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Art and Symbols

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This "Mr. Potato Head" graffito was scrawled on an ancient Maya wall. It gives us a glimpse of informal, popular art that combined humor with fantasy. To see more of these folk sketches would counter some of the formality of the official art.

Art and Beauty

Overview

Beautiful objects were highly prized in Mesoamerica. But what constituted beauty was defined in different ways than by us today. At least four principles or rules appear to have governed Mesoamerican esthetic expression.

One of the principles was that the sacred penetrated and suffused every aspect of life and quite dominated some areas of experience. The shadow of things supernatural hung over all, more often in an ominous than in a reassuring manner. The divine powers were mainly seen as fearsome; a person or a people had to deal carefully with them. Pessimism about life outweighed optimism. Mesoamericans were a solemn people, and much art of the area—on public buildings, in depictions of deity, on funerary vessels, etc.—reflected that solemnity. But in the face of fear, one of the consolations that could be pursued was beauty in nature, ornament, and speech. Fortunately the divinities too were thought to approve of and enjoy beauty.

A second principle was that tradition was a linchpin of society. As far as possible, problems were solved not by thinking new thoughts but by discerning how old notions applied to a current situation. It is striking to observe in Mesoamerican art how many ways—though not all—of thinking, doing, and representing endured for many centuries without fundamental change.

Third, the social elite—mainly the nobility and the top priests—set public standards, very much as in medieval Europe or other premodern societies. Most long-distance commerce was in luxury items that catered to the desires of the upper strata of society, for they alone had the wherewithal to reward merchants for bringing to them natural or cultural treasures from a distance. Their patronage also supported craftsmen and artists, so their upper-class whims modulated the long-term patterns of beauty through which the culture was expressed.



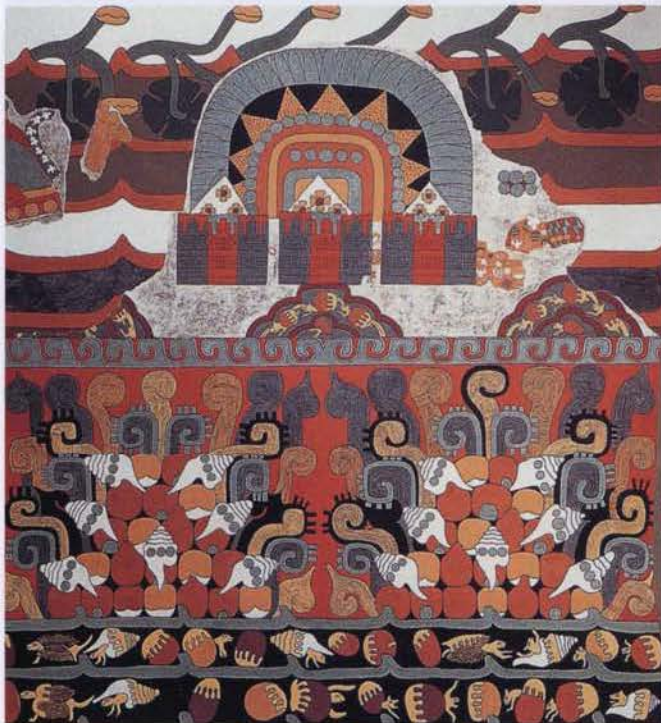
One of the most famous of all sculptures from Mexico, "The Wrestler," as it has been called by some in our day, displays sculptural mastery of a high order in representing the human body. This Olmec piece dates from before 600 B.C.

The intricacy of symbol piled upon symbol that is illustrated by this Zapotec funerary urn (about A.D. 500) is present in much of the orthodox art of the later periods of the Mesoamerican tradition.



The fourth consideration was that the most notable pieces of art that have been preserved were political. That is, they glorified and justified the rulers, their allied priests, and the deities connected in the public mind with the dominant class (just as was the case with Egyptian art). We today give much attention to this ancient propagandistic art because the makers and sponsors saw that it was placed in prominent positions—the great stone monuments, the mural paintings, the temple facades. Yet there were pieces of art that had no apparent political purpose. These items appeal today to our sense of beauty, and they could have appealed to ancients too, beyond any propaganda value.

Did the mass of people have their own esthetic life? That is hard to know, but it seems likely that at least simple expressions of beauty, ranging from seeing the hand of an infant, to observing delicate flowers, to watching a sunset, were appreciated by many of the folk even if they lived in isolation from most high-class art.



