

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN SCRIPT

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Overview With the Maya glyphs, Aztec pictograms, and Inca quipu, there is no doubt that Latin America contributed a great deal to the history of writing systems and coded communications. The predilection for the graphic created a fertile artistic ground from which many unique art forms emerged, including systems of writing, and also innovative forms of writing design and production. While the content of writing was often tightly controlled by governments and the Catholic Church, the expressive forms created their own energies and promoted messages, almost always populist, with passionate cries for action.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Maya script: The Maya developed an elaborate set of glyphs which they used in their writing. Most are preserved today in the form of elaborate carvings or molded stucco in walls and stela. Others exist as they were painted onto ceramics and on bark-paper codices. Unfortunately, most of the bark-paper codices were burned by Spanish priests. The Mayan glyphs are constructed of compound elements, and they are essentially logosyllabic, which means that each logo corresponds to a syllable. In addition to a system for words, the Maya also developed a system for writing numbers, equations, and also astronomical relationships (for their calendars). The Maya were the only culture in Latin America that developed a fully functional written language, which is to say that they write everything they could say. While only four Maya codices survived the conquistadores, it is possible that in the future, codices will be found in the numerous Maya ruins yet to be excavated.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztec pictograms: The Nahuatl peoples of the central highlands of Mexico used pictograms to communicate with others who spoke the Nahuatl language. The pictograms can be found in Aztec codices, and were produced by the highly skilled scribes, or codex painters. Each pictogram conveyed meaning by means of graphic symbols. For example, night was represented by a black sky and a closed eye. Thus, the pictograms were systems of signs (semiotics), and they did not correspond to spoken syllables as did the Maya glyphs. While only 15 pre-Columbian Mesoamerican codices survive today, there are hundreds of Aztec codices that were produced in colonial times by the codex painters. They represent a great bridge in our understanding of the Nahuatl peoples, and also the perception of the Spanish conquistadors because many of the colonial-era contain Nahuatl and Spanish written commentary and descriptions.

Inca: The Inca did not have a writing system. However, they did have a coded system of communication that involved elaborate patterns of knots tied in a wide array of types of strings, that came in different colors and weights. Individuals could use the system of knots and strings to communicate numbers, dates, statistics, and even sequences of events. Thus, the quipus could, in a rudimentary way, even communicate stories or narratives. The larger quipu had as many as 1500 strings. The numerical system was a decimal system (groups of 10), and the largest decimal was 10,000. The quipus were carried by runners who delivered the quipus as messages and receipts. The quipu recorded inventory, demographics, statistics, armies, equipment, and important dates on the calendar. Simple quipu are still in use today by llama flock owners.

EARLY MODERN (Colonial)

Spanish script for official archives: Archives were maintained by the Catholic Church and also the Viceroyalties of the Spanish Crown. They tended to be handwritten by scribes on parchment documents, or entered into official leather-bound books kept at each parish's main church.

Early Printing Press: The first printing press in the New World was set up in Mexico City in 1539. It was a revolutionary technology, and permission had to be granted by Spanish king Carlos V and the archbishop of Mexico City. The house of the first printing press is called "Casa de la Primera Imprenta de America), and in its first years, at least 35 books were produced by Juan Pablos, from 1540 and 1560. The documents that were printed were related to viceregal and Church-related topics, which included a brief catechism to distribute to parishioners.

19TH CENTURY

Simon Bolivar and Independence Broadsheds: Following the model of the one-page flyers and broadsheds printed during the American and French Revolutions, Simon Bolivar and his groups made use of the format to communicate messages quickly to the people. Even after independence, the tradition continued, with one-page broadsides tacked to walls, doors, and other public places to fire up supporters and energize them to fight for reforms. They tended to be very plain in their design, with large, prominent headlines, and a few block paragraphs, always with a call to action.

