THE DESIGN PROCESS OF ANDEAN ICONOGRAPHY IN ANCIENT PERU AND ITS APPLICATION TO MODERN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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Project Introduction

The Beginning

Andean Iconography as a Form of Communication

Cosmo–Vision

Geometry in the Design of Andean Iconography

Modern Styles in Andean designs

A Cross–Cultural Analysis to Preserve our Ethnic Heritage

Conclusion

Complete Bibliography
The reason for this thesis project is a very personal one. As a Peruvian and a graphic designer, I want to understand how ancient Andean iconography was created, how it worked, and where is it going. I am not attempting to create something new or original, but to rethink and reinterpret my own heritage. To do so, I am analyzing the design process of Andean iconography while I use modern theories to compare them. This analytic experiment will be the main structure of this thesis project. The complete analysis along with the research and the final visual project will help me to truly understand Andean iconography and the interaction of these icons and symbols in the Andean culture and in today's culturally diverse world.

I am exploring the differences between Andean iconography and the symbol making of contemporary and ancient cultures. I am also attempting to find the similarities of ancient Andean iconography and contemporary symbol making through the design process. I am not attempting to find or decode the semiotic meaning of Andean symbols or icons, because that would be a much longer and detailed study that would demand an extensive understanding of the cultures' social interaction and needs. Instead, I am attempting to decode the design process and methodology to understand, a little bit more, the Andean philosophies, beliefs, and aesthetics. As Robert Williams said, “Design is the process of generating form for the purpose of enriching human existence.” Andean iconography enriches the past and the present of human existence, especially of Peruvians, because it is part of their culture. That is why I, as a Peruvian and a designer, think it is essential to study it.
Andean Pre-Columbian cultures of Peru, as well as the Incan Empire, are known for their outstanding iconographic designs represented in textiles, architecture, ceramics, and even in the landscape. What makes Andean iconography so attractive is not only its simple and beautiful aesthetics, but also its ability to carry social, spiritual, and political messages. Icons and symbols in Andean cultures were not designed “for design’s sake”; they were created to fulfill specific purposes in the society.

Our knowledge of the past comes from translations and from superimposed concepts introduced essentially by European influences. For this reason, over time Peruvians have forgotten the important knowledge and potential that Andean cultures possess. We are now becoming an alienated society that imitates global powers. We are so concentrated on being part of a globalized world and on being a “modern” society that we do not notice that our own culture is disappearing. Our cultures’ unique and harmonic philosophies, beliefs, and lessons are waiting to be re-learned and developed.

In this paper I will explain Andean philosophies and beliefs because, in order to understand and analyze the design process of Andean iconography, it is imperative to first understand their philosophies, beliefs, and ideas. Without understanding the cultural context it is impossible to understand how the iconography was created and how it worked. With this thesis paper, I also present the idea that a culture’s history, customs, beliefs, and philosophies can strongly influence and enhance its visual expressions.

It has been said that icons and symbols can unify cultures by being “universal”, but is this so-called “universal” language killing the heritage of individual cultures? Can these universal symbols also include distinct cultural elements? How do icons and symbols from different cultures interact and survive in a globalized and “universal” world? I will attempt to answer all these questions through this paper, and I will relay my message of awareness and concern through a graphic design piece.

This study and analysis is inspired by curiosity about cultural destiny. I want to share my culture’s knowledge and, hopefully, influence future researchers. I believe Peruvians should study their culture, enjoy it, and promote it. Learning the potential of Andean iconographic design process will allow me and other designers to reach a higher level of design. I want to bring my heritage to the modern world, so that my culture can evolve with the world without losing its uniqueness.
Before discussing the enormous but barely appreciated contributions of ancient Andean cultures, it is necessary to give a brief history of Peru’s past. The Incan Empire (1400 to 1600 AD) is probably the most well known ancient culture from Peru. It was formed by the conquest of thousands of previous cultures located throughout Peruvian and South American lands.

The Incas were a small farming community named after their eighth ruler, Viracocha, who was personified by the sun. The Incas were a simple society ruled by Zinchis (strong men). They started conquering small cultures of the Urubamba Valley, the Aymaras, and then kingdoms in the Lake Titicaca basin. Eventually, they conquered every political power existing in Peru and South American lands. The Incas absorbed the politics and knowledge of the cultures they conquered. By conquering and reorganizing societies the Incas, a small community in the beginning, expanded rapidly and created an empire. Some of the most important and influential cultures conquered by the Incas were the Huaris (400 to 700 AD), the Nazcas (200 to 600 AD), the Paracas (300 BC to 300 AD approximately), and the Moches (600 to 900 AD).

