

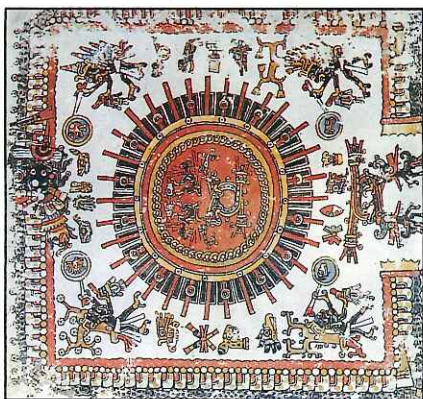
Mexico's pre-Hispanic and colonial painted books

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"These chroniclers kept account of the days, months and years, and although they had no system of writing like ours, they had figures and characters to express whatever they wished; and of these they made books of such ingenuity and subtlety that they were almost as fine as our own. Our friars saw some of these books and I myself saw a few; they were burnt by order of the friars, who thought the parts concerning religion might have a harmful effect on these people, whose conversion had only just begun..."

Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

Man has constantly sought to communicate and preserve his ideas, doctrines and theories; in short, all the knowledge he has acquired since the beginning of time. To do this, he has



Codex Borgianus.

used the materials that nature has provided. Examples of his work can be seen in wood, stone and bone carvings, which parallel gradual improvement in his means of communication.

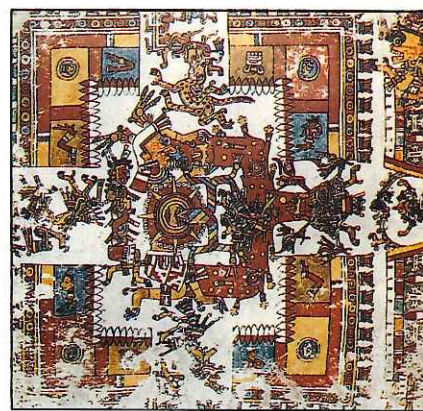
The earliest attempt to systematize the writing of a language was cuneiform writing on clay. Egyptian hieroglyphic writing followed, with nature once again providing the materials, including principally papyrus and later parchment.

In Mesoamerica, the development of writing appears in the pictographic records of its people, called codices by the Spaniards, (from the Latin *codex*, meaning code) since they were somewhat similar in format to the Roman codices.

It has been estimated that these pictographic records first appeared between the 7th and 9th centuries and that they continued to be produced by the various peoples of Mesoamerica after the Conquest.

It was the chroniclers and historians of the conquest who recorded the importance of these documents in Mesoamerican societies. They were called *amoxtli*, in Nahuatl, from which the term *amoxcalli* is derived, meaning a place for the preservation, storage and consultation of documents.

Cultural activity flourished in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, doubtless one of the main reasons why special storage



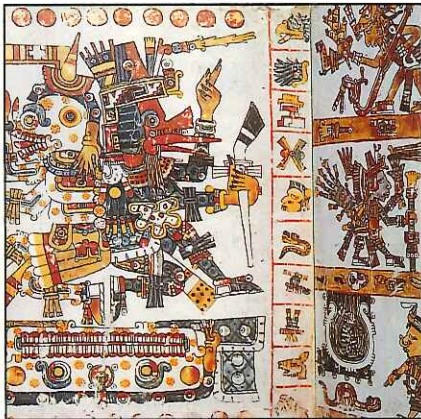
Codex Borgianus.

areas were provided for official civil, religious, military, and economic documents.

According to Dr. Joaquín Galarza, an expert on the subject, the term codex today refers to manuscripts made by indigenous Mesoamerican peoples, to record their languages by means of a basic system of codified images derived from their artistic conventions. In other words, the codices were the visual records of their language.

The creation of these documents is inextricably linked to the *tlacuilo* (from Nahuatl *tlacuiloa*: to write or paint). The *tlacuilos* had to be able to draw or paint skillfully and possess a broad knowledge of their times and a thorough understanding of their

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language. They might be either men or women, who, at an early age, were chosen for their ability. Later, they were highly trained in the techniques of making codices. Though their work was preserved in the *Amoxcalli*, their names were not recorded, for none of the codices bears the signature of its maker. According to some scholars, this is because the codices belonged to the community in which they worked.

