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## Anthropology of Art

### Indigenous Concepts in Contemporary Art in Guatemala

Gabriela Jurosz

Looking at the anthropology of Guatemala, it seems largely underinvestigated. There are still certain anthropologists out there who look upon the country's indigenous ethnics as people of folklore costumes. The composition of their contemporary society, with its ethnic complexity, seldom becomes the subject of anthropological investigation. Correspondingly, anthropological publications about indigenous art mostly focus on the art of weaving. Yet, it is the contemporary visual art production of these ethnics which condenses ancestral and social values and, therefore, it is of special anthropological interest.

This article is an entry into the discourse of anthropology of art through the introduction to some concepts of indigenous art in Guatemala. I attempt to lay out a spectrum of themes, hoping they would be discussed in further detail, eventually by other authors.

## The Development of the Anthropology of Art

Anthropology concentrates on the research of sociocultural, economic, medicinal, archaeological, and linguistic aspects. All of the above have a developed discipline of their own, whereas the anthropology of art as a separate category hardly exists. The young discipline looks back to its beginnings with Franz Boas' 1927 publication "Primitive Art" (Boas 1955). As Adrian Gerbrands states, indigenous art, up to around 1950, has been considered not more than a "style" which was to determine the place and year of origin of an art object (1969: 58). Today, however, this approach is scientifically insufficient. Art is not only "an object with aesthetic and/or semantic attributes ... that are used for representational or presentational purposes," as Morphy and Perkins have cited (2006: 12), although the authors also stress the importance of studying a work of art in its social and cultural context (2006: 16). Since Boas, many anthropologists have recognized that it is necessary to research origin in terms of content; focus should also be set on the social aspects, as represented by the object and its content. The object of art is a vehicle to transport meaning of cultural and social behavior, historic and contemporary.

The first publications on a singular theme about art started to appear in the 1980s. Coote and Shelton, contributing to the beginnings of such writing, suggest that it is necessary to distance oneself from art as an art-lover in order to be able to see art with scientific eyes. One must break with the aesthetic experience to reach an objective point of view (1992: 4 ff.) – an understanding the anthropologist could have learned long before from art historians. The separatist perspective on art of Radcliff-Brown has still impact on contemporary anthropology. Alfred Gell detects the reason for the late entry of anthropology of art into the anthropological field as an overestimated evaluation of art as something almost "religious" (1992: 3) while Robert Layton believes art is being overestimated in its value and is, therefore, "elitist" (1991: 42). As such, he states, art cannot be considered as a subject of anthropological research.

Additionally, the neglect of anthropology of art is a result of the fear to face iconology. Seen in this way, art in addition to being sacrosanct becomes "untouchable." It is the interpretation of art which – despite established art historical "objective" plastic art values – may in reality never be completely objective and which anthropological science may, therefore, prefer to avoid. As such, this cannot be reason enough for ignoring the problem overall. We need to face the time-consuming studies of a

fundamental understanding of non-Western artistic values and develop scientific measures for art from an anthropological perspective. Interpretation, in its linguistic sense of explaining meanings, in the end is nothing more than analysis – and that surely is a scientific method. Morphy and Perkins put it this way: “... the challenge for anthropology has been to open up its own interpretative practice to the aesthetic and affective dimension of objects” (2006: 11). The step from a simple comparison of data for museum purposes, as was customary in the 19th century, up to a modern discipline of anthropology of art is still in its infancy. Other scientific fields, such as psychology and recently neurological studies, have contributed importantly to the discourse, while anthropology has stayed behind. The debate around art challenges the anthropology to become more flexible.

There are few references about Guatemalan art in libraries in- or outside of Guatemala. In New York libraries, in the 1990s, there was not much more to be found than the catalogue of the Guatemalan biennial Juannio art fair. Today, besides David Greene’s book on Alejandro Wer (Greene 2010), books are mainly by Guatemalan writers. However, they usually lack an anthropological viewpoint. Even the relatively recently published volumes “Mayanización y Vida Cotidiana” by Santiago Bastos and Aura Cumes (2007), intended as a guide for ethnographers, has little to say about art – though it uses an image of a painting by the here discussed contemporary artist Arturo Monroy for its book cover. Therefore, we are fortunate to see a long history of writing about the Southwestern Indians whose concepts of thought in many ways resemble those of the Guatemalan *indígenas*.

The goal and task of the anthropology of art is – as in all other disciplines of the anthropological as well as the art historical field – documentation, description, and interpretation of the behavior of man. Hereunder we should find the following measures already gathered by anthropologists: Raymond Firth sees the task of anthropology of art to investigate the implications of an art piece in its society, and to survey essential cultural values expressed in the artwork. Firth in Layton describes it as a way “to discover ‘the nature of the values ...’” (1991: 43). Shelton states (as cited in Coote and Shelton 1992: 8) that it is not enough to gather information about the context in which content has been created or has meaning or comes to its use. Shelton (1992) believes that it is important to investigate “fundamental ontological categories underlying the ascription of values” (Coote and Shelton 1992: 8).

Next to the anthropological discipline stands the

discipline of art history. The fathers of iconography and iconology, Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, too, have made an impact on the importance of image content rather than form alone. Today we owe them and other major art historians the fundamental knowledge of artistic values. Also the art historian Hans Belting has made a point to attribute to art a deeper rather than an aesthetic meaning. He has pointed out the significance of icons and objects of ritual in the arts and their function: “We should first ask about the early use of icons and their functions before raising the question whether they developed an aesthetic of their own” (1994: 1). Coote and Shelton recognize the advantage anthropology has over art history in its dealing with living entities (1992: 4). Although the anthropological method allows interviewing the artist, the art historian knows that this does not always lead to correct results. The artist, bound into a net of circumstances, cannot necessarily distance himself from his surroundings. Coote and Shelton’s argument, moreover, is not valid for the art history of contemporary art, which, too, deals with living artists directly. With regard to historical art contemporary witnesses have reported on artists they knew in their time. A crossover between the two disciplines of anthropology and art history unfortunately is still rare.

