

## Conversion and Conservation: Mexica Featherwork, the Miraculous, and Early Modern European Practices of Collecting

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**RESUMEN** Este ensayo investiga el impacto del Encuentro de América, en particular de las misiones franciscanas, en la producción cultural de la Nueva España. Se concentra especialmente en investigar el rol que jugaron los mosaicos plumarios mexica-cristianos en la conversión de indígenas, a la vez que transmitían la *invenzione* artística de los mexicas a coleccionistas europeos. El ensayo pretende estudiar la re-contextualización de los mosaicos plumarios después de que cruzaron el Atlántico, es decir, la transformación de estos objetos rituales en objetos estéticos y explora la relación entre el arte mestizo y la conversión religiosa.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** mosaicos plumarios, Nueva España, misiones franciscanas, Bernardino de Sahagún, arte náhuatl, descubrimiento de América, crónicas de indias, *Kunstammer*, Virgen de Guadalupe, *invenzione*

**ABSTRACT** This essay investigates the impact of the Encounter of America, particularly of the Franciscan missions, in the cultural production of New Spain. Specifically, it investigates the twofold power of Christian-Mexica feather mosaics in both the conversion of indigenous peoples and the transmission of indigenous artistic *invenzione* to European collectors. The essay focuses on the re-contextualization of featherworks after they crossed the Atlantic, and thus in their transformation from ritualistic to aesthetic objects.

**KEYWORDS** feather mosaics, New Spain, Franciscan missions, Bernardino de Sahagún, Nahuatl art, Encounter of America, chronicles of the Indies, *Kunstammer*, Virgin of Guadalupe, *invenzione*

# Conversion and Conservation: Mexica Featherwork, the Miraculous, and Early Modern European Practices of Collecting

Juliana Ramírez Herrera

Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan missionary in New Spain, and sometimes called “the first modern anthropologist”,<sup>1</sup> dedicated over sixty years of his life (1529-1590) to the study of Nahua culture and language. The most complete version of his findings is compiled and illustrated in the *Florentine Codex* in both Spanish and Nahuatl.

According to Sahagún, the purpose of the codex was to educate the friars in the traditions of the Mexica, so that as doctors of the soul, the priests could properly identify and cure spiritual diseases.<sup>2</sup> Sahagún’s statement not only reveals his commitment to converting indigenous people, but also his awareness of the need to translate indigenous practices into a language that Spanish priests could understand: friars needed to be educated in the customs of the natives so they could properly identify “idolatrous” behavior in order to eradicate it.

The *Florentine Codex* is a massive manuscript of approximately three thousand folia. It is divided into twelve books, starting with “The Gods” and finishing with “The Conquest”. Each folio is organized into two columns: on the right appears the text in Nahuatl and, on the left, appears

1J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “Sahagún and the Birth of Modern Ethnography: Representing, Confessing, and Inscribing the Native Other”, in *The World of Bernardino de Sahagún: Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico*, ed. J. J. Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and E. Quiñones Keber (New York: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, the University at Albany, State University of New York; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 35.

2 “El médico no puede acertadamente aplicar las medecinas al enfermo que primero conozca de que humor, o de que causa procede la enfermedad. De manera que el bueno medico conviene sea docto en el conocimiento de las medicinas y en el de las enfermedades para aplicar convenientemente a cada enfermedad la medecina contraria”. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, digital versión of codex 218, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Florence), vol. 1, bk. 1: “Prólogo”.

Sahagún's translation into Spanish. Illustrations are inserted within the text, sometimes framed, sometimes without frames, and appear mostly in the Spanish column. Even though Sahagún made a conscious effort to maintain his research objective and remain faithful to what the Nahuatl elders he interviewed told him,<sup>3</sup> there are certain instances where the friar did not include a Spanish translation. Sometimes the left column is blank<sup>4</sup> or only includes illustrations.<sup>5</sup> Other times, Sahagún included his own thoughts, concerns, and criticisms of the Mexica world.<sup>6</sup>

Book IX, titled, “The Merchants. About merchants, and officials for gold, precious stones and feathers”, presents the most cases of this lack of translation. In this instance, however, rich illustrations decorate the left column. The illustrations look finished, are carefully designed, and present no blank spaces between them. This differentiates them from other drawings included in other books (for instance, in the appendix of book II), in which the lack of a Spanish translation seems to be a result of a lack of time, rather than a lack of intention (compare figure 1 and figure 2).

Considering book IX deals with merchants and precious materials such as gold—important factors in the conquest of Mexico—the gaps in the translation seem even more conspicuous. Many sections, particularly those that refer to the techniques used in the production of artworks using feathers and silver are not translated into Spanish. Instead, Sahagún introduces these chapters noting that since these crafts are irrelevant to issues of faith and are so common in New Spain, there is no reason in making a translation, for the reader, if he/she wanted, could hear it directly from the officials and see it with his/her own eyes.<sup>7</sup>

The brief introductions that Sahagún gives to these chapters demonstrate that some indigenous crafts continued to flourish even after the Spanish inva-

3 “Me parece que no a sido trabajo superfluo el aver escrito esta estoria, la qual se escribió en tiempo que eran vivos los que se hallaron en la misma conquista y ellos dieron esta relación, personas principales, de buen juicio y que se tiene por cierto que dixeron toda verdad”. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, bk. 12: “Al lector”.

4 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, bk. 2, ff. 137v.-142v.; vol. 3, bk. 10, ff. 84v.-97.

5 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, bk. 2, ff. 143r.-143v.; vol. 2, bk. 9, ff. 50r.-54r., 51v.-56v., 61v.-67r.; vol. 3, bk. 10, ff. 139v.-142v., 192r.-199r.

6 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, bk. 10, ff. 70v.-84r.

7 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, bk. 9, ff. 50r, 55v., 61v.

sion and that any person living in New Spain during the sixteenth century had access to these workshops. More importantly, however, I would like to suggest that Sahagún's lack of translation of the *production* of these artworks reveals that skills such as featherwork continued to be controlled only by indigenous artists. Even though the feather mosaics produced after the Spanish invasion portray Christian imagery, the technique of the *amantecab* (or featherworkers) continued to be virtually the same as before the arrival of the Spaniards—a technique only indigenous artists knew how to control. Featherwork, in other words, emerged in the sixteenth century as a niche of indigenous autonomy.

Allowing for this space of indigenous creation when all other forms of indigenous artistic production were being destroyed (books were burnt, metal objects melted, temples and statues demolished), demonstrates that Spaniards valued feather objects for their aesthetic qualities. It was the appreciation of this “new” and marvelous technique what allowed for its production and conservation. However, as Alessandra Russo suggests, its iconography had to be manipulated in order “to exorcise the material of its diabolical or pagan references”.<sup>8</sup> This recalls the use of marble inlay, a pagan art, in the construction of Christian buildings during the Roman Empire, renewing the symbolic implications of the technique.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how an innovative art form, never seen in Europe before, captured the Western imagination. Mexican featherwork was not only a niche of indigenous autonomy, in which indigenous culture was allowed to continue to flourish after the Spanish invasion, but it was the means through which indigenous artists mesmerized and impressed European viewers and collectors. Feather mosaics spoke of indigenous *invenzione* and artistic ability, and were collected and compared with oil paintings and other forms of European artistic production. On the other hand, it is important to remember that these objects were produced under the vigilant eye of Franciscan missionary friars, and that most of these mosa-

<sup>8</sup> Alessandra Russo, “Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformations in Sixteenth-Century Feather Art”, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 42 (2002): 229.

<sup>9</sup> Annamaria Giusti, *Pietre Dure and the Art of Florentine Inlay*, trans. Fabio Barry (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 11.

ics depicted Christian imagery. The conservation *and* conversion of the medium are thus processes that need to be studied together.

