Problems in Interpreting the Form and Meaning of Mesoamerican Temple Platforms

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Perhaps the primary fascination of Pre-Columbian art for art historians lies in the congruence of image and concept; lacking a widely-used form of written language, art forms were employed to express significant concepts, often to peoples of different languages.

Such an extremely logographic role for art should condition research in a fundamental way. For example, to the extent that Mesoamerican art-forms literally embody concepts, there can be no real separation of image and meaning. To interpret such art in the light of Western conventions, where meaning can be indirectly perceived (as in allegory or the imitation of nature), is to project misleading expectations which then hinder understanding.

One of the most obvious blendings of form and meaning in Pre-Columbian art is the temple, with its supporting platform. The form and surface articulation of these pyramidal structures naturally draw the attention of the observer, if only because of their imposing size. It is the intention of this paper to examine some of the problems involved in deriving meaning and stylistic significance from the form and especially the ornament of the platforms at Teotihuacan, the well-known Classic Period metropolis in the Valley of Mexico.

To more fully develop the role of ornament in Teotihuacan architecture, it will be helpful to briefly discuss the significance of the pyramidal form itself, in Teotihuacan as well as in Pre-Columbian America in general. Such forms are always part of a conceptually significant whole: they help identify sites and precincts as being important through elevation and extent, while through orientation such sites are ordained celestially. Further, by the number of levels in a platform's elevation, distinctions of importance are made relative to other sites at a given location.

Consider, for example, the largest and probably most important temple platform at Teotihuacan, the so-called Pyramid of the Sun, a name given to it by the Aztecs over half a millenium after Teotihuacan fell, around the eighth century A.D. (Figure 1).[1] Archaeologists have discovered much information about the pyramid that suggests that it occupies its location for very specific reasons, and that it may signify by both chthonic and celestial means the most important deity for this ancient city. The orientation of the Pyramid of the Sun suggests a degree of celestial significance for the pyramid and Teotihuacan in general. It should be noted here that the theological and cosmic importance of orientation cannot be overstressed for this or any other Pre-Columbian monument. Through orientation, significant architectural configurations are justified by cosmic order. Celestial patterns are traced on the earth by the movements of the heavens, so that earthly space and ritual may be ordained by the heavens. The ordering of space as well as time is, according to Dr. E.C. Krupp, "what makes the world sacred for traditional, nonsecularized peoples. Once the world is founded and ordered, it acquires meaning. We can then have a sense of place in it."[2]

In the case of the Pyramid of the Sun, its western face is parallel to the city's most prominent axis, the avenue popularly known as the Street of the Dead. This axis is oriented 15°28′ east of true north for some (as yet) undefined reason (although many other Mesoamerican sites have similar orientations). Offered in explanation are a variety of hypotheses that often intermingle calendrical, topographical and celestial elements.[3]

It should not be surprising to see similar practices in other Mesoamerican centers, given the religious conservatism of ancient cultures in general. Through the common orientations and orientation techniques of many Mesoamerican sites, we can detect specific manifestations of this conservatism despite historical and racial differences among Pre-Columbian peoples. The Aztecs, for example, celebrated Teotihuacan as the place where time began, as the "original source of civilization and government, and the place where cosmic order was established."[4]

But given the potent and multivalent conceptual significance that must have fully informed every aspect of monuments such as the Pyramid of the Sun, how would this significance condition their articulation and ornamentation? Ananda K. Coomaraswamy provides a framework for these questions in a 1939 article entitled "Ornament," in which he explores etymological parallels for words meaning "to decorate" or "ornament" in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and English. In general, he noted what he called "a degeneration of meaning" in these words, as for example, in the word "decor," which comes from the same root as "decorous" or "decent"; originally, all three words must have been closely related in meaning.[5]

The modern notion of decoration or ornament as mere embellishment did not hold true for the art of ancient cultures. As Coomaraswamy points out, it had a fundamental "adjectival" role.[6] The conceptual significance of ornament is that, in this "adjectival" role, it is essential to definition and to the establishment of hierarchical relations in conceptually-based images and monuments. We will now turn to the place of ornament in Teotihuacan architecture, in the light of ornamentation's integral role in early forms of art where concept and form share a mutual identity.