This large "abstract" mural is a reproduction in the Museo Nacional of a scene in the Temple of Agriculture at Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico. The original is now destroyed. Shell symbolism (which has parallels in Andean South America and in India) was frequently emphasized at this metropolis.



Such busy sculptural detail as this on a structure at the site of Kabah in the Yucatan peninsula further illustrates the principle frequently evident in Mesoamerican art that elaboration was considered better than simplicity.



The beauty of the natural world in Mesoamerica, exemplified by this sunset over Lake Atitlan, must have made an impression on many observers. Alma the elder, in the commonest interpretation of Nephite geography, would have seen evening views like this from "the place of Mormon" nearby. So when he rhapsodized about "how beautiful" the spot was (Mosiah 18:30), it may not have been just because of spiritual experiences enjoyed there.



Not all Aztec artists felt obliged to crowd up their sculptures to excess with religious or royal symbols. This rabbit done in rock crystal shows skill and taste that would likely have pleased the sculptor of "The Wrestler," who lived more than two millennia earlier.



Once again, in observing nature rather than representing sacred symbolism, an exceptional Aztec artist has let simplicity triumph in this stone sculpture representing a shell.



Flowers were enjoyed for themselves by some people, who planted them around their homes. Their beauty struck Aztec wise men as embodying the mystery of all artistic expression—oral, musical, graphic, or other. For the entire class of esthetic phenomena, they used the metaphorical label *in xochitl in cuicatl*, which translates to English as “flower and song.” More deeply it signifies something like “the mysterious moving power of symbolism.” Moreover, these lovely blossoms from the *flor de mayo* tree were sometimes steeped in hot water and made into a delicate preserve to be eaten.

Feather Work

An Unusual Form of Art

Some exotic Mesoamerican artistic media went well beyond what we think of nowadays as art. For example, the Aztecs used seeds to make images of sacred beings and then ate them as part of a ceremony (which they thought of as “eating the flesh of god,” a kind of communion). High artistry was also used to construct mosaics of flowers. The products of most such perishable media we cannot concretely visualize, but a small number of specimens of Aztec feather work exist that provide a window for us on one lost esthetic tradition that strikes us still as justly famous. Feather art was highly prized throughout Mesoamerica for centuries. Problems of preservation have destroyed most of those objects, of course. Historical accident has preserved a few specimens that allow us to see the details of this form of art among the Aztecs of sixteenth-century Mexico.

Rare feathers were imported by Aztec merchants (hummingbird and quetzal feathers were most prized), sometimes from distances of more than a thousand miles. Vast quantities of feathers were among the items of tribute brought to the rulers in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the domain (see the Codex Mendoza listing shown on page 115).



From Father Sahagun's monumental report on Aztec customs, we see scenes depicting feather craft. Here, the emperor Montezuma praises a merchant arriving with a shipment of feathers from a distant land.



In his workshop a virtuoso designer prepares varied, lovely pieces; probably no two were alike.

This has been traditionally called “Montezuma’s Mantle” in the records of the European museum that owns it, but the feathers turn out to have come from Brazilian species of birds. It may have been collected in that area in the last century and mislabeled. Nevertheless this magnificent full-length garment conveys something of the grandeur that would have characterized the best specimens of Mesoamerican feather work.



These multihued delicacies of every size were passed to extended families or guilds of feather experts to be groomed and sorted. Master artists then designed objects intended to strike the fancy of royalty or other wealthy patrons or to be sold in the marketplace. Cane or reed frameworks provided a backing to which feathers were glued or tied in rendering the design. Most designs had some religious significance.

The Aztec feather workers lived in a special district in the capital city where they enjoyed privileged rank. They had their own gods and rites through which they sought protection and inspiration to assure that they would do quality work and not waste the precious, nonrecyclable materials. Among the art objects constructed were tall standards or flags of a sort, each of which identified a particular god, leader, kin group, warrior order, or community. Dancers gestured with specially made feather arrangements held in their hands. Or a person's arms, legs, ears, hair, or waist were decorated with tufts in some special style.

This headdress is one of the few featherwork specimens that the early Spaniards sent to Europe and that have been preserved in museum collections.



An accomplished dancer at the court required a variety of feather devices as part of his performance.



The pose of this Jaina-style figure from the western Maya area around A.D. 700 suggests the use of priestly or lordly rhetoric to teach, please, and persuade audiences.

Oratory and Poetics

Facility in speech was highly prized in most ancient American cultures.

Examples of oratory from Mesoamerica preserved from the time of the Spanish Conquest demonstrate to what a high level this art form had been developed.

