

TRANSLATIONS AND TRANSITIONS / TRADUCCIONES Y

TRANSICIONES:

A CELEBRATION OF MEXICAN & CENTRAL AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE (1821–2021)

MARCH 17–NOVEMBER 7, 2021

Vibrant and sophisticated societies have developed over thousands of years in what is today Mexico and the nations of Central America—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. This exhibition celebrates the rich cultures of these countries, which grew from strong indigenous roots, were bent and shaped by Spanish domination, and have evolved and flourished since independence.

When Spanish invaders (conquistadors) arrived in this region around 1519, they encountered complex indigenous cultures. Each had distinct languages, religions, and sophisticated ways of interpreting and managing their environments, from crops and animals to astronomy. The Spanish conquest imposed military domination, religious conversion, and a colonial political regime on the peoples of these lands. Spanish became the administrative language for government, and Catholicism was made the official religion. Although Spain sought to control, commercialize, or fully eradicate local physical and cultural resources, its conquest of these cultures faced active resistance from indigenous peoples. Key aspects of local knowledge and traditions endured despite these “translations and transitions” and did not entirely disappear during three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.

The peoples of Mexico and Central America finally won their freedom from Spain after years of struggle, and 1821 is commemorated today as their year of independence. Following the establishment of self-governing nations, there was a renewed appreciation for the region’s native cultures. *Translations and Transitions* explores and celebrates the survival and importance of these traditions, illustrating and contrasting forms of indigenous and European knowledge in this moment of reflection on 200 years of independence.

This exhibition has been curated by Ellen Hoobler, William B. Ziff, Jr., Associate Curator of Art of the Americas, with Lynley Herbert, Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts and Curatorial Chair. It is made possible by the generous support of the John G. Bourne Fund for the Exhibition of the Arts of the Ancient Americas and the John G. Bourne Endowment for the Arts of the Ancient Americas.



Mexico and Central America

The works in this gallery tell the story of a history of interactions between Europe and the Americas. Many of the objects in this gallery were made in different parts of North and Central America, by cultures that flourished about 1–1500 CE. This map illustrates the geographic range of those cultures.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Mexicans and Central American cultures have long traditions of recounting their histories through stories, in many forms, including poems, riddles, prayers, songs, and wisdom passed down by the elders. These stories have been told in hundreds of indigenous languages developed over thousands of years. While some native languages are at risk of dying out, today more than 6 million people speak Mayan languages, including nearly 40% of Guatemala's population. In fact, indigenous languages are spoken in Baltimore by many who can trace their roots directly to these ancient cultures.



Figure 1

Some societies also developed their own system of written symbols to record their traditions. One of the most complex was Maya hieroglyphic writing, shown on the cylinder vase displayed here (figure 1). Some of the glyphs, or signs, represent entire words or concepts, while others represent syllables or sounds. Maya scribes, who mastered these complex writing systems, were held in high esteem and had the privilege of wearing special ceremonial clothing and accessories. This ceramic figure (figure 2) wears an



Figure 2

elaborate headdress, featuring shell disks sewn onto cloth, usually worn by scribes.



Figure 3

During the conquest of the Americas in the 1500s, one of the priorities for Spanish invaders was to create dictionaries that enabled the learning of indigenous languages. These *Vocabularios*, like the one for the Nahuatl language of Mexico by Friar Alonso de Molina (1571) displayed here (figure 3), were not neutral: they were a tool of conquest. The ability to communicate with the native peoples allowed the conquerors to establish religious and political control. Despite the reasons for creating these dictionaries, they have ultimately helped to preserve the Nahuatl language, which is still spoken by 1.3 million people in Mexico today.

1 Cylinder Vase

Maya culture, Guatemala, 650–800

Earthenware, slip paint

Gift of the John G. Bourne Foundation, 2013, acq. no. 2009.20.177

2 Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana (Dictionary in Spanish and Mexican languages)

Author: Alonso de Molina (Spanish, ca. 1513–1579); Printer: Antonio de Spinosa, Mexico City, 1571

Printed book, ink on paper

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 92.498

3 Figure of a Scribe

Maya culture, Mexico, 550–850

Earthenware, post-fire paint

Gift of John Bourne, 2009, acq. no. 2009.20.36

FOOD AND CULTURE: CHOCOLATE

Many staples of modern global cuisines originated in the Americas—tomatoes, potatoes, corn, chilies, and avocados—but perhaps none is as beloved as the cacao fruit, the raw material from which chocolate is made. Cacao “beans” (the seeds of the fruit) were highly valued in the Americas from ancient times and even used as money. Friar Francisco Oviedo y Valdés, who lived in Nicaragua in the mid-1500s, noted then that 10 cacao beans could buy a rabbit in the market.