### The Meaning of Art

As stated above, in the reflection of art it is the understanding of culturally different meanings which matters. Many years have passed, since anthropology started to define its discipline through the investigation of meanings. Jamake Highwater<sup>1</sup> sees indigenous meaning as follows: “Making images is one of the central ways by which humankind ritualizes experience and gains personal and tribal access to the ineffable ... the unspeakable and ultimate substance of reality” (1981: 58). As Franz Boas states, art is an essential part of all cultures, especially in economically poor countries (1955: 27). Art is all-time present in the cultural web of Guatemala with its rich mythological heritage, on the one hand, and its political implication, on the other. Since art making – both, concrete or abstract – within culturally determined variations speaks with its own language, a discipline explaining art is a special one. Both, art history and anthropology of art need to be able to bridge art and science. Therefore, anthro-

<sup>1</sup> Author and scholar of the Cherokee Indians who deals with the indigenous knowledge system, both, scientifically and in the form of novels.

pology of art needs to develop a specific language. The status of art as a partial discipline of the study of man is gaining importance as a medium of communicating cross-cultural values. Art as an “other type of language,” one without words, expresses ideas and forms and serves to maintain and develop its culture. Words can be a limitation. The pictorial language in many ways expresses content more meaningfully than speech or writing does, especially when dealing with a content that is not concrete. Such a non-concrete content is the subject of research for anthropology and art history.

### Research Situation

I conducted audiorecorded interviews with ten artists in their studios in the summer of 1994. With other artists, I conducted less formal interviews. Besides researching literature, I used as a method on-site observation and work analysis. My goal was to hear the story and trajectory of their work and life and to identify some of the codes of their art works – their signs, their symbols, and concepts typical for the individual work of art and the ethnic group the art work derived from. I moved to Guatemala in 1995 and studied the culture and gained experience in the six years of living there, which made my knowledge on the subject more profound.

### Introduction to the Background

Artistic expression in Guatemala has a long tradition, reaching back to the Olmecs (1500–400 B.C.). Contemporary art is in many ways a product of that history. Starting with the pre-Columbian *indígenas* through the *conquista* and the influence of European modernism to the repressions of the dictatorships in the second half of the 20th century, the creation of art up to the present has been shaped by its historic and political background. Within this course of history and its impact on society, Guatemalan art has been determined by the indigenous worldview, the mythology as well as its rich culture and diversity of its landscape. These factors provide a strong background for identification. They effect the ethnically diverse population<sup>2</sup> in different ways.

When researching the influences of “indigenous art” on contemporary art, one should ask the ques-

2 The Guatemalan population consists of about 60% of ladinos and mestizos. The other part consists of 21 indigenous groups (who speak 53 languages and idioms) and the small group of Garifunas on the Caribbean coast plus a small percentage of other ethnics.

tion: Are today’s indigenous people the continuation of the pre-Columbian Maya Indians? Guatemala’s fragmentation into fifty-three languages and idioms make us aware of internal cultural differences. We find, on the other hand, important cultural mutual-ity that stems from a common indigenous knowl- edge system stretching all the way from North to South America.

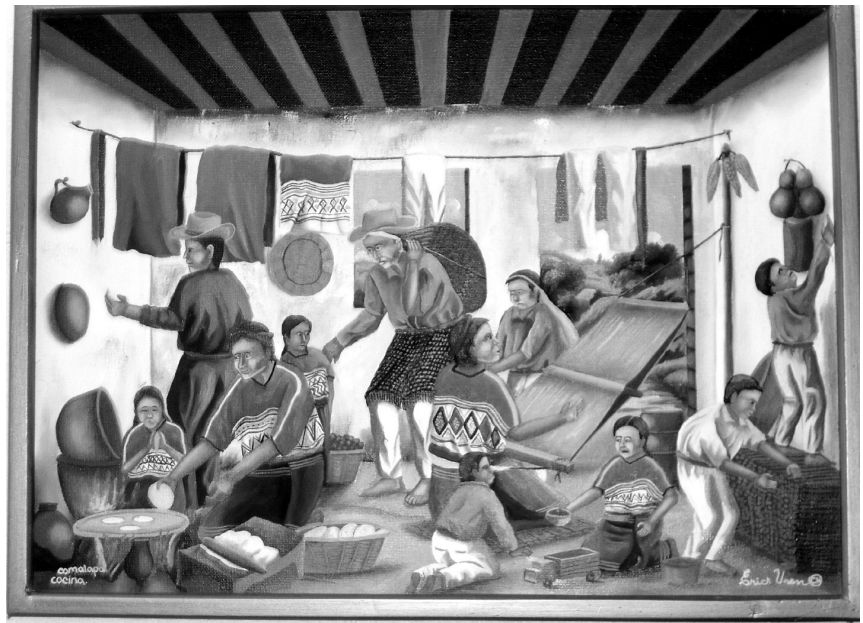
### Characteristics of “Indigenous Art” in Guatemala, Portrayed in Its Depiction of Everyday Life and Cosmology in the Indigenous Painting

Ruptured from the common rational of the Western world experience, the notions of ratio vary notably in indigenous towns and villages from this Western concept. The idea of time, space, and reality or un-reality is a different one. While indigenous people manage their daily life within both knowledge sys- tems, the indigenous concept sees as real not what you see but what you experience and know. The in- digenous painters<sup>3</sup> depict as real appearing every- day situations with an underlying symbolic plain of meaning. An indigenous painting indicates such a transcendental plain by certain characteristics, which I will discuss as follows.

