

for institutionalized indigenous control over writing norms in pan-Mayan struggles in the 1980s and 1990s” (p. 14). Romero identifies K’iche’ as emblematically formative of the pan-Mayan movement, and presents a unique view of that movement through examination of the work of two K’ichee’ authors: Adrián Inés Chávez’s idiosyncratic translation of the *Popol Vuh* has been taken up as scripture by many pan-Mayanists, while Humberto Akabal’s poetry demonstrates the ongoing creativity in the use of the K’ichee’ language.

The book’s presentation is lovely, with helpful maps and evocative photographs. Romero has demonstrated that “colonialism is not just a political system or a state of mind but also a hybrid semiotic regime, a tense exchange of signs and ideologies that certain individuals, veritable cultural prophets, constantly recreate” (p. 105).

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The Untranslatable Image: A Mestizo History of the Arts in New Spain, 1500–1600. By Alessandra Russo. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 357. Note on translations. Acknowledgments. Prologue. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00. doi:[10.1017/tam.2016.47](https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2016.47)

Russo’s provocative book, first published in French in 2013, focuses on three corpuses—feather paintings or mosaics, maps, and graffiti—created in New Spain in the century after the conquest. Rather than presenting a survey of these very different media, the book offers an analysis of the creative process, as artists, most of them indigenous, grappled with ideas and images of both local and distant origins. In Russo’s view, the work of art that results “constitutes a means of thinking about, and then transforming, reality,” and thus “the ongoing process of *making* images” offers a unique perspective onto the tumultuous period (pp. 4, 5).

Conventional histories of art of the period once focused heavily on style and iconography, particularly the absorption of European imagery (as native artists looked at European books and prints and drew on them for inspiration) and were once guided by tropes of decadence (as native artists “lost” their distinctive styles) or acculturation (as “native” art became visually indistinguishable from European). Instead, Russo emphasizes the creative capacity of artists in New Spain to “reorder” their perceived reality, working outward from both European and Mesoamerican canons (p. 6). To escape the straightjacket of convention, Russo invites the reader to “start from zero,” in considering the art of the sixteenth century, that is, “forget irrevocable classifications; disciplinary separations; the frontiers between popular and cult art, between artisan and artist, between ‘native’ and Western” (p. 13).

The chapters are divided into three sets of three, each of the three “trptychs” including a chapter on feather paintings, often inspired by imported European printed sources and now canonical images in art history; one on maps, ranging from the exquisite diagram of the Codex Mendoza to prosaic land grant maps; and another on graffiti scratched onto walls of monastic convents and accidentally preserved through whitewashing. The repetition in the book’s structure allows Russo to make three passes at each of these materials (feather paintings, maps, and graffiti). In each case, the first pass serves as an introduction to the specific body of work, and the subsequent two present deeper investigations into the creative routes that artists forged. Thus, we come to understand with each 20- to 30-page chapter more about the nature of artistic creation in the New World, as well as the intellectual currents within which artists and their viewers moved.

Russo firmly rejects the idea that artists passively absorbed new forms. In discussing maps, she underscores how artists drew on both a circular spatial conception, with its roots in the pre-Hispanic, and an imported (but quickly digested) cartographic language, (in particular Western rules of spatial construction) to fashion wholly novel “image-maps” of New Spain—an argument that will be familiar to readers of her 2005 book *El realismo circular* (pp. 211, 221). Russo also explores the ways that both artists and viewers puzzled out the location, both temporal and spatial, of the Americas in relation to Europe. When a contemporary viewer, Diego Muñoz Camargo, discussed indigenous feathered textiles, he pointed to their association with the curtains of the Tabernacle, thereby connecting “the New and the Old World’s temporalities” (p. 95).

Russo’s ambition and imaginative reach are admirable. Each chapter is erudite and firmly grounded in primary source material. Taken together, they sparkle: each offers unexpected visual comparisons and textual connections, for which the author draws on a wide archive spanning both “native” and “European,” considerably complicating both categories in the process. Sections within the chapters often focus on individual works of art: jump starters for discussion in seminars. A few parts of the book fall short, as in her dogged (and wholly novel) pursuit of graffiti in Mexican monasteries, which seemed to me overly speculative on questions of dating and authorship, and then too conservative in interpretation (an author is assigned, iconographical meanings are neatly resolved). But these are small quibbles with a work whose signal achievement is to show how an art history of the New World can free itself from limiting metaphors, like “syncretic,” and categorically based methodologies, such as the dutiful parsing of an artwork’s “indigenous” or “European” elements. Russo’s work in opening pathways of interpretation into cultural agents during a period of dramatic cultural change offers a model to fields beyond art history.

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