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1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My research is situated in the field of the transformation of pre-Columbian artistic expressions under the circumstances of colonization. One of the challenges of this area of knowledge is the need to recognize forms and meanings potentially belonging to two different traditions, and to value their connecting routes. It can be compared with the study of Christian art of Late Antiquity, insofar as it is necessary to consider pagan symbolic traditions, as well as the new languages generated in Christian thought.

My work has taken care of two aspects of this transformation of indigenous art: On the one hand, I have dealt with a set of artistic manifestations that formed an integrated whole and reached their full visibility only within liturgy. On the other hand, I have studied pictographic codices produced by native artists throughout the sixteenth century, in which the rationality of the changes can be explored in detail.

I would highlight three specific methodological challenges: 1) Characterize Mesoamerican religiosity and liturgy as it survived the cataclysm of state religions after the Conquest. 2) Define the ways of action of religious orders to conduct the process of syncretism. 3) Build the category of Mesoamerican pictographic language.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

In *Islands of History*, by Marshall Sahlins (Chicago 1985), I found approaches that stimulated my reflection on the symbolic expressions of cultural diversity in colonization contexts. The book gave me tools to inquire about how traditions determine cognitive criteria. In *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, by E. H. Gombrich (Princeton 1960) I obtained very useful clues to meditate on what today we would call the construction of pictorial languages, and especially some guidelines that have allowed me to build a working definition of the concept of “Pictographic language”. And, thirdly, I read an Italian version of several papers by Aby Warburg, under the title *La rinascita del paganesimo antico*, originally *Gesammelte Schriften*, recollected

by Gertrud Bing (Leipzig-Berlin 1932). There I could see acute insights that guided my inquiry into the use of humanist sources in New Spain, and a line of thought on the Paganism/Christianity relationship, which has accompanied my vision of the sixteenth century since then.

*3. What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

I find that any form of methodological extremism that proclaims the superiority of one research strategy and the obsolescence of the others can impoverish Art history. I also believe that the instrumental utility of some research steps is often confused with the explanation strategy, which should be as comprehensive as possible. That said, I find that the exploration of style is a necessary tool to identify basic aspects of geographical or ethnic affiliation, and more complex aspects regarding the intentionality of works of art. I also think that iconography, as an assessment, even if provisional, of the potential meanings of an image, offers a starting point for other revisions.

The dichotomy iconography/style is a naïve appreciation: no scholar can ignore that style acts as a factor in the construction of meaning, that stylistic variations respond to needs for meaning.

The writings of classic authors of iconography, such as Edgar Wind or Erwin Panofsky were quite complex constructions, difficult to overcome; they implied a great humanistic erudition, philological strategies, as well as very lucid notions of the History of ideas and the analysis of social contexts.

*4. Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

Some of the recent turns in the history of images are the continuation of methodological explorations begun long ago. In recent decades, for example, a way has been found to introduce semiotics among the tools of the art historian, without the previous levels of conflict and misunderstanding.

Studies on reception, whose long history Peter Burke reminds us, have served in these days to open new routes in the knowledge of images. I appreciate and share Burke’s idea that “the more distant the two cultures are, the more visible the reception process becomes”, which makes this approach especially useful for shedding light on images in the context of the relationship between The West and the indigenous worlds.

Some studies on the cultural patterns of colonial societies have proposed very innovative approaches as to what we could call “the double reading” of objects: objects related to native traditions, and at the same time inserted in the order of European and Christian customs, and even in the world market. In this respect, the work of Thomas B.F. Cummins seems exemplary to me.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

One of the most relevant notions that have been constructed in the history of art in recent decades is that of *pictorial language*: a type of analysis that transcends the boundaries between formal and iconographic studies, and that also considers the complex problems of materiality. The exploration of pictorial language has relied in some way on the methodological legacy of structural semiotics, and on studies, quite recent, on the *gaze* as a determining *historical fact* in artistic processes.

Colonial artifacts and images show, on the one hand, the decomposition of native techniques and styles and, on the other, a variety of adaptation strategies to coexist with European forms. Images immersed in domination/negotiation dynamics usually show a delicate balance in the construction of meanings; they take advantage of different metaphorical levels of symbols in search of religious and cultural compatibility. This circumstance of my object of study inclines me to seek more comprehensive methodological approaches, capable of exploring the semantic routes created by procedures such as analogy and juxtaposition. The question of colonial images goes far beyond the “coexistence of styles”: it is precisely about the creation of new plastic languages.

6. *What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

I work with images and liturgical spaces, and with pictorial representations of the territory that seek to intervene in the negotiations between indigenous people and Spanish colonists. From that study experience, and meditating on previous research, I would say that *the meaning of an image is the way in which its visual configuration confirms a belief*.

I think of an example, which I will explain without details. The members of an indigenous brotherhood meet in the cloister of the monastery, there they make smaller processions than those carried out in the atrium. The pavements of the cloister have been flattened with red gravel, as red were the stones of the cave in which their ancestors saw the sacred sign that motivated them to stop their migration and found the city State. In the cloister here are images of jaguars, as in native founding legends. On the top of the fountain stands the sculpture of an eagle, brought from the ancient settlement which the friars have forced them to abandon. In the procession they carry crosses adorned with feathers and flowers.