What here shall be called “indigenous painting,” has been termed “art naïf,” “primitivism,” “tradi- tional art,” “Maya art,” and in Spanish also *costum- brismo*. Artists acquire its knowledge usually in an autodidact, nonacademic way, but the art form and the artists are far from unconscious, “naïf,” “pure,” or “spontaneous” (Cofiño de Prera 2001: 10). Ety- mologically, the term “naïf” derives from the Latin word *natives*, which means “native” or “natural,” a signification which could be acceptable for this kind of art, had it not taken on the above mentioned sense of naivety. Tourists imported the name “naïve art”, in reference to the art of Henri Rousseau. The paint- ers themselves do not see their art as such.

The first known painter is recognized to be An- drés Curruchich, a Cakqchikel artist from the high- lands of San Juan Comolapa. Curruchich in his easel oil paintings focuses on women and men in traditional costumes – however not in the same way as the romanticizing watercolor painters, such as Humberto Garavito, do. The indigenous painting, the one which has not been altered by Western con- cepts, is based in many ways on the oral tradition of storytelling (Monterroso Echeverría 2005: 7). It demonstrates the integrated understanding of a per-

3 People who live integrated into the indigenous culture within their community.



**Fig. 1:** Erick Unen (Photo: [www.artemaya.com](http://www.artemaya.com)).

son who is a living part of his society instead of being an observer from outside. Curruchich does not show *indígenas* in romantic situations such as walking to the water fountain; instead, he is interested in the common undertaking at a market place as a reflection of its central and transcendental meaning. To explain the concept of “costumbre” art, which is the most authentic in Curruchich’s paintings, let us have a look at the art of one of his contemporary followers, and specifically, Erick Unen (Fig. 1). Unen follows the tradition of depicting one living-space, with all pertaining daily activities, in a manner that this space could be considered nearly “the whole Mayan world”. Curruchich’s figures create small groups, who present the every-day market activities as if on a stage. Unen shows the same in the equally important space in Mayan life, the kitchen. Within the “indigenous art”, artists depict particularly the cosmology and its symbolic mirroring in the everyday events in form of market activities. I later will return to explaining the multidimensional relation of spaces and the position of man in them. Jamake Highwater’s insights in many ways apply to the indigenous people of the Southwest as well as to those in Guatemala. He describes that the presence of both worlds – the so-called real and its symbolically represented transcendence – do not go back to a dualism but much rather to a simultaneous existence of multiple realities, such as in the indigenous view (1981: 66–68). This insight is essential for an understanding of the indigenous way of life.

Before I will continue the explanation of this matter, let me look at the everyday situation repre-

senting the run of the cosmos. The people in Curruchich’s paintings deal, and they deal with food. “The man as dealer” is of great importance in indigenous life. That too applies to the function of the artist. Raymond Firth states: “The artist-craftsman is only a part-time or leisure-time worker in this activity” (1951: 172). The painter’s works are not necessarily seen as “originals”; instead, they are goods, since goods are something sacred. Art – no better or worse than other goods – is that “something” integrated into life that people may not even have a term for it. Jamake Highwater formulates the relation as follows: “For primal peoples, on the other hand, the relationship between experience and expression has remained so direct and spontaneous that they usually do not possess a word for art” (1981: 55). In the indigenous culture it is not important to create something new; rather, it matters to “transmit stable values of experience from one generation to the next.” The indigenous artist is embedded in his “milieu, versed in its values” and is “eager to be in conformity with them and to be acceptable by his group” (Firth 1951: 172). Therefore, it is not astonishing that the act of painting may be a tradition in a family. As Raymond Firth notes, “[p]rimitive art is highly socialized” (1951: 171). Copying paintings from other artists, therefore, is not rare. Since there is no concept of individuality or originality in the Western sense, copying is not judged negatively.

“The idiosyncratic characteristics that gradually arose in Europe during the Renaissance and became known as *individuality* and *originality* are virtually unknown among Indians and other aboriginal

craftsmen, whose work is considered no more rarefied or conceptually discrete than that of the farmer, shaman hunter, or any other person of the tribe” (Highwater 1981: 56).

Copying artworks is considered more as a multiplication of what has proven reliable and what always repeats to reflect the continuing laws of the universe. With this understanding, we cannot blame the artist for producing the same-themed artwork for the tourist market.

“The market place,” as an arena of events, finally plays a “central role” and is presented in art – as to be explained – in its symbolic significance as a center of action of the universe. Here goods are passed hand to hand. They represent a sacred means of communication among people. The dealer in the market place keeps the world moving by passing on his goods. The same goes for the artist as a dealer. To express the significance as a center pulling together its singular parts, the artist sometimes uses the representation of a candle in the center of a gathering of people. The market and its dealing of goods represent a platform for the “community.” Melissa Butler in her foreword to David B. Greene’s publication about community and art in Guatemala cites the author: “Greene re-imagines community as centered around a common good that itself shifts and changes at will ...” and “[t]he work of art becomes a vehicle for expressing collective identity against which the main characters may be measured, accepted, embraced, or reflected and cut off, and, in the process, the sense of ‘participating in’ as well as ‘transcending’ community takes on a new sharpness” (2010: viii). The contraction of all elements in a picture is not a sign of “unity,” though, often imagined in Western perspective. Jamake Highwater sees that matter as follows: “The Native American grasp of the solidarity of life is an expression of kinship and not a conviction of unity” (1981: 69).

The indigenous knowledge system teaches us to see things in other ways. The “maintenance of the ‘figure as a whole’” is common in indigenous portraiture. A portrait in the form known in Western artistic depiction is unknown to the indigenous painter.<sup>4</sup> While in Western art we have no problem seeing a body that seems to be cut in half, the “original” indigenous artist paints his subject as a whole figure.<sup>5</sup> Again, this fact is not to be perceived as

a sign of unity per se. The depicted is based upon knowledge of human corporality rather than temporarily seeing one part of it. Highwater describes a case concerning the experience of the Swiss Rudolph Friedrich Kurz with a Sioux Indian. The Sioux corrected him to draw his horseman by showing both legs. Not the obvious is relevant, but what man knows in reality (1981: 57). The indigenous artist, therefore, needs to paint a body with all its parts, visible or not.