*Figure 1. Present day Peru map.*
Figure 2. Current map of South America.

Figure 3. Evolution of Andean Cultures and the Inca empire from 1453 to 1525.

Figure 4. Territory occupied by the Inca Empire.
The Incas introduced their own principles of organization to the conquered cultures, but they realized that a constant renovation and reorganization of these societies was vital to maintain all the conquered communities attached to the Incan Empire. This strategy of constant renovation was also used as a philosophy and was present in the iconography realized during that time.

I am analyzing mainly Incan iconography, but I know that Andean history carries complex events and influences from a multitude of cultures throughout time. This gives each image its own iconic language and diverse levels of meaning. The main Pre-Incan cultures whose symbols I am analyzing are: Chavin, Nazca, Paracas, and Huari.

Figure 5. Early Spanish chronicle drawing of a Quipu.
Chavin art is naturalistic. Its main subjects are human beings, birds, snakes, felines, and other animals represented as zoomorphic* deities. Chavin art is also heavy and dark in color. It includes distinctive geometric designs such as circles and ornamental borders. The Chavin religion and art had a strong influence in Peru’s history for almost a thousand years.

The Nazca culture, located in the south of Peru, descended from the Paracas culture. The Nazcas are better known as the creators of the large rectilinear and zoomorphic forms in the desert known as the “Nazca Desert Lines”. Nazca art presents scenes depicting their life and beliefs, and it is polychrome, using up to eleven colors on a single vessel.

Figure 6. Drawing of the Raimondi Stone,
Sculptured monument from the Andean culture of Chavin.

Figure 7. Chavin Art. Chavin de Huántar,
1000 BCE-200 CE
Figure 8. Nazca tunic.
The Huari culture, which was located in the center of Peru, was one of the most influential cultures for the Incan Empire, especially in agricultural technologies, social and political organization, and transportation (road construction). Huari art is characterized by its very abstract and geometric patterns, where straight forms prevailed over organic forms. One can detect the Huari’s influence in Incan visual representations by noticing that in Incan art, lines and squares prevailed over circles and arcs. For example, this abstract and geometric style was acquired by the Incas for the creation of the Tocapu code, an abstract and geometric group of symbols that have not yet been decoded.

*Figure 9. Topacu Code. Inca Empire,* 16th Century A.C.
Figure 10. Huari culture sculpture of a standing dignitary sculpture.
In ancient Andean societies, where the written word did not exist, iconography was the primary form of communication. As Anistatia Miller states, “Symbolic images are the foundation for written communication; the most ancient symbols are a conduit to the present.” Rebecca Stone-Miller also clearly supports this by explaining that, “...any memory system can be called a form of writing, since it records information for the purpose of future transmissions.”

To understand how Andeans communicated through iconography, one has to understand that Quechua speakers understood “writing” and “book” as synonyms to the word “quellca”, which actually means “painting” or “drawing”. This word is also the foundation for the word “quellccani”, which means (as 16th century lexicographers established) “to write” or “to draw”. This indicates that in Andean cultures iconography was a communication system that took the place of writing. They used painting, drawing, carving, and especially weaving as graphic ways of communication.

Andean iconography is a language. A language is an articulated system used to communicate ideas. It employs structured elements organized in a code form. In the case of Andean cultures, these articulated systems are organized icons, signs, and symbols that form a “visual vocabulary.” These elements are combined in an organized way that follows established rules to transmit messages. In another words, Andean iconography uses a symbolic language based on their beliefs to communicate ideas.

“Any memory system can be called a form of writing, since it records information for the purpose of future transmissions.”
Rebecca Stone–Miller

“Code is a system of signs which incorporates relations and meanings.”
Per Mollerup
Any kind of communication system is useless if the receptor (audience or viewer) does not know how to decode it. To do so, the receptor has to be part of the context and has to be familiar with the content. As Per Mollerup says, “Code is a system of signs which incorporates relations and meanings.” This is supported by Paul Lester’s idea that “signs have no meaning outside of their context.” Andeans emphasized the essence of the message (content or subject matter) over the external appearance, producing “symbolic reality.” Icons and symbols did not have specific and rigid meanings as today’s symbols have. They were related to the cultural beliefs of societies. In other words, the community established the symbolic meanings of the visual representations, and these meanings varied according to the context.

Andean iconography is also considered geometric decoration or geometric art. Geometric decoration or geometric art is considered the first form of visual expression in ancient cultures. Moreover, in some cultures, geometric art is considered the ancestor, and in several cases the substitution for writing. This type of art is used to design simple forms and to invent new patterns.