The Street of the Dead is chiefly articulated by the *talud*-and-*tablero* façade where levels of enframed masonry panels are cantilevered out on ledges over a sloping talus or base (Figure 2).[7] Very few of these façades have retained even traces of their decoration, although the base of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl flanking the south end of the Street of the Dead still exhibits multiple *tableros* surmounting a *talud* carved in low relief (Figure 3).

At this temple, water associations are suggested, according to George Kubler, by the juxtaposition of scaly

goggled heads (which may have some connection to Tlaloc, who is frequently described in later sources as a deity of rain) with feathered serpents (known to the Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl) set among conch and pecten shells.[8] Other water associations are evident in the painted dadoes that have survived in the interiors of some Teotihuacan buildings.[9]

In general, it should be noted that the tiered levels of Mesoamerican platforms suggest possible religious meanings themselves, as Pre-Columbian cosmological models are hierarchical. J. Eric S. Thompson notes that the Maya heavens were constructed much like a seven-terraced pyramid, with the bottom heaven representing the visible sky.[10] Since the visible sky is the medium for clouds, which are, of course, of great significance to an agrarian society, it would be logical to find allusions to "water rites" on the lower levels of temple platforms; also consistent with this would be Kubler's suggestion that the presence of the feathered serpent at these lower levels "may unite ideas of earth and air."[11]

René Millon points out that the *talud*-and-*tablero* unit adorns the façades of secular buildings as well along the Street of the Dead, resulting in what he called the "sacralization of the locus of secular activities."[12] Elevation thus helps to distinguish special precincts, both secular and religious. It becomes another form of boundary delimitation.

Tableros, often containing pertinent subjects in painting and sculpture, help enforce the distinction between precinct and topography, even to the point of redundancy, as in the multiple *tableros* of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. Such *tablero* images further envalue the concept of elevated precinct; ornament, here in the form of decorated façades, is fully integrated into a formal system of meaning, serving in an "adjectival" role, as Coomaraswamy might have said. Such envaluation is redundant in a linguistic sense, as noted earlier. However, redundancy in conceptually based forms and images is a positive principle, as meaning accrues quantitatively (and thus clarifies for the viewer) the concept being presented.[13]

It follows from this that the very form of the profile itself may embody meaning, before the addition of redundant adjectival elements. Indeed, painted representations of temple platforms often show no ornamentation of the *tablero*. Kubler noted this in suggesting that the form of the *talud*-and-*tablero* by itself may have stood for "sacred architecture" in Teotihuacan.[14]

As Kubler also points out, this notion is enforced by the presence of the *talud*-and-*tablero* shape on vessels, vessel feet, pendants and noseplugs.[15] The wearing of such objects, or the use of the *talud*-and-*tablero* in the framing or bracketing of imagery on everything from pottery vessels to temple platforms, suggests that the *talud*-and-*tablero* shape stood for more than temple; it stood for Teotihuacan itself as a place of cosmic and chthonic import. The architectural façade may act as a validating agent, emblematic of the particular power of the place known now as Teotihuacan. This power almost certainly formed the basis for Teotihuacan's political authority as well as its cosmological primacy.