Written sacred texts were at the core of much oral performance. The writings contained fundamental information about many subjects—history, famous people, the calendars, astronomy, mythology, characteristics of the gods, and ritual. But in order for the glyphic characters to be fully interpreted, readers of the written text needed or were greatly benefited by extensive oral learning. The Aztec *calmecac* or school demonstrates the pattern of use of the later Mexican documents. Priests and teachers explained and interpreted the painted codices in detail, making their young students memorize extensive commentaries about the texts (comparable in function to Jewish midrashic literature). The commentaries were lectures on moral, religious, historical, and poetic matters. In southern Mesoamerica, the texts themselves, rather than commentaries, were more often studied, but only experts were thought to have a complete knowledge of the texts.

The ability to memorize that resulted allowed those properly schooled to incorporate long oral excerpts when they spoke on public occasions. They were called upon as priestly teachers to exhort, encourage, and critique personal and group behavior, information, and ideas. The test of a wise man or skilled teacher was his mastery of the content of the records and his ability to weave them with skill into an oral performance.

Munro Edmonson has pointed out that much of everyday speech among the Quiché Maya of highland Guatemala even today remains repetitive, poetic, literary, and oratorical, like the texts preserved from earlier times. Nuances of the Quiché language are still used to produce effects that are “comic,” “elegant,” moving, or “discursive.” “Words matter, and formal discourse matters even more.”¹⁴¹ This love of speaking and admiration for effective forms of speech led to deep appreciation for oratory as art. A great, wise, powerful public figure ought to have superb speaking skills, it was felt. One of the titles of the Aztec ruler was Great Orator. We may suppose that some of the lay population also gained substantial oral facility involving some of the formal texts in order to participate in ceremonial events.

Among the forms of oral literature were epic and lyric poems, hymns, songs,

The extensive records of Aztec oral art that were transcribed by Father Sahagun and others in early-sixteenth-century Mexico show how much exhortation was laid upon members of that society. In this example, a father presses his son in powerful language to plan for a successful life with patient preparation.



Even though you may long for women,
hold back, hold back with your heart
until you are a grown man, strong and robust.
Look at the maguey plant.

If it is opened before it has grown

and its liquid is taken out,
it has no substance.
It does not produce liquid; it is useless.
Before it is opened
to withdraw its water,
it should be allowed to grow and attain full size.
Then its sweet water is removed
all in good time.

This is how you must act:
before you know woman
you must grow and be a complete man.
And then you will be ready for marriage;
you will beget children of good stature,
healthy, agile, and comely.

sagas, histories, and dramatic presentations that combined music, symbolic costumes for the characters, recitations, and dance. An Aztec category, which may have been equally common among other Mesoamerican peoples, was called *buebueltlatolli*, or “speeches of the elders.” These long discourses of exhortation and warning were given on occasions of important social transition—the coronation of a ruler, birth, reaching adolescence, marriage, even death. They taught the most profound values of society, warning the person to be humble and diligent in the face of the new role and the burdens being assumed.

While we today distinguish poetry from other forms of speech, Mesoamericans did so only to a limited degree. Admired everyday speech verged into formal oratory, and poetic elements infused both. However, the fundamental poetic form, Edmonson reminds us, was semantic;¹⁴² they did not use word rhymes or meter. Rather, successive lines or statements were connected by the repetition of words closely linked in meaning. These forms frequently involving puns or allusions to history and mythology. Couplets—a single concept repeated in two forms—were often used for emphasis and to please the ear, such as in the Aztec characterization of an accomplished oral artist: “he has flowers on his lips . . . flowers come from his mouth.”¹⁴³

The power of prayer, chanting, or singing to the heavens is suggested by what may be the earliest (about 500 B.C.) carved monument from highland Guatemala. In any case, this kilted man is engaged in serious, probably ritual, activity. This piece was found in the ruin of a sacred structure at the site that some Latter-day Saints consider to have been the city of Nephi (Kaminaljuyu, in suburban Guatemala City).





VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Ancient Israelite writers used the same couplet form found among the Quiché, and it occurs in the Book of Mormon too. For example, compare Psalms 47:5, "God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet," with 2 Nephi 25:2, "Their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations."¹⁴⁴ A more extended form of parallel phrasing is called chiasmus (see sidebar), and it too occurs in the Bible and the Book of Mormon and among native peoples in southern Mesoamerica.

