



The Peso

Martha Salazar

Has rhetoric been forgotten? Is it confined only to old works of literature? Rhetorical procedures seem inevitable and perhaps inescapable as we use language and work to communicate effectively. Aristotle conceived of rhetoric as the art of persuasion. Quintilian understood rhetoric as a method that could provide procedures to evaluate (and create) literary works. However, analysts of oratory as well as of literature agree that rhetoric is used normally and automatically in daily communication. “Normal” language refers to the means of communication between human beings and the world around them. Rhetoric orders the elements of language in oral, gestural and visual communication in order to increase attention and sharpen the message. It basically establishes a relationship that Charles Morris calls *semiosis*, which is composed of three elements: a sign or signifier, that which is signified and an interpreter.

In visual communication, the formal or structural aspects of the sign corresponds to syntactics, while the meaning of the sign corresponds to semantics. Both of these are related to pragmatics. Each sign consists of three aspects: a structure, a meaning and an interpretation. Therefore a figure is syntactic when it operates through the formal aspect of the sign (such as color or contrast), semantic when it functions through its meaning (such as presenting specific iconic images – flowers, buildings, people) and pragmatic when it is interpreted through use (such as pesos representing a

diverse Mexican ethnic heritage and history, serving as a medium of economic exchange).

Money is a complex instrument of exchange. It must be secure in the sense of being resistant to unauthorized duplication and also in the sense of having believable value. It is nothing more than an ephemeral token of value. But what is often overlooked is the communication potential of money – it is widely circulated and visually examined by other cultures. It can be thought of as perhaps one of the primary pieces of national corporate identity.

MEXICAN PAPER MONEY

As in other countries, the development of Mexico's monetary system was tied closely to the society's development. Before the Spanish Conquest (1521), indigenous societies paid tribute to the Aztec leaders with goods such as jade beads, cotton cloth and gold objects. But the symbol that had the greatest importance in commercial trade was the cacao bean. Its use continues into modern times; as late as 1911 it remained the basis for transactions in the state of Chiapas (*Enciclopedia de México*, volume 9).

With the Conquest, Spanish economic structures were suddenly incorporated into the economy of the con-

quered people forming an initial stage of capitalist society, according to the peculiar mercantile characteristics of the Hispanic economy (*Enciclopedia de México*, volume 9). During colonization, cacao was revalued considerably in terms of the *real*, a unit of currency equivalent to two hundred grams of cacao bean.

New Spain's first mint was established in 1535. For two centuries it functioned as a private enterprise, minting coins in silver. In 1731, the Mexico City mint was established, where gold and silver coins were produced, notable not only for design, but for the amount of precious metal they

contained. (Later, copper coins were produced.) The evolution of coin production was evidence of the decline of the Spanish empire in Mexico. Much currency was not in general circulation at this time, but was held and controlled by the church. (*Enciclopedia de México*, volume 9).

When the independence movement began in 1810, in response to the insecurity that prevailed throughout the Mexican territory, the mint in Mexico City authorized other mints in various parts of the country to produce coins and bills with particular regional characteristics like the name of the state (rather than that of the country) and images of locally important people. These “foreign” mints, operating autonomously, were gradually closed during the War of Independence. But the symbolic celebration of regional themes continues even to the end of the twentieth century.

In 1925, the Banco de México began to issue paper notes, the first of which was worth five pesos. Later bills of ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred, five hundred and one thousand pesos began to be issued. All were produced by the American Bank Note Company of New York and were backed by gold reserves. At first, their use was voluntary. It was not until 1935, ten years later, that the circulation of paper money was mandated.

In September, 1969, a modern facility to produce paper money was opened in Mexico City and the bills made there were gradually put into

circulation. These modern bank notes represent themes that will never die – the images of Mexican heroes. The bills are produced by Mexican experts with the world’s most up-to-date procedures and techniques. The currency designs are indigenous, representing historical themes, places of natural beauty and monuments (Bátiz, 1984).

Because of recent inflation in the Mexican economy, the “new” peso was introduced in 1994 to reduce the number of zeroes; the bills and coins that were formerly valued at 1000 pesos, for example, became one new peso. All the money issued during a two-year transition period was designated as the new peso. In January, 1996, once people had become accustomed to the conversion system, the adjective was dropped and the designation *peso* was reintroduced on bills and coins, which otherwise retained the same design. Gradually “new” peso money was withdrawn from circulation through the normal process of retiring deteriorated currency.

