



Objects without Texts: Mimbres Painted Bowls and the Problematics of Interpretation

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Archaeological cultures like the Classic Mimbres, a relatively localized and short-lived phenomenon within the wider regional tradition of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico, are defined exclusively by their material remains. Clusters of morphological traits – often taken as indexical for less tangible beliefs, practices, or identities – serve to differentiate them from their geographic and temporal neighbours. An undeniably useful (and perhaps indispensable) tool for understanding the past, the labelling of archaeological cultures nevertheless leads to a hermeneutic circle whereby individual objects are interpreted within a cultural context that is itself an extrapolation from the set of objects. For the Mimbres, this interpretive dilemma is compounded by the presence of a uniquely expansive iconographic record, which has survived in the form of thousands of hemispherical bowls decorated with geometric and figural paintings. These images are graphically compelling, endlessly diverse, and often humorous in ways that continue to grab the attention of modern viewers, and this engagement often manifests as a strong desire to understand and explain them. In the absence of a closely associated textual record, however, these images are often – and, as will be shown below, problematically – read through the lens of stories and beliefs originating from temporally and geographically distant cultures. This is all to say that interpretation is a methodological issue that continues to be debated in the scholarly discourse, one that is all the more pressing due to the frequency with which it is applied without critical assessment of its complexities and potential pitfalls.

Yet, interpretation is not only a retrospective act engaged in by modern scholars; it is also present at the moment an object is made and is intrinsic to the ways it materializes ideas. As George Kubler outlined half a century ago in his book-length treatise, *The Shape of Time*, the creators of individual objects riff on a constantly evolving variety of possibilities available to them within the (formal, cultural) traditions in which they are working.¹ That is, objects can be taken as representative or constitutive of a particular societal context, but they should also be understood as being made by individuals who are both actively (re)producing and responding to the range of perspectives and stances that comprise the cultural tradition within which they were made. The sociologist Anthony Giddens has described the relationship between individual actors and societal structures as dialectical, the latter being both constituted by and constraining to the former, who engage in reflexive monitoring of these conditions of social praxis.² This process can result in artworks that point to and reflect upon the material, interactive, and diachronic qualities they

Detail of rotated view of Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl depicting a fight between a human and a bear (plate 10).

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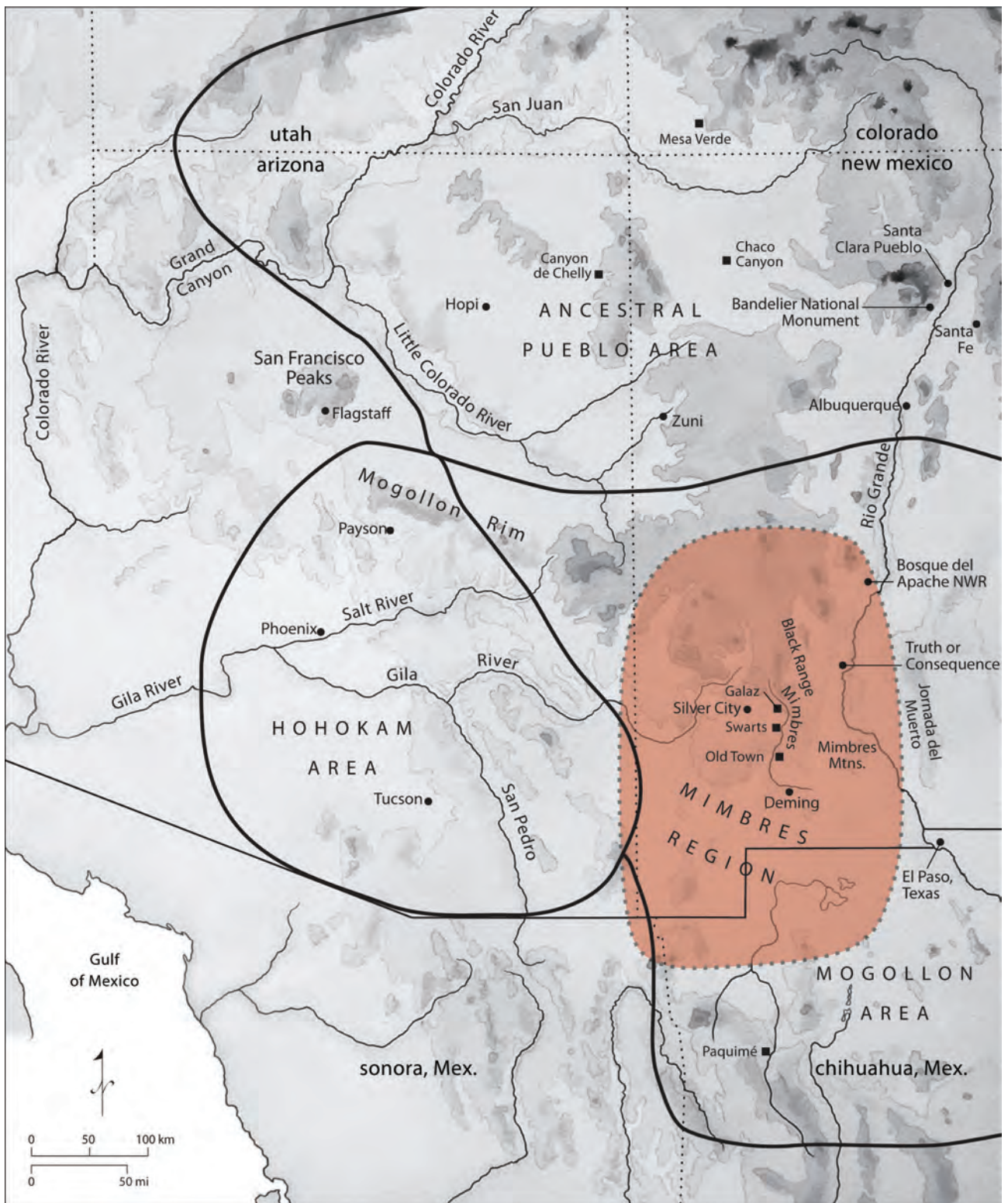
embody. Following a critique of the use of textual sources from different times or places as a basis for iconological interpretations, I will argue that some Mimbres painted bowls self-referentially draw attention to the phenomenological conditions of their own apprehension. In short, I am making a case for taking more seriously what might be called the poetics of these objects; for, just as iconography deals with the semantic content of images by making reference to ideas that are external to them, poetics places emphasis on the mediality through which that content is made manifest.

Classic Mimbres Culture

Mimbres – Spanish for ‘willows’ – is the name for a river in what is now southwestern New Mexico; it has been variously applied to the region centred on this waterway, to the distinctive pottery style produced and distributed across this area from around 750–1150 CE, and, by extension, to the culture with which these ceramics are associated (plate 1).³ An outgrowth of the more widespread and longer-lived Mogollon tradition, Mimbres culture also shares attributes with its neighbours from the broader cultural region that extends across much of what is now the southwestern United States and northern Mexico: Ancestral Puebloans (or Anasazi) in what is now the Four Corners region to the north and the Hohokam in the area of modern-day Arizona to the west.⁴ These names refer to distinctive, regionally bounded patterns of architecture, ceramics, and subsistence, but, as Stephen Lekson has argued, it is possible that these differences have been granted too much weight in the archaeological interpretations of the past.⁵ Rather than reflecting separate ethnic populations or socio-political structures, they could have arisen as localized adaptations to discrete ecological conditions by members of an otherwise largely shared cultural tradition. The difficulty of reading people into the material remains is further demonstrated by scholarly disagreements as to the meaning of the relatively radical changes in the ceramics, architecture, and burial practices that signal the end of the Classic Mimbres period around the middle of the twelfth century. Some scholars have argued this reflects changing lifeways in response to ecological considerations and an opening up of the region to outside interactions and influences, without a significant change in the make-up of the population.⁶ Others see a discontinuity in the population of the region between the Classic Mimbres and subsequent Black Mountain phases.⁷ Further archaeological investigations will no doubt continue to refine how the Mimbres phenomenon is understood, particularly with regard to the relationship of this archaeological culture to both its contemporaries and its successors across the southwestern US and northern Mexico.