Other poetic forms are also shared in Old Testament, Nephite, and Mesoamerican literary expression.¹⁴⁵ One of these combines two adjectives with narrow meanings to signify a more general concept. For example, in Job 29:8, the combination of "the young men" plus "the aged" conveys the meaning everybody; Psalms 95:5 uses "the sea" and "the dry land" to stand for all creation. Alma 37:7 means continually when it couples "liest down at night" and "risest in the morning." Among the Aztecs, the expression "skirt and blouse" signified the sexual aspect of a woman, while "face and hear" referred to personality.

The love of and facility with language manifested in the materials from Mexico and Central America recall the Nephite ideal of being "learned [with] a perfect knowledge of the language of the people."

At one extreme such mastery allowed one to "use much flattery, and much power of speech" (Jacob 7:4). But the Mesoamerican love of skilled speech also resonates with Moroni's statement that the Lord had "made us mighty in word" (though not in writing). "Thou hast made all this people that they could speak much" (Ether 12:23), indeed, "Thou hast . . . made our words powerful and great" (Ether 12:25).

From the Mayan Dresden Codex, a text and illustration represent an ancient flood, part of a myth cycle widely shared throughout Mesoamerica (as well as in southern and eastern Asia) that tells of the destruction of the world by different catastrophes.



CHIASMUS

One of the stylistic devices that aided ancient people in memorizing and recalling long oral texts was chiasmus. It consists of a pattern of word arrangement that presents a subject in stepwise fashion from beginning to a climax statement, then

reverses the order, ending with the same concept with which the piece began. It was often used in the Bible and in Near Eastern and Greek literature.¹⁴⁶ John W. Welch first detected this form in the Book of Mormon thirty years ago and has since shown that it was often used and highly developed in Nephite texts.¹⁴⁷ More

recently the form has been shown to characterize native Mayan literature that dates before those people were made acquainted with the Bible by the Spaniards. The example here compares a chiasm in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya, with a passage from the Book of Mormon.

BOOK OF MORMON (MOSIAH 5:10–12)

And now whosoever shall not take upon them *the name* of Christ
must *be called* by some other name;
therefore he findeth himself *on the left hand of God*.
And I would that ye should remember that this is the *name*
that should never be *blotted out*
except it be through *transgression*; therefore
take heed that ye do not *transgress*
that the name be not *blotted out* of your hearts
I would that ye should remember to retain this *name*
that ye are not found *on the left hand of God*,
but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall *be called*
and also *the name* by which he shall call you.

POPOL VUH

"At, u K'ux Kab, . . .

Nabe q'ut *vinaqir*

Ulev,

Huyub, tak'ah,

X ch'oboch'ox u be ha

X biniheyik k'olehe r aquan xol tak huyub.

Xa ch'obol chik x e q'ohé vi ba

Ta x k'utuniheyik nimaq *buyub*.

Kehe q'ut u *vinaqirik ulev*

Ri ta x *vinaqirik* k umal ri

U K'ux Kab

"Oh Heart of Heaven, . . .

and once *it had been created,*

the earth,

the mountains and valleys,

The *paths of the waters* were divided

and they proceeded to twist along among the hills

So the *rivers then* became more divided

As *the great mountains* were appearing.

And thus was the creation of *the earth*

When it was *created by him*

Who is the *Heart of Heaven*

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Music and Dance

As with the oral arts, so with music and dance: long traditions lay behind the forms and cultural standards that were in vogue in Mesoamerica at the time the Europeans arrived. Increasingly, careful looks by scholars at the carved monuments and painted vases of the Classic Maya reveal that dance was common and that probably few if any serious or ceremonial events in public failed to involve both music and dancing. It is from the Aztec culture that we learn the most regarding these arts because of the relatively full descriptions left to us by the first Spanish priests to arrive in central Mexico.

As might be supposed in a civilization

as involved with religion as that of Mesoamerica, much of the music and dance was performed on ceremonial occasions. On the basis of the scenes painted on vases found in Maya tombs, Michael D. Coe believes that rites for the interred dead might well have used the text of "a long hymn which could have been sung over the dead or dying person."¹⁴⁸ The Spaniards mentioned compositions that nobles or priests danced to and sung or chanted slowly and seriously on solemn and important occasions. Other types of music and dance were livelier and included songs of love and flirtation. Still another sort scandalized the Catholic fathers as "highly improper" with "wriggling and grimacing and immodest mimicry."¹⁴⁹

The most common musical instruments



This ninth-century A.D. Maya mural at Bonampak shows long wooden trumpets blown as part of a procession of nobles. One music scholar has claimed that these instruments are similar in form and maybe in function to silver trumpets mentioned in the Bible in Numbers 10:1–10.¹⁵⁰

were rhythmic (drums, scrapers, rattles), but melodic ones were also heard, including whistles, flutes, panpipes, long single-toned horns, trumpets of hollowed wood, and shell trumpets. No remnants of actual music have been preserved for us to hear today.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Little is said about music and dance in the Book of Mormon. The use of music in Israelite rites at Jerusalem is reported in the Bible, and we can suppose that elements of that pattern were brought along by the people of Lehi (and the Mulekites) as part of the Mosaic ceremonies. They had musical and dance forms for entertainment too (see 1 Nephi 18:9 and Mosiah 20:1–5).



