Body Ornamentation in Pre-Columbian America

A Body Language of Aesthetics?

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The first and probably the ultimate work of Art with which man is confronted is without context his own body, either by modifying it or by using it as an artistic medium. It is enough to recall the many hands in red or black discovered in prehistoric caves which define the beginnings of an artistic language, such as in the Cueva de las Manos Pintadas located in Patagonia and dated 9300 CE. All societies have long associated symbols, metaphors, and significations with the body. The human body, with its physical and psychological properties, figures both as a basis and mediator in cultural interactions and, as such, is affected by the social life its supports. The French anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt delivered this reflection in his 1937 study of the society of New Caledonia: "Adornments and body modifications are the most subtle esthetic means by which man expresses, complexes or affirms states that his words cannot express." (Leenhardt 1937: 112) Painted, adorned, shaved, depilated, covered, tattooed, scarified, pierced, incised, deformed, manipulated– the body has been, is and will always be the object of special attention in all societies. No people have ever lived naked. The public is both fascinated and sometimes appalled by the potential for transformation offered by the body. It is possible to manipulate it in countless ways whether through the lengthening of the ears or the lower lip, the piercing of the nasal septum, the binding of the legs or the thighs. One can also proceed to castration of the genitals or breasts, deformation the feet or circumcision. And of course, deform the skull and manipulate the teeth. The list is almost endless.

The body carries a symbolic burden and occupies a decisive place in identity expression and social communication. Ornament means as much as it adorns, and all these interventions on the body participate in the expression of a humanity. The body is not neutral, as evidenced by the various interventions which arise from an "organisation of appearances" (Barthe-Deloizy 2003: 23). This is all the more true since the body is a material that is easy to work with. The British archaeologist Joanna R. Sofaer notes:

> "The plasticity of the body means that the body is never pre-social and is contextually dependent. There is no gene for plasticity. It is not precoded. Plasticity is a developmental phenomenon that exists from birth to death. For the skeleton, plasticity, as a material quality of the body, rests upon the physical, chemical and mechanical properties of bone which are, in turn, a function of biological processes." (Sofaer 2006: 74–75)

The ornament serves to mark the social condition, profession and general hierarchical categories. All Amerindian peoples used dye or pigmentary substances for various purposes: aesthetic (to attract the eye), hygienic and practical (heat, perspiration, protection of the skin against insects and the sun), prophylactic (bubos, fevers, cavities), magical and religious (war, protect against hostile and evil forces, snake bites). Using the example of the head, Mexican anthropologists Vera Tiesler and Maria Cecilia Lozada specify:

> "The head, in its natural or culturally adapted presentation, is a central locus not only of spirituality but also of appearance and body display. Put on social stage, the head turns into a canvas for social discourse and performance-in reality, all human interaction […]. It is organic hard-ware of what David Le Breton and Marcel Mauss describe as 'corporal sociabilities', body techniques, and embodied interactions." (Tiesler/Lozada 2018: 1; cf. Le Breton 1985)

Beauty, aesthetics, power and domination are all reflected in it. A reflection on idolatry by Franciscan missionary and ethnographer Bernardino

de Sahagún (c. 1500–1590) further emphasizes the importance of the head for pre-Hispanic societies by its association with celestial space. According to Sahagún's native informants the head is referred to as the *ilhuicatl* which means the sky: "our head, in other words the sky" (Sahagún 1577: III, l. X, c. 27, § 2, f 72v.). The head also channels the flow of energy from the sun into the body at birth.

Before going into detail, it needs to be emphasized that this article is widely based on such ethno-historical and ethnographic sources that provide valuable evidence on these body-related practices. This refers just as much to the subjectivity of the observers and their cultural codes as to the precise data offered by direct witnesses and reporters or who have collected their information from locals. Archeological data can refine, complete or even invalidate historical sources. I propose here a reading grid to try and answer the following questions: How and why societies regulate one's appearance by manipulating the body? Can we go beyond a simple aesthetic reading? Are we not faced with a complex socio-cultural representation? How and why do societies regulate these distinct appearances?

Painting the bodies, wearing feathers, dyeing and manipulating the teeth

What most impressed Europeans when they first arrived in the Americas were the preexisting body modifications observable in most of the indigenous populations. Some had become residual, such as cranial vault modification, while others, such as dental manipulations, were still alive in the 16th century, mainly in Mesoamerica and northern South America. These practices were part of the daily fabric of social relations and also punctuated significant stages in the lives of individuals (initiation rites, mourning, etc.).