Minor modifications have been made in the production of the most recent bills. The seals bear only the name “Banco de México” and have two signatures instead of three. The lower denomination bills (ten, twenty and fifty pesos) have been reduced in size, thus saving seventeen percent of their manufacturing cost, and the two hundred and five hundred peso bills are now also being produced.

Like most currency systems worldwide, there are certain systematic fea-

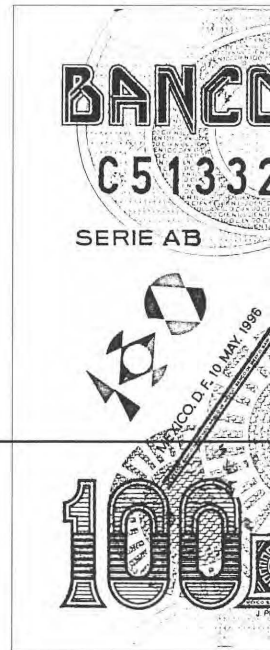
tures built into the peso. Among these are size and color differentiation to assist users in accurately selecting the correct denomination even if they have impaired eyesight; security features, including threads visible against bright light, lines of micro-print re-

peating the words *Banco de México*, the seal of the bank and signatures, a numbering system and complex color printing. The obverse of each bill features the portrait of a historic person, while the reverse celebrates a monument or specific location in Mexico.

RHETORICAL ANALYSES OF MEXICAN MONEY

The One Hundred Peso Note

The one hundred peso note represents the Aztec culture which once dominated the Mexican territory. The bill bears an idealized image of the king Nezahualcóyotl (1402–1472), the Great Lord of Texcoco, who consolidated his dominion over the Valley of Mexico by forging alliances with the lords of Itzcatl and Totoquiyahtzin. Nezahualcóyotl was one of the most notable figures in the history of ancient Mexico. In his youth, he was deposed from his empire, but when he finally came to power he ruled with just and even progressive laws. He conquered immense territories, demanding respect, service and loyalty from the conquered peoples. During his reign, Nezahualcóyotl restored local power to lords of the smallest kingdoms, who were expected to pay tribute. Other accomplishments during his rule include the institution of councils for public education, war and the treasury, and the enactment of



Background glyphs in pre-Columbian style represent suns, water and mountains

Speech volute with repetition of volute form in background

Nezahualcōyotl glyph

Coyote animal totem represents King Nezahualcōyotl

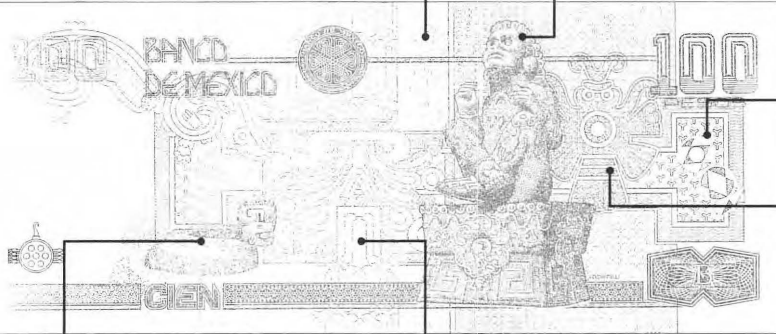


Seal represents a butterfly

Idealized drawing of King Nezahualcōyotl

*Different peoples who
paid tribute to the
Aztecs (parenthesis)*

*Sculpture of Xochipilli with ornaments
of jade flowers and butterflies
represents art (metaphor)*



Ball court (ellipsis)

*Butterfly represents
souls of warriors dead
in battle (metaphor)*

*Stone sculpture pays
tribute to Quetzalcoatl,
the highest divinity*

*Glyph of cave with falling water
with shells and jade stones represents
life and kindness (metaphor)*

eighty laws to guarantee loyalty to the state and adherence to good customs. Nezahualcōyotl was also concerned with ecological conservation in his territory. In the Tezcutzingo forest, he protected trees, propagated animal species, collected spring water, built aqueducts, introduced irrigation and carved pools out of rock.

He also wrote beautiful poems in his native language, Nahuatl, which was represented both iconographically and phonetically. After the Conquest, his poems were translated into Spanish. One of his poems appears on the obverse of the bill:

*I love the song of the mocking bird
Bird of four hundred voices
I love the color of jade
And the perfume of the flowers
But I love more my brothers, mankind.*

While the ancient Mexican people thought there were many gods, Nezahualcōyotl came to believe in the existence of one God, whom he called Tloque Nahuaque.

In addition to the figure of Nezahualcōyotl, some pre-Columbian glyphs also appear on the one hundred peso note. They represent places, things or aspects of the Aztec culture,

such as the ball court, the god of art, Xochipilli, and the tribute paid to the Aztecs by conquered peoples.