These Aztec flutes or flageolets were excavated in Mexico City at the site of the Great Temple, which the Spanish conquerors destroyed.



Men dance near a lord or priest seated on a platform. Many of the people shown on Classic Maya painted vases, like this one, are engaged in serious dance. Social, political, and ritual etiquette clearly demanded that a person of social stature be competent in a variety of dance forms.

A superb figurine in the Jaina style (ca. A.D. 700) has been called "The Troubadour" because it appears to represent a man singing.



This troupe of musicians and dancers are represented in Sahagun's record of Aztec life at the time of the Conquest.



A set of figurines dug up at Zaachila, Oaxaca, obviously represents a musical "combo." For what occasions they played we cannot guess.



The world tree in Maya belief was a ceiba, the tree that yields kapok. The tall, strong trunk lends itself to the idea of reaching into the heavens.



The complex mythological scene on Stela 5 at Izapa, Chiapas, has been interpreted variously. Many Latter-day Saints have considered it a symbolic depiction of Lehi's dream recorded in the Book of Mormon, following the views of M. Wells Jakeman. More recent, better-documented analyses take different positions regarding it.¹⁵⁹ But almost all agree that the tree of life is central in the scene.

Symbolism

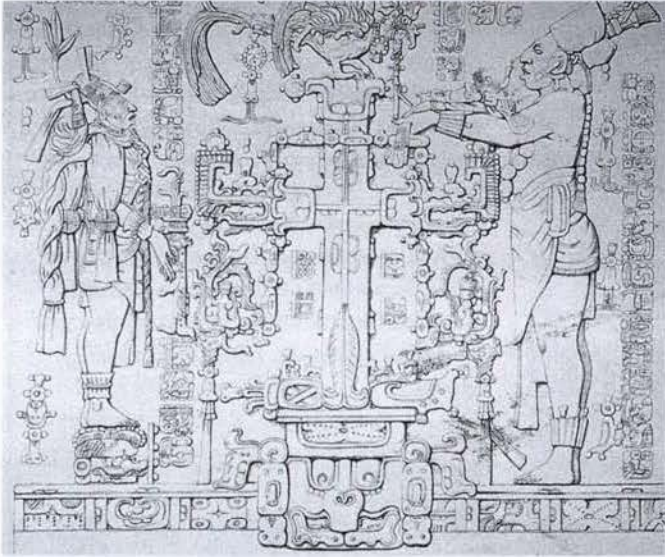
Trees

Materials preserved from an ancient people use a profusion of symbols impossible to grasp in full because we cannot fully recover their complex view of the world. In Mesoamerica a host of exotic symbols is evident. To attempt to grasp them involves seeing both their strangeness and their likeness to our meanings.

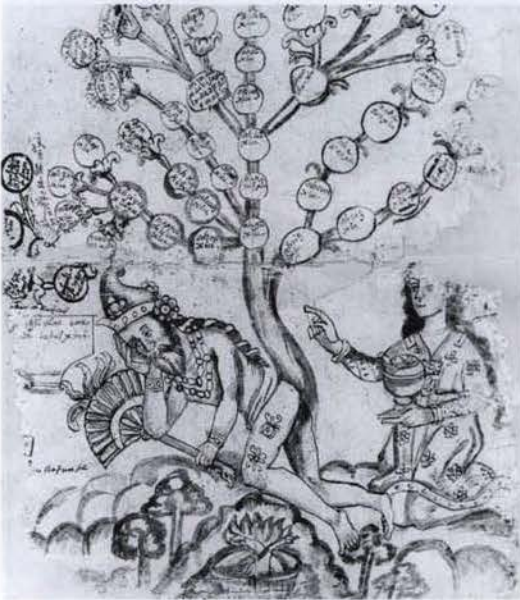
A first level of understanding is simply to appreciate how great the chasm is between their view of the world and ours. Yet, some meanings seem well-nigh universal, such as the opposition between light (good) and dark (evil), or between right (lucky) and left (unlucky). A few similarities like those let us feel a common humanity with the ancients.