## FEATHERS AND THE AZTEC EMPIRE

Feathers in the Aztec Empire carried political, economic, and cosmological meanings. Firstly, they represented the political dominance of the Mexica over far-away territories that had been colonized and integrated into the empire. It was under Ahuitzotl (1486-1502), the *tlatoani* (or Aztec ruler) that preceded Montezuma II (1502-1520), that the borders of the empire were expanded west toward the Pacific coast and south toward Guatemala, where birds with colourful and iridescent feathers were found.<sup>10</sup> These feathers were presented to Tenochtitlan in the form of tribute.<sup>11</sup> In *Matrícula de tributos* (figure 3), for instance, we see tributes of feathers and birds recorded along with lavish animal skins and stones such as jade. Secondly, feathers were also traded at commercial posts in territories outside the political domain of the Aztec empire.<sup>12</sup> Feathers were an ideal raw material to trade: not only because they were considered valuable—their use was fundamental in certain religious ceremonies such as human sacrifice<sup>13</sup>—but because they were light and easy to transport and carry.<sup>14</sup> Thirdly, and probably more importantly, feathers had spiritual and supernatural significance: they embodied the divine and helped it materialized on earth.

10 “las plumas ricas parecieron en tiempo del señor que se llamava Huitzotl y truxeron las los mercaderes, que llamavan tecunenenque quando conquistaron a las provincias de anaoc. Entonces començarõ los amantecas a labrar cosas primas y delicadas”. Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 2, bk. 9, f. 61r.

11 Teresa de María y Campos, “Rich Feathers, Fine Feathers”, in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Teresa Castelló Yturbide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A. C., 1993), 35.

12 Frances F. Berdan, “Economic Dimension of Precious Metals, Stones, and Feathers: the Aztec State Society”, *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 22 (1992): 313.

13 Alessandra Russo, “Uncatchable Colors”, in *Colors between Two Worlds: the Florentine Codex of Bernardino de Sahagún*, eds. Gerhard Wolf and Joseph Connors (Florence: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz Max-Planck-Institut; Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies; Milan: Officina Libraria, 2011), 395.

14 De María y Campos, “Rich Feathers”, 35.

The Mexica considered rare, colourful birds, such as hummingbirds and quetzals, sacred. In the *Florentine Codex*, in book XI, titled “Earthly Things. About properties of animals, birds, fish, trees, herbs, flowers, metals, and stones, and about colors”, Sahagún describes the hibernating cycle of the hummingbird:

renuévase cada año, en el tiempo del invierno, coélganse de los árboles por el pico. Allí colgados se secan, y se les caye la pluma. Quando el árbol torna a reverdecer, él torna a revivir y tórna a nacer la pluma. Y quando comienza a tronar, para lluver, entonces despierta y se boele y resucitan.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, hummingbirds are described as magical animals with supernatural properties capable of coming back from the dead. Every year, when it started to rain, they renewed themselves in all their beauty and splendour. The cycle of hibernation embodied the cycles of nature, the “resurrection” of the earth at the beginning of spring, and the production of crops. Moreover, it resonated with the Mexica cyclical conception of time and the New Fire Ceremony they performed every fifty-two years in which a new fire would be lit in the chest of a sacrificial victim, renovating the “old” light.<sup>16</sup> This was done as a sign of gratitude towards the gods who had allowed for the continuation of the world and the beginning of a new fifty-two-year cycle.

The relationship between birds, feathers and the supernatural world was also epitomized in the names of the gods themselves and cosmogonies related to them. According to the *Códice Chimalpopoca*, when Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl de Tollan (the legendary leader of the Toltecs, who bears the name of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god) was born, he was so unhappy with his physical appearance that he refused to come out and join the world. The feathered god Coyotlinahua

15 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 3, bk. 11, f. 24.

16 Nicholas J. Saunders, “Stealers of Light, Traders in Brilliance: Amerindian Metaphysics in the Mirror of Conquest”, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 33: Pre-Columbian States of Being (spring, 1998): 229.

fashioned for him a banner of feathers, then a green mask [...] and then a feathered beard [...] When he was finished, he gave a mirror to Quetzalcoatl. When Quetzalcoatl looked at himself in the mirror he was very satisfied, and it was then that he decided to come out of his isolation.<sup>17</sup>

It is thus thanks to his new attire that Quetzalcoatl can embrace his divine role and reveal himself to humans. As Alessandra Russo argues, it is the feather what “effectuates the metamorphosis of the divinity”.<sup>18</sup>

The birth myth of Huitzilopochtli (the hummingbird god) also reveals the importance of feathers in the materialization of the divine. According to the version narrated by Sahagún in book III, Coatlicue, the mother of the gods, after giving birth to four hundred stars, promised to remain chaste. One day, when she was sweeping the temple on Tepeyac in sign of penitence, a bundle of feathers landed on her belly. She grabbed the feathers and put them under her skirt. When she tried to reach for them again, they had disappeared: the feathers had miraculously impregnated her with Huitzilopochtli. Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue’s daughter, was furious with her mother for presumptuously breaking her vow of chastity. She convinced her siblings to go with her and kill Coatlicue. Together they beheaded her, from whose torso emerged, as a grown man in full armour and ready for battle, Huitzilopochtli. He subsequently fought and dismembered his sister, whose head became the moon.<sup>19</sup>

In these accounts of Quetzalcoatl and Huitzilopochtli it is evident how feathers not only help the divine materialize in the world but also how feathers indeed provide the divine with its immense power. During human sacrifices feathers continued to play this role: the victim, who embodied the god to whom the sacrifice was offered, was dressed in feather attires in the likeness of the deity (figure 4). He or she was thus simultaneously victim and god. In his *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, the chronicler and Jesuit friar José de Acosta narrates this transformation from human to god:

17 Primo Feliciano Velázquez, trans., “Anales de Cuauhtitlan”, in *Códice Chimalpopoca* (México: UNAM, [1945] 1992), par. 39, p. 9, 11. Quoted in Russo, “Plumes of Sacrifice”, 232.

18 Russo, “Plumes of Sacrifice”, 232.

19 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 1, bk. 3, ff. 1r.-3v.

Every year they gave a slave to the priests so that the living likeness of the god would always be present; as soon as he entered into the office, after washing him very carefully, they dressed him in all the clothing and insignias of the idol and gave him the same name, and for a whole year he was as much honored and revered as the idol itself.<sup>20</sup>

Feathers conflated the natural and the supernatural worlds. Their shimmering quality embodied *tonalli*, the Nahuatl concept of the “soul”,<sup>21</sup> and translated in Molina’s *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana* as “*calor del sol*”.<sup>22</sup> The brightness of feathers, as Russo puts it, “was the tangible aspect of such a vital source [the sun], which stabilized the cosmic and the terrestrial orders by linking the human with the sacred”.<sup>23</sup> When the victims were prepared for sacrifice, and they were dressed in feathers, the iridescence of their attires transformed them into the gods. The shimmer of feathers materialized on earth the divinity of the sun and the energy that provided life to all the Mexica.

Every fifty-two years a cycle ended and the universe was at risk of being obliterated. To prevent this from happening the Mexica had to continuously adore and feed the gods the most precious and sacred of all food: human blood and flesh. Unlike Christianity, in which only one human sacrifice was demanded for the eternal salvation of all souls, in the Aztec religion constant sacrifices were needed to ensure the perpetual renewal of time. Spaniards abhorred Aztec human sacrifice, not only because of the cannibalistic practices that ensued from the ritual, but because it was uncannily similar to the Sacrifice of Isaac, except, in the Mexica case, there appeared to be no divine intervention and the sacrifice was indeed executed. “From this”, writes Acosta, “we can see the malice and tyranny of the devil, who in this has tried to surpass God”.<sup>24</sup> While for the Jesuit friar the completion of the

20 José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan, trans. Frances López-Morillas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 297.

21 Saunders, “Stealers of Light”, 244, 228.

22 Alonso Molina, *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana* (Mexico City: Antonio de Spínosa, 1571), 149.

23 Russo, “Uncatchable Colors”, 395.

24 Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 292.



sacrifice evidences the *eternal* battle between good and evil, God and Satan, in the Mexica world the sacrifice was related to the cyclical conception of time and its continuous renewal.

