

Pintaderas

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Three pre-Columbian pintaderas, or stamps, are analyzed rhetorically to reveal their visual meaning for a contemporary audience.

Pintaderas are flat or cylindrical stamps generally made of baked clay and used by pre-Columbian civilizations as articles of trade. Thus the places where they are found today are not necessarily their geographical places of origin. For example, in the United States stamps have been discovered in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Arizona, New Mexico and Florida. In Mexico they are found mainly on the high central plateau, in the state of Guerrero and on the Gulf of Mexico. They are scarce in the Pacific lowland, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the Yucatan peninsula and in southern Mexico. They are also known in the Antilles, Puerto Rico among the Taino Indians, in Central American countries and in Colombia among the Quimbaya Indians to the west of the Cauca River. Samples from this locality are known to be made of stone and sheet gold. Wooden stamps are used in Ecuador, Brazil and on the shores of the Negro River. North of Trujillo in Peru, gourds have been carved for use as stamps. Mexican *pintaderas* have been traded widely from North to South America.

The *pintaderas* can be applied in two different ways: by printing in color or stamping in relief. Printing can be done on skin as a sign of distinction or as a symbolic adornment in rites and customs. It can also be used as identification on clothing or paper. Stamping in relief was used to decorate pottery. It was either applied before finishing or done directly in the mold. Stamps were even used for decorating food and pliable objects.

The Indians were familiar with and used a great variety of vegetable and mineral dyes. The most commonly used for stamping were smoke black from pine trees (*ocotl*), black soil or pine charcoal (*tlayacac*), white soil or chalk (*tizatlali*), and gypsum (*chimaltizatl*). Arnotto tree (*achiotl*), cochineal (*nochistli*), and the sap from the *escuahuitl* tree (the tree of blood) were also used for reds. *Tecozahuil*, the yellow soil; the sap of argemone, “thorny poppy” and the *zacatlascal*,

a parasite of certain tropical trees, were used for yellows. Indigo was available for blue, while turquoise blue was obtained by mixing a little white and alum in with the indigo. Colors were ground and then mixed with a white medicinal soil, Mexican argemone or with alum (*tlalxocotl*).

Printed patterns were rectangular, rounded, triangular or irregular, depending on their various ornamental uses. Despite its abstract character, geometric design was common in the oldest stamps, in part because the forms can be easily made. Naturalistic designs, plants, animals and human figures, combined with geometric designs followed. Such motifs became so simplified that they eventually evolved into conventional symbols such as stepped-frets, and finally fantastic patterns were created by using the former elements along with symbolic, ceremonial or artificial figures, taken from other native crafts, rites or customs.

LIFE AND DEATH – SNAKE SYMBOL

The snake is a creature that can be represented in a simple way. It is one of the most enigmatic symbols, associated with fear of a fatal bite from a hidden serpent lurking on the ground, in the grass or between the stones – thus the snake symbolized death.

However, the figurative association of the snake with the phallus, together with its similarity to something rooted in the ground with an invisible life force, placed the animal in an absolutely ambivalent context: it was both a carrier of death and a creator of life. The snake's ability to abandon its old skin is a more subtle signification

relating to man's deep concern with resurrection and immortality.

The symbolic sign of the "round" snake with its tail connected to its head, seeming to consume itself or being nurtured by its own death, is symbolic of eternal return. The idea of regeneration equals representation of the secret of eternity. The linear form of the snake body provides a rhythmic succession of spots, lines, colors – it is a perfect context for ornament. The spirals, knots or ribbons represent abstractions of great symbolic content. The snake body facilitates the joining of the figurative with the symbolic.



Figure 1

Snake from Veracruz [Figure 1]

What is denoted? Here we see a snake with different kinds of patterns and spots on its body and head. Its tail has a little bell. Its mouth is open displaying its fangs. It faces in a particular direction – showing movement to the right.

What is connoted? We may interpret this image as a sacred animal – authoritative, perhaps poisonous, in its dangerous and threatening appearance. It is full of energy and threatening to bite.

The image can also be interpreted in terms of its syntactic or structural rhetorical representations. The repetition of dots and patterns in the body is a kind of isophony. The repetition of a rhythm with stepped-frets at the top and bottom of the body are a form of parallelism. While these are a kind of hybrid repetition, there is a simple repetition in the ovals in the tail and the dots in the head.

From a semantic point of view, we can see exadversion, or assertion with a double negative, in the poison in the tail and the menacing jaws of death. The bell and texture of the snake skin are presented as hyperbole – as emphasized attributes. The design of the snake skin represents a sacred animal, a kind of deity with the power to bring death. This is definitely metaphorical and strongly based on pre-Columbian beliefs. Beware: the snake is a god.

