

**PRE-HISPANIC PICTORIAL COMMUNICATION:
THE CODEX SYSTEM OF THE MIXTEC
OF OAXACA, MEXICO**

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The Mixtec have long inhabited the rugged mountainous area in the western half of what is now the modern Mexican state of Oaxaca. In the pre-Hispanic period, the Mixtec people were socially stratified, and the hereditary nobility placed a high value on knowledge of their genealogy and ancestors and the activities of those ancestors as rulers and statesmen, for an understanding of the past was essential to prove their right to govern. Before the Mixtec discovered a method of recording this history, all information had to be entrusted to memory. But human memory can be both fragile and fallible. Vital data may be lost forever through an unexpected death; and despite the best of intentions, facts may become corrupted or confused. In an effort to ensure the accurate retention of essential genealogical and historical accounts, the Mixtec institutionalized their memory of the past by making it the duty of their priests to memorize this crucial information.

At a time that scholars have not yet been able to specify, Mixtec artists began painting pictures of events and assigning specific meanings to certain designs in their drawings; some of the elements in their scenes were based directly on phrases and names in the Mixtec language. With the creation of this pictorial system, the Mixtec finally found a permanent and unchanging way to preserve information, one that was no longer dependent upon human lifespans or memories. Early versions of these scenes have not survived but might have been drawn on large cloth sheets called *lienzos*, a format widely used in Mesoamerica. But by at least A.D. 1400, and perhaps considerably earlier, a new format came into use, that of the codex. Codices were made of leather: wide strips of animal hide were glued together end to end to form a single, long continuous strip, and folds were then made in alternating directions across this strip to create pages (*figure 1*). Because of their screenfold form, codices folded compactly to a size similar to that of a modern book; and, like books, they were normally opened so that two pages were visible side by side.

ABSTRACT

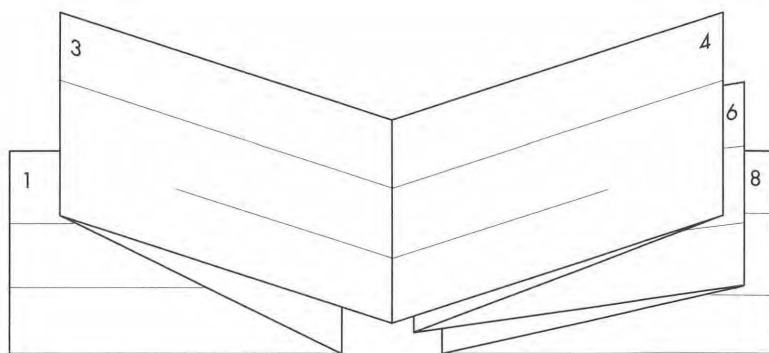
This paper summarizes the nature of the pre-Hispanic pictorial communication system used by the Mixtec people of Mexico, who were creating manuscripts in which they recorded their histories, genealogies and religious beliefs long before the Spanish reached the New World. The principal pictorial conventions are explained, and each is illustrated with an example from one of the surviving manuscripts.

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The post-Hispanic *lienzos* that are known today from the Mixtec region are large and often contain depictions of numerous events, but usually there is very little internal structure to indicate the order in which the scenes should be read. If these characteristics were also true of pre-Cortesian Mixtec *lienzos*, then an important reason for the adoption of the codex format, with its relatively narrow width but extensive length, may have been the control this new form imposed upon the arrangement of the scenes. The more exact the sequence in which the painters depicted their information, the more accurately this sequence could later be interpreted. To eliminate all possible ambiguity concerning the order in which the pictorial episodes should be read, the Mixtec artists marked the pages of their codices with a pattern of red guidelines that were drawn so as to create one single band of space that meandered back and forth across the pages for the length of the manuscript. (See figure 1 for an example of these guidelines.) With the introduction of this strict structure, all the pictorial data in a text were channeled into a single continuous stream of information in which the painters normally depicted events in chronological order.

