Rajagopalan on Peterson and Terraciano, 'The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico'

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In 1576, in the midst of an epidemic, Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and a team of Nahua tlacuilote (artist-scribes) labored to complete an extensive encyclopedic work that is commonly referred to today as the Florentine Codex. The Nahua authors, Antonio Valeriano, Martín Jacobita, Pedro de San Buenaventura, and Alonso Vegerano among them, had worked on this handwritten and painted manuscript in the context of the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Santiago, Tlaltelolco, where Sahagún had taught for many years. Today, the breadth and scope of the knowledge contained in the twelve books that comprise this work, now in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Med. Palat. 218-220), represents an invaluable source for understanding the Nahua world in sixteenth-century Mexico. This collection of essays, edited by Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Kevin Terraciano, offers fresh insights into the production and conceptualization of the manuscript, as well as the nuanced interchanges that occurred among its many collaborators.

As modern translations came into wider circulation, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, scholars have increasingly turned to the Florentine Codex, or Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España, as a crucial source that copies, consolidates, and edits decades of work by Sahagún and his collaborators. Drawing on classical and indigenous models for its organization, the manuscript covers diverse topics related to the spiritual realm, the natural world, and social practices. Of the three texts that comprise the manuscript—Nahuatl, Spanish, and pictorial—the alphabetic Nahuatl text was recorded first, the alphabetic Spanish translations and additions came next and the abundant hand-painted images were created as part of the last stages.

It is in analyzing this third text, the images, that The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico, makes one of its most important contributions. While there are earlier studies based on a physical examination of the original manuscript that have greatly advanced our knowledge of the two thousand-plus images, sustained study has been complicated by limited access to high-quality color reproductions of the original. Peterson outlines some of these challenges in the present volume (pp. 24-29). Since the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana made the manuscript available digitally in 2012, the images, and their relationship on the page to the alphabetic texts, have become much more accessible. The present volume is lavishly illustrated with color plates that
support the authors’ arguments. The images are not studied in isolation but are examined from different perspectives to plumb their sources, meaning, context, and relationship to the surrounding alphabetic texts.

Terraciano, in the introductory chapter of the book, brings the reader up to date on some of the fundamental facets of this complex manuscript. While we have more provenience information on this manuscript than most from sixteenth-century central Mexico, the history of its thirty-year compilation, and even its very title, is not straightforward. The overview of the Florentine Codex’s history and orientation to some of its primary organizational models prepares readers (seasoned and novice alike) for the discussions that follow. The included tables are especially valuable as they concisely summarize this history and define the manuscript titles used to refer to the constellation of materials related to the Florentine Codex’s production and early dissemination. A summary of the twelve authors’ contributions is also included. While all of the selected essays speak to one another thematically, the editors have organized the contributions into four loose categories. Part 1 considers “The Art of Translation,” broadly speaking. Part 2 examines “Lords: Royal and Sacred.” Part 3 brings together essays on “Ordering the Cosmos.” Part 4 addresses “Social Discourse and Deviance.” Peterson’s essay in part 1 follows Terraciano’s and serves almost as a second introduction focused on the Florentine Codex images. Her historiography of image study and inquiry into the rationale for and “translatability” of these paintings facilitates an understanding of the essays that follow. As she notes, “To one degree or another, all the volume authors probe the intertextual relationships and ask how the images are related to the accompanying language texts, as well as how the imagery may signify differently” (p. 23).

Using a variety of methodological approaches, several authors take as a primary focus an examination of materials used as a source or conceptual model. Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo uses close visual comparisons to advance arguments that Florentine Codex painters adapted European models from the work of Johann von Cube, Andrea Alciato, Hans Sebald Beham, Konrad von Würzburg, Luis de Ávila y Zuñiga, and Olaus Magnus, among others. While pinning down exact image sources is a tricky task, Escalante introduces several compelling possibilities. Elizabeth Hill Boone studies changing representations of Aztec kings and deities to probe the dialogic relationships with indigenous traditions of Mexican pictography and the myriad old-world sources at play in the Florentine Codex’s production. Here, the author adds to our growing list of influences by tracing the presentation of the gods to models found in a thirteenth-century treatise by the European philosopher Albricus. While Guilhem Olivier’s primary task is a meticulous analysis of gods and devils in the Florentine Codex, he also draws connections to Greek Euhemerist theories. Eloise Quiñones Keber examines a source closer to home, Sahagún’s own Primeros Memoriales (1559-61). A case study of the representations of the deity Chicomocoatl in the Primeros Memoriales and in the Florentine Codex leads the author to conclude that “the experienced artists of the Tlatelolco scriptorium, abetted by those of from San José de los Naturales, who had worked under the guidance of Pedro de Gante until his death in 1572, might have taken the initiative to plan and produce the myriad paintings of the Florentine Codex” (p. 93).