Important here is the notion that the *talud*-and-*tablero* profile or shape means what it means regardless of size or scale, since it serves only an adjectival or qualifying role within a formal system. This has important ramifications for the understanding of scale in Mesoamerican architecture.[16]

It also follows that the platform, or cairn as Kubler termed it more generically,[17] also has a qualifying role by itself, regardless of its degree of ornamentation. Its size is relative to other platforms in a given location, as noted earlier. The platform or cairn elevates the temple or house of the deity. The cairn, whether pyramidally shaped or simply a low platform, does not bear significance in and of itself but only in relation to the temple or altar it once supported. Additional meaning may accrue to the form of the cairn through articulation of its levels in some distinctive or ornamental way, although countless representations of pyramids in Mesoamerican ceramics, vase painting, wall painting and codex illumination emphasize the vestigial but essential role of the cairn, with or without distinguishable façade, summarily indicated and often dwarfed in size by its surmounting temple or precinct, even though this was probably not always the case (Figure 4).

Depending on the context of such representations, detailed articulation of the platform's profile may have been important for reinforcing notions of place, polity, deity or any aspect of these. But what most all Mesoamerican temple and precinct platforms have in common, from before Teotihuacan until the arrival of the Spanish, are their terraced levels, ornamented in most cases with some projecting element in order to cast horizontal shadow lines and thus further emphasize the distinctions between those levels.[18] The platforms represent a formal convention of extreme duration, employed by all Mesoamerican societies.

Western art historians tend to overlook the significance of this kind of diachronic, conventional continuity in attempting to deal with Pre-Columbian art and its style or type of ornamentation. This issue is vital for the study of ancient cultures such as Teotihuacan. It is natural for Westerners to see the history of art in synchronic or periodic terms—as a succession of styles—because, as David Summers says, "the concept of style has never strayed from its autographic and physiognomic connotations."[19]

Thus, isolable formal variations of the *talud*-and-*tablero* façade (Figure 5) in different regions outside Teotihuacan have often been assumed by Western writers, even Kubler, to be "physiognomic"[20] and to primarily signify "distinct meaning in the sense of characterizing different architectural traditions, different cult practices, . . . and different ethnic identities."[21] Kubler goes on to compare these variations to the classical orders of Vitruvius. As with the orders, these variations are felt to be individually "expressive" and to "correspond to geographical and ethnic groupings."[22]

Yet, it should be pointed out that while façades or their profiles differ from place to place, they are essentially equivalent at a basic level; for example, there may be many places in Mesoamerica where mythic time began; Teotihuacan happened to be one of them. The ornamental significance of the different profiles lies, as Kubler noted, in their geographic specificity. They help distinguish between sites that are essentially equivalent in cosmological terms by means of geographic identity. Ethnic and political identity must have followed from this, to various degrees.

In conclusion, Mesoamerican architecture clearly employs siting, precinct delimitation, orientation and hierarchical levels to establish and qualify conceptual significance. Ornament, as an adjectival element, is integral and not merely additive decoration in this case. When seen in this light, geographical differences in façade or profile ornamentation reveal relatively minor variations in long-

standing conventional form as much as they reveal changes in meaning and style. Full understanding of the significance of Mesoamerican architectural forms, indeed of probably all Pre-Columbian artistic forms, can be distorted as long as Western predilections for detecting the historical discontinuities and unique inventions of changing styles are allowed to cloud one's comprehension of the slowly evolving forms of convention. This study was completed in the desire to demonstrate that taxonomic distinctions of form cannot always be assumed to reveal fundamental differences in meaning in Mesoamerican art.

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1 For a recent discussion of the archaeological data on Teotihuacan by a leading expert, see René Millon, "Teotihuacan: City, State, and Civilization," in *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, gen. ed. Victoria Reifler Bricker, vol. ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff, I (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 198–243.

2 *Echoes of the Ancient Skies: The Astronomy of Lost Civilizations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 75.
On the terrestrial and celestial factors that conditioned the siting of temples in ancient Greek architecture, see Vincent Scully, *The Earth, The Temple and The Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1969).

3 This (as well as what immediately follows) is discussed in Doris Heyden, "An Interpretation of the Cave Beneath the Pyramid of the Sun," *American Antiquity*, 40 (1975), 131–147; Anthony F. Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1980), p. 222ff.; Vincent Malmström, "A Reconsideration of the Chronology of Mesoamerican Calendrical Systems," *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 9 (1978), 105–116. See as well Millon, p. 239f., n. 4.