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Only four pre-Hispanic Mixtec codices have survived. The Codex Zouche-Nuttall (*Add. MS. 39671*), now in the British Museum, London, is painted on both sides; one side depicts the life history of a great Mixtec warrior and politician while the other side relates mythic-historic events and genealogical sequences. The Codex Bodley (*2858*) is held by the Bodleian Library, Oxford; both of its sides are comprised principally

FIGURE 1
The screenfold form:
a typical codex.

of long genealogical sequences. The Codex Vindobonensis (*Mexicanus I*), in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, shows on one side the story of the creation of the Mixtec region and, on the other, displays a series of genealogies. The Codex Colombino-Becker, which gives a detailed life history of the same Mixtec ruler as does the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, is now fragmented and incomplete; the Colombino sections (*No. 35-30*) are in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México, while the Becker parts (*Nr. 60306*) are found in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna. In addition, there is also one early colonial codex whose scenes are painted entirely in the pre-Hispanic style: the Codex Selden (*3135 [A.2]*), in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, contains genealogical sequences and some historical events. (Photographic facsimilies of all these manuscripts have been published and are listed in the additional bibliography at the end of this article.)

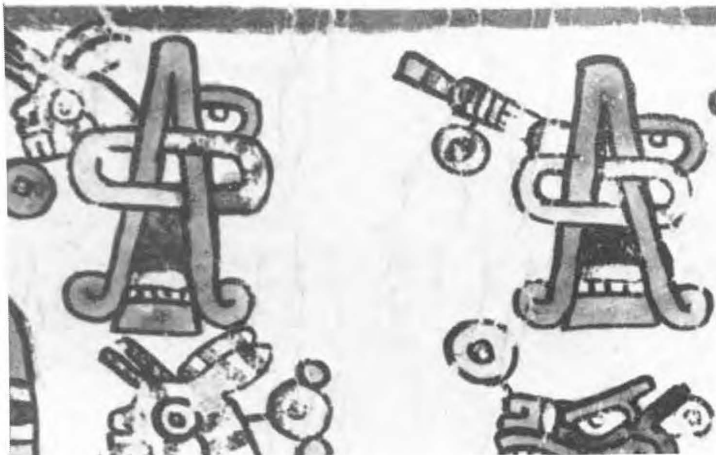
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In creating their codices, the Mixtec artists had three important decisions to make concerning the physical form of the manuscript: how to orient the strip, at which end to begin the pictorial text and what pattern to use for the red guidelines. A codex may be unfolded so that its length is extended either horizontally or vertically; the sequence of the scenes may begin at either end of the strip; the guidelines may be drawn on the strip either parallel to its long length or at right angles to its length. There are examples of almost all possible combinations, showing clearly that there was no "standard" way to organize a pictorial text. The Codex Zouche-Nuttall has both sides oriented horizontally; both are read from the right end of the strip to the left end, and both have the red guidelines at right angles to the length. The Codex Vindobonensis has both sides horizontally oriented and read from right end to left end, but the obverse side has the red guidelines at right angles to its length while the reverse side has these lines placed parallel to its length. The Codex Colombino-Becker, painted on only one side, is horizontally oriented and read from the left end to the right end, with its guidelines parallel to its length. The Codex Bodley has both sides horizontally oriented and with the red guidelines parallel to its length, but the obverse side is read from the left end to the right end while the reverse side is read from the right end to the left end. The only extant manuscript to be oriented vertically is the Codex Selden, which is read from bottom to top and has its guidelines at right angles to its length; it is painted on only one side.

Whether the Mixtec texts on *lienzos* is not known, but whatever the milieu may have been, they apparently used it to refine the shape and form of their pictorial conventions and to come to agreement on the meanings of certain types of drawings and scenes. All the extant Mixtec codices share the same basic conventions, already complete and fully established with the same meanings.