If there are aspects of Classic Mimbres culture that are still debated or imperfectly understood, the cluster of features that serves as its archaeological signature – setting it apart from its geographic and temporal neighbours – is more clearly defined. These all began to manifest around 950 CE, and achieved their fullest form between about 1000 and 1130 CE, spread across several dozen relatively egalitarian communities of no more than a few hundred inhabitants apiece.⁸ The most notable marker of Classic Mimbres culture is the distinctive black-on-white pottery that – unlike contemporaneous Ancestral Puebloan black-on-white ceramics, which are decorated almost exclusively with geometric patterning – includes both geometric designs and figural imagery. The interior, concave surfaces of hemispherical bowls were the preferred grounds for decorative embellishment (plate 2), again in distinction from the Ancestral Puebloans, who made a greater variety of vessel forms that were typically painted on their exteriors. Both production and consumption of these bowls appears to

1 Map showing approximate extent of the Mimbres cultural region within the US Southwest. From Margaret C. Nelson and Michelle Hegmon, eds, *Mimbres Lives and Landscapes*, Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research, 2010, page viii. Photo: Reproduced with permission, all rights reserved.



have been relatively evenly distributed across the sites and their inhabitants, which is to say that they were not significant markers of wealth or status.⁹

Mimbres bowls appear to have been valued for utilitarian as well as aesthetic and symbolic reasons. Most vessels exhibit at least light use-wear, but those with more accomplished painted decoration are less likely to have been used heavily.¹⁰

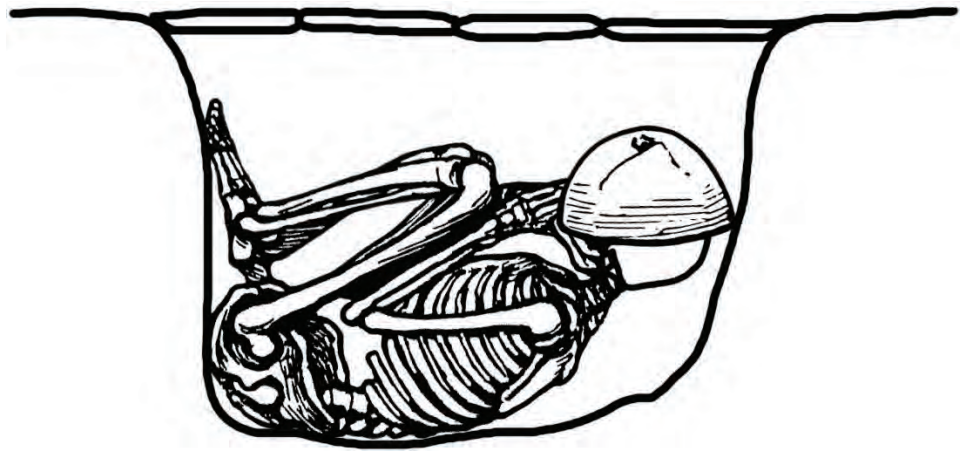
The presence of usage marks suggests that most vessels first served as functional receptacles for food preparation, service, or storage prior to being incorporated into burials, the context from which they have most commonly been recovered.¹¹ Most, but not all, Classic Mimbres burials were placed beneath the floors of occupied rooms in a flexed position with a hemispherical bowl inverted over the head – or, occasionally, the torso – and a hole punched through its base (*plate 3*).¹² These features represent a notable departure from earlier, extramural burial practices and coincided with alterations in the built environment that suggest significant changes in social and ritual life at this time.

Architecturally, Classic Mimbres culture is associated with agglomerations of above-ground rooms, which replaced earlier, semi-subterranean pithouse residences. These pueblos were constructed of unworked stones set in mud, and are therefore distinguishable from later adobe roomblocks found in the Mimbres region.¹³ Furthermore, large sunken ceremonial spaces, often referred to as great kivas due to their similarities with other Puebloan structures of this name, were burned and abandoned in the mid-to-late tenth century, with ritual activity apparently shifting to double-hearth rooms within the roomblocks and to the open plazas between them.¹⁴ All of this indicates that the onset of Classic Mimbres culture was accompanied by notable changes in community organization and ritual practice.

2 Oblique view of a Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl, c. 1000–1130 CE. Ceramic with slip, 9.5 × 18 cm. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (25-11-10/94825). Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



3 Schematic drawing of a typical Mimbres urn burial. Adapted from J. Walter Fewkes, *Archeology of the Lower Mimbres Valley, New Mexico*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1914, figure 1. Drawing: Author.



Mimbres Vessels: Imagery and Interpretation

The over 10,000 known Mimbres black-on-white bowls present a vast repertoire of geometric designs and figural and narrative imagery. This constitutes a visual archive that is unparalleled among the ancient cultures of the Southwest, making it the object of much scholarly inquiry. There is tremendous diversity among the figural imagery painted on Classic Mimbres vessels, which ranges from isolated depictions of animals or anthropomorphic figures to multifigural narrative scenes. The latter include representations of daily life as well as what appear to be ritual activities and compositions with supernatural elements that possibly recorded myths, visions, or other culturally specific content. Scholars have turned to the paintings as an important source of information about ephemeral aspects of ancient Mimbres lifeways, for example hunting practices, bodily adornment and gender roles.¹⁵ Even such apparently straightforward readings of the images are not always without controversy, however, as exemplified by the pushback of multiple scholars against the assertion by Michelle Hegmon and Wenda Trevathan that an unrealistically depicted birthing scene could indicate that the painters of Mimbres vessels were men, who would be less intimately familiar with parturition events.¹⁶ With more ambiguous imagery, such as depictions of ritual activities or scenes involving supernatural figures, the desire to gain insights into Mimbres religion, ideology, and mythology has led some scholars to turn to much later accounts from the Modern Puebloan peoples or to texts originating from the Mesoamerican cultures far to the south.

Plate 4 shows the image from a bowl in the collection of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology in New Mexico. It is illustrated here with a drawing out of respect for that institution's recently adopted policy of no longer exhibiting or endorsing the publication of photographs of objects in their collection associated with burials (ascertainable in this case by the presence of the perforation in the base of the bowl).¹⁷ The ethical issues related to working with sensitive cultural materials as well as the problems arising from the use of drawings rather than photographs as the basis of interpretation will be addressed more fully later in this essay. The imagery from this bowl depicts an anthropomorphic figure seemingly emerging from or descending into a black space at the centre of the vessel. He or she is flanked by an identical pair of mammals who are connected to the central circle by wavy lines. At the top and bottom of the depicted hole are crescent shapes filled with dot-in-square patterns. When shown a photograph of this vessel by the ethnographer Lois Weslowski, numerous Hopi informants unanimously identified these latter features as a conventionalized representation of maize.¹⁸ Although this identification is possibly correct, it remains unverifiable due to the approximately 800 to 1,000 years that had passed since the time the bowl was produced. Indeed, despite



4 Drawing of Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl with narrative scene, c. 1000–1130 CE. Ceramic with slip, 12.8 × 32 cm. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. Drawing: Author.

the fact that they shared the same cultural background, the identification of the crescents with dot-in-square patterning as maize was almost the only thing Weslowski's Hopi informants agreed upon. The animals, for example, were variously described as being bears, beavers, mountain lions, rabbits, badgers, armadillos, or coyotes, and the central figure was interpreted by different informants as a deity in his underworld home, a deceased individual in his grave, or either the progenitor or the offspring of the animals, in the latter case as an unborn child still in the womb.¹⁹

Recognizing that discrepancies in the identification of iconographic content such as that discussed here derive from the significant cultural divide between Modern Pueblos and the Classic Mimbres people, Weslowski still argues for the potential value of indigenous insights to inform our understanding of these images:

The review of some of the Hopi commentaries provides a stimulating glimpse of the research potential inherent in native discussions of Mimbres iconography. It is important to emphasize that although this study analyses these specific descriptions, its purpose is to extract from the accounts general perceptual guidelines that can teach us how to view Mimbres art objectively. It is obvious that the underlying basis of the consultant's interpretations is an experience which is uniquely Hopi. The participants themselves are well aware of this bias, continually cautioning that their ideas are only from the Hopi point of view. Yet their observations still offer new ways to look at the Mimbres pictures. Most significantly, they provide us with insights into the visual content of this imagery.