Drawing up a panorama of all the body ornaments used by the native American populations is a challenge that is difficult to meet in the space of this contribution as the variety of ornaments is extraordinary and spectacular. The peoples used all the resources of nature to beau-

tify their bodies, to enhance them and to offer a vision of themselves, mingling aesthetical, religious, social and cultural aspects. In the eyes of the European conquerors, the dazzling diversity of the native population's body embellishments became essential attributes of their identity. Body paintings challenged the first Europeans in the "New World", among them of course Christopher Columbus (1451–1506). As early as in October 1492, he described the body paints of the men who came to meet him:

> "They paint themselves black, and they are the colour of the Canarians, neither black nor white. Some paint themselves white, others red, and others of what colour they find. Some paint their faces, others the whole body, some only round the eyes, others only on the nose" (Columbus 1893: 38).

A few decades later, important chronicler Francisco López de Gómara (c. 1511-c. 1566) also emphasized painted bodies when describing the inhabitants of Hispañola (López de Gómara 1858: I 173) or those of the city of Cumaná in Central America (1858: I 173, 205). Many other chroniclers, missionaries, travelers, also included such observations on painted bodies.

Body paints were among the most sophisticated ancient ornaments all over this world region. The pigment deriving from the *Genipa americana* tree was in use throughout intertropical America. Thanks to the Spanish chroniclers, such as the Jesuit José de Acosta (c. 1540–1600), we learn that the Incas used a compound of mercury, called *llimpi*, a vermilion product reserved for the nobility for the beautification and health of the skin. (Acosta 1954: 103) To paint their face, the indigenous of Collao used a fruit that looks like a cherry, called *ñuñunya* in quechua (Cobo 1956: I, 227). The Taïnos of the West Indies coated their bodies with *roucou*, from a shrub which gave a red color, while the Mayas preferred hematite minerals. Certain populations of the West Indies applied vegetable pigments and mineral dyes while the Peruvians had also discovered the virtues of the mineral vermilion pigment. Some people, e.g.

the Caribs of the Orinoco, painted their entire body, including head and hair.

Figure 1: Indian woman from Cumana meeting Spanish

Benzoni, Girolamo (1857 [1572]): History of the New World, Shewing His Travels in America from AD 1541 to 1556, p. 4.

The Iquitos on the upper Amazonas were called *puca-umas* or *cabezas-rojas* (red head) because the men wore a tonsure and painted their heads with *roucou*. In 1541, the historian Girolamo Benzoni (1519–1572) witnessed an encounter, at Cumana, of Spaniards with an indigenous woman, practically naked, painted black, her body covered with arabesques:

> "She was quite naked, except where modesty forbids, such being the custom throughout all this country; she was old, and painted black, with long hair down to her waist; and her ear-rings had so weighed her ears down, as to make them reach her shoulders, a thing wonderful to see; she had them split down the middle and filled with rings

> of a certain carved wood, very light, which wood, in their language, is called Cacoma. Her nails were immoderately long, her teeth were black, her mouth large, and she had a ring in her nostrils, called by them Caricori; so that she appeared like a monster to us, rather than a human being." (Benzoni 1857: 4)

The skin was not the only painted medium. Like this woman, many ethnic groups used to dye their teeth, a practice very widespread in the Americas. Pietro Martire d'Anghiera (1457–1526) described the technique for blackening the teeth (the geographer never crossed the Atlantic and thus relied on the reports of those who had). Between the ages of 10 and 12, the indigenous chewed leaves and then applied the resulting paste to their teeth until they were as black as coal (1912: 368, 369). According to Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa (c. 1530–1592), who in fact travelled to Spanish America, the name of the Yanaximes people came from *Yana* (mouth) and *Simi* (black) (1907: 205). The Aztecs dyed their teeth black or dark red, a custom widespread also among their neighboring groups Otomis and Huastec (Sahagún 1577: III, 127v, 135r).

The art of the pen strongly irritated Europeans as it was unthinkable for them that such spectacular headdresses, with their shimmering colors and complexity were crafted by an "uncivilized" culture. The numerous feathered objects recovered from archaeological sites are evidence of the importance of feathers in pre-Columbian times. The sophistication and skill with which these objects were made indicate that they were part of a well-developed tradition. On the north coast of Peru, the tradition of feather working extended very far back in time, possibly even to the preceramic period (2000 BCE). Most feathered artifacts come from the Late Intermediate Period, Late Horizon, or Colonial Period. The tradition of feather working also flourished in the Andean highlands. As stated by anthropologist Candler:

> "The iconography of the north and central coast clearly depicts the use of feathers and birds in headdresses. Moche iconography presents an especially varied array of elaborate headdresses, often

> combining effigies of birds and animal heads with complex feather plume ornaments." (Candler 1991: 8)

