Manuscript Painting and the Conventos

This last chapter is dedicated to the development of pictography once it was fully incorporated into the intellectual project of the friars and their art schools. The four manuscripts discussed in the preceding chapter also form part of the corpus of pictographic and written works produced under mendicant sponsorship. They largely relied, however, on established pre-Hispanic canons, such as those found in the Borgia Group manuscripts. The written text, provided in the form of glosses, is largely subordinate to the images. Written explanations were intended to complement or clarify the meaning of the pictorials, whose overall presentation and composition still conformed to known pre-Hispanic pictographic genres.

By contrast, the work of Bernardino de Sahagún discussed in this chapter was wholly novel, blending European literary antecedents and local pictographic traditions. In particular, the Florentine Codex is widely considered the most important source on Nahua culture, religion, and history at the time of contact and is therefore cited at length in this book. However, the bulk of information in the document is found in the written texts. The Nahua version of the texts, whose complete translation was attempted only once, by North American scholars Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble (Sahagún 1950–1982), reflects the interests and knowledge of an Indigenous intellectual elite that had been fully educated at mendicant schools. The monumental work of Bernardino de Sahagún is contrasted with the Codex Yanhuitlan, a document produced in the Mixtec town of the same name. The manuscript is fully pictographic and hails from a region in Mesoamerica where picture writing was particularly developed. The Mixtec codices, in fact, constitute the only pre-Hispanic corpus of historical documents that focus on local and regional genealogies. The Codex Yanhuitlan is heir to this tradition, but it also represents a novel genre that fully incorporated a format, a style, and contents derived from European and colonial examples.

Both works have received extensive scholarly attention. Therefore, I focus on specific aspects that demonstrate the scope, impact, and limitations of the mendicant evangelical and educational enterprise in New Spain. On the one hand, the encyclopedic and scholastic endeavor of the Franciscans, which is exemplified by the work of Sahagún, intended to salvage Mesoamerican religion by portraying it as dead and sealed in the past, not as a living phenomenon. Consequently, books were seen as repositories of fixed knowledge on mythology and rituals, as also observed in the Codices Telleriano-Remensis, Vaticanus A, Tudela, and Magliabechiano. On the other hand, the Codex Yanhuitlan was produced in an Indigenous town and demonstrates how local Mixtec leaders and artists were able to re-appropriate the pictographic medium from the friars to address the complex socio-political situation in early colonial Yanhuitlan.

One striking aspect of these manuscripts is the innovative and widespread use of monochrome, an artistic development unique to sixteenth-century New Spain that has yet to receive its scholarly due. In Europe, monochrome painting (usually referred to with the term grisaille, from French for “gray-like”) was first adopted in manuscript illumination. An outstanding example is the famous Book of Hours produced by Jean Pucelle for Jeanne d’Evreux, the queen of France in the first half the fourteenth century. Eventually, early Netherlandish painters mastered the technique in oil painting, most notably in the decoration of altar wings. Throughout the Renaissance, the grisaille technique was commonly employed to paint architectural decorations and details and to create trompe l’œil or other similar visual effects. Among the few scholars who have addressed the use of monochrome in the visual arts of New Spain, Manrique (1982) and Peterson (1993, 62–63) considered that the lack of color was a direct consequence of the pedestrian and unoriginal copies of European models that arrived in the New World in the form of prints. Although I believe that the introduction of print illustrations from Europe triggered the production of monochrome images among Indigenous tlacuilos, the selective adoption of grisaille in specific contexts reveals a conscious positioning on the part of local artists vis-à-vis a foreign and imposed tradition.

European art historical scholarship on grisaille has examined it as a representational strategy that engages and asks questions of the viewer (Schoell-Glass 1999). Philippot (1966) noted that the lack of color in early Netherlandish altar wings, which usually depicted fictive sculptures in niches, had the effect of collapsing different levels of reality into a single surface. Fehrenbach (2011) considered that monochrome in early modern marble sculpture constituted a regression of the naturalist Renaissance impulse to a potential state of animation, a moment in which dead and raw materials seemed to come alive and make present what the picture claimed to be. Finally, Powell (2012, 107–111) remarked on the uncanny vivacity of paintings of monochrome sculpture, highlighting a possible paradox; the painted image purports to be a sculpture, but sculpture shows a degree of realism in its expression that one would only expect from the “real” subject. In all these cases, grisaille is employed to implicitly reveal the mechanism by which the image and its life-like and mimetic qualities are created. This is often framed within the debate on the paragone (comparison) between the relative merits of architecture, sculpture, and painting. Monochrome manifests a transition or process that the viewer must...
In the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015), the use of monochrome is associated with the act of writing in a series of illustrations about colors and their production. Cochineal red is clearly associated with pictorial manuscript production and the drawing of guiding lines on a rectangular strip in folio 217v (Fig. 8.1a). Black, a pigment obtained from a fruit known as nacazcolotl, is produced for writing, as exemplified by an illustration of a scribe in folio 281v, where his tools, chair, and book indicate a European activity (Fig. 8.1b). The Nahuatl text related to this image defines the black pigment as “a medium for painting, a medium for writing” (tlacuiloloni, letrachioaloni; Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, 241, Dupey García 2015, 235). The distinction between local and imported techniques and technologies is clearly stated. While black as a color has intrinsic symbolic associations in both pre-Hispanic and Indigenous colonial art, as stated in the same chapter on the Florentine Codex regarding the color tlilli (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015, 238), in the current discussion I am primarily concerned with what is clearly a lack of color: the use of black and white in an obvious and conscious opposition to a colored palette. Indeed, painting was considered writing in Mesoamerican tradition. Recent studies on the importance of colors in manuscripts and sculpture revealed that the meaning of images was closely tied to their material components (Magaloni Kerpel 2014, Dupey and Vásquez 2018). Hue, brilliance, texture, origin, production process, and provenience were all factored into the selection of a specific palette for any given occasion.