The most ubiquitous of the pictorial conventions in the Mixtec codices are those for the dates of events and the names of the people involved. The calendar system used by the Mixtec dated events through a date count of 260 days and a year count of 52 years. The day count was composed of twenty day names and the numbers 1 through 13, with each of the day names and each of the numbers combining together in turn to name successive days until all 260 different combinations had been used, after which the cycle began again. The year dates were composed of four of these day names which each combined in turn with the numbers 1 through 13, giving a matrix of fifty-two different year dates, after which this cycle also repeated. Year dates were always depicted with a design resembling an interlaced A and O to distinguish them from day dates (*figure 2*). Small circles were drawn to represent the numbers associated with both year and day dates.

In the codices, all Mixtec bear as their formal name the date of the day on which they were born. However, this custom of naming people for their birth date results in a universe of only 260 different names for all persons. It should not be surprising, therefore, that each person was also given another name, which modern codex specialists call a "personal name," and that these personal names vary greatly. Each Mixtec figure pictured



in the codices was identified by a drawing of the appropriate calendar name, representing the day of birth, and another drawing showing the personal name. By this combination of the two names, any individual can be distinguished from all the other hundreds of persons depicted in these manuscripts. While scholars have long been able to read the dates and the day names, they have been hampered in interpreting the personal names because many of the objects shown in those names have not yet been identified.

Because the Mixtec artists were able to paint a person's full name in their texts, they never found it necessary to develop a portraiture genre to identify individuals. Furthermore, with the name being all that was necessary to specify fully the identity of a person, the codex figures did not need to be individualized but could be drawn without personal characteristics. When there was no particular need for human figures to be shown, these could be eliminated and only the names themselves depicted; a parentage statement for a bride would always contain the names of her father and mother but not necessarily their figures. A remarkable example of the use of only the names of individuals occurs on the final painted page of the reverse side of the Codex Vindobonensis; the artist, apparently in great haste to complete his text, stopped drawing the figures and painted only the names of the individuals involved in the last few marriages and births.

It is in the depictions of the names for localities, however, that the Mixtec codex pictorial communication system reached its most advanced state and its most intimate connection with the Mixtec language. Land occupies a particularly important place in Mixtec life because the region is so mountainous that areas suitable for growing food are often quite scarce. The ownership and control of land is thus extremely important: land means life. Arguments over land in the region are deep seated and long lasting, and some boundary disputes between towns have gone on for centuries. Being able to demonstrate through the drawings in a codex that a particular location was the property of a certain family or town consequently might be crucial to survival.

Alfonso Caso,² the great Mexican student of the Mixtec codices, was the first to interpret the pictorial linguistic code being used in these manuscripts for the "place signs" that represent localities. He knew from a sixteenth-century Spanish document that the Mixtec name of the important town of Tilantongo meant "black earth," and then, in a copy of a post-Hispanic map, Mapa de Teozacoalco (*JGI XXV-3*, Benson Latin American

FIGURE 2

Typical year and day dates in the Codex Bodley (4-11).¹ On the left, the dates are the Year 1 Rabbit, Day 1 Rabbit; on the right, the Year 1 Reed, Day 1 Alligator.

Collection, University of Texas, Austin), he encountered a place sign having a black and white base (*figure 3*) and realized that this represented the name of Tilantongo.

The work of later scholars, particularly Mary Elizabeth Smith, has shown that the place signs drawn in these codices directly picture the *Mixtec* name of the particular locality. If there was ever any question whether these codices had been painted by the Mixtec, doubts were totally resolved with the discovery of this direct linguistic evidence.

Because Mixtec is a tone language, there are many opportunities for substitutions and visual play on words in the depictions of place names. Caso noted that the Mixtec name of the town of Teozacoalco meant "great foundation" and that in the Mapa de Teozacoalco the place sign drawing contained a small figure folding or bending a base, and he concluded that these elements

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FIGURE 3
The place sign for
the town of Tilantongo
in the Codex Bodley
(17-II).



FIGURE 4
The place sign for the
town of Teozacoalco
in the Codex Bodley
(15-III).