During colonial times, the oldest mention dates from the first voyage of Columbus. In December 1492, the Admiral Columbus briefly described men wearing plumes of feathers on their heads: "Some had tufts of feathers on their heads." (Columbus 1893: 96) He renewed this comment in January 1493 about Caribs who embedded their hair in a sort of purse of parrot feathers while others used to wear plumes behind their heads (1893: 159, 160). Pêro Vaz de Caminha (1450–1500), clerk to Pedro Álvares Cabral (c. 1468-c. 1520), the commander of the expedition which landed in Brazil in April 1500, recounts the event in a famous letter to the King of Portugal. Like Columbus, Vaz de Caminha describes this native population by emphasizing their body ornaments and in particular the feather headdresses. Among the first objects exchanged are feather caps: "And one of them [an Indian] gave him [Nicolau Coelho] a hat of long bird feathers with a little tuft of red and grey feathers like those of a parrot." (Greenlee 1937: 9)

The anthropologist Alfred Métraux even affirms that in 16th century Brazil the art of featherwork would have reached its peak (Métraux 1982: 35–36). The Tupi and Guarani populations, settled along the Brazilian coast, particularly used macaw and ibis feathers to adorn their bodies, make capes, coats and tiaras, and these feathers were the subject of an important trade. The Frenchman André Thevet (1516–1592) pointed out that in Brazil "the greatest traffic in this land is that of ostrich feathers, sword trimmings made from beautiful plumes, and the most exquisite feathering of parrots brought from far away" (Thevet 1575: II, 938).

Figure 2: Tupinamba dance. Theodore de Bry (1592): Les Grands Voyages. India Occidentalis. Pars tertia. Vol. III.

This art is present everywhere, from Mesoamerica to the Andean foothills. The conquest of Mexico allowed the Spaniards to discover an art that had reached its highest level of perfection. Cortés and his companions were in awe of so much beauty and such perfect mastery of these arts, both taxidermy and the use of feathers by the *amantecas*, feather craftsmen highly respected in Aztec society. Of all the presents and war trophies brought back from the Aztec world by the *conquistadores*, featherworks were certainly among the most appreciated and sought after in Europe. Hernando Cortés, conquistador of Mexico, believed that the plumes and other featherwork were so precious that they can only be reserved for the Emperor Charles V. Today, less than fifteen works of Mexican precolonial feather art can be counted in the world. Among these, the most spectacular is undoubtedly the so-called "Moctezuma" plume at Museum für Völkerkunde (Ethnological Museum) in Vienna. It is a headdress made up of more than 450 long quetzal feathers, but also of feathers from the cotinga, spatula and piaye birds, arranged in a fan and decorated with crescents and gold shells. Tradition wants

that this plume crowned the Emperor Moctezuma and that he himself offered it to Cortés so that he, in turn, could present it to Charles V, but this is rather a legend. More modestly, plumes of this type had a ceremonial function and capped the idols or the priests serving them. We owe Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain* a precise description and detailed vignettes on the artisanship of the Aztec feather craftsmen.

In the Andes region, the Spaniards' admired the *cumbi* the Incas made, finely woven cloths with feathers integrated into the fabric (Candler 1991: 1–15). *Cumbi* featured prominently on any list of precious objects given as tribute or used in ritual sacrifices. The chronicler of Incan origin, Felipe Guaman Poma (c. 1535-c. 1616), refers to "*cumbi* of feathers" (1980: I 146), and Jesuit missionary Bernabe Cobo (1580–1657) described them more in detail:

> "They wove them in the same *cumbi*, but in such a way that the feather comes out over the wool and covers it in the manner of a velvet. The equipment they had for this kind of cloth was very great, because of the innumerable multitude and variety of birds that this land breeds, of such fine colours that it exceeds any price." (Cobo 1956: II, 260)

Native American populations placed great value on these feather adornments. According to Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1578–1650), a chronicler born from a Spanish father and a "mestizo" mother near Ciudad de Mexico, when the Spaniards plundered their capital, the Aztecs attempted to save the feathered objects from destruction, while the conquerors greedily seized all the gold and silver that had decorated places of worship (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1838: 108). Objects of great value and reserved for the elite, feathers were sacred. The hunter who killed a quetzal, whose feathers were among the most sought after, was punished by death. Figuratively, the quetzal feather, *quetzalli*, means "leader, beloved lord". According to the French protestant voyager and colonist Jean de Léry (1536–1613), featherwork was highly valued by the Tupi in Brazil, the

capes being among the only things that they carefully preserved and carried with them as they moved from site to site (Léry 1990: 92).

Figure 3: : De los officiales de pluma (Amanteca) (detail)

Sahagún, Bernardino de (1577): Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España, vol. II, Book IX, f° 62r.

In pre-Columbian times, from the Mexican plateau to the Isthmus of Panama, many people practiced manipulating their teeth. First evidence of filing is given for the Valley of Mexico, the country's central high plateau, during the Early Classic period (1400–600 BCE). It seems that the practice then spread to the Maya lands, roughly corresponding with Yucatan, Guatemala, Belize and west of Honduras.

