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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2001, the Jay I. Kislak Foundation invited a small group of scholars to view a series of eight seventeenth-century paintings depicting events from the Conquest of Mexico.¹ As the paintings were removed from their crates, they revealed a vivid and highly detailed visual history of the Conquest distilled into eight key moments, including the meeting of Cortés and Moteuczoma, the *Noche triste*, and finally the siege of Tenochtitlan. Although they reproduced an official Spanish version of the Conquest, the content and narrative style of the images immediately evoked a lively discussion and provocative observations, making it clear that these remarkable works of art could serve brilliantly as a catalyst for a variety of cross-disciplinary exchanges and debates surrounding the history of the Conquest and the subsequent colonization of Mexico. In the spring of 2003, *Visions of Empire: Picturing the Conquest in Colonial Mexico* opened at the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami. In conjunction with this

exhibition, which publicly displayed the Kislak paintings for the first time to a North American audience, the university hosted an international symposium, “Invasion and Transformation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Images of the Conquest of Mexico.” Prominent scholars from the United States and Mexico—representing the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, art history, foreign languages and literatures, history, and religion—made presentations in which the Kislak paintings formed a common point of reference.

By an extraordinary coincidence, the symposium took place the same weekend U.S. president George W. Bush ordered U.S. armed forces to enter Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power; the painted images of tense encounters, destruction, and full-scale battles between the Spanish and the Mexica resonated strongly with reports about the contemporary invasion. The parallels between past and present events also heightened awareness of the themes that bound the papers together. Collectively, the speakers brought attention to the fact that wartime events are not simply recorded: they are written down, visualized, negotiated, and embellished by the victors as well as the vanquished.²

The present volume includes essays based on the original symposium papers, color reproductions of the Kislak paintings, and detailed descriptions of these works of art, which we are pleased to present to a wider audience. Some of the authors have closely studied the Kislak paintings, addressing the style, content, and intended function of the works for their contemporaries. Other contributors have used the paintings only tangentially, focusing their attention on colonial period religion, theater, science, and literature. In viewing the Conquest and its complex legacy from multiple perspectives, these chapters make important new contributions to the scholarship on this important event and increase awareness of its long-term effects.³

At the most basic level, the title of this volume, *Invasion and Transformation*, refers to the military invasion of the Aztec Empire by Spanish forces and the transformations in political, social, cultural, and religious life that occurred in Mexico both during the Conquest and in the colonial period that followed. As we have employed it, however, the concept of invasion goes far beyond a simple definition of armed advance to include, among other things, the introduction of new diseases into the Americas, the forced conversion of the indigenous population to Christianity, and the immigration of Europeans into the young colony of New Spain. The fact that these changes and invasions brought about by the Conquest were negotiated through a process of *mestizaje* by the indigenous population is evident in art and architecture, literature, music, language, religion, social customs, clothing, and many other related areas. Of course, the Spaniards, including Hernán Cortés and others of Spanish ancestry in Mexico, also addressed and

interpreted these traumatic events of the past in their own ways, and this volume includes their voices as well.

Given the variety of methodological approaches and disciplines represented by the authors in this volume, there were bound to be occasional areas of disagreement. The spelling of the Aztec emperor's name was one such contested area. For English speakers, "Montezuma," which approximates the Spanish pronunciation of the Nahuatl name, is the most common spelling in popular use. In trying to establish the correct spelling and pronunciation, one is faced with the fact that colonial sources use a variety of orthographic conventions that do not agree. As Susan Gillespie explains, the etymology of the name (usually translated as "Angry Lord") comes from the roots *teuctli* (lord) and *zoma* (to frown in anger); *mo-* is a possessive prefix.⁴ The spelling of his name in sixteenth-century Nahuatl-language or Nahuatl-influenced documents varies little. In the *Codex Mendoza* it is Motecçuma. Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* and *Primeros Memoriales* record his name as Motecuçoma. The *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* spells it Moteuhçoma. Other documents have the same or similar spellings. Today, we use the small "z" for the "ç" (cedilla), which was the medieval form of z.

Other orthographic variations can be traced to the vowels "o" and "u," which were used by different Nahuatl speakers in the Basin of Mexico for the same morphemes (e.g., Culhuacan and Colhuacan, Chapultepec and Chapoltepec).⁵ According to Frances Karttunen (1983:xxiii), "cu" was used to express the "kw" sound (like "qu" does in English), and it could appear at the beginning or the end of a syllable. When it came at the beginning, as in *cualli* (kwalli), the "u" followed the "c." But when the sound appeared at the end of a syllable, as in *teuctli* (tekwtli), the "c" and "u" were supposed to be inverted. As Karttunen has nonetheless noted, not everyone followed this practice (see, for example, Sahagún's spelling), so one finds *teuctli* spelled as *tecutli* (or *tecuthtli*), giving the incorrect impression that the word has an extra syllable, which is then mispronounced tay-koo-tee. Some writers left out the "u" altogether, simplifying the sound from "kw" to just "k" (as in the *Codex Mendoza*). Based on the current research on Nahuatl pronunciation, and to avoid the confusion of multiple spellings, "Moteuczoma" has been adopted as the favored spelling throughout the volume, except in direct quotations from primary source material.

