Making the Carvings Speak

Iconography, Aesthetics, and a Museum Logic in Yucatec Maya Tourist Art

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by
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In July of 1998, I asked the Yucatec woodcarver Jorge Pool Cauich to explain the iconography of this carving. He replied:

“I would describe this figure as a priest accepting a jaguar head offering. And this serpent is the serpent that appears on the side of the Castillo at Chichén during the equinox. Tourists will always buy a piece that has the serpent that appears during the equinox.”

The object in question was part of the Ah Dzib P’ízté’ Expo 98, a museum-style exhibition of the wood and cement carvings created in the Yucatec Maya community of Pisté. Located two kilometers from the archaeological site of Chichén Itzá, Pisté has long been the site of contact between Maya, archaeologists, anthropologists, and tourists. Since the 1970’s, members of the community have created archaeologically inspired art for sale to tourists at the ruins of Chichén, in specially designated markets or shops, and outside major hotels and restaurants in the town itself.

Initiated in 1997 as part of a collaborative ethnographic field school directed by Quetzil Castañeda, the Ah Dzib P’ízté’ Project was geared towards a positive valorization of this tradition. Over the course of three field seasons, art expositions, workshops, and an art competition were orchestrated as sites for dialogue on the nature of ancient and contemporary forms of "Maya art." This collaborative work was not simply an attempt to valorize this art form, but a staging of an ongoing set of engagements through which the notion of "Maya culture" is invoked, contested, and transformed. Created as a trigger for these engagements, Pisté art represents a unique appropriation of images and narratives generated through archaeological research. It also poses a series of challenges to traditional notions of “iconography” and “ethnic art.”

The sometimes ambivalent reception of "tourist art" traditions such as Pisté’s stems from
the deeply entrenched assumption that "true" art—be Western or "primitive"—originates outside of commodity markets. This is exemplified in a typology created by Nelson Graburn in the mid-70's, in which "tourist art" indexes a degree of acculturation at which economic necessity overrides the original aesthetic or symbolic criteria of the art form (Graburn 1976: 5-10). In the late 1980's and early 1990's, more critical research focused on the discursive structures through which the Western art world created such categories in its incorporation of objects of non-Western material culture (see Clifford 1988; Price 1989). More recent research has continued these lines of inquiry, describing the interactions between anthropology, Western museum and art institutions, and indigenous artisans, in the emergence of new and hybrid art forms (see Meyers 1995, Mullins 1995, Errington 1998).

While all of these studies seek to problematize the pre-giveness of categories stemming from Western art worlds, there is still the presupposition of an original native meaning that is displaced through the removal of the object from its original context (Marcus and Meyers 1995). Pisté art provides an interesting complication for these schemas, as its "native meanings" are generated through contact with academic and museum institutions and with the touristic market. Like Mayanist archaeologists and art historians, Pisté’s artists draw from a canon of images and narratives in creating a vision of the ancient Maya. At the same time, they employ compositional and narrative logics that violate some of the basic suppositions with which archaeologists and art historian have traditionally interpreted Maya art. In this paper, I focus on this “other” set of practices that come into play when the tourist asks the question "what does this piece mean."

Over the course of my research in Pisté, artists often stated that they did not know exactly what the images that they incorporated into their work represented. Sometimes, if they failed to provide a convincing description at the site of sale, potential customers walked away from an otherwise fine carving. This demand for pieces that are imbued with meaning stems from a long tradition of viewing the art of the ancient Maya as "iconography," a term who's contemporary usage can be traced to the art historical writings of Erving Panofsky. For Panofsky, the association of images with contemporary texts allowed for the re-construction of the original meaning and
ideological context of artworks and artistic traditions. (Summers 1995: 10-20). Although Maya art had been seen as inherently “symbolic” since the time of Seler, Schellhas, and Spinden, the word “iconography” entered Maya studies through the work of George Kubler. Rather than being based on external literary sources, (which he believed were unavailable) Kubler's iconographic analysis was based on a set of "graphic rules" and conventions that systematized the creation of art (1969:2-6). While an examination of artistic conventions is central to any art historical analysis, this rejection of anything but pictorial "themes" gave an even greater role to underlying structural "rules." While advancements in hieroglyphic decipherment and the "new Vision" of the ancient Maya popularized in the 1980's gave names to many of these forms, the idea that images in Maya art can be read as fixed utterances of an underlying iconographic language is still prevalent.

This emphasis on the “symbols” encoded in artwork is one way through which the “authenticity” of contemporary Maya artisanry is tested by consumers. An object of folk art is considered all the more real if its iconography links it to an authentically Maya world-view. This logic is evident in Walter Morris' analysis of motifs in highland Maya textiles. He interprets certain brocaded patterns as adapted, abridged, and egalitarian versions of ritual designs used by the ancient elites (Morris 1987: 113). These textiles become authentic not only because they are presumably made through “traditional” techniques, but also because they encode vestiges of an ancient and “mysterious” religion.

