

Postclassic International Styles and Symbol Sets

Elizabeth H. Boone

Michael E. Smith

The similarities seen in art forms throughout much of Postclassic Mesoamerica have been attributed to the existence of a widespread artistic phenomenon that has been variously called the Mixteca-Puebla tradition or Mixteca-Puebla horizon style (Nicholson 1960, 1982; Paddock 1982), the Mixtec style (Robertson 1959:12–24; Ramsey 1975, 1982; Brockington 1982), the “International Style of the Late Post-Classic” (Robertson 1966, 1970), the codex style (critiqued by Quiñones Keber 1994), as well as the Postclassic religious style and the Mixtec codex style (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980). Most of these terms and characterizations embrace both the formal style of the relevant artworks and their iconography in attempting to explain how and why murals from eastern Quintana Roo, for example, look so similar to polychrome pottery from Cholula. Few scholars are fully content with these terms, however, which may explain the proliferation in nomenclature. One problem is that the term *style* has been differentially defined, and the so-called style’s characteristics have been variously described as composing both formal (i.e., pertaining to form) style and iconography.

In this chapter we examine painting traditions from Postclassic Mesoamerica—distinguishing style and iconography—to examine the nature of the widespread “international” (Robertson 1970) styles and symbols that were so prominent at this time. We introduce several new concepts that help organize past research on this subject: the Postclassic international style, the Early Postclassic international symbol set, and the Late Postclassic international symbol set. The temporal and spatial distributions of these styles and symbols suggest some of the ways in which communication, ideology, and artistic production were integrated in the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system.

STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

Donald Robertson, as an art historian trained in the study of the formal styles of European art, was careful to limit his 1970 discussion of the Postclassic Maya murals at Tulum to the style in which the murals were painted (Robertson 1970). Being predisposed to separate style from iconography, he eschewed iconographic questions about the Tulum murals to focus solely on the manner in which forms were rendered and organized, noting that the murals are similar in formal style to central Mexican paintings but are iconographically Maya. This distinction between formal style and iconography is an important one, because the iconography and the style of a work may belong to different traditions, as is the case at Tulum.

Style, although a much debated and variously employed concept even within the realm of art history (e.g., Sauerländer 1983; Kubler 1979; Elkins 1996), is generally recognized to pertain to the manner in which forms are rendered and how they and larger compositions are structured. Ernst Gombrich (1968:352b) defined style as “any distinctive . . . way in which an act is performed”; Jules Prown (1980:197) characterized it as “a distinctive manner or mode” (as quoted in Elkins 1996:876). A more concrete definition is given in Meyer Shapiro’s classic discussion of style written for *Anthropology Today*, where Shapiro (1959:289) defined style as referring to “three aspects of art: form elements or motives [motifs], form relationships, and qualities (including an all-over quality which we may call the ‘expression’).” Style thus refers to how forms are rendered, how they are organized and structured into coherent compositions, and such other expressive characteristics as the hardness or softness of line, the quality of light and color, and so on

(Shapiro 1959:289–290). Style is “the objective *vehicle* of the subject matter” (Shapiro 1959:304, emphasis added), rather than the units that compose the subject.¹

The units that form the subject matter itself belong to the realm of iconography: representational forms, abstractions, icons, and symbols read by the viewer as animate and inanimate objects, places, actions, times, and concepts. When these units are structured into significant relationships with other units, and are thereby organized as an iconographic system, they convey specific meaning, a message disseminated by the artwork or artifact. Style is the vehicle that carries the message; the images and symbols are the components that make up that message.

Although a broadly defined art style can be marked by a preference for certain subjects and units of meaning, style and iconography usually should be analyzed separately. They provide different kinds of data. Iconography can yield the intended meanings of a work, whether these are expressed directly, indirectly, or metaphorically. Style qualifies these meanings and offers clues about the artists’ training, and the cultural preferences and expectations of artist and audience. Both iconography and style can be used to document the movement of people, goods, and ideas.

