Flower World Iconography, and Metaphor in the Rock Art of the Southern Colorado Plateau

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Bernardo de Sahagún (1499 –1590)

Of the Uto-Aztecan languages, Nahuatl is one of the best documented, contact period languages and cultures due to the studies and records of Bernardino de Sahagun. As a Franciscan friar, missionary priest and ethnographer who followed Cortez into Tenochtitlan in 1529, and spent more than 50 years in the study of Aztec (Mexica) beliefs, culture and history. Learning Nahuatl, teaching scribes to write Nahuatl using the Spanish alphabet into which he translated the Psalms, the Gospels and a basic manual of religious education.

His fame is derived from the manuscript of the Historia General or the Florentine Codex. It consisted of 2400 bilingual pages organized into 12 books with approximately 2,000 illustrations drawn by native artists. It contained cosmology (worldview), ritual practices, society, economics, and history of the Aztec people. Twenty of the texts included the “flower-song” poetry by the author Nezahualcoyotl ‘Hungry-Coyote’.

Modern Nahuatl is spoken by 1.5 million people.
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As Spanish grew in use, there were notable things of Mexico with no word in Spanish, so the Spanish speaking population adopted Nahuatl words:

How do you say “avocado” in Spanish

Aguacate  Spanish

Ahuaca-tl  Nahuatl

“Guacamole”  Ahuaca-mulli!
Ahuacatl is a *metaphor* in Nahuatl…

“For many centuries the Mexica and numerous other cultures have viewed avocados as an aphrodisiac.”

Sir James Fraser’s ‘Law of Similarity’

“Testicle!”
Friar Diego Durán, a Dominican Friar who grew up fluent in Nahuatl in Texcoco, describes Aztec poetry in the year 1570:

“All the native [songs] are interwoven with such obscure metaphors that there is hardly a man who can understand them unless they are studied in a very special way and explained so as to penetrate their meaning…”
The Flower Metaphor

In Aztec poetry and song it was commonly noted that the Nahuatl word for flower (xochitl), was used to refer to things that didn't seem to have anything to do with flowers! Local, stylized ‘wars’ that the Mexica were involved in were called "flower wars" and that deaths were metaphorically referenced as "flowers".

A Flowery War death was considered to be more noble than dying in typical warfare; this can be seen in the word for a flower war death, xochimiquiztli, ("flowery death"), blissful death, fortunate death.) It was also thought that those who died in a Flower War would be transported to the heaven...
But what was the flower metaphor? Sahagún, did leave us with a hint in the codices: "The Aztec Flower World was a solar garden of heroic kings and warriors, where the honored dead flowered as birds and butterflies sucking the nectar of sweet flowers." Codex bk. 3: 49; bk. 6: 163

A public ritual was held with "flowers." In the fall a major, ritual feast was called the Farewell Feast of Flowers. The Feast continued after European contact in a similar form, much like the old religion. The last day of the twenty-day Feast was October 26, only a few days before today's "Day of the Dead," still celebrated today in Mexican communities with the same flowers, "Death Marigolds."
FLOWERS THEN, WERE A METAPHOR FOR CONNECTION TO A SPIRIT UNDERWORLD, A PATH TO EMERGENCE AND A SYMBOL OF SPIRITUAL POWER SUCH AS FERTILITY, BIRTH, THE BREATH OF LIFE DEATH.
Hill suggests a southern, Mexican origin for Proto-Uto-Aztecan, spreading with maize agriculture northward into the American Southwest.

The ‘Tepiman Freeway’ of agriculture, trade and ideology.

Earliest maize agriculture 9,000 BP Balsas River, Morelos.
Yaqui Deer Songs

The Easter/Pascua dance the deer is depicted as a magical being from the sea ania, the flower world where beauty and life abound.

Flowers pervade Yaqui culture. Some Yaquis believe that the blood that flowed from the wound in Christ's side turned into flowers when it fell to earth. But the flower symbolism is more ancient as well. Flowers also represent the sea ania, the flower world “beneath the dawn.”

Flowers are metaphors for all that is good and beautiful in Yaqui life, including the beauty of the deer and all the other beings who inhabit the magical pre-Christian world.

Sheridan and Parezo 1996
Jane Hill and Kelley Hays-Gilpin, Northern Arizona University, Curator Archaeology, Museum of Northern Arizona “The Flower World in Material Culture: An Iconographic Complex in the Southwest and Mesoamerica” 1999

They proceeded to described Flower World imagery on Pueblo material remains such as ceramics, wooden flower caches, wooden birds and kiva murals.

Pueblo III and IV Kiva murals provided the strongest case for depiction of a colorful flowery Spirit World including: flowers, plants, butterflies, dragonflies, flying birds, and macaws.
The Mesoamerican concept of a Flower World paradise was located within a “Flower Mountain” where a watery underworld, or breathing cave existed (Karl Taube).

The underworld was controlled by a rain man; the source of the wind, and the breath of life. Note “breath” leaving the cave.

Olmec, Chalcatzingo, Morelos, Mexico, ca. 4,000 B.C.
Quatrefoil flower motif as cave mouth, or spirit passageway for “breath”.

