Contemporary Zapotec poet, Víctor de la Cruz, laments that he composes his poetry on paper. Even writing in his native Zapotec, the poet finds it impossible to authentically represent his language when writing on paper. In his poem “Who are we? What is our name?” de la Cruz refers to pre-Hispanic times where he envisions writing as more expansive, where its surfaces could be found in nature, songs, and adornments. The poet’s anguish implies that to write is to relive the violence of the colonial project that not only imprisoned the indigenous peoples’ word with the letter, but severed its ties to the senses and the sacred. When the Spanish brought the alphabet to the New World, the civilizations of Mesoamerica had been practicing their own systems of writing for centuries. Mesoamerican writing implied more than the letter; indeed, with the exception of the Maya, an alphabet was not involved at all. “To write” was also “to paint” and its surfaces could be found on stone, animal skins, or screen “books” or codices.

In the case of central Mexico, the geographic area we will focus on in this chapter, the Spanish friars who were entrusted with the task of converting the indigenous populations found that the Mesoamericans had different kinds of books, among which, Elizabeth Hill Boone points out, were a class of texts considered most dangerous to the project of evangelization. These books, Boone explains, were the divinatory books, the ones that spoke of the “invisible world” or “the world of divine or spirit beings, supernaturals and cosmic forces.”
They were consulted for all aspects of life and were “books of fate.”\(^5\) For this reason, they were also among the first books to be burned by the Spanish.\(^6\)

Contemporary historical reflections generally concur that the writing/painting of the Mesoamerican peoples was eventually usurped by the Spanish project that systematically sought to colonize their language, writing, and souls.\(^7\) The evidence to support this is indeed compelling. James Lockhart pinpoints the end of the seventeenth century as the time when the pictorial completely disappeared from Nahuatl writing. In the 1530s centers in Mexico City and Tlaxcala had begun to instruct the Nahuas on how to write their own language alphabetically, and by the 1540s numerous alphabetic texts in Nahuatl could be found.\(^8\) While Lockhart suggests that the pictographic tradition continued to some extent, “and the two methods supported each other” after the conquest, he states that the pictorial eventually gave way to the alphabetic: “Ultimately, however, they competed, and the alphabetic method took over more and more of the functions of communication, to the point that the pictorial component became unnecessary and fell by the wayside.”\(^9\) Walter Mignolo adds yet more evidence to this account by illustrating that the colonial project was infused with the philosophy of the Spanish grammarian, Antonio Nebrija, and his belief that to conquer implied to civilize and that this could be accomplished by disseminating alphabetic writing and Castilian.\(^10\) The eventual result of this, writes Mignolo, was “the fading out of every writing system except the alphabetic.”\(^11\) With so much overwhelming evidence to support the belief that there was indeed a passage from the pictorial to the alphabetic, this would hardly seem a topic that needs to be revisited, yet that is precisely what this chapter will attempt to do.

My own work on this topic began with a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico to meet with a Zapotec artist who had founded an art school in the rural village of Santa Ana de Zegache. He called his school The Center for Visual Thought, and as it turns out the artists were farmers—children and adults—the meeting place a tree. And the actual center? “It’s here,” the artist said, as he pointed to his heart.\(^12\) The artist, Nicéforo Urbieta, had begun a personal journey to discover whether the Zapotec people of today were thinking and communicating as they did in pre-Hispanic times. His question has now inspired my own investigation as I continue to inquire whether the passage from the pictorial to the alphabetic was completed centuries ago, or whether the two sign systems continue to compete today. What I have found through fieldwork with Urbieta and
the artists of the Center for Visual Thought is that revisiting history through its legacy in the present day rather than through records from the past provides an opportunity to examine image-making today and to discover that imagistic production, rhetoric, and reception challenge the notion that Mesoamerican writing was completely abandoned for the alphabet. Indeed, I would suggest that the battle for souls persists and that the image, that is, the writing of the Mesoamerican peoples, continues to be used.\textsuperscript{13}

What I would also like to propose in this work is that the Mesoamerican valorization of duality, concealment, and metaphor in writing/painting lends itself to a mode of visual rhetoric that may go unrecognized to those of us steeped in Western literacy. This may be the reason why scholars do not recognize that the image is alive and well in contemporary Mexico. The central example I will discuss is the story of a portrait that was commissioned of Nicéforo Uribeta and that was presented to Pope John Paul II in 2002 when he came to Mexico to beatify two Zapotec martyrs and to canonize Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin. I will discuss the hidden layers of meaning in this painting, how it embraces Mesoamerican rhetoric, and how it ultimately was perceived as a threat by the Catholic church.