The tree as a symbol is one feature the Mesoamericans emphasized. The growth and death of trees, their fruit, and the shelter they provide represented individual, social, and divine activity. A common notion in Mesoamerica is the "world tree." A pillarlike tree was said by the Maya to represent the first tree of the world. It was supposed to exist at the center of the world, or navel of the earth, where it grew up through the layered heavens; its trunk served as a route for moving between levels. The tree's root connected the multiple underground levels.¹⁵¹ Other Mesoamerican peoples had similar ideas. Related conceptions occurred in other parts of the world (for example, the city of Jerusalem was conceived as the navel of the world).¹⁵²

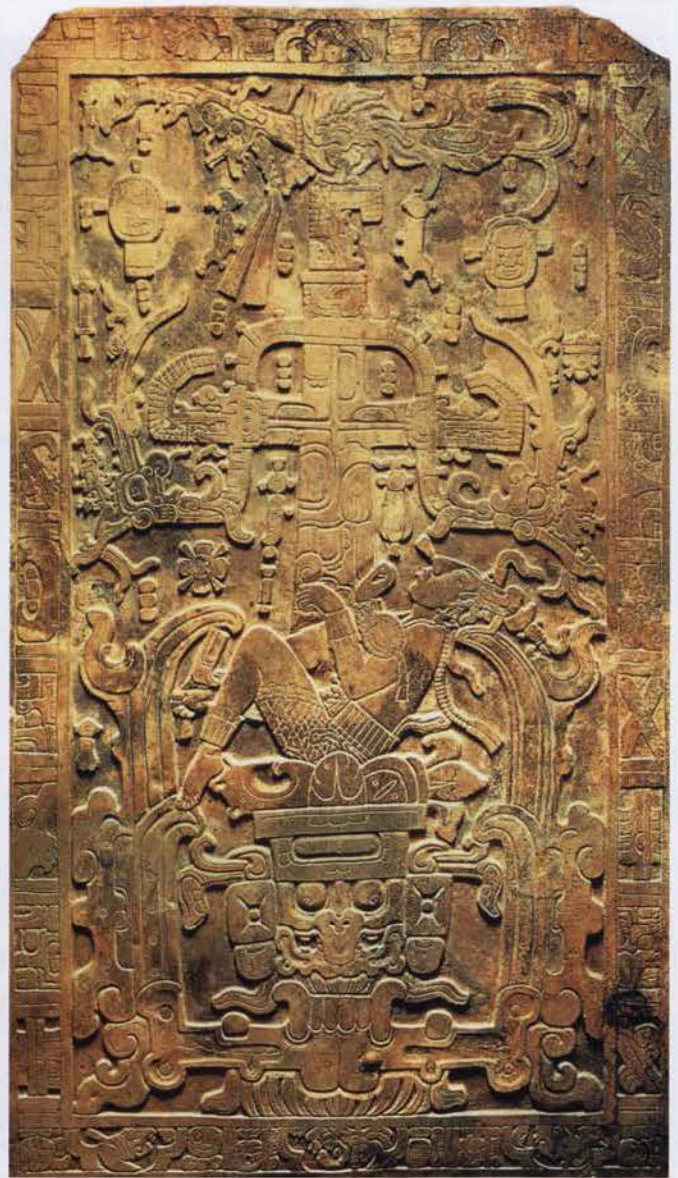
Another meaning spoke of the tree of life. Some Mesoamericans thought that it had nourished the infant founders of their group and had thus, in a sense, given them life. That concept was associated with the representation of a tribe or descent group as a tree, with the founder as the trunk.¹⁵³ The tree of life also had the sense of a sacred objective that worshippers sought to attain in order to confer life on the seeker. In the last sense, Mesoamerican beliefs paralleled religious ideas in the Near East and Southeast Asia.¹⁵⁴ It was in this sense that certain trees, and even groves, were considered necessary at temple centers and sacred areas in general. For example, the Maya of Yucatan combined the idea of the world tree and of a sacred grove located at a sacred well at the navel of the world in the center of certain cities,¹⁵⁵ and the same combination characterized Near Eastern sacred centers.¹⁵⁶



Alfred Maudslay's century-old drawing of this famous sculptured panel at Palenque displays the same basic features as the Assyrian scene shown above it.¹⁶⁰



A descent group, the Xiu family of Yucatan, displayed for their colonial Spanish masters their royal descent in the form of a tree, with the current family head at the bottom.