Considering the intrinsic relationship between feathers, human sacrifice, and the perpetuation of the Aztec world, it is interesting to analyze how feather mosaics served the Franciscan missionary work and the Spanish colonial enterprise, and how the encounter between the New World and the Old World, and the manipulation of the iconography of feather mosaics altered the Mexica understanding of the universe and time.

#### AZTEC FEATHERS AND THE CHRISTIAN, EUROPEAN WORLD

Right after the Spanish encountered the Aztec Empire, artworks from Mexico arrived in Europe—similar to the feathers sent to Tenochtitlan in the form of tribute from the newly conquered territories. In 1520, the treasures Hernán Cortés sent to Charles V, which he had received from Montezuma II during their meeting in 1519, were exhibited in Toledo, Valladolid and Brussels, and caused great astonishment to those who saw them.<sup>25</sup> The German artist Albrecht Dürer, who at the time was travelling in the Netherlands, wrote in his journal, “I saw the things brought to the king from the new golden land [...] I have never seen in all my life anything that has moved my heart so much [...] I have wondered at the *ingenia* of men of foreign lands”.<sup>26</sup>

Featherwork, and other Mexican artworks, became tokens of the newly discovered territories that had been incorporated into the Spanish Empire. As Deanne MacDonald suggests, it was these artifacts that materialized the reality of this new land and embodied the colonial power of the Spanish Crown.<sup>27</sup> In other words, these objects functioned as evidence of the existence and subjugation of these “strange” territories and peoples. In the same way collectors from Europe travelled to Rome in the search of ruins and

25 Deanna MacDonald, “Collecting a New World: The Ethnographic Collection of Margaret of Austria”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 3 (autumn, 2002): 654-655.

26 Albrecht Dürer and Philip Troutman, *Sketchbook of His Journey to the Netherlands, 1520-21* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 24-25.

27 MacDonald, “Collecting a New World”, 660.

marbles, considered not only the material traces of a glorious, past civilization, but also evidence of the creative powers of nature,<sup>28</sup> European rulers sought to collect curios from America, especially feather mosaics, which, like marbles, not only portrayed the artistic *ingenio* of indigenous artists but also the rich American flora and fauna.

The encounter of “new” lands dramatically impacted the Western conception of the world. Previously unknown territories, plants, animals and religions had to be explained and incorporated into the European and Christian tradition. Ptolemy and Pliny, along with many other authorities from antiquity, proved inadequate to explain the “new” and “multicultural” world.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge of reality had to be acquired, instead, through observation and empirical methods. The European discovery of America, therefore, “provoked novel methods of empirical description, organization, analysis, and synthesis”.<sup>30</sup> It is thus no coincidence that the first anthropological and ethnographical works, such as Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*, were produced during this time, and that objects brought to Europe from the newly encountered territories served as portals to this new knowledge.

According to Detlef Heikamp, during the Renaissance, *Kunstkammer* became “microcosms of the universe”.<sup>31</sup> All sorts of curios and artifacts from all over the world, regardless of their material value, became part of princely collections. In the dedication of the *Historia general de las Indias*, Francisco López de Gómara describes the discovery of America as “la mayor cosa después de la creación del mundo, sacando la encarnación y muerte del que lo crió”.<sup>32</sup> Artworks from America came to signify the miracle of the discovery: the greatest event of the history of humanity after the death and Incarnation of Christ.

28 Giusti, *Pietre Dure*, 24.

29 Paula Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy”, in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2004), 172.

30 Karl W. Butzer, “From Columbus to Acosta: Science, Geography, and the New World”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, no. 3: The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research (September 1992): 543.

31 Detlef Heikamp, *Mexico and the Medici* (Florence: Edam, 1972), 7.

32 Quoted in *ibid.*

Once the objects brought to Europe from America and other territories were introduced into courtly collections they were recontextualized, studied and analyzed through the European and Christian gaze. Collections contributed to an early modern intellectual and colonial enterprise, in which difference was assimilated and incorporated into the European, Christian world. These objects, moreover, also functioned as diplomatic gifts that betokened the political power of their owners: feather mosaics helped Charles V and Philip II portray themselves as great conquerors, while allowing princes from other courts to align themselves with the colonial enterprise of the Spanish Crown.<sup>33</sup> The courts of Margaret of Austria's, Rudolph II's, Ferdinand of Tyrol's, and the Medici were among those where featherwork from New Spain was collected. But feather mosaics travelled even beyond Western Europe, arriving to Asia and Africa.<sup>34</sup>

This connection between art and colonial power is made explicit in Felipe de Guevara's *Comentarios de la pintura* (written around 1560, though only published much later). Guevara comments on the virtuous rule of Julius Caesar whom he describes as a lover of art: "la Pintura ni la aficion de ella no embota la lanza, ni reprime el deleyte de ella los ánimos fogosos de conquistar mil mundos, como deseaba Alexandro".<sup>35</sup> This passage can be juxtaposed to another passage towards the end of Guevara's *Comentarios*, in which the author laments the destruction of art during the Goth invasion of Rome:

Esto es lo poco que de la Pintura antigua se ha podido recoger, no sin dolor y sentimiento grande de la pérdida de los libros que contenían el arte de la Pintura [...] Todo esto debemos á esos bárbaros de Godos, los quales ocupando las provincias, llenas entónçes de todas las buenas artes, no se contentaron solo con arruinar los edificios, estatuas, y semejantes cosas, pero tambien se ocuparon con sumo cuidado en quemar

33 Lia Markey, *The New World in Renaissance Italy: A Vicarious Conquest of Art and Nature at the Medici Court* (Ph.D. dissertation, Faculty of the Division of Humanities, Department of Art History, University of Chicago, 2008), 166.

34 Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf, and Diana Fane, eds., *El vuelo de las imágenes. Arte plumario en México y Europa* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Arte, 2011), 5.

35 Felipe de Guevara, *Comentarios de la pintura*, ed. Rafael Benet (Barcelona: Selecciones Bibliófilas, 1948), 81.

librerías insignes, no dexando papel á vida, como si de propósito ovieran contra las buenas artes, y no contra los hombres, tomando á fuego y sangre la conquista.<sup>36</sup>

Guevara thus bases the distinction between virtuous and barbarous conquest on the appreciation of art. In doing this the author urges the king of Spain to protect and collect the art of the New World and all other art brought to Spain from foreign territories, encouraging “a ‘transnational’ or ‘international’ training [...] for both painters and viewers”,<sup>37</sup> as Alessandra Russo suggests. Unlike Giorgio Vasari, Guevara conceived the future of a national style in the inclusion and adaptation of foreign styles, in the learned colonial expansion of the Crown.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Guevara commented on the limitations of artists who refused to look beyond their nation in the production of art, writing:

tomemos un aleman que mejor diseño tenga, aunque sea Durero desde que debuxe, ó pinte caballos; nunca en cien mil caballos verná á toparse en la fantasia con un caballo Español alindado [...] La causa es el hábito que tiene de haber siempre visto caballos Alemanes, fuertes de miembros y groseros; y de aqué viene que todas las ideas que de caballos se le representáren serán de caballos Alemanes.<sup>39</sup>

The creative capacity of the artist, in other words, depends on how much access he has to the art and the natural world that exist outside his nation. Therefore, both artists and collectors could profit from the contemplation and comparison of the artifacts and artworks displayed and housed in the *Kunstammer*, from which they could acquire knowledge and a sense of cosmopolitanism. In this light, feather mosaics, along with other indigenous forms of cultural production were not only the material evidence, the passive

36 *Ibid.*, 155-156.

37 Alessandra Russo, “De Tlacuilolli: Renaissance Artistic Theory in the Wake of the Global Turn”, in *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, eds. Jill H. Casid and Aruna D’Souza (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2014), 23.

38 *Ibid.*, 35.

39 Guevara, *Comentarios*, 98-99.

signifiers, of colonial power. Appreciated as aesthetic objects, as novel forms of art, feather mosaics were in fact actively endowing their collectors with the learned and cosmopolitan aura of what was understood to be virtuous governing.