In addition, although Cortés would have been called Hernando (or Fernando) by his contemporaries, he is generally referred to as Hernán in today's literature. We have chosen to follow this practice in this volume.⁶

Throughout this volume, the reader is repeatedly made aware of the ways people remember and reconfigure historical events, rituals, and even art forms from the past to address the needs and interests of the present. From a discussion of how the legendary meeting between Moteuczoma and Cortés influenced

a sixteenth-century Nahua play about the birth of Jesus to an investigation of indigenous death rituals and their influence on Christian burials during the colonial period, the chapters in this volume shed new light on the complexity of cultural responses to the Conquest.

REMEMBERING THE LEGENDS

Although the Conquest of Mexico employed a cast of millions, three central characters have attained mythic status: Hernán Cortés, the emperor Moteuczoma II, and the native translator Malinche (also called Malintzín). The name of each of these figures calls up vivid stereotypes—the ruthless soldier, the fearful emperor, the traitorous harlot, to name but a few. The third canvas in the Kislak series (plate 3) depicts the meeting of these three extraordinary people, who stand in the middle of an elaborate ceremony on the shores of Lake Texcoco. In this painting, one of the most compelling in the series, cross-cultural miscommunication, as well as brewing tensions between the Old World and the New, are embodied by the two men. Clad in gleaming armor but with his arms outstretched in a clear gesture of embrace, Cortés approaches the elegant but scantily clad emperor. Moteuczoma does not allow the Spaniard to touch him, however; access to the royal body, it seems, was only for the privileged few. Although Malinche is also present, the narrative focus is clearly on the two men. A comet, faintly visible in the sky above the smoking volcano in the background, portends disaster, including the death of Moteuczoma, the fall of the Aztec Empire, and the destruction of Tenochtitlan.

Why did Moteuczoma, Cortés, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Malinche achieve such prominence in our understanding of the events of the Conquest? As Louise Burkhart argues in Chapter 1, “The Cortés-Moteuczoma encounter stands synechdochically for the larger cultural encounter” between the Spanish and the Mexica. As such, it is not surprising that references, sometimes veiled, to this pivotal event are made throughout colonial literature. In her chapter she analyzes a Nahua colonial drama of Herod’s encounter with the three Magi, which she argues makes a critique of Cortés and Moteuczoma while at the same time offering more appropriate models of kingly behavior. She highlights the complex ways Nahuas sought to position themselves in relation to the events of the past in light of the colonial reality.

The transformation of the Conquest’s principal players into figures of iconic importance during the colonial period is addressed by several authors in this volume. They approach the phenomenon by examining written as well as visual materials. In Chapter 2, Susan Gillespie addresses the historical characterization of Moteuczoma as a “fearful, fawning failure of a ruler.” By turning her attention to colonial accounts of the Conquest from the sixteenth century, she enriches our

perspective by examining both how and why indigenous writers assigned blame to Moteuczoma for the defeat of the empire. Gillespie pays special attention to the role of omens in this literature, which she notes are very much focused on Moteuczoma's body and person. She demonstrates that these omens should not be understood at the fatalistic response of a subjected group; rather, they are the active production of a people who needed to accommodate, explain, and resist their new political and social realities.

Viviana Díaz Balsera, in Chapter 3, focuses our attention on Cortés through a critical examination of his letters, which she argues hold "a crucial place in the founding discourses about the New World." In her chapter she demonstrates how Cortés's own version of the events contributed to the anthropomorphization of the Conquest as a struggle between two heroic men whose attributes, negative and positive, mirrored the character of their respective nations. According to Díaz Balsera, Cortés's skillful rhetoric allowed him to present himself as a master strategist, a faithful vassal, and a military hero to his most important reader—the king of Spain and the Holy Roman emperor, Charles V.

By focusing on images of Malinche, an important indigenous woman who worked as a translator for Cortés, Constance Cortez, in Chapter 4, introduces the last of the three key figures in the history of the Conquest. In recent years Malinche, characterized variously as a "whore, victim, avenger, stoic observer, [and] survivor," has come to share some of the blame with Moteuczoma for the defeat of the empire. Cortez explores the roots of these contradictory descriptions by comparing and contrasting images of Malinche produced in New Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By tracing Malinche's transformation from a dynamic participant in the early colonial period to a passive, European-looking bystander in the Kislak paintings, Cortez raises important questions about race and gender as presented in these works of art.