In the colonial setting, pictographic images not only had to coexist with written texts but also often played an ancillary role. The changing dynamic between these two poles (the written and the painted) is highlighted in manuscripts produced in the intellectual circles of the conventos using monochrome. In both Primeros Memoriales and

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8.1. The work of Sahagún

The intellectual enterprise of Bernardino de Sahagún culminated in two major works that are commonly referred to as Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex. In this section, they are analyzed by focusing on the distribution and function of the illustrations in the manuscripts, as well as their relationship to the corresponding written text. In the process, the deliberate role played by grisaille becomes apparent.
the Florentine Codex, images played a fundamentally different role than the nearly contemporaneous manuscripts discussed in the previous chapter despite being drawn by Indigenous artists. However, like the Codices Telleriano-Remensis, Vaticanus A, Tudela, and Magliabechiano, Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex are two distinct works that are closely related to each other, as the latter made ample use of the information and images found in the former, which was produced earlier. While Primeros Memoriales was largely drafted in Tepeapulco in the modern state of Hidalgo, the Florentine Codex was essentially a product of the College of Santiago Tlatelolco, where Sahagún ended his prolific career as a teacher and a missionary. Primeros Memoriales, which is missing some sections, is about a third of the length of the Florentine Codex, which comprises three volumes of over 700 folios each. Furthermore, in Primeros Memoriales, most illustrations are found in sections devoted to the religious aspects of Nahua culture, such as the veintena ceremonies and the array of gods; in the later Florentine Codex, sections devoted to natural philosophy are more profusely illustrated. While certain final decisions on the production of both manuscripts may only be speculated about (perhaps Sahagún realized that it was wiser not to indulge in the illustration of “idolatrous” subjects), it is worth engaging in a comparison of the strategies employed in the two works.

8.1.1. The gods and the chants

According to Sahagún himself (1950–1982, Introductory Volume, prologue to bk. 2) regarding the way that information was initially gathered, elderly people in the community of Tepeapulco discussed matters pertaining to various topics (e.g., court, warfare, politics, and religion) “in pictures.” It is possible that Sahagún was referring to pictographic documents that eventually became the sources for the selectively drafted images in Primeros Memoriales. Indigenous students and assistants eventually added Nahuatl text to the illustrations (López Austin 1974, 123, Quiñones Keber 1988, 202–203). A passage in Primeros Memoriales (paragraph 5A, ff. 261r–267v) depicts Mesoamerican and Nahua deities. Each image is accompanied by a short text in a manner that was probably similar to the way that Nahua researchers initially took notes in the field. Infolio 261r (Fig. 8.2), the first god depicted is Huitzilopochtli, the patron of the Mexica. Although the text on the left refers to him, he is preceded in the illustration by Paynal, a vicar or surrogate of Huitzilopochtli who plays a major role in the festival of Panquetzaliztli dedicated by the Mexica to their tutelary god (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34). Paynal is holding a white and blue banner that may indeed signal this celebration, as argued for a similar depiction on page 17 of the Codex Laud (Fig. 7.21). Huitzilopochtli carries a turquoise fire serpent disguise, known as *xiuhconahualli* in Nahuatl. In the corresponding image in the Codex Laud, the New Fire is lit on a turquoise fire serpent.

I believe that Paynal was depicted as preceding Huitzilopochtli in Primeros Memoriales, a decision that was later reversed in the corresponding section of the Florentine Codex (vol. 1, bk. 1, f. 10r), because of the
intrinsic ceremonial value assigned to the enunciation of a god. Mentioning a god means summoning their presence, an act that in itself implies ceremoniality and temporality. Gods cannot be fully distinguished from the specific celebration and moment in which they appear because they do not exist as an absolute idea; rather, they are the materialization of prayers, chants, and other ceremonial acts designed to summon them according to given calendrical occurrences (such as the veintena of Panquetzaliztli).

Even if depictions of single deities are a pictographic innovation extracted and reduced from more complex pictographic scenes (Quiñones Keber 1988, Boone 2019, 99–106), they still bear unmistakable traces of the Mesoamerican tradition of image-making, which materializes divinity through the medium of pictures. The succinct text that accompanies the images enumerates the gods’ attributes, from headdresses to staffs and other paraphernalia, in a rather descriptive manner—first for Huitzilopochtli, then Paynal. The text suggests that enunciation can create an image, its likeness (or ixiptla), in a similar manner to dough, stone, wood, or pigments (Magaloni Kerpel 2014, 9–13). The redundant and pleonastic listing of the images’ features, which may or may not be visible in the illustration, recalls the comments made by one of the annotators in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Reiterating in writing what is depicted in a side picture may seem repetitive according to the proto-scientific interpretive logic applied in “research” by Sahagún’s pupils. From the viewpoint of religion and ritual, however, correct repetition is necessary for the successful completion of a ceremony. If the ceremoniality of the god’s attributes and evocation is suppressed, the listing becomes repetitive and useless. Thus, the Sahaguntine encyclopedic project clashed with the intrinsic value of pictography as an expressive religious medium.

In the later redrafting of the Florentine Codex (vol. 1, bk. 1, ff. 10r–12v), deity depictions were placed at the beginning of the first book. They were not accompanied by descriptive texts but rather were assigned the names of Roman gods and a reference to the text in which their ceremony is mentioned (Fig. 8.3). In only two instances, images of the gods were reused to illustrate the cuicame (songs) in the appendix of the second book, which was dedicated to

Figure 8.3. The gods Opuchti, Yacatecutli, Xipec, and Nappa Tecutli, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 218, vol. 1, bk. 1, f. 12r. Courtesy of MiC. Any further reproduction is prohibited.
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the ceremonies of the veintenas (Fig. 8.4). The images of deities that accompanied the chants were adjusted to make the figures’ postures more dynamic than those of their counterparts in the first book. Xipe Totec, whose chant was analyzed in Section 2.3 of this book, is engaged in chanting, as indicated by the speech volutes emerging from his mouth. In the following image, his position has flipped, and he is playing a drum and drinking. These are fitting additions to a text that purportedly reproduces a chant—a performance. Thus, we are left to wonder whether this is a depiction of a deity or a performer. This ambiguity is even more apparent given that the god, priest, or impersonator performs a ritual and sings a song that should be chanted rather than by him. No clue is given on where the chant and dance may be taking place, as no participant or temple is shown. Instead, the image is witness to the effect of the chanting; it comes alive thanks to the power of the accompanying song.