**Why on Paper?**

“Why write on paper?” asks Víctor de la Cruz. Instead, he offers leaves, sky, and song. That of which he speaks, I dare say, is not merely poetic but speaks instead of a writing that is connected to the cosmos and the sacred. It also defies all Western notions of writing, for writing today is most commonly believed to be “graphically recorded language.”\textsuperscript{14} The fact that Mesoamerican writing, with the exception of the Maya, did not employ an alphabet has always made it difficult for scholars to consider the codices legitimate writing at all.\textsuperscript{15} The pervasiveness of writing as recorded speech is evident in the recent response to the discovery of an Olmec tablet in Veracruz, Mexico, supposedly the earliest known writing in the Western Hemisphere. William Saturno, anthropologist and expert on Mesoamerican writing, says of the tablet, “That’s full-blown, legitimate text—written symbol taking the place of spoken word.”\textsuperscript{16} But when the early Spaniards described Mesoamerican texts they did not talk about recorded speech, but rather the image, which the friars quickly learned was how they read and wrote, and was therefore the most effective way to communicate with them.\textsuperscript{17}
Before describing some similar present-day images, let me briefly summarize my earlier work where I shared my journey to the Center for Visual Thought to meet Nicéforo Urbieta and the artists of this special school. Urbieta spent six years in maximum security prison during Mexico’s “dirty war.” During this time he continued to be dedicated to his then-Marxist beliefs and undertook an artistic project to help him synthesize his readings of Das Kapital. His plan was to put all of the first volume of Das Kapital into graphic form so as to have an easier way of understanding it. On this he worked for one year, spending day and night making glyphs, codes, and graphic symbols, putting all of these onto two pieces of paper. At the time he did not make a connection with this project and the writing of his pre-Hispanic ancestors, but when he finished and stood back to gaze upon his work, he marveled at what he had created: Pre-Hispanic codices.

At this point he began to realize that this system of writing—which we recall is not even considered true writing—is actually exceptionally advanced as it allows the reader to take in everything at once and to capture “the explosion of thought.” This connection with the past made Urbieta wonder whether the same people and mode of thought and communication that created this system was still alive today. So after his release from jail, he went back to his Zapotec village to find out what remained of ancient Zapotec culture and communication. He began by meeting with members of his hometown; they discussed the economic hardships of the pueblo as well as how to preserve their Zapotec language and culture. Someone in the group proposed they do something with their hands while they speak as the custom in the community is to work while visiting with friends and neighbors: “while my mouth speaks my hands work.” On one occasion, Urbieta brought clay to the group and to his amazement, while the group spoke, extraordinarily beautiful and complex sculptures were produced. Urbieta saw this as a confirmation of what he had suspected, that for indigenous communities orality and images continued as dominant forms of communication. For Urbieta, the image is similar to that of the poet, de la Cruz, in that it includes all of the senses in which culture and meaning is shared; Urbieta cites not only these sculptures, but also the sounds, colors, and food of the yearly fiestas in which meaning is made and ancient traditions are shared.

Barbara Mundy, in her study of the maps made by Mesoamericans in central Mexico in 1580, describes an environment where “cultural
communication was dominated by images.” But in several hundred years, according to Lockhart and Mignolo, this would no longer be the case, as the alphabet would supposedly reign supreme. How then could Urbieta’s findings be true, that nonalphabetic communication was still dominant? Mundy observes that friars did not actually erase the image but used it for their own purposes. She points out that in New Spain mendicant friars embraced the image as a means to educate and convert the Amerindians. The friars themselves did not necessarily have the artistic skills to work in an imagistic medium, so they recruited indigenous artists to make Christian iconography. And so, while the Mesoamerican pictorial texts were banned, the imagistic medium continued: “Friars sought to replace not only the image with the text but the indigenous image with the Christian one.” In Mundy’s findings, there was an interruption regarding the content of the image; but the medium most important to the indigenous people—their method of reading and writing—was still very much alive.