THE POSTCLASSIC INTERNATIONAL STYLE

The Postclassic international style is distinct from earlier Classic styles (e.g., at Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, or among the Maya) and the Epiclassic and Postclassic Maya styles of the Chichén Itzá murals and the Maya codices. Its stiff lines and stocky proportions, for example, are somewhat reminiscent of Teotihuacan frescoes, but its figures are more naturalistic, less iconic, and therefore more easily read than those of Teotihuacan. Its lines and forms are quite distinct from the expressive contour lines or organic forms of Maya painting. H. B. Nicholson (1960, 1982) and Donald Robertson (1959:16–24), among others, have noted the style’s characteristics, and the description below draws on their perceptions. Although Robertson’s more-extensive discussion described the style of the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, which he used to define the preconquest style of Mexican manuscript painting, many of the attributes pertain to the international style as well.

The Postclassic international style is characterized by its rendering of form, the quality of line and color, its figural proportions and positions, and its employment of images in shallow space (figure 24.1). Forms are flat, precise, and almost geometric in their shape. As Robertson (1959:17) pointed out, “human forms . . . are not visually unified” but “can be divided into separable, component parts,” such that “the figure is a totality created from the addition of the various appendages and the head to the

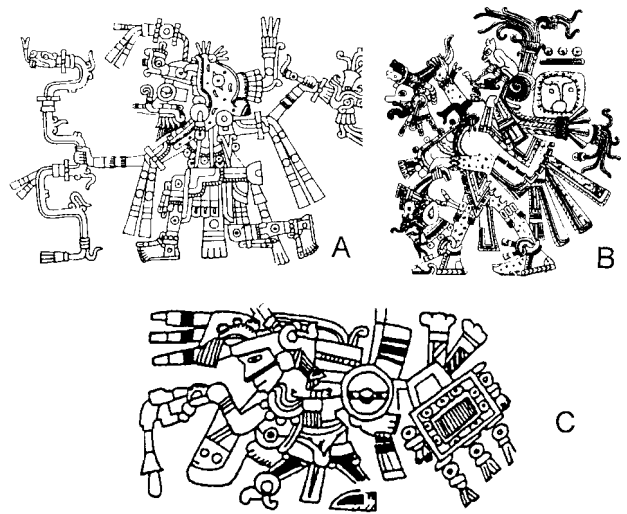


Figure 24.1 Human and deity figures as depicted in the Postclassic international style: (A) Codex Laud 2 (Anders and Jansen 1994:256); (B) Santa Rita mural, Mound 1, west wall (Gann 1900); (C) Tizatlan, painted Altar A, front (Marquina 1964:237.)

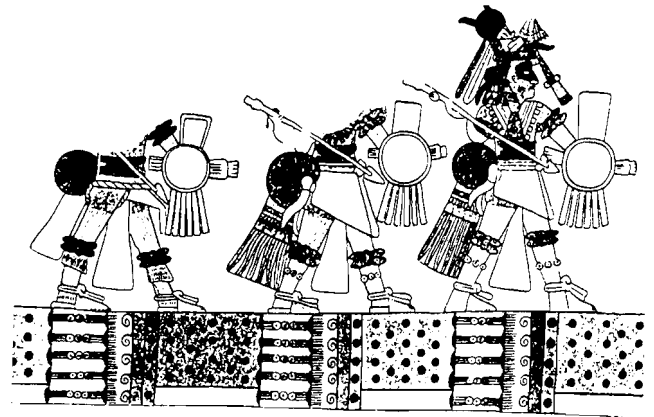


Figure 24.2 Example of the Aztec painting style: mural from Structure 1 at Malinalco. (García Payón 1946: opposite p. 20.)

torso.” The forms are bordered by even, controlled, black outlines, which further flatten the forms and give a crisp edge. Robertson (1959:16) noted that “the treatment of line [which he called a ‘frame line’] . . . is one of its distinctive traits. . . . It is without purposeful variation of width or intensity, and its primary role is to enclose areas of color, to act as frames to flat color washes.” This contrasts with the calligraphic or contour line preferred by the Classic and Postclassic Maya (e.g., Bonampak murals, Codex Dresden).