#### FEATHER MOSAICS AS AESTHETIC OBJECTS

The sentiment of wonder and admiration that feather mosaics caused among Europeans is evident in sixteenth-century chronicles of the Indies. Bartolomé de las Casas comments:

all human genius and in terms of all other nations of the world, the newest, if not the rarest, should be the most admired and appreciated, for it is art that the Mexican people know how to develop so well and perfectly [...] with the natural color of feathers, these artisans produce what other excellent painters create with their brushes.<sup>40</sup>

Gerónimo de Mendieta, in his *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, also writes: “but what appears to exceed all human ingenuity is the trade and art of making feathers, with their own natural tints and hues, carefully placed, into everything that the finest painters can create with their brushes”.<sup>41</sup> The Jesuit Acosta takes these assertions a step further, and argues that feather mosaics were even superior to painting:

In New Spain there are a larger number of birds with excellent plumage, finer than any to be found in Europe, as can be seen from the feather pictures that come from there. These are rightly prized and cause amazement that such delicate work can be done with birds’ feathers. They are

40 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, vol. 1, p. 332. Quoted in Marita Martínez del Río de Redo, “Featherwork during the Viceroyalty”, In *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Castelló Yturbide, 106.

41 Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, vol. 3, p. 56. Quoted in Alberto Cue, “Featherwork among the Mexica”, in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Castelló Yturbide, 52.

so smooth that they seem to be painted in colors, *and better than what the brush and dyes do*. They have such beautiful sheen, and are so pretty and lifelike, that when they are looked at slightly sideways they delight the eye wonderfully [my italics].<sup>42</sup>

Las Casas, Mendieta, and Acosta not only praise Mexica inventiveness, but also compare feather art with the work of painters and Nature. These types of comparisons were common not only in the chronicles, but also in the writings of contemporaries who had never been to New Spain but who had had access to feather mosaics through princely collections. Ulisse Aldrovandi, for example, adds another layer to this complex net of comparisons, when, describing a feather mosaic of Saint Jerome, he parallels the indigenous featherworkers with Apelles, the greatest painter of antiquity: “not even Apelles, if he could be brought back to life, nor any other superb painter could better portray [it] with the brush”.<sup>43</sup>

These feather objects, in other words, caused great amazement and were highly valued in princely collections, where they not only came to embody the New World and its conversion and inclusion to Christianity—as was mentioned earlier—but also where they were immediately engaged in the contemporary debates and conversations on art. According to MacDonald, these objects were aesthetically valued, regardless of their origin. She mentions, for example, that in the Mechelen inventories of 1516 and 1524-1525, expressions such as “*beau*”, “*fort bien fait*”, and “*bien ouvré*” were employed to describe both European and indigenous works.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, contrary to Christopher Columbus’s definition of a hammock as, “*cosas de algodón hilado y redes en que dormían [los indígenas]*”,<sup>45</sup> which described its *function*, objects such as hammocks were recorded in the Medici inventories, not as part of mattresses and bedding, but in closer proximity to paintings, “indicating”, as Lia Markey suggests, “that they might have been displayed

42 Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 237.

43 Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae*. Quoted in Alessandra Russo et al., *El vuelo de las imágenes*, 14.

44 MacDonald, “The Ethnographic Collections”, 660.

45 Cristóbal Colón, *Viajes de Cristóbal Colón, con una carta*, ed. Bartolomé de las Casas and Martín Fernández de Navarrete (Madrid: Calpe, 1922), 56.

[...] or hung in the same manner as paintings”.<sup>46</sup> Once hammocks, and other artifacts from New Spain and America in general, crossed the Atlantic, they lost their “original” meaning and function and began to be studied, observed and appreciated under new paradigms.<sup>47</sup> These objects became detached from what made them valuable in New Spain and became valued for new reasons, particularly, sensorial and aesthetic ones.

According to Serge Gruzinski, once Europeans begin to consume corn, cacao and tobacco, these foods are isolated from their religious and supernatural connotations:

prior to the Conquest, they [cacao and tobacco] were eaten only by the indigenous nobility, for they enabled humans to enter into contact with the divine world. During the colonial period, these same items became simple merchandise, ultimately becoming the focus of secular sociability (and, when it came to chocolate, a feminine one at that). People began to partake of them by inventing refined “rituals” which had lost all religious dimension, becoming merely a sign of wealth and social status. Any quest for a superhuman otherworld was replaced by sensory pleasure and material lavishness in the form of chocolate services and smoking accessories.<sup>48</sup>

I would like to suggest that feather mosaics undergo a very similar process. Even though most of them continue to be used as religious artifacts, albeit Christian ones, their primary role in Europe and the princely collections is as exotic aesthetic objects that, as Acosta mentions, “delight the eye wonderfully”, and contributed to their owner’s social status.

Collecting during the Renaissance became a pleasurable and learned activity aligned with the revival of the liberal arts and the deliberate effort in elevating the status of painting and artists. As Paula Findlen mentions, in the building of “museums”, “the humanists self-consciously placed them-

46 Markey, *The New World in Renaissance Italy*, 177.

47 MacDonald, “The Ethnographic Collections”, 661.

48 Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 47.

selves in the grove of the Muses [...] to stress their direct ties with ancient wisdom”.<sup>49</sup> Giovanni Rucellai, a Florentine merchant, argues that his collections gave him “the greatest contentment and the greatest pleasure because they serve the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself”.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, as Michael Baxandall notes: “buying such things is an outlet for the pleasure and virtue of spending money well”.<sup>51</sup> Collecting was thus a virtuous activity that brought pleasure and prestige to the collector, as well as to his city and god.

Feather mosaics in this context, and as mentioned earlier, ennobled the collector because they linked him/her with the new discoveries. Ferdinando I de Medici, for example, sought to align himself with the Spanish Crown and to pursue his colonial interests by acquiring objects from the New World.<sup>52</sup> But Mexica featherwork also pleased the senses of its collectors, who not only rejoiced in looking at these objects but who saw them in dialogue with the artistic and intellectual production of Europe. Feather mosaics, in other words, contributed to and questioned Renaissance theoretical debates on art.

In the preface to the third part of Vasari’s *Lives*, the author argues that the Hellenistic sculptures excavated at the time of Michelangelo allowed some artists to attain perfection and beauty. These sculptures, comments Vasari, “copied from the greatest beauties of nature, and with certain attitudes which involve no distortion of the whole figure but only a movement of certain parts...brought about the disappearance of a certain dryness, hardness, and sharpness of manner”.<sup>53</sup> They allowed artists like Michelangelo to both identify “the greatest beauties of nature” and learn how to “play” with the rules of proportion in order to produce more dynamic, life-like, yet harmonious bodies. This artistic freedom did not reject the principles of ancient architecture and sculpture, such as rule, order, and proportion, but rather

49 Findlen, “The Museum”, 163.

50 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 2.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Markey, *The New World in Renaissance Italy*, 166.

