of the founders that matters in the history of Tenochtitlan—each one of those figures in the quadrant, the upper part of the painting—has their name set next to them, just as these men here have all been named.