Inlays, which appeared in the pre-classic, experienced their golden age during the classic period (100 BCE-300 CE). Archaeologists observed a combination of both for the late classic period (700–900). Finally, in the post-classic, from c. 1000 to the arrival of the Spaniards, the en-

crustations had disappeared. They had been replaced by tooth filing which, at the time of the conquest, also seemed to be disappearing, especially among men. A 1992–98 study on the remains of 1515 Mayan individuals from 94 archaeological sites in southern Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala showed that up to 65 per cent of women and 58 per cent of men – and even young boys and girls aged around 15 – underwent dental manipulation, which is a considerable percentage. The practice was more widespread in Mesoamerica, but cases can also be detected in the Caribbean and others, less numerous, in South America, especially in what is today Argentina, the Peruvian Amazonas and the Ecuadorian coast.

Dental manipulations can be categorized into three types: filed, pulled out, or encrusted teeth. First, let's look at the teeth filing. We have some testimonies from 16th century chroniclers, the most famous Diego de Landa (1524–1579), bishop of Yucatan, who traveled the province during the 1560s in order to eradicate idolatry.

He described Maya women who "had a custom of filing their teeth leaving them like […] a saw, and this they considered elegant. Old women performed this task, filing them with certain stones and water." (Landa 1941: 125–126). Bernardino de Sahagún specified that the Huastecs "were deliberately sharpening their teeth." (Sahagún 1577: III, 135r) Further south, beyond the Isthmus of Panama, among the indigenous living around Guayaquil, cleric and ethnographer Lope de Atienza (1537-c. 1596) observed that their teeth were filed down almost to the gumline, whereas the Quijos of Ecuador filed their four incisors (1931: 54). Archeology confirms these practices. On the skulls of adolescents discovered in Sayate, in the north of Argentina, there is a double longitudinal section of the forked incisors and the same manipulation, less clear, on skulls discovered near Potosi in Bolivia.

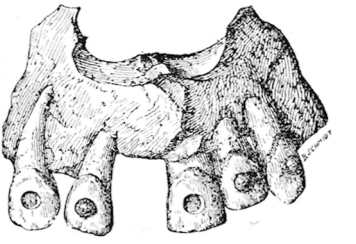
The second type of manipulation concerns the pulling or avulsion of the tooth. The Tarascans of Michoacan removed their canines. On the Ecuadorian coast, the Huancavilcas were toothless, as the chronicler Gonzalo Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557) described (Oviedo y Valdés 1959: V, 98), while Pedro Cieza de León (1518–1554) noted that three upper and three lower teeth were removed children from the province of Guan-

cabilcas in Peru (Cieza de León 1864: 181, 192). This practice was also visible among the Qimbayas of Colombia or the Paenes of the Peruvian altiplano.

Figure 4: Statuette head with four perforated upper incisors

Hamy, Ernest-Théodore (1882): "Les mutilations dentaires au Mexique et dans le Yucatan." In: Bulletins de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris, 5, pp. 879–887, p. 883.

Figure 5: Portion of upper jaw with incisors and canines perforated and inlaid



Ibid.: p. 884.

Finally, the inlay technique was also widespread. A legend from the *Popol-Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya, presents a mythological character whose "teeth of precious stones, shining in his mouth" were removed (*Popol-Vuh* 1861: 45). The stories of chroniclers Sahagún and Mota Padilla of preparing teeth to encrust stones are confirmed by archaeology. At the end of the 19th century, the anthropologist Théodore Hamy presented two cases: The open mouth of a terracotta statuette from near Medellin in Mexico revealed incisors with regular cylindrical holes, the upper jaw of a statuette from a tomb in Campeche in Yucatan offered incisors and canines with cylindrical holes in which blue stones had been inserted. (Hamy 1882)