Mesoamerican
The Uto-Aztecan speaking Hopi of the American Southwest, also have the concept of a cave-like underworld from which the breath-of-life flows as new life. This wind, or breath emerges from a flowery opening termed the si’papu. Every kiva has a si’papu. Kivas are microcosms of the middle world of man.
Hopi oral tradition describes this underworld as the home of **Muy’ingwa**, the germination spirit. His home is described as a lush, well watered world, full of life, with dragonflies, butterflies, birds, especially humming birds, green grasses, flowers in full blossom, and abundant corn. Certainly a paradise for farmers in the desert.
Muy’ingwa lives, or “sits” on Sihchomo, (Flower Mound). located metaphorically below the si’papu of the kiva.
Muy’ingwa is associated with the underlying essence, energy, or the life spark, for all living things. He is also chief of all clouds.
Older Hopi ethnography and contemporary Hopi people recognize that sincere prayers, songs, and actions directed toward the spirit world can bring forth the reality of Muy’ingwa’s home, a “land brightened with flowers” into the world of man.

Spirits can be manipulated using all modes, or media. Each mode can carry the same message of need.
Spiritual manipulation of wimi on altars is a good example of using visual images as metaphor suggesting a particular association of what is desired in the world of man.
Muy’ingwa’s response to sincere prayer is to send the living germ, “breath”, or seed of all vegetation that grows on the surface of the earth along the spirit path, connecting the underworld to the si’papu, and through the si’papu into the kiva. The kiva is a ritual microcosm of the middle world of man.
Flower metaphor, used to illustrate the movement of new life, or the “breath-of-life” through a spirit passageway (the flower’s stem) from Muy’ingwa’s underworld center, through the si’papu opening symbolized by the flower’s stigma, and petals into the kiva, symbolically the middle world of man.
Similar metaphor

Stemmed flower growing from a flower mound
Metaphoric, or permanent “visual prayer” developed as petroglyphs depicting flower mounds.
Flower mound icons requesting new life in the four corners of the world. Water symbols, lightning, and plants growing from Sand-Altar-Woman, mother of all plants.
Like verbal poetry, song, or prayer, we suggest certain petroglyphs are metaphorlic permanent visual prayer.
Metaphoric flower mounds, dragonflies, butterflies, and corn as visual prayer. Like begetting like.
Butterflies, or “water-flower-wings”, implies the fluttering of butterfly wings.
Visual metaphors form a nexus of imagery used to communicate need without the use of words.
Hummingbirds associated with flower symbols, a strong visual prayer requesting the birds of spring, and summer to arrive.
Hummingbird and flower motifs
Visual metaphor from mural paintings at the ruins of Kawayka’a. Lightning fertilizing a flower mound, from which flowers and corn grow.
Sho’tokûnûñwa is appealed to for fertilizing lightning.
Sho’tokünûñwa in mural paintings, and on kiva curtains, holding lightning, corn, and a...
Pueblo tradition suggests that associations among serpents, lightning, and arrows, are ritually, and metaphorically analogous.

The lightning-snake, or lightning arrow is the fertilizing instrument used by Sho’tokünûñwa, or his impersonator.
Lightning frame
Lightning-serpents ritually fertilizing flower mounds in the Kiva.
The prevailing belief among the Hopi is that a lightning strike leaves an arrow-like object, or yoysiva, metaphoric sperm, buried in the fields making them fertile.
The serpent is vitally linked to the earth’s fertility, and that fertility, of course, depends on rain. The serpent’s phallic shape and its entrance into the female earth both suggest the human sexual metaphor through which agricultural fertility was symbolically rendered.

At Hopi, “this way of metaphorically referencing the process of fertilization as an arrow being shot, is also found in the way Hopi think about the process when a man impregnates a woman. It is said that a man is ‘shooting his arrow’”
Muy’ingwa guiding an interwoven grouping of natural metaphors including lightning, serpent, seeds, and katsina to the si’papu. Metaphorically fertilizing, and watering a flower, allowing it to grow in the middle world of man.
Sho’tokünûñwa, Muy’ingwa, lightning snake, Tuwa’boñtumsi, or Sand Altar Woman, and the sister of Muy’ingwa.
Hopi elders, interviewed by Watson Smith during the excavation of Awatovi in the 1950’s, stated that a circle, or concentric circle can represent any flower depending on context. One flower can stand for many, or all.
The Hopi do not draw biologically correct flowers, but show a conflation of shape, germ, seed, or life spark, (soona’at). Sekaquaptewa.
Watson Smith’s baseline mural flower types found as petroglyphs

Earlier versions of some flowers are found on Mimbres ceramics
Petroglyphs of slab pahos with flower metaphor, and soona’at
Hopi oral tradition includes a mythic “paradise.” A state, or place where food (corn) was plenty, and rains abundant - A world of perpetual summer, and flowers.
Uto-Aztecan speaking Hopi, of the American Southwest, have numerous spirits, associated with the “Flower World”, “breath-of-life”, new life, and fertility.

To simplify we will be discussing Muy’ingwa/Alo’saka, and Sho’tokünûñwa.
Ethnography informs us that spirits can be manipulated using all modes, or media, and that each can carry the same message of need.
Conflated images of Muy’ingwa, Sho’tokünûñwa, and Tuwa’boñtumsi, or Sand Altar Woman in petroglyph form.
Si’papu sand painting

Muy’ingwa corn

Sho’tokũnũñwa Chamahiya

Flower mound with flowers