Semantically, the images on the reverse are representative of Aztec culture. They include some of the principle elements of this ancient society and identify the origins of the Mexican people. For example, the *Mitl Chimalli* is a shield used in battle – important since the Aztecs were warriors. The butterfly symbolizes fire and the souls of the warriors who died in battle. The game played on the ball court was not just a sporting event, but also pertained to the cult of the gods. The losers of the game were sacrificed in the belief that the sun needed to be fed human blood in order to guarantee that it would rise the next day, and that with

the sacrifice, it would grant the favors of good climate and abundant harvest. The stone sculpture of the plumed serpent represents *Quetzalcoatl*, the great pre-Columbian god of the Aztecs. The face of *Nezahualcōyotl* shows a young man with indigenous features, with a sparse moustache and beard and a penetrating look that connotes strength, solemnity and power. His diadem and earrings are characteristic of royalty and indicate his position of power.

The people represented here are allegorical as they indirectly tell a story about the pre-Columbian Mexican people. The pre-Columbian symbols stand for larger concepts; for example, the shield represents *Mitl Chimalli*, which as a *synecdoche* stands for the warrior dimension of Aztec society.

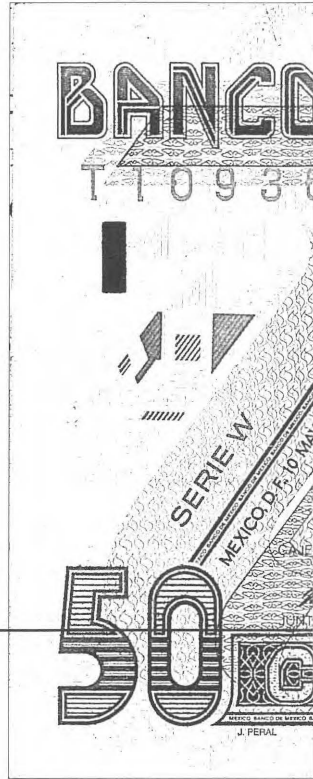
The Fifty Peso Note

The main image on the obverse of the fifty peso bill is José María Morelos (1765–1815), a national hero, Mexican priest and soldier. At the beginning of the revolution, he united with “Fatherland” Hidalgo with whom he fought for Mexican independence. Morelos was the first to create laws directed to distribute land among the Indians. The reverse of the bill depicts Lake *Pátzcuaro* in the Michoacan state, the place where Morelos was born. *Morelia* City, the capital of the state, was named to honor this hero.

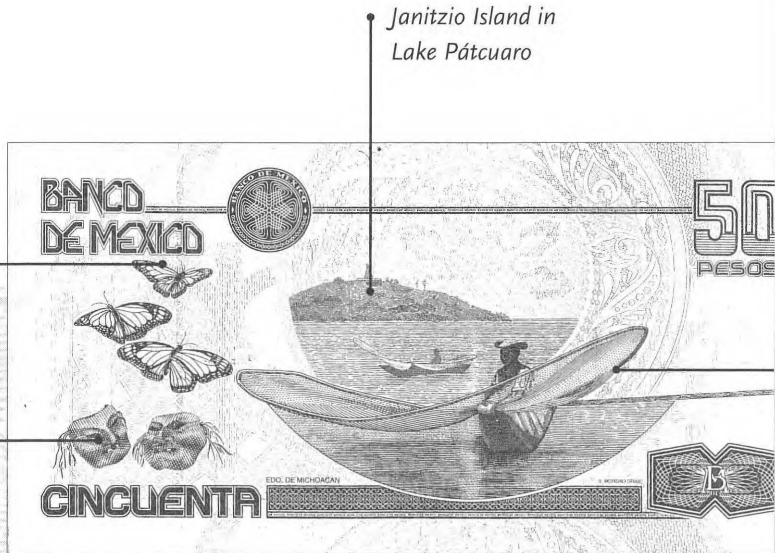
The images shown on both sides of the bill are representative of the history and culture of Mexico. The image of “*El Generalísimo*,” don José María Morelos, has appeared six more times in different versions of bills. His presence evokes feelings of Mexican nationalism. The seal with the canyons alongside this historic man connotes the idea of the Independence Revolution. In Morelos’ face we see a strong and mature man, serious and convinced of the values that he defended in the revolution. His clothes are that

of a priest and he wears a handkerchief because of the headaches from which he suffered.