In indigenous painting, the artist perceives a depicted figure as equal to a living person. Although not in the same way as in votive images, he still considers the figure a representation of sacred forces. He does not think of unity as the sum of two parts, as would be in Cartesian thought.<sup>6</sup> “Otherness” does not post one but many possibilities (Highwater 1981: 68).

To make a multiple view possible, the indigenous creator may paint an event in a “birds-eye-view,” as if looking at the picture from above. Through such a perspective the artist enables the viewer to obtain a sort of over- and outview. The viewer can identify this way with various worlds simultaneously and move back and forth between them. He stands both within and outside of the depicted event, in multiple spheres at the same time. Andrés Batzín Navichoc (\*1964) from San Pedro at Lake Atitlan depicts four people sitting around a centrally located mountain of corn (Fig. 2). In the Guatemalan indigenous painting “space is a representation of the action-field of a physical landscape and a social world” and their mutual connection. Space becomes a field for the describing testimony of the lived reality of an individual within his society. Man, action, and action space are related. Such space may be a house, the church, the *cofradía*<sup>7</sup>, and the procession in the

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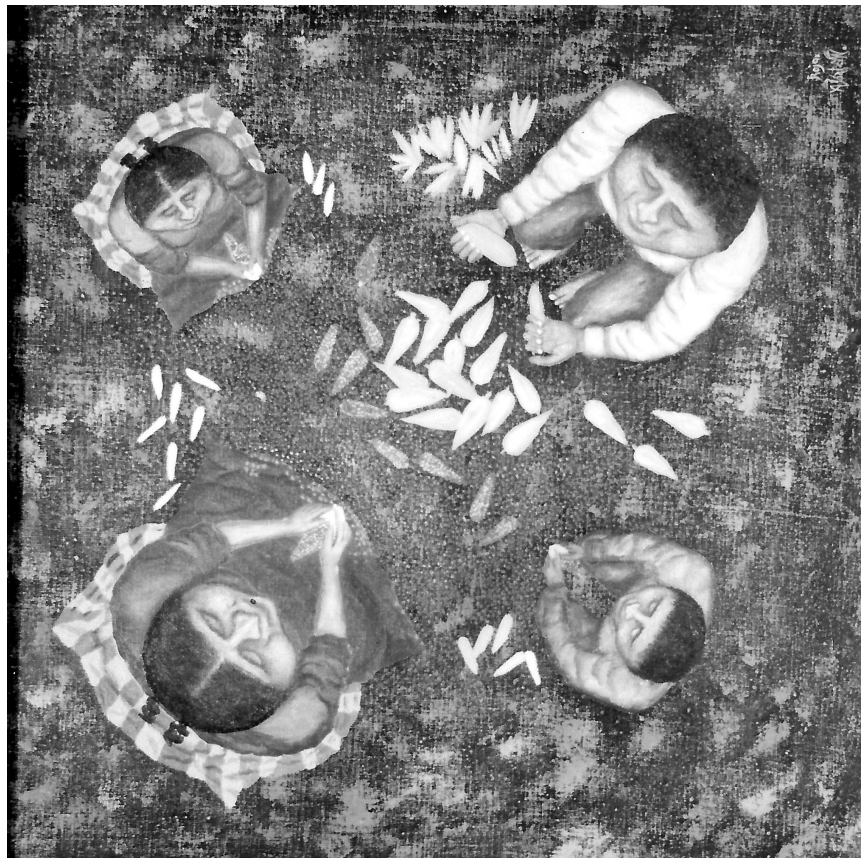
There are many culturally and religiously mixed phenomena in Guatemala. Nevertheless, anthropology and anthropology of art want to look at the indigenous part of things.

6 Highwater quotes that the Western division of the left and right brain part in intuition and ratio, and summing up the two as one and one is two, seems highly naïve to indigenous thinking. He describes the indigenous view of the Hopi Indian Black Elk: “... ‘as they must live together like one being,’ he makes it perfectly clear that for Indians the oneness of consciousness is not an ultimate and fixed reality but a sacred capacity for centeredness, for an integration of the self and the world that is learned” (1981: 66 f.). What Highwater calls “centeredness” corresponds with “integrity.”

7 The main purpose of Maya religious practices is to ensure that the sun, stars, moon, and planets continue on their paths. Man has his part in the greater scheme of things: through following a rigid schedule of rituals, he can help to keep the gears greased. If someone does not do the rituals on the proper time and in the correct manner, the cycle will be broken and the world will end. “The Cofradías or Brotherhoods pro-

4 It repeatedly needs to be said, that the Guatemalan indigenous culture is a changing one where appropriation of art exists, both through the influence of people of other cultures coexisting in the country, and through tourism.

5 “Original” means not influenced by a Western concept. Now, this is something difficult to see in a culture that has been influenced by Western thought for more than five centuries.



**Fig. 2:** Andrés Batzin Navichoc  
(Photo: G. Jurosz, Guatemala).

street, the town center with its plaza, the whole village, or the rural field (Vásquez Castaneda 1987). Landscape as a theme rarely is only representation. A privy public understands to grasp the multitude of meanings.