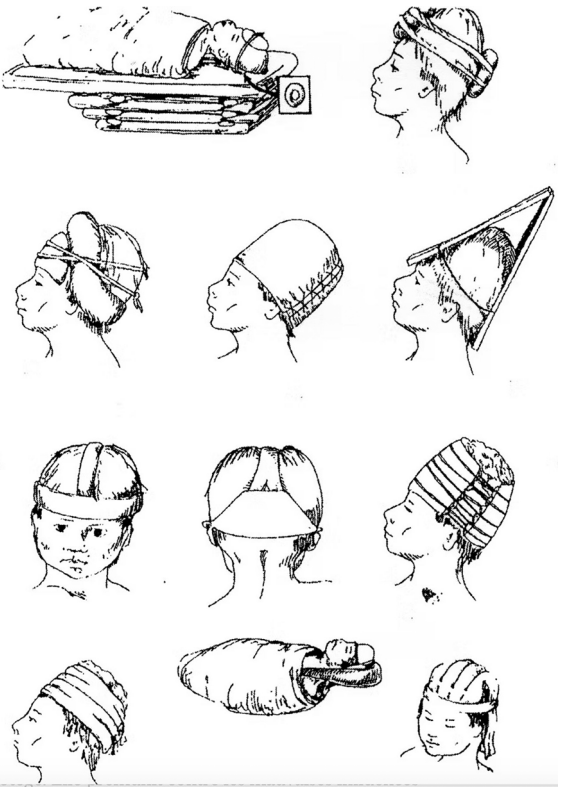
Manipulation of the cranium

It is indeed cranial deformations that appear to be the most accomplished of the bodily manipulations of which man is capable. Although Europeans had little contact with people with deformed skulls because this custom was disappearing when they arrived in America, this practice remains one of the strong markers of pre-Columbian societies. Shaping the cranial vault constitutes one of the most ubiquitous biocultural practices over the world, and a very ancient one. The first, in the Central Highlands of Mexico, has been dated to 8500 to 7000 BCE. Among the Andean communities it is dated back at least to the 6th millennium BCE. Out of a collection of 500 skeletons of Peruvian origin kept in Paris, only 60 show no deformation. In South America, the artificially deformed skull of a person who lived 7000 BCE was found in a cave in Uricocha, in the Peruvian Andes. The Chinchorro culture (7000 to 1100 BCE), from north of Chili to south of Peru was practicing a very pronounced form of deformation. Several ethnic groups adopted these customs, the best known of which are the Paracas cultures (600 BCE to 100 CE), Nazca (200 to 600) or Tiwanaku (700 to 1200) around Lake Titicaca. In many sites excavated in Mesoamerica, individuals with deformed skulls constitute more than 90 per cent of the total. In Mesoamerica, infant head modeling has been practiced from almost ten thousand years. This custom, although in sharp decline, was still visible in the 16th century. In 1557, the Italian philosopher Girolamo Cardano listed the regions where they were still practiced: Cuba, Mexico, Cumana (Venezuela), Porto Velho (Brazil) and Peru.

In his book published in 1552, *Historia general de las indias,* López de Gómara informed that around Cumana (Venezuela), the indigenous population gently squeezed the head of their children: "They squeeze children's heads very gently, but a lot, between two cotton pads to make their faces wider, which they consider beautiful." (López de Gómara 1979: 121) The artificial compression or constriction of the infants' head is easy during the first years of life, when the skull is still malleable. With the skull vault then hardening, the changes become permanent.

The external distortions may be obtained by massage, hard compression devices, constricting wraps, bandages, and hats.

Figure 6: Different methods to deform skulls in America



There are two ways of deforming children's skulls. The first is the tabular or fronto-occipital: the anterior and posterior compression resulted in flattening at the front and back and lateral bulging of the head. Two types of tabular deformations resulted, oblique and erect, according to the angle of board pressure. For the oblique, the head shaping was ob-

tained with two boards compressing in an oblique way the frontal and occipital regions. The compression at the back was centered at the inion and exerted from the lowest part of the occipital bone to the lambdoid suture. For the erect, the deformation was obtained in two ways. First at all, by a vertical, frontal piece of wood kept in place by a compressive bandage plus the occipital compression, which resulted in keeping the child flat against the cradle-board; on the other hand by two vertical boards exerting pressure on the front and back parts of the child's head. This process is described among many American peoples. In the mid-16th century, the chronicler Perdo Cieza de León (1520–1554) observes that the Caraques of the Ecuadorian coast:

> "When a child was born they put its head between two boards, so that at the age of four or five, the head was long and broad, but flat behind. Not content with the heads that God gives them, they thus make them into the shapes that please them most." (Cieza de León 1864: 185).

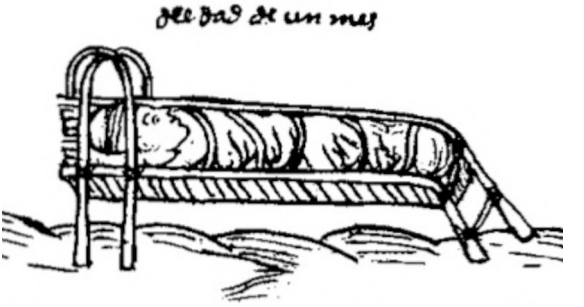
In 1566, bishop de Landa – otherwise known for having destroyed most of the Maya scripts in Yucatán (Chuchiak 2005) – offered the most famous description of the mode of deformation practiced by the Mayas:

> "The women brought up their little children with all the roughness and nakedness in the world, since four or five days after the infant was born, they placed it stretched out upon a little bed, made of sticks of osier and reeds; and there with its face upwards, they put its head between two small boards one on the back of the head and the other on the forehead, between which they compressed it tightly, and here they kept it suffering until at the end of several days, the head remained flat and molded, as was the custom of all of them" (1941: 125).