53 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. P. Jaks, trans. G. du C. de Vere (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 223.



enhanced them. Freedom, in other words, allowed artists to judge nature and ancient exempla, and to inject representations with “a certain resolute spirit” that was missing before.<sup>54</sup>

Beauty, in Vasari’s terms, is thus a product of a rational exercise on the part of the artist: it is precisely his exposure to and study of Hellenistic sculpture what provided him with the intellectual capacity of discerning between the beautiful and the ugly. This capacity is not a natural talent but an acquired skill that is learned and developed through the practice of looking and copying exempla from antiquity.<sup>55</sup>

Mexica feather mosaics did not belong to this tradition. The *amantecah* did not have access to the “great works of antiquity”; their world did not fit in the European understanding of the world. And yet, their artworks, as mentioned earlier, were described in *the same terms* used to describe European artworks. Terms like “genius”, “ingenuity”, “*vaghezza*”, are common in Renaissance descriptions of feather mosaics and indigenous artists. Felipe de Guevara made an effort to link what seemed like a “parallel” indigenous past with Western history and art. In his *Comentarios*, the author includes, as part of the chapter titled “*De las pinturas egipcias*”, a section on pre-Columbian painting. Guevara writes:

Esta suerte de pintura y el declarar por ella sus conceptos, parece haver imitado los indios occidentales, y del nuevo orbe, especialmente los de la nueva España: ahora sea que por antigua tradición les venga de los Egipcios, lo qual podria haber sido, hora sea que los naturales de estas dos naciones concurriesen en unas mismas imaginaciones.<sup>56</sup>

Guevara was not trying to take away from indigenous invention by arguing that their way of painting/writing and understanding art came from the Egyptian civilization, or that it was thanks to a possible contact with Egypt that the indigenous people of New Spain were capable of producing art. He was instead trying to connect a recently discovered past in relation-

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>56</sup> Guevara, *Comentarios*, 342.

ship to what was known to him. But for Guevara, indigenous invention remained astounding:

justo es tambien concederles haber traído a la Pintura *algo de nuevo y raro*, como es la pintura de las plumas de las aves, variando ropas, encarnaciones y cosas semejantes, con diversidad de colores de plumas que por allá cria la naturaleza, y ellos con su industria escogen, dividen, apartan y mezclan [my italics].<sup>57</sup>

Guevara, in other words, credited the skill of the *amantecah* with the enrichment of the arts in Europe. They brought “something new and rare” to painting. Furthermore, it was through their technique and ability that they found good judgment to “divide, separate, and mix” the feathers with which they painted their objects. Put differently, according to Guevara, the artistry of the *amantecah* did not come from their knowledge of antiquity but was instead related to their *invenzione* and the creative powers of their natural surroundings, to the beautiful birds “*que por allá cria la naturaleza*”.

The identification of feather art as painting also engaged and challenged Renaissance artistic debates between skill and pigment. While Cennino Cennini (1370-1440) argued that the beauty of ultramarine blue exceeded the skill of the artist, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) saw ultramarine, gold, and other lavish pigments, simply as the raw materials of art that required the skill of the artist to be truly beautiful: “a subject can be dressed in ugly colours and still astound those who contemplate it, because of the illusion of relief”,<sup>58</sup> Da Vinci argued. According to Baxandall, towards the end of the fifteenth century the artistry of painters in manipulating materials became as important (and one could argue, even more important) than the display of lavish and expensive pigments or other materials. Leon Battista Alberti writes:

Ivory, gems, and all precious things of this kind in the painter’s hands become more precious. Also gold itself, elaborated by the art of painting,

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Roger Jones, “Mantegna and Materials”, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 2 (1987): 71-72.

comes to be repaid with very much more gold. Better still, lead, the lowest-priced of metals, if it was roughly hewn by the hands of Phidias or Praxiteles into some effigy, would (be regarded) perhaps (as) more precious than raw and generally unworked silver.<sup>59</sup>

And later, in criticizing those painters that use too much gold, Alberti adds: “I (would) strive [...] to imitate by means of colors rather than by means of gold”.<sup>60</sup> For Alberti, then, the artist has two different abilities: not only can he beautify pigments and materials *through* his art, but he can also portray them *in* his art. The painter becomes a second god, for he can recreate God’s creation: nature.<sup>61</sup>

Feather mosaics challenged, to a certain extent, this distinction between skill and pigment. On the one hand, the *amantecah* took the rich feathers and carefully trimmed them and glued them on the *amate* paper to create iridescent and beautiful images. It is thanks to the skill of the artists that the raw material, the feather, transforms into a richer and more elaborate object. As the chronicler Francisco López de Gómara mentions, the work of the *amantecah*, was a tedious and delicate one. They did not randomly place the feathers together:

Y acontéceles no comer en todo un día, poniendo, quitando y asentando la pluma y mirando a una parte y a otra, al sol, a la sombra, a la vislumbre, por ver si dice mejor a pelo o contrapelo o al través, de la haz o del envés; y en fin, no la dejan de las manos hasta ponerla en toda perfección.<sup>62</sup>

These mosaics, on the other hand, were valued precisely because they were made of feathers. As mentioned earlier, the very material of these artworks signified the natural resources that emanated from the New World, and this of course, not only functioned as evidence of the existence of new lands but

59 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 45.

60 *Ibid.*, 72.

61 *Ibid.*, 45.

62 Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de México*, ed. Jorge Gurría Lacroix (Caracas: Fundación Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2007), 153.

as a constant reminder of the wealth of the newly found territories. In the case of feather mosaics, there was a genuine interest, aesthetic and commercial, in the material itself. The identification of featherwork with painting suggests that it was precisely in the materiality of these objects that artistic skill rested. With feathers the *amantecah* did precisely what Renaissance oil painters strived to do, namely, convey other luxurious materials and capture light, except in the indigenous case, the material was not entirely subject to the representation. The viewer experience oscillated between looking at the depiction, appreciating the artistic skill of the *amantecah*, and looking at the material, at the feathers, and dreaming of far-away lands and their riches.

#### THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

Thomas Cummins argues that “for the telling of narratives across cultures, there needs to be invented/found a mutually recognized cultural space that forms a permeable and transparent referent through which the words of the other can pass through translation into one’s own culture”.<sup>63</sup> This space was filled by the image, as many Christian pictorial texts, produced in the early conquest in order to communicate religious dogma (figure 5), attest. Consequently, feather mosaics were religiously of tremendous importance. At the beginning of the conquest, when missionaries were just learning the indigenous languages, the image played a major role in the conversion of the natives.<sup>64</sup> However, as I have argued in this paper, images produced in New Spain also impressed Europeans aesthetically. The power of the image, in other words, was twofold: it helped communicate Christian “truth” to the natives and indigenous *invenzione* and artistry to European collectors.

63 Thomas Cummins, “From Lies to Truth: Colonial Ekphrasis and the Act of Crosscultural Translation”, in *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450-1650*, ed. Claire Farago (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 152.

64 Serge Gruzinski, “Images and Cultural Mestizaje in Colonial Mexico”, *Poetics Today* 16, no. 1: Loci of Enunciation and Imaginary Constructions: The Case of (Latin) America, II (spring, 1995): 54.

Acosta narrates a moment in which the king of Spain seems perplexed and amazed by a feather painting depicting Saint Francis receiving sainthood from Sixtus V:

and when the king was told that the Indians had made it he tried to test it by brushing his fingers lightly over the picture to see if it was indeed made of feathers; he thought it marvelous that it was so well done that the eyes could not tell whether they were natural colors of feathers or artificial colors painted with brush. The sheen made by green and a sort of yellowish-orange, and other lovely colors, is extraordinarily beautiful; and if the picture is looked at in a different light the colors seem dead, which is a notable change.<sup>65</sup>

This passage evidences the astonishment of the king, who in a gesture recalling Saint Thomas, felt the need to touch the object in order to believe what he saw.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Acosta's narration also points at the incredible skill of the *amantecah*, who in working with the precious creations of nature produce extraordinary objects that play with light in ways that not even oil painting could achieve.<sup>67</sup>

An interesting juxtaposition to the king's reaction is the Cajamarca episode, when the Franciscan friar Vicente Valverde met Atahualpa in 1532 and tried to convert him to Christianity. After the friar's intervention, the Inca asked him to show him who or what proved all he was saying as true. Valverde proceeded to give Atahualpa a Bible or a Breviary (there are different versions of the encounter), which the Inca failed to open or read and subsequently threw on the ground.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 238.

<sup>66</sup> Russo, "Uncatchable Colours", 405. Russo mistakenly believes that Acosta is describing Sixtus V's reaction, but a careful reading of the passage makes clear that it is the king of Spain looking at a feather mosaic that depicts the Pope.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> For a summary and analysis of most of the versions of the Cajamarca chronicle see Antonio Cornejo Polar, "Voice and the Written Word in the Cajamarca 'Dialogue'", in *Writing in the Air: Heterogeneity and the Persistence of Oral Tradition in Andean Literatures*, trans. Lynda J. Jentsch (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13-58.