In the famous tomb deep beneath the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, a prominent seventh-century ruler of the city, Pacal, is represented on this superbly carved stone cover of his burial sarcophagus as sliding or falling down the world tree axis into the underworld in a metaphor associated with the setting of the sun.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Tree symbolism pervades the Book of Mormon. Lehi, and Nephi, each saw in vision "the tree of life," which was "precious above all" (1 Nephi 11:9) and "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10).¹⁵⁷ Jacob, the first priest among the Nephites, expounded an involved allegory in which trees represented Israelite tribes (see Jacob 5).¹⁵⁸ Alma₂ compared the word of God to a seed planted in the human heart that could be nurtured to become a tree of life (see Alma 32:28–42).



Warriors and priests who wished to emulate the jaguar or who felt under its protection wore skins of the feline to cultivate the link. This man appears in the Tudela Codex from central Mexico.

The jaguar in the wild is still greatly feared wherever it is found in the lower forestlands of Mesoamerica.

This representation on Relief 4 at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, has been interpreted as the night jaguar capturing the day's light.¹⁶⁰ But it could just as well represent a vicious man under the influence of his jaguar nawal attacking a human victim, actually or politically.

Symbolism

Felines

Norman refers to the jaguar as “the most impressive zoological motif” in Mesoamerican art, yet it had religious significance beyond being just an art motif. Some of its popularity derived from the animal’s standing as “the New World ‘king of the beasts’ with wide-ranging mystic and shamanistic qualities.”¹⁶¹ This conception of the jaguar is widespread in tropical America. Mainly its associations are malevolent: “The fierce jaguar. Bloody his mouth; bloody his claws. A slayer as well. Devourer of flesh. Killer of men.”¹⁶²

Appropriately, the jaguar was a prime symbol of the god of the underworld, where the spirits of the dead had to go. (Thus, in a sense, the god/animal eventually “ate” everybody.) This supreme cat prowled the jungle during the night hours, when it was supposed that the sun was passing through the underworld. The

beast’s independence of movement and freedom from enemies who could injure him was also admired, though this admiration was tinged with fear. Jaguars were also envied because they were considered to live a lazy life of ease. One can see how these characteristics would be attractive to power-hungry rulers¹⁶³ or perhaps secret-society adherents.

A different version of the jaguar was associated with sky, rain, moisture, and fertility.¹⁶⁴ But the dual connection is not far-fetched because the seas, the ultimate source for rain, were thought to be underground, so to speak, and thus connected with the underworld feline. Furthermore, in nature jaguars often live in jungle areas with abundant water and vegetation.

In the Near East, incidentally, the lion represented the Sumerian and Canaanite Nergal, god of the underworld and burial; the lion was also connected to kingship, because he was also considered the sun god who spent the night in the underworld.¹⁶⁵



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

In the Nephite record, the lion is represented as a predator that was dangerous to domestic animals and who also was an instrument of divine vengeance (see 3 Nephi 20:16; 21:12; Mormon 5:24). The association of the lion with the office of the king of Judah would have been familiar to the Nephites through the brass plates record they brought with them.

HYBRID BEINGS

The neat zoological categories—feline, snake, bird—that we would feel comfortable with in trying to deal with Mesoamerican symbolism refused to stand still in ancient thought and art. After all, these are supernatural, not merely naturalistic, beings, and it is their symbols we are seeing, so why should they be confined by earth's natural forms? So in symbolic form, jaguars sometimes prove to be half serpents, or reptiles may bear feathers and fly about.

Even more striking is the hybridization of animals with humans. One of the most ancient versions of this unity is seen in the Olmec practice of turning images with largely human bodies into effigies with jaguar characteristics, especially by drooping the corners of the mouth. One proposal to account for these distortions of nature is that what we are seeing stems from shamans' experience with trances. Another view is that the use of hallucinogenic substances by artists played a part in generating these unusual concepts.



This classic Olmec sculpture from Las Limas, Veracruz, shows a man holding a passive infant with jaguar facial characteristics. The piece is now in the Museum in Jalapa, Veracruz.



The coyote was an important figure in the mythology of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples, who included the Toltecs and Aztecs. This feathered coyote¹⁴⁷ from Teotihuacan may be connected to that myth cycle.



Unique hybrid creatures are represented in this artist's copy of a mural called "The Mythological Animals," at Teotihuacan.



The massive, armored crocodile, or cayman, thrives in certain areas of the Mesoamerican lowlands. Known as *cipactli* among the Aztec and the *imix* earth monster in Mayan iconography, this symbol conveys the sense of the interior of the earth and underworld.¹⁷¹ In Mesoamerican sacred art, features of the jaguar and other animals were at times combined with those of the cayman so the figure turns out a fantastic hybrid.