Colors are generally bright and fully intense, without any modeling or shading to suggest volume (figure 24.1). Proportions tend to be squat, with the most important elements (e.g., the heads of humans and animals) enlarged, and figures are usually posed in a way that exposes their

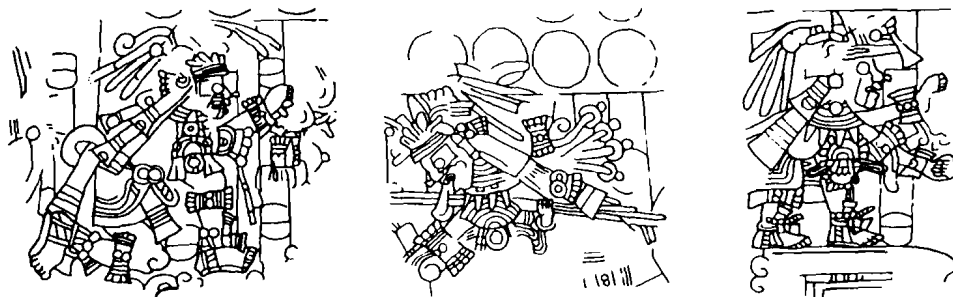


Figure 24.3 Example of the Southwest Maya style, a substyle of the Postclassic international style: mural paintings from different parts of Structure 2 at Iximche'. (Schele and Mathews 1998:303.)

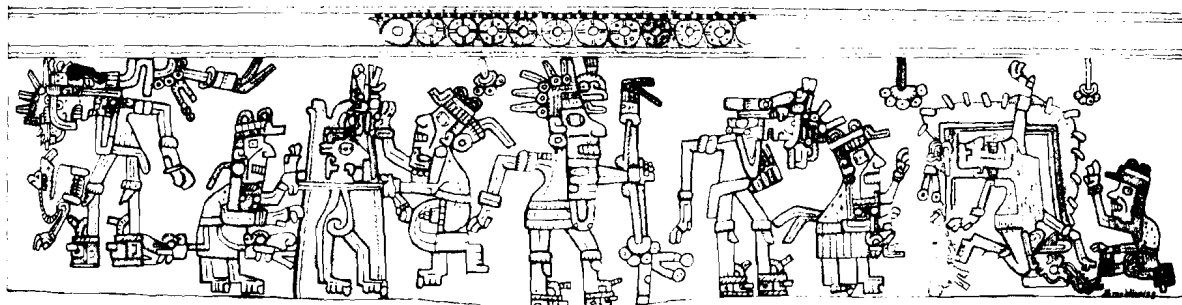


Figure 24.4 Example of a possible west Mexican variant of the Postclassic international style: a ritual scene from a polychrome ceramic vase from Amapa, Nayarit. (From von Winning 1977:131.)

features in the fullest or most revealing way. For example, upper torsos may be presented frontally, whereas the hips, heads, and limbs are almost always in profile, as are feet and hands; plants are usually rendered with their roots exposed. Space tends to be ambiguous and shallow, and backgrounds are rare. Figures usually fill most of the two-dimensional space available to them, and often are rendered floating in space or tied to a ground line or register. Robertson (1970:80) called this feature “register space,” and noted that many works contain more than one horizontal register filled with figures.

The most elaborate and extensive artworks painted in the Postclassic international style are the preconquest Mixtec and Borgia Group codices. The thousands of figures and pictorial symbols in these codices, and in the native-style Aztec pictorials, make up the greatest corpus of international-style images, which is the principal reason the style has been so closely linked to pictorial codices. Polychrome pottery from Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcala, and the area in and around the Valley of Mexico comprises another large corpus, as do the relatively few extant murals in the same regions.

Although this international style appeared from the northern Gulf Coast to Guatemala, and from Guerrero to Quintana Roo, several regional substyles can be distinguished. A specifically Mixteca-Puebla substyle has been described by Robertson (1959:17–24). Like the international style, it is represented by the Mixtec and Borgia Group codices, especially the Zouche-Nuttall and Borgia

codices, and by the ceramics and murals from northwestern Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala. This substyle has also been variously subdivided into Mixtec, Cholula, Borgia Group, Codex Borgia, and Codices Laud and Fejérváry-Mayer (Robertson 1959:17–24, 1963, 1966; Nicholson 1960, 1982; Nowotny 1961:13–16; Ramsey 1975, 1982; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Boone 1990, 2000; Sisson and Lilly 1994a, 1994b; Lind 1994). Examples are provided in figure 24.1 and in the illustrations in chapters 25 and 26.