The intent of this study then is not [to] advocate that the Hopi can tell us what the Mimbres meant by their naturalistic paintings. Rather, the project seeks to generate a wide range of comparative data that can teach us how just to look at these designs in a variety of new ways. What becomes noteworthy, therefore[,] are the answers to such questions as:

- a. What elements of the image do the consultants find visually significant?
- b. How do they go about translating the combinations of these elements?
- c. What aspects of their own cultural experience do they rely on to provide clues for interpreting the Mimbres imagery?²⁰

Weslowski acknowledges here that modern readings are grounded in a worldview far removed from that of the original artists, similar to the disclaimer that accompanied interpretations of Mimbres images by the Hopi painter Fred Kabotie in the mid-twentieth century.²¹ Yet she also believes that indigenous practices of looking can open paths to better understand, if not the meanings of the pictures painted on the bowls, then at least their logic. A similar motivation underpins the analysis of Mimbres vessels carried out by Rina Swentzell, a modern potter from Santa Clara Pueblo.²² Weslowski's project, as well as the writings of Kabotie and Swentzell, can be characterized as decolonial in their efforts to temper etic modes of interpretation grounded in Western academic thought with the emic insights of indigenous perspectives.²³ It must be noted, however, that ways of looking at images are themselves potentially varied between members of the same culture and subject to change in the *longue durée*; indigenous cultures are neither homogeneous nor timeless. Nevertheless, even if Weslowski's preliminary conclusions tend to be rather general (e.g. the importance of relative placement, gestures, and bodily adornment to meaning; the possibility for abstract motifs to have carried representational meaning), they are valuable for encouraging a renewed engagement with the structural syntax of Mimbres imagery as opposed to focusing solely on the meanings of specific motifs.²⁴

Yet, Weslowski's account is also valuable precisely because of the wide-ranging disagreements in even basic iconographic identifications among various informants, which demonstrates the precariousness of relying on modern ethnographic interpretations to make sense of the distant past. This becomes all the more problematic when what is sought is a deeper, iconological understanding of the cultural or symbolic values associated with the images. Building on Erwin Panofsky's insights into the disjunctions between the meanings ascribed to Renaissance images

and their Classical prototypes, George Kubler famously cautioned scholars of the ancient Americas to be wary of intimations of continuity between disparate time periods.²⁵ Forms may persist or be revived, but the symbolic meanings attached to them rarely remained unchanged.

Furthermore, as Brian Shaffer has ably demonstrated in his dissertation, which critically analysed the various interpretive approaches applied to Mimbres imagery, it has been common practice among modern scholars to mix and match numerous points of comparison originating from distinct sources and contexts in an effort to read the imagery on the bowls.²⁶ Although they share many cultural features, Modern Puebloans comprise speakers of several distinct languages and have diverse beliefs, myths, and ritual practices. Which, if any, of these individual groups comes closest to ancient Mimbres society remains unclear. The defining traits of Mimbres culture demonstrate significant departures from a number of broadly shared Southwestern traditions; therefore, even as it is acknowledged that the Mimbres were among the ancestors of the Modern Puebloans, intimations of direct continuity should be scrutinized.

In addition to variations on the direct historical approach, whereby Mimbres images are interpreted through recourse to the mythology, cosmology and culture of their descendants in the region, scholars have also looked further afield to the images and texts of other indigenous peoples, particularly those from Mesoamerica. In a survey of the use of the dot-in-square motif in ancient Southwestern art, Laurie Webster, Kelley Hays-Gilpin, and Polly Schaafsma identify this element as having been employed by Mimbres painters to represent an array of materials used for adornment, including 'snakeskin, beads, mosaics, animal fur, bird feathers, turtle shell, [and] teeth', and argue that its association with maize only came later.²⁷ However, they suggest that the multivalency of this common motif could have allowed it to draw connections between a range of related ideas, such as the way serpent skin, maize, and greenstone objects were all part of an associative complex in Mesoamerica dating back to at least the Formative period (c. 1500 BCE–250 CE).²⁸

Webster, Hays-Gilpin, and Schaafsma's fruitful analysis of the multiplicity of meanings and associations carried by this widespread motif depends on numerous examples they reference to build their argument, including some images from Mimbres bowls. In their discussion of the vessel depicted in *plate 4*, they remark that it is 'reminiscent of the Maya Maize God's rebirth from the Cosmic Turtle Shell', as seen on a Classic Maya codex-style dish (*plate 5*).²⁹ The turtle carapace depicted on this plate is covered with a pattern of diagonal wavy lines forming a field of squares with dots in their centres, a pattern also seen on the lily pad beneath it to the right. In the Maya region and throughout Mesoamerica, this pattern appears to have been strongly correlated with the irrigated and cultivated earth, and it was often used on the bodies of reptilian creatures that metaphorically represented this concept. Comparing the use of the dot-in-square motif in the Mimbres image to its use on the Maya plate thereby implies that the crescents in the former were intended to depict the broken earth rather than the maize that rises from it. This interpretation could very well be correct, but, as with the identification of the dot-in-square crescents as maize by Weslowski's modern Hopi informants, it remains unverifiable. By reading the imagery on this vessel through comparison with a well-known image from Classic Maya civilization (c. 250–900 CE), these authors utilize an interpretive strategy that has become relatively prevalent due to the rich textual sources and better-understood pictorial repertoire associated with this admittedly distant culture. As a further example will demonstrate, this line of inquiry can become particularly problematic when specific iconographic (and, by extension, cultural) connections are treated as more exact than is warranted.



5 Classic Maya codex-style plate with scene of the Maize God's resurrection, c. 680–750 CE. Ceramic with slip, 5.8 × 32 cm. Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts. Photo: Justin Kerr.

A bowl excavated from the Swarts ruin in 1926 by Cornelius B. and Harriet S. Cosgrove and now in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University depicts the confrontation between a human and a bear, their forms reduced to a graphic simplicity that nevertheless remains highly legible (plate 6).³⁰ In the absence of further information, it would seem impossible to venture beyond this cursory identification of the imagery on this vessel, to speculate, for example, on whether it might represent a specific historical encounter or a mythological story. In a recent paper, however, Patricia Gilman, Marc Thompson, and Kristina Wyckoff have suggested that this bowl illustrates a mythological scene known from the *Popol Vuh*, a book-length creation story belonging to the Quiché Maya of the Guatemalan highlands and dating to the mid-sixteenth century.³¹ This identification was first proposed two decades ago by Thompson,³² and it is invoked in the more recent article as one line of evidence for the authors' proposal that direct connections with Mesoamerica were the

impetus for the dramatic cultural changes that occurred between the mid-tenth and mid-twelfth centuries in the Mimbres region. In his dissertation, Shaffer raised significant questions about the use of Mesoamerican sources in the interpretation of Mimbres iconography, including Thompson's original discussion of this and other Mimbres imagery as directly relating to stories from the Popol Vuh.³³ Because this pertinent criticism has seemingly had no impact on current scholarship, it is worth rehearsing some of the issues at stake, particularly in the light of new evidence related to the verifiable interactions between the southwestern United States and Mesoamerica.

Much of the Popol Vuh recounts the exploits of the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, as they avenge the deaths of their fathers (who were also twins) in the underworld and lay the groundwork for the current era of creation.³⁴ According to Thompson and his co-authors, the scene in question relates to the overthrow of Seven Macaw (Vuqub Caquix), a false sun god who claimed glory beyond his station. In the Popol Vuh, the Twins, who are excellent hunters, shoot Seven Macaw with a blowgun,

6 Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl depicting a fight between a human and a bear, c. 1000–1130 CE. Ceramic with slip, 8.1 × 29.5 cm. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (26-7-10/95879). Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College.





7 Drawing of Izapa Stela 2, c. 300 BCE–250 CE. From John E. Clark and Ayax Moreno, 'Redrawing the Izapa Monuments', in Lynne S. Lowe and Mary E. Pye, eds, *Archaeology, Art, and Ethnogenesis in Mesoamerican Prehistory: Papers in Honor of Gareth W. Lowe*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, number 68, Provo, UT, 2007, figure 13.2. Drawing: Ayax Moreno.

the Popol Vuh are typically referred to by generic names in the literature. Thus, the celestial avian creature that appears with some frequency in pre-Hispanic Maya art is usually identified as the Principal Bird Deity rather than Seven Macaw.³⁷ Nevertheless, there is significant iconographic evidence to support the close relationship between these supernatural entities, the latter likely being a late (and perhaps regional) version of the former.