4 Krupp, p. 278; *cf.* Millon, p. 230.

5 "Ornament," *Art Bulletin*, 21 (1939), 375–382. References from pp. 376, 381. The author gratefully acknowledges the insights of Daniel Ehnbom, whose enthusiasm for Coomaraswamy is infectious.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 381, n. 15.

7 On the prevalence and construction of the *talud*-and-*tablero* at Teotihuacan, see George Kubler, "Iconographic Aspects of Architectural Profiles at Teotihuacan and in Mesoamerica," in *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, papers from a symposium held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 1970 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), pp. 24–39, especially p. 25ff.; Millon, p. 228.

8 Kubler, "Profiles," p. 28ff; *cf.* also Esther Pasztory, *The Iconography of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, No. 15 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1974), and, in the same series, George Kubler, *The Iconography of the Art of Teotihuacan*, No. 4, 1967.

9 On these paintings, see Arthur G. Miller, *The Mural Paintings of Teotihuacan* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 1973).

10 "Maya Rulers of the Classic Period and the Divine Right of Kings," in *Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, pp. 52–71, especially pp. 58–59.

11 Kubler, "Profiles," p. 30.

12 Millon, p. 230.

13 This notion of redundancy is also discussed (with respect to Western traditions) in Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 132ff.

14 Kubler, "Profiles," p. 33.

15 Kubler, "Profiles," pp. 32–33.

16 The author is grateful to David Summers for this observation. This article is due in large part to his encouragement and erudition.

17 *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Maya, and Andean Peoples*, The Pelican History of Art, ser. ed. Nikolaus Pevsner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), p. 29.

18 Kubler, "Profiles," pp. 34–35.

19 "Conventions in the History of Art," *New Literary History*, 13, Pt. 1 (1981), 103–125; especially p. 106.

20 Kubler, "Profiles," p. 25.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

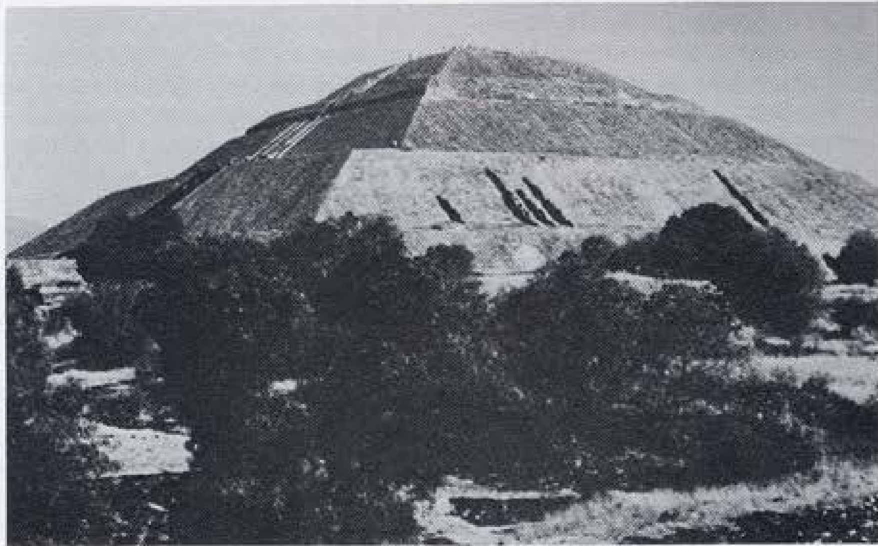

Figure 1, Pyramid of the Sun (view from the southwest), ca. 100–200 A.D., Teotihuacan, Mexico. From Dr. E.C. Krupp, *Echoes of the Ancient Skies: The Astronomy of Lost Civilizations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 277. Photo by Robin Rector Krupp.