In Sahagún’s cuicame, both texts and images are engaged in an act of mutual interpretation. They do not explain each other but rather indicate the constitutive elements of the performance. Collectively, song, music, dance, and the image of the god are the god. While the image itself remains only an illustration, it expresses the vitality and efficacy of the ceremony that does not lie in the clear enunciation or communication of content but rather in the correct realization of a performance. While written texts

Figure 8.4. The chants of Xipe Totec and Chicomecoatl, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 218, vol. 1, bk. 2, f. 143r. Courtesy of MiC. Any further reproduction is prohibited.
and images are forcefully separated by the colonial logic of writing, the painting of the singing Xipe Totec is a correlative of the transcribed chant, which also seems to have the power to breathe life into the image.

8.1.2. The huehuetlatolli and the book

Aside from the cuicame, there is another section in both Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex that includes the transcription of recited texts—namely, prayers and admonitions given by the rulers to their people and by parents to their children. Paragraphs 15–17 of Primeros Memoriales and Book 6 of the Florentine Codex are dedicated to the huehuetlatolli (words of the elders; Sullivan 1974). Unlike the cuicame, these texts are prosaic, although the language employed is still profusely rhetorical and metaphorical. The corresponding illustrations in both manuscripts share a lack of color and evident reliance on European models, especially engravings.

In Primeros Memoriales (paragraphs 15–17, ff. 61v–66r), uncolored images were deliberately employed to illustrate the rulers’ speeches and admonitions in a section of the manuscript on rulership. In folio 65v, the image of a lonely man illustrates “how the ruler felt compassion for the people” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 248; Fig. 8.5). The bearded

Figure 8.5. “How the ruler felt compassion for the people,” Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España. Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 9/5524, f. 65v.
man sits on an icpalli, a straw seat with a high back, and rests his head on his left hand in a pensive manner. This posture is typical of an innovative type of Ecce Homo or Man of Sorrows, which developed around 1500 in northern Europe and was especially popularized through German engravings and the work of Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 8.6). In New Spain, a close geographical and chronological example can be found in the upper cloister of the Augustinian convent in Malinalco in the state of Mexico. A despondent Christ sits on the cross, awaiting crucifixion (Fig. 8.7). A nun kneels and prays in front of Jesus, indicating the devotional and meditational nature of the image.

In the Florentine Codex, Book 6 includes the speeches of leaders but begins with prayers dedicated to the ancient gods, followed by a series of expiatory texts. In the first prayers, Tezcatlipoca is introduced as “principal god” (principal dios), betraying the Christianized overtones found throughout the texts. Moreover, all the illustrations are in grisaille, which led Magaloni Kerpel (2011, 73) to suggest an explicit adherence to European book illustrations of a mostly doctrinal and liturgical nature. The question remains, however, as to why the artists decided to employ such a strategy in this particular book.

Figure 8.8 presents a double illustration. A group of kneeling men in the bottom image direct their gaze upwards. The object of their attention is seemingly a monstrous creature floating in the sky in the top vignette. In the latter, a lone man stands with his arms crossed in a sign of respect for the same being. The illustrations seemingly depict Tezcatlipoca, who appears at the beginning of Book 1 in full attire. Here, however, the god is completely transformed, and his bifurcated tongue suggests a diabolical creature. In the image, the presence of both worshipers and a priest, who is cast in an intermediary role, separates the divine from the human in a clear hierarchical arrangement. At the same time, there are no costumes or musical instruments to indicate a specific ceremony or gods; instead, the image is a diagrammatic representation of a religious power structure.

Throughout Book 6 of the Florentine Codex, images and texts make constant (albeit indirect and implicit) references to Christianity by employing an image typology that abruptly deviates from Mesoamerican types and adheres to models derived from Christian doctrinal texts. Printing presses had been active in New Spain since 1539 and were almost exclusively devoted to the production of religious texts in Indigenous languages. It is likely that Indigenous peoples participated in the production of books in their native language, not only as writers and translators but also as illustrators and typographers (Grañén Porrúa 1991, 24–25, Garone Gravier 2011, 161–163). Despite fragmentary historical information, the participation of Indigenous intellectuals seems quite reasonable given that New Spain’s doctrinal books made extensive use of their native language in bilingual texts, a feature shared by Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex, and indeed an innovation of New Spain’s presses. Therefore, it is unsurprising that manuscript and book illustrations resembled each other, as they were all simultaneously produced in the same intellectual milieu of the friars’ conventual schools.
The strikingly different visual references used by Nahua artists in illustrations of the cuicame and the discourses of the elders demonstrate that there were two types of religious images at play, each with a distinct cultural ancestry and formal and iconographic features. They conveyed a different religious experience in pictures and words. It is generally assumed that huehuetlatolli was a Mesoamerican genre (León Portilla 1961). In the colonial context of book production, while the cuicame were largely left untranslated, the more prosaic discourses of the elders seem to find a counterpart in the doctrinal genre employed by the friars (Dibble 1974).