As both the names Principal Bird Deity and Seven Macaw suggest, this being was, first and foremost, avian. This alone associates it with the sky, a connection that is reinforced through additional pictorial means: the Principal Bird Deity was often depicted either descending from a split sky band or as perched atop a crocodilian tree widely understood to represent an *axis mundi* linking the underworld (roots), terrestrial (trunk) and celestial (canopy) realms.³⁸ The supernatural qualities of the bird itself are indicated in a number of ways. The use of anthropomorphism can be seen on Stela 2 from the Late Formative site of Izapa, illustrated here with a line drawing because the low relief of the original carving is difficult to read in a photograph (plate 7). Here, the upper portion of the composition is filled with an inverted, descending avian. The helmet-like bird head surmounts or surrounds a human head seen in profile, the bird's curling beak projecting like a visor in front of the face. As another supernatural marker, the long bones of the wings of the Principal

breaking his jaw. As they approach for the kill, the wounded antagonist tears off the arm of Hunahpu. Through guile and trickery, the Twins are able to finally defeat Seven Macaw, stripping him of his jewels and finery and recovering and reattaching the lost arm in the process.³⁵ Thompson sees parallels with this story from the Popol Vuh on another Mimbres bowl, where an ursine creature is depicted with a severed human arm in front of its mouth.³⁶ By extension, the confrontation between a human and a bear on the vessel in plate 6 is read as the final defeat of Seven Macaw and the retrieval of the severed arm, although this latter element is nowhere in evidence and the depicted person is shown with both arms intact.

Thompson's reading of Mimbres imagery through the stories recounted in the Popol Vuh followed the notable advances in Maya iconography based on this book, which has proven to be an important resource for interpreting images that might otherwise have remained largely opaque. Although the version that survives was recorded in Roman script during the early colonial period, imagery painted on Maya ceramic vessels dating to the Classic period, as well as mural paintings and carved stone monuments from the Late Formative period (c. 400 BCE–250 CE), strongly suggest that many of its component stories existed in one form or another as much as two millennia earlier. Cognizant of Kubler's admonition against directly interpreting ancient imagery through more recent texts, however, most Mayanists are cautious about their assertions of continuity, and early versions of characters known from

8 Classic Maya polychrome plate (the Blom Plate), c. 600–750 CE. Ceramic with slip, diameter 44.5 cm. Cancún: Museo Maya de Cancún. Photo: Author.



Bird Deity were often represented as agnathic serpent heads, which is the case both on Izapa Stela 2 and on the Classic Maya polychrome dish known as the Blom Plate (plate 8).³⁹ This feature is perhaps easiest to make out in the upraised wing of the avian creature on the latter example, in which a black-pupilled white eye is seen within the red head from which white fangs project. In most Mayan languages the words for serpent and sky are homonyms, and this pictorial element further establishes the close identification of this being with the celestial realm.

In the examples illustrated in plate 7 and plate 8, the Principal Bird Deity is flanked by a pair of human figures – who are furthermore shown shooting the bird with blowguns on the Blom Plate – a tableau that strongly parallels the narrative of Seven Macaw’s downfall at the hands of the Hero Twins recounted in the Popol Vuh. Furthermore, the Popol Vuh stresses the importance of Seven Macaw’s jewels as the means by which he establishes his false grandeur, and the removal of these gleaming, undeserved adornments as the goal of the Twins.⁴⁰ Most representations of the Principal Bird Deity show it wearing large ear ornaments, a form of elite jewellery commonly seen in Mesoamerican art and material culture. On Izapa Stela 2, these donut-shaped ornaments can be seen at the right sides of both the avian and anthropomorphic heads. The ostentatious adornment of the Primary Bird Deity is even more emphatically indicated on the Blom Plate, where its second (avian) head rises on a long neck composed of a string of jewels while further ornaments are vomited from the bird’s beak. Of course, such iconographic identifications depend on familiarity with the broader corpus of Maya art and the representational conventions it utilizes. Jewels shown here in an atypical usage as part of a mythological allegory are identical

in form to similar elements worn by Maya elites in naturalistic portraits as well as to actual examples recovered archaeologically.

Despite the disjunctions that undoubtedly occurred between variations across both time and space, an underlying mythic core featuring a supernatural avian associated with the sky and the *axis mundi* linking it to the earth appears to have a significant continuity in Mesoamerica.⁴¹ Rather than a celestial bird, the Mimbres bowl in plate 6 depicts an earth-bound ursine, and therefore does not correlate with this central trope. If, as Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff suggest, the advent of pictorial imagery in the Mimbres region is connected to wider cultural and ideological changes resulting from direct contact with Mesoamerican peoples, shouldn't the visualization of this mythological scene more closely reflect the ways it appears, both textually and pictorially, in the region of its origin? The transposition of Seven Macaw from a bird into a bear in Thompson's interpretation would represent a considerable departure from the original cosmological associations of this myth, and would therefore seem to minimize the importance of direct contact with esoteric knowledge that he and his co-authors argue was an important contributing factor in the development of Classic Mimbres society.

Certainly contact between the Southwest and Mesoamerica occurred and became increasingly important during this period. Although the precise nature of this interaction is still being investigated, much recent work has added significantly to an understanding of the dynamics at play. Of particular importance is the presence of non-local material in the archaeological record. The skeletal remains of scarlet macaws, for example, have been recovered throughout the Southwest, over 1,000 km from their natural habitat in the tropical lowlands of Mesoamerica.⁴² Furthermore, three dozen Mimbres vessels depicting parrots or macaws have been identified by Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff, who argue that it is unlikely that these birds, which require significant and specialized care, could have been successfully exchanged in 'down-the-line' trade, and that they are therefore the best evidence of direct contact between the regions.⁴³ They hypothesize that some Mimbresños made the long journey to the south to obtain both ritual knowledge and scarlet macaws with which they returned, leading to a relatively radical transformation of the local culture including the proliferation of pictorial imagery.⁴⁴ There are several considerations that complicate this interpretation, however.

The closest natural habitat for macaws is also the nearest source of cacao: the Huasteca region of northern Veracruz. Chocolate was an important elite drink throughout Mesoamerica, and cacao beans were often used as a form of currency due to their portability and inherent value. Chemical testing of ceramic vessels from sites across the American Southwest has demonstrated the presence of chocolate in the region.⁴⁵ However, traces of another botanical stimulant – *Ilex vomitoria* – originating from the southeastern United States have also been recently identified at Southwestern sites.⁴⁶ This member of the holly family was used to make 'black drink', an important component of indigenous rituals observed by the earliest Europeans in the Southeast. Indeed, two Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowls from the Galaz Ruin tested positive for caffeine and theobromine in a ratio that suggests the presence of *Ilex vomitoria* rather than cacao, as each of the plants contains these active substances in distinctive proportions.⁴⁷ Therefore, Mesoamerica was but one source of both material goods and ritual knowledge among the Mimbres and their neighbours, and should not be unduly privileged in this regard.

Furthermore, the Ancestral Puebloan site of Pueblo Bonito, a major masonry construction in Chaco Canyon with over 600 rooms arranged in a semi-circle rising

at least four stories high, contains much more evidence of intensive exchange with Mesoamerica than do sites in the Mimbres region: many more parrot and macaw skeletons, much higher concentrations of chocolate, and evidence of significant socioeconomic hierarchical stratification arising from the unequal distribution of the wealth derived from this trade.⁴⁸ Yet, unlike the Classic Mimbres, the Ancestral Puebloan inhabitants of Pueblo Bonito did not abandon their great kivas, change their burial practices, or begin to produce figural imagery. Thus, if Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff want to suggest that contact with Mesoamerica was the main impetus for these changes, it remains for them to explain why they only occurred in this one region, which was, moreover, not one of the most intensive trading centres.

Finally, the authors propose that the Huasteca was the source for macaws, yet they base their interpretations of Mimbres imagery on the *Popol Vuh*, which was recorded centuries later in the highlands of Guatemala, many hundreds of kilometres further to the southeast. While the cultures of Mesoamerica shared many beliefs and practices, this expansive region was far from homogeneous, but rather comprised many language groups and cultural traditions. Huastec diverged from other Mayan languages at the time the Teenek people migrated into what is now northern Veracruz, likely in the early Postclassic period (c. 900–1200 CE, which is, interestingly, the time associated with increasing material interaction between Mesoamerica and the American Southwest), but possibly much earlier.⁴⁹ While they feature many pan-Mesoamerican elements, Teenek creation myths focus on the culture hero Thipaak and differ in significant ways from the *Popol Vuh*, including the absence of any twins.⁵⁰ Therefore, the imputation that this cultural area was the source of transmission for specific Maya myths as they were written down in the Guatemalan highlands hundreds of years later should be treated with scepticism.