On the reverse are images representative of the Michoacan state that connote peace, beauty, candor and the traditions of that place. Michoacan (which means “place of fishermen” in Nahuatl) is one of the most beautiful states of Mexico. Besides showing where Morelos was born, it is the monarch butterfly sanctuary.



Crossbow with crossed cannons



Janitzio Island in Lake Pátcuaro

Butterflies signify the migratory sanctuary in Mexico

Old men masks used in traditional Michoacan dances



Eagle with the Latin phrase "victory will happen"

Broken chains with the word "south" between them

Portrait of José María Morelos

— Fishermen with nets represent marine economy; Michoacan bateas ("wooden plates") signify craftsmanship



Vignette of flowers
in colonial style

Spanish tiles

San Jerónimo
Temple

The Two Hundred Peso Note

The obverse features the image of the poet Juana de Asbaje y Ramírez who was born in 1648 in San Miguel Nepantla. In 1669, she professed her faith as a religious *concepcionista* in San Jerónimo convent where she became Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz. She was a prolific writer, producing over four hundred works in many styles. Well versed in every known science, she was also a painter and musician. She fought for equal rights and equal opportunity for women.

Circle of flowers



Light illuminating
an open book

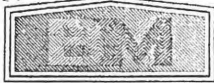
Pen and inkwell

Books

Portrait of Juana de
Asbaje y Ramírez



K8968244



BANCO DE MEXICO

The images on the bill are a clear sample of cultural aspects of colonial Mexico. Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz during her long life became one of the most important literary figures in Mexico. Her talent and deep interest in knowledge at a time when the world of art was only for members of the court and the church is remarkable. The bill is allegorical because it tells with images aspects of Sister Juana's life story.

The books, pens and ink wells represent literature. Sister Juana's clothes

represent her as a member of a religious order. The pens and the ink well show that she lived during colonial times. Her determined look and calm, young face connote a serious woman, cultivated and devoted to religious service and the literary arts.

The Temple of San Jerónimo is an ancient religious construction. This construction speaks to us of the isolation of the people who lived there. Its harsh appearance contrasts with the vignettes of flowers that convey the femininity of the writer.

CONCLUSION

These three peso notes tell a larger story – Mexico embraces and officially celebrates all its people, the conquered and the conquering, the native and the imported, men and women and humble artisans along with political heroes. It also celebrates its land. The use of rhetoric and visual symbolism

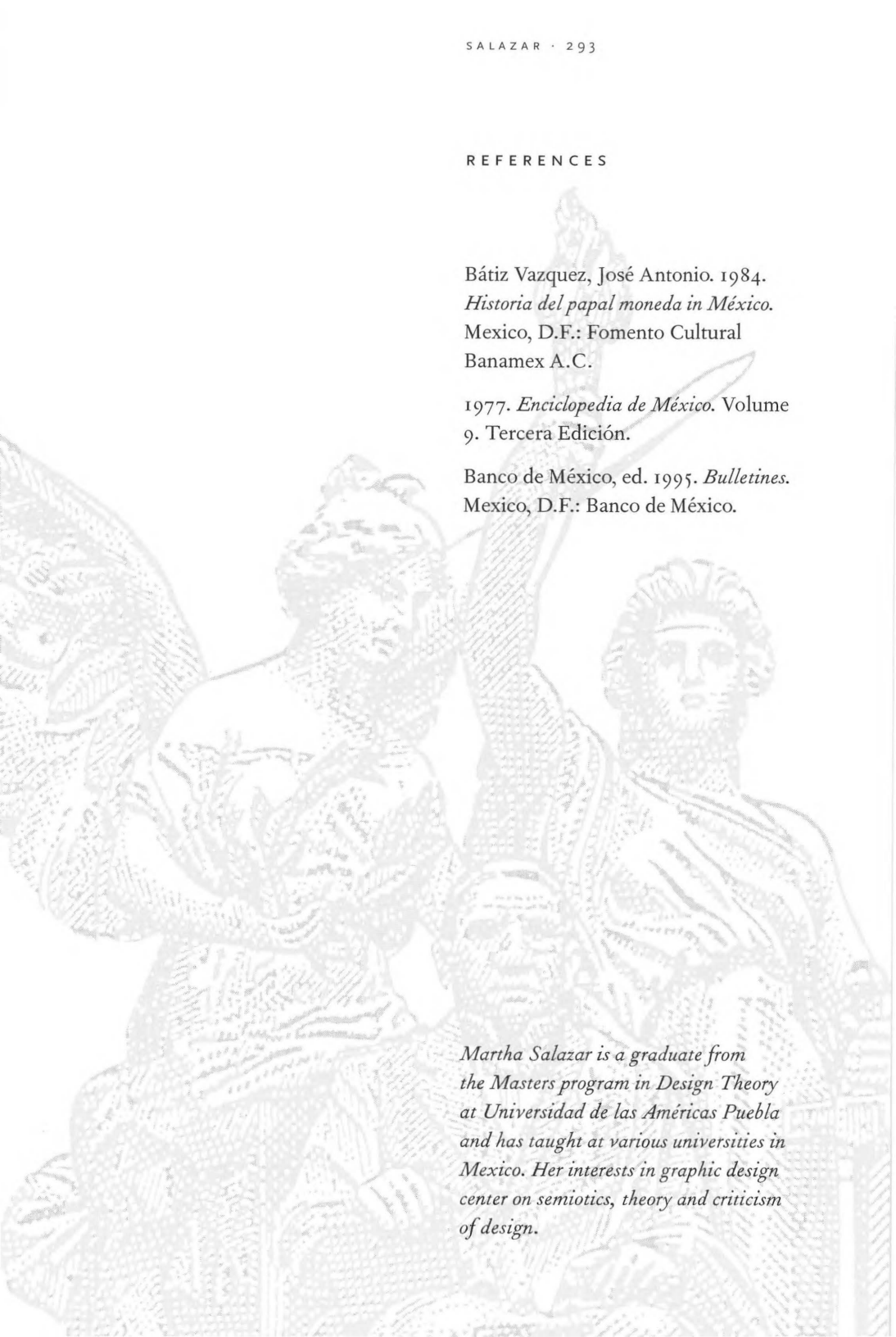
in the design of national currencies bears greater scrutiny. What themes and rhetorical communication devices are common among many countries, and which are used selectively or uniquely. What meaning can we attach to these similarities and differences? These are questions for another time.