Figure 4

No major celebration or ritual in ancient Mexico and Central America was complete without chocolate. Processing cacao was quite complex and laborious, involving drying, roasting, and grinding the beans. Until the 19th century, chocolate was almost always consumed as a beverage, and it was bitter—very different from the sweet treat we know today! It was served from large containers like the Maya vessel displayed here (figure 4), which is decorated with cacao pods sculpted in clay.

When drinking chocolate was introduced to Europe, it lost its ritual meaning and became a luxury item enjoyed by the wealthy who could afford such a delicacy. European serving vessels reflected the value of the imported chocolate they contained and were often created out of metal, like the elegantly fluted silver pot shown here (figure 5).



Figure 5

After independence, Mexican and Central American countries continued exporting the region’s cacao to European consumers—the habit of drinking chocolate was so entrenched there that it was even sold by street vendors like the French man shown in the watercolor by Paul Gavarni (figure 6).



Figure 6

4 Lidded Vessel for Chocolate

Maya culture, Guatemala, 250–550

Earthenware, slip with incising

Gift of John Bourne, 2009, acq. no. 2009.20.39

5 Chocolate Pot

Joseph-Théodore Van Cauwenbergh (French, 1723–after 1787), 1774

Silver, amaranth wood

Museum purchase with funds provided by the S. & A.P. Fund, 1948, acc. no. 57.1802

6 The Chocolate Vendor

Paul Gavarni (French, 1804–1866), 1855–57

Watercolor and ink with graphite underdrawing and heightening on wove paper

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 37.1449

ANIMALS OF THE AMERICAS: JAGUARS

Jaguars are deeply entwined with myth and magic in Mexico and Central America.



Figure 7

The Maya sacred text, the Popol Vuh, is filled with stories about the jaguar. The largest predators in the Americas, jaguars move swiftly between different realms: sky (climbing high into trees), earth (hunting with legendary stealth and speed), and even into the underworld (swimming in subterranean rivers). The ability of these fearsome hunters to stalk their prey at night is alluded to on the Honduran ceramic vessel with jaguar figures on a dark background (figure 7).

Ancient ancestral lords sat on thrones covered with jaguar pelts and wore their skins ceremonially, and artists

fashioned gold jaguar pendants (figure 8). Rulers in the region also presided over religious rituals that included the processing of tobacco and other hallucinogenic plants on *metates*, or grinding stones, like this one carved with a



Figure 8



Figure 9

jaguar's markings (figure 9). Through these rituals, rulers connected with their animal spirits or "co-essences," often jaguars. Indigenous artistic representations of jaguars sought to convey that spiritual power which derived from their domination of the environment in the Americas. However, that context and tradition were lost when these animals were brought to European zoos. After

observing a captive jaguar in Paris, French artist Antoine-Louis Barye sculpted this close study of the animal's musculature (figure 10). His depiction valued anatomical precision rather than conveying the deep symbolism associated with jaguars in their American habitat.



Figure 10

7 Tripod Vessel

Maya culture, Honduras, 550–850

Earthenware and slip paint

Gift of John Bourne, 2009, acq. no. 2009.20.34

8 Pendant of Jaguar with Two Double-Headed Snakes

Chiriquí culture, Panama, 800–1521

Gold and copper alloy

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 57.300

Pendant of Jaguar or Composite Creature

Chiriquí culture, Panama, 800–1521

Gold and copper alloy

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 57.270

9 Effigy Metate (Grinding Stone)

Atlantic Watershed culture, Costa Rica, 700–1550

Volcanic stone

Gift of John G. Bourne, 2013, acq. no. 2009.20.171

10 Standing Jaguar

Antoine-Louis Barye (French, 1795–1875), 1840

Bronze

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 27.84

MAPPING TENOCHTITLAN—MEXICO CITY

Maps are a way of making sense of the world, and the traditions behind making them vary greatly across cultures. Here are two illustrations representing different visions of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan: one is an indigenous chart (translated into print) and the other is a European view.



Figure 11

The black-and-white print (figure 11) reproduces a page from a richly colored pictorial manuscript, known as the Codex Mendoza, made by the Aztecs (or Mexicas, as they called themselves). This indigenous map of Tenochtitlan would not help to navigate the city's streets; its imagery focuses instead on relaying important information about the city's origin story. It had been foretold that when the Mexicas were migrating, they should settle where they encountered an eagle perched upon a cactus. This vision, shown at the very center of the map, confirmed the place where they were destined to build their empire.