The depiction of four figures as in Batzin's image represents the four directions or the "four cardinal points" of the universe, which indigenous peoples view as the unity of the world that it takes to be harmonized. Just that is what the four figures in the painting are doing – they "harmonize the run of the world" through their work and in community. The significance of the image reflects the spiritual meaning of the daily job of releasing maize from its piston. As a sacred plant, the maize takes on the central role in the image. The "run of events" is being depicted by the "principal of movement." Like the white dots, known in Indian paintings from India or in artwork by the Australian Aborigines, seeds in indigenous painting are being depicted as vibrating dots. They are an integral part with spiritual mean-

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vide this function in Santiago. Although set up by the Spanish priests to promote Christian ideals they were soon subverted to the Native religion. They are each named for the saint or deity that they are dedicated to" (<[www.santiagoatitlan.com/Religion/Cofradia/cofradia.html](http://www.santiagoatitlan.com/Religion/Cofradia/cofradia.html)> [06. 12. 2013]).

ing. Sculpturally they strengthen the impression of movement. The smaller and more in amount, the more they seem to vibrate. The figures in Batzin's image are the light-colored pistons which seem to float and circle over the background. The artist achieves such an effect of movement and vibration by the adversarial setting of complementary colors, ideally red and green.

The usual pattern of activities stands symbolically for transformation. One could philosophicaly say that through the daily routine man reaches the possibility of transcendence of the quotidian. In the creation myth, the "Popol vuh," the God of Maize is the God of Transformation. He dies, travels thereafter through the sphere of water into the world of the Gods, and is reborn (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2003: 4). The indigenous viewer identifies the corn as a vehicle for transformation. Hunbatz Men describes this conception: "The Mayans took the symbolic 'G' from our universal memory, from the place where we came as seeds ... Mayan sagas made this symbol, as religion and science, part of their consciousness. Their people still live this consciousness" (1990: 31, 34). Jamake Highwater describes for the American Indian, what becomes also valid for the Indians of Guatemala: "American In-

dians, [on the other hand], look at reality in a way that makes it possible for them to know something by temporarily turning into it” (1981: 61). Knowledge, believe, and conception transcend. Highwater refers to Paul Radin, when stating: “The Indian does not make the separation into personal as contrasted with the impersonal in the Western sense at all. What he seems to be interested in is the whole question of existence and reality; and everything that is perceived by the senses, thought of, felt, and dreamt of, truly exist for him ... as inseparable aspects of the real” (1981: 56).

Maize and other “seeds” are a common phenomenon in indigenous images. According to the creation myth, they are not only the very first and original seeds, but also inter-communicator between the sphere of humans and the Gods. They are vehicles of transportation for mythical and real information which is being sown, harvested, dealt, and eaten and so serving for the preservation of man and society. The myth describes: “The creators created thereafter a new man from maize. However, they were not content with the outcome and sent a bird named Xecotcovah and a jaguar named Cotzbalam to destroy the humans. Then, the creators made a third man, from flesh and bones and with intelligence” (Andrade Warner 1985: 36). A painting by Paula Nicho Cumez (\*1945) from the year 2004 has been titled “*Ruk’ux Je’el*” (“Spirit of the Maize”). The plants of the maize field here seem alive; from the incense ascends the spirit of the maize.

The scene in the described image by Batzin – through the four figures bound by the ritual of their labor – reflect the cosmological conception as ritually presented in the *Palo volador*. Mariano Chavajay Gonzales (\*1960) takes up this theme in a painting from 1990. He depicts the *Palo volador*<sup>8</sup>, as it

is the tradition in the town of Chichicastenango in Guatemala. The ritual is a form of “communication of man with the celestial world.” In other cases ritual symbols may be used for communication, such as hot air balloons or kites. The custom of “kite flying” on November 1st, the Day of the Death, partly derived from the Christian tradition, is an example for compartmentalization. The term introduced by Edward H. Spicer (1954: 665), describes the adaptation to the imported Christian religion. Kite flying can be observed in diverse celebrations in Guatemala and is a well-used motive in indigenous art. Paula Nicho Cumes painted kite flying in a picture/composition titled *Q’a B’anobal*.<sup>9</sup> David Greene states the animation of objects of daily use with in order to incorporate them into the world of gods: “to animate a functioning object – and thereby to bring a natural object into the world of gods” (2010: 59).

The portrayal of the “human figure” in Andrés Batzin’s work wants to be understood “in multiple ways.” His figures depict humans from flesh and blood, on the one hand, on the other they represent the first created people, made from wood, as described in the creation myth, the “Popol vuh,” which the Guatemalan indigenous people identify with. Of the eight Tz’utuhil painter-brothers of the Chavajay family also Mariano Chavajay Gonzales depicts wood-like figures (Fig. 3), and so do most of the other indigenous painters. It is not, after all, a lack of knowledge of how to depict a human body, which makes the artist paint the way they do. Rather, it is a conscious decision based upon mythical knowledge. In the “Popol vuh,” the creators, out of nothing or from chaos, created light, nature, and the animals. At first they created people from wood. They multiplied, but they did not have emotions and did not know where they came from and where they were going. They also were not able to get up on their own, after they had fallen to the ground (Andrade Warner 1985: 35f.). David Greene accounts the multiple reality in an example in his discourse about the cultural interpenetration of the Christian and the indigenous culture: “the plaster articulating vegetable-human composite belongs to the world of the divine while the mental image it evokes belongs to the world of nature”, and “two kinds of being (human, vegetable)” (2010: 58).

8 The *Palo volador* is performed both in Guatemala and Mexico. *El Volador* (The Birdman), also called *Palo volador*, is one of the most authentically preserved “dances” from pre-Columbian times, although the costumes now reflect a European influence. Five men are carefully prepared to perform the dance. One man is the captain and four take the roles of birdmen. A tall, strong, straight tree is stripped of its branches and bark and set up in the main square of the town. A wooden cylinder is attached to the top of the trunk (*palo*), with a frame from which hang the four ropes to which the birdmen are tied by their ankles. The captain sits on top of the cylinder, playing a drum and flute, and turns to the four corners of the universe. Then the four birdmen, hanging head down, slowly descend in a motion slow at first and gradually increasing in speed. The number of circles they turn before touching the earth varies, but in pre-Columbian times they circled thirteen times. The number of turns multiplied by the four birdmen equals the number of years of the pre-Columbian calendar: fifty-two, divided by four, thirteen year periods. The *Palo volador* undoubtedly has an intimate relation

to the worship of the sun. The captain who turns toward the cardinal points and the birdmen dressed as eagles (birds of the sun) make this clear.