In Andean cultures, the so-called geometric decoration or geometric art appears in textiles, architecture and ceramics, and it does indeed take the place of writing. Through icons and patterns, Andeans told stories and related important events. The iconography acted as a vehicle for visual communication.

*Figure 11. Dipylon Vase, 8th Century BCE.*
Andean iconography is a rich universe of designs and symbolic codes connected to a powerful social, economic, political, and spiritual system. For the Andeans, the act of creating iconography represented the connection between the human world and the sacred world. This sense of connection between the two worlds was represented in the designs themselves.

Icons can have several levels of understanding. On one hand, they have an expressive connotation, which is primitive or natural, immediate, and instinctive. On the other hand, there is a secondary unconventional meaning that encourages interpretation and decoding. Besides these two, there is also the intrinsic meaning, which unifies, supports, and explains the visible and the hidden meanings. In Andean iconography, all these levels of meaning are present, creating a well-structured form of communication. One can identify images, scenes, stories, myths, and symbols, while obtaining a great amount of symbolic value.

To understand what Andean iconography is, one can also see it as group of pictograms, like the ones in African writing. Pictograms are graphic characters or symbolic pictures that represent an object, an action, or an event. But in order for a pictogram to effectively communicate a message, it has to have the same qualities as a symbol. The pictogram has to have a relationship with the people and the context. Moreover, when creating a pictogram, one has to be focused on the function of the message in order to produce a recognizable visual element.

*Figure 12. Bantu Symbol Writing.*
*Figure 13. African Writing.*
Like pictograms, Andean iconography represents objects, animals, and humans. In the case of humans, the iconography reflects everyday life and beliefs.

On the other hand, ideograms, symbols that represent ideas or concepts without indicating a specific word or name, were commonly used by Andean cultures and by several ancient cultures for religious purposes. Andean iconography is a combination of pictograms (representations of specific actions or objects) and ideograms (representation of ideas or concepts).

Andean iconography was an unlimited source of inventive design that was part of a changing society. The designs became more complex or more simplistic as the cultures evolved, but they were always original and creative, taking advantage of their philosophies and of every possible source of inspiration to create a special image or idea.

*Figure 14. Ideograms from Taquile, Puno Peru.*
Figure 15. Ideograms from Taquile, Puno Peru.
There are several essential design components in Andean iconography. We might not be able to understand the meaning of all of them due to the fact that these ancient cultures have disappeared, but we can recognize some elements. Animals, for example, are very common visual elements in Andean iconography. Animals represented the desire for power, superhuman qualities, strength, size, ferocity, sharp vision, ability to fly, and fertility. Deities, which were half human and half animal, represented the desire to maintain human capacities and obtain animal skills. Another important visual element found in Andean iconography is the Southern Cross, also known as the Chacana. The Chacana symbol represents the center of the universe and is not only an important visual element but also a grid structure used to produce harmonic compositions.

The tradition of communicating using icons and symbols instead of words survived beyond the Spanish conquest and hopefully it will survive to the modern world. The knowledge is there, in each line, brush, stone carved, and textile designed. Today’s designers just need to allow themselves to learn from these ancient designers, through research and observation.

Figure 16. Ceramic iconography from Chancay culture. Central coast of Peru, 1100–1450 A.C.

Figure 17. Alpaca from textile. Nazca culture. Central coast of Peru, 200–600 B.C.

Figure 18. Ceramic iconography of a snake, Moche culture. North coast of Peru, 100 B.C. to year 0.
Figure 19. Chacana symbol and four variations of the same symbol in different Andean cultures: Inca, Chavin, Huari, and Casma.


5 Imogene E. Asberry, Adinkra Symbols as a Means of Communication: Literal and Proverbial Interpretation (Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah Georgia, 1997), 2.

6 Ibid., 6.

**Figure 1.** Present day Peru in the world map, 2005 (Flamingo Marina <http://flamingo-marina.com/EN/about_costa_rica/>).

**Figure 2.** Current map of South America, 2005 (MDNH, Inc. The Sacred Text <http://www.sacred-text.com/nam/mnp/map3/htm>).

**Figure 3.** Evolution of Andean Cultures and the Inca Empire from 1453 to 1525, 2005 (MDNH, Inc. The Sacred Text <http://www.sacred-text.com/nam/mnp/map3/htm>).

**Figure 4.** Territory occupied by the Inca Empire, 2005 (MDNH, Inc. The Sacred Text <http://www.sacred-text.com/nam/mnp/map3/htm>).