This whole set of images has a deep meaning for the community: we are Christians, we are pilgrims, our ethnic history is part of the history of salvation.

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

Most liturgical images were embedded in complex assemblages and only within them did they have full meaning. Spaces, routes, and illuminations, as well as ornaments, costumes and other images were part of such sets.

This becomes evident in the spectacular *autos sacramentales* and in rural processions, but it was something very widespread, especially in the liturgy of the 16th century.

Even relatively sober ceremonies, such as the procession of a brotherhood through the corridors of the cloister, formed part, together with the images, of the same unit of meaning. The narrative of the Passion of Christ, which was the most common pictorial program in the lower cloisters of New Spain, had to be combined with the march of the believers to complete a meaning such as "His sacrifice produces our *salvation*".

Incense or gunpowder smoke was used in New Spain, and still today, to form a cloud that surrounds some processional images. At certain festivals, the offering of bread and wine is also caused to rise from a cloud of smoke. The device of the cloud produces the notion/sensation of wonder and signals the crossing of the border between the divine and the human.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

I think a distinction can be made between two types of studies on human relationship to images. Those that deal with a more intellectual relationship, based on leisurely observation, and linked to aesthetic judgment and literature. And, on the other hand, those that address a more emotional, passionate relationship, based on the gaze, even on glance. At the risk of simplifying things, we could say that these are two forms of relationship with images, one elitist (courtesan or bourgeois) and the other popular, or popular collective.

Works like Michael Baxandall's have taught us to what extent there is a social regulation of styles, including an elitist social construction of pictorial languages. Other studies have warned us of the power of images, *quasi* acting subjects, in various contexts.

Peter Burke constructed a fairly complete model that contemplates the intellectual construction of images, the variations that result from that construction, and the collective responses to images.

There is an asymmetry that we should consider in more transversal investigations: the elitist response to images is such that it can modify images/ the popular response is such that it can accept (or reject, for that matter) images as facts of power.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers' understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

From time to time, the concern of some groups about the possibility that images teach something other than what should be accepted has been revealed. That fear shows a strong belief in the ability of images to instruct. The time of the Counter-Reformation is exemplary; and it is particularly striking what we see within the corpus of precepts and discussions on painting in the Spanish seventeenth century: a remarkable conviction in the pedagogical usefulness of the image!

I hesitate to accept that radical faith in the ability of images to document the people's conceptions. Along with the images of the Counter-Reformation, sermons and catechesis

were developed, and there was a general care for the respect of orthodoxy, fueled by the real risk that the Inquisition represented. In that context, images could confirm more than instruct, celebrate more than explain.

I tend to think of the efficacy of the image rather in terms of its ability to make beliefs visible. If the *Divina Comedia* described, for educated people, a topography of Heaven and Hell, the sermons simplified and disseminated it: and the paintings offered a visible synthesis.

The painting can say as much as “Thus travels the light of Glory ... Something like this is the way to empyrean heaven ...”.

#### 10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

I think there is no doubt that materiality is part of the message. And today we can approach the material consistency of images better than ever. For centuries, materials have been understood as conveyors of certain values, such as rusticity or nobility, inevitably connoting the meaning of the works. To this traditional assessment, we should add a relatively recent understanding of materials as the origins of the meaning process, at least in some cultures and in certain types of works. I believe that the use that many abstract artists made of materials, as objective or natural referents, not only favored the aesthetic approach of the public, but also promoted a new interest in “understanding” materials. I think of Tàpies, or Pollock.

However, I am more familiar with non-Western and syncretic art and its ceremonial contexts. Some progress has been made in identifying the cosmological meaning of certain materials. And, thus, it turns out that we can affirm that, in the first place, it is jade: the green stone is the main source of meaning. And then there are its forms, like the ax or the drop of water, that qualify its meaning. The same can happen with the quetzal feather or the skin of a jaguar.

#### 11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users*

The sentence “the life of images” is a beautiful poetic figure. As soon as we forget that it is a metaphor, we will begin to move away from understanding the social and aesthetic processes that create the illusion that images live. The expression has been linked to the name of some authors such as Fritz Saxl and John Berger, in part due to the distortion produced when translating their works.<sup>1</sup> A similar expression was used, indeed, by Henri Focillon in *La vie des formes* (Paris, 1934).

The works of David Freedberg and Peter Burke, each in their own way, represent fine examples of how to face the problem: understanding the efficacy of images in the cultural contexts that determine how they are perceived, and exploring the social process of feeding/receiving meanings.

We use bold expressions like Michael Fried’s “absorption”, Alfred Gell’s “captivation”, and even Fritz Saxl’s “magnetic power of images”. And I wonder if we are not, sometimes, beginning to imagine that, indeed, there is something in the images that makes them *act on* us.