9 *Q’a B’anobal* means “what is ours.” It needs mentioning that female artists are rare and a recent occurrence.



**Fig. 3:** Mariano Chavajay Gonzales (Photo: www.artemaya.com).

### Concepts from the Indigenous Knowledge System in Contemporary Painting in Guatemala

The artists presented in this section are ethnically wide apart from each other. Nevertheless they share their recent history and culture and all refer to indigenous concepts in their works of art. The artists belong to the generations before the globalized hybrid living, as in some cases known in the Guatemala of today. All of the presented artists have been traveling and staying in Europe or the USA for a period of time. Much of their referring to indigenous concepts may have been reinforced by the absence of their home-culture.

The earliest artworks known to archaeology and art history of Guatemala are the colossal heads of the Olmec culture.<sup>10</sup> These freestanding basalt boulders of 2–3 meters diameter, placed upon the ground, are confirmed only in Central America and there in La Venta, Tres Zapotes, San Lorenzo in the Gulf of Mexico. The lesser known colossal heads can be found in the pacific region of Guatemala, mainly in El Baúl.

Influential in the contemporary art, as to be seen, is their round gigantic form as well as the “view of the head-figure in direction of the sky.” The Guatemalan sculptures are abstract, organically round-

<sup>10</sup> Literature generally considers the Maya culture known from archaeology to be of a different people than the ones living today. In this article, I consider today’s indigenous people in Guatemala to be the subsequent generation of the Old Maya. That is as the *indígenas* see themselves.

ed forms, while their Mexican counterpart shows rather edgy forms with clear features and naturalistic attributes, such as helmets. These round shapes of the abstract head forms match the Maya hieroglyphs which we know from steles and Maya codices (1000–1200 B.C. and older) where in the depicting different gods represent meanings of words.

The “prevalence of such round and other organic forms” is one of the most obvious characteristics in Latin American art. Resulting from my Guatemalan dialogs with the following artists and the studies of their culture and scientific literature, this article will show how the feature of the organic form traces back to a knowledge system, different from the Cartesian one. As reflected in the science history of the Maya-Indians, nature and particularly its seeds and fruits, in the indigenous knowledge system, are considered being representations of the human individual; as singular authority and nucleus in a cosmic space of equal particles. “The use of mathematics is essential, and quintessential is the value of the zero (0), in Mayan zero is pronounced ‘ge’ [G], and symbolized by the egg, creator of the universe” (Men 1990: 30). The value of the “zero” is not one of nothing, rather it indicates a “beginning” of something – as a seed does and as the Maya saw the value of the “zero” in their hieroglyphs. The concept of “beginning” is one of “hope”; its manifestation in the symbol and image of a seed means fruiting and yield. Hunbatz Men continues explaining: “I reached the conclusion that the Mayan ‘G’



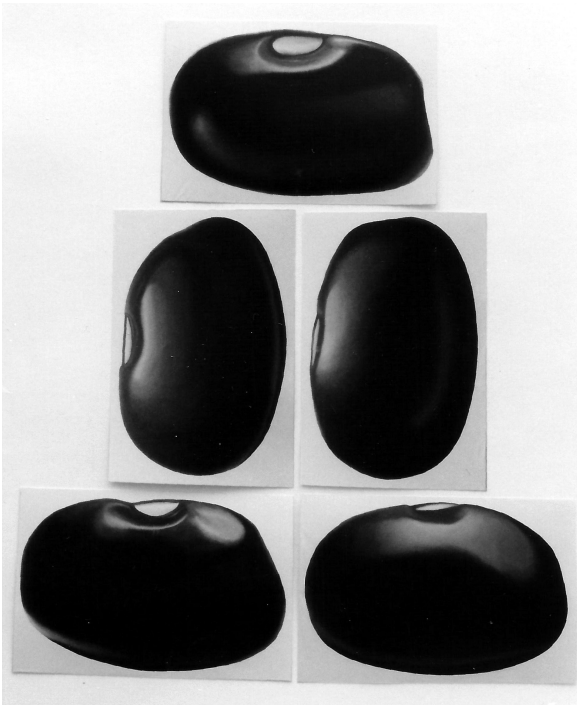


Fig. 4: Arturo Monroy (Photo: A. Monroy).

is the omnipresent germ, the essence, the seed” (1990: 31).

In contemporary Guatemalan art we find round, balloon-like form abstraction such as in the figures of the mestizo painter and sculptor Arturo Monroy (\*1959). He creates giant forms depicting fruits and seeds, such as maize and black beans (Fig. 4). He presents these natural elements like “blown-up” forms filling the whole space of the canvas. Moreover, he shows them in their full form, never cut as we may see in Western portrait painting. In many conversations with the painter, during the time of my six years in Guatemala, he confirmed knowing the Olmec sculptural heads.<sup>11</sup> He also stated to be creating those forms out of his personal indigenous cultural feeling. Having grown up on fruit plantations in an area that today has been overtaken by the capital of Guatemala, Arturo Monroy remembers to have learnt that the respect for nature has gained identification with the idea of oneness, which he saw represented by the fruits on the trees or his dinner table. Emphasizing his father in memory, he depicts in his images homage to nature. His idea of “abundance”<sup>12</sup> stands in connection to that. That

11 In fact, it was him who took me to see them.

12 The concept of “abundance” in Latin American cultural history is a well-known phenomenon, viz. Flores Zúñiga (1992: 27).

too, he states having incorporated in childhood. Nature as well as his parent’s giving personalities gave him a feeling of richness in midst of financial poverty. The concept of abundance resulting from nature equals a feeling of “being provided for.” Monroy extends this idea to his understanding of the cosmos which he feels provided by. In this artist’s point of view, the concept results from both, the Christian as well as the indigenous tradition. Using the distance interpretation as common in art history, I would see the artist generously interpreting the Christian religion already out of his indigenous tradition. In his art, he expresses abundance through a richness of forms and color.

