

## **WOMEN IN PREHISPANIC ART**

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To narrate the role of women in Pre-Hispanic art is quite challenging, due to the marked differences in the two aspects to be addressed in this research. Regarding the role of women as objects in art (as a source of inspiration for it), their fundamental role in society throughout all times is obvious, as without "Her," man as a being does not exist.

The level of material development achieved by Pre-Hispanic society limited female participation as subjects of art (as creators of it) to the field of applied arts. Even in our days, we can appreciate remnants of this profound creative vocation in various parts of the current Republic of Guatemala.

This assertion also cannot in any way exclude women's participation during this period of our history in contributions to painting, sculpture, and other major Fine Arts, albeit in very isolated cases and subject to not leaving evidence of their participation, due to the predominant role of men in society.

In the Pre-Columbian era, applied arts held a predominant place in society; these were cultivated by women, and we can take as an example the remnants that are still observed today in the heirs of this tradition.

Classic examples of the female artistic tradition include the magnificent pottery works of Chinautla, on the outskirts north of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, where the creation of ceramic pieces has taken different directions in the vast field of art. The best-crafted works gradually transition into Folk Art, while others become useful crafts or even transform into what is known as tourist art, or sometimes deformations of the original art. Parallel to this, one can also mention with similar characteristics the indigenous Guatemalan textile creation, where women also play a primary role with similar transformative results over time due to economic reasons.

### **Feminine pre-Hispanic iconography**

The Pre-Hispanic feminine iconography is rich because it is dedicated to highlighting the importance of women within society. Therefore, in their representations, they are related to the moon as the wife of the Sun and, due to her sexual weakness, committed "errors" typical of women, such as naivety, adultery, and others.<sup>1</sup> These representations were intended to serve as didactic material about the role that women should fulfill correctly within each community organization of that time.

The Moon as a female deity acquired various supernatural roles, addressing feminine issues such as being the goddess of childbirth, fertility, medicine, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruz, Alberto, *El Pueblo Maya*, Salvat Mexicana de Ediciones, México, 1981, Pág. 186.

Additionally, there is iconography related to women's creative work and their activities in the specific field of art; the Goddess Ixchel is a valuable example of these expressions as she was acclaimed as the patroness of weaving.<sup>2</sup>

It is worthwhile to pay attention to representations of women within Pre-Hispanic communities, especially related to personal adornment and the feminine aesthetic ideal. These aspects, which have not yet been extensively explored, could be subjects of specific studies in the future.

There are also monumental and written sources that have not been thoroughly studied or directly related to the topic discussed here, where women appear in scenes of daily life or in representations that have not been analyzed up to this point.

### **Female artists in the pre-Hispanic period**

The level of material development in Pre-Hispanic society, as mentioned earlier, determined limitations on women's participation as subjects of artistic creation. However, there is evidence proving that women were always alongside men in all activities, including, of course, art.

Lo expuesto podemos inferirlo de los párrafos siguientes, extraídos del Popol Vuh, que relatan las antiguas historias del pueblo Quiché "Dad a conocer vuestra naturaleza, Hunahpú-Vuch, Hunahpú-Utiú, dos veces madre, dos veces padre, Nim-Ac, Nimá-Tziís, el señor de la esmeralda, el joyero, el escultor, el tallador, el Señor de los hermosos platos, el señor de la verde Jícara, el maestro de la resina, el maestro Toltecat, la abuela del sol, la abuela del alba, que así seréis llamados por nuestras obras y nuestras criaturas."<sup>3</sup>

We deduce not only women's participation alongside men but also their role as "co-actors" with an intimate relationship with them. Their correlated role can be derived from considerations such as naming them "Grandmother of the Sun, Grandmother of the Dawn," which places them on a plane of certain equality with the man who is being named "Lord."

The same text further states, "Next came divination, the casting of lots with maize and tzité. 'Good fortune! Child!' an old woman and an old man told them. And this old man was the tzité fortune-teller, the one called Ixpiyacoc. And the old woman was the diviner, the shaper, named Chiracán Ixmucané."<sup>4</sup>

Again, it can be inferred that women participated as creative subjects in art alongside men, but with the difference that they were granted the title of "shaper" or "formadora." This indicates that women existed as artists in Pre-Hispanic society, but

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<sup>2</sup> IDEM.

<sup>3</sup> Anónimo, Popol Vuh, traducción de adrián Recinos, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1964. Págs. 28 y 29.

<sup>4</sup> Idem. Pág. 29

they were subject to social factors that limited their participation, especially in the Fine Arts such as painting, sculpture, and architecture.

However, in the field of what are called applied arts, their work has continued to our days, undoubtedly as a vestige of the division of labor by gender; this also helps explain the apparent limited participation of women in the Fine Arts. Unfortunately, specific names of women dedicated to artistic creation during the period we are discussing did not survive to our days. Perhaps archaeologists will be able to provide more data in the future. Let's now analyze the overall role of the collective female creative production...

### **The art of weaving**

Weaving was undoubtedly a very important creative activity for women during the Pre-Hispanic period, constituting an applied art form. They crafted unique pieces (woven garments) according to different occasions and uses, ranging from clothing and accessories to tablecloths and decorative textiles.

We can infer this artistic tradition based on remnants that still exist within our indigenous female population, particularly in the Guatemalan highland region. True masterpieces of this art can be appreciated in various museums in Guatemala and abroad.<sup>5</sup>

Within the creative process of these artworks, there are testimonies indicating that they were not always the work of a single artist in the Pre-Hispanic era, but rather the result of technical divisions of art. There were "Weavers," "Spinners," and "Seamstresses."<sup>6</sup> The weavers were responsible for weaving blankets, the spinners knew how to "spin finely and evenly,"<sup>7</sup> and the seamstresses knew how to sew and embroider. The study specifically refers to women in Mexico, but we must consider the deep cultural ties of the Mesoamerican area, which undoubtedly extended this situation to Guatemala. This is confirmed in the New Work published by the Museo Ixchel.

Furthermore, it is easy to enrich the topic of weaving by visiting any archaeological or ethnological museum in the Mesoamerican area, as they contain valuable remains of extinct societies that attest to women's participation in art.

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<sup>5</sup> Los Museos que pueden ser visitados concretamente son: El Museo Ixchel en la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción y el Museo del Hombre de la Ciudad de San Diego California en Estados Unidos de Norte América.

<sup>6</sup> Tuñón Pablos, Enriqueta. El álbum de la Mujer, Antología de las Mexicanas. Epoca Prehispánica, Vol I, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México, 1991. Pags 134,135.

<sup>7</sup> IDEM

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that weaving had the goddess "Ixchel" as its patroness of this creative activity, who was also the protector of painting and embroidery.<sup>8</sup>

### **Feather art**

The division of labor by gender necessitated women's care of domestic animals, including birds. Feathers became a valuable element within the Pre-Hispanic community, serving as raw material for the creation of headdresses and other ornaments used by high lords and priests during festivals to highlight their leadership role within the community. Feathers were also consistently associated with divinities.

In the context of Mexico, the relationship between women and feather art is described as follows: "Those who sell feathers spun with cotton. The one who sells spun feathers often raises many birds from which she plucks the feathers. She wraps the plucked feathers in clay; she plucks the feathers from above and those underneath, which are very soft like cotton. She then does the following: she spins feathers, spins evenly, spins thick strands, spins poorly twisted, spins well twisted, twists the feather, spins nequén with bone, with which Otomí women spin. She spins the plucked feather with a lathe, and she also spins the twisted feather of chicks, as well as the feathers of large geese, duck feathers, Peruvian duck feathers, labancos feathers, and chicken feathers."<sup>9</sup>

It is also reasonable to deduce that this work process was carried out in Guatemala, and once the feathers were spun properly, feather art pieces could have been created. This assertion can be reinforced when considering that "Our element of study has become an object of commercial exchange with the possible purpose of becoming part of an ornamental object, but it also serves as a tribute. From the Title of the House of Ixquin-Nehaib, Lady of the Territory of Otzoyá, this condition of the feather with the aforementioned purpose is demonstrated."

"And then news came to all our ancestors from Moctezuma, sending word to them to pay tribute, and they did so. They dispatched many Quetzal feathers, gold, emeralds, pearls, diamonds, cacao, pataxte, and also blankets of everything they were given here by the chiefs, sending so much to Moctezuma in Tlaxcala, where the aforementioned Moctezuma was located."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ruz, Alberto. Op. Cit. Pág. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Toñón Pablos, Enriqueta. Op. Cit. Pág. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Morales Castellanos, Gabriel. *Reminiscencias del Arte Plumario en la tradición Popular Indígena de Guatemala*. Publicación Folklore Americano, Número 44, Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, México, 1987.

It is important not to overlook that the Quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala, and its plumage has been associated with divinities and great lords. The female contribution in working with feathers involved creating useful objects for "Works with a social purpose." Additionally, feathers served as a form of tribute from an ancient Guatemalan community to Moctezuma.

## **Culinary art**

Since the Pre-Hispanic era, the "Art of Cooking" has also been important within women's crafts, as evidenced by the continued presence of dishes from that time in our diets today. For example, "tortillas" remain a staple food in the Guatemalan diet, highlighting the significant contributions of women in creating flavorful dishes for the senses of smell and taste. However, for now, it is advisable to only mention these contributions, as this topic is extensive and deserving of a special study.

## **Dance**

"Landa mentions a dance, the nahual, in which men and women took part—usually only men or only women participated—and which the chronicler describes as 'not very decent.'"<sup>11</sup>

It is likely that women participated as artistic subjects in dance. However, the Spanish conquest brought new ideas regarding this, as Christian morality tended to sideline what it did not understand. The movements and costumes of indigenous dances may not have been easy for Spanish priests to comprehend, and therefore, they likely dismissed them as a temptation to their customs.

On the other hand, dance in Pre-Hispanic society had a ritualistic character and was an art that did not endure across time and space. Undoubtedly, with the introduction of a new religious ideology, the worship of ancient deities was prohibited, leading to the decline of ancient dances. Because of these main reasons described, it is difficult to reconstruct the role of women in this art. However, this initial brief approach should serve as a starting point for future study of the topic.

## **Literature**

Within the literature rooted in Pre-Hispanic culture, two notable figures mentioned in the Popol Vuh (the ancient stories of the Quiché) are "The Diviner, the Shaper, named Chiracan Ixmucané"<sup>12</sup> and "the maiden Ixquic."<sup>13</sup> In both cases, women act as sources of inspiration in literature for ideological and didactic purposes. The first exemplifies a model of companionship for men, even aiding them in their creative endeavors and being considered equal to them. The second

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<sup>11</sup> Ruz, Alberto. Op. Cat. Pág 261.

<sup>12</sup> Anónimo. Popol Vuh. Op. Cit. Pág. 138.

<sup>13</sup> IDEM. Pág. 58.

illustrates the virtues of youth, such as curiosity, naivety, and innocence, which are indisputable attributes of young women.

### **The art of basketry**

Another branch of Guatemalan applied arts of Pre-Hispanic origin is the art of basketry, the crafting of various useful items that, being unique pieces, possess a character of "popular beauty." One notable example is "petates," made from a type of reed that grows along riverbanks. Petates serve as sleeping mats, especially in warm areas, and are also used as carpets or room dividers to provide privacy within homes.

Women are still responsible today for sourcing the raw materials to weave petates, doing their best to create high-quality products and selling them in the nearest market. The most in-demand petates are those with the best design, size, and quality, as I personally observed in the municipal center of the Chiquimula Department in the eastern part of the country. I also obtained information indicating that Quetzaltepeque and the village of San Nicolás are locations where these petates are made.

Another part of these creative activities involves a large number of women who specialize in making baskets and trays for various purposes. There is a special focus on design and craftsmanship, especially for those used domestically. Nowadays, these items have become highly stylized for purely commercial purposes, with some even replacing natural fibers with plastic materials.

Within the category of basketry, we can also include the works of jarcia and sibaque, typical of the eastern region of Guatemala, which are sometimes embellished with embroidery using cotton threads, wool, lustrines, and other materials.

### **Pottery**

The deep Pre-Hispanic roots in this branch of Applied Arts can be inferred from the survival of this traditional art in Chinautla, a town located on the outskirts of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción in the northern area. In this community, a significant number of indigenous women are dedicated to crafting various items such as pots, planters, and other household utensils. This continuity of traditional craftwork reflects the enduring cultural heritage and skills passed down through generations in Guatemala.

Some of these objects stand out because they incorporate artistic details, as their creators go beyond simply making functional items and add elements of their personality to their craftsmanship.

The origin of this artistic tradition can be traced back to the division of labor based on gender, where women were responsible for household care and had to

create useful objects for the home. They added their personal touch to these items, and the process of crafting has been passed down from generation to generation. This tradition reflects the creativity, resourcefulness, and skills of women in adapting and enhancing practical objects within their domestic roles.

This matter can be easily confirmed by interviewing any random indigenous woman. When I asked a neighbor in Chinautla about this topic, she responded, "Every woman should know how to do household things when she gets married." This response underscores the cultural expectation that women possess practical skills related to household tasks, including traditional craftwork, as part of their domestic responsibilities.<sup>14</sup>

Otra persona consultada sobre el mismo tema, pero siendo originaria de la aldea San Nicolás en el municipio de Quetzaltepeque en el Oriente del país, respondió: "En mi tierra, las madres enseñan a sus hijas el oficio doméstico, como hacer ollas y comales, y todas debemos saber hacer petates y canastas".<sup>15</sup>

The previous inquiries reveal remnants of a sexual division of labor inherited directly from their ancestors, although this evidence is also not sufficient to admit that all pottery was made by women, since primarily during the Pre-Hispanic era, crafting religious objects was considered men's work, as previously mentioned.

### **Feminine appreciation of art**

Since the Pre-Hispanic era, it was the woman who first shared artistic inclinations with other family members; she was the first to guide and endorse these activities. To illustrate this issue, I took some excerpts from the Popol Vuh, which reinforce this assertion.

"Immediately they began to play the flute, playing the song of Hunahpú-Qoy. Then they sang, played the flute and the drum, taking their flutes and drum. Afterwards, they seated their grandmother beside them and continued playing and calling with the music and song, chanting the song called Hunahpú-Qoy."

Finally, Hunbatz and Hunchouén arrived, and upon arriving, they started to dance. However, when the old woman saw their ugly faces, she burst out laughing upon seeing them, unable to contain her laughter. They immediately left and were not seen again.<sup>16</sup>

The previous reference is a passage from one of the stories of the ancient Quiché people. We can observe the feminine appreciation of art, whether as a subject directly participating in artistic creation, or as an object serving as inspiration for it. Here, there is evidence of a role as "audience or subject of artistic

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<sup>14</sup> Informante María Antún, Edad 32 años, Vecina de Chinautia

<sup>15</sup> Informante Juliana López. Edad 54 años, vecina de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, originaria de la aldea San Nicolás, Municipio de Quetzaltepeque, Depto. de Chiquimula.

<sup>16</sup> Anónimo, Popol Vuh Op C Cap N. P

appreciation"—a person for whom a creation is made and who, through laughter, sanctioned the representation.

The same chapter, in another of its passages, tells us:

"Then Humbatz and Hunchouén became enraged. They only amused themselves by playing the flute and singing, by painting and sculpting, in which they spent the whole day, and they were the solace of the old woman."<sup>17</sup>

We can infer that even in the Pre-Hispanic era in Guatemala, there were full-time artists. However, dedicating oneself solely to art was probably not entirely well-regarded, as it was considered merely entertainment in the text. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that this activity, alongside keeping the family together, was a very important bond as it "served as solace for the old woman"; a reason that once again denotes a profound relationship between home, art, and women as an essential part of their household, serving as the audience or sanctioning the creations not only in educating their children but even when these children reached a certain maturity.

### **Female external grooming**

There are few contributions on the topic of clothing and grooming among women during the Pre-Hispanic era; some information has been rescued, and from there, we deduce that in Mesoamerica, women had a taste for their personal appearance and "how they liked to style and groom themselves." Likewise, the use of oils and colors, as well as clothing, was noted.<sup>18</sup>

We can infer some type of feminine aesthetic from observing sculptures of the period. The same applies to painting, with the most classic example preserved in the Bonampak mural, depicting a scene of grooming, along with other evidence found on stuccoed and painted ceremonial vessels depicting scenes of daily life. However, specialized studies on this topic remain an area of inquiry due to its breadth.

### **Final observations**

This work constitutes a first approach to the study of the relationships of Pre-Hispanic women with art in its various aspects: as creative subjects, as sources of inspiration enriched through the work carried out with a new role, that of "art appreciation"—serving as teachers and collaborative companions in the artistic process.

It should be noted that as these are the initial steps of research and exposition on the topic, the treatment of each subtopic may be somewhat superficial and imprecise. However, this will undoubtedly be corrected with the emergence of new

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<sup>17</sup> IDEM. Pag. 3

<sup>18</sup> Toñón Pablos, Enriqueta. Op. Cit. Págs. 129 a 133.



research that sheds light, with the knowledge of new insights, on the leading role of women in Guatemalan society from its earliest formation to the present day.