Mesoamerican Rhetoric: The Flower and the Song

The great Aztec poet Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472) anguished over finding a symbol that would live forever. The solution he would find in poetry itself, what the Aztecs called “the flower and the song”: “At last my heart knows it. I hear a song, I contemplate a flower... May they never fade.” According to David Carrasco, the Nahua poet-philosophers or tlamatinime (“those who know something”) responded to their anxiety over the illusory and temporal nature of the human experience by devising a method to transcend the mortal world and connect with the gods: “The main technique was the creation of in xochitl, in cuicatl, or the flowers and songs, artistic expressions in the forms of words, songs, and paintings that connected the human personality, referred to as ‘face and heart,’ with the divine.” Carrasco explains that the rhetoric they developed mirrored the Nahuatl philosophy of duality. The Nahuas believed their creator, Ometeotl, was a deity of two, also known as Tonantzin, Todohtzin, or “Our Mother,” “Our Father.” Reality was constructed of dualities that could be found everywhere: “male/female, hot/cold, left/right, underworld/celestial world, above/below, darkness/light, rain/drought, death/life.” The rhetoric the tlamatinime developed embraced this dual reality by means of the difrasismo, or two entities expressed together to form a single concept; for example, “in atl, in tepetl = water and hill = town; in xochitl,
in cuicatl = flower and song, = poetry or truth.”

Poetry and art were indeed powerful, explains Carrasco, for to express oneself in flower and song—that is in the verbal and visual arts—was to be imbued with the sacred: “the human personality became linked to the divine duality above.”

Boone understands the graphic image to be parallel to the nahuallatolli or “speech of the sorcerers” that was used by the diviners to communicate with and about the supernatural world. It was not a language intended to clarify or be readily accessible, but it “was a rich and complex manner of speaking, one that approached meaning obliquely and through metaphor.”

The intention, Boone explains, was “to obscure and hide rather than clarify,” and to reveal “by its indirectness the fuller qualities of an essence.” She explains how “water,” for instance, was expressed as “she of the jade skirt,” “her blouse is jade,” “the mistress of jade.”

The important thing to note is that the metaphor both reveals the fundamental nature of the term it describes—its color—for example, yet does so by means of a rhetoric that simultaneously conceals the item itself. The ability to obscure meaning would prove to be useful, I believe, in the war of images that was about to come.

The War of Images

Mundy describes the Spanish battle to win indigenous souls as “a war fought with images.” The author explains that while the friars of New Spain continued the tradition of using the image as a means to evangelize, and did so with the aid of indigenous artists, they hoped that in controlling the images the native people produced they could control them politically and ideologically. Replacing Mesoamerican images with Christian ones did not, of course, lead to an easy conquest of the souls of the local people. The Dominican friar Diego Durán expressed his frustration over how the indigenous people pretended to be faithful to the church but held on to their pre-Hispanic rituals and beliefs, “feigning that the rejoicing is made to God, when their object is the idol.” Sahagún remarked in the same vein: “They easily accepted as god the god of the Spaniards, but not in order to leave their ancient ones, and this they hid during the catechism when they were baptized.”

The struggle would be played out in a visual realm as the Spanish friars sought to destroy the pagan gods by annihilating their images and idols and replacing them with Christian ones. Serge Gruzinski explains that the movement to convert the indigenous
population began in 1525 with the Franciscans: “It opened with the systematic and irreversible destruction of sanctuaries and idols: the war of images was intensifying.”

