

Sub-project B07

The *Florentine Codex* – The Visual Arrangement of the Manuscript as a Medium for Cross-cultural Translation and Negotiation in the Early Modern Era

Prof. Dr. Margit Kern

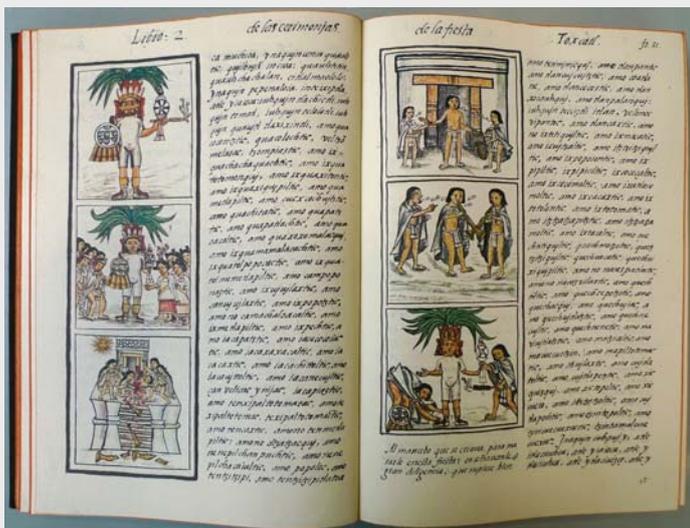
Anna Boroffka, M.A.

Objectives

This is an art history project which analyses the visual organisation of the *Florentine Codex*, completed in 1577 in New Spain (today's Mexico) and named after the city of Florence where it is now archived. The manuscript, entitled *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, is an anthology of the religion, social structures and history of the Mexica people as well as the regional fauna and flora and was produced by indigenous workers under the guidance of Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún.

The codex texts were assembled using information gathered from research conducted among the indigenous population. The manuscript was compiled by juxtaposing the Nahuatl texts, based on local oral tradition and transcribed in the Latin alphabet, with a Spanish summary heavily interspersed with pictorial illustrations. Contrary to previous research, the project assigns a functional role to the dominance of pictorials since the miniatures often prove superior to the sometimes distorted attempts at paraphrasing found in the Spanish text.

In addition to this, the project demonstrates that the heterogeneous visual apparatus of the illuminations shows genre assignments which are not limited to an explanation or illustration of the text. The hypothesis is rather that the artists, deliberately pursuing a strategy of rhetorical alterity, reflect two visual systems perceived as distinct units. Through the use of picture concepts and pictograms with European or indigenous connotations, the artists negotiate the cross-cultural exchange as a conscious choice of modus.



Double page from the *Florentine Codex* containing a text column written in Nahuatl and a pictorial sequence (book 2, fol. 30v, fol. 31r)

Project Summary

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Nahuatl language was not written down using letters but using drawings and paintings which were interspersed with glyphs. Pictorial illustrations were increasingly given the function of knowledge repositories, that is, a means of recording oral traditions.

After the Spanish conquest in 1521, missionaries introduced their alphabetic script to New Spain. In the *Florentine Codex*, for example, the text column in Nahuatl compiled from the information gathered from the Mexica is presented in the form of a Europeanised text corpus. However, the abundance of illustrations in the Spanish text column means it has more similarities to a pre-Hispanic illuminated manuscript, whereby the recording system is understandably inverted in the page layout.

A further hypothesis is that European and Meso-American texts and images were deliberately cited to produce the codex and that the resulting cross-cultural texture, which is woven from multi-layered translation and negotiation processes, was reflected in the physical appearance of the manuscript. The codex architecture was structured by following the model of European encyclopaedias of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. Numerous pictorial sequences, modes of representation, ornaments and fonts from the unpublished manuscript are based on the aesthetics of European printmaking. Also in evidence are glyphs and calendar symbols which



Miniature with seabirds from the *Florentine Codex* (book 11, fol. 61v)



Woodcarving depicting birds from the *Libro llamado exemplario*, 1546, Seville (ch. 2, fol. 19v)

are based on pre-Hispanic models and are interweaved with the miniatures. These link the scenes in the pictures to periods in the ritual calendar, or formulate categories of linguisticity and phonetics which could not be portrayed using a uniquely European notion of pictures. The cross-cultural exchange here not only generates the deliberate choice of modus, but also enhances the authority of selective citation.