20TH CENTURY

Avant-Garde Concrete Poetry Broadsheds: In the 1920s, Mexican writers such as Manuel Maples Arce, created one-page flyers containing poetry fused with abstract art, inspired in many ways by the Russian Futurists of the 1920s, and earlier, the Italian Futurists of pre World War I Italy (many of the Italian futurists were killed in the war they thought they wanted, which would “liberate” aesthetics from old, tired, aristocratic forms). They were printed on one page and often included wood-block printing of block graphics and calligraphy. Calling it, a “Super-poema bolchevique en 5 cantos” poet-graphic artist-print designer Manuel Maples Arce, used a combination of block letters to create dramatic black, red, and white poems that also served as posters. German Arzubide produced work as well, under the name of “El Movimiento Estridentista” (The Strident Movement), which captured the bold, strident form and message of the innovative writing forms and design.

Writing and the development of Innovative Fonts: Stridentism, which was associated with the Mexican Revolution, and which took inspiration from the avant-garde Futurist movements in Italy and Russia in the early 20th century, was unique in its development of a blockish font that was an edgy echo of Dada and Art Deco, which always contained a loud cry to action. Poets Manuel Maples Arce, German List Arzubide, German Cueto and others produced one-sided broadsides and posters, as well as magazine covers. Surprisingly, it did not spring out of Mexico City but in Xalapa, the capital city of the state of Veracruz.

Revolutionary Broadsheds and Posters of the 1960s: Writing styles and forms merged with pop art and culture in the 1960s, with the result that many posters containing minimalist poems, combined with collages of photographs (usually of Che Guevara in with beret) and colors / sketches inspired by comics. The skillful use of design to give the message a vibrant, relevant feeling was important in creating a “brand” and the kind of warrior banners that idealistic youth of the 1960s could rally around.

Discussion/Questions

1. Of all the world’s early written communications, the hieroglyphics of the Maya were unique in that the symbols represented both a depiction of meaning, as well as a direct correspondence to the spoken sound of the language. It is not known to what degree the populace was literate, but it can be assumed that there were a large number of people who could at least read, even if they could not produce the glyphs. The glyphs were ubiquitous. What are the implications to the culture? How might it give the Maya more ways to understand themselves and the world around them?
2. We have more examples of Aztec pictograms than we do of the Maya codices. Unfortunately, the Spanish priests aggressively destroyed all that they could find. Further, it was not possible to produce more Maya glyphs because the people who built the temples and wrote the codices had already been gone for centuries. In contrast, the Nahua people continued to speak their language and to paint pictograms. In fact, the Conquistadores found it useful for the Nuhuatl (Aztec) to produce pictograms depicting conversion. How might the differences in the experiences with writing have an impact on cultural blending and a sense of self?
3. The Incas did not have a written language, but they had many strategies for communicating meaning, which we could view as a kind of “writing.” They had an elaborate system of knotted string, called “quipus,” which were used as a kind of portable spreadsheet. They could convey calculations, inventories, and even sequenced events. The Incas distinguished themselves for their ability to construct works of civil engineering. Contemplate the

implications and create a scenario in which the “quipu” form of communication could be even more effective than a written script in coordinating projects and leading teams or troops.

4. When reading is universal, but writing the domain of a privileged few the actual printed word possesses a great deal more authority, to the point that it can take on the weight of a sacred text or a royal edict. Thus, in the years before the printing press, documents were written by scribes and kept under lock and key. The printing press changed all that. It made information more easily obtainable, and encouraged literacy. It also encouraged people to act on their dreams. For example, the tales of the explorers’ exploits in “The New World” motivated many to make the arduous journey to try their luck. Discuss the different impacts of the printing press on and within Latin America.

5. In a way that seemed to come full circle and echo the pictograms of the Aztec Codices, the early twentieth-century Mexican poets forged a new, graphics-intensive way to communicate their message. It brought together abstract art, geometric shapes, bright colors, and text, and the result was a poem that was part poster, part illustration, and part exhortative message, all created on a single sheet of paper called a “broadside.” Explain how writing forms such as broadsides lent themselves to messages of the people and political activism, as well as avant-garde artistic expression.

Reading

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