

CONCLUSION

Untranslatable Images?

THE ART HISTORIAN Aby Warburg thought that due to the imbrication between "original thoughts" and the "European contribution," each ritual and artifact (dance, sculpture, drawing, pottery) that he encountered in New Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century constituted "the most difficult object imaginable: a palimpsest whose text—even if we bring it out—is contaminated."¹ A few lines later, Warburg signaled another element that rendered these works even more impenetrable: the variety of languages spoken in the region (thirty or forty), to which should be added the fact that a *mélange* of Spanish and English and a sign language constituted the lingua franca of the local populations.

Without speaking specifically of a process of *untranslatability*, Warburg's notes suggest the impossibility of envisioning all of the dimensions of these "difficult objects" without taking into account the fact that they were "spoken" and constantly retranslated from one language to another. In this book, linguistic multiplicity has become the metaphor for the unprecedented artistic configuration that arose in New Spain between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The "polyglot" authors of feather mosaics, maps, and graffiti—but also of mural paintings, codices, corn sculptures, and so on—had to undertake innumerable "translations" between

Mesoamerican arts and European arts. Hence the idea of *untranslatability* that has been explored in this book may denote their artistic task: "to never stop (not) translating," as Cassin put it, one artistic world into another. Should we now see the art of New Spain as a new lingua franca that resulted from these multiple translations? This would be a lingua franca practiced not as a "consensual language" or a "ground of understanding," but rather as a language in transformation, resulting from tensions, extreme conflicts, even disorientation.²

In his notes for the lecture on the ritual of the serpent, Warburg also warned against the idea of an authentic and pure original. By evoking the image of a palimpsest, he reminds us that by definition these "difficult objects" are composed of additions, erasures, and combinations with which the "primary" text is—paradoxically—already contaminated. Our *mestizo genealogy of objects* has tried to establish the multiple origins of objects, to disengage the articulations of the elements that compose them, but also to demonstrate certain thresholds that preclude their dissolution into a faceless whole.³ This proposal aims to avoid the pure and simple application of culturalist criteria in the study of artworks. For a geographic map is neither exclusively "Indian" nor exclusively "Renaissance"; a feather mosaic (even if "signed" by the workshop of Pedro de Gante (see figure 4.5) is more than an exemplary image of Franciscan art in the New World; and finally, graffiti (which escapes any definition) cannot be reduced to the manifestation of subversive or "popular" arts.

Hence the necessity to practice what we are calling a *mestizo history of art*. Over the course of these pages, we have seen how a division into art-historical "genres" is debatable, since that division flows from recent classifications that have forged the discipline. In the sixteenth century, what differentiated a feather image from a map? Undoubtedly not the fact that one was a "sacred" image and the other an "administrative" image. And the hundreds of feather shields might belong to several registers at once, since, as we have seen, Cortés made them veritable American trophies destined for the temples of Iberian and European Christianity. Due to their quantity and their material, the feather shields that arrived in the Old World were of greater "cartographic" efficacy than an imprecise map of the conquered territories. As for the mosaics with Christian iconographies, they would soon be called *pinturas* (paintings), just like the hundreds of geographic maps. This is another example of how our modern perception is far from the kinds of categories in use in the sixteenth century.

To construct this mestizo history of art, I have drawn from various disciplines—history, aesthetics, anthropology, but also ornithology, linguistics, restoration practices, and geography—realms of knowledge that are also mutually *untranslatable*. By multiplying the points of view, I have tried to skirt a certain number of traps: reducing the feather mosaics to “exotic” objects, transforming the cartographic images into “traditional maps,” or assigning graffiti to simple scribbles that lack any interest other than expressing the “psychology” of their authors.

To think of this corpus born from violence and saved from oblivion, I have had to reconstitute a space composed of different ensembles that have become separated over the course of time in order to open a new “archaeological dig” in the archives and collections of objects originating in New Spain. The *novohispano* triptych tried to take into account the fractures, the discontinuities, and the rifts.⁴ To recompose and associate fragments is an experiment that recalls the efforts of *novohispano* artists who, carried along by events, proved capable of “combining the most disparate fragments.”⁵ If it is true that, for psychoanalysis, recomposition is part of the work of identification that enables the subject to be fully at ease with himself, to assume himself,⁶ perhaps the postconquest artists succeeded in redefining themselves by creating new images and by denoting their temporality.⁷ Whether they are feather mosaics dated in the sources—think of the Virgin and Child of Huejotzingo of 1531 (see figure 4.4) or the *Mass of Saint Gregory* (see figure 4.5) dated 1539—or a panoply of maps for which we can know precisely the day when they were composed, or even the many dates etched into the convent walls (1578, 1598, 1629 . . .), what is manifest is a true “desire for history.”⁸ This is a crucial question, to the extent that it indicates not only the desire of the missionaries and conquistadors to synchronize worlds, but also the desire of the artists to find their own time, their own history.