The latter is indicative of another strength of this volume, namely, its focus on indigenous agency in the creation of the manuscript. For example, in his essay on book 12 of the Florentine Codex (chapter 3 in this volume), Terraciano discusses the differences between the three texts (temporal as well as narrative). Through comparison and his study of feather imagery and its related associations, he
articulates ways in which the Nahua perspective on the Spanish-led war on Mexico was laid out. In doing so, he imparts a better understanding of this, often bleak, account of violence enacted by the Spanish in an unprecedented manner. Diana Magaloni Kerpel’s close analysis of the visual and material aspects of images in the first two books of the Florentine Codex, and their relationship to surrounding texts, reveals “visual strategies that might have remained hidden to any observer outside the indigenous tradition of painting. These strategies follow a ritual logic that not only conveys the sacredness of the appearance of the ixiptla [sacred impersonator or substitute] in the festivities but also signifies that the paintings continued to be imbued with a ritual reality” (p. 163). Through close visual and contextual analysis of two images documenting aberrant environmental phenomenon, another author, Barbara Mundy, examines how the location and physical context in which the tlacuiloque worked helped to shape the ideas expressed in the Florentine Codex. The evidence points to a continuing view among Nahua elites that ritual interventions were required in their role as environmental intermediaries. Nuanced explorations of how and why the tlacuiloque worked can be found throughout this volume.

In many instances, these inquiries tackle Nahua conceptions of the sacred, leading to insightful observations. For example, Olivier notes that the Nahua authors of the Florentine Codex used the Spanish loanword Dios (god) just once in the Nahuatl text, and this in reference to the supreme deity Tezcatlipoca. In addition to the sustained examination of deity representations in the work of Quiñones Keber, Boone, and Olivier, Molly Bassett’s essay on tlaquimilolli (sacred bundles) offers useful insights into how Aztecs regarded material, color, and visible/invisible, or interior/exterior relationships in connection to god-bodies. Notably, she proposes conceptual connections between bundles, mountains, and temples. Peterson (chapter 11) examines references to transgression and confession in book 6, a nexus point between the Florentine Codex’s treatment of the celestial and earthly realms. The author’s investigation of the huehuetlatolli (speech of the elders) in book 6 focuses on images of the deity Tezcatlipoca and elucidates how the Florentine Codex demonstrates Nahua painters and authors “amalgamating the visual and textual languages available to them” (p. 180) rather than simply being transformed in a one-directional process of acculturation. Lisa Sousa’s study of social deviants in book 10 focuses on Nahua symbols of moral transgression; she concludes that in this book Nahua incorporation of Christian aspects was selective, noting the single appearance of the devil in the book’s images and a revealing absence of references to sin (tlatlacolli). Perhaps this limited presence can also be attributed to the focus on the human and earthly realms in the latter books of the Florentine Codex. From Terraciano’s and Olivier’s theories on what labeling the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortés as teotl meant, to Magaloni’s interest in how images become ixiptla, this volume contains diverse perspectives that add dimensionality to our understanding of changing Nahua conceptions of the sacred realm.

Ellen Baird reminds us that in 1545, a wave of cocoliztli (a hemorrhagic fever) took 80 percent of the indigenous population and in 1576 a further 50 percent were lost to the disease’s devastating effects (p. 201). In her essay on the section of book 10 devoted to parts of the body, she points to this as part of the reason Sahagún’s Spanish translation departed from original plans to translate the Nahuatl text, and focused instead on memorializing his evangelization mission. Baird argues that the images mediate between the Spanish and Nahuatl texts. Here, her analysis of the final image of a resigned, kneeling male figure (fol. 84r) is one of the most convincing. Baird describes this image that immediately follows Sahagún’s final observations on those dying “without remedy or aid” as follows: “The young man’s solitary position in the landscape, his pensive downward gaze, and his hand
gesture toward the earth are immensely touching and express the futility of the moment, reinforced by the heart-wrenching Spanish text immediately above him” (p. 212). Ida Giovanna Rao’s essay, which introduces readers to a sixteenth-century Italian translation of the Spanish text of the first five books of the Florentine Codex, demonstrates that this manuscript, completed under dire circumstances, was valued early on by European audiences.

The essays included here, developed out of a 2015 conference at the University of California, Los Angeles and the Getty Center, compile the work of scholars from the United States, Mexico, and Italy. The scholars come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds such as history, art history, and religious studies, and many have worked previously on the Florentine Codex. This book will directly appeal to those interested in sixteenth-century manuscripts of central Mexico and Nahua culture more generally. It will be an essential source for those working on the Florentine Codex.


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