**Figure 5.** Early Spanish chronicle drawing of a Quipu, 2000 (Juniata College, Cultural Contact in the Americas <http://faculty.juniata.edu/sowell/culturalcontact.html>).

**Figure 6.** Drawing of the Raimondi Stone, Sculptured monument from the Andean culture of Chavin, 2005 (Pacific Lutheran University, The Chavin Cult, Mason 1957: Figure I, <http://www.plu.edu/~gehrssa/page4.html>).

**Figure 7.** Chavin Art. Chavin de Huántar 1000 BCE to 200 CE, Cultural Expeditions Peru (National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology and History of Peru, Lima) <http://www.culturalexpeditions.com/chavin.html>.

**Figure 8.** Nazca Tunic, 1100 to 1400 AD, Peru, Textiles and Carpets, 2005 (Pre-Columbian textiles and carpets, <http://www.rudisouth.com/textilecarpet/precol11.htm>).

**Figure 9.** Tocapu Code, Inca Empire, 16th Century AC (Introduccion a la Iconografia Andina, Jesus Ruiz Durand, Lima Peru, 2004, 137).

**Figure 10.** Huari, Standing Dignitary ca. A.D. 600-1000, Huari, Kimbell Art Museum Fort Worth, 2002 (Collections, <http://www.kimbellart.org/database/index.cfm?detail=yes&ID=AP%202002.04>).


**Figure 12.** Bantu Symbol Writing. (Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika, Saki Mafundikwa, West New York, NJ: Mark Batty, 2004, 34 and 35).

**Figure 13.** Adinkra Symbols. (Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika, Saki Mafundikwa, West New York, NJ: Mark Batty, 2004, 34 and 35).

Figure 15. Ideograms from Taquile, Puno textile. (Introducción a la Iconografía Andina 1, Jesus Ruiz Durand, Ikono S.A.. March 2004, Lima Peru, 318 and 327).


Figure 17. Alpaca from textile. Ocucaje culture. Central coast of Peru, 10th Century A.C (Introducción a la Iconografía Andina 1, Jesus Ruiz Durand, Ikono S.A.. Marzo 2004, Lima Peru, 237).


Figure 19. The “Chacana” symbol (left) and four different variation of the same symbol in different Andean cultures (Inca, Chavin, Huari, and Casma). (Introduction to the Semiotic of Pre-Columbian Andean Design, Zadir Euribe Milla, Cultural Association Amaru Wayra, Lima Peru, 1990, 77).
**Aymara Culture:** One of the most important cultures of the Urubamba Valley and the biggest enemies of the Inca culture.

**Chacana:** Andean symbol that represents the center of the universe, balance, and the Cuatriparticion (division of four). This symbol is also used as a grid structure.

**Deity:** God, a deity is seen as a God. A culture can have more than one deity.

**Geometric Decoration or Geometric Art:** It is considered the first form of visual expression in ancient cultures. In some cultures, geometric art is considered the ancestor, and in several cases the substitution for writing. This type of art is used to design simple forms and to invent new patterns.

**Huari Culture:** The Huari culture was located in the center of Peru and was one of the most influential cultures for the Incan Empire, especially in agricultural technologies, social and political organization, and transportation (road construction).

**Ideograms:** Symbols that represent ideas or concepts without indicating a specific word or name. They were commonly used by Andean cultures and by several ancient cultures for religious purposes.

**Lake Titicaca:** The highest navigable lake of the world. It is located between Peru and Bolivia and was the home for the Inca culture, the Aymara culture and the Tiahuanaco culture.

**Nazca Culture:** The Nazca culture was located in the south of Peru, and was descended from the Paracas culture. The Nazcas are better known as the creators of the large rectilinear and zoomorphic forms in the desert known as the “Nazca Desert Lines”.

**Pictograms:** Graphic characters or symbolic pictures that represent an object, an action, or and event.

**Polychrome:** Wide range of colors. A polychrome object is an object such as a vase painted with several colors.

**Quechua:** The Incas language. There is no alphabet for this language. It is a combination of sounds that communicate concepts along with the imagery (iconography or the Kipus).

**Tocapu Code:** Abstract and geometric group of symbols that have not yet been decoded. The Tocapu Code was used for communication and for data documentation.

**Viracocha:** The most important Deity from the Inca Empire, who was personified by the Sun. The Incas believed he was the creator of all life and the universe.

**Zinchis:** Lead society from the Inca culture. The name Zinchis means “Strong Man”.

**Zoomorphic Deities:** Zoomorphic comes from the word zoomorphism. Zoomorphic deities are gods represented with animal attributes or characteristics.