In the light of all these considerations, it would seem that the *Popol Vuh* suggested itself to Thompson and his colleagues as a source through which to interpret Mimbres images primarily because of its very existence as a text. The demonstrable material connections between the Southwest and Mesoamerica were undoubtedly accompanied by the exchange of ideas, ideologies, and ritual practices. However, the precise nature of these interactions remains poorly understood and proper names derived from other cultures can suggest a greater degree of equivalence than is likely warranted.⁵¹ Most Mesoamericanists now emphasize the disjunctions between images from different time periods by using generic names such as Principal Bird Deity (rather than Seven Macaw) or the Teotihuacan Storm God (rather than the name of the later Aztec storm deity, Tlaloc) to refer to earlier manifestations. All the more caution should be observed when it is a matter of different cultures that speak distinct languages and are located long distances from each other. Even if the presence of a severed arm next to a bear on a Mimbres vessel does connect this image with the story from the *Popol Vuh* – and there is no reason to believe that this is necessarily the case – then the relationship between these versions is too far removed to justify referring to the bear as Seven Macaw.

Since Kubler first cautioned against specific historical analogies – the use of ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts to interpret earlier cultural manifestations – in Mesoamerican iconography a half-century ago, a number of scholars have pushed back against what they see as an overly sceptical stance.⁵² They argue that, even taking into account the dramatic upheavals that resulted from the Spanish Conquest, enough continuities exist between the cultures of the ancient past and more recent times to make these perspectives a valuable resource. However, most advocates for the continued recourse to colonial and modern accounts of indigenous cultures in the study of the ancient past have taken pains to insist that such documents need to

be used in a careful and controlled manner. Texts should be incorporated within diachronic analyses that compare multiple lines of evidence to identify the similarities and differences between them. Rather than being assumed a priori, there is a burden of proof to show how and when cultural forms or ideas have persisted as well as the responsibility to tease apart the elements that represent continuities from those that have undergone disjunctions.

Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of Mimbres Painted Bowls

Iconographic interpretations like those discussed above tend to consider Mimbres images in isolation, removed from the material support of the vessels on which they were painted. As with many other studies, the figures that accompany Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff's article are in the form of drawings that reproduce Mimbres motifs without any indication of their original size or placement in relation to the bowls' concavities. From an archaeologist's point of view, there are a number of compelling reasons to illustrate scholarly analyses of Mimbres paintings with line drawings rather than photographs. As a practical concern, self-produced drawings do not entail the often significant expenses of obtaining high-quality images and the permissions to reproduce them. Another practical consideration leading to the use of line drawings is the legibility of the image. With their very clear black-on-white paintings, this is not an issue for Mimbres bowls, but with low relief carvings on stone stelae such as the example from Izapa illustrated in *plate 7*, imagery tends to be difficult to make out in photographs. However, it should be kept in mind that the supposed clarity drawings provide is tempered by the possibility of inaccuracies, imaginative reconstructions of damaged elements, or other departures from the objects in question.

The choice to work with drawings rather than photographs can also be a matter of archaeological ethics. Committed to discouraging the market in antiquities and the destruction to archaeological sites caused by looting, many scholars – and most archaeological publications – make an effort to avoid adding value to objects in the hands of private collectors. This stance can lead to a preference for drawings over photographs, even in instances where objects were scientifically excavated and are in publicly accessible museum collections, as a means to downplay the tangible and aesthetic qualities both of individual objects and of the entire class of objects to which they belong. Furthermore, a growing recognition that both the discipline of archaeology and the institution of the museum had their origins as part of the colonialist enterprise – and a concomitant sensitivity to indigenous perspectives on these matters – has led some to reconsider the proper treatment of certain materials, particularly those with sacred or mortuary associations.

The acquisition of, control over, and dissemination of cultural materials raises a number of ethical concerns, and grappling with these will always require some compromises. The Society for American Archaeology's Principles of Archaeological Ethics includes the exhortation that archaeologists should

carefully weigh the benefits to scholarship of a project against the costs of potentially enhancing the commercial value of archaeological objects [...] especially objects that are not curated in public institutions, or readily available for scientific study, public interpretation, and display.⁵³

Although they do not explicitly state their ethical stance, Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff include drawings of multiple unprovenienced bowls from private collections

to support their discussion, suggesting that they view the scholarly benefits of studying the iconography on such unscientifically excavated bowls to outweigh the potential concern of abetting the commercialization of these specific objects, and of Mimbres bowls more generally.⁵⁴ In my estimation, the value of studying Mimbres images as inseparable from the bowls on which they are painted, as discussed below, necessitates the use of photographic illustrations. However, mindful of the ethical concerns outlined above, only images of vessels in publicly accessible collections have been included here.⁵⁵

Some archaeologists might consider line drawings as sufficient for analyses that aim only to understand the images in terms of what they represent, whereas most art historians recognize that a drawing necessarily constitutes an interpretation, which could affect how the subject matter is perceived. Moreover, line drawings tend to obscure other aspects of artworks that can be equally meaningful. This observation is not new. Barbara Moulard has argued that the ceramic materiality and hemispherical shape of the bowls, the black-and-white colour scheme of the painted decoration, and the holes punctured through the bases of the vessels all held important symbolic or metaphorical meaning related to Mimbres mortuary practices and religious beliefs, and that any analysis of the images should take this into account.⁵⁶ The importance of this insight cannot be overstated: Mimbres images are but one element of a symbolically potent object, and their meanings cannot be fully grasped outside of a consideration of the formal, material, and contextual situatedness of the bowls on which they were painted.

Although Moulard's approach reclaims the embodied physicality of the vessels, her analysis neglects a dimension that was fundamental to how they would have been experienced: time. She reads both the images and the further qualities of the bowls' form and materiality through the lens of their ultimate inclusion in burials. There are, however, some questions about the validity of this interpretive paradigm.⁵⁷ A majority of the painted bowls now in museums were recovered from mortuary contexts, but this is a factor of those being the relatively intact examples that are typically selected for collections; most painted hemispherical bowls wound up as broken sherds deposited in middens. Likewise, although a majority of Classic Mimbres burials were accompanied by an inverted and punctured bowl, these almost always show evidence of prior use. Thus, there is no reason to believe that the imagery adorning the bowls was made primarily in reference to the burial context.

Without referencing Moulard specifically, J. J. Brody has cautioned against interpretations of Mimbres images that read them in connection to their contexts:

The paintings have little or no obvious relationship to vessel use, and they underline the proposition that the functions of a utilitarian object should never be confused with the functions of the decorations applied to it. A picture is not a pot; the two mean different things, are used for different purposes, and function in different ways for different ends.⁵⁸

This assertion seems to go a bit too far in the opposite direction. Although the images almost certainly pointed to referents unrelated to their physical placement within bowls, it is also the case that they were inextricably connected to their ceramic supports. Figural imagery, which was developed far more extensively by the Mimbres than by any other culture in the ancient Southwest, is found almost exclusively on the interiors of hemispherical bowls and almost never on other vessel types. Furthermore, among all types of Mimbres ceramics, only hemispherical bowls were regularly

punctured through their bases prior to their inclusion within burials, a ritual treatment unique among the cultures of the Southwest.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is not unreasonable to expect that this confluence of traits played an important role in the ways these bowls, which were apparently of great importance to Mimbres group identity, were conceptualized. Even if the images were not made expressly with regard to the funerary context, it seems likely that Mimbres artists would occasionally have taken the possibility of this mortuary function into account at the time they painted them.

However, this was but one aspect of the object. Before they were entombed – if indeed that was to be their fate – these objects had prior existence as food containers, as communicators of symbolic meaning, and as sources of aesthetic pleasure. In addition to the material qualities identified by Moulard, attention should therefore also be paid to the temporality of Mimbres bowls, artworks that were experienced within time as they were handled and that were extended across time as they traversed multiple contexts and forms of encounter. With this expanded perspective in mind, I would like to now return to the bowl in *plate 6*.