As for the illustrations, Tezcatlipoca is distorted and monstrous in Book 6 of the Florentine Codex. In Book 1, he appears with all his diagnostic attributes, along with all the other Mesoamerican gods in an arrangement akin to the Greco–Roman pantheon (Botta 2016, Olivier 2016). Perhaps a Classical topos allowed the tlacuilo a truer image of the ancient gods who were no longer worshiped (not openly, at least) when the book was compiled. However, is this depiction more reliable, or have we come to “believe” colonial images of Mesoamerican gods because they present the readable iconographic pictures that we need as scholars?

Figure 8.8. Prayer to Tezcatlipoca, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 219, vol. 2, bk. 6, f. 8r. Courtesy of MiC. Any further reproduction is prohibited.
The overall structure of the Florentine Codex, which loosely follows that of Primeros Memoriales, is encyclopedic and based on medieval and universalistic conceptions of knowledge (Robertson 1959, 167–172, Palmeri Capesciotti 2001, Ríos Castaño 2014, ch. 3). As remarked by Quiñones Keber (1988, 207), the first six books of the manuscript are dedicated to ancient sacred wisdom, including chapters on gods, ceremonies, divination, and prognostication—all aspects also treated in ancient pictographic manuscripts. Books 7 to 12, by contrast, concern natural philosophy—topics and genres that have no counterpart in Indigenous manuscripts. The Mesoamerican roots of the first six books prioritized orality and performance tied to ritual events. Book 6 also belongs to this part, but incorporates Christian sermons and prayers, effectively mediating between a Mesoamerican conception of ceremonies and their depictions and Western rhetoric and images. While the texts are inspired and poetic in Book 6, Tezcatlipoca is depicted as unreachable and monstrous. Through the use of grisaille, the tlacuilos commented on all that is missing when a Christian conception is applied to Mesoamerican religion: the gods are unrecognizable, distant, and silenced. Monochrome illustrations in Sahagún’s works typically accompanied very long texts that claimed to be verbatim reproductions of recited originals. The text is thus frozen and not performed. The gods have left this world, and the new religion posits a god who remains unknowable. The use of monochrome, based on engraved illustrations, communicates the idea that the Christian way of constructing doctrinal truth is incapable of conveying Mesoamerican divinity. Thus, Sahaguntine illustrations express the impossibility of a resolution between Mesoamerican and Christian conceptions of the sacred.

8.1.3. History and its moral

Book 12 of the Florentine Codex relates the conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan by Cortés’ invading troops. The book is unique to the Florentine Codex and not present in Primeros Memoriales. Lockhart (1993, 1–27) argued that the narrative of the city’s siege and capitulations was likely collected at an early date in Tlatelolco, based on details of the account that specifically refer to this locality of Mexico City. It is well known that illustrations were left uncolored starting from Volume 3, Book 11, folio 178r, which is probably due to technical and logistical problems such as a lack of pigment or time to apply it before the work was shipped to Europe. However, in Book 12, the use of color is resumed in a few vignettes, thus creating a visible contrast with the rest of the images.

Folio 34r (Fig. 8.9) illustrates the rebellion of Tlatelolca warriors after the massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards in the sacred precinct during the celebrations of Toxcatl. A Nahua warrior overcomes his adversaries, who are falling in the background. His spear is horizontally positioned and straight, and the diagonal posture of his legs creates an abstract and solid composition that starkly contrasts with the dismembered bodies of the falling Spaniards. The colorful feathers on the warrior’s helm and the pink hue of his skin clearly indicate that the figures in the background are purposefully painted in grisaille. The Tlatelolca warrior is static and victorious, while the Spaniards are trampled and defeated.

The illustration neatly conforms to the genre of Book 12, which appears to be based on a long-standing European historiographic paradigm established by Greek historian Herodotus, a fact that has not been recognized before. Herodotus’ narration of the Greek war of resistance against the Achaemenid Empire combines eyewitness accounts of battles and other pivotal events of the conflict with anecdotal and ethnographic details about the jewelry, armor, and weapons of the foreign Persians (Hartog 2009). Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 12) adheres to this Classical topos by declaring in the introduction to Book 12 that he wanted to compile the history of the conquest to record Indigenous terms for weaponry and other information related to the Nahua art of war. Ludo Snijders indicated to me in a personal communication (2015) that the reference to the Persian war was indeed explicit in the image under discussion, as well as in the following images in folios 36v and 39r because the shield of the Nahua warrior sports a capital lambda (Λ) whose diagonals mimic the firm posture of the Tlatelolca warrior. The letter is equivalent to the Latin “L” and stands for “Lacedaemon,” the Greek name of the city of Sparta. It bears remembering that the Spartans were the army that led the Greek coalition in a heroic last stand at Thermopylae.

In central Mexico, history was not as favorable to the Nahua as it was to the Greeks. When the Tlatelolca rebellion finally succumbed to the Spaniards, all was lost. The use of monochrome in this context functions within a specific historiographic genre and should not be understood in relation to chants, ceremonies, and performance, as analyzed above, but rather as a parable or moral. In “pagan” times, before the advent and imposition of Christianity, the confrontation between Spaniards and Nahua would have resulted in a favorable outcome for the besieged Nahua. The painter of the images in Book 12 took the final defeat and imposition of Christianity as an incontrovertible fact and a starting point. He projected the events of the conquest to an ancient time, when the “others” (or barbarians) would have been the Spaniards. Thus, the cities around the lake in the basin of Mexico were accordingly equated to the coalition of Greek cities against the invading Persian army.