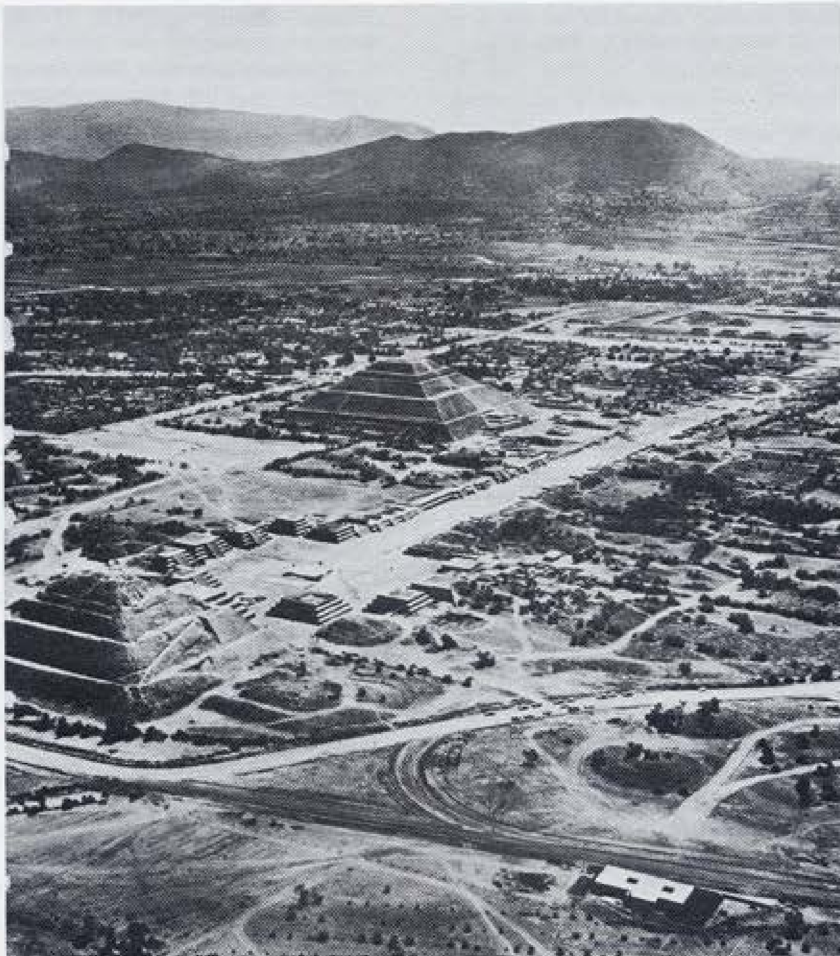

Figure 2, Street of the Dead (aerial view from the northwest, with the Pyramid of the Sun in the center), ca. 200 A.D., Teotihuacan, Mexico. From Doris Heyden and Paul Gendrop, *Pre-Columbian Architecture of Mesoamerica*, trans. Judith Stanton, History of World Architecture, gen. ed. Pier Luigi Nervi (New York: Abrams, 1975), part of pl. 38. Photo by Compañia Mexicana Aerofoto, Mexico City.