Steven LeBlanc has discussed the imagery on this Mimbres bowl without recourse to any textual source.⁶⁰ He speculates that the bowl could commemorate the killing of a bear, which, based on the relative paucity of ursine remains in the debris recovered from their pueblos, would have been an unusual and noteworthy event among the Mimbres. Because it can never be confirmed or refuted, this reading is no more satisfying than any other proposal for the meaning of this image. Yet he goes on to note that, due to the absence of a ground line or any other means of orienting the viewer, it is impossible to determine whether it is the human or the bear that is triumphant in this struggle (*plate 9* and *plate 10*). Following Brody's observation that 'all Mimbres bowls are fundamentally mobile and should be viewed as such', I would like to argue that, far from being a pictorial deficiency, this ambiguity was an intentional feature of the image.⁶¹

Even if this vessel documented a specific historical event or mythological story whose outcome would have been known to its original Mimbrenño audience, the moment that is depicted remains an unresolved one that must be negotiated by the viewer. One or the other of the contenders has the upper hand in this ongoing conflict depending on the direction from which this round vessel, whose very form resists any notion of a fixed orientation, is perceived. Indeed, viewing the bowl from an oblique angle – which, in a Mimbres context, would likely have been as common if not more so as directly looking down into the concavity – would further emphasize the (temporary) dominance of whichever figure was most visible. By implicating the contingency of its own viewing, the integration of image and bowl therefore serves to collapse the distinction between the beholder-subject and beheld-object. Furthermore, it draws attention to the temporality of the vessel, which prolongs a moment of dramatic uncertainty into the ongoing present of the viewer as it also points forward towards an eventual, even inevitable conclusion. The narrative blow that will finally end the contest between human and bear thus comes to be conflated with the physical blow that will one day strike this bowl at its centre, in the area around which the struggle is depicted.⁶²

The image of a struggle between a human and a bear almost certainly had a primary narrative referent that is now lost (or, at the very least, unverifiable). Yet the artist has created a composition that engages with the geometry, physicality, and mobility of the bowl itself; the active and unfixed conditions of viewership; and the anticipated possibility of the puncturing of the bowl as part of a transformation of its status and role within Mimbres society. Although unquestionably one of the most

9 Rotated view of Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl depicting a fight between a human and a bear (plate 6). Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College.



dramatic examples, this vessel is not unique in the ways it self-reflectively points to its own mediality. Analysis of another example will show this, and a much more extensive exploration of the poetic aspects of Mimbres images can be found in a separate essay.⁶³

A bowl now in the Princeton University Art Museum depicts an agricultural scene (plate 11).⁶⁴ Six human figures and a banded animal occupy three-quarters of the bowl's interior, while the rest of the space is filled with a garden plot in which growing plants are arranged into three rows. Numerous Mimbres bowls feature such a 'polar orientation', in which multiple figures all have their feet directed towards the centre of the bowl.⁶⁵ When seen from the top, as is often the case in museum displays or photographic images, the figures are arranged radially, projecting outward like the spokes of a wheel. If viewed obliquely, however, the figures would appear to rise up the inner walls of the bowl, standing upright and sharing a centre of gravity. As this perspective only allows for a portion of the total scene to be observed at any one time, it requires the beholder to manually rotate the bowl to bring further figures into view. Not only does such a composition encourage – or even insist upon – active viewing, it also adds a temporal aspect of the image, which unfolds as it is viewed in successive fragments.

This example is unusual among Mimbres bowls with radial compositions – as well as among Mimbres paintings more generally – in that it includes a landscape feature

that helps define the setting for the action. The garden plot would appear to be depicted from above, its rectangular perimeter delineating the boundaries of its horizontal extent. However, the side closest to the bottom of the bowl also serves as the ground line from which the plants are growing, the roots of the plants being shown beneath this line. When considered from the oblique vantage point that such polar oriented compositions appear to call for, the perspective shifts from a bird's-eye view to one of depth as one looks into and across the garden. Both the human figures and the garden share a common ground line; this situates them within, rather than adjacent to, the plot of land they are working on, which is, moreover, conflated with the physical ground for this representation – the vessel itself.

Made from clay taken from the living earth, the vessel is metonymically related to the garden plot. Both have undergone material transformations – forming and firing, irrigation and cultivation – to become useful to humans. This scene can be understood as a portrayal of the production of the crops that would have been prepared in or consumed from vessels like the one on which it is painted. But the relationship of this imagery to the social role of the object extends even further, looking forward towards the possibility of the vessel being perforated at the time of its placement within a burial. The depicted farmers all hold pointed digging sticks, and their varied and dynamic poses combine to give the impression of vigorous movement as they break the soil. The rows of dots seen between the similarly arranged rows of plants in the garden plot might represent holes for the sowing of seed and thus visualize the



10 Rotated view of Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl depicting a fight between a human and a bear (plate 6). Photo: © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

results of their activity. But this action is also formally and conceptually related to the puncturing of the vessel itself, an intervention that was eventually made at the centre of the earthen bowl.

The conflation between the planting of crops and the puncturing of the earthen bowl implied here could be understood in relation to Harry Shafer's hypothesis about the changes to mortuary practices that characterized Classic Mimbres culture. Noting that the trend towards intramural burials more closely associated the deceased with the living occupants of specific roomblocks, Shafer has argued that this shift in the way the dead were interred – a fundamental consideration for a community, one that indexes underlying ideologies such as attitudes towards death and the persistence of the soul – could have been related to a need to communicate with deceased members of previous generations as part of the staking of ancestral claims to the best agricultural lands following the advent of more labour-intensive irrigation projects.⁶⁶ The hemispherical bowls that were used both for the

11 Classic Mimbres black-on-white bowl depicting an agricultural scene, c. 1000–1130 CE. Ceramic with slip, 10.2 × 25.1 cm. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum. Photo: PUAM.



preparation and service of the fruits of agricultural labour, and as a crucial element of this new burial tradition, participated in both of these dimensions of Mimbres life, and therefore served as a tangible link between them. Just as the simultaneous depiction of two sequential moments – the sowing of seed and the maturing plants – in the representation of the garden on the vessel in *plate 11* collapses the temporal dimension of the agricultural cycle into a single image, the bowl itself embodies dual diachronic possibilities as both a vessel for food preparation and service and a punctured funerary object.

Both visually alluring and semantically opaque, the diverse imagery on Mimbres painted bowls continues to attract the interest of modern viewers. It is not surprising that this interest is often expressed as a desire to explain the images. Yet, iconological explanations that rely on texts or ideas that originate from geographically or temporally distant cultures remain unavoidably fraught. Identifying the meanings of images is but one way to engage with Mimbres art, however.⁶⁷ The paintings are also appealing in their physical specificity, as sensuous sites of encounter, and it must be the case that their material, phenomenological qualities also held importance for their creators.⁶⁸ Although there will inevitably be a disjuncture between the responses a Mimbres bowl might elicit from modern viewers and those of the eleventh-century denizens of what is now southwestern New Mexico, both are rooted in the experiential properties of the object. Rather than reading them as illustrations of external texts, it is through a consideration of the ways they sometimes self-referentially point to the substance and form of the bowls on which they were painted and the contexts and conditions in which they would be encountered that the images have the potential to still speak.

Recent decades have seen a growing and sometimes contentious archaeological literature pertaining to the use of phenomenological methodologies to study past cultures.⁶⁹ As a field of study, phenomenology originated among philosophers theorizing the nature of perception and experience and its role in mediating between human subjectivity and the material world, often collapsing the Cartesian distinction between the two.⁷⁰ Its use in archaeology is predicated on an assumption of the universality of certain aspects of human experience that can be imputed to all people no matter their cultural backgrounds.⁷¹ Foremost among these is spatial perception, and the study of the experiential aspects of landscapes and the built environment has been a primary focus of phenomenological archaeology.⁷² The artworks studied from this perspective are almost always monumental pieces that are fixed within architectonic spaces that control access, movement, lines of sight, and other aspects of perceptibility. Mary Weismantel, for example, has persuasively and productively analysed the experiential qualities of the art and architecture of Chavín de Huantar, an early Andean ceremonial site located in the northern highlands of Peru.⁷³ Likewise, in an analysis that demonstrates the utility of phenomenology even when dealing with periods and cultures for which abundant textual documentation exists to guide interpretations, the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has brilliantly analysed a fresco of the Annunciation by Fra Angelico in relation to the spatial and lighting conditions of its setting to demonstrate the theological implications of the seemingly empty white patch of wall between the two figures.⁷⁴ As I have argued here, a phenomenological methodology can also be fruitfully applied to mobile objects.

In making elegant arguments grounded in the ways that artworks are encountered, both Didi-Huberman and Weismantel have anticipated and compellingly responded to a potential criticism of this approach, namely that it depends on subjective and possibly ethnocentric claims that remain unsubstantiated. Rather, these authors

contend, it is the epistemological privileging of textual knowledge underpinning most Western scholarship that is biased and limiting, creating an illusion of methodological rigour while obfuscating other ways that artworks communicate.⁷⁵ Moreover, as the historian Frank Ankersmit has argued, subjective experiences in the scholar's present should not be discounted out of hand, but can rather form the basis for sensitive and valid insights into past moments.⁷⁶ A recent article by Stephanie Whittlesey that investigates the subjective colour produced by black-and-white designs when certain Mimbres bowls are spun is an intriguing example of scholarship into a potentially significant experiential aspect of these vessels that was prompted by modern observations.⁷⁷

By setting the bowls in motion, Whittlesey's analysis reactivates the dimension of time as a crucial aspect to understanding them. Indeed, any consideration of the ways artworks are experienced must necessarily grapple with their temporality. All perception is embodied and durational. Objects do not rise to consciousness instantaneously and in their entirety, but rather reveal multiple facets of themselves over time, particularly when they are encountered from different perspectives or in different contexts.