This poses an interesting problem for the sale and valorization of Pisté Art. As an artistic tradition, it is less than thirty years old. Maya iconography in Pisté art stems not from continuity in graphic conventions or underlying cosmological structures, but from contact between several generations of Pisté Maya, archaeologists, anthropologists, and tourists. The composition of pieces is based not on the coded expression of an underlying cosmology, but on an aesthetically-driven pastiche of motifs drawn from the archaeological zone of Chichén Itzá, archaeological texts, post cards, tourist posters, murals in local restaurants and hotels, and other sources. This is not to say that Pisté art represents a random assortment of pre-iconographic images or an un-reflective duplication of more "authentic" forms. Rather, it is the central element in a set of strategic
performances that play on a popular imagination of the ancient Maya.

The strategic visual and narrative practices through which Piste Art is created and sold are orchestrated through what could be called a "museum logic." Here, I draw on Castañeda’s characterization of the modern Museum as a “zone of writing.” In the museum, objects and spaces are inscribed and re-inscribed with meaning through practices of touring (Castañeda 1996). These practices are not limited to the "museum" that is Chichén Itza's archaeological zone, but provide a generalized set of logics for the presentation of images and narratives to tourists. At the site of sale, images inscribed in wood or cement are re-inscribed through a "tour" in which the artist anticipates the perspective buyer's expectations. Through these tours, a serpent head could be linked with the movement of energy in and New Age cosmology, with phenomenon of light and shadow that occurs on Chichén’s main temple at the Spring equinox, with the culture hero Kukulkán, or any of a number of popular explanations. The image does not encode a fixed meaning from a systematic iconography that precedes the creation and sale of the piece. Rather, it serves as a site for the inscription of history and meaning that emerges through the interaction of tourist and artist/vendor. The inscription of meaning onto a carving can extend to the vendor’s confirmation that a piece hand crafted out of local woods by a “real” Maya, two features that are equally important in constituting an authentically Maya object.

The employment of this museum logic is not limited to the site of sale, but provides a framework through which different qualities—be they aesthetic or thematic—are taken into account at all levels of production. In describing the practices that govern the composition of museum display, Stephen Greenblatt cites “wonder” and “resonance” as two master-tropes employed in exhibits. The trope of wonder, a characteristic of art museums, galleries, and shop displays, uses effects such as dramatic lighting and strategic placement of objects to emphasize their aesthetic singularity and stimulate desire to own them. Exhibits based on “resonance,” such as most ethnographic and historical exhibits, emphasize the multiple historical, geographical, or cultural connections that contextualize the object (Greenblatt 1991).

While the market for authentically "Maya" objects creates a demand for pieces that resonate,
artists and merchants in Pisté are concerned primarily with “wonder.” Even though artists recognize that jaguar and serpent heads, scroll motifs, pyramids and elaborate headdresses are meaningful within the context of “la cultura Maya” or Maya culture, their primary concern is with combining these elements in an eye-catching, attractive fashion. Even the most exacting reproductions of ancient bas reliefs are altered through simplification or through the addition of new decorative elements. It is these aesthetic considerations, more than iconographic content, that restrict the kinds of pieces that are created by Pisté artists.

Art worlds and artistic conventions are constituted through a series of institutionalized interactions between artists, critics, merchants and consumers (see Marcus and Meyers 1995: 27). In Pisté, these discursive practices occur through artists’ and merchants’ constant evaluations of the composition and style of pieces. The demand for particular designs and the work of particular artists establishes aesthetic norms that guide technical exchange and innovation among artists. These aesthetic practices thus focus on the initial visual engagement by the tourist. The individual images only become meaningful as "iconography" when the tourist is lured by their careful visual design and placement. The object then initiates a dialog in which an inquisitive tourist might perform an ethnography of the artwork and artist, to which the artist responds with an ethnographic anticipation of the tourist's expectations.

The nature of Pisté art as a series of practices for creating strategic representations of Maya culture is an important example of how archaeology can be utilized by local communities. Critical theories of ethnic art and museology tend to emphasize the displacement of "original" meanings through re-contextualization by Western academic institutions. In Pisté art, the tropes of the museum do not displace an inherent "meaning" and original context, but are already complicit in the creation of a shared culture of ethnography and archaeology. Local forms of wood carving and batik painting can be seen as a “home-grown” visual anthropology that appropriates, adapts and re-mediates images and ideas generated by archaeological institutions.
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