TRANSFORMING HISTORY

As a group, the Kislak paintings distill the highly complicated events of the Conquest into a series of carefully selected scenes, all of which are based on Spanish accounts. A number of authors in this collection, including Matthew Restall and Michael Schreffler, have carefully studied the content and style of the Kislak paintings. For Restall these works are examples of mythistory, which he defines as "a vision of the historical past heavily infused with misconceptions and partisan interpretations so deeply rooted as to constitute legends or myths." In his analysis, presented in Chapter 5, he brings attention to a number of mythic elements in these works, from their presentation of Cortés and his men as professional soldiers to the portrayal of the Mexica as representatives of a

barbarian empire. He also notes that the implied superiority of the Spanish—as represented by Cortés and his captains—is what ultimately brings about their victory, both in the histories and in the Kislak paintings.

In a complementary manner, Schreffler argues in Chapter 6 that representations of the Conquest of Mexico, including the Kislak series, must be situated within the discourse of Spanish imperial power in the late seventeenth century. He brings attention to the laudatory treatment of the Conquest in these works of art and the manner in which they highlight “the ritual formation of loyal subjects.” As such, he challenges earlier scholarship on images of the Conquest produced in New Spain, which have tended to explain the subject’s popularity as evidence of Creole nationalism. Schreffler’s close reading of the paintings highlights the ways they stimulated memories of the past while simultaneously presenting the improved version of the present.

Diana Magaloni-Kerpel shifts attention back to the Nahua in Chapter 7 in her discussion of how the Conquest of Mexico is represented visually and verbally in Friar Bernardino Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*. Magaloni-Kerpel and Gillespie differ in their approaches, as well as their interpretations, of the eight omens in Sahagún’s work. Whereas Gillespie’s analysis aligns the omens closely to the person of Moteuczoma, the destruction of the empire, and the realities of the post-Conquest environment, Magaloni-Kerpel uses the omens to draw direct parallels with the sacred texts of the Nahua “red and black” tradition. In bringing attention to the Nahua notion of cyclical time, Magaloni-Kerpel suggests that Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex* functions as a “sacred text that tells the story of the foundation of a new cycle of time and a new people: the era of the Nahua Christians of New Spain.” Native texts and paintings functioned as agents of speech and memory in the pre-Conquest period; Magaloni-Kerpel’s analysis suggests the manner in which text and image continued to play an important role in connecting events of the past to the present.

EFFECTS OF INVASION

The invasion is remembered, but the transformation is what remains. Unlike the heroic and mythologized renditions of history seen in the Kislak paintings and gloriously recounted in colonial histories, disease, death, and violence were more common realities for large portions of the middle and lower classes in post-Conquest Mexico. The imposition of foreign economic structures, religious institutions, deadly viruses, and an uncertain political future led to social responses previously unimagined. The kinds of radical social alterations detailed by Martha Few and Ximena Chávez Balderas point very literally to the consequences of invasion and transformation.

As Few argues in Chapter 8, even in the face of horrific illness, biases about race and ethnicity profoundly influenced scientific practice in New Spain. Few addresses *cocolitzli*, one of the terrible diseases that devastated Mexico in the wake of the invasion. She focuses attention on several autopsy reports on *cocolitzli*, written by Spanish colonial physicians brought in to study what many considered an “Indian” disease. As Few argues, “The process of the construction of racial difference in this context, legitimized by the language and practice of colonial medicine, interacted with broader ideologies of colonial authority and power in New Spain.”

As a consequence of the vicious cycle of disease and death and in response to the introduction of Catholicism, subtle transformations occurred in funerary practices, which Ximena Chávez Balderas details in Chapter 9. Although the Spanish sources suggest that the indigenous population readily adopted Christian rituals, Chávez Balderas’s research proposes a more nuanced interpretation by addressing the changes in religious ideology and spatial function in an urban context. Like many of the authors in this volume, she brings attention to the fact that during the colonial period, “new institutions, forms, and meanings emerged that demonstrate the unmistakable influence of the customs and habits of the native population.”

FULL CIRCLE

In the final chapter, we examine the Conquest through the lens of the Kislak paintings. This chapter introduces the reader to these extraordinary works of art by means of a detailed discussion of each painting’s content and how it relates to the traditional history of the Conquest. Because these works present a highly conservative and pro-Spanish version of history, they serve as a foil to the new interpretations of the Conquest offered by the contributors to this volume.

NOTES

1. In this Introduction we have drawn upon a number of sources, including the essays and descriptions of the Kislak paintings found in Jackson and Brienen (2003).

2. See Schwartz (2000).

3. We would like to acknowledge symposium participants David Carrasco, Tom Cummins, and Oscar Vazquez, who chose not to participate in this volume but whose contributions have proven invaluable.

4. Personal communication, November 24, 2004. Gillespie cites Kartunnen (1983).

5. Ibid.

6. Thanks to Matthew Restall for raising this point. See Pagden (1986).