**FIGURE 5**

The place sign for the town of Magdalena Jaltepec in the Codex Selden (6-11).

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**FIGURE 6**

The place sign for the town of Magdalena Jaltepec in the Codex Vindobonensis (42-IV).

conveyed the idea of the name (*figure 4*).³ Smith was able to explain the linguistic basis for the place sign: the small figure was “breaking” the foundation, that word being a homonym with “great” except for differences in tone—and much easier for the painters to depict.⁴

At least one case of dialectal differences in the pictorial representation of the name of a town has been found among codex place signs, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the Mixtec region. In the Codex Selden, Smith identified the place sign for the town now called Magdalena Jaltepec (*figure 5*) and noted that the “jawbone” element of the name represented the initial locative *a-* in the town’s Mixtec name of *Añute*.⁵ This particular locative occurs in Mixtec principally in Nochixtlán valley, where Magdalena Jaltepec is located. In the Codex Vindobonensis, however, the place sign for Magdalena Jaltepec is pictured without the jawbone element (*figure 6*), indicating that this codex did not originate in the Nochixtlán valley.

The ability of the Mixtec painters to depict in their manuscripts the exact name of a locality meant that they had no need of realistic drawings to specify these places, and landscape painting never developed as a genre.

Because of the social stratification that characterized pre-Hispanic Mixtec society, accurate genealogical information was vital in determining the rights and duties of individuals. There was consequently a need for pictorial conventions that would enable the necessary genealogical data to be preserved, especially the major life crises of birth, marriage and death. Marriages were pivotal because they were not only the source of future rulers but also had great political significance in uniting families and the towns they controlled. Marriage was indicated by picturing a man and woman facing one another, usually seated on a woven straw mat (*figure 7*). The births of children were shown by drawing them immediately after the marriage of their parents (*figure 8*). Since inheritance normally passed through male primogeniture, the first son was usually depicted first, as his father's heir, with the rest of his siblings following. At times, some children were shown at their birth also facing their spouse, to indicate the person that child would marry when grown. A normal death was very rarely depicted in the codices but when it was, the person was shown as a bundle wrapped in cloth for burial (*figure 9*). The deaths most likely to be depicted were those that occurred violently, such as a murder or a sacrifice.

Other pictorial conventions are connected with the various phases of war. As shown in figure 10, the chevron path indicates that the warrior "walks to the enemy."⁶ His conquest of the locality is shown by

FIGURE 7

The pictorial convention for marriage is a man and a woman seated facing one another, as shown here in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall (26-III).





FIGURE 8

The pictorial convention for the birth of children is to depict them immediately following their parents' marriage. In the Codex Bodley (34-R-II-III), the marriage of Lady 6 Monkey to Lord 11 Wind, shown in the upper band, is followed in the lower band by the births of their two sons.



FIGURE 9

The pictorial convention for a normal death is to depict the dead person as a bundle, as pictured here in the Codex Bodley (28-II).

the arrow projecting from its place sign, and his victory is further enhanced by his capture of the ruler of that town, whom he grasps by the hair. All these variations allowed the painters considerable flexibility in stating the degree of a conflict and in explaining the nature of its outcome.

Analysis of postures and gestures have enabled still other pictorial conventions to be identified. The physical position assumed by warriors in scenes of

attack and conquest indicates “hostility” (*figure 10*). Another posture shows that a person is “dedicated to traveling on a sacred mission” (*figure 11*); that is, engaged in a sacred journey that must be completed.⁷ As an illustration of how Mixtec artists could combine various conventional drawings to create new meanings, this pose of dedication to traveling on a sacred mission can be combined with the chevron band that signifies walking to the enemy in order to show that a person is on a sacred journey that carries him into enemy territory but that he is not hostile nor engaged in warfare (*figure 12*). In the Codex Colombino-Becker, a very unobtrusive system of hand gestures functions to indicate which person in a scene had made a request and which had agreed to carry



FIGURE 10

This scene shows the pictorial conventions in the Codex Bodley (10-11) representing war, conquest and capture. The physical posture of the standing warrior indicates that he is hostile, while the chevron path on which he stands means that he “walks to the enemy”; in other words, he is going to war. On the left, two arrows pierce the place sign to show that it has been conquered, and the rope around the neck of its seated ruler reveals that he has been taken prisoner.