The second way is the annular deformation, result of tightly wrapping the head with a compressive bandage or by constriction bands, single strings, bandaging, or tightly fitted hats resulting in a conical cranial vault. Depending on the type of binding, oblique or erect deformations

were obtained. Various chroniclers such as catholic missionary Juan de Torquemada (1557–1626) observed this practice: Barely born, the children were provided with a complex apparatus on the head until the age of three or four-five years (Torquemada 1723: 2, 312). According to Cieza de León, the Collas, established around Titicaca, did "wear woollen caps called *chucos* on their heads. Their heads are very long, and flattened behind, because they are pressed and forced into what shape they choose during childhood." (Cieza de León 1864: 363). In the 1610s, the chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala (c. 1540–1615), of mestizo origin, gave us the only two contemporary drawings of this technique, showing a baby in a cot with its head wrapped in bandages

Figure 7: Inca cradle (k'irawpi kaq), holding a month-old baby Guamán Poma de Ayala, Felipe (1615): Nueva corónica y buen gobierno, f° 212 [214], drawning 79.



Interpretation of the findings

The complex relationships between the body and its socio-cultural role have always questioned anthropologists. Vera Tiesler points out that recent research focuses on the social "construction" of the body and its interactions with the mind, culture, religion, identity, gender and

age (2014: 13–18). The individual bodily existence(s) founds the group to which it belongs, the community's codes and norms. Thus, the body can be perceived as a "social product". Body art then becomes a physical habitus, constructing the social body through collective constraints. French anthropologist Marcel Mauss is one of the first to have expressed it in the mid-1930s with his seminal article on body techniques (1935: 271–293). Cranial vault modification, dental manipulation, feather ornaments and body paintings can be categorized along three dimensions: manifestations of aesthetics; prestige symbols and signs of belonging to a specific group; elements for religious rituals.

Ornaments and body deformation discerned social groups and showed a social rank. Tiesler suggests that cranial modification was an important indicator of Maya social integration or differentiation according to gender and residence patterns, in particular, during the Classical Period. If children were destined to become rulers, priests, warriors and achieve high status, an oblique deformation was imposed (Sotelo Santos/Valverde Valdés 1992: 210). After the Classical Period, this was much less frequent, probably due to the influence from neighboring cultures (Tiesler 2012, 14; Romano Pacheco/Tiesler: 2008 18–25). In the Andes, head shapes established the person's social identity and separated different groups within society: class, castes and slaves. Torquemada observed hierarchical status distinctions and symbols of group affiliation in this area:

> "We have already mentioned the different nations of Peru, most of whom, and in almost every province, had their own custom, different from the others, of shaping heads with industry, and it was a wonderful thing to see how diligently they deformed heads, especially those of the lords; they ploughed them in such a way (and I don't know if they are used to this custom) that they clamped them with cotton, wool or bandages for two or three years after birth; and when the head had reached more than a quarter of the height of the child

> and had taken the shape of a *coroça*[1] or a very stiff and very high clay mortar, they then became very diligent, and by great privilege, the people of Peru granted certain lords, whom they wished to favour, to form the heads of their sons in this way like that of their kings and all those of his lineage." (Torquemada 1723: 2, 583)

In the Muisca culture too, in Colombia, cranial deformation was a sign of hierarchy, performed only in the highest classes. It was a sign of social status like clothes, accessories, funeral ceremonies and tombs.

In the same vein, the feather is also a kind of codified language. It served as a form of social recognition, a "mark of rank". In Aztec society, the identity of an individual, for example his rank in the military, was defined by the finery he wore, what part of the bird's body from which the feathers used came from, or their color. The feather allowed for the identification of the social rank, age and economic situation of the person wearing it.

However, this is less clear for teeth. In Mexico, the great character exhumed in the secret chamber of Palenque had very simple dental manipulation, but the guards who accompanied him on his last journey had inlays. At Monte Negro, Oaxaca, the human remains found in large tombs in the center of the necropolis did not show any manipulation, while on the other hand, the skeleton found in one of the simplest tombs of the site showed a pyrite inlay. So, there may not always be a correlation between dental manipulation and high social rank (Romero 1958: 215–220).

Conversely, it may have also been a sign of infamy. Francisco López de Gómara, a priest who accompanied Hernán Cortés, described this custom among the Darien Indians: "The captive's face is scarred and a tooth is knocked out" (López de Gómara 1979: 105). According to the Inca mestizo Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), who wrote a chronicle at the beginning of the 17th century, the Inca Huyna Cápac (c. 1493–1527) punished the Huancavilca chiefs in the following way: He ordered the principal chiefs and their descendants to pull out "two upper teeth and two

1 The *coroça* is a conical headdress made of paper or painted cardboard worn by convicts during the period of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions.

lower teeth, as a reminder and testimony to the lies they had told when pledging loyalty and submission to the great Tupac Inca Yupanqui, their father." (Garcilaso de la Vega 1723: 305) Body painting also showed the position of an individual in society. Among the Indians of the province of Cueba, free men painted their chins, going up to their ears, as well as their arms and chests, whereas slaves were marked on their foreheads and cheeks (Oviedo y Valdés 1840: 136–137).