According to Antonio Cornejo Polar, many chroniclers interpreted the gesture of the Inca as a sign of barbarism. Not only did Atahualpa show no respect for the word of god, but he did not even know how a book was supposed to be used. Cornejo Polar reminds us, nonetheless, that many of the Spanish conquistadors were illiterate and that the text that Valverde presented to Atahualpa was most likely written in Latin. “In effect”, writes Cornejo Polar, “the book appears in Cajamarca not as a means of communication but as a sacred object, worthy of reverence and able to produce revelations and resplendent miracles”. Put differently, and as other chroniclers recount, the expected reaction of the Inca was not of his reading the book but of his *revering* the book. The Bible or Breviary that Valverde lent the Inca failed as a magical and mystical device.<sup>69</sup> It did not capture the Inca’s attention; it did not communicate anything to him. Unlike the feather mosaic presented to the king of Spain, the book did not mesmerize Atahualpa.

In the same manner that images served the Franciscan missionaries to communicate unknown and foreign concepts to the Mexica, feather mosaics and other artworks from the New World helped collectors learn from far-away lands and peoples. Colonial images, as Cummins argue, “constitute the location to which the act of looking by Europeans and natives could be mutually and simultaneously directed in order to establish agreement”.<sup>70</sup> When the king of Spain touched the mosaic he did not engage with what was familiar to him: the iconography. In turn, the king engaged with what he did not know: the innovative technique. The formal qualities of the mosaic effectively speak to a foreign audience; they appear marvelous and astonish the viewer.

This bidirectional power of the image—its role in New Spain as a conversion tool and its role in Europe as an aesthetic tool through which new knowledge could be accessed and new social and political dynamics conveyed—explains the simultaneous conservation *and* conversion of the medium. When most forms of indigenous artistic expressions were obliterated, Franciscan missionaries instead commissioned feather mosaics. The medium was allowed to continue to exist, but under very specific parameters: it was appropriated and manipulated through the violence and coercion of the

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> Cummins, “From Lies to Truth”, 153.

conquest. This is what Gruzinski calls a process of “decontamination” and “resacralization”.<sup>71</sup>

The first dated featherwork known, The Mass of Saint Gregory, completed in 1539 and dedicated to Pope Paul III (figure 6), depicts a popular medieval theme that continued to be engraved and painted by several artists during the Renaissance. Because European prints (mostly German and Dutch) served as models to the *amantecah*,<sup>72</sup> there are many similarities between the 1539 feather mosaic and the northern European traditional depiction of the Mass of Saint Gregory. Compared, however, with pre-Columbian feather mosaics, the Mexica Mass of Saint Gregory presents major differences. Take, for instance, the feather mosaic shield depicting Coyotlinahua (figure 7), which was listed among the presents sent by Cortés in 1522 to different bishops and monasteries in Spain.<sup>73</sup> In the colonial feather mosaic, anthropomorphic figures and a primitive perspectival system help depict the narrative scene. A new sense of time and space is thus introduced to the art of feather painting, one that was absent in pre-Columbian objects, as the feather shield evidences. In it, not the human divine, but an animal deity is represented on a monochromatic background, one that does not connote a specific location. Coyotlinahua is instead depicted as an icon.

As Serge Gruzinski points out, the introduction of Western pictorial characteristics not only helped to spread Christian dogma through the production of images that worked as mnemonic and didactic tools, but indeed converted and altered Mexica concepts of time, space and divinity.<sup>74</sup> According to Gruzinski,

The Western image harbors and displays the main conceptual innovations that Christianity sought to spread, the anthropomorphic representation of the divine (the continuous repetition and exaltation of the

71 Gruzinski, “Images and Cultural Mestizaje”, 63-64.

72 Martínez del Río de Redo, “Featherwork during the Viceroyalty”, 119.

73 Lilia Rivero Weber and Christian Feest, “Der Schatten der Götter. Mexikanische Federarbeiten des 16. Jahrhunderts”, in *Der Altmexikanische Federkopfschmuck*, eds. Sabine Haag, Alfonso De María y Campos, Lilia Rivero Weber, and Christian Feest (Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers; Mexico City: Conaculta, 2012), 50.

74 Gruzinski, “Images and Cultural Mestizaje”, 56.

Incarnation), notions of temporality, space and historicity (the image portraying an event that is inscribed within the linear trajectory of a non-recurrent past), and the representation of the afterlife [L'image occidentale recèle et visualise l'essentiel des innovations conceptuelles que le christianisme cherchait à répandre, qu'il s'agisse de la représentation anthropomorphe du divin (la répétition inlassable et l'exaltation de l'Incarnation), de notions de temporalité, spatialité et historicité (l'image figure un événement inscrit dans la trajectoire linéaire d'un passé non récurrent) et de la visualisation de l'au-delà].<sup>75</sup>

Representing the mystery of god's Incarnation through the depiction of Christ as fully human and the connotation of a linear conception of time and a non-recurrent past is visually of immense importance in the portrayal of the Mass of Saint Gregory. According to the story, while Pope Gregory the Great was celebrating the Eucharist, one person in the congregation doubted the mystery of transubstantiation. Miraculously, to prove the Holy Host was indeed his body, the Man of Sorrows appeared on the altar flanked by the symbols of his passion.<sup>76</sup> The Mass of Saint Gregory thus portrays what according to Christian dogma is the only genuine human sacrifice, the one sacrifice that ensured the eternal salvation of all souls in the universe, rendering Nahua human sacrifices obsolete, unnecessary, and demonic.

In The Mass of St. Gregory, the hummingbird (the animalistic divine) now coexists with the Christian god made human (Jesus), but it is reduced to an aesthetic experience. The twofold process in which the medium is simultaneously converted and conserved provides the object with its new religious and political power: feathers, in the same manner they allowed Quetzalcoatl to embrace his divinity, now function as the channel for the transubstantiation of Christ; and the hummingbird, as a symbol of resurrection, points to the Man of Sorrows as the ultimate sacrifice for our salvation. The work of the *amantecah*, put differently, captures and betokens the Christian divine while

<sup>75</sup> All translations from the French are mine. Serge Gruzinski, *Visions indiennes, visions baroques: les métissages de l'inconscient* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), 140.

<sup>76</sup> Henry S. Francis, "Mass of St. Gregory by Hans Baldung Grien", *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 39, no. 7, pt. 1 (September, 1952): 186.



emptying the Nahuatl symbols from their magical and mystical meaning; feathers, cacao, tobacco, etc., become a sensorial and an aesthetic experience.

This, I would like to argue, was a Franciscan strategy to control religious syncretism and to impose religious dogma without recurring to the supernatural. The friars used images as mnemonic and didactic tools, not as magical devices. As Gruzinski mentions, “although the Franciscans developed a visual strategy, they were still reluctant towards edifying visions, favouring a humanist and didactic approach to the image [*quoique les franciscains aient su développer une stratégie visuelle, on a vu qu’ils se montrèrent réticents à l’endroit des visions édifiantes, préférant cultiver une approche humaniste et didactique de l’image*]”.<sup>77</sup> The Franciscans were reluctant to share their access to the miraculous, as if only Saint Francis, “the *alter Christ*”, could directly and physically experience the divine without running the risk of confounding it with the demonic. In 1472, for example, in the bull *Spectat ad Romani*, Sixtus IV “was led to prohibit the representation of St. Catherine ‘*cum stigmatibus Christi, ad instar beati Francisci*’ (‘with the stigmata, in the likeness of blessed Francis’).<sup>78</sup>

In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, the Jesuits and other missionary orders arrived to New Spain, doubling the number of mendicant clergy by 1580 and more than tripling it by 1650.<sup>79</sup> The Franciscans therefore lost the monopoly in the conversion of Mexica souls, which led to an expansion on the modes of conversion. According to Gruzinski, during this time “the edifying vision was the main concern of the clergy, and finally became a Christianizing and acculturating tool [*la vision édifiante passe au premier rang des préoccupations du clergé et devient définitivement un instrument de christianisation et d’acculturation*]”.<sup>80</sup>

In the second half of the sixteenth century the missionary work changed, and the emphasis switched to what Gruzinski calls “the colonization of the

77 Gruzinski, *Visions indiennes, visions baroques*, 141.

78 Arnold I. Davidson, “Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata”, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (spring, 2009): 457.