FIGURE 11

The pictorial convention that means an individual is dedicated to traveling on a sacred mission is represented by the posture shown here in the Codex Colombino-Becker (4-III).

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FIGURE 12

Various independent pictorial conventions can be combined to specify situations more precisely. In this scene from the Codex Colombino (19-III) part of the Codex Colombino-Becker, the chevron path retains its meaning of "walking to the enemy," but the warrior's posture indicates that he is dedicated to travelling on a sacred mission. The combination of the two conventions means that the warrior is not going to war but is merely crossing enemy territory en route to his destination.



out that request (*figure 13*).⁸ In the Codex Bodley, an apparently insignificant matter—whether figures were shown using seats with round or square corners—was actually serving to distinguish the dominant and submissive persons in meetings and marriages.⁹

In their codices, the Mixtec used a sophisticated pictorial communication system to record the information they considered essential so that it could be preserved for the use of future generations. The artists created designs to express this knowledge and manipulated these depictions to express additional meanings. All during the twentieth century, scholars have slowly been determining the manner in which the Mixtec codex scenes were understood by their original readers. The manner of dating events, naming people and presenting genealogical events is basically understood. The functioning of the linguistic elements in the place sign drawings, clearly demonstrating that these names are in the Mixtec language, proved that these manuscripts had been created by the Mixtec. It is possible that additional direct linguistic references may be found in these codices among the great number of visual clues given by the clothing and jewelry, the postures and gestures, and the actions and activities of the hundreds of figures pictured in the texts. The system, which has long been locked mutely into these colorful pictures, is gradually yielding to the work of an international group of codex specialists, and steps are now under way to teach the Mixtec themselves to interpret these documents that record their own ancient history.

FIGURE 13

The hand gestures shown by figures in the Codex Colombino-Becker convey specific meaning. In this scene from the Codex Becker (5-11), the gesture by the man on the left means that he is making a request, while the gesture of the man on the right indicates that he is agreeing to carry out that request.

NOTES

- ¹ Mixtec codex citations can be compared to Biblical citations, which consist of the book, chapter, and verse number so that any published version of the Bible can be used to locate a citation. A full Mixtec codex citation includes only the name of the codex, the page number in Arabic numbers, and the band number in Roman numerals, and in this way a reproduction of that codex can be used to locate the scene.
- ² Alfonso Caso. 1949. "El Mapa de Teozacoalco." *Cuadernos Americanos* 47 (5): 153. México.
- ³ Caso. "Mapa de Teozacoalco," 153-155.
- ⁴ Mary Elizabeth Smith. 1973. *Picture Writing From Ancient Southern Mexico: Mixtec Place Signs and Maps*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 57-58.
- ⁵ Mary Elizabeth Smith. 1983. "Codex Selden: A Manuscript from the Valley of Nochixtlán?" In *The Cloud People: Divergent Evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations*, ed. Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, 252-255. New York: Academic Press.
- ⁶ Smith. *Picture Writing*, 33.
- ⁷ Nancy P. Troike. 1982. "The Interpretation of Postures and Gestures in the Mixtec Codices." In *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico*, ed. Elizabeth H. Boone, 195-198, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks.
- ⁸ Troike. "Interpretation of Postures and Gestures," 184-185.
- ⁹ Nancy P. Troike. 1979. "Preliminary Notes on Stylistic Patterns in the Codex Bodley." In *Actes du XIIIe Congres International des Americanistes* 7, 185-186.

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All codex illustrations in this paper are derived from the facsimiles listed below.

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