Whereas many scholars believe that pictographic writing, with its concealments and ambiguities, is an artifact of the past, I would like to present an example of a contemporary pictorial text that displays many of the features of the divinatory books I have discussed earlier. I believe that the visual techniques employed in this text are meant to obscure meaning in a way that opens up the possibility that hidden messages and an “invisible world” could exist today. The story I will relate is that of Pope John Paul II’s final trip to Mexico where he came to beatify two Zapotec martyrs and to canonize Juan Diego, to whom many faithful believe the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared. For this event, a painting of the martyrs was commissioned of Nicéforo Urbieta, and later reproduced in various items such as scapulars, posters, and candles. In recounting the commission of the painting of the martyrs of Cajonos, I highlight how this contemporary painting was controlled and censored and thus mirrors the colonial context Mundy described was taking place in 1580 in central Mexico. As such it implies that the ancient form of writing, the pictorial, continues to be both relevant and threatening.

The Papal Visit

In July of 2002 Pope John Paul II visited Mexico where he beatified two Zapotec martyrs, Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles, and canonized Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, the Chichimeca Indian said to have been visited by the Virgin of Guadalupe. Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles were fiscales (local indigenous assistants to priests) from San Francisco Cajonos, Oaxaca who are said to have been murdered by Zapotec townspeople in September of 1700 as revenge for their having reported to parish priests that an “idolotrous” gathering would be taking place.

In honor of the Pope’s visit, Nicéforo Urbieta was asked to paint a portrait of the Zapotec martyrs, a copy of which would be presented to the Pope at the Basilica in Mexico City. The process Urbieta underwent in the creation of this painting strongly resembles Mundy’s account of how Mesoamericans were monitored and controlled when asked to make Christian iconography. In the time period about which Mundy writes, sixty years after the conquest, most Christian images were
being made by native locals. And though the friars were attempting to oversee this process, the viceregal government was concerned that the indigenous peoples making the images actually had too much control over their art. The viceroy, thus, called for a formal means to observe the images being made: “Within San José de los Naturales was an examination center for native painters, and in 1552 Viceroy don Luis de Velasco commanded that no native be allowed to paint religious images without first being examined in San José.”

The fear that native painters might infuse the Catholic image with their own symbols is visible in a modern context with the case of Urbieta’s commission. Urbieta was invited by a priest to paint the portrait of Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles that would be used in the celebration of their beatification. His preliminary sketch, he explained to me, produced syncretistic symbols: a dove and a snake, that held both pre-Hispanic as well as Christian meanings. The archbishop and priests requested weekly meetings with Urbieta to monitor his work, and at these gatherings the idea of syncretism and symbols was immediately vetoed by the church. Week after week they met with the artist to discuss and critique his progress. The archbishop and his council were very specific about how the martyrs should be represented; Urbieta explained that they insisted on every detail: “Their faces should look like this, their expressions like this, the signature should be here…” Ultimately the archbishop and priests were satisfied with the final result and the portrait was revealed in a public gathering with the media present.

The painting appears to be fairly straightforward: two Zapotec men in humble clothing each holding a cross, thus showing their allegiance to the Catholic church. The artist, however, when interviewed by the media, revealed another layer of meaning to the painting. Urbieta first explained that in the cathedral in Oaxaca, where the painting was to be displayed, there were already two Christian icons that could be interpreted as pre-Hispanic ones. One was the black Christ of Esquipulus, whom he interpreted as the dark Lord Tezcatlipoca. Also in the cathedral was the cross of Quetzalcoatl, a pre-Hispanic cross that some believe was left by one of Christ’s apostles, while others view as a pre-Hispanic symbol of Quetzalcoatl. What Urbieta accomplished in his painting, he explained, was to unite the two deities, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, already present in the cathedral, but not joined together. This he did in the portrait of Juan and Jacinto, who he explained represented the
union of Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl. These two deities formed a duality in the Mesoamerican pantheon, and while they often had an antagonistic relationship, joined to create heaven and earth by seizing the earth monster and dividing it into half. In an interview, Urbieta unravels the layers of meaning in his painting:

The square, symbol of the universe, is in the portrait. The color of jade, that is the symbol of life, the water of the harvest. The scapular of Monte Albán—each one of the men portrayed has one—one has the color red in his cross. The other the color black in his cross—Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. And well, the symbol of duality, the two, because of the fact that it was going to be in the cathedral where there already was a symbol of the black Christ, the Señor del Rayo, the black Christ of Esquipulus, they call him, and that is the symbol of Tezcatlipoca, who is the black Lord. There already was the symbol of the cross of Quetzalcoatl in the chapel where the Martyrs of Cajonos are. Now, the only thing that was missing was the symbol of duality to make it complete.