A well-defined Aztec painting style is characterized by more naturalism in the rendering of form, by longer and leaner proportions, and by characteristic ways of rendering certain symbols (Boone 1982a; see figure 24.2). The Tulum and Santa Rita murals (figure 24.1B), also characterized by longer and leaner proportions, may represent another substyle (Quirarte 1975, 1982), and a southwest Maya substyle has been suggested for murals at the cities of Iximche' and Utatlan (Guillemín 1965; Carmack 1981; Carmack and Larmer 1971; see figure 24.3). Still other regional styles may emerge with more study. For example, Late Postclassic polychrome ceramics from Nayarit depict human or deity figures in a manner that exhibits most of the characteristics of the Postclassic international style (von Winning 1977; figure 24.4). Individual manuscripts, and indeed individual painters within the manuscripts, will have their own painting styles. Despite the detection of regional and codical variations, however, they all participate in the Postclassic in-

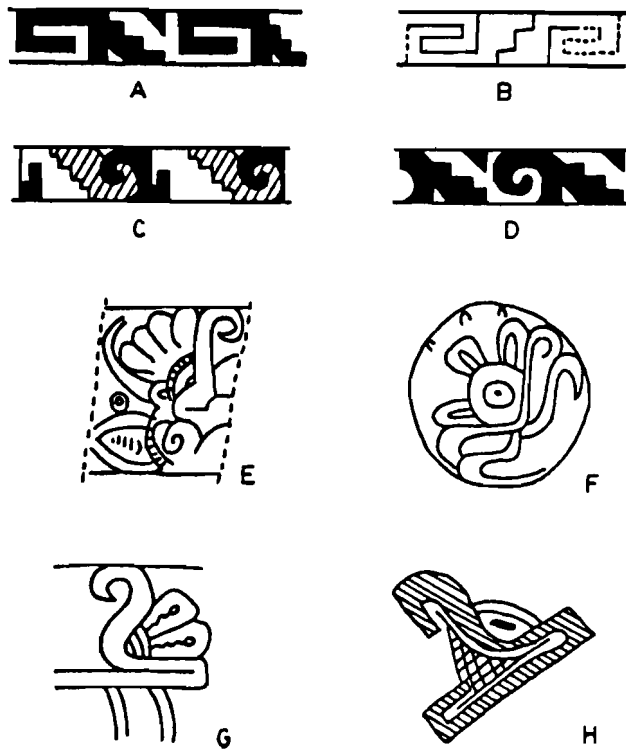


Figure 24.5 Examples of the Early Postclassic international symbol set: (A–D) xicalcolihqui, or step-fret designs; (E–H) serpent heads. (A) Tizatlan, Tlaxcala; (B, E, G) Tizapan el Alto, Jalisco; (C, H) Nicoya area, Costa Rica; (D) Valley of Oaxaca; (F) Culhuacan, Basin of Mexico. (After Smith and Heath-Smith 1980:23; see original source for citations.)

ternational style, which unites them as a common expressive phenomenon.

POSTCLASSIC INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL SETS

THE EARLY POSTCLASSIC INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL SET

During the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods, common iconographic elements were depicted on local painted ceramics throughout large parts of Mesoamerica (figure 24.5). These symbols, typically portrayed in horizontal bands around the exteriors of ceramic bowls, appeared first at sites in west Mexico and the Nicoya region of Costa Rica, only becoming popular in other areas (such as the Mixteca-Puebla region, the Basin of Mexico, the Gulf Coast) after the twelfth century, or the Middle Postclassic period (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980:18–31).

