

6 Aug 02

Dear S & S

Wonderful to see you - although sorry the timing was bad. The Bryce Place will be so great. Next time we're in the front room will gaze at greenery & art, not plywood & Sawdust.

Let me know if this report needs Amendments / revisions.

I await photos & slides! Thanks for your hard work & cooperation on this matter.

I ordered Umberger's dissertation for you - should arrive by 17 Aug. (If not, call me)

Also, I found a used copy of Denver Artec bk on internet so I'll return yours ASAP.
PLEASE get E-MAIL! ♥ Carolyn

The Role of Shamanism in Mesoamerican Art

A Reassessment¹

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Increasing numbers of scholars are relying on the concept of shamanism to interpret pre-Columbian artworks without examining its origins and questioning its viability. This essay explores the historical roots of this field's romance with the shaman and offers an explanation of its appeal. We argue that by avoiding such terms as "priest," "doctor," and "political leader," the words "shaman" and "shamanism" have helped scholars to "other" pre-Columbian peoples by portraying them as steeped in magic and the spiritual. We begin with a look at when, where, and why this reductive representation emerged in pre-Columbian art studies, suggesting that it originated as an idealist aversion to materialist explanations of human behavior. We then examine the sources and validity of the principal criteria used by Pre-Columbianists to identify shamanism in works of art and look at some possible reasons for shamanism's popularity among them. We conclude that there is a pressing need to create a more refined, more nuanced terminology that would distinguish, cross-culturally, among the many different kinds of roles currently lumped together under the vague and homogenizing rubric of "shaman."

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1. This article comes out of a graduate seminar on art, medicine, and power in conquest-period Latin America offered by the senior author at UCLA in the fall of 1998. Her coauthors were students in that seminar. We thank Josephine Volpe, another student in that seminar, for her contribution to the research on Aztec *nagualism*.

The past decade has seen an increasing number of Mesoamericanists relying on the concept of shamanism for their interpretations of artworks created prior to the Spanish conquest. Whether these scholars are anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, or trained in Latin American studies or the history of religions, all have drawn heavily on social scientific literature in the form of ethnohistories and ethnographic reports. It is our position that many of these writers, regardless of their disciplinary base, are using shamanism to provide predictable, easy, and ultimately inadequate answers to what are often very complex questions about the relationship of art to religion, medicine, and politics in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica.

Without wishing to diminish the important contributions of some of the work on shamanism and art, we contend that many of those who have related the concept of shamanism to preconquest Mesoamerican artworks have avoided the demands of scholarly rigor. Although the evidence that shamanism is reflected in these art objects is at times surprisingly scanty, it is sometimes used to support broad claims for shamanism's role in the understanding of Mesoamerican art. Moreover, many of these studies proceed in an uncritical manner. In particular, scholars writing about Mesoamerican art in relation to the concept of shamanism invariably fail to examine the historical origins and viability of the vocabulary and models they have chosen to use. They neither provide adequate etic criteria for identifying a person as a "shaman"—criteria that have cross-cultural (including transatlantic and transpacific) validity—nor fully disclose what is currently known about those specific individuals' roles. In particular, the internal rankings and factions within and among specific groups of religious-medical practitioners, like the economic and political aspects of their performance, are typically played down in studies of Mesoamerican art if they are mentioned at all. The result is a seductive but also reductive and lopsided portrayal of Mesoamerican art as an essentially "spiritual" affair.

For us "the spiritual," as something largely separate from the mundane political and economic spheres, is, like "shamanism," a vague Western category whose utility in analyses of Mesoamerican art is seldom defined, justified via cross-cultural comparison, or compared with indigenous, emic notions of religiosity. When it takes center stage it is usually at the expense of a historical perspective. The resulting highly romantic image of Mesoamerican religion and the art it supposedly inspired plays directly not only to uncritical lay readers but also, as others have pointed out, to self-serving nationalist and

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