To acquire a temporality distinct from the metropolis while belonging to the monarchy: this is what was required in the society of New Spain. And yet, how could one be something other than a simple copy? This was the stake of a great part of the enterprise of colonization. European expansion was in effect constructed by a double dynamic: an imaginary duplication of worlds and an awareness of a new reality. This tension between copy and novelty explains the toponymic obsession in expressions like New Spain, New Grenada, New Galicia, New Andalusia, New Toledo—or, after 1560, New Mexico.⁹ But the question of the copy also refers to the Platonic condemnation of art as “imitation.” We should not forget that the missionaries

utilized images in Mexico according to the Aristotelian prescription that attributes to them, if not a capacity of direct access to truth, then at least a pedagogic and cathartic role. According to George Kubler, the European images that were sent to America—notably the engravings in prayer books—were already “old things.” So what were these “American copies” of old-fashioned images? Scholars have suggested they were “misunderstandings”: local painters are said to have badly interpreted their “models” by creating images whose novelty would thus be the fruit of an error. For the Mexican art historian Jorge Manrique, the repertoires that arrived in the New World were already a *mélange* of medieval and Renaissance forms. This “temporal confusion” is said to have lent an atemporal character to the creations of New Spain.¹⁰ For others, the artists were animated by a powerful “mimetic impulse” and copied the new objects incessantly, and this copying enabled them to take possession of them. But this reproduction was not passive, since they demonstrated great freedom, notably in the use of color. The copy implied “an effort of imagination and reflection that was outside the scope of a European mind,”¹¹ all the more so since the copies also tried to capture parcels of the Western world.

The “old things” or the “confusion of time” of this transportable Europe (*portátil Europa*)¹² that landed in America, once adapted and interpreted by local artists, was radically transformed to the point of acquiring unexpected temporality and *contemporaneity*. For example, on the maps of New Spain, the landscape traits observed by a *tlacuilo* in the background of European engravings—like the distant mountains behind a Virgin and Child or a Crucifixion—became the principal subject of that image, which results in the earliest landscape paintings in the history of art (see figure 5.18). We find the same dynamic in the production of feather mosaics created on the basis of engravings whose “model” can be detected. The feather miters of Toledo and Vienna that represent a Tree of Jesse (see figure 4.6) show how this iconography, in the context of colonization, is reinterpreted to represent the profound temporal break in kinship relations provoked by the Spanish Conquest. It is the same with graffiti: think of the lunar eclipse of Tepepulco (see figure 6.11) that adopted a print contained in the *Liber Chronicarum* but separated the stars in order to record the astronomical event of the night of September 15, 1578, in its full duration. In New Spain, the sphere of creation is thus a space where the relation between original and copy is inverted. And there are other implications. At the threshold of this book, I mentioned the notion of *nepantlism*, this space

“in between” in which the artists would have created their images after the conquest. Nothing is less sure, now that we have identified the historical role that these images played in the process of colonization and have analyzed their profound originality in the world artistic panorama, enabling us to find them a place, *their own* place. Thus feathers, maps, and graffiti cease to be *nepantla*, “in between” in a “nonplace,” just as they have ceased being relegated to a “nontime.”

In our triptych, each part of the corpus enters into dialogue with the other two by affirming itself in relation to them. Thanks to our work on cartography, we were able to analyze the graffiti and pay special attention to the space they occupy in the monument, but also to the spatial logic of their narrative construction. Reflections on the sacred sphere in the feather mosaics enabled us to see the landscape paintings, too, as the expression of a new existential quest that went beyond a purely administrative or even stylistic matter. And with the graffiti, it was their spatial construction and their placement on the monument that illuminated their narrative dimension, sometimes also related to the sacred sphere, as in the Salomon's knot of the Sala de Profundis (San Miguel Tzinacantepec).