The concept of abundance, moreover, relates to the one of “enlarging the round form.” Similar to Arturo Monroy’s depiction of fruits and seeds, another painter executed his elements in the sense of enlarging the round form. Over decades, painter Rodolfo Abularach created in his large-sized canvases his life’s capital theme of the “giant eye” (Fig. 5). Its form fills the complete space of the canvas and allows a simultaneous insight into both, detail and the large picture of the eye as if viewing into a universe.

Another characteristic, mentioned when discussing the Olmec sculptures, is the “viewpoint towards what is above.” We can find this feature in paintings by the artist from the Indian city Quetzaltenango, José Leiva (1964–2003) (Fig. 6). In his images, he often paints a figure gazing towards the moon. The painter, who has passed away some years ago, spoke in our audio interview of 1995 about the relation between the feature “viewpoint towards the above,” and the cranial deformation practice of the Old Maya. In this practice the Maya have been binding heavy stones of jade to the lower back of their children’s heads in order to reach a cranial deformation. The prolonged profile was at the least an ideal



Fig. 5: Rodolfo Abularach.

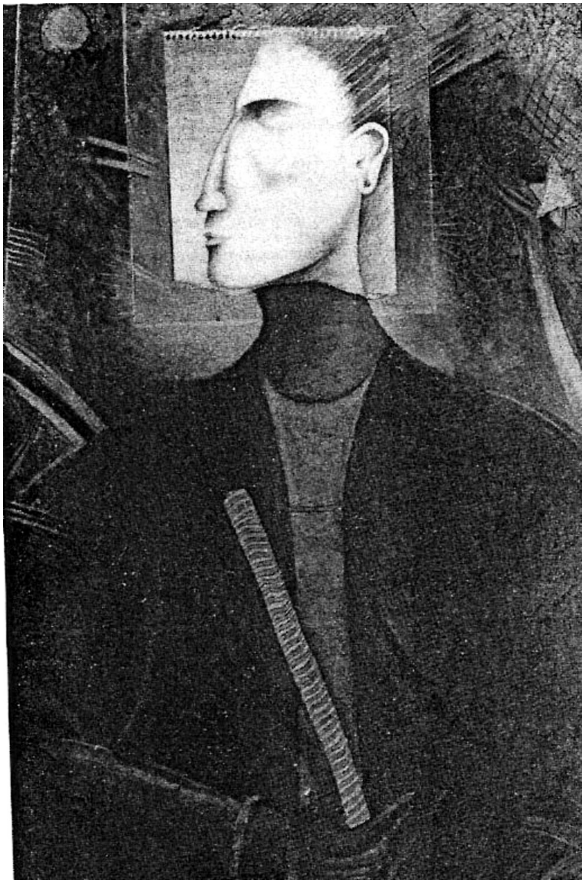


Fig. 6: José Leiva (Photo: G. Jurosz, Guatemala).

of beauty. Possibly it also had spiritual meaning. The artist assumed that the practice stood in connection with the same feature known in the Olmec colossal heads.

Another feature in today's painting is the *juego de pelota*, the ritual Maya ball game known from archaeology. In many places throughout the Maya area there are ball courts for the described spiritually meaningful and culturally institutionalized game, as, e.g. in Copán, Honduras. This game, argues Arturo Monroy, has a double meaning: the *juego de pelota* is a game between players who at the same time symbolize the communication between man and gods.<sup>13</sup> In the indigenous painting as has been explained above, such ritual communication with the numinous sphere is often depicted through seeds and especially through maize. Arturo Monroy uses this measure to create a spiritual and meditative mood. His painted swirling seeds create an impression of ant-like communication and of an unreal movement, as typical in indigenous painting.

13 See also the chapter on space in indigenous painting.

A style typical in Latin American art is the “magic realism.” It is known especially in literature. Through the usage of the measures of “magic realism,” the artist creates the impression of removing things and the viewer from the everyday life and alters perception directing it onto life itself. One way to create such a lyrical-poetic-atmospheric world is to depict amorphous figures and animals known from fables or personifications of numinous beings acting in suggestive ways. In “experience religions” (Bargatzky 1997, 2007), they are a typical feature of experiencing reality and often take on the function of a messenger. The personified beings seem to approach and withdraw themselves in the paintings and radiate a certain power, which the viewer seems to be part of, but without the ability to dominate it.