During Epiclassic and Early Postclassic times, the polychrome ceramics with symbols of the Early Postclassic international symbol set were associated with Fine Orange and Plumbeate ceramics, the predominant pan-Mesoamerican trade wares of the period, and with distinctive pyriform vessels used in these and other ceramic types. The distributions and associations among these symbols and ceramic wares suggest a common participa-

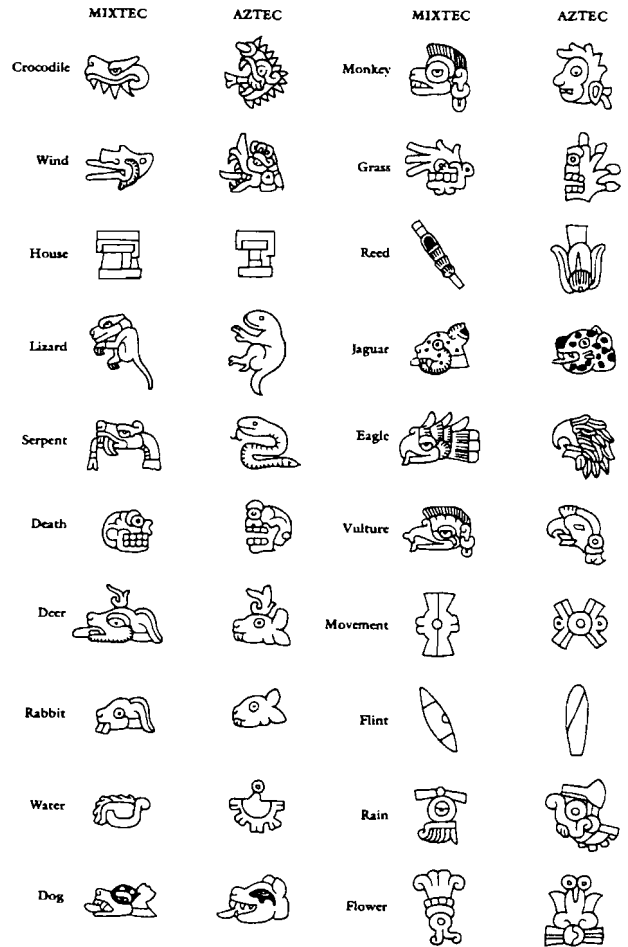


Figure 24.6 Mixtec and Aztec versions of the 20 day signs of the Late Postclassic international symbol set. (From Boone 2000:40.)

tion in the extensive trade networks that spread throughout Mesoamerica in Epiclassic/Early Postclassic times. These networks emphasized coastal routes, and the peoples of highland areas such as central Mexico were only minor participants compared to lowland coastal and riverine peoples. Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) argued that the distribution of the Early Postclassic international symbol set (which they called the “Postclassic religious style”) derived from these decentralized coastal networks of trade and communication, rather than spreading outward from a central Mexican heartland (as proposed by, among others, Nicholson [1960] and Meighan [1974]).

THE LATE POSTCLASSIC INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL SET

The Postclassic international style, a post-A.D. 1200 phenomenon, is almost always accompanied by a particular set of images and symbols that collectively can be called the Late Postclassic international symbol set. The painting style and image set evolved together from the same impetus in central or southern Mexico, and they are so