The impact of Christianity’s imposition is evident in another illustration in which color is applied as a juxtaposition to monochrome. The vignette in folio 40v (Fig. 8.10) represents in a vertical arrangement the sequence of events that followed the death of Motecuhzoma II, leader of Tenochtitlan and the Mexica, and Itzquauhtzin, ruler of Tlatelolco, when the Spaniards threw their bodies into the city canals. Eventually, Nahua priests recovered the bodies and gave them a proper burial. In the first illustration at the top, two Spaniards and the rigid but lifeless body of Itzquauhtzin are painted in full color; this contrasts with...
the lower half of the image, in which the murky waters of the canal and the body of the Mexica tlatoani are depicted in gray. The use of color progressively ceases and in the second vignette the image is rendered only in black outline. This shift in the use of color is accompanied by changes in composition. While the bodies of the deceased rulers are depicted in a frontal position in the upper part of the image and the point of view is longitudinally placed in the air, Motecuhzoma’s body is disarticulated when Nahua priests transport it. The viewer finds themself on the same plane as the protagonists of the events. The lifeless movement of the Mexica ruler’s body equals that of the fallen Spanish soldiers in the previously discussed illustration on folio 34r to indicate defeat and death. It also signals the tlatoani’s transition from the status of a hero to that of a defeated human.

Magaloni Kerpel (2003a, 38–40) interpreted the two compositions as contrasting pre-Hispanic and Spanish views. First, the static and front-facing bodies of...
the deceased rulers rely on Mesoamerican canons in the representation of sacrificial victims, while the transportation of Motecuhzoma’s body is based on the Catholic theme of the burial of Christ in the following scene. I agree with the latter identification, which is amply evidenced by the many representations of the same theme in Mexican conventos (Fig. 8.11). However, I do not think that the colored and frontal depiction of the Indigenous leaders is related to the depiction of human sacrifice in the Florentine Codex or pre-Hispanic manuscripts, which usually show naked, disarticulated or dismembered, bleeding bodies (see, for example, Fig. 4.14, 6.9). Rather, I believe that both images rely on prototypes of the dead body of Christ, whose depiction underwent profound transformation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ringbom 1965, Belting 1994, Nagel 2000). Increasingly emotional and dramatic images and compositions departed from long-held canons imposed by Byzantine icons.
which were front-facing, hieratic, and flat, as seen in the famous feather mosaic that Diego Huanitzín, the governor of Mexico City, bequeathed to Pope Paul III in 1539 (Fig. 8.12). The sequence of images in the Florentine Codex presents the trajectory from iconicity to naturalism.

According to the text and images, the burial of Motecuhzoma was not conducted according to established pre-Hispanic customs. Instead, his body was covered with wood and then burnt. In the Nahuatl text, it is further stated that the body of Motecuhzoma was disrespected and humiliated in a manner reminiscent of Jesus’ suffering during the Passion. Eventually, Motecuhzoma’s body burst into flames and produced a foul odor. According to the narrative in both images and words, it would appear that the Mexica ruler lost his sacred status when his life assumed the same trajectory as that of Christ. However, Jesus died as a man, only to be resurrected as a pure spirit. By contrast, the Mexica ruler had the opposite destiny, moving from a deified presence to physical disappearance (Bröchler 2009, 63–69).

The use of monochrome enabled Indigenous artists to discuss the new status and function of the image in a colonial context in purely visual terms. The humanization of God according to Christian canons denotes a world without gods. The new god imposed by the Spaniards after barbaric campaigns of destruction that razed ancient

Figure 8.11. The burial of Christ, sixteenth century. Cloister, Convento de Santo Domingo, Tepetlahxicoc, state of Mexico. Photo by Javier García.

Figure 8.12. Diego Huanitzín, Mass of Saint Gregory, detail. Musée des Jacobins, Auch. Photo by Steven Zucker.

temples and their images bears the wounds of defeat on his body: humiliation, betrayal, torture, and death. Motecuhzoma-Christ expresses the disappearance of the gods from Indigenous land. The use of grisaille creates an image that is only a trace of its former self, deprived of all the colors and powers that were lost on the way from the Old World.

8.2. The Codex Yanhuitlan

The Codex Yanhuitlan, the last manuscript considered in this book, is quite different from those addressed so far. Its contents are not religious, although there are remarkable images of Mesoamerican gods. It dates to the colonial period but was not produced in the schools of the conventos. However, as I claim in the following pages, it shows a clear relationship with and dependence on the artistic innovations of the friars’ workshops. The Codex Yanhuitlan was produced in the Mixtec town of the same name under Indigenous patronage and thus offers an opportunity to close the story of Mesoamerican pictography and religion by returning to an Indigenous point of view, albeit in an inevitably colonial context.

The manuscript hails from the Mixteca in modern Oaxaca, southern Mexico, a region known for its long pictographic tradition in pre-contact times. Possibly drafted around 1550, the manuscript directly addresses historical events and characters related to the tumultuous period following the invasion and the imposition of the colonial regime. For this reason, it has attracted the attention of scholars since the 1940s, which resulted in a progressive clearer image of its contents and the town’s history (Jiménez Moreno and Mateos Higuera 1940, Berlin 1947, Sepúlveda y Herrera 1994, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009, Doesburg et al. 2015). Every folio of the manuscript was cut and separated from the original quire or binding, most likely in the eighteenth century. Most of the pages are in the Biblioteca Lafragua in Puebla (hereafter referred to as “Lafragua”), while other parts are found in the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City and the Centro Cultural Santo Domingo of the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa (CCSD) in Oaxaca.

I specifically address the manuscript’s style and iconography, which display a unique intermingling of Mixtec, Nahua, and Western features. Grisaille is used throughout the manuscript, which represents an innovation of the Codex Yanhuitlan within the Mixtec pictographic tradition. Folio Lafragua 8v (Fig. 8.13) depicts a typical colonial scene. A large Spanish figure looms in the center and is seated on a large wooden armchair. He is engaged in a lively interaction with three visibly smaller Indigenous men while holding an oversized necklace (most likely a rosary), which extends to the other side of the page. The Indigenous figures on the Spaniard’s right stand on top of a rectangle, a place name for Yanhuitlan found throughout the manuscript. Another male figure addresses the Spaniard from the left. The lower part of the page is missing, but there is another place name on the right, which is currently unidentified. The identity of the scene’s protagonist has been a matter of disagreement among scholars. On the one hand, Jiménez Moreno and Higuera (1940, 64) considered him to be a religious figure such as a vicar or a bishop because of his long robe and large hat, whose brim is tied with a knotted rope. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2009, 167), on the other hand, identified him as a lay person—more specifically, Francisco de las Casas, a Spanish conquistador and the first encomendero of Yanhuitlan, who was said to have usurped the role of the friars and taught the rosary (doctrine) to Indigenous people under his encomienda (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1999, 167–168).