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INDEX TO VOLUME 32 BY TITLE

- 78–92 *Cloth-Bound Reverie* · Michael Golec.
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- 150–181 *The Effects of Line Length and Method of Movement on Patterns of Reading from Screen* · Mary C. Dyson and Gary J. Kipping.
- 100–127 *Extending Control of Digital Typography* · Peter Karow.
- 280–293 *National Currency as Rhetoric: The Peso* · Martha Salázar.
- 56–77 *Paper Representation of the Non-Standard Voice* · Mark Balhorn.
- various *Poems* · Errol Miller
- 256–263 *Pre-Columbian Stamps: Pintaderas* · Claudia Navarro Tapia.
- 264–279 *Rhetoric in Logotypes* · Mária González de Cosío.
- 234–255 *Tale of the Origin: A Rhetorical Analysis of a Mythical Mexican Tale* · Alejandro Brizuela.
- 5–34 *Twenty-Six Not-So-Easy Pieces* · Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl.
- 193–304 *Visual Rhetoric: A Special Issue* · Mária González de Cosío and Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl, guest editors.
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- 35–54 *Writing in the Age of Email: The Impact of Ideology versus Technology* · Naomi S. Baron.

INDEX TO VOLUME 32 BY AUTHOR

- 56–77 Balhorn, Mark · *Paper Representation of the Non-Standard Voice.*
- 35–54 Baron, Naomi S. · *Writing in the Age of Email: The Impact of Ideology versus Technology.*
- 234–255 Brizuela, Alejandro · *Tale of the Origin: A Rhetorical Analysis of a Mythical Mexican Tale.*
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- 150–181 Dyson, Mary C. and Gary J. Kipping · *The Effects of Line Length and Method of Movement on Patterns of Reading from Screen.*
- 78–92 Golec, Michael · *Cloth-Bound Reverie.*
- 100–127 Karow, Peter · *Extending Control of Digital Typography.*
- 150–181 Kipping, Gary J. and Mary C. Dyson · *The Effects of Line Length and Method of Movement on Patterns of Reading from Screen.*
- 128–149 Lücke, Karsten · *The Digital Book: A Flexible Digital Document Format.*
- various Miller, Errol · *Poems.*
- 200–233 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer · *Doubly Damned: Rhetorical and Visual.*
- 197–199 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer · *Visual Rhetoric: An Introduction.*
- 5–34 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer · *Twenty-Six Not-So-Easy Pieces.*
- 193–304 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer, with Mária González de Cosío · guest editors, *Visual Rhetoric: A Special Issue.*
- 280–293 Salázar, Martha · *National Currency as Rhetoric: The Peso.*
- 256–263 Tapia, Claudia Navarro · *Pre-Columbian Stamps: Pintaderas.*