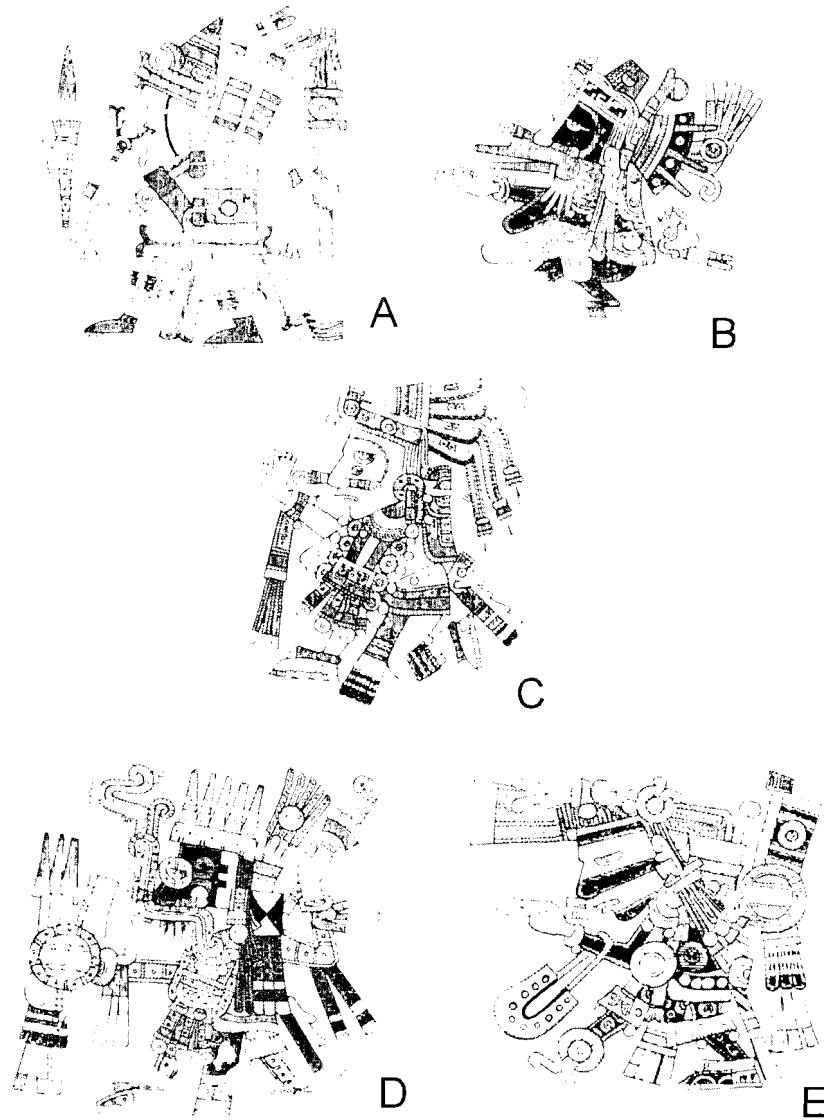


Figure 24.7 Central Mexican deities associated with the Late Postclassic international symbol set: (A) Xipe Totec (Codex Borgia 61; Seler 1963); (B) Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl (Codex Borgia 9; Seler 1902–1903; figure 343); (C) Tonatiuh (Codex Borgia 66; Seler 1963); (D) Tlaloc (Codex Borgia 25; Seler 1963); (E) Tezcatlipoca (Borgia 57; Seler 1902–1903; figure 584).

interconnected that it is rare to find one without the other. The peoples of the Mixteca-Puebla region and central Mexico selected key symbols from the Early Postclassic international symbol set and other sources to create their own distinctive group of iconographic elements. This symbol set represents a Mexican versus a Maya perspective on the world, expressed in images that reflect Mexican customs and cosmology. The Late Postclassic international symbol set is characterized largely by imagery pertaining to the calendar and religious life, which is why several scholars have equated the international style with religious manuscripts (Robertson 1966; Brockington 1973:84; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980:29–31).

Nevertheless, the symbol set is also composed of more-secular and mundane imagery from Mexican pictography. Nicholson (1960:614, 1982:229) and Ramsey (1982) have listed many of the symbols in this set, and the listing below draws from their work.

Calendrical information in the symbol set reflects the Mexican calendar as it was represented especially in central and southern Mexico and used by the Aztecs, Mixtecs, Tlaxcalans, and their neighbors.² The 20 day signs (figure 24.6) are fairly naturalistic images of animals, plants, and objects (e.g., Jaguar, Reed, Flint), or they are symbols for concepts or phenomena (e.g., Movement, Wind). The day numbers are always expressed as a series

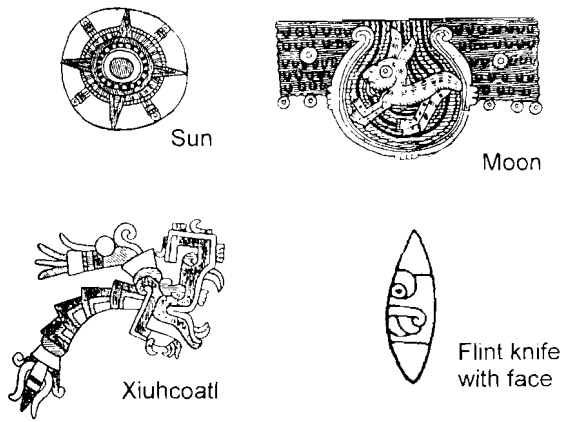


Figure 24.8 Some noncalendric elements of the Late Postclassic international symbol set: sun (Codex Borbonicus 16; Seler 1902-1903: figure 523); moon (Codex Borgia 71; Seler 1902-1903: figure 398); Xiuhcoatl, or fire serpent (Codex Zouche-Nuttall; Seler 1992:3:215); flint with fanged face (Codex Vienna 11a; Boone 2000: figure 4).

of linked or clustered disks rather than as bars and dots (although bars and dots can be used to express quantities). There is no use of place value within a vigesimal system, as one finds in the Maya Long Count or in Postclassic Maya codices such as the Dresden. It is the Mexican calendar that is being expressed.

