Lecture: "Living Color: Tonalli in Nahua Featherwork Production"

Discussion published by John Schwaller on Monday, July 30, 2018

August 3, 6:45 PM

Pre-Columbian Society of Washington DC August Lecture

"Living Color: Tonalli in Nahua Featherwork Production"

by Allison Caplan, Ittelson Fellow at CASVA and PhD Candidate at Tulane University

Previous studies have suggested that Late Postclassic and early colonial Nahua viewers experienced specific artistic creations as animate, particularly in ritual contexts. This talk advances our understanding of Nahua featherworks’ animacy by examining producers’ responsiveness in their production practices to particular feathers’ containment of tonalli, a solar-derived animating force or soul. I first examine an aesthetic and value-laden distinction in the sixteenth-century Florentine Codex between tlazoh (beloved) and macehual (commoner) feathers. This distinction registers feathers’ differential ability to contain tonalli, which made tlazoh feathers living beings and macehual feathers inanimate materials. Nahuatl writings on the various stages of production—bird-hunting, dyeing and selling feathers, and mosaic construction—call attention to feathers’ relative and precarious animacy. I argue that producers’ care to preserve specific feathers’ tonalli represented a major artistic and commercial concern that ultimately enabled finished featherworks’ displays of animacy.

Allison Caplan is the Ittleson Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts and a Ph.D. candidate in Art History and Latin American Studies at Tulane University. Her dissertation, “Their Flickering Creations: Value, Appearance, and Surface in Nahua Precious Art,” examines Nahua aesthetics and conceptions of materiality in multimedia works that combine feathers, precious stones, shell, metals, and other valued materials. Allison received her M.A. in Art History and Latin American Studies from Tulane in 2014 and graduated summa cum laude from Columbia University in 2011 with a B.A. in Comparative Literature and Society and a minor in Art History. Allison has organized conference sessions on human-bird interactions in the Americas and on indigenous concepts of value for the American Society for Ethnohistory and is currently organizing a session on indigenous languages and the language of Art History for the College Art Association. She has held internships at the Smithsonian, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Getty Research Institute, and the New Orleans Museum of Art. In the fall, Allison will join the Met’s Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas as the Sylvan C. Coleman and Pam Coleman Memorial Fund Post-Doctoral Fellow for 2018-2019.

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