In essence, Urbieta managed to represent two realities, a technique Mundy discovered in her own studies of the Relaciones Geográficas, the maps made by indigenous peoples of New Spain at the request of the Spanish crown. Mundy wondered whether the Mesoamericans were representing space according to their own reality or whether they were trying to please the Spanish audience for whom they were making the maps. She believes that most of the maps convey both influences—their true feelings and reality along with what the Spanish Catholic king would like to see. Mundy writes, “In short, the native colonial artist’s work was colored by his (or her) ‘double consciousness,’ as he (or she) painted for the local community as well as for a shadowy, but powerful Spanish patron.”

Indeed it would appear that Urbieta was attempting the same: to conceal an indigenous belief or reality while providing the Catholic church with one that is acceptable. Meaning is clearly layered in Urbieta’s painting, which brings us back to the divinatory books that spoke of the “invisible world” and did so through highly cryptic vocabulary where meaning was often masked and required a diviner to interpret it.

Let us now examine this graphic vocabulary and investigate whether its abstruse and hidden features are both relevant and present in contemporary Mexico. One characteristic of the divinatory codices is that
they always feature an image of a supernatural being that is physically identifiable by such characteristics as clothing, facial paint, and the like.48 Urbieta’s painting features two supernaturals, though they are only physically identified by their symbolic colors, red and black. In other words, that the Zapotec martyrs represent Mesoamerican supernaturals in the Urbieta painting is not readily evident. In the case of the divinatory codices, Boone emphasizes that understanding these ancient books was difficult for the ancient reader as well as for the modern one. She explains, “The difficulty for the modern reader, as for the pre-conquest diviner, is first to identify the images and then to recognize their intended meaning.”49 Indeed, in the case of the ancient codices, only a trained priest or diviner could interpret the mysteries of these texts. In the case of the Urbieta’s painting, we require his interpretation and explanation as the Mesoamerican message and symbolism remains almost completely concealed beneath the Christian images.

Graphic signs that identify locations are an important element of the divinatory codices.50 In the case of the supernatural beings in the divinatory codices, meaning is derived from the association the supernaturals have with each other as well as the spatial context in which they are located. Boone explains, “The elements composing the scene jointly participate in the creation of meaning, for the message is not merely the presence of a certain supernatural or being but of some entity doing or having done it to a specific thing, and occasionally it is important that the action take place in a specific kind of location.”51 In the case of Urbieta’s painting, the artist was not permitted to include any symbols, actions, or identifiable locations, so it is my belief that he extended his “codices” by including the entire cathedral in Oaxaca as his backdrop.

In other words, the location of where the painting was to be displayed, the cathedral in Oaxaca, is significant as it forms part of the narrative and contributes to the layers of meaning in the work. The painting of the Martyrs of Cajonos reveals the ancient technique of “the flower and the song,” the verbal and visual arts that sought to invoke the divine duality of the cosmos by means of a graphic and visual representation of duality. The red and the black are not only the artist’s nod to both deities, but also to the metaphor of writing (a reference to the red and black ink used to make the codices) and to the greater transcendent goal of the flower and song. Urbieta says, “And now the two are there—the red and the black. How many poets around Nezahualcoyotl talked about the color red and black, the symbol of wisdom, the wisdom to harmonize chaos and order.”52
The artist revealed his portrait in a public ceremony where he “divined” or interpreted the Mesoamerican narrative concealed in the image of the Zapotec martyrs. This portion of his explanation was neither revealed in the print media, nor did it appear on the local TV news, both of which had interviewed him. In addition, the two promised subsequent interviews with Urbieta that were to take place at the Basilica in Mexico City and later in Oaxaca were cancelled. As to why the Mesoamerican reading of his painting was excluded in the media became more clear when the artist and I stumbled upon an altered version of his painting. While shopping together at a market in Oaxaca, we stopped in a small store where I noticed religious candles that displayed Urbieta’s painting. On closer examination, however, the image was not quite the one Urbieta had made. The red and the black circles—the smallest nod to the deities Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca—had been erased. In their place were not the two crosses with the red and black centers, but now a single cross in a traditional Spanish Baroque style (see figure 9.1). That the red and the black—the ancient metaphor for Mesoamerican writing—had been erased is, I believe, symbolic of a larger attempt to win an ongoing battle for images, writing, and souls. At the same time, it also mirrors the colonial project that Gruzinski describes as having two phases: “According to the chronicles it was carried out by way of a simple and precise scenario that would often be replayed. A scenario in two acts, linking annihilation and substitution; the idols first were broken (by the Indians and/or by the Spanish), then the conquerors replaced them with Christian images.”