Elmar Rojas (\*1938) is an artist to achieve such mysterious feeling in his images. He has been a pioneer of the “magic realism” in Guatemalan art. He takes on local myths as his theme, which presents a connection of meaning to all of Latin America. Rojas gives his paintings an expression of weightlessness by forming his figures with round bodies, so that they seem to float in space. For that purpose he uses a technique of various layers of paint, which then are being smudged to strengthen the impression of weightlessness. This creates an effect of “placelessness.” The non-place reminds us of the abstract space of the universe. Jamake Highwater describes the “intrinsic amalgamation of space and place” in the indigenous mentality where “the defined space – the enclosure – serves as a model of the world, of the cosmos, or microcosmically, of the beings of nature” (1981: 122). Rojas gets inspired by the folkloric world and mixes ideas with meaning from his real social context. With his *espantapájaros* (“scare-crow”) he has created a very personal iconography within the “magic realism.” His scare-crows do not match their known appearance. With a large black hat and small in stature, the *espantapájaros* is the colorful creation of a figure which resembles the fable figure of the *sombrero* (Asturias 1981: 47–51). He seems to be a numinous being known to the viewer “as from deep dreams” (Flores Zúñiga 1992: 28). Other mythically inspired figures in the art of Elmar Rojas originate from the local-rural and folkloric Guatemalan surroundings. These are birds, horses, dogs as well as workers in the field and church towers (Méndez D’Avila 1995: 14). Méndez D’Avila sees them as “figures of remembrance” (1995: 6) and of “having been forgotten” (14) in the “ever present past” (8). “Que los milagros, que los partos portentosos, que los golpes de catástrofe, que los sueños, que todo tipo de filtro y prodigios no conforman supersticiones, sino la mis-

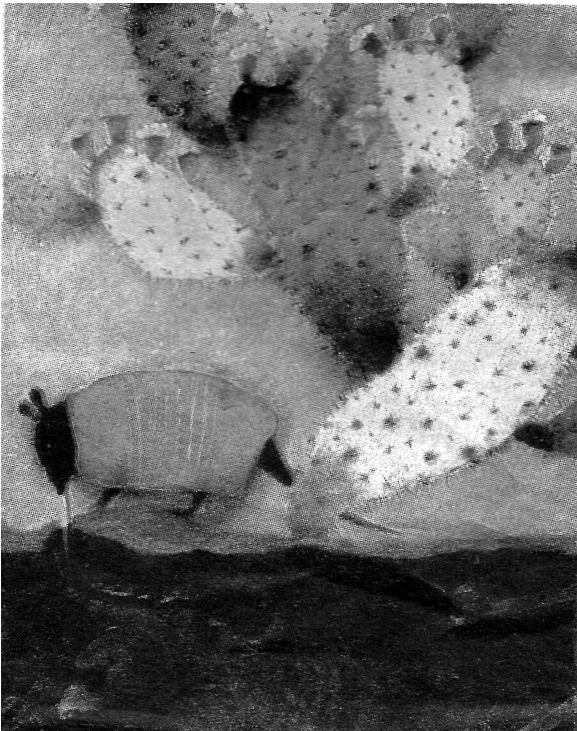


Fig. 7: Ixquiac Xicarás (Photo: www.artemaya.com).

ma realidad.” The “magic realism” of Elmar Rojas operates “between absurd and normal, wonder and common” (Méndez D’Avila 1995: 8). These figures serve as such to “transcend reality” (1995: 6f.). In its function, they keep the consciousness of the viewer flexible for them to stay, able to think back and forth between the diverse. Flores Zúñiga sees the “emotional apathy in Rojas’ images as the most impressive element of his” (1992: 28).

One of the major sources of inspiration of Guatemalan art is the “world of animals.” Even here, the two spheres of reality and the unreal are mixed. Ixquiac Xicarás’ (\*1947) armadillo (Fig. 7) and Arturo Monroy’s butterflies and insects as well as large animals are symbols of the indigenous world. They signify a strong connection to the agricultural sphere and identification with nature. Animals often represent realities that people in a politically suppressed system cannot speak out. Such is Ixquiac Xicarás’ armadillo, the animal which, when in danger, buries itself into the ground. The dogs which appear accompanying the *espantapájaros* in Elmar Rojas’ paintings have similar a meaning.

This survey was to give an insight into the concepts of indigenous and mestizo art in Guatemala. An anthropology of art, which interprets art as style in a quantitative way as “once a sufficiently large number of art objects is known to be from the same region and the same period they provide the cor-

pus that characterizes the art style of that area and that era” (Gerbrands 1969: 58), can provide a fundament of research material. Only a reflection on deeper cultural values, made visible by art and their influence onto their society, however, can contribute to a further development of an anthropology of art as a separate and serious one. In the shortness of this article, it was not possible to focus on every detail. Moreover, many artists and their themes could not be examined. It would need a larger publication to meet their importance.

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**His Eyes Were Watching Her****Papa Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Anthropology**

Frank A. Salamone

Zora Neale Hurston studied with Franz Boas from 1925 to the mid-1930s. Despite his urging she did not complete her dissertation. However, she had completed a number of ethnographic and folkloric works which clearly reveal his influence. Under Boas's watchful influence, Hurston began to make changes in both anthropology and literature, anticipating and influencing future developments. Boas was generally reluctant to write prefaces for books. However, he did so for Hurston's "Mules and Men" ([1935] 1990) displaying his encouragement and approval of her work. Under his influence she helped bring a more subjective and novelistic style to ethnographic work and a more ethnographic tone to literature. Her work has influenced a number of anthropologists, directly and indirectly, including Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and George Marcus, as well as literary figures such as Alice Walker, Tony Morrison, and Maya Angelou. She anticipated a more reflexive and subjective anthropology in which the narrator was no longer privileged and the subject allowed to speak for her or himself.

**Introduction**

Zora Neale Hurston's role in American literature has been acknowledged and no longer is it possible to see her as a lost or forgotten figure. Alice Walker, Tony Morrison, and Maya Angelou, not to mention Oprah Winfrey, have rediscovered her and made her work known to a wider American public. The Library of America has published a complete collection of her works. However, her significance to anthropology has ironically gone largely unacknowledged.

There are, of course, works which focus on her contributions. As early as 1980 Robert Hemenway noted her contribution to anthropology and its influence on her work in his seminal "Zora Neale Hurston. A Literary Biography." Other works have followed building on his work. Indeed about one-hundred other books cite his work. The question remains, then, why is her work not given the place in anthropological studies which it deserves?

This article seeks to examine reasons for her long neglect within anthropology as well as her direct