I believe that an illustration produced in Juan Pablos’ printing workshop in Mexico City may contribute to the discussion on the identity of this enigmatic character. The print first appeared in Pedro de Gante’s 1553 doctrina (doctrinal manual), a bilingual Nahuatl and Spanish text. On a page dedicated to the Spiritual Works of Mercy (Las obras de misericordia spirituales; Fig. 8.14), a small illustration depicts a man engaged in a lively conversation with a group of smaller people standing in front of him. The image illustrates one of the seven spiritual works of mercy—namely instructing the ignorant, which involved lay people, not friars or priests, in the care of the spiritual
Figure 8.14. Spiritual Works of Mercy. Illustration from Pedro de Gante, Doctrina cristiana en lengua mexicana (Mexico City: Juan Pablos, 1553), f. 60v. Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

well-being of those in need. People who offered works of mercy were often depicted wearing a long robe that covered their entire body and a large hat, a reference to the first act of mercy attributed to a traveling Samaritan. Therefore, the scene from the Mexican engraving shows a double relationship with the page from the Codex Yanhuitlan in both form and content. Not only can the central character be identified as a lay person, but it can also be argued that he is in fact engaged in a spiritual work of mercy, given the large rosary that fills the page. García Valencia and Hermann Lejarazu (2012) noted that the Codex Yanhuitlan’s characters make particularly complex gestures that nonetheless bear little resemblance to the equally elaborate hand movements of the protagonists of the Mixtec codices. The colonial manuscript adheres more closely to the rhetorical gesturality of Renaissance treatises found in many of the early illustrations produced for Juan Pablos’ press, which indicates that such representational conventions circulated in New Spain’s artistic, intellectual, and Indigenous circles from a very early date and had already been fully absorbed by local artists when the Codex Yanhuitlan was produced.

Juan Pablos (originally Giovanni Paoli from Brescia, Italy) co-founded the first printing shop on the continent in 1539 with Juan Cromberger, who hailed from Seville. The printing house was located on a plot that was once the property of Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop and inquisitor of New Spain, who also resided nearby (Grañén Porrúa 2010, 3–6). The Franciscan school San José de los Naturales was built on the old grounds of the destroyed royal workshops of the palace of Moteczuma (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010, 137) and located only blocks away from the press. Although the conventual school in Santiago Tlatelolco is widely credited as the main center of production for Indigenous manuscripts in the capital, the city center of Mexico was also important. The intellectual and physical proximity of the Office of the Inquisition, the school of San José de los Naturales and the press of Juan Pablos offers an opportunity to ponder the exchanges that may have occurred between men who worked and lived there at both the local and regional level, once the effects of the convents’ institutionalized education were felt in other parts of New Spain.

In this light, further similarities between images produced in Juan Pablos’ workshop and the Codex Yanhuitlan may not be coincidental. The Manual de adultos, a catechism for adults, was possibly the first book published in the New World by the press and is known today only through fragments held at the Biblioteca Nacional de España (Grañén Porrúa 2010, 22, 145–148). The book appears to be a Latin-to-Spanish translation of Liber Sacerdotalis (first printed by Pietro Ravani in Venice in 1523), a very popular manual for the administration of sacraments and Catholic liturgy that was widely utilized by friars in New Spain, including Bishop Juan de Zumárraga (Zulaica Gárate 1939, 31–36). The frontispiece of the Liber Sacerdotalis depicts a small group of priests or novices who are presented from the back and kneeling in front of the pope and other prelates (Fig. 8.15). A similar representational strategy is used to illustrate a crowd of men on one of the Codex Yanhuitlan’s pages, which breaks with pre-Hispanic Mixtec conventions (Fig. 8.16; Escalante Gonzalbo 2010, 165–168). Some of their heads have a tonsure, which was typical for ordained men but quite uncharacteristic for Indigenous men.

Despite the Codex Yanhuitlan’s evident Mixtec affiliation, the manuscript’s exact site of production is not known. The Indigenous ruler of the town, don Domingo de Guzmán, and the governor don Francisco de las Casas spent two years in Zumárraga’s prisons in Mexico City while the Inquisition officially investigated accusations of idolatry and apostasy leveled against them (Greenleaf 1969, 74–81). During interrogatories, which occurred between 1544 and 1546, Domingo de Guzmán testified that he knew the Christian doctrine because he learned it from a book circulated by the friars (Grañén Porrúa 2010, 21). It is even more likely that, during their two years in jail, both Mixtec men were given regular instruction with doctrinal manuals. The manuscript was painted not long after the two Mixtec leaders’ safe return to their town; thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the painter of the Codex Yanhuitlan relied on print images.
Another interesting correlation between circulating Christian prints and the imagery of the Codex Yanhuitlan can be seen in the two large medallions that depict a solar god and Xipe Totec in AGN folios 504r–507v (in the left of Fig. 8.17). The heads are encircled by a series of rays commonly found on Mixtec gold disks. Although they presumably depict pre-Hispanic objects, the rendition of the two gods’ profiles is inconsistent with known Mixtec goldwork, which favors front-facing and often three-dimensional depictions. Rather, the medallic portraits of Christ (Hill 1920), which became increasingly common in fourteenth-century Europe, seem to be a closer iconographic antecedent. A print by Hans Burgkmair was widely copied, and different versions appeared in the books of New Spain. Some were perhaps locally produced, as evinced from their style and execution (Grañén Porrúa 1993–1994, 105–107; Fig. 8.18). In folio 504v, the two medallions of the solar god and Xipe are paired with two anthropomorphic and life-like depictions of the rain god, who is known as Ñuhu Ndzaui among the Mixtecs, and a female goddess. As established by Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2009, 159), the four gods correspond to the four tribute and veintena periods of the Mexica Empire, to which Yanhuitlan was subject (see Section 4.2). The solar god is related to the celebration of Panquetzaliztli.
Figure 8.17. Reading right to left, a cave and four gods. Codex Yanhuitlan, ff. 504–507. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.