A color illustration from a Flemish atlas (figure 12) shows a very different, European approach to documenting the city, which focuses on providing a geographic context for the capital. Although effectively conveying its location on an island at the center of several lakes, the European illustrators who created the map were unfamiliar with the urban center, resulting in a map that attempts to look detailed but is ultimately unspecific.



Figure 12

Christian friars (members of Catholic religious orders) often destroyed indigenous pictorial records in the first years of the Spanish conquest as a way to erase local knowledge. Many were later recreated to serve colonial needs for understanding the local population. After independence from Spain, documents which illustrated indigenous traditions from before the invasion became an important source of national identity. Today, the imagery of the eagle and cactus shown in the Codex Mendoza has been adapted into the shield and flag of the Mexican nation.

11 Tenochtitlan, reproduction of page from the Codex Mendoza (Mexico, ca. 1541–42)

Purchas His Pilgrimes

Author: Samuel Purchas (English, ca. 1577–1626), London, 1625

Printed book, ink on paper

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 92.110

12 “Mexico, regia et celebris Hispaniae Novae civitas” (Mexico, royal and popular city of New Spain)

Georg Braun (German, 1541–1622) and Frans Hogenberg (Flemish, 1535–1590), *Civitas orbis terrarum*, Cologne, 1572, reprinted in Gerardus Mercator (Flemish, 1512–1594), *Atlas*, Duisburg, 1595

Printed book, ink on paper, hand-tinted with watercolor

Gift of Jean and Sidney Silber, 2003, acc. no. 92.98.2

TRANSLATING THE GODS

Spanish conquistadors justified conquering and colonizing the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America by claiming a desire to convert its people to Christianity. Conversion was necessary, they argued, because the indigenous religions were violent and barbaric, involving rituals they found shocking, such as human sacrifice. This justification for colonization was reinforced for European audiences by printed images that supposedly documented the religions of the Americas, in this case, that of the Aztecs (or Mexicas, as they called themselves).

The book here illustrates the Mexica patron god Huitzilopochtli (figure 13), meaning “Hummingbird of the Left,” a deity associated with war. Huitzilopochtli is illustrated as a monumental statue with wings like a bat, split hooves, and a goatlike tail, as well as a second face on his belly. He towers menacingly over his altar and sacrificial victims.



Hummingbird of the Left (Huitzilopochtli) as depicted in the late-1500s Codex Telleriano-Remensis (folio 5r).

This Mexica sculpture of Tlaloc (figure 14), “Beloved Lord and Provider,” is abstracted but benign, with goggled eyes and a crown of feathers.

Fragments of the pre-Spanish past, such as this sculpture, were the subject of much study and fascination after independence. Artists and writers drew inspiration from them, and by the mid-1800s, museums had been founded in the region to collect and safeguard these treasured artworks as a means of keeping local histories alive.



Figure 13

Yet a Mexica image of the deity (see at left), shows a regal warrior whose costume evokes a bright green bird. He was intentionally made more threatening in print—his representation is drawn directly from demonic and satanic imagery that would have been frighteningly familiar to European Christians.

Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica war god, was often contrasted with Tlaloc, the deity associated with rain, water, and fertility. The main temple of the Aztec capital had an altar for each.



Figure 14

13 “Viztlipuztli idolum Mexicanorum” (The Mexicans’ Idol of Huitzilopochtli)
America being the latest, and most accurate description of the New World; containing the original of the inhabitants, and the remarkable voyages thither [. . .]
Author: John Ogilby (English, 1600–1676), London, 1671
Printed book, ink on paper
Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 92.537

14 Sculpture of Tlaloc (God of Rain and Water)
Aztec culture, Mexico, 1400–1521
Volcanic stone, traces of stucco and pigments
Gift of John G. Bourne, 2014, acq. no. 2009.20.201

ASTRONOMY

Prior to the Spanish conquest, astronomers in Mexico and Central America used their knowledge to orient pyramids and temples to major constellations. They tracked the movements of the moon, stars, and planets, which became associated with deities. The incense burner here (figure 15) shows the face of one of these, a supernatural creature that represents the sun at night during its journey through the underworld, from dusk until dawn.



Figure 15

By contrast, the elaborate star charts and calculation dials in James Bassantin's book (figure 16), displayed here, make very clear how European scholars documented and shared their knowledge of astronomy.

Gazing up at those same stars, what patterns and images did astronomers in the Americas see? In this gallery, René Treviño's painting, *Reclaiming the Constellations (Jaguar)* (figure 17), is a reimagining of the indigenous constellations that have frequently been erased from history.