Can this triptych now help us understand other images, or even other eras or other geographic spaces? Let us go back to the altar cloth of San Miguel Tzinacantepec (see figure 1.2) and compare it to an object that lies outside our corpus, a magnificent silk cloth embroidered in gold thread (figure 10.1). Its provenance is still uncertain today: considered by some specialists to be an example of the famous Indo-Portuguese *colchas*,¹³ it might also be of Sino-Portuguese fabrication.¹⁴ These pieces were used in situ, but also sent to the four corners of the world, like the feather mosaics we have studied. The silk-embroidered cloth is strongly reminiscent of our first object from New Spain (see figure 1.2): the crowned two-headed eagle, the scenes figuring on the outside margins of both cloths, their size, the colors—not to mention the optical effect due to the brilliance of the silk and gold threads comparable to that of the feathers—are some of the elements common to two liturgical vestments made thousands of miles apart. This type of cloth might have indeed traveled from Asia to New Spain on the famous “ship of China” (*navio da China*), meaning the galleon that from 1565 linked Manila and Seville via Acapulco, Mexico City, and Veracruz. That a *colcha*—a piece itself issuing from the reciprocal transformations and “untranslatability” between Asian arts (Indian? Chinese?) and Portuguese



FIGURE 10.1. Indo-Portuguese *colcha* or Sino-Portuguese *alfaia* (?), silk and gold thread, 276 × 219 cm, Macao or Canton, sixteenth/seventeenth century. Photograph by Luisa Oliveira. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (inv. 2333). Instituto dos Museus e da Conservação, I.P. (Lisbon)/Divisão de Documentação Fotográfica.

arts—could have reached New Spain and in turn have had an impact on the art of the *amantecca* (not to mention the cartographers and graffitists) is just as plausible.

This example makes our panorama even more complex. If the altar cloth of San Miguel Tzinacantepec (see figure I.2) was also the fruit of an encounter with Asian art, then to what extent should one study it exclusively as an artwork of New Spain? Should we not envision this art as more linked to the “Iberian” expansion, an adjective aiming at the creations issuing from both Spanish territories and Portuguese territories? The *manto* and the *colcha*, but also many of the other images that might now enrich our corpus,¹⁵ all offer magnificent examples of the creation of “difficult objects” in the early Iberian modernity. But we could not tackle these vast horizons without starting from a solid anchoring, in other words, from a deeper knowledge of a given place and time: New Spain in the sixteenth and start of the seventeenth century. Thus, the Iberian worlds that a Sino-Portuguese *alfaiá*, an Indo-Portuguese *colcha*, and a New Spanish *manto* have placed before our eyes radically distance us from a global vision of art with fluid contours, obsessed by the all-out circulation of objects and merchandise. Instead these objects reveal an *Iberian* history of art nourished in precise times and spaces, as well as a mestizo history of art that knows how to linger over the specific processes of invention that can only be detected *en situation*, meaning in specific contexts.

But could this Iberian art history be limited to study of the images and objects themselves? *The Untranslatable Image* has “de-exoticized” a vast field of study by showing that here are objects that pose, today as yesterday, questions that are absolutely contemporary to European artists: the problematics of landscape painting, of the creation of sacred images, of the representation of historical events. Henceforth we shall have to analyze in what way the writing that developed *around* these objects is also a fundamental archive for tackling the early *artistic* modernity in other terms than those of “center” and “periphery.” This archive, which I call an Iberian archive, will assemble the pages of Bartolomé de Las Casas, of Diego Muñoz Camargo, and of Chimalpahin and Aldrovandi on the feather mosaics, with the commentaries by Pietro Martire d’Anghiera on the maps or by Alonso de Zurita on the codices, or by Díaz del Castillo on the graffiti—cited here and there in this book—but it will also feature the reactions of the innumerable voyagers, missionaries, artists, and naturalists who observed the architecture,

painting, metalwork, or sculpture not only of America, but also of Asia, Europe, and Africa. These texts, much more than simple chronicles stuffed with curiosities, ought to push back another frontier—that of a Eurocentric artistic literature, if not an Italian-centered one (Alberti, Vasari, etc.)—and make us discover, beyond this iron curtain, the invention of a properly Iberian aesthetic theory, with its own categories that are as unprecedented and singular as the objects studied here.