I have argued that the Mimbres artist or artists who painted the scene of conflict between a human and a bear intentionally drew attention to and played upon the mobile aspects of the bowl and its round form to create a composition with more than one possible reading. They also anticipated the potential puncturing of the vessel as part of funerary rituals, folding this future event into the dramatic narrative illustrated on the bowl. The vessel depicting an agricultural scene also seems to have taken into account this fairly consistent vessel treatment, as do a number of other bowls that depict scenes such as birds hatching from eggs and human and mammalian births. Playful associations such as these call to mind Brody's observation that 'Visual puns are the heart and soul of Mimbres paintings'.⁷⁸ It is not difficult to imagine such punning to be extended to the material and social experiences of the vessels that served as their grounds. In this regard, images such as these are best understood, through a Kublerian or Giddensian lens, as the creations of artists reflecting upon and responding to the broader contours of the cultural tradition to which their works belong. The act of puncturing the vessels at the time of burial may have produced new ritual significance, but at the time of their creation these images already played upon the possibility of this future act.

Modern interpretations of Mimbres bowls that ignore their temporal complexities overlook a crucial aspect of the imagery. In their discussion of the 'Plural Temporality of the Work of Art', Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood assert that

'Art' is the name of the possibility of a conversation across time, a conversation more meaningful than the present's merely forensic reconstruction of the past. A materialist approach to historical art leaves the art trapped within its original symbolic circuits. It tends not even to notice that the artwork functioned as a token of power, in its time, precisely by complicating time, by reactivating prestigious forebears, by comparing events across time, by fabricating memories.⁷⁹

With imagery that asserts the simultaneous participation of these objects in distinct moments of time, the Mimbres bowls discussed in this essay encapsulate a plural temporality whereby they can be understood as having extended themselves through time or, conversely, as collapsing the temporal dimension into a single instant.

Notes

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- 1 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven and London, 1962, 49–53.
- 2 Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, London, 1979, 49–59.
- 3 Michelle Hegmon, 'Recent Issues in the Archaeology of the Mimbres Region of the North American Southwest', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 10: 4, December 2002, 308. The dates given here relate to Mimbres ceramics, which have been periodized into Style I (c. 750/775–900s), Style II (900s–1000), and Style III (1000–1130/50), the latter corresponding to Classic Mimbres culture, the focus of this paper. Mogollon ceramics show that the region was continuously occupied from at least 200 CE, and Mimbres culture appears to have developed directly from these earlier populations. For a more detailed discussion of the developmental sequence of Mimbres ceramics, see J. J. Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, Revised Edition, Santa Fe, 2004, 67–81.
- 4 Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 59–66.
- 5 Stephen H. Lekson, 'Chaco, Hohokam and Mimbres: The Southwest in the 11th and 12th centuries', *Expedition*, 35: 1, 1993, 44–52.
- 6 Darrell G. Creel, 'The Black Mountain Phase in the Mimbres Area', in *The Casas Grandes World*, ed. Curtis F. Schaafsma and Carroll L. Riley, Salt Lake City, 1999, 107–120; Margaret C. Nelson, 'Mimbres, the Mystery?', in *Mimbres Lives and Landscapes*, ed. Margaret C. Nelson and Michelle Hegmon, Santa Fe, 2010, 99–103.
- 7 Harry J. Shafer, 'The Mimbres Classic and Postclassic: A Case for Discontinuity', in *The Casas Grandes World*, ed. Schaafsma and Riley, 121–133.
- 8 Michael Blake, Steven A. LeBlanc, and Paul E. Minnis, 'Changing Settlement and Population in the Mimbres Valley, SW New Mexico', *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 13: 4, Winter 1986, 459–461; Patricia Gilman, 'Social Organization and Classic Mimbres Period Burials', *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 17: 4, Winter 1990, 457–469.
- 9 Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 101–102; Patricia A. Gilman, Veletta Canouts, and Ronald L. Bishop, 'The Production and Distribution of Classic Mimbres Black-on-White Pottery', *American Antiquity*, 59: 4, October 1994, 695–709.
- 10 Alicia Bray, 'Mimbres Black-on-White, Melamine or Wedgewood?: A Ceramic Use-Wear Analysis', *Kiva*, 47: 3, 1982, 133–149.
- 11 Harry Shafer has argued that the presence of imagery on the bowls suggests their primary purpose was for use in public feasts or ceremonial events, after which they could have been used in a variety of ways before being discarded or incorporated into burials. See Harry J. Shafer, *Mimbres Archaeology at the NAN Ranch Ruin*, Albuquerque, 2003, 188–190.
- 12 Shafer, *Mimbres Archaeology at the NAN Ranch Ruin*, 135–162. Plate 3 was adapted by the author after Figure 1 from J. Walter Fewkes, *Archeology of the Lower Mimbres Valley, New Mexico*, Washington, DC, 1914 with reference to the critique made by Shafer (*Mimbres Archaeology*, 139) of the original drawing, which depicts the body in an upright flexed position that does not accurately reflect the flexed horizontal position observed in the majority of Classic Mimbres burials.
- 13 Hegmon, 'Recent Issues', 311–315; Stephen H. Lekson, 'Was Casas a Pueblo?', in *The Casas Grandes World*, ed. Schaafsma and Riley, 88–90.
- 14 Darrell Creel and Roger Anyon, 'New Interpretations of Mimbres Public Architecture and Space: Implications for Cultural Change', *American Antiquity*, 68: 1, January 2003, 67–92.
- 15 Marit K. Munson, 'Sex, Gender, and Status: Human Images from the Classic Mimbres', *American Antiquity*, 65: 1, January 2000, 127–143;
- Brian S. Shaffer, Karen M. Gardner, and Barry W. Baker, 'Prehistoric Small Game Snare Trap Technology, Deployment Strategy, and Trapper Gender Depicted in Mimbres Pottery', *Journal of Ethnobiology*, 16: 2, Winter 1996, 145–155.
- 16 Christopher T. Espenshade, 'Mimbres Pottery, Births, and Gender: A Reconsideration', *American Antiquity*, 62: 4, October 1997, 733–736; Michelle Hegmon and Wenda R. Trevathan, 'Gender, Anatomical Knowledge, and Pottery Production: Implications of an Anatomically Unusual Birth Depicted on Mimbres Pottery from Southwestern New Mexico', *American Antiquity*, 61: 4, October 1996, 747–754; Steven A. LeBlanc, 'A Comment on Hegmon and Trevathan's "Gender, Anatomical Knowledge, and Pottery Production"', *American Antiquity*, 62: 4, October 1997, 723–726; Brian S. Shaffer, Karen M. Gardner, and Harry J. Shafer, 'An Unusual Birth Depicted in Mimbres Pottery: Not Cracked up to What It Is Supposed to Be', *American Antiquity*, 62: 4, October 1997, 727–732.
- 17 According to Brody (*Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 163), this bowl was 'excavated by A. M. Thompson at either the Three Circle or Eby site, before 1952'. A good photograph of this bowl has previously been published in J. J. Brody, Catherine J. Scott, and Steven A. LeBlanc, *Mimbres Pottery: Ancient Art of the American Southwest*, New York, 1983, 21.
- 18 Lois Vermilya Weslowski, 'Preliminary Report of the Mimbres Iconography Study', unpublished manuscript in the possession of the Goldwater Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979, 23–25.
- 19 Weslowski, 'Preliminary Report', 23–25.
- 20 Weslowski, 'Preliminary Report', 26, emphasis included in the original.
- 21 In the preface for Fred Kabotie, *Designs from the Ancient Mimbres with a Hopi Interpretation*, Second Edition, Flagstaff, AZ, 1982 [1949], xi, David Laird writes, 'Fred does not claim that, because the Hopi culture acts in a given way, the same event must have triggered the creation of a design in the Mimbres culture. Quite the contrary, his interpretations say simply, "If this were a Hopi design, here is the Hopi story or event from which it would have come." This book is, therefore, not a Mimbres document at all, but a Hopi one.'
- 22 J. J. Brody and Rina Swentzell, *To Touch the Past: The Painted Pottery of the Mimbres People*, New York, 1996.
- 23 Cecelia F. Klein, 'Conclusions: Pre-Columbian Gender Studies', in *Gender in Pre-Hispanic America*, ed. Cecelia F. Klein, Washington, DC, 2001, 363–385.
- 24 Weslowski, 'Preliminary Report', 27–31.
- 25 Erwin Panofsky, 'Renaissance and Renascences', *The Kenyon Review*, 6: 2, Spring 1944, 201–236; George Kubler, 'Period, Style and Meaning in Ancient American Art', *New Literary History*, 1: 2, Winter 1970, 127–144.
- 26 Brian Sawyer Shaffer, 'The Mythology of Classic Period Mimbres Painted Pottery Iconology: Evaluation of the Iconographic Interpretations', unpublished PhD dissertation, Texas A&M University, 2002, 276–278.
- 27 Laurie D. Webster, Kelley A. Hays-Gilpin, and Polly Schaafsma, 'A New Look at Tie-Dye and the Dot-in-a-Square Motif in the Prehispanic Southwest', *Kiva*, 71: 3, Spring 2006, 331 and 338.
- 28 Webster, Hays-Gilpin, and Schaafsma, 'A New Look', 339.
- 29 Webster, Hays-Gilpin, and Schaafsma, 'A New Look', 331. On page 322, the authors illustrate the image from this Maya plate in a line drawing and wrongly identify it as the 'turtle pectoral worn by ruler Pakal at Palenque, Mexico, depicting the Maize God's rebirth from the Cosmic Turtle'.
- 30 According to the Peabody Museum Collections Online Database (<https://pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu:8443/peabody/>), this bowl (PM#26-7-10/95879) was found placed over the chest of Skeleton 737 beneath the floor of Room 76. A drawing of this bowl was first published as Plate 225d of H. S. and C. B. Cosgrove, *The Swarts Ruin: A Typical Mimbres Site in Southwestern New Mexico: Report of the Mimbres Valley Expedition Seasons of 1924–1927*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. XV, No. 1, Cambridge, MA, 1932.
- 31 Patricia Gilman, Marc Thompson, and Kristina C. Wyckoff, 'Ritual Change and the Distant: Mesoamerican Iconography, Scarlet Macaws, and Great Kivas in the Mimbres Region of Southwestern New Mexico', *American Antiquity*, 79: 1, January 2014, 90–107.