I would like to suggest that the alteration of the painting that censures the Mesoamerican layer of meaning points to a desire to control both ideology and image, despite the fact that we are told that dangerous books ceased in their production centuries ago.

Let us now turn to another example of how the church continues to wage a war through images. This case is also related to the Papal visit of 2002. The canonization of Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin was of enormous significance to indigenous people everywhere, as Juan Diego was the first indigenous Roman Catholic saint. But the portrait of Juan Diego that the church chose to represent on posters, stamps, and the like was “a light-skinned, full bearded man who looks more like one of the sword-wielding Spanish conquistadors who subjugated the Aztec empire.” Thus the two images, that of Juan Diego and Urbieta’s portrait of Juan Bautista and Jacinto de los Ángeles that were widely
distributed to the public were ultimately controlled by a Catholic church that appears to continue to exert a message of dominance by means of the image.

In order for Urbieta to present the “double consciousness” that Mundy described, he had to utilize ancient techniques that both concealed and revealed Mesoamerican cosmology. That is, through duality, supernaturals, metaphor, and location. And so, to return to the quest of Nezahualcoyotl—did he find a symbol that would last? Nezahualcoyotl and the tlamatinime developed not merely a symbol that would last, the flower and the song, but a rhetoric that by design could survive and resist by means of its power to conceal meaning. That this art is still monitored, altered, and viewed as threatening points to the persistence of the pictorial rhetoric of Mesoamerican art and the “invisible world” it continues to protect.

Notes

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1. De la Cruz, 80–83. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Spanish are my own.
2. León-Portilla and Shorris, In the Language of Kings, 25–26. León-Portilla stresses that Mesoamerican literature had a performative element as well and was often recited in public spaces, such as feasts and involved both music and dance.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 5.
7. For a history of literacy in New Spain, particularly the passage from the pictorial to the alphabetic, see Mignolo (1995); Lockhart (1992).
9. Ibid., 331.
10. Mignolo, 41.
11. Ibid., 66.
13. Serge Gruzinski suggests that the battle for political and religious hegemony, which took place in the imagistic realm, may indeed be ongoing: “The gigantic enterprise of Westernization that swooped down upon the American continent became in part a war of images that perpetuated itself for centuries and—according to all indications—may not even be over today.” Gruzinski, 2.
15. This point is made by Elizabeth Hill Boone who provides a detailed analysis on why Mesoamerican writing has not been considered “true writing.” See, “Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge.”
17. “In New Spain, the mendicant friars celebrated the image as the way to reach and to teach New Spain’s native peoples.” Mundy, 84.
18. Brandenburg (Fall 2003).
21. Mundy, 84.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. León-Portilla, Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World, 82.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Mundy, 85.
34. Ibid., 84.
Tracy Brandenburg

36. Ibid.
37. Gruzinski, 61.
38. For an excellent discussion of the Cajonos Rebellion and its aftermath, see Yannakakis (2008).
40. Mundy, 85.
41. Ibid., 86.
42. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. León-Portilla, *In the Language of Kings*, 18.
47. Mundy, 72.
49. Ibid., 35.
50. Ibid., 34.
51. Ibid., 61.

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In Search of the Invisible World