The deities are Mexican also. Indeed a preponderance of the images belonging to the Late Postclassic international symbol set are those of the supernaturals seen in the central Mexican, Mixtec, and Borgia Group codices (figure 24.7). Present are the flayed god Xipe Totec (Our Lord, the Flayer), the culture hero and wind god Quetzalcoatl/Ehecatl (named 9 Wind in Mixtec codices), the sun

deity Tonatiuh (named 1 Death in Mixtec codices), Cihuacoatl (who may be 9 Grass for the Mixtec), and a good number of other deities. Each is represented with a generally consistent cluster of attributes. Accoutrements and costume elements of these gods include such things as flayed skins, wide collars of jade bordered by gold bells, as well as distinctive pectorals, headdresses, back devices, and arm and wrist bands. All of these individual elements take their place in the Late Postclassic international symbol set. Other elements, many associated with ritual action and religious concepts, are rayed sun disks, moon disks with U-shaped (pulque) vessels in them, Xiuhcoats (fire serpents), flints with fanged faces, the symbol for gold, long-handled incense pans, and earth-monster mouths as openings into the earth, just to list a few spanning a broad range (figure 24.8).

Polychrome ceramics belong to this ritual world as well. Ceramic motifs that characterize the Late Postclassic international symbol set include rays, reeds, and bird heads that cut through or embellish concentric bands that ring vases, bowls, and plates. Other characteristic motifs are flints, night eyes or stars, disembodied hearts and hands, skulls and bones, step-frets, and tightly controlled scrolls, disks, and feathers. These motifs appear as separate images on the flat ground or borders of the vessel (figure 24.9; see chapter 25 for further discussion).

Outside the ritual sphere, the Late Postclassic international symbol set contains a number of mundane images and conventions as well. Women and men, for example, are distinguished by their clothing and hair-styles. Old age is represented by a toothless or snaggle-toothed person with tousled hair. Stones, hill-signs, water, smoke, fire, earth, and sky-bands are all



Figure 24.9 Examples of the Late Postclassic international symbol set found on polychrome ceramics from Cholula and Oaxaca. (From Lind 1994:94.)

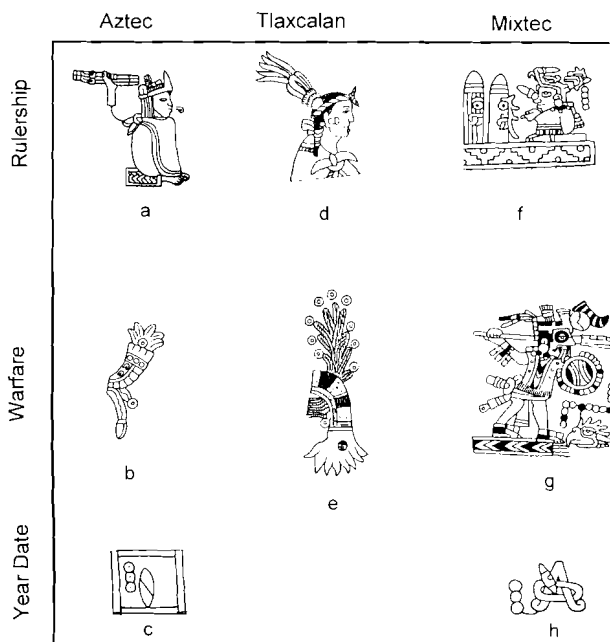


Figure 24.10 Regional variation in the symbols of the Late Postclassic international symbol set: (a) Aztec ruler Acamapichtli (Codex Mendoza 2v); (b) atl-tlachinolli, Aztec symbol for war (Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada); (c) Aztec year 3 Flint (Codex Mendoza); (d) Tlaxcalan ruler (Lienzo de Tlaxcala 7); (e) atl-tlachinolli, the Tlaxcalan symbol for war (Tonalamatl Aubin 9); (f) Mixtec Lord 4 Wind ruling the Place of Flints (Codex Bodley 31c); (g) Mixtec Lord 13 Eagle going to war (Codex Bodley 28b); (h) Mixtec year 3 Flint (Codex Vienna). (Drawings of a–c, f–h by John Montgomery; d after Chavero 1900; e after Selser 1992:3:70.)