I believe that the best way to profit from the theoretical advances on the interaction and response of people to images would be to deepen our knowledge of the social relationships underlying these apparent relationships of attraction.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

Most of the pre-Hispanic images that we know were literally immersed in long and complex ceremonies. Consider, for example, groups of young people who entered a square dancing and singing to the rhythm of drums and flutes. They were soon engulfed in copal smoke from the braziers. They could smell the scent of flowers that saturated rugs and parapets. As for the images of their gods (those we see in museum showcases today): consider that they were painted in bright colours, impregnated with blood or charcoal, covered with blankets and feather ornaments. Those who participated in the celebration did not go there to contemplate the images; rather they appeared before the images and were “observed” by them. The gods, whose effigies had been activated for a few days with the temporary inlay of precious stones, were deemed to be actually present.

Without music, without cyclical movements, without the lash of the fragrances of smoke and flowers, there was no ritual event, nor was the aesthetic episode consummated.

Privileging silent observation is the result of our experience in museums. In the indigenous world, even after the conquest, the festival was the space of images par excellence, and it was a multisensory space.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

It is not possible to study the indigenous cultures of central Mexico and their plastic expressions and not arrive to the vision of the landscape as a powerful component in ceremonial precincts, in ritual displacements, in visual or oral narratives about identity.

It is an interesting paradox that peoples that developed an intense urbanism, such as the Nahuas, had remained attentive to the reading of landscape, to the point of replicating it in the ceremonial complexes of their cities. Myths of origin and myths of foundation marked the landscape, inch by inch, in a symbolic narrative of possession and protection that was repeated in the ceremonies of the year. In fact, ceremonial itineraries constantly crossed from the countryside to the city. In *lienzos* and codices, this iconic landscape was formulated in pictographic terms.

The pre-Hispanic notions of migration, sacred destiny and ethnic identity were linked, after the conquest, to Christian conceptions of pilgrimage, salvation, and Christian community. The landscape was re-signified, and the processions gave new vitality to this multiple system of references: territory, pictorial representation, urban-cosmogram.

Art history must deal with that symbolic device that is landscape and consider rich interdiscursivities: as in topography/myth/pictography/architecture.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

I have faced three modalities of transferring images to new contexts. One of them is the exhibition of *debris*, which implies an unequivocal reference to another era. It occurs, for example, when the broken image of an indigenous god is placed face down on the wall of a church. As a defeated warrior of the *Psychomachia*.

A second modality is *syncretism*: the coexistence of the symbolic repertoire of two religious traditions, under the predominance of one of them and with analogy as a guide. In the case of New Spain, the understanding of syncretic images and programs requires the parallel analysis of written and pictographic testimonies, of liturgical episodes, and of the repertoires and plastic languages of the two traditions.

A third modality is *eclecticism*. The cases that I have been able to explore show a disarray, but not a disdain for the harmonization of meanings. The works produced after the collapse of the Teotihuacan empire, in which Mayan, Oaxacan and Teotihuacan motifs and symbols coexist are paradigmatic. There is a provisional confluence without a stable hegemony.

Is eclecticism always the expression of a period of crisis? And is syncretism typical of a society in transition? I think so, in both matters.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

In the case of Hispanic America, and since the sixteenth century, the recognition of indigenous cultures has been carried out within the framework of the Spanish language and the classical and Christian philosophical traditions. In the 19th century, the criteria of scientific rationality and new ethnic prejudices were incorporated. So, anglophone hegemony is only the last leg of the process.

Impossible to escape the system of thought that gave rise to our current way of analysing the world. However, the historical sciences have some mechanisms of review and self-criticism. Since the 1970s, for instance, research on the indigenous worldviews, as well as translations and philological studies, has intensified. This has allowed new inquiries with alternative explanations that are not restricted by Western views of art and religion.

Faced with the issue of the English-speaking predominance in art history scholarship, I believe that the challenge of the Hispanic American countries goes beyond the delicate task of translating the concepts. The biggest problem is our theoretical and conceptual dependence on North American and European academic circles. In other words, the scarcity of our own theoretical production.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

Sometimes partisan positions within the academic endeavor make me uneasy, even more so if they proclaim the death of the previous ways of investigating. The best works of art history that I know, those with the greatest explanatory capacity for complex problems, are those that integrate various methodological procedures, and can incorporate new analysis strategies without ignoring the resources that are at the origins of the discipline. When I examine with my students the works of Svetlana Alpers, for example, we have this feeling that the tools of the old masters and new approaches can coexist in solid and deeply historical explanations.

Personally, I think it would be helpful for art history to revisit its relationships with social history. Concepts such as *ideology*, whose application to the study of images Nicos Hadjinicolaou probed, or *hegemony*, so interesting in the study of culture, can enrich the current panorama in the analysis of images. I have the impression that our success in understanding the processes of construction of meanings, and of responding to images, could be completed with the reconsideration of the cultural conflict typical of divergent interests in history. There are social circumstances outside the canvas or the wall that we do not always make visible in our explanation.

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1. In its translation into Spanish, *Lectures of Fritz Saxl*, edited by Gertrude Bing, (London 1957) bear the title *La vida de las Imágenes* (Madrid 1989). The book *About looking*, by John Berger (New York 1980), received a new title in its German translation: *Das Leben der Bilder oder die Kunst des Sehens* (Berlin 1981).