Figure 16

15 Incense Burner

Maya culture, Mexico or Guatemala, 600–900

Earthenware

Gift of John A. Stokes, Jr., 2003, acc. no. 48.2770

16 "Pratique des Movvemens Celestes" (Star chart with zodiac signs)

Astronomique discours, par Jaques Bassantin Escossois

James Bassantin (Scottish, d. 1568), Lyon, 1557

Printed book, ink on paper

Bequest of Henry Walters, 1931, acc. no. 92.621

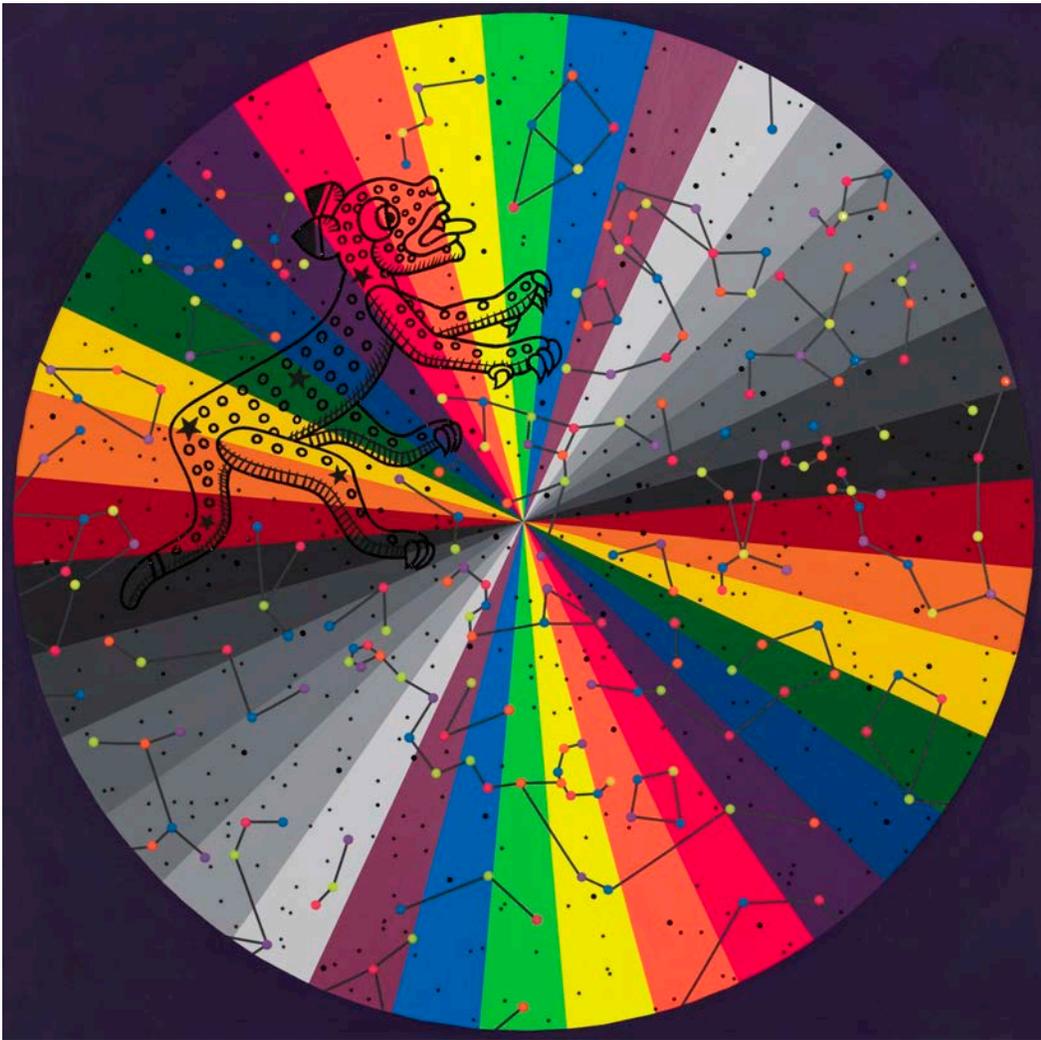


Figure 17

17 Reclaiming the Constellations (Jaguar)

René Treviño, 2019

Acrylic and rhinestones on wood panel

This work plays on the subjectivity of the past, which is seen through the lens of those with the power to write it. Who gets to name the constellations? Why do they have Greek names like Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Perseus, when they had been named previously by other cultures? In renaming the constellations, I strip them of their Greek/Western mythos. The high key color, or rainbow, also brings to mind a variety of meanings—the calm after a storm, a celebration of bounty and variety, and most importantly, a symbol of pride for the LGBTQ+ community. As we become aware of our insignificance in the universe, we can remember that the stars and constellations had names before the ones we now know and will have different names long after we are gone.

—René Treviño

On loan from the artist