The reflections of the various observers also crystallize around body adornment as an ethnic marker and a sign of integration into the community. In the early 16th century, the Frenchman Binot Paulmier de Gonneville described the Carijo of Brazil. Their feather crowns are said to have had the function of identifying themselves with a clan through the use of feathers of the same color as those that made up the chief's crown (Gonneville 1946: 36).

However, one of the most important aspects of body adornment refers to religious, ritual and magical motivations. They allow the wearer to emulate aspects of the appearance and/or behavioral characteristics of their animal source, and they provide spiritual strength and protection. First of all, body modifications and adornments have the function of appropriating the qualities and power of an animal by allowing the person to identify with it. In 1615, the capuchin Yves d'Evreux (1570-c. 1630) described the Tupinamba as adorning themselves with "ostrich feathers" for war and explained that this would enable them to flee more quickly if the battle went badly for them (Yves d'Evreux 1864: 24). The behavior of the bird and its appearance merge with the wearer. This is a continuum that can still be observed until recently. When the Waynas of Guyana go to war, they get scarified with motifs representing jaguars and birds of prey, figures that manifest their predatory nature in the face of enemies (Velthem 1995: 254–55).

The size of ornamental teeth also carries this symbolism. The Ticunas of Peru adorned themselves with necklaces of monkey teeth to acquire agility and cunning. For the same purpose, the Carib women of the Orinoco wore sign teeth around their necks and caiman teeth in their ears. These motivations still exist. In the mid-1970s, anthropologist Morales Gómez noted that men of the Cuna ethnic group in Colombia

wore necklaces of animal teeth in order to incorporate their strength (Thomas 2011b: 202).

Beyond the appropriation of strength and power, identifying with an animal enabled a connection with the divine. In the Andean cosmovision, the art of the feather created links with the world of the gods. The representation of birds, symbolized by their feathers, linked the power of gods with temporal rulers on earth. Textile items decorated with feathers, such as Nazca ceremonial plumes, symbolized this direct link between high political and religious dignitaries with the divine world.

The feather-decorated clothing of pre-Hispanic Peru was mainly found in tombs. The deceased was often wrapped in richly decorated textiles called *unku*, a rectangle of cloth split down the middle to allow it to be put on. Their brightly colored feather decorations (macaws, hummingbirds, toucans) were symbols of identity and marks of power, and these divinized textiles facilitated the journey of the body by helping the deceased access the world of the dead, where he or she is transformed into an ancestor (Ferrer-Joly (eds.) 2016: 22–49).

Finally, and most importantly, body adornments provided spiritual strength and protection. The head, considered as the center of spiritual life, also combined power and strength, authority and vitality. In Inca culture, the head was linked to the upper world, to celestial bodies, to the *animu*. Its circular shape was believed to attract cosmic energies and those from deep within the earth. To close the fontanel meant to ensure that the spirit of the child could not escape, thus causing its death. It is the same in Central America with the *tonalli*, a kind of animate, circulating vital force leaving through the head at the time of death. The *tonalli* of infants was believed to prevent them from falling ill and losing spiritual energy. So, the flattening of the occipital bone was a means to protect a baby's spiritual and physical integrity (Thomas 2017: 91–106). This list further describes the head's qualities for the Nahuatl people from Mexico: ilhuicatl [the celestial part, the sky], tlalnamiquini [the rememberer], tlamatini [the knower], tlancayotl [achievement, destiny], cicpactonal[li] [dexterous, of superior science], mauhcaittoni [venerable].

Heads and faces were believed to be seats of the orifices and organs of the senses as well as openings and possible passages for evil spirits.

They were therefore to be protected by tattoos, piercings, scarifications, make-up, ornamental jewelry and other conformations and "deformations". Entering and conforming into a social group required going through rituals of deformations. Those regarding the skull of babies are the most impressive examples.

Body paints also played a protective role. They were linked to bloodshed, whether in the context of war or hunting, hence the highly valued red color, which had additionally strong magical and ceremonial meaning according to chroniclers such as López de Gómara (1858: I 173–174). And even though the smell of the paints put them at a disadvantage in battle with the Spaniards, they did not give them up. In the early 17th century, the Spanish Franciscan friar Pedro Simón (1574-c. 1628) referred to the Pijaos of the New Kingdom of Granada who were easily spotted by the soldiers' dogs because of the smell of the paints. Although they knew it, they did not fail to apply it, so powerful was its symbolism (Simón 1892: IV 379). In a more general way, colors had a close relationship with blood. In Aztec society, yellow was the color of sacrifice and prisoners who were to be killed were smeared with this color. Aztec warriors covered themselves in black before going into battle because it symbolized war and the night.