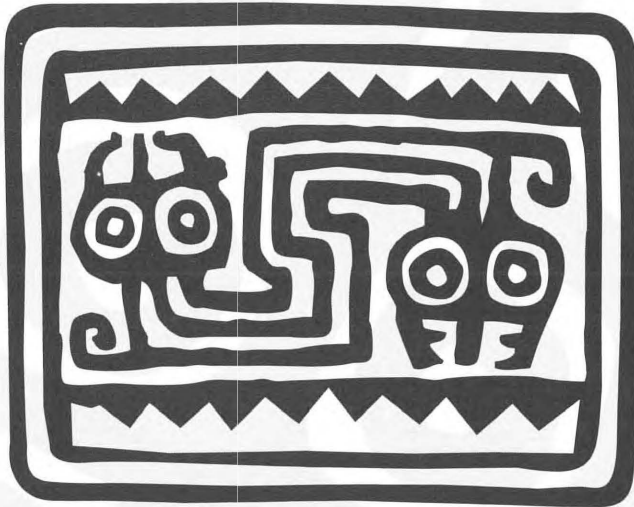


Figure 2

Snake from Guerrero [Figure 2]

What is denoted? One snake body has two heads oriented in opposing directions. The snake is between two stepped-frets and is contained in a rectangle.

What is connoted? Duality; a positive appearance is present in the left head and a negative one in the right head. Further, the left head is oriented up to life, while the right is oriented down with the mouth opened connoting death. Here is life from beginning to end. The rectangle is a figure with four sides and four is a magic number for pre-Columbian civilizations.

From a syntactic point of view, the rectangle enclosing the snake is a form of parenthesis. The repeating rhythm with stepped-frets at the top and bottom of the snakes is a form of parallelism.

From a semantic viewpoint, two different concepts are represented within the same animal figure: life and death – an antithesis. The size of the heads is too big for the size of the

body, this generates hyperbole or overstatement. Together, the antithesis and hyperbole indicate how important the opposing snake heads are to this image's significance. The juxtaposition of life and death, represented by the figure of the snake, are metaphorical. In this case, the rhetorical figure with the greatest force is antithesis, representing the duality of life from beginning to end.

SYMBOLIC FIGURES BETWEEN SKY AND GROUND

For people anchored to the ground by gravity, birds seem imbued with extra-terrestrial power. That the bird is associated with both the earth and the heavens, and thus transcends a primitive conception of life, adds to its symbolic power. All flying animals have been objects of spiritual reverence in symbolic-mythic beliefs. It is curious how the faculty of flying is associated

with earthbound creatures in which wings or feathers alone signify flight; *Quetzalcoatl*, the feathered snake, is one such example. The majestic front view is commonly used to show the bird rising and flying simultaneously. In most cases the image isn't a realistic representation, but rather is an idealized "superspecie" richly decorated with symbolic motifs.

Eagle from Mexico City [Figure 3]

What is denoted? The body and claws of an eagle are shown. The head has a big eye and the wings are spread. There are decorative motifs in front of the body which is enclosed in a rectangle.

What is connoted? The duality of the earthly and the heavenly. The eagle is ever watchful as it is within the bird's power to fly over people and protect them. The eagle has special attributes and is considered to be a sacred animal, an authority. Again, we see four, the magic number, reappear in the four sides of the rectangle.



Figure 3

From a syntactic point of view, the rectangle enclosing the eagle is a form of parenthesis. The repeating forms in the tail is a kind of parallelism.

From a semantic point of view, the eagle could be an adversary of men or a protector deity, able to save them from their enemies. The simultaneous presence of a positive and negative du-

ality indicates antithesis. The size of the eyes and the size of the head is too big for the rest of the body – this is hyperbole or exaggerated emphasis again. As an authority, the eagle eternally watches over people. Here again, the strongest rhetorical figure is antithesis – the power of the eagle to protect or to destroy.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the rhetorical figures in these stamps, it is clear that a primary knowledge of their specific use and the value of the visual message provides for a richer interpretation. The historical moment of this interpreter (the author) is a handicap to accurate interpretation. This is not unusual when examining images from the past. While the rhetorical analysis here is repetitive, revealing the same figures used again and again, this however, is what is important. It provides a framework within which to understand the main characteristics of

signification for these ancient images. Exadversion and antithesis, both of which simultaneously assert and deny, present an aesthetic and mystical tension and is in keeping with the science-religion philosophy of early Mexican cultures. Hyperbole, which insists on attention and perception, reinforces the key symbolic elements. This, together with the syntactic figures of parenthesis and the repetitive structures of isophony and parallelism, may have most clearly addressed what was an illiterate audience. Mysteries are symbolically revealed in the *pintaderas*.

REFERENCES

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