The *tlacuilos* used a variety of media in making their codices: color and line drawings, combined with signs for phonetic transcription which all together created a writing system. Theirs was different from the European system, being recorded as if on a series of superimposed planes, finally to be read at the surface, where the phonetic signs combine with symbolic elements in an aesthetically balanced composition.

An even greater variety of materials was used in making the codices; pictographs were drawn on tanned animal hide, especially deerskin, handmade indigenous paper and textiles made from henequen (*Agave fourcroydes*), yucca (*Yucca filifera*) and cotton fibers.

The most commonly-used material was a paper made from the bark of the strangler fig or amate tree (*Ficus spp.* of which there are 55 genera and more than 700 species in Mexico). Preparation began by stripping the bark off the trunk or the largest branches of

the tree and soaking it in water. The bark fiber was then completely cleaned and softened on specially carved, grooved stone slabs, with bunches of willow twigs threaded through a hole and twisted to make a handle. It was then cut into strips which could be easily joined together by beating the bark with a smoother stone. Finally, the fiber was polished and cut into sheets of paper of any size required.

The 20th century has seen renewed production of this type of paper, mainly used in indigenous crafts. Production methods have scarcely changed since pre-Hispanic times.

Once the material had been prepared, it was ready to be used for drawing or painting. The colors used by the *tlacuilos* in the codices were made from natural raw materials such as plants, insects, sand and stone from diverse parts of Mesoamerica. The natural colors of the codices have withstood the elements for several centuries, and it is largely due to these pre-Hispanic dyes that the codices have been preserved to the present day in all their original splendor.

White or *iztac* was obtained from gypsum, called *tlacuac*; scarlet and purple from *cuamochitl*, called Brazil wood by the Spaniards; black by burning and grinding guava wood or corn silk, although pine wood smoke was more common. Various shades of red (*chichiltic tlapalli*) were obtained from cochineal (*nocheztlil*), better known as "prickly pear's blood". The Spaniards earned huge profits from the sale of this dye in Europe, Asia and Africa. The seeds of the annatto or lipstick tree (*achiote*, *Bixa orellana*) produced gold and orange, and yellow (*cuztic*) and ochre (*teocazhuil*) from the leaves of the yellow cosmos (*xochipalli*, *Cosmos sulphureus*).

The codices themselves bear witness to the instruments used to draw and paint them. Thick and fine brushes were used; rigid, sharp-pointed instruments of different thicknesses for drawing shapes and other semi-flexible

ones for extending colors and filling in areas. They were made of wood, reed, obsidian, bone and stone, and paintbrushes were made of wood and the fur of certain mammals. Examples of these appear in the Florentine codex.

Traditional pre-Hispanic writing was based on a series of images which taken either individually or as a whole provided detailed information on historical, genealogical, political, economic and social events, among others. These images can be divided into two groups:

Small images, known as "glyphs", represented proper names, places names and chronological accounts. These are the only elements of traditional indigenous writing recognized by specialists today as words.

Large images, known as "icons", are a product of the same representational and grammatical conventions as mentioned above. They include all the small images which together produce traditional indigenous writing.

The use of different levels of images appropriately arranged



Codex Mendocino (plate 12).

spatially by the *tlacuilo* created writing. The images constitute the text itself; there is no separation between text and illustration as in Europe. They are “text images” joined in a representational-phonetic composition, using a technique which was current until the 18th century. They consist of forms, colors and spaces which together shape concrete words.

The forms were taken from everyday objects, which had to be identified to enable their names to be pronounced and a syllabic transcription to be made. The same colors are used for the same objects, which is why researchers call them “phonetic colors”.