On the other hand, the color protected against death. It was attributed protective qualities against hostile and evil forces. In the 17th century, according to the Flemish priest Adrián de Ufeldre, the Darien of Panama organized ceremonies for children aged between six and nine. During an initiation session they would paint them to ward off demons and evil spirits. Similarly, the Darien and Cunas painted young girls as they entered puberty (1682: 1–56).

Finally, in a more prosaic way, body paint protected the skin. In 17th century Peru, the chronicler Ruiz Blanco noted that men and women painted their bodies to protect themselves from the sun (Ruiz Blanco 1690: f° 32). Columbus and Cortés had already noted this. These dyes were also a means of defending oneself against insects, especially mosquitoes, and to fight certain diseases (Thomas 2011a: 77–78).

In a similar vein, cutting or inlaying teeth was a practice of mystical essence as in the Mayan culture. Some gods were sculpted or painted

with the oblique cut of a tooth, such as Tlatoc, the deity of rain and storms. He was depicted with large eye circles and long teeth on his upper jaw. The most represented god in pre-Hispanic times was Huehue-Teotl (Old Gods), worshipped by the Olmecs, Zapotecs and Aztecs. His canines are oversized and this characterized old people considered important and knowledgeable. Chac-Xib Cha, god of fertility, offered himself to his worshippers with protruding nostrils, an enlarged tongue and showing his canines, a sign of ferocity (González Ortiz/Montero Becerril/Toriz Maldonado 2008: 47–48). The funeral rituals are also very interesting. Often the face of the deceased was covered with a jade or ceramic mask with the mouth open, without teeth or central incisors, to enable a fleeing spirit.

In Amerindian thought, birds occupy an essential place in mythology. One need only recall the founding myth of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. It was an eagle on a prickly pear tree that indicated to the migrating people where to finally settle, after their tutelary god had been guiding them in the form of a hummingbird since the beginning of their long journey.

In the indigenous cultures, the relationship between the society of birds and that of men was believed to be very close, to the extent that the former became a metaphor for the society of men in Central and South America. Within the animal kingdom, the bird society was the one believed to have the most similarities with human civilizations. Paradox? Since they differ profoundly from humans, birds can afford to resemble them. Claude Lévi-Strauss makes this clear. Feathered, oviparous, winged, they seem to form a society distinct from ours. Yet, however far removed it may be, this bird society is homologous to the one we live in. Birds love freedom, build a home, live in a family and feed their young. They socialize with their fellow kind and, above all, they communicate by acoustic means that are reminiscent of an articulated language (Lévi-Strauss 2004: 245–246). And while different birds have an extraordinary difference in appearance that makes them immediately recognizable, there are hardly ethnic distinguishing marks in humans. The art of plumage was created in order to distinguish them and allow them to display an identity. The bird became the reference to imitate.

The feather also became a material that singled out, ordered, arranged, and displayed the hierarchy of societies. In imitating birds, it became a metaphor for human identity (Schoepf 2001: 28–30).

Summary

Body adornments of the indigenous Americans reflect a certain way of being in the world with a unity of soul and body. They reveal complex symbolic codifications – signs of belonging, rites of passage, aesthetic, prophylactic, therapeutic, social and cosmogonic functions. The embellishment of the body, its remodeling, modification and improvement are acts that represent a form of bodily memory that express an identity, reveal a status or indicate belonging to a society. It is a language of signs, an aesthetic expression as much as a marker of identity and cosmology.

Thus, the body becomes a medium and a subject of representations and thoughts. Through a drawing, a color, a pen, a body modification, meaning is inscribed on and in the body, and a whole culture and a relationship to the divine are expressed. The complexity of these adornments reflects a collective and individual expression. The body is the site of collective manifestations of what is personal. Body adornments embellish, dress as well as protect and give meaning to life and daily acts. For example, there were social, political or spiritual meanings for the cranial and dental manipulations as well as references to health, beauty, ferocity, social distinction and the godly.

The cosmological and religious dimension of these ornaments are elements primordial for their understanding. The wearing of feathers, the manipulation of the occiput, paintings or dental modifications also protect against diseases and bad influences, defend against spells and establish a privileged relationship with the deities. The head in particular – plucked, painted, deformed, with teeth filed or inlaid, not to mention pierced lips, ears or cheeks, hair cut in a thousand ways, tattooed or scarified skin – linked individuals with the cosmos via the human body.

This body is polysemous. For Amerindian people, it was an indispensable medium between the material and the spiritual, and much

more than an envelope of flesh, bone and blood. It was the conduit for magical and religious rituals and spirituality, and it undoubtedly played a part in balancing the world.

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