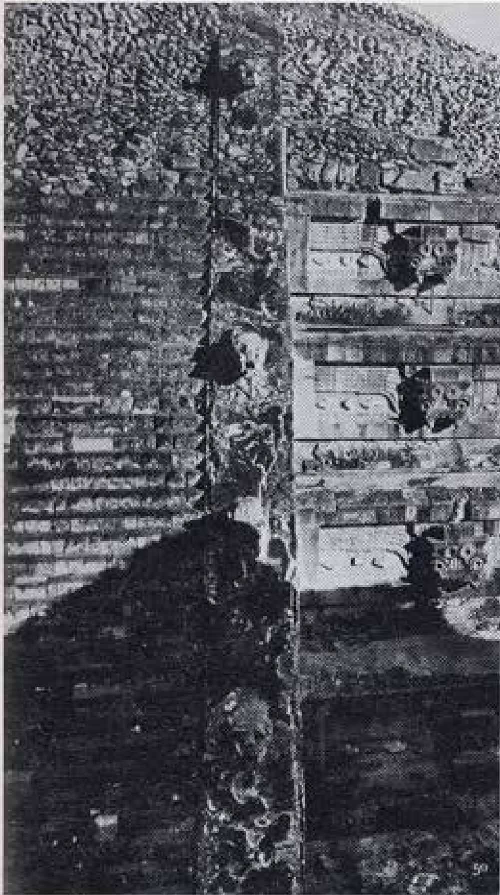

Figure 3, Main stairway of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (with *talud*-and-*tablero* façade to the right), ca. 200 A.D., Teotihuacan, Mexico. From Jacques Soustelle, *Arts of Ancient Mexico*, trans. Elizabeth Carmichael, 2d ed. (New York: Viking, 1967), pl. 50. Photo by Claude Arthaud and F. Hébert-Stevens.

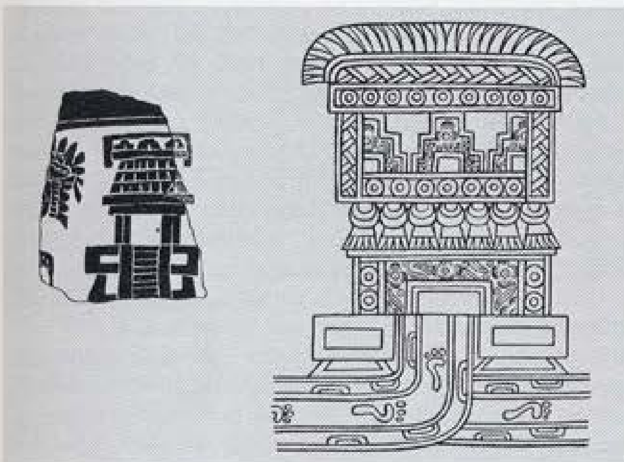

Figure 4, Representations of Teotihuacan temples: derived from a pottery sherd with champlevé decoration (left), and from a fresco detail at Tetitla, Mexico (right). From Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Knopf, 1957), fig. 52. Drawings by Covarrubias.

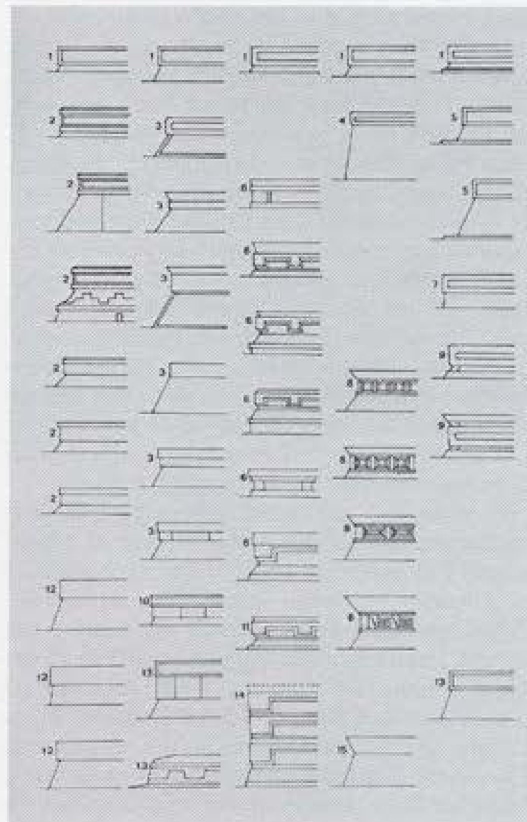

Figure 5, Various *tablero* profiles found in Mesoamerica. From Heyden and Gendrop (see citation Figure 2), pl. 61. Drawing by the studio of Enzo di Grazia.