The *tlacuilos* used all the available space, covering the entire surface of the codex with “small images”, placing them in straight lines, in any order, either horizontally or vertically, and with no set limits. The only limits in pre-Hispanic Mexican “books” are representational and grammatical, the expressive fusion of words and text. The codex is both an artistic expression and a text to be read.



Codex Mendocino (plate 66).

Classification of the codices

Traditional indigenous writing is a broad subject about which diverse and extensive conclusions have been reached, few of which are as yet definitive. For research purposes, codices have been variously classified according to their format, subject matter, colors or the type of material used. However, they are generally divided into the following main categories:

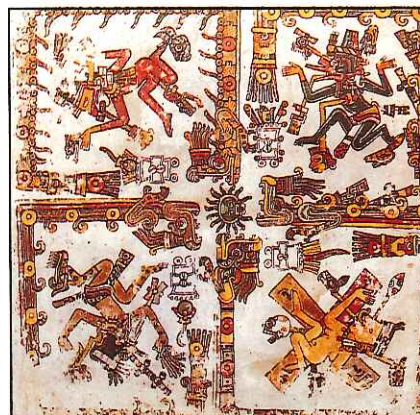
1. *Major or prestigious works:* spectacular, unique or particularly beautiful codices, exquisitely drawn, handsomely and brilliantly colored, and above all, produced in pre-Hispanic times. The category includes codices that provide solid and important information to researchers.
2. *Minor works:* codices produced after the conquest up to the 18th century, showing signs of European influence.

A further division distinguishes *codices with color or without*. In the former, bright colors were used to fill in the outlines, whereas in the latter, the outlines were not filled in, remaining as line drawings, with spaces held “in reserve,” by the *tlacuilos*. According to Dr. Galarza, this “reserve” meant that traditionally colored space was being left blank.

For a painter-scribe, or an “intellectual” of the time, who knew the colors for each sign, it would not have been difficult to recognize the colors for the reserved spaces. Color in the codices is a variable which may appear in pictographs, but its absence does not prevent the reader’s understanding of the subject matter.

Yet another division classifies codices according to subject matter:

1. *Calendrical and ritual codices:* these concern religion, ceremonies, chronology, and everything related to predictions and astronomy. They were ruthlessly destroyed by the



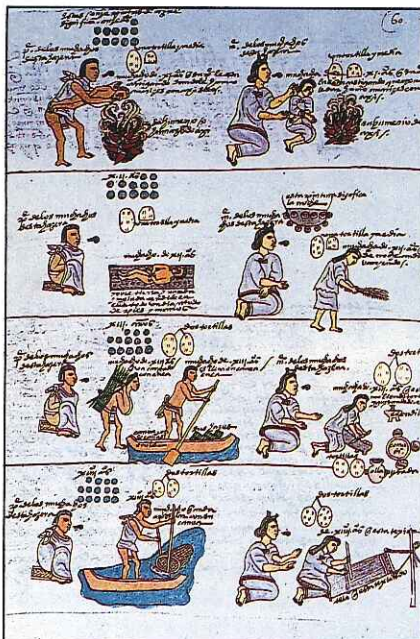
Codex Borgiaus.

Spaniards, in an attempt to eliminate all traces of any former religion. Surviving examples of such pre-Hispanic codices include the Codex Borbonico and the Borgia Group of codices, while the Tonalamatl de Aubin, Ixtlixochitl and Telleriano-Remensis codices are examples of works created during the Colonial period.

2. *Historical and cartographic codices:* record the Mesoamerican peoples’ concept of history. Outstanding events are typically narrated in exact chronological order. Other matters are often included, such as the geographical layout of the region or the area where the events took place. The Pilgrimage Scroll, the Tepexpan Scroll and parts of the Sigüenza Map are noteworthy examples.
3. *Genealogical:* these are both pre-Hispanic and Colonial, although most surviving examples date from the latter. They record dynastic succession in specific areas. In colonial times, they were used to settle issues of land rights and privileges, brought before the Government of New Spain. Lineage was indicated by means of straight or dotted lines, speech virgules and footprints. The Genealogy of the Mendoza-Moctezuma Family and the Etlá

family, the Guevea Canvas, have been preserved to this day.