- 32 Marc Thompson, 'Mimbres Iconology: Analysis and Interpretation of Figurative Motifs', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 1999, 129.
- 33 Shaffer, 'The Mythology of Classic Period Mimbres Painted Pottery Iconology', 75–166.
- 34 In the logic of the myth, both of the older set of twins (One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu) are fathers to the Hero Twins, who were miraculously conceived when the living skull of one of them spat into the hand of a maiden: "'So be it," said the head of One and Seven Hunahpu – they were of one mind when they did it.' Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life, Revised Edition*, New York, 1996, 99 and 261.
- 35 Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 78–81.
- 36 Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff, 'Ritual Change and the Distant', 99.
- 37 The term Principal Bird Deity was first introduced by Lawrence W. Bardawil, 'The Principal Bird Deity in Maya Art: An Iconographic Study of Form and Meaning', in *The Art, Iconography and Dynastic History of Palenque, Part III*, ed. Merle Greene Robertson, Pebble Beach, CA, 1976, 195–209. Based on iconographic and epigraphic evidence, the Classic Maya version of this deity appears to have been an aspect of the creator deity, Itzamnaaj, and was occasionally referred to as Muut Itzamnaaj ('Bird Itzamnaaj'). See Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya*, Austin, 2006, 234–238.
- 38 Constance Cortez, 'The Principal Bird Deity in Preclassic and Early Classic Maya Art', unpublished MA Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1986, 73–84; Karl A. Taube, William A. Saturno, David Stuart, and Heather Hurst, *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala, Part 2: The West Wall*, *Ancient America* 10, Barnardville, NC, 2010, 29–57. With regard to its frequently depicted position atop the axis mundi of the World Tree, Dennis Tedlock (*Popol Vuh*, 237) notes that some modern Quiché identify Seven Macaw with a group of stars corresponding to what is now called the Big Dipper, which is proximal to the pole star around which the heavens appear to rotate.
- 39 Bardawil, 'The Principal Bird Deity in Maya Art', 196–198.
- 40 Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 77.
- 41 For an analysis linking the Principal Bird Deity of the Maya to a more widespread Mesoamerican 'Great Bird' figure, see Christophe Helmke and Jesper Nielsen, 'The Defeat of the Great Bird in Myth and Royal Pageantry: A Mesoamerican Myth in a Comparative Perspective', *Comparative Mythology*, 1: 1, May 2015, 23–60.
- 42 Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff, 'Ritual Change and the Distant', 94–95; Adam S. Watson et al., 'Early Procurement of Scarlet Macaws and the Emergence of Social Complexity in Chaco Canyon, NM', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, 112: 27, 7 July 2015, 8238–8243.
- 43 Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff, 'Ritual Change and the Distant', 95–96 and 102–103.
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- 47 Crown et al., 'Ritual Drinks', 11440.
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- 49 John Robertson and Stephen Houston, 'The Huastec Problem: A Linguistic and Archaeological Perspective', in *The Huasteca: Culture, History, and Interregional Exchange*, ed. Katherine A. Faust and Kim N. Richter, Norman, OK, 2015, 19–36.
- 50 Janis B. Alcorn, Barbara Edmonson, and Cándido Hernández Vidales, 'Thipaak and the Origins of Maize in Northern Mesoamerica', in *Histories of Maize: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Prehistory, Linguistics, Biogeography, Domestication, and Evolution of Maize*, ed. John Staller, Robert Tykot, and Bruce Benz, Burlington, MA, 2006, 599–609.
- 51 Marit K. Munson, *The Archaeology of Art in the American Southwest*, Lanham, MD, 2011, 105–106; Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 173.
- 52 See, for example, Gordon R. Willey, 'Mesoamerican Art and Iconography and the Integrity of the Mesoamerican Ideological System', in *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, New York, 1973, 153–162; Terence Grieder, 'The Interpretation of Ancient Symbols', *American Anthropologist*, 77: 4, December 1975, 849–855; Alison Wylie, 'The Reaction against Analogy', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8, 1985, 63–111; Ann Brower Stahl, 'Concepts of Time and Approaches to Analogical Reasoning in Historical Perspective', *American Antiquity*, 58: 2, April 1993, 235–260; Kent G. Lightfoot, 'Culture Contact Studies: Redefining the Relationship between Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology', *American Antiquity*, 60: 2, April 1995, 199–217; Jeffrey Quilter, 'Continuity and Disjunction in Pre-Columbian Art and Culture', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 29/30, Spring–Autumn 1996, 303–317; and Klein, 'Conclusions', 374–379. A thorough discussion and analysis of the history and application of the direct historical approach in Americanist archaeology can be found in R. Lee Lyman and Michael J. O'Brien, 'The Direct Historical Approach, Analogical Reasoning, and Theory in Americanist Archaeology', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 8: 4, December 2001, 303–342.
- 53 <https://www.saa.org/career-practice/ethics-in-professional-archaeology>.
- 54 Gilman, Thompson, and Wyckoff, 'Ritual Change and the Distant'.
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- 56 Barbara Moulard, *Within the Underworld Sky: Mimbres Ceramic Art in Context*, Pasadena, CA, 1984; Barbara Moulard, 'Form, Function, and Interpretation of Mimbres Ceramic Hemispheric Vessels', *Phoebus*, 4, 1985, 86–98.
- 57 The rest of this paragraph draws on Shafer, *Mimbres Archaeology*, 190; for a critique of Moulard's problematic reconstruction of Mimbres mortuary symbolism from disparate Modern Puebloan ethnographic sources, see Shaffer, 'The Mythology of Classic Period Mimbres Painted Pottery Iconology', 188–243.
- 58 Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 177.
- 59 Of the 10,541 bowls in the Mimbres Pottery Database (2013), 4,713 are listed as having a 'kill hole', with a further 2,106 listed as 'indeterminate'. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6067/XCV8KK9CNH>.
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- 65 Brody, *Mimbres Painted Pottery*, 146–147.
- 66 Harry J. Shafer, 'Extended Families to Corporate Groups: Pithouse to Pueblo Transformation of Mimbres Society', in *Mimbres Society*, ed. Valli S. Powell Martí and Patricia A. Gilman, Tucson, 2006, 15–31; Shafer, *Mimbres Archaeology*, 213–216.
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- 71 Van Dyke, 'Phenomenology in Archaeology', 5909.
- 72 Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology*, 25: 2, October 1993, 152–174; Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*, Oxford and Providence, RI, 1994; Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds, *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, 1996.
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- 79 Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York, 2010, 18.