Symbolism

Reptilian Figures

Reptiles—snakes, crocodiles, and even dragons—constituted another complex category of symbols of divinity. One connotation these creatures convey is obvious—danger! These are beasts not to be toyed with, so a reptile could be a very potent nawal protector. A second symbolic meaning comes from the reptile's connection with water. While not all reptiles are found near water sources,

some of the most fearsome, like crocodiles, are, hence there is logic to the linkage. Water is one of the ultimate life-giving realities in Mesoamerica; either too much or too little can be disastrous, so one wants to be on the good side of the powers controlling the moisture. Moreover, reptiles were thought to be connected not just with water but most often with the subterranean world, where Mesoamerican thinking supposed the great supply of waters, and the dead, were located. The earth was considered to rest on the back of a great reptilian creature that floated on the underworld ocean. This monster was modeled on the crocodile, although its appearance could take variant forms. Many sculptured scenes show at their base this subearth creature, often very stylized and hard for the inexpert eye to detect.¹⁶⁸

Another Mesoamerican reptilian symbol is a dragonlike being connected with the sky and rain; its two-headed symbol is spread widely in east Asia as well as the Americas.¹⁶⁹ Yet sky and earth elements are so often combined that a reptile above and another beneath are hard to separate.

In the Bible, the Israelite myth of Leviathan (mirroring the Babylonian myth of Tiamat) also portrays a dragon in the waters under the earth. Jehovah was considered to have conquered this monster at one point in mythological time.¹⁷⁰



Snakes are found throughout the art of Mesoamerica, a fact that is not surprising since snakes are common in the tropics. The symbolism conveyed includes both positive and negative aspects. The god Quetzalcoatl (see below) was pictured as a serpent that blessed, but other manifestations, such as this Aztec coiled rattlesnake, were threatening.



RAIN AND THE EARTH MONSTER

The monster/dragon/serpent was associated not only with night and the underworld abode of the dead but also with life-giving rain. Izapa Stela 25 signals this dual nature of reptilians. They can damage or they can bless. A dualistic balance appears, as it does with much Mesoamerican symbolism. Men live by the grace of the life-conferring power of divinity at the same time they are at risk from encountering or managing that power in the wrong way; there is “an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11).



Norman interprets this scene (enlarged at right) as depicting the action of the god who confers or controls the rains (compare Helaman 11:4–17). In his view, symbolic representations of the evaporation–precipitation cycle, a metaphor for resurrection, are found on this stela.¹⁷²

Stela 25 at Izapa (first century B.C.) shows a cayman with vegetation growing from its body, which ties the creature unmistakably to the earth monster of later Mesoamerican tradition. This scene represents a specific mythic event told in the Popol Vuh in which a crocodile bites off the arm of a hero-god.¹⁷³



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon uses reptilian imagery in several ways. (1) “That old serpent” in the Garden of Eden was the devil—beguiler, antagonist, destroyer (2 Nephi 2:18; Mosiah 16:3). (2) “That awful monster the devil, and death, and hell” (2 Nephi 9:19; see 9:10, 26; compare 2 Nephi 24:9) was both a metaphorical being and a place associated with the death of the body (see 2 Nephi 9:10). (3) This monster is likely the same as the reptile of chaos, Leviathan in the Bible (see 2 Nephi 8:9; Isaiah 27:1); filthy waters beneath the earth represent hell, the abode of this serpent/dragon (see 1 Nephi 12:16). But water from beneath the earth could also be considered “pure,” as shown by Mosiah 18:5, which recalls a Maya practice of entering caves for the purpose of obtaining sacred

water for use in some ceremonies. (4) “Like dragons did they fight” (Mosiah 20:11; see Alma 43:44) was an expression used by the Nephites to connote strength and vigor in battle. It could well refer to the Mesoamerican cayman, or crocodile, which is a powerful, fearsome foe.¹⁷⁴ (5) Moses erected the brass image of a benign serpent in order to heal the Israelites who had been bitten by hurtful “fiery flying serpents” (1 Nephi 17:41; compare Numbers 21:6). This image was treated by the Nephites as a symbol of Jesus Christ and his healing power and superiority over mundane evil (see Helaman 8:14; 2 Nephi 25:20; Alma 33:19). The fact that the saving serpent icon was lifted “upon a pole” could remind one of the “flying” aspect of the Mesoamerican feathered hybrid serpent.