79 Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 146.

80 Gruzinski, *Visions indiennes, visions baroques*, 134.

imaginary (*la colonisation de l'imaginaire*)".<sup>81</sup> As part of their conversion to Christianity, it became necessary for the Mexica, not only to be able to depict and understand Christian images, but to also experience the Christian supernatural themselves: "if the first objective implied just gradually becoming accustomed to the iconic and iconographic codes of Western Europe, the second requires the Indians subjectively to experience what was sacred to the Christian".<sup>82</sup>

Allowing indigenous peoples to appropriate and experience the Christian miraculous meant less control on the part of the missionaries. Unlike feather mosaics, which were produced under the vigilant Franciscan eye, supernatural visions and mystic experiences were beyond the control of the clergy. According to Gruzinski, the use of hallucinogens, traditionally part of Aztec culture, helped to make this transition from the material image to the immaterial apparition.<sup>83</sup> Now that the Mexica could potentially directly access the "true" image of god, the saints and the Virgin Mary, the role of indigenous artistry in general, and of the *amantecah* in particular, became less important.

#### THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE, OR TONANTZIN

The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac is one of the first and most dramatic instances in which the power of the image, as an indigenous artistic creation, is obliterated. According to the traditional account of the story, in 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared on mount Tepeyac to Juan Diego, an indigenous man, and asked him to tell the Archbishop Zumárraga to build a temple in her honour. To prove Juan Diego's vision to the Archbishop, who initially was sceptical of what Juan Diego claimed, the Virgin asked the indigenous man to gather flowers in his *tilma* (or cloak). The flowers miraculously imprinted her image on Juan Diego's cloak, which was revealed when he met with the Archbishop and let the flowers spill out. The image imprinted on

81 *Ibid.*

82 Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico*, 188.

83 Gruzinski, "Images and Cultural Mestizaje", 72.

Juan Diego's *tilma* was thus not a man-produced image, but instead proof of Juan Diego's supernatural encounter with the Christian divine. Juan Diego's *tilma* was the material trace that attested to the physicality of the supernatural, in the same way Saint Francis's stigmata materialized his mystical encounter.<sup>84</sup> Just as curios from the New World helped materialize the existence of the unknown, Juan Diego's *tilma* proved that indigenous peoples could have *immediate* access to the Christian miraculous.

The apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe was, however, controversial, for it had occurred on Tepeyac, the same hill where Tonantzin, literally meaning, our mother, was adored. Allowing for indigenous people to continue to pilgrim to a site of former pagan importance bordered with religious syncretism. There were enough similarities between the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tonantzin to generate anxiety among the friars, especially since there was no way to make sure the Mexica were not using the image of the Virgin as a veneer to continue with their "idolatrous" behavior. In book XI, Sahagún warns the reader of this practice:

En este lugar [Tepeyac] tenían un templo dedicado a la madre de los dioses, que la llamaban Tonantzin que quiere dezir, nra madre; alli hazian muchos sacrificios a honrra desta diosa [...] y agora que está allá edificada la iglesia de Nra Señora de Guadalupe, también la llaman Tonantzin...y es cosa que se debería remediar, porque el proprio nombre de la madre de dios Santamaría no es Tonantzin [...] nantzin parece esta invención satánica.<sup>85</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Franciscan missionaries in charge for the conversion of indigenous people during the first half of the sixteenth century were highly worried about religious syncretism and constantly compared and juxtaposed Nahua practices and beliefs to Christian rituals with the only intention of labeling them as "demonic".<sup>86</sup> Moreover, as Clara Bargellini

84 Davidson, "Miracles of Bodily Transformation", 451-452.

85 Sahagún, *Historia general*, vol. 3, bk. 11, f. 234 r.

86 Patricia Harrington, "Mother of Death, Mother of Rebirth: The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 1 (spring, 1988): 33.

mentions, other Franciscan clergy denounced the promotion of the adoration of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a miraculous image, and insisted that it was man-made.<sup>87</sup> With the arrival of other orders to New Spain, however, new approaches to the conversion of the natives emerged, and in 1553 a new Archbishop, the Dominican Alonso de Montúfar, was consecrated. He came to replace the Franciscan Zumárraga after his death. Montúfar ordered the building of the chapel at Tepeyac and defended the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>88</sup>

The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe symbolized not only the indigenous access to the miraculous, but also the tensions between the Franciscans and the other missionary orders in New Spain. With the support of the Dominicans, the miraculous image of Guadalupe and the indigenous immediate and supernatural experience of the divine were slowly recognized. Conversely, as indigenous people gained access to the miraculous, the production of feather mosaics declined.

The Augustinian Matías Tebaida, an eighteenth-century chronicler, wrote: “in Tiripitío I was able to find a feather worker and in Pátzcuaro there are a few; they do not apply themselves because the work is great and the profit small, for the Spaniards disparage such marvelous work only because it is made by indians”.<sup>89</sup> In Tebaida’s words the decline of the role and reputation of the *amanteca* is evident: his ethnicity now interfered with the appreciation of his art and *invenzione*, so highly praised in the sixteenth century. Producing feather mosaics in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was no longer a profitable activity, and the prices of feather mosaics dropped dramatically. Teresa Castelló mentions that in the Notaries Archive of Zacatecas, “four large ones [feather paintings] were mentioned in 1656: the Our Lady of Solitude, Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, with a total value of forty pesos”. While in 1662, “a feathered portrait of Saint

87 Clara Bargellini, “The Colors of the Virgin of Guadalupe”, in *Colors between Two Worlds*, eds. Wolf and Connors, 4.

88 Alberto María Carreno, “Don Fray Alonso de Montúfar, Second Archbishop of Mexico, and the Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe”, *The Americas* 2, no. 3 (January, 1946): 284.

89 Quoted in Teresa Castelló Yturbide, “Featherwork in the Indigenous Tradition”, in *The Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Castelló Yturbide, 156.

Augustine was valued at three pesos”.<sup>90</sup> In less than ten years the price of feather mosaics had dropped over fifty per cent.

This rejection of the *amanteca* and his work was a consequence, I would like to suggest, of the rising status of the artist and oil painting in Europe. Not only were Spanish painters, such as Baltasar de Echave Orío, brought to New Spain to decorate the Mexican churches, but local artists, such as Cristóbal de Villalpando, were commissioned to produce paintings after Rubens’s compositions. Furthermore, European collectors became more interested in owning paintings by renowned and important European artists than in objects from anonymous artists in far-away territories.<sup>91</sup> Artworks, which had been valued in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century because of their lavish materials, and later in the sixteenth century for the skill of the artist, came to be valued in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward based on the reputation of the painter.

The miraculous apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, though it granted indigenous people access to the Christian world, including the miraculous (once reserved for the most revered saints, *i.e.* Saint Francis)<sup>92</sup> also stripped the *amantecah* from their little niche of indigenous autonomy. In making the distinction between image and vision, images and feathers lost power as magical and mystical devices in channeling the divine. The *amantecah* were thus no longer active participants in materializing the sacred on earth through their skill and *invenzione*, but instead were replaced by Juan Diego, a passive viewer,<sup>93</sup> whose *tilma* became the “canvas” on which the Virgin Mary painted her own image.

In both cases, however, it is ultimately nature, God’s creation, that materializes the divine. Both feathers and flowers serve the artist. The difference, nonetheless, is that in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, it is the Virgin herself who paints the image. Juan Diego’s body experiences and channels the divine, but it does so thanks to Juan Diego’s obedience and passivity, not thanks to his active artistic creation. The hand of the indigenous artist is, in

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>91</sup> Martínez del Río de Redo, “Featherwork during the Viceroyalty”, 115.

<sup>92</sup> Juan Diego was canonized on July 31, 2002.

<sup>93</sup> Bargellini, “The Colors of the Virgin”, 14.

other words, effaced, and with it the traditional medium used by the *amantecah*: featherwork.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe appears not as feathers glued on *amate* paper, but as pigment applied on fabric. This same pigment started to slowly make its way into feather mosaics, and in the eighteenth century faces and hands were no longer rendered with feathers but with oil (figure 8). The traditional Mexica technique was thus altered and the simultaneous processes of conversion and conservation became a simple one of appropriation.

The indigenous artist was denied, not the miraculous in this case, but the status of painter. Conquest, as Russo argues, had initially allowed for an autonomous place “where art is given a space for thinking, sometimes just before, and sometimes just after the destruction. Or against it”.<sup>94</sup> But with the miraculous apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, indigenous artistic creation is obliterated and the *amanteca* is relegated to the role of a passive viewer. He is denied any genius or *invenzione*.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the violent conquest and conversion of the indigenous population in Mexico, the work of feather artists continued to flourish during the sixteenth century. Though the transformation of the iconography of feather mosaics was definitely a form of violence inflicted on the indigenous technique, one by which the feathered image was sanitized from any pagan references, the production of these objects remained an indigenous activity. As such, feather mosaics depicting Christian imagery functioned, not only as tools for the conversion of the indigenous population, but as objects that carried and communicated indigenous artistry.

While in America the Franciscan friars used feather mosaics for the religious instruction of the Indians, once these objects crossed the Atlantic, they transformed into artworks admired for their aesthetic qualities. Feather mosaics in princely collections were seen in conversation with other forms of

<sup>94</sup> Russo, “De *Tlacuilolli*”, 35.

artistic production and engaged and questioned Renaissance debates on art and artistic skill. The *amantecab* were admired for their *invenzione* and even compared to the most cherished artists from antiquity.

The raising status of the artist in Europe, however, changed the nature of the *kunstkammer*. Objects were no longer valued because of their lavish materials or their “exoticism”, which previously helped their owners to forge an image of virtuous conquerors. From the mid-sixteenth century on, political and economic power was instead conveyed through the commissioning of paintings and sculptures from specific European painters that had risen to the category of genius.

Furthermore, the niche of indigenous autonomy that the Franciscan commissioning of featherworks had created was diminished as other orders arrived to New Spain, expanding the modes of conversion. The indigenous-produced image, visually familiar to the audience and used as a didactic tool to introduce novel religious concepts, became less central in the conversion process, making indigenous artistic techniques dispensable. The active hand of the indigenous artist was thus effaced and hidden behind new artistic works that followed a baroque aesthetic, coopting a space that had previously conveyed the indigenous creative and artistic prowess to a European audience.

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ximjotia acatonan hitechienoc  
oasquj tixavja muchihallocan  
novja.

Xaiamehoa ximjotia acatonā  
hitechienocarusquj tixavjian mo  
chan hhallocan, novja.

¶ Fotochin incuje tescatsōcatl.

Iian, yia, yia, yia ayia, ayio,  
oyia ayia, ayia, ayia, yia,  
yio, vjia, ayia, yia, ayia vj  
ia, yio vjia.

Colivacan, mavispan atlaacatl e  
hama, yio, ayio, yia, yio.

Tescatsōcatl tepan teutl, macoc  
iechoaia, avjia, macavi teutl,  
macoc yiechoaia,

Huja axalacatzepan teutl, ma  
coc yiechoaia macavi teutl,  
macoc yiechoaia.

¶ Atlahoa icujc.

Huja nichalmecatl, nichalme  
catl negavalaactla, oljia quato  
nalla, olia.

Veia, veia, macxoiauh quilas  
teutl illamanj macxoiauh.



Figure 1. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, 16th century. Digital version of codex 218, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, vol. 1, bk. 2, f. 143r.



mictiuh. inie ommotectiuh tla ye  
 pechoti, iniquican icac tlaotzalli  
 omoteneub, ipan onmotztiuh inma  
 chiotl, ininuhqui ic icuuhuhqui, inque  
 quitlamantli tlapalli ipan mota.  
 Inicoac omogalo omiuetica tlaoa  
 tzalli: niman isco onmoquetza in  
 tlaotihuitt, motzpanthub, mogalo  
 tiuh, omiuetica onmoquetztiuh,  
 can iuh otlatocatiuh, mo ye pechoti  
 uh inhuitt commopochtitiuh in tla  
 oatzalli: aub ipan onmomantliuh, in  
 amamachiotl tla cuiuitt, ipan onmo  
 iehcotiuh, inie amo cana neeuhtuh  
 tlatiioalli, inie amo qui patiliz, can  
 uel on monamictitiuh in machiotl:  
 inie onmocalotiuh ihuitt. Ocacan  
 ihuitt in in mochioa iniecaui inihui  
 tla cui solli in tzacutica mochioa.  
 Aub in tzeentlamantli tlatiioalli,  
 in can mecatica, iohitica iccaui: ichoat  
 inuhqui ecachoaztli, quezgallica  
 cechoaztli, machoncoti, tlamamalli  
 tlauiztli, tozehoatl etc. Niman ietla  
 pilolli, tlatzcomaiotl, tlateloloiotl,  
 tlaiaacac pifcaciaotl, mochie mouel  
 nestia, icmo tlamamaca mecacoa z  
 ti. Aub inie caui achto molpiza  
 incolotli: catzpan misguachua ic  
 chicaoa, tchoatl ipan momana in

Figure 2. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, 16th century. Digital version of codex 218, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, vol. 2, bk. 9, f. 66r.



Figure 3. *Matrícula de tributos*, 1522-1530, codex on *amate* paper, 29 × 42 cm. Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City



ca muchioa, ynaquyn cenca quauo  
 tic, quylhuyā in coa: quauobhtin.  
 quauob chachalan, cihlalmaololo.  
 ynaquyn pepenalora, inreixipila  
 ate yiaioa: iuhquyn tlachicthi, iuh  
 quyn to mad, iuhquyn telolotli, iuh  
 quyn quauyt tlaxixintli, amoqua  
 cocototitlic, quacolocotitlic, velzō  
 melaoac, tzompiahtic, amo ix  
 quachachaquachtic, amo ixqua  
 totomonguy, amo ixquaxitontic,  
 amo ixquaxitquypiltic, amo qua  
 metlapiltic, amo cuexcohuylitlic,  
 amo quachitatic, amo quapats  
 tic, amo quapattachtic, amo qua  
 oacaltic, amo quaxozomalacuy,  
 amo ixquamamalacachtic, amo  
 ixquatolpopoactic, amo ixqua  
 tolmemetlapiltic, amo campopo  
 nactic, amo ixujujlaxtic, amo  
 canuyujlaxtic, amo ixpopotitlic,  
 amo no camachalocacaltic, amo  
 ixmetlapiltic, amo ixpechtic, a  
 mo iacapatitlic, amo iacacolia  
 tic, amo iacaxacacaltic, amo ia  
 cacaxtic, amo iacachittitlic, amo  
 iacauyititlic, amo iacaneuyitlic,  
 can veliac ynijac, iacapiastic,  
 amo tenxipaltotomacac, amok  
 xipaltotomac, tenxipaltotomactic,  
 amo tencaztic, amorio tenmela  
 piltic: amono tlzatzacuy, amo  
 nenepilcham puchtic, amo nene  
 pilchacauiltic, amo popoloc, amo  
 tentsitzipi, amo tentsitzipiltatōa

Figure 4. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, 16th century. Digital versión of codex 218, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, vol. 1, bk. 1, f. 30v.





Figure 5. *Testerian Catechism*, 1524, manuscript, 15.5 × 11 cm. Center for the Study of the History of Mexico CARSO, Mexico City



Figure 6. *The Mass of Saint Gregory*, 1539, feather mosaic on wood, 68 × 56 cm.  
Musée des Jacobins, Toulouse



Figure 7. *Feather shield with coyote, c. 1500*. Feathers, gold plate, cane, leather.  
Museum of Ethnology, Vienna



Figure 8. *Saint Joseph and the Child*, 18th. century, feather mosaic, 11.5 × 9 cm. Museum of Ethnography, Berlin