4. *Ethnographic codices*: record the customs, laws, lifecycles and behavior of conquered peoples. They were produced only during the Colonial period and were created to enable the colonial administration and friars to find out more about morals, education, the military, government and daily activities of the indigenous people. Examples of these are the Magliabechiano, Tudela and Mendocino codices.
5. *Chilam Balam*: these are mostly 16th century compilations of previously missing works written in the Mayan language. They include chronological, astrological and medicinal data as well as Mayan chronicles. The most famous examples are the Chilam Balam de Chan Kan, Ixil and Tizimin.
6. *Cartographic codices*: these are maps of specific areas, whose content is related to other topics. They record territorial boundaries, geographical features, towns, etc.



Codex Mendocino (plate 61).

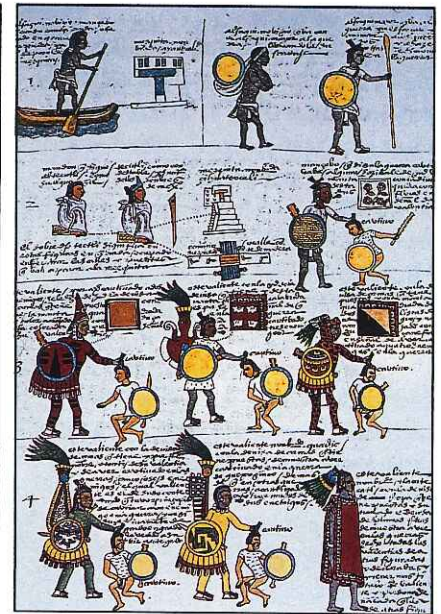
Many appeared during Colonial times as legal proof in property litigation both for groups and individuals. Notable examples include the map known as the Maguey Paper Plan, the Mauricio de la Arena Codex, the First Zacatepec Canvas, and the Map of Santa Cruz, among others.

7. *Economic codices*: these contain real estate records for tax purposes, civil, fiscal and tax records. They were produced both in pre-Hispanic and colonial times. Their importance lies in the help they provided the Spaniards to enrich themselves by exacting tribute. This category is represented by the Tax Register, and the Chavero, Mendocino and Sierra Codices.
8. *Testarian*: these are all post-conquest documents and include all the Mexican pictographic manuscripts containing transcriptions of prayers and recommendations for teaching catechism. The genre is said to have been originated by the monk Testera de Bayona, and the finest example of them is to be found in Gómez de Orozco's Christian Doctrine.

As to the format of the codices, pre-Hispanic versions differ physically from colonial products. Traditional codices were produced in various formats which may have been chosen to fit their subject matter. Ritual calendrical codices were usually created on folding, accordion-like, strips, so they could be illuminated horizontally on both sides.

The cartographic codices were drawn on pieces of cotton. Historical codices were drawn on strips of amate or deerskin, and called strips or rolls depending on whether they were folded or rolled up.

Other codices, produced during the Colonial period, had a book format. The leaves were stitched and pasted together on the left side and then bound in parchment or leather.



Codex Mendocino (plate 65).

The method by which several sheets of amate paper were joined together was known as the panel format, and was used during both the pre-Hispanic and Colonial times. Single sheets of either indigenous or European paper were also used.

These Mexican pre-Hispanic and Colonial painted books have played a vital role in the reconstruction and study of Mexican history. They are firsthand sources for political, economic, religious and social data on the peoples of Mesoamerica.

Moreover, the codices proved so versatile that the Conquistadors were able to adapt them to suit their own needs, which explains why they were still used for nearly three centuries after the Conquest.

Although different from European books, as far as layout is concerned, the Codices are regarded as indigenous masterpieces of pre-Columbian and Colonial times and the forerunners of books in Mexico.

The current resurgence of research into the subject, often overlooked for long periods, will no doubt provide valuable insights into both the codices themselves and the history of Mexico. ❧