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Unearthed Expression

“Architecture inevitably expresses something about the people for whom it is designed”. This was written by Jose Bernardi in his review of *Ancient Origins of the Mexican Plaza*. He goes on to say how architects often try to create spaces that speak to its audience. This is also the same for artists; the artists of Mesoamerican art. They tell their stories through the combinations of ideograms and phonetic signs. Today, we can analyze their culture after they appear in reliefs, steles, and vase paintings. Although sometimes there can be consequences of these discoveries. Such as, in the reading; “Reflections of an Intruder” in the book *Essays on Mexican Art* by Octavio Paz, he speaks about how there is a disappearance of the hypothesis of “peaceful theocracies” in the Mayan times. This is uncovered through the depictions of rituals. In turn there are instances where discoveries have shown us changes in our sensibility. That over the past four hundred years. We can see changes in our analysis of discoveries, and uncover a more rich meaning and value to things; specifically the Great Coatlicue. This is something Paz debates in his other chapter; “Material and Meaning”. Amongst the three readings, they all share things in common speaking to the Mayan civilization’s art; talk of religion, politics, and mexican culture. There is a deeper meaning to all the findings, and that is that they all speak to the expression. The expression of what is revealed both in the past, and present day. To express is: to squeeze out the juice and the essence, not only of the idea but of the form as well.

Mesoamerican art has revealed the beliefs, rituals, and religions of the past time. This wouldn’t be known today, had the people not left their mark on the things they left

behind. This goes back to what Bernardi was saying where the creator tries to express something known to them, to the viewer. Whether it can be representing a culture's symbolic construction of the world, or interpret a particular group's identity. This isn't only shown through relics and paintings. Bernardi speaks about how the Mexican Square is one of North America's most expressive innovations. Nothing in the present day can compare to its impressive scale and alignment to the surrounding landscape. Mexican plazas in general were originally created as part of a religious compound. They were located in new towns on top of Mesoamerican settlements. Overtime the nature of these spaces evolved into a public space of commerce and seat of political power. In present day, a monument that is well known for its vast alignment and historical significance is the National Mall in Washington D.C. A place that resonates with past



historical speeches, and movements. Sharing similar attributes as the Mexican plaza; a place of commerce, gatherings, political demonstrations, etc.

From recent studies, the cultures derived around Mexican plazas have expressed something different based on how they were preserved. Amongst the talk of

religion and cosmology, in the early 16th century the two different cultures; European Christians and Mesoamerican had interpreted each other's expressions and unknowingly helped each other preserve their own cultures. With each culture, they worked with the already blatant expressions in the earth, and took advantage of it. This just shows how other cultures can take expressions differently. Not knowing how it was really used, they interpreted it to work for themselves. It isn't until today how we can uncover how these spaces were used differently.

Until a very short time ago, it was believed that Mesoamerican cities were not really cities but ceremonial centers inhabited solely by priests and a small number of bureaucrats. We now know that they were real cities, that is to say, centers of economic, political, military, and religious activity (Paz, 79). Along with strong civilizations, there comes some strong beliefs - which then incorporate strong standing rituals.

Found in a relief at Chichen Itza and at other sites both inside and outside the Mayan, are depictions of history and great sacrifice. To the mayans it is a ritual of symbolic expression of “the other world”. Mayan art has expressed this game in unforgettable

works - reliefs, frescoes, paintings, drawings, and incisions carved in jade, bone and other materials - the two forms of sacrifice. (Paz, 72) There are two murals in Cacaxtla that Paz speaks of. He expresses his description of the frescos; a ballet of forms and vivid colors, a hallucinatory and hideous dance, blue-green plumes waving.... pools of blood.



At the beginning Paz paints a picture of a beautiful scene, then continues on to explain the vigours gruesome part of the scene where the king and queen lacerate themselves. Some see these depictions as wonderful sacrifice and beautiful scenery, whereas others, can't see the side of beauty in such a gruesome scene. One can look at these inscriptions and reliefs and depict a disgusting tradition, however, it turns to be something of the Mayan culture that is religious, symbolic, and honored. In this way,

one generalization is replaced by another. For the Mayans, it was the mission of men, to preserve universal life, including their own - by feeding the gods with the divine substance; blood. (71) The Mayans left these depictions, as a way for us to understand their civilization. They are expressing their beliefs, their ritual, their day to day ways of living. And we now are here to interpret and read these expressions.

Our present day interpretations have changed over time. The Great Coatlicue takes us by surprise not only because of her dimension... but because she is a concept turned to



stone. An unearthed monument that was determined to be a goddess, then seen from demon to monster, monster to masterpiece - over four hundred years. The different eras of discoverers, changed attitudes. As the people judged her based on how she was created and what she expressed to them, she got new identities and new fears. As the people changed, she stayed the same. The people's own perception was changing based on evidence of the culture she came from. "The word that really suits Mesoamerican art is expression. It is an art that speaks, yet it says what it has to say with such

concentrated energy that its speech is always expressive" (Paz, 35). Her form could be interpreted in different ways to different people, she expresses so much, just as a piece of carved stone.

Within these three readings each author has the ability to tell a story from each object. They explain how it is expressed to them. With Mexican Plazas, not only was there a continuous relationships and influence among the various societies and eras - but cultural forms and expressions too were similar, from cosmogonic myths and artistic

styles, to political and economic institutions (Paz, 80). Mayan art has left an abundance of representations of these ritual experiences, although it is only today that we have a clear understanding of their actual meaning. We can see how people have changed their perception on a piece of art, who knows what people will believe in years to come? I agree with what Paz speaks of, how Mayan art is astonishing by its realism and literalness. The images and figures it presents can be read. They are not just illustrations for a text: they are the text itself.

Citations

Jose Bernardi. "The Mexican Plaza and the Transformation of Culture" Review of Ancient Origins of the Mexican Plaza: From Primordial Sea to Public Space, by Logan Wagner, Hal Box, and Susan Kline Morehead. 8 July 2014 Marginalia.

Paz, Octavio. "Material and Meaning" *Essays on Mexican Art*. Harcourt Brace, 1994. (29-43)

Paz, Octavio. "Reflections of an Intruder" *Essays on Mexican Art*. Harcourt Brace, 1994. (64-83)