Xipe Totec to Tlaxiipehualiztli, and the rain god to Etzalcualiztli. Finally, the goddess can be identified as Tlazolteotl, who corresponds to the veintena of Ochpaniztli. According to the most accepted reconstruction of the manuscript (Doesburg et al. 2015, 53–54), the four gods were positioned right before a giant reptilian maw, as reconstructed in Figure 8.17. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2009, 159) interpreted the crocodilian creature as the first day of the calendar, day Crocodile, while Doesburg et al. (2015, 54) considered it to be the entrance to a cave and the earth, which is often zoomorphically rendered in pictographic manuscripts. These two options are not mutually exclusive, as previously seen on pages 39–40 of the Codex Borgia (Fig. 3.5) and pages 17–22 of the Codex Laud (Fig. 7.22). In all these representations, the day/cave crocodile eats the days and ceremonies and the gods that lead them. In the Codex Borgia, the extended and horizontal jaws of the crocodilian creature count as the first day, day Crocodile, of the two sets of days that extend over the sides of the manuscript. In the Codex Laud, the gods walk towards a cave, where an offering is eventually placed. As noted by Anders and Jansen (1994, 253), in Codex Laud the day 1 Jaguar is inserted into the cave in the form of a round dot and a feline ear at the back of the crocodilian monster. The pages of the Codex Yanhuitlan, possibly painted in the early 1550s, are not only among the earliest surviving depictions of Mesoamerican gods in the post-conquest period but also indeed contemporaneous to the veintena images from colonial manuscripts discussed in the previous chapters. Based on these notable aspects of the Codex Yanhuitlan, it can be concluded that the manuscript was produced by an artist from a cultural and religious milieu who was well aware of the friars’ intellectual pursuits and their preferred portrayal of both “ancient” Mesoamerican religion and Christian doctrine.

A third distinctive iconographic element found throughout the manuscript further corroborates the idea that the tlacuilo of the Codex Yanhuitlan had been trained at the schools of the conventos. In two instances (Lafragua 9v, AGN 506v), Indigenous rulers sit on the typical Nahua icpalli, a royal seat with a high back. In folios Lafragua 8v (Fig. 8.13), Lafragua 1v, and CCSD 1r, women sport the typical two-horned hairstyle of married Nahua women, while Indigenous men wear the characteristic central Mexican tilma, a large cloth knotted on the shoulder. These features are not found in Mixtec manuscripts. The same “foreign” conventions appear in the sixteenth-century monochrome murals in San Juan Teitipac in the valley of Oaxaca, in which local friars, Spaniards, and Indigenous people participate in the Holy Friday procession (Fig. 8.19). The use of Nahua conventions indicates that the artist was either from central Mexico or had been trained at a conventual school in that region. The fact that monochrome was employed in both mural and manuscript painting further suggests that the technique was also tied to a specific central Mexican artistic training and the schools of the conventos.

The heterogeneity of the Codex Yanhuitlan’s sources complicates the identification of the document’s genre. In addition, its purpose and commission are not documented.

Figure 8.19. Parade during Holy Friday, sixteenth century. Convento of San Juan Teitipac, Oaxaca. Photo by Javier García.
The combination of Christian and Mesoamerican iconography seems even more baffling when one recalls the persecution suffered by the leaders of Yanhuitlan shortly before the manuscript’s presumed realization. The manuscript was likely sponsored by the cacique Domingo de Guzmán, following his return to power after two years in prison in Mexico City, where he had been formally charged and persecuted by the Inquisition. Perhaps don Domingo’s defeated rulership after years of struggle accounts for the juxtaposition of different ideologies: pre-Hispanic gods and their importance in the Indigenous tribute system and Spanish and Dominican attempts to dominate local resources.

8.3. Discussion

As Quiñones Keber (1988, 203) remarked, Sahagún’s project was inherently contradictory. The friars sought information regarding Indigenous religion and customs while simultaneously persecuting, demonizing, and destroying every manifestation of them. Nahua artists bore witness to a world in which the past that they were asked to portray was only visible in the ruins that surrounded the schools that they attended. In the Sahaguntine work, the reference to Classical antiquity and the abrupt passage to Christianity should be understood in this light.

Although it is deeply indebted to the artistic endeavors of the conventual schools, the Codex Yanhuitlan seems to propose a different model of coexistence. Mesoamerican gods, despite being depicted according to European conventions, were not framed within a Classical canon but rather were clearly presented as part of a Mesoamerican understanding of time, the calendar, and tribute. Mesoamerican gods and Christian symbols and institutions are represented in the Codex Yanhuitlan, in stark contrast to the conspicuous absence of European religion in the extensive Sahaguntine works (Terraciano 2010, 67). Despite its purported ethnographic stance, Sahagún’s experiment is fraught with the impossibility of reconciliation between the Mesoamerican and Christian worldviews, as seen in the image of Motecuhzoma-Christ. Rather than a mediation between two worlds, as frequently suggested (e.g., Escalante Gonzalbo 2003, 191, Magaloni Kerpel 2003b), the Nahua artists who worked within the confines of the conventual schools belonged to a single world, replete with contradictions that could not be resolved in light of the friars’ patronage and exigencies.