represented by well-established and widely shared pictorial conventions. The elements that compose the symbol set are the pictorial conventions on which the Mexican pictographic system is built. Many of these elements have been described and illustrated by Mary Elizabeth Smith (1973a:20–35), Joyce Marcus (1992a), and Elizabeth Boone (2000:31–61), among others.

Just as there are regional and more individual variations in the international style, there are regional, ethnic, and individual variations in the Late Postclassic international symbol set (figure 24.10). The central Mexicans, for example, used the turquoise diadem to signal a ruler's authority, and they often signaled war by combining the elements of water and fire (*atl-tlachinolli*). They placed their year signs in square cartouches. The Mixtecs used none of these conventions. Instead, Mixtec rule was expressed by the ruler sitting on his or her place sign; war was signaled by a chevron path (literally read as the path or road to the enemy); and years were signaled by the A-O year sign (Smith 1973a:20–35). The Tlaxcalans, for their part, identified their rulers by a royal headband of twisted cord (Nicholson 1967). Other regional and politically motivated variations can surely be teased out with further study.

STYLE AND SYMBOL IN THE POSTCLASSIC

The two aspects that define the widespread graphic phenomenon of Postclassic Mesoamerica are a Mexican painting style and a Mexican symbol set, which became international once they diffused more widely. The term *Mexican* is used here because this style and this symbol set were concentrated in central Mexico, Tlaxcala, Puebla, and Oaxaca, and they surely developed within this realm. Whether they actually originated in one part or the other is unknown, although we can say that the style and symbol set developed together and were carried outward together as complementary parts of the same ideological package (chapter 25). Despite the close association of the style with the symbol set, it is useful to recognize that the international style is a graphic and pictorial style of rendering and organizing form. The Late Postclassic international symbol set is a set of images and elements that carry meaning within a particular iconographic system. Usually the two moved together throughout Mesoamerica, but not always.

Because so many elements in the Late Postclassic international symbol set are calendrical and religious in nature, their widespread distribution may signal the existence of a pan-Mesoamerican religion. The religious unification of Mesoamerica was begun in Epiclassic and Early Postclassic times with the spread of the Early Postclassic international symbol set (Smith and Heath-Smith 1980) and the spread of the iconography and ritual paraphernalia of the feathered serpent cult (Ringle et al. 1998). Whether the expansion of the prominence and importance of international symbols and styles in Late Postclassic times simply expressed a preexisting religious unity, or whether that expansion was a major force in creating Mesoamerican religious unity, is difficult to judge.

The Postclassic international style and the Late Postclassic international symbol set were adopted in many areas of Mesoamerica long before the formation of the Aztec empire. For example, the Cholula polychrome ceramics and the codices and polychrome ceramics of the Mixteca region were all well established by the start of the Late Postclassic period (chapter 25), and the Tulum and Santa Rita murals were painted early in the Late Postclassic period, prior to the Aztec empire (Masson 2000a). Just as commercial exchange between the Basin of Mexico and exterior areas preceded processes of imperial expansion (chapter 31), so did the spread of Aztec styles in painting, sculpture, and architecture largely predate Aztec imperialism (Umberger and Klein 1993; Umberger 1996).

The expansion of the Aztec empire, however, contributed greatly to the further spread and adoption of these styles and symbols (chapter 27). They followed Aztec trade routes and were borne along with Aztec

armies, ambassadors, and marriage alliances as the empire extended its domain over other, distant peoples. But since the adoption of the styles and symbols began well before imperial expansion, they are best viewed as markers of the networks of exchange and communication that comprised the Postclassic Mesoamerican world system.

And just as the Aztec empire was only one part of that wider world system, the imperial use and promotion of Postclassic international styles and symbols was only one facet of their importance in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica.