ART HISTORY: INTERPRETING CULTURE THROUGH VISUAL ARTS

Art historians write to enrich our understanding of and appreciation for both art and culture. Like all other writers, they write to change the world, but they do so in subtle ways. In their writing, art historians help you better understand a piece of art, the artist, and the human culture that influenced the artist. First, they direct your attention to the most significant elements of a piece of art; under their guidance you notice what you might otherwise have ignored. In this way, they shape what you deem important—a powerful rhetorical move. Second, they offer background information about the artist, the artistic genre, the historical period, and the cultural context. When you understand this information, you can comprehend what the artist was trying to convey and why she made the artistic choices that she did. Finally, art historians suggest how you might interpret the art. Art historians do all this because they value the messages that art conveys—messages to the viewer about art and the artist’s culture. Reading the writing of art historians expands our understanding of human nature and culture; in turn, as you learn more about how humans create culture you gain an even richer understanding of art, others, and yourself. The long-term effect of such change—reshaping your understanding of people and their cultures—is powerful.
A Portable Rhetorical Lesson:
Looking, Pointing, and Interpreting

In this chapter we focus on how you can use images and words to clarify and enrich an interpretation. The chapter’s portable rhetorical lesson is the strategy of pointing and saying, “If you want to understand, look—but look purposefully and knowledgeably.” The images do more than merely illustrate the words; words and images collaborate to help the reader develop a fuller understanding of a complex idea.

Wise writers have always combined words and images to communicate effectively when things get complicated. If you need to explain how to wire an electrical outlet, you will use both a list of steps and a diagram rather than asking your audience to imagine what the inside of an outlet looks like. Furthermore, the extensive visual capabilities of word processing software and electronic slideshows such as PowerPoint have made it simple to combine words and images—so easy that many writers slap words and images together without considering how they work together or how they relate to the topic of the presentation. These are the presentations that bore some viewers and confuse others. Art historians can teach you much about how to do this work more intelligently.

**Chapter Topics:** Power is the common theme here: power of kings, divine power that is balanced by human limits, the power of a proverb as seen through the eyes of common people, political power, the power of images to tell stories and soothe or excite emotions, and even the power of an observer, of one who points, to shape meaning.

**To Think About. . .**

Middle school history teachers commonly assign their students to create a family crest as a way of engaging them in the distant world of medieval England. Typically, these family crests are comprised of three parts: a shield (the background shape), a set of images, and a motto. Think back to middle school. If you had been asked to create a family crest for your own family, what would it have looked like? What images would you have selected to represent your family’s best qualities? What words would you use to represent what your family believes most dearly?

**WRITING IN ART HISTORY**

Introduction by Henry Luttikhuizen,
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As the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Visual images and objects are extremely helpful in teaching us about the world and ourselves. One only needs to consider the medical use of magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs), an architect’s use of blueprint, or a good hiking map to see the value of pictures. Diagrams, charts, and
illustrations enable us to convey our ideas more clearly and with greater depth. The problem with the old saying is that it equates words and images: 1 image = 1,000 words. And that badly oversimplifies the rhetoric of art history.

Art historians work to develop the observational skills of their readers, helping them to be better at understanding images, but using both pictures and words to do that. Art historians point out particular features of the art and suggest how those features might be interpreted. They put those interpretive suggestions in the context of historical and cultural information, and they keep their reader’s eyes fixed on the art and not on the art historian.

In the following short essay, a chapter from an exhibition catalogue, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller provide an excellent model of art-historical writing. Their words do not attempt to reproduce an entire picture; rather, their writing enables us to focus on important visual elements and therefore think about the art more clearly. (And the words are frequently necessary complements to the art because in some of the sculpture it is hard to understand what we see without the authors’ explanations.) The authors effectively address such things as the materials used to make the art, the location, and the cultural conventions exhibited by art objects, helping readers to understand the connection between ritualistic bloodletting and mystical vision in ancient Maya civilization.

The practice of art history requires us to bring verbal and visual modes of communication together; it is, in a sense, an occasion for “show and tell.” Words do not merely describe pictures; they point out certain characteristics of the pictures. They suggest that particular aspects of a work are noteworthy. Schele and Miller do not try to explain everything they possibly can about specific images. They draw our attention to particular details in hopes of supporting their argument concerning the connections among visual imagery, divine bloodletting, and mystical vision. For instance, in their discussion of Lintel 25 (Plate 63, page 146), Schele and Miller concentrate on the relationship between the depiction of Lady Xoc’s bloody gift and the evocation of the Vision Serpent, who makes it possible to communicate with the gods. Throughout the text, the authors direct us to the visual features of objects and connect those features to their social, political, and religious function. The figurine of a noble lord piercing himself (Plate 69, page 152), for example, reveals how mighty Maya leaders must also serve as sacrificial victims on behalf of their people.

Interpreting the symbolic content of art fosters greater cultural and aesthetic appreciation and understanding, but it is important not to overlook other artistic features, such as the style, the size of the work, its physical location, and the materials used to create it. As Schele and Miller point out, precious stones were carved in the form of stingray lancets. Although these objects were not used to perforate human flesh (other materials could serve this ritualistic task more effectively), these cut stones worked as powerful symbols that possessed more strength than an actual stingray spine. The spine-like appearance of the carved object conveyed bloodletting, while the use of precious stones suggested permanence and value.
Good art historiography does more than just point to the art; it is also always contextual. That is to say, it takes the original historical setting into account. Ideas from other disciplines are often imported to strengthen points in the argument. Schele and Miller, for instance, bring biology into the discussion by addressing the power of endorphins, which can be released by blood loss, to induce hallucinogenic visions, such as those depicted in Maya art. They also attempt to describe what the setting of a ritual would have looked like: “The rising clouds of swirling smoke provided the perfect field in which to see the Vision Serpent; gazing into the smoke, the celebrants may have actually seen it.”

Because art history is like “show and tell,” sometimes students confuse it with creative writing. Although every experience of art is subjective, art history writing should not be understood as an opportunity for personal expression. The focus needs to remain on the visual image or object instead of on the writer. For example, Schele and Miller may have been deeply moved by ancient art in Mexico, but they do not concentrate on their own experiences or on how these objects have touched their lives. On the contrary, they address how these works affected their initial audience, the people who looked at these images and used them.

In summary, art historians’ words about pictures are rhetorical tools intended to guide viewers in a particular interpretive direction. Schele and Miller effectively direct the reader’s eyes to visual characteristics that support and clarify their ideas. They successfully link the appearance of visual images and objects to their intended meaning and use within Maya society. Their careful descriptions of Maya art encourage readers to look more closely at the images, to become more engaged with what they are seeing and what they are reading. Perhaps this is the greatest strength of Schele and Miller’s writing. They are able to entice readers to learn more about these powerful pictures in conjunction with Maya bloodletting rituals. Simply put, the authors are able to use their words to open their reader’s eyes to see fascinating qualities of Maya art. And opening our eyes to others helps us better to see and understand ourselves.

**READING TIPS**

Look at the pictures on pages 145–153. Try to imagine their textures, their size in real life, their stories, their characters, their sense of realism and fantasy. When you read the text, regularly flip to the pictures to see first-hand what the authors are pointing out to you. Finally, read for two elements: (1) descriptions of the art itself, (2) historical information about the art and culture. Remember that art history is the study of the interconnections of art and history; lose yourself in the art, but remember that the art also helps you understand the culture and history of the Mayans.
Think about the rhetorical effect of starting with this quotation: It focuses immediately on a historical account of blood sacrifice. So it both catches your interest with the words and conjures up very vivid, gruesome images.

Yucatan is a large peninsula in southeastern Mexico.

Classic Maya is the period from roughly, A.D. 200–900.

The Late Preclassic Period went from 300 B.C, to A.D. 200.

Obsidian and flint are stones used to make sharp-edged tools—which could be used for cutting flesh.

This sentence is the simple version of the thesis of the whole book. The three sentences that precede this statement outline the particulars of the thesis as it is developed in this chapter. So, as is common in humanities essays, you find the thesis at the end of the first paragraph.

Event glyphs are visual markers depicting historical events.

Bloodletting and the Vision Quest

*Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller*

Chapter 4, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*

They offered sacrifices of their own blood, sometimes cutting themselves around in pieces and they left them in this way as a sign. Other times they pierced their cheeks, at others their lower lips. Sometimes they scarify certain parts of their bodies, at others they pierced their tongues in a slanting direction from side to side and passed bits of straw through the holes with horrible suffering; others slit the superfluous part of the virile member leaving it as they did their ears.¹

Thus did Diego de Landa, the first bishop of Yucatan, describe the blood-letting of the Yucatec Mayas. During the early years after the Conquest, similar ritual practices were reported from all the regions occupied by Mayan-speaking peoples. Bloodletting imagery pervades Classic Maya art as well. Archaeological evidence for it is abundant, although much of the regalia made of perishable materials is lost. Beginning in the Late Preclassic period, lancets made of stingray spines, obsidian and flint are regularly found in burials and caches. Stingray spines, for example, are often found in the pelvic regions of the dead and were perhaps originally contained in bags hung from belts. It is clear that bloodletting was basic to the institution of rulership, to the mythology of world order, and to public rituals of all sorts. Through bloodletting the Maya sought a vision they believed to be the manifestation of an ancestor or a god. Thus the Maya expressed piety by letting blood from all parts of the body. Blood was the mortar of ritual life from Late Preclassic times until the arrival of the Spanish, who were shocked by the practice and discouraged it as idolatrous worship.

While the importance of blood sacrifice in Mesoamerican societies has long been recognized, the practice was considered to be Mexican rather than fundamentally Maya. The recognition of event glyphs and the deciphering of iconography associated with bloodletting in the last twenty years has changed this view radically.² The Spanish reaction was not exaggerated: bloodletting did permeate Maya life. For kings, every stage in life, every event of political or religious importance, every significant period ending required sanctification through bloodletting. When buildings were dedicated, crops planted, children born, couples married or the dead buried, blood was given to express piety and call the gods into attendance.
Consequently, the lancet—the instrument for drawing blood—became a sacred object infused with power. Models of stingray spines were manufactured from precious stone, not for use as lancets but rather as symbols of the power inherent in the spine. The Maya carved bone awls with bloodletting imagery to declare their function as lancets and to use in the costuming that signaled the rite. The concept of the lancet itself was personified in the form of the Perforator God, although this personified lancet is perhaps more accurately considered a sacred power object rather than a deity. The triple and double cloth knots tied around the forehead of the Perforator God became the most pervasive symbol of the bloodletting rite. The Maya wore cloth strips and knotted bows on their arms and legs, through pierced earlobes, in the hair and in clothing. Sacrificial paper made from the felted bark of the fig tree was used as cloth; unlike all other kinds of cloth, both this paper cloth and cotton cloth were cut and torn when used in the bloodletting rite. After the paper cloth became saturated with blood, it was burned in a brazier, for the gods apparently required that blood be transformed into smoke in order to consume it. Thus the icons of smoke and blood came to be indistinguishable in visual form; both are rendered as a bifurcated scroll, the specific reference for which is determined by context or by the addition of modifying signs. In order to make this scroll understood indisputably as blood, the Maya added precious signs, such as bone beads or shells, to its basic configuration. Maya cosmological symbolism suggests that the building element of the Middleworld was blood; it was certainly the most precious and sacred substance of this world.

The sacred text of the Maya, recorded after the Spanish conquest. Note how the way the authors tell the story in this paragraph evokes the tone of ancient mythology. The rhetorical effect is to put the reader in the mindset of the people who made and viewed the art.

The creation story of the Popol Vuh provides a context for the rite of bloodletting. At the beginning of all things, when the creator gods finished their work, they wanted to be recognized by their living creations. The birds and beasts of the fields answered them with only a meaningless cacophony of sound, and for that they were forever destined to be the food of man and of one another. The gods tried several times to create special creatures who would know them, but nothing worked. Finally, using maize for flesh and water for blood, they created human beings who could recognize them and understand their relationship to the creator gods. The gods’ prolonged efforts are central to the understanding of bloodletting: they wanted creatures to “name [their] names, to praise them” and to be their providers and nurturers. The gods wanted creatures who could worship them, but—more important—they also needed men to give them sustenance.
Permeating this creation myth as well as many parallel myths from other Mesoamerican peoples is the concept of a reciprocal relationship between humans and the gods. The earth and its creatures were created through a sacrificial act of the gods, and human beings, in turn, were required to strengthen and nourish the gods. Gods and humans cannot exist without each other. It is clear from Classic Maya art and inscriptions, as well as from the Popol Vuh, that blood drawn from all parts of the body—especially from the tongue, earlobes, and genitals—was sustenance for the gods.

Some of the most dramatic representations of the Maya act of ritual bloodletting occur on two series of lintels found in buildings at Yaxchilan. The three lintels in each series are designed as a single program encoding one level of information into the imagery and another into the inscriptions. The scenes portray different points in the same ritual that compose a narrative whole, much like sequential frames in a comic strip. The inscriptions, however, record widely separated dates, implying that the same ritual occurred on several different occasions. This approach to narrative programming was attempted first by the artist called the Cookie Cutter Master during Shield Jaguar’s reign, then repeated thirty years later, in the reign of his son, Bird Jaguar.

The sequence of lintels featuring Shield Jaguar . . . begins over the left doorway of Structure 23 with a scene of bloodletting (Plate 62, Lintel 24, page 145). Elegantly dressed, Shield Jaguar wears the shrunken head of a past victim tied to the top of his head, signaling his sacrificial role. His principal wife, Lady Xoc, kneels before him in a huipil of finely woven, complex design. Her headdress, with its tassels, bar, trapeze and Tlaloc signs signal that she is engaged in a very special bloodletting rite that will eventually include captive sacrifice. She pulls a thorn-lined rope through the wound in her perforated tongue, letting the rope fall into a woven basket full of blood-spotted paper strips. Lady Xoc’s lips and cheeks are covered with the dotted scrolls that signify the blood streaming from her wounded mouth.

Lintel 25, the second in the series, shows the consequence and purpose of the bloodletting rite (Plate 63, Lintel 25, page 146). The same woman, still kneeling, gazes upward at an apparition, a Tlaloc warrior, emerging from the gaping mouth of a Vision Serpent. In her left hand, she holds a bloodletting bowl with the bloody paper, a stingray spine and an obsidian lancet; in the right hand, a skull and serpent symbol. The Vision Serpent rises from a separate bowl placed on the ground in front of her. The
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Plate 62 (Lintel 24)

The serpent is double headed, perhaps as a reminder of the royal scepter and the fact that the occasion of the rite is Shield Jaguar’s accession. The serpent’s writhing body surges upward through a blood scroll, declaring that the vision materializes from blood itself. The Tlaloc god and warrior brought forth refer to a special sacrificial complex that the Maya associated with the god of the
evening star and with war. During the accession rites of the king, his wife underwent bloodletting so that she could communicate with this warrior, who may have been a dead ancestor or a symbol of the king’s role as warrior in this cult. The warrior is not named, but it is clear that the purpose of the bloodletting rite was to cause this vision to materialize.

Today, scientists acknowledge that endorphins—chemically related to the opiates and produced by the brain in response to massive blood loss—can induce hallucinogenic experiences. But the Maya also knew that drawing large amounts of blood would, without the help of other drugs, produce visions that were the raison d’être of their rituals. Through such visions, the Maya came directly into contact with their gods and ancestors. The great rearing serpent—the physical manifestation of visions arising from blood loss and shock—was the contact between the supernatural realm and the world of human beings. The precise supernatural being contacted by the rite is manifested by the image in the mouth of the Vision Serpent.

The Vision Serpent may have been more than a symbolic manifestation of hallucination. Information from Room 3 at Bonampak as well as from other pictorial records makes it possible to reconstruct some parts of the rituals that took place in the great open plazas of Maya cities. Against a backdrop of terraced architecture, elaborately costumed dancers, musicians, warriors, and nobles entered the courts in long processions. Dancers whirled across the plaza floors and terrace platforms to music made on rattles, whistles, wooden trumpets and drums of all sizes. A crowd of participants wearing bloodletting paper or cloth tied in triple knots sat on platforms and terraces around the plaza. According to Bishop Landa, these people would have prepared themselves with days of fasting, abstinence, and ritual steam baths. Well into the ceremony, the ruler and his wife would emerge from within a building high above the court, and in full public view, he would lacerate his penis, she her tongue. Ropes drawn through their wounds carried the flowing blood to paper strips. The saturated paper—perhaps along with other offerings, such as rubber (the chicle resin from which chewing gum is made)—were placed in large plates, then carried to braziers and burned, creating columns of black smoke. The participants, already dazed through deprivation, public hysteria and massive blood loss, were culturally conditioned to expect a hallucinatory experience. The rising clouds of swirling smoke provided the perfect field in which to see the Vision Serpent; gazing into the smoke, the celebrants may have actually seen it.
At Yaxchilan, the final act in Shield Jaguar’s sequence is recorded on Lintel 26 (photo not included). Shield Jaguar, already dressed in cotton armor, carries a short stabbing knife. Lady Xoc stands silently beside him with blood still oozing from her wounded mouth. In her hands, she holds her husband’s jaguar helmet and flexible shield. She is helping him prepare for battle, perhaps to take captives for the final sacrificial act.

Bird Jaguar, Shield Jaguar’s son, came to the throne in A.D. 752, ten years after his father’s death. He constructed a building to house lintels showing the same three scenes commissioned by his father; however, he ordered the scenes
differently by centering the war scene on Lintel 16, then flanking it on the left with the vision scene (Plate 65, Lintel 15, page 148) and on the right with the bloodletting scene (Plate 64, Lintel 17, above). The capture recorded in Lintel 16 occurred only eight days before the bloodletting depicted on Lintel 17, which was, according to its inscription, conducted in celebration of the birth of Bird Jaguar’s heir, on 9.16.0.14.5, or February 18, A.D. 752.

Lady Balam-Ix, the woman who lets blood on Lintel 17 (Plate 64), is not the mother of the newborn but apparently a second wife of Bird Jaguar who publicly lets blood in celebration of the birth of her husband’s heir. She wears the same costume Lady Xoc wears in the earlier narrative sequence, which suggests that these rituals were closely regulated by tradition. The rope she uses to draw blood from her tongue, however, is not lined with thorns, perhaps because the artist neglected to represent them or because the thorn-lined rope was used only by Lady Xoc as a special gesture of piety. Bird Jaguar is shown preparing for his self-mutilation, thus
confirming that the king and his wife both performed the mutilation rite and offered blood. Interestingly, by wearing a skull and snake headdress identical to those used by Lady Xoc on Lintel 25 (page 146), Bird Jaguar seems to be emphasizing a special association with his father’s principal wife, even though she was not his own mother.

On Lintel 15 (page 148), Lady 6-Tun, yet another of Bird Jaguar’s wives, stares at the vision she has brought forth through bloodletting (Plate 65). Her *huipil* repeats the one Lady Xoc wore in this rite a generation before, although she contacts a different, unidentified person. He may embody the idea of sacrifice, just as the Tlaloc warrior on Lintel 25 personifies sacrifice and the Tlaloc war complex.

Both of these series of lintels are associated with accession. The vision scene on Lintel 25 took place on the day of Shield Jaguar’s accession, and the bloodletting and capture scenes of Bird Jaguar’s series occurred only seventy-five days before his accession. The Maya had long practiced bloodletting rituals as a required preparation for, or conclusion to, accession rites.

The association of bloodletting with accession was carried into a variety of media. A Late Classic cylindrical pot from the Dumbarton Oaks collection (Plate 68, page 151) shows an episodic narrative of accession. In the primary scene, Balam-Puahtun, the new king, is seated on a bench in his palace surrounded by members of his court. In the smaller and more important scene, the king, standing outside the palace, aims a lancet at his penis, while one of his nobles pulls a rope through his own tongue. The noble takes on the role performed by the king’s wife at Yaxchilan. Furthermore, the nobleman participant on this pot wears the same type of headdress as the wives at Yaxchilan. Thus, the ritual role rather than the gender or rank of the practitioner determines the headdress.

In his seventeenth-century account of the ceremony, Fray Delgado, a Spanish priest, vividly described the method of drawing blood from the penis, as practiced among the Manche Chol Maya:

In Vicente Pach’s ranch I saw the sacrifice. They took a chisel and wooden mallet, placed the one who had to sacrifice himself on a smooth stone slab, took out his penis, and cut it in three parts two finger breadths [up], the largest in the center, saying at the same time incantations and words I did not understand. . . .

An extant figurine (Plate 69, page 152) displays the exact procedure. A seated lord, who is cutting his penis with a sharp blade held in his right hand, sheds drops of blood onto blue
paper. The rope collar he wears symbolizes his acceptance of the role of penitent; he is a lord, but for this rite he has taken on the symbolic trappings of the lowliest of humans, the captive whose destiny is to die in sacrifice. His face, like that of the seventeenth-century Manche Chol practitioner, does not reveal pain, although other figurines show victims screaming in agony. Perhaps the ability to bear pain stoically was admired as both courageous and pious.

Bloodletting had one final function for the Maya: to bring the gods into man’s presence. This aspect is best conveyed by the imagery of the scattering rite. Long thought to symbolize either the beneficent distribution of bounty to the people or the casting of maize seeds in augury, the scattering rite is named simply for the action shown—the scattering of what looks like pellets or streams, which are now recognized as blood. This rite was performed to celebrate the period endings in the Long Count calendar, especially the katun, the hotun (five years) and the lahuntun (ten years).
La Pasadita Lintel 2 (Plate 76, page 153) is a particularly good illustration of the scattering rite. Bird Jaguar, the king of Yaxchilan, is marking a period ending (9.16.10.0.0) with the cabal or underlord, who ruled La Pasadita for him. Dressed in the symbolic array of Chac-Xib-Chac and wearing his father’s name on his belt to declare his line of descent, Bird Jaguar drops a dotted stream of blood into a knot-shrouded brazier. His groin is covered with the Perforator God, marking the source of the blood offering he drops. The cabal stands nearby, ready to assist him in performing the rite.

During both the Early and the Late Classic periods, this rite is recorded either in images or inscriptions at most sites; around A.D. 780, however, the Maya of the central Peten began depicting it in a new way. Although, as before, the king wears an elaborate costume and drops blood from his hands, new elements—gods wrapped in blood scrolls—float
ancient deities who travel through life in canoes

Here we see an expansion of the chapter’s thesis. The vision achieved through bloodletting has consequences beyond personal visionary experience. And the language of the typically cautious authors becomes bold: “The conclusion is inescapable… .”

around his head. Some of these floating gods are presently unidentified, although the principal ones are the two Paddler Gods. That the scrolls surrounding the gods are blood seems certain, since they are identical in form to the material through which the Vision Serpents of Yaxchilan rise and identical to the substance scattered by Bird Jaguar. One aspect of the scattering rite, then, is that gods are found to float in blood scrolls—much as the Vision Serpent rises through blood in other rituals . . .

The declaration of these births is explained by the symbolism of the period ending rites that the monument commemorates. Scattering was the principal period ending rite throughout Late Classic Maya history; scattering was a bloodletting rite; the Paddlers are the gods in the blood scrolls above the king’s head; and the Paddlers are the gods born. The conclusion is inescapable—the act of bloodletting literally gave birth to the gods. The Maya believed that bloodletting brought the gods as well as their ancestors into
physical existence in human space and time. Thus the Vision Serpents were more than symbolic representations of hallucinations; they were the bodily fulfillment of those visions. The god or ancestor contacted in ritual actually appeared, and when the ritual ended, he was gone.

The power of ritual to incarnate the supernatural may also explain why the king could appear in so many different guises. It appears that the king was conceived to be a vessel of sorts and that through ritual, a god was brought into his body. At the end of a ritual, the god would depart, but in the next ritual, another god would come to reside within the vessel. This ability to host the supernatural may have been shared by all Maya, for masks and body suits are worn by many participants of public ritual. For the duration of a ritual, they would become the gods they impersonated.

Inscriptions associated with bloodletting rites imply other birthing symbolism: the king became “the mother of the gods” by giving them birth through ritual. This relationship is explicitly stated at Palenque, where the gods of the Palenque Triad are called “the children of Pacal and Chan-Bahlum.” The glyph that records this relationship is one that stands between a mother and her child in all other contexts. The king is the mother of the gods because he gives them birth and nourishes them through his gift of blood. The blood scrolls and Paddler figures that float above the scattering king are pictorial representations of the result of bloodletting—the physical manifestation of the gods.

The ability to give birth to the gods through ritual is an awe-inspiring concept, for it means that ritual was far more than role playing. As the bearer of the most potent blood among humankind, the king was the focus of tremendous power—thus the pervasiveness of scenes showing his bloodletting in Maya art. Through his gift of blood, the king brought the gods to life and drew the power of the supernatural into the daily lives of the Maya.13

Notes


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scenes of the act, the Perforator God and other regalia in his article “Ritual Blood-Sacrifice among the Ancient Maya, Part 1,” in the *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Part 2*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson (Pebble Beach, Calif.: Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1974), 59–77. Using this iconography as a base, epigraphers were able to identify verbs, tides and other written expressions recording the rite, which in turn led to the recognition of related pictorial representations.

3. In his study of the meaning of color in Late Preclassic architectural sculpture, David Freidel first suggested that scroll symbols for blood and smoke were identical, and he correlated an interrelationship between these two symbols and those of water and mist or clouds (“Polychrome Facades of the Lowland Maya Preclassic,” in *Painted Architecture and Polychrome Monumental Sculpture in Mesoamerica* [Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985], 5–30).


6. Shield Jaguar’s lintels were placed in Structure 23, a double-galleried, north-facing building on the lower level of the city. Lintels 24 and 25 were taken to The British Museum by Maudslay in 1882, and Lintel 26 was removed to Mexico City’s Museo Nacional de Anthropologia in 1964. Originally the top member of a door, each lintel was carved with a text on the outer surface and with a scene on the underside, facing the floor.

7. Archaeological evidence suggests a strong interaction between Teotihuacán and the Lowland Maya, beginning about A. D. 400 and lasting for some two hundred years. During that period the Maya absorbed a complex of symbols, including this headdress and the so-called Tlaloc imagery, but it is increasingly clear that the Maya redefined this symbol complex for their own purposes, thereafter associating it with bloodletting rites, both self-inflicted and involving captives. Lady Xoc’s usage of this Teotihuacanoid symbol does not mean that Teotihuacanos dominated Yaxchilan or that she was from that city; rather, it signals that this particular bloodletting ritual is being enacted.


12. David Stuart was the first epigrapher to recognize the pattern of the Paddler names in Maya inscriptions and to realize their great import to the scattering rite. He was also the first to propose the interpretation of the Dos Pilas inscriptions presented here. See David Stuart, “Blood Symbolism in Maya Iconography,” *RES* 7/8 (1984), 6–20.

13. In “Fertility, Vision Quest and Auto-Sacrifice: Some Thoughts on Ritual Blood-Letting Among the Maya,” (in *Art, Iconography, and Dynastic History of Palenque, Part III, Proceedings of the Segunda Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, ed. Merle Greene Robertson [Pebble Beach, Calif.: Robert Louis Stevenson School], 181–193). Peter Furst first suggested the interpretation of Maya bloodletting as a “vision quest: like the young Indian in the ordeals associated with the Sun Dance on the Great Plains, under certain specific circumstances the Maya may have sought to obtain divine guidance from deified ancestors or guardian spirits in an alternate state of consciousness or ecstatic trance triggered not by psychoactive plants but rather by a massive physical jolt to the system” (184). He also discusses “non-hurtful pain” and its documentation in rituals and other experience around the world.
READING RESPONSES

1. Reading this chapter, you probably learned as much about Maya culture and religion as you did about Maya art. What seems to be the role of the Maya art in this chapter? That is, does the historical and cultural information help you “see” the Maya art better or is the Maya art “evidence” of Maya cultural practices? What evidence in Schele and Miller’s chapter supports your choice?

2. Review Schele and Miller’s chapter, paying special attention to the way they shift topics between the cultural context for the art and the art itself. Choose one shift that you think is particularly effective and describe why it is effective. Choose another shift that you find to be particularly ineffective and revise it so that it’s more effective.

3. Choose one of the lintels that Schele and Miller describe. Study the image closely and then re-read what they have to say about the lintel. Do you accept everything they say about this lintel? Make a list of the claims they make about the lintel, ordering them from the claim that you are most willing to accept to the claim that you are least willing to accept. For claims that you find somewhat suspicious, what is it that makes you suspicious?

NOTES ON GRAMMAR, STYLE, AND RHETORIC:
ASSERTIVENESS AND HONESTY IN INTERPRETATION

One striking aspect of “Bloodletting and the Vision Quest” is that Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller present their statements with different levels of force or confidence. They present many of their statements as we would probably expect them to—in a straightforward manner as facts. For example, at an early point in their chapter, they write that “When buildings were dedicated, crops planted, children born, couples married or the dead buried, blood was given to express piety and call the gods into attendance” (p. 142). They present several other statements, however, with what many linguists call “modality markers,” which allow writers to show how committed they are to the truth of their statements—an honest admission that they are offering only one possible suggestion.

With the kind of modality markers called “hedges,” writers reveal a cautious commitment to the truth of their statements. Writers can hedge in many different ways (see the Notes on Grammar, Style, and Rhetoric essay in the biotechnology chapter for additional examples of hedges). They can use adverbs such as perhaps and possibly, modal verbs such as might and may, main verbs such as seem and appear, and phrases such as to our knowledge and to a certain degree. In addition, writers can use different kinds of clauses to introduce their statements: I think, I guess, I suppose, It is possible that, I find it possible that, and It’s thought that.

When writers explicitly indicate how committed they are to the truth of their statements, they do not always give a cautious assessment. Sometimes they add punch to their statements by using what are called “emphatics.” Many specific forms can function as emphatics. Writers can use adverbs such as certainly and assuredly as well as phrases such as without a doubt and with no hesitation whatsoever. They can insert clauses such as I am certain within other clauses: The Maya, I am certain, continued this practice for years. Similarly, they can introduce their
statements with clauses such as I am certain that, It is clear that, There is the certainty that, and It is surely the case that.

As noted above, Schele and Miller use a large number of modality markers. Some of these are emphatics. It is interesting that some emphatics are linked to claims that appear immediately after Schele and Miller sound a note of doubt or ignorance: “The warrior is not named, but it is clear that the purpose of the bloodletting rite was to cause this vision to materialize” (147). It is also interesting that some emphatics are linked to explicit indications of the evidence Schele and Miller use to justify a certain statement: “It is clear from Classic Maya Art and inscriptions, as well as from Popul Vuh, that blood drawn from all parts of the body—especially from the tongue, earlobes, and genitals—was sustenance for the gods” (144). Finally, it is interesting that emphatics introduce some of the statements most central to this chapter: “It is clear that bloodletting was basic to the institution of rulership, to the mythology of world order, and to public rituals of all sorts” (142).

But Schele and Miller are not certain about all of their statements, and thus they do not present them all as facts or include emphatics with them. With some statements they use hedges. In one situation they hedge lightly with the adverb apparently: “After the paper cloth became saturated with blood, it was burned in a brazier, for the gods apparently required that blood be transformed into smoke in order to consume it” (143). In another situation they hedge lightly by using the introductory clause It appears that: “It appears that the king was conceived to be a vessel of sorts and that, through ritual, a god was brought into his body” (154).

These hedges sound relatively light notes of uncertainty. But Schele and Miller also use some hedges that signal a greater degree of uncertainty. For instance, at one point they use the modal verb may. In a sentence referring to an unidentified person brought forth in a vision, they write that “He may embody the idea of sacrifice, just as the Tlaloc warrior on Lintel 25 personifies sacrifice and the Tlaloc war complex” (150). But the most prominent of the hedges signaling fairly significant uncertainty is the adverb perhaps; it appears more than six times in this chapter. Here is one example: “Stingray spines, for example, are often found in the pelvic regions of the dead and were perhaps originally contained in bags hung from belts” (142).

What we find in this chapter, then, are statements lying all along the continuum of authorial certainty. Why do the authors move through such a wide range of expressed certainty? The range of their expression accurately reflects the range of knowledge in their field at the time of their writing. It is clear that Schele and Miller are confident that some of the statements they make about the Maya and their culture are facts. Moreover, they regard some of these facts as very important. But it is also clear that Schele and Miller are not absolutely certain about what some aspects of Maya culture meant to the Maya themselves. Thus Schele and Miller often hedge statements having to do with why the Maya might have performed certain rituals and depicted them in certain ways. And if you read the endnotes for this chapter, you will notice that such statements have been debated in the interpretation of Maya culture for years; you will even notice that scholars working in this area of interpretation can point to specific dates when people made breakthroughs in understanding Maya inscriptions or drawings.

Thus the emphatics that Schele and Miller use express enthusiasm about aspects of Maya culture and about interpretive progress in the study of Maya culture. And their hedges signal respect for the complex and distant culture that they study. This is respect for difference, for the alien, in that Schele and Miller do not assume that they can interpret all aspects of Maya culture in the ways we typically interpret other cultures—easily and quickly by comparing other cultures to our own.
In Your Own Writing . . .

The writing you do in college will not always be about cultures that are alien to you. But some of the writing you do will probably deal with subjects about which you do not have complete knowledge. As you write, remember the pattern that Schele and Miller follow:

• If some of your statements can clearly be shown to be based on facts, state them directly.
• If some of your statements are based on facts and are close to the heart of your overall message, consider using an emphatic with them.
• But if some of your statements cannot be shown to be based on facts, and if these statements are controversial, use a strategically placed hedge with them.

STUDENT WRITING IN ART HISTORY

Introduction by Rebecca Merz, art history major

The Assignment. I wrote the research paper that is reprinted here for a class on African art. The assignment was very open-ended; we were instructed to write about any topic pertaining to African art, such as a specific artistic tradition among a group of people, a contemporary African artist, or even a broader theme spanning many culture groups. Since I am particularly interested in how art serves as a means of promoting royal authority, I knew that I wanted to write my paper on this theme. To narrow the topic, I chose to focus on the obas (rulers) of the Benin kingdom in Africa (in an area that is in present-day Nigeria).

The Content. The Edo people of the Benin kingdom consider their obas to be semi-divine rulers, but this is a position of much complexity, laden with many fascinating contradictions and paradoxes. This complexity is abundantly manifest in the art of the Benin people. As the central authority of the Benin kingdom, the oba has control over the production of art. Thus, the majority of Benin art was produced for the use of the oba, and for distribution according to his will. Consequently, much Benin art promotes the authority of the oba both through empowering motifs, which serve as a sort of visual “propaganda,” as well as through the innate power of the objects themselves.

The longer I looked at the images I found in my research, the more intriguing I found it and the more insight I received into the nature of Benin kingship. That gave me the confidence to point out important features of the images to my readers and offer interpretations.

Learning to Write in Art History. Once I asked my sister to read through one of my art history papers to give me some feedback, and as I read through her comments, I noticed that she asked several questions, the answers to which I thought should have been obvious. When I questioned her about this, I was appalled to find that she had not even glanced at the images included in the paper. The images are the most important part; they are what set an art history paper apart from any other kind of paper. The images and the words work together to illuminate cultural history.

Writing a good art history paper is, however, more than just carefully looking at, describing, and pointing out the features of an image. It does take careful
research. It is important to know the historical context in order to understand fully what is happening in a work of art. Religion, politics, the economy, personal relationships, and so many other factors all need to be taken into account when analyzing a work of art. The more information that can be known about the artist and the context in which he or she worked, the better that the image can be understood.

In the end, though, it is impossible to know what was in the mind of the artist as he or she created the image—or in the minds of those who have viewed the art. The best that can be done is to make an interpretation based upon visual clues and historical context. Inevitably there will be many different theories about a work of art, and it is impossible to discern which are correct and which are not. Often all that can be done is to lay out all of the arguments and allow the reader to carefully examine the image for themselves. This is what I have tried to do in my paper, for example, with the two plaques. After briefly describing the image, I offer several interpretations on the meaning of the object. Not any one of these interpretations is correct—rather they are all at work simultaneously to make the image that much more complex. I leave the reader with these various contextual details and interpretations which comprise a potential meaning for the object.

*Creating Change through Writing in Art History.* Every day we are bombarded by images, many of which we interpret subconsciously. They become so commonplace that we do not even pay them much thought. There is much to learn, though, by training ourselves to really think about what we are looking at. Images play an integral role both in the formation of culture as well as the reflection of culture. Images reveal society’s beliefs and values, and they are manipulated for specific ends, including the creation of political and cultural beliefs. This is certainly true of the Benin society. Examining Benin royal art reveals that art has a great deal of power.

Writing art history helps to develop a critical understanding of the various roles that images play as well as the power that they have to reflect and shape society, whether that be in the past or in the present. The ability to intelligently describe, explain, and interpret images leads to not only a greater insight into culture, and a greater appreciation for the visual arts, but also to a greater ability to discern the important role that images play in society. And that has certainly changed the way I experience and understand culture.
Benin, overthrew the Ogiso with the help of their Yoruba neighbors in Ife. The king of Ife sent his son, Oranmiyan, to Benin. Oranmiyan married an Edo maiden, and their son became the first oba of Benin, the first oba in a dynasty that continues to the present.

This legend illustrates well the complex nature of the office of the oba. Through marriage to an Edo woman, the divine nature of the Yoruba kings fused with the political authority of the native Benin rulers to form a new dynasty. Thus the oba of Benin is both human and divine. As such, he not only occupies the highest position in the Benin social hierarchy, but he is also able to act as a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms. The oba has the power over life and death, and is capable of both great wrath and great benevolence. Yet for all of his supernatural ability, the oba does not wield complete and absolute authority. He is dependent upon the many chiefs and court officials who check his power. The art produced by the Benin court reflects the complicated nature of the oba, which is, in essence, a composite of paradoxes.

The oba of Benin has many supernatural powers. He is not thought to participate in ordinary human activities like sleeping and eating. These actions are not even alluded to in his presence. The oba is believed to have psychic ability, and is considered so powerful that his feet cannot touch the ground without causing great devastation. He controls the forces that affect all aspects of Benin life and culture. Ritual and regalia enhance the oba’s innate power. Coral, an important material in Benin, was controlled by the oba, who distributed it to various court officials as a sign of their loyalty as well as his power over them. The royal coral, which is only worn by the king, consists of an elaborate headdress and often includes netted coral beads that cover the oba’s entire person. The coral is more than mere ornamentation; it is believed to make everything spoken in its presence come true. It gives the oba mystical abilities, the right to issue punishment, and the power to utter an irrevocable curse.

The immense power of the oba is evident in the commemorative brass heads, which are an important class of Benin art. The brass head shown in Figure 1 is characteristic of Benin brass heads. It portrays the oba wearing royal regalia, in particular, the elaborate coral headdress. A comparison of this brass sculpture to the photograph of Oba Akenzua II shows the continuity between Benin sculpture and the actual regalia worn by the kings. The brass heads, while they were likely intended to represent a specific oba, are not individualized portraits, rather, they are a stylized depiction of the king.
Figure 1  Brass head.
That the image is in itself a generalization of the oba rather than an individual portrait speaks to the ritual nature of the office itself. The oba is a unique individual, but more than that, he is venerated as the embodiment of a political institution. He is a person, but his very existence is symbolic and ritual. For the Edo people, the head represents the seat of wisdom. Ceremonies to strengthen the head of the oba take place yearly. Brass, the material from which the heads are cast, also has complex symbolism. Because it neither rusts nor corrodes, brass represents the continuity and permanence of the monarchy. In addition, its reddish color is thought to keep evil forces at bay. These heads are kept on ancestral altars and usually represent the oba or the queen mother. Brass heads served as a base for elaborately carved elephant tusks. Ivory was a substance to which the oba had exclusive claim. He had rights to one tusk from every elephant killed, and since the oba served as the controller of the ivory trade with Europeans, the material represented great wealth. The white color of ivory is a sign of purity, and the possession of elephant tusks gives the oba the physical power of the elephant as well as its associations with leadership, longevity, and wisdom. Finally, the elephant tusk forms a vertical projection from the top of the head, which the Edo consider to be the threshold between the physical and spiritual realms, and thus, the place where spirit possession takes place. This vertical axis is important in Benin culture, and it also appears in palace architecture and the coiffures of the queen mother. The spiritual qualities of ivory carved with empowering motifs, coupled with the sacrifices made on the altar and the placement of the tusk on the top of the head, works to channel power from the commemorative image of the king through the spiritually charged tusk and into the air, which represents the spiritual realm.

This function of the brass commemorative heads reflects one of the most important aspects of Benin kingship. Since the oba is both human and divine, he is the perfect mediator between the physical and spiritual worlds. His position places him in contact with the spirits, gods, ancestors, and even the forces of nature. He is able to communicate with these inhabitants of the other realm, act as an intermediary on behalf of the Edo people, and harness their powers for the good of his kingdom. The oba serves as the representative of the ancestors, but also as the channel for ancestral spirits, which protect and empower Benin society. Indeed, much of the oba’s ritual function centers on the ancestors, and the first action of every oba upon coronation is to erect an altar to his predecessor. The
By “iconography” I am referring to a set of images which symbolically represent the oba, and his characteristics. These images serve as a sort of visual metaphor for the oba. For example, the Portuguese traders represent the oba’s control of wealth. The leopard represents his strength.

Ancestral altar of Oba Ovonramwen in the palace in Benin City is a surviving example of such an altar (Figure 2). The oba is at the center of Benin society, which is symbolically represented by the fact that his palace lies at the heart of Benin City, which in turn lies at the heart of the Benin kingdom. The oba is at the pinnacle of the Benin socio-political hierarchy as well as at the physical and symbolic center of the kingdom.

Another important aspect of the oba’s supernatural persona and mediating position relates to his tie to the god Olokun. Olokun, the god of the waters, was one of the most important deities in the Edo pantheon. The oba was closely tied to the deity, who acted both as a royal patron as well as a divine alter-ego. Olokun was associated with trade and wealth. This was an important aspect of the oba’s power, for he controlled all trade of precious materials like ivory, coral and brass. In addition, it was the oba who controlled the trade with Europeans, and images of Portuguese traders play an important role in Benin royal iconography.

More important, though, was Olokun’s association with the waters. Olokun is the lord of the sea, and the oba is the lord of the land; together they represent control over the whole. They are deity and divine king, and their control is absolute and
complete. It is not only, however, that they rule the separate realms, but also that the oba takes on the characteristics of Olokun and receives power from the deity. Animals associated with the god Olokun, including mudfish and crocodiles, frequently serve as royal motifs. The Edo saw the riverbank as a place of transition between realms, and creatures that dwell both in and out of water are associated with the ability to travel between realms.

One of the most important dualities present in the person of the oba is his simultaneous role as life-giver and death-dealer. Since the oba has the power over life and death, he is seen as both benevolent and fearsome. The oba brings well-being to the nation. Early obas were military heroes, who expanded and defended the kingdom. Later obas took on a more ceremonial role, and through their ritual actions brought well-being to the nation. During the yearly Igue festival, the mystical power of the oba is renewed, and his strength to guarantee the well-being of the community during the coming year is ensured.

Despite this positive role of the oba, there is also a violent and dangerous side that is greatly feared. Not only does the oba have the power to bring life to the community, he also has the power to deal out death. The Edo people refer to the oba as “child of the Sky whom we pray not to fall and cover us, child of Earth whom we implore not to swallow us up.” The oba presides over all capital offenses, and he is the only person able to deal out the death sentence. This power over life and death is spiritual as well as political. The oba has a great deal of occult power and knowledge and is capable of using this as well as his political authority to deal out his judgment. The oba is capable of great violence, as is evident in his ability to perform human sacrifice. This highest form of sacrifice was controlled by the oba, and the violence of the action signified his great power.

The oba was identified with a number of animals that illustrate this royal paradox of simultaneous benevolence and malevolence. As king of the forest, the leopard is one of the most common animal motifs in royal iconography. Killing leopards was the privilege of the oba, and these slain leopards are sacrificed to the cult of the oba’s head. Tamed leopards are used in royal processions to show the oba’s power over the king of the forest. The oba gave out leopard teeth and skins to military leaders as a symbol of their loyalty to him, his control over them, and his power to delegate the right to take life. In addition, the leopard possesses the innate qualities of leadership. Leopards possess a cruel side which is tempered

Even though I am not here referring to any examples of art, I try to keep my readers’ attention focused on images that reinforce my thesis.
by reserve and moderation. Like the oba, the leopard is both “menacing and moderating.”¹⁰ The elephant also is symbolic of this dual nature. The elephant possesses great physical strength and is, like the oba, a formidable creature, but the elephant also possesses the leadership qualities of longevity and wisdom.¹¹ The crocodile, associated with the

Figure 3 Bronze plaque, Oba with animals.
god Olokun, acted as a sort of “policeman” sent by Olokun to punish the wicked. According to the Edo people, the “power of the crocodile represents the power of the oba, whose hand has the strength of the crocodile.”

The oba possesses the same dangerous ferocity as the crocodile in his ability to strike the wicked. The oba, as the highest authority in the Benin state, is responsible for insuring justice in his kingdom. A bronze plaque from the palace provides a telling example of the association of the oba with powerful animals (Figure 3). Here the oba is portrayed holding two leopards and having the feet of two mudfish. The pairing of these two particular animals represents the oba’s control over both the land and the sea. Both animals show his strength and ferocity, but they also allude to his moderation and justice as the supreme authority in the Benin kingdom.

This enormous power wielded by the oba does not go unrestrained, however, for the hierarchy of the Benin political system offers many checks on the oba’s power. The oba may be the highest member of the Benin kingdom, and the possessor of divine nature, but is in many ways dependant upon those around him. In numerous examples of Benin art, the oba is depicted surrounded by chiefs and attendants. He may have supreme authority, but he does not rule alone. Perhaps one of the greatest checks on the oba’s authority comes from the Uzama. The seven members of the Uzama are an old political group in Benin. The Uzama existed before the oba, and it was they who ended the corruption of the previous dynasty and initiated the founding of the present. The Uzama are the kingmakers and the “keepers of tradition.” Unlike many of the political positions in Benin, theirs is hereditary rather than appointed, and as such, they are somewhat beyond the control of the king. From the very beginning of the dynasty there was tension between the oba and the Uzama.

The oba is of the divine line of Ife, but he receives his authority to rule from the kingmakers. The oba needs the Uzama’s cooperation in order to perform the rituals of his office, and their ability to withhold cooperation is a great weapon against tyranny.

This simultaneous dependence upon the members of his court and authority over them can be seen in another brass plaque from the palace in Benin City (Figure 4). This plaque offers many insights into the complexity of Benin kingship and the variety of paradoxes that it presents. On this plaque are three figures; the central figure, who is depicted at a slightly larger scale, is the oba. Two attendants stand on either side of the oba, and as they
turn towards him, they act as a framing device, drawing the viewer’s attention to the central figure. They hold his arms in a supportive manner that almost seems to impart a sense of weakness to the oba. This is a good example of the oba’s reliance upon the members of his court. It is a visual reminder that, although the oba is the most important and powerful member of Benin
society, he does not rule alone. He is at the same time all-powerful and utterly dependant.

The apparent weakness of the oba is tempered by the portrayal of his divine nature. This is done through the depiction of mudfish legs. This is a common motif in Benin royal iconography, and its connotations are particularly rich. The mudfish is highly valued by the Edo people. It is a principal source of food, and it represents peace, prosperity and fertility. Moreover, it is associated with Olokun. The divine attribute of mudfish appendages alludes to the fact that the oba’s feet are never allowed to touch the ground because the divine power of the oba can cause terrible destruction. Mudfish are valued as sacrificial animals because they are thought to possess the “ability to overcome all obstacles.” This is due to their ability to survive outside of water for substantial stretches of time by closing their gills. In this way, the mudfish, like the crocodile, is able to survive both in and out of water, and therefore, serves as a symbol of mediation between the physical and spiritual realms. In addition to these positive qualities, however, the mudfish is also dangerous. Some species of mudfish are capable of delivering an electric shock, and because of this dangerous potential, the mudfish serves as an apt metaphor for the simultaneously malevolent and benevolent powers of the oba.

Mudfish legs were first used in royal iconography during the reign of Oba Ohen in the fifteenth century. According to history, Ohen was struck with paralysis for having committed an act of adultery. Since physical perfection was demanded of kings, Ohen attempted to hide his infirmity. When he appeared in public he was carried and his legs remained covered. Images of him with mudfish appendages called attention to his divine power rather than his human frailty. After some time, the Iyase, an important official and military commander, became suspicious and decided to spy on the king. The Iyase discovered Ohen’s secret, but the oba had him put to death. When the truth of the matter surfaced, the officials of the kingdom cast judgment on Ohen for his duplic- itous actions, and they had him stoned to death. This account reveals much about Benin kingship. It shows that although the oba is divine, he is not invulnerable. He is capable of wielding terrific power, but that power must be used within bounds. When the oba exceeds these bounds, he too is subject to judgment. This is evident in the U-shaped brass plaque (Figure 4), where the two attendants standing on either side of the oba function as checks on the power of the
oba. They not only support the oba, but they keep him from misusing his power to the detriment of the kingdom.

This plaque represents the duality of Benin kingship. It portrays the oba as both human and divine, and therefore the mediator between the physical and spiritual realms. It depicts him as both powerful and vulnerable, capable of great benevolence and peace, as well as great violence and danger. Here, the oba is the most important and powerful member of Benin society, but he leans on his court for support. He possesses the ultimate authority, but it is authority within bounds. His power is both absolute as well as utterly fragile. It is this composite of paradoxes that creates an incredibly complex and multifaceted image of the oba.

Notes

2. Ibid., 31.
5. Ibid., 89.
9. Ibid., 75–6.
10. Duchâteau, 89.
11. Ibid., 89.
12. Ibid., 64.
15. Ibid., 71–3.

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Figure 4: Plaque depicting mudfish-legged king and supporters, Brass, 18th–20th century
READING RESPONSES

1. At the end of her opening paragraph, Rebecca Merz claims that “The art produced by the Benin court reflects the complicated nature of the oba....” If read one way, this sentence would imply that Merz will examine art to understand a cultural role—that of the oba. Is this what Merz does? If you think so, list evidence from her text that would support you. If not, list evidence from her text that indicates she’s doing something else.

2. Merz does a particularly good job of connecting information about the Benin culture to the art she’s examining. Note the spot in the text where she makes this connection most skillfully. How would you describe the technique she uses to link cultural information and artistic artifact?

3. Create two lists of the places where Merz shows how committed she is to the truth of her statements, one list of places where Merz indicates she is cautiously committed and another list of places where she confidently asserts the truth.

PUBLIC WRITING IN ART HISTORY

Introduction

Michiel Plomp’s essay on The Beekeepers appeared originally in an exhibit catalog for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In this entry, Plomp accomplishes a great deal. First, he directs the attention of those viewing this drawing to the enigmatic features that make it such an object of curiosity for art historians. For example, in his opening paragraphs he draws the viewer’s attention to the distant water mill and church. Second, he provides viewers with historical and cultural background so that they fully understand what the artist Pieter Bruegel was representing—for example, the contemporary viewer might not recognize the central figures as beekeepers or their baskets as bee hives. Third, he presses the viewer to question the relationship of the Flemish proverb located in the lower left corner to the scene Bruegel depicts. Finally, he summarizes recent attempts by art historians to discern what Bruegel was trying to communicate in this sketch. In all of these tasks, Plomp demonstrates the fine work that art historians do: he uses words to interpret artistic images and uses artistic images to interpret distant cultures.

Plomp demonstrates the enigmatic nature of this famous drawing by laying out at least three radically different interpretations of this drawing. While he notes the weaknesses of the first interpretation, he does not critique the other interpretations. Rather, he leaves it up to viewers to judge for themselves. In this way, Plomp encourages viewers to puzzle about Bruegel’s The Beekeepers, just as art historians have for centuries.
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Beekeepers*

*Michiel C. Plomp*

In a hilly farmyard in the vicinity of a village church three beekeepers appear with beehives, probably preparing to catch a swarm of insects. On the right, a boy or a young man has climbed a tree. To the left of center, in the background, a brook with a water mill can be seen.

The text in the lower left corner of *The Beekeepers*—in all likelihood written by Bruegel himself—reads: “He who knows where the nest is has the knowledge / he who robs it has the nest.” This Flemish proverb, still in use today, alludes to the futility of having knowledge unless it is accompanied by action. It should explain the image but in fact, it obscures the meaning of this ostensibly simple peasant scene, making it mysterious and difficult to interpret.

Interestingly, in 1568—about the same time Bruegel drew *The Beekeepers*—he painted the *Peasant and the Bird Nester* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), whose subject clearly relates to the proverb, and about forty years later two

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*The Beekeepers, ca. 1567–68*

Pen and brown ink

20.3 × 30.9 cm (8 × 12 1/8 in.)

Signed and dated at lower right: *BRVEGEL MDLXV...*; inscribed, probably by the artist, at lower left: *dije den nest Weet dij[e[n?] Weeten / dijen Roft dij heeten* (He who knows where the nest is has the knowledge / he who robs it has the nest)
etchings bearing the text of the saying and made after a composition by David Vinckboons ... were issued. Although the boy in the tree is the only element of the present drawing that appears in the *Peasant and the Bird Nester* and the etchings, one scholar has attempted to show that Bruegel’s drawing carries the same meaning as the other works. He noticed that just as in Vinckboons’s composition a young lad strips the nest while peasants merely watch and allow themselves to be robbed, so in Bruegel’s drawing activity and passivity are contrasted in the form of the boy who steals a swarm of bees while the oblivious beekeepers concern themselves with their work. This argument founders, however, because there is no swarm of bees in Bruegel’s image, nor does the boy seem to have a receptacle for the insects, and, furthermore, the proverb speaks of nests rather than beehives.

Recently *The Beekeepers* has been the subject of several other studies. One of these suggests that the sheet illustrates the deadly sin of avarice and unwittingly revives the earliest identifications of the subject, which date from the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, in maintaining that the figures are robbers who are looking for a treasure (the nest) in the beehives. The boy in the tree is the lookout and the thief on the right is still searching for the prize. The villain on the left has found it and is trying to flee without sharing the spoils; the man in the center knows this and grabs at a dagger with which to threaten his partner and prevent his escape.

Another recent analysis views the image as symbolic rather than as a straightforward representation of a real activity and considers its message to be religious and political. According to this interpretation, Bruegel’s beehives stand for the Catholic parish churches, for in the sixteenth century the Church was frequently compared to a beehive. After the iconoclastic raids of August 1566, many churches in Flanders had been emptied of their clergy (bees) and their contents (honey). Thus, in Bruegel’s picture three faithful Catholics (the beekeepers) are attempting to restore the hives and put them back in their proper places, while an iconoclast (the boy in the tree) turns his back on them, doing nothing. The work of the beekeepers, the action alluded to in the inscribed proverb, is action that benefits the Church. The study also suggests other possible readings—for example, that the boy sees how a Catholic hive and a Protestant church can coexist peacefully—and concludes with the rather farfetched idea that the image may present a Protestant point of view as well.

Whether there is truth in any of these theories remains to be seen. It also remains to be seen whether *The Beekeepers* is the sole survivor of a group of Bruegel’s drawings with sensitive religious and political content that Karel van Mander asserted the dying master asked his wife to burn because “he was afraid that on their account she would get into trouble or she might have to answer for them.” Clearly Bruegel’s *The Beekeepers*, “one of the most enigmatic drawings” of the sixteenth century, has not yet yielded all its secrets.

Notes
1. Vanbeselaere (1944, p. 85) and Boström (1949, pp. 79, 88) had doubts about whether Bruegel inscribed the text.
3. Renger (in Berlin 1975, no. 100) suggested that the drawing might also contrast audacity and caution, as symbolized by the unprotected boy and the covered-up beekeepers.
4. Admittedly, as Kavaler (1999, p. 235) has noted, the drawing may have been trimmed along the upper edge, which would perhaps have eliminated this crucial detail.
7. According to Sybesma (ibid., p. 472), the three beekeepers may be agents of the Inquisition, since the Dutch word *corfdrager* can mean “hive or basket carrier” and also “secret informer.”
8. Sybesma (ibid., pp. 476, 478) notes that the source for any presumed Protestant content would have been *De Biënkorf der H. Roomsche Kercke* (The Beehive of the Holy Roman Church) of 1569 by Philips van Marnix van Sint Aldegonde, in which the Catholic Church is ridiculed. However, this was published after the drawing was made, a fact that Sybesma explains away by hinting that Bruegel deliberately misdated his sheet to protect himself from the Inquisitors. Sybesma proposes that the proverb as well as the image can be interpreted as a Protestant message. Another recent interpretation suggests that *The Beekeepers* contrasts the communal ethic (as represented by the beekeepers) to individual enterprise (symbolized by the boy in the tree); see Kavaler 1999, pp. 233ff.

**READING RESPONSES**

1. The author describes different interpretations of Bruegel’s drawing. Which interpretation seems the most plausible to you? What facts, argumentation, or language did you find most persuasive?
2. Describe how your understanding of the Bruegel drawing changed from the first time you saw it until you finished reading Plomp’s essay. What features of the drawing did Plomp’s essay draw your attention to? What features of the drawing still confuse you?
3. Find three places in the text where Plomp uses modality markers to soften the strength of his claim. Rewrite these three, using a different method for signaling uncertainty for each one. Note the method you use.

**MORE WRITING IN ART HISTORY**

**Introduction**

Written for students, this “profile” of an important contemporary artist demonstrates the characteristic rhetorical choices of art historians. To begin, it points readers’ attention to the artwork itself. It describes various features of the art and their significance: the prominent canoe image as an enduring symbol of Native American culture but also a symbol of movement and change, or the “trinkets” that represent stereotypes and commercialism but also a “trade” (the ironic title of the artwork) that is offered back to contemporary American
culture. In short, the description and interpretation aim to bring out the rich complexity of the art itself.

The authors also talk about the physical presence of the artwork. Its size (over thirteen feet long by five feet tall) dramatic colors, and mixture of painting and various kinds of objects make a powerful, and possibly confrontational, impression on a viewer.

Furthermore, the authors introduce the historical context by writing about the tragic relationships between white settlers and Native Americans and by noting that the painting was composed in response to the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to the “New World.”

Finally, the authors write about the artist—her own history as a Native American and her philosophy of art. When they quote Smith as saying, “Dying cultures do not make art. Cultures that do not change with the times will die,” they not only help us to understand *Trade*, they reinforce the message that art not only helps the viewer interpret culture; it *is* culture.

**Profile: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith**

*Craig McDaniel and Jean Robertson*

In *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*

In 1992 the United States recognized the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas. While most public events designed to mark the anniversary were planned as proud celebrations, Native Americans offered their reactions from a more somber vantage point. For them, Columbus’s arrival in the Western hemisphere is remembered as the initial encounter of European and Indian civilizations, an encounter that resulted in violent contact and tragic results. Over a span of some four hundred years (from 1492 until the closing of the American frontier at the end of the nineteenth century), Native Americans lost their rights to land, Indian cultures were uprooted, and indigenous peoples suffered subjugation (especially in South America). Horrific numbers became victims to diseases the Europeans brought with them. The colonial era of European discovery and settlement meant increased warfare and displacement for the indigenous peoples who were already in the Americas.

In response to the Columbian quincentenary, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a prominent contemporary artist and enrolled member of the Flathead Salish, created a monumental oil painting. Measuring over thirteen feet wide, *Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)* is a multi-layered artwork. The representation of a canoe dominates the image. The canoe’s abstract simplicity is reminiscent of a pictographic image—a flat, abstracted style of representation that was used in many Indian cultures prior to the twentieth century. In the context of Quick-to-See Smith’s art, the canoe shape serves as an icon symbolizing Native American people—their culture, history, and ongoing existence. Constructed on three
Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)
Oil and mixed media, 60 × 170 inches
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
separate canvases, Trade is a triptych, a tripartite format often reserved for sacred imagery (such as scenes from the Bible) in European art in the late fifteenth century, the time of Columbus’s voyage. Smith employs the image of an Indian war canoe as a sacred object, worthy of veneration and meditation.

Around and within the image of the canoe, Smith affixed a plethora of collage material, including photographic images of news events, illustrations of animals, and snippets of text from current newspapers and magazines. She also incorporated imagery culled from other artists’ work. For example, in the upper right of Smith’s painting, we find a copy of a drawing by George Catlin (an artist who accompanied expeditions into Indian territories in the early nineteenth century); the image in the drawing juxtaposes an Indian in headdress with the same Indian wearing European-style clothing. The various newspaper clippings incorporated into Trade provide tidbits of information about late-twentieth-century daily life, such as a culture fair on an Indian reservation and an event at a university. Taken as a whole, the painting expresses Smith’s understanding of the dynamic process of history: while earlier ways of life are lost, other patterns of living take shape. The canoe endures. The artwork’s entire composition is embedded in a field of gestural brushstrokes. The overriding color scheme of bold greens and reds calls to mind the world of nature as well as the bloody conflicts of earlier Indian wars.

A row of trinkets (including a toy tomahawk and Atlanta Braves baseball cap) is festooned above the three canvases. Smith’s tongue-in-cheek approach holds up evidence of the commercial exploitation of Native Americans by the dominant capitalist culture. Stereotyped portrayals of Indians, such as the Atlanta Braves baseball team’s mascot with his huge grin and bright red skin, hang alongside consumer goods featuring a racialist use of nicknames, such as a pouch of Red Man tobacco. In her painting, Smith seems to offer to trade these cheap items back to white America; doing so, Smith offers an ironic commentary on the history of European colonialism, which perpetrated a long litany of “peace treaties” and “trades” with Indians—such as the purported purchase of Manhattan Island for the equivalent of twenty-four dollars’ worth of cheap trade goods.

Some critics, collectors, and viewers of Native American art prize the work of artists who continue to utilize styles and subjects that identify closely with the work of their ancestors. Exemplifying this approach are current artists and artisans who create pottery and jewelry that look almost identical to objects made over a century ago. Other artists foster an approach to making art that signals the vitality of change and emphasizes the reality of the present. For example, Quick-to-See Smith’s hybrid approach to the use of disparate materials and modes of image making is consistent with her identity as a contemporary artist educated in both mainstream and Indian cultures. For these artists, to insist on preserving an unchanging vision of what it means to be Indian would be to foster a romantic, essentialist view of the past. In fact, history shows that tribal cultures were never static; all cultures underwent a process of change, including the incorporation of new ideas, tools, and resources. The Plains Indians, for instance, adopted (and adapted to) horseback riding only after Spanish conquistadors first shipped horses from Europe in the sixteenth century.

Quick-to-See Smith explains, “Dying cultures do not make art. Cultures that do not change with the times will die.”1 The pastichelike quality of Smith’s approach to
painting—combining found objects with oil paint—matches the hybrid character of her expression of Indian identity. Today’s Native Americans live complex lives, embedded in a rich mixture of cultural influences. Like most, Quick-to-See Smith’s life has involved interactions with the world of mainstream culture and commerce; like other Americans, she has watched television, experienced her own direct encounters with the natural world, and heard stories passed down from her ancestors.

*Trade* exemplifies an activist approach to art-making. Activist art is an art of conscience, of creating for a cause. Donald Kuspit describes the preferred stance of activist artists as a willingness to “confront rather than console.” In this painting, the artist critiques mainstream American culture’s tendency to pigeonhole Native American identity. . . .

As an artist, Smith could be described as a postmodernist: she appropriates and combines styles of imagery from other cultures and periods of history. Smith’s approach to painting references the mark-making bravura of the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s and 1960s, the irony of 1960s Pop Art, the energy of 1980s Neo-Expressionism, and the collage strategy of many modern and postmodern artists. Smith’s work emphasizes deeply felt ideas about topical social issues, and her output also seems to be made in a spontaneous burst of emotion and creativity. What separates Smith’s approach from many postmodernists’ is that in undertaking her work she refuses to employ the products of culture as if objects and images were only arbitrary signs without any underlying significance. Smith insists that actions have real consequences. She examines some of the consequences of Native Americans’ and newer arrivals’ shared historical legacy and calls on all of us to reexamine the past and face the future without blinders.

Born 1940, on the Indian Mission Reservation in Saint Ignatius, Montana, Quick-to-See Smith received a masters in art from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. She now lives and works in Corrales, New Mexico.

Notes

**READING RESPONSES**

1. Authors McDaniel and Robertson describe “activist” art as “art of conscience, of creating for a cause.” What cause is Quick-to-See Smith promoting with *Trade*? In your own words, describe the understanding that you gain from Quick-to-See Smith’s art.

2. Consider how McDaniel and Robertson convey confidence in what they’re writing. Note three places where they use either emphatics or hedges.
Finally, note three places where you believe the authors should have added a hedge or an emphatic.

3. In his introduction to the first reading, Professor Luttikhuizen draws on the adage “A picture is worth a thousand words.” After looking at Quick-to-See Smith’s artwork and reading McDaniel and Robertson’s essay about it, agree or disagree with the adage. Be sure to include examples from your own experience with Quick-to-See Smith’s art to support the points you make.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

ASSIGNMENT 1: APPLYING THE PORTABLE RHETORICAL LESSON

Background: In art history, writers interpret art, making connections between the artist, her relationship to her culture(s), her selection and use of particular artistic media, and the skill with which she expresses herself. Often, however, living artists are called upon to interpret their own work; although art critics will not accept the artist’s interpretation uncritically, this interpretation is the artist’s opportunity to persuade people to view her art and its significance her way.

Your task is to create and explain a piece of art so that readers are inclined to interpret your art as you would like them to.

To begin, you’ll need to create a piece of art that represents, honors, or critiques the culture around you, using media of your choice. Rest assured: since this is not an art course, you will not be assessed on your artistic skills. It’s worth remembering, though, that your art should be complex enough to support extensive interpretation. Once you have completed your piece of art, note for yourself the dominant theme you want to express in your art and how particular aspects of the art help you communicate that theme.

As you begin drafting, think carefully about how you want to shape the reader’s experience of your art—what aspect do you want him to attend to first? Next? How will you help the reader understand the connections among aspects of your art? How much description—of the culture, of the piece of art—will your reader need? Think carefully, too, about the level of confidence you want to use when you describe what your art means. How sure are you that you understand exactly what you meant to express? How much freedom do you want to give the reader to interpret the meaning of your art for himself?

ASSIGNMENT 2: MAKING CONNECTIONS

Background: When most people hear the name brand “Tupperware” they think of leftovers in a refrigerator rather than an art exhibit in a museum. But according to the Tupperware company’s website, “The graceful form of Tupperware products and their quality and functionality have been recognized and acquired by a number of the world’s art museums and industrial design collections, and have won design
awards in the United States, Europe, and Japan.” It seems that the Tupperware company values both design and functionality as two of the available means of persuading consumers to purchase their product. Contrasting Tupperware’s attention to design to Steelcase’s use of words and numbers from its ergonomic study of the Leap Chair in Chapter 14, Marketing, you might conclude that Steelcase cares more about functionality and less about design. In that report, the words and numbers from a study of employee productivity consistently draw the reader’s attention to how the chair functions. But the images that accompany those words and numbers suggest that Steelcase cares about design, too.

Your task is to analyze the relationship between the images, the words, and the numeric information in the ergonomic study of the Leap Chair. You should pay careful attention to the images, words, and numbers that appear on the same page, analyzing how the images add design elements to the report and function to reinforce the information conveyed by the words and numbers. You should also carefully attend to the additional information that the images convey. Which design features does Steelcase emphasize? Why might consumers (business owners) value those features?

As you draft, you will want to decide how much information about the ergonomic study you need to convey to your reader, how to order your reader’s experience of the ergonomic study, how you will draw your reader’s attention to those design features, and the certainty with which you make your claims about the design features.

ASSIGNMENT 3: DOING THE RESEARCH

Background: One way a culture defines itself is through its art. This is undoubtedly true of the cultures of which you are a part, such as your local community, your ethnic group, or your country. Furthermore, as we have seen in the readings for this chapter, one way that others define a culture is by interpreting its art.

Your task for this assignment is three-fold: (1) to select a piece of art or a type of art from a culture in which you are a part, such as your local community, your ethnic group, or your country. Furthermore, as we have seen in the readings for this chapter, one way that others define a culture is by interpreting its art.

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