The use of monochrome reveals the mechanism by which the painted image was created and conceived and, by extension, reveals gaps in the friars’ contradictory project. As previously suggested (Cline 1988, Magaloni Kerpel 2003b, 221), it is possible that Book 12 of the Florentine Codex offers a subversive view of Sahagún’s project that was highly critical of Spanish military and political presence in Mexico. However, Indigenous artists were required to frame history through a dramatic and irreconcilable division between the periods before and after the conquest, a legacy that lingers in academia to this day. The Codex Yanhuitlan, in contrast, manages to portray the Indigenous point of view on the colonial situation. As a result, Mesoamerican and Catholic sacred images and objects are given similar and equal treatment in the Codex Yanhuitlan. By contrast, in the Florentine Codex, Christian imagery is only indirectly found in the diabolical representation of God-Tezcatlipoca in Book 6 and the Motecuhzoma-Christ. The Codex Yanhuitlan indeed belongs to a long Mixtec tradition of picture writing that did not wane with the conquest but adjusted to the colonial context and continued well into the eighteenth century, whereas the Sahaguntine experiment was short-lived because it was incapable of translating and imagining Mesoamerican religious and cultural conditions in the colonial context.
Conclusion

Understanding Mesoamerican religious pictography requires rethinking and questioning our own conceptions of what pictures and calendars “do.” I proposed that pictographic images were not a series of finite symbol sets. While they were part of a larger cultural system, both their symbolic meaning and formal qualities were open to reinterpretation and reinvention depending on the occasion, time, and place of execution. Mesoamerican pictorials are characterized by an enduring but somewhat deceptive iconicity. As demonstrated throughout this book, iconographic studies and interpretations of Indigenous art rely heavily on external sources, which are often fraught with ignorance and prejudice on the part of the writers. In the Western artistic tradition, which has historically favored representation over abstraction, naturalism tends to be understood as a strategy that strips images of magical powers by constraining them to reality. In Indigenous America, where there is no external “text” (either written or recited) for explaining images (Severi 2004), the mimetic and iconic impulse is of a different nature, more akin to magic. Creating a picture by copying and replicating generates a second nature to the original capable also of multiplying its powers (Taussig 1993). By creating a picture of a god with the attributes of an animal or a plant, their unique abilities—flight, vision, strength, dexterity, and curative properties—are transferred to the book, where the image resides, and to the person invoking the god, who verbally replicates the power of the original. In other words, pictographic images do not function according to the Western semiosis that encodes meaning through external referents. Instead, they derive their power from the suggestion of analogies, assonances, and resemblances that generate meaning within the picture.

Understanding pictographic images as generators of meaning by association rather than symbols also has implications for the understanding of time and time-keeping systems as cultural constructions, as it contradicts the notion of time as objectively measurable and controllable by technological means. Mechanical, digital, and astronomical clocks that can capture time in an increasingly precise manner turn our conception of time into something unquestionable and absolute. What if time in Mesoamerica was understood as being inherently dependent on the tonalpohualli, the mathematical system employed to measure it, with all its possibilities and constraints? I believe that the numerous inconsistencies found in the correlation of the Christian and Mesoamerican calendars demonstrate that there was no impulse towards synchronicity in Indigenous America. Rather, time-keeping was conceived as a conscious activity for pondering human destiny and one’s place in the world. There were not two (or more) separate calendars in ancient Mesoamerica, one historical and one religious, because reckoning with the past and envisioning the future always entailed mediation with the constraints of the present. A thorough reconsideration of the veintena cycle is a theme that extends over this entire book and encompasses both the potency of images and the calendar. I proposed that the visionary aspects of the veintenas were profoundly misunderstood and silenced by the friars and their pupils, who refrained from describing the most private and mystical aspects of the rituals and privileged information on their public execution instead. The fact that even the earliest colonial sources on the ceremonial cycle were compiled more than a generation after the last public performance took place further complicates the matter. The domestication of the veintena rituals relied on the creation of a calendar ad hoc and the pursuit of a correlation between Mesoamerican and Christian chronologies. Finally, I proposed seeking fragmented clues on the veintenas in pre-Hispanic and early colonial documents (the Codices Borgia, Laud, Magliabechiano, and Yanhuitlan) to counter and question the systematic reconstruction conducted by the friars.

Consequently, I believe that the strict distinction between religious and historical documents should also be questioned, as it relies too heavily on European and post-Enlightenment conceptions of history and religion. While there were certainly different genres of pictorial manuscripts (e.g., genealogical, tributary, and divinatory), separating belief from fact is not always an easy feat. Historical events, especially catastrophic ones such as conquest and famine, impact not only religious behavior but also ideas regarding divinity and destiny. Moreover, preconceived notions informed by one’s education and culture dictate the way in which even traumatic events are apprehended and understood. I would like to conclude this book with a note on a specific Nahua tradition employed to describe pictographic manuscripts in Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29). In a chapter dedicated to the discussion of the various kinds of people who dwelt in Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards, the first paragraphs introduce the Toltecs, the putative cultural ancestors of the Aztecs. According to the text, “the Toltecs were very wise” (Sahagún, 1950–1982, bk. 10, ch. 29, 168) because they invented the year count (cextiuhlapoalli) and the day count (tonalpoalli): “They established the way in which the night, the day, would work; which day sign was good, favorable; and which was evil […]. All their discoveries formed the book of dreams.” In Nahua, the “book of dreams” is called a temicamatl, which is given as “book for interpreting dreams” in Anderson and Dibble’s translation. However, from the passage above, it can be inferred that the temicamatl was a book that contained all calendrical and mantic knowledge and not a separate book used to interpret dreams. Later in the same chapter, in a passage on the origins of the Mexico, the temicamatl is mentioned again as an invention of the wise and