

Sensibility and the Colonial Image of the Americas

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“What is sensibility?” the French philosopher and playwright Diderot asked to rhetorical effect. He immediately answered himself that sensibility is “the vivid effect on our soul of an infinity of delicate observations.” Sensibility, that “first germ of thought,” was crucial not only to European art and literature in the second half of the 18th century and the early 19th century, but also to European scientific inquiry (Diderot 1:195). Indeed, sensibility was so essential to human nature that some practitioners described “all the faculties that we call intellectual” as flowing from sensibility (Holbach 1:3).

This paper examines the course of sensibility as it was transposed from European society to ancient Maya and Aztec civilizations of America. One agent of this transposition was Jean Frederick Waldeck (1766?-1875). An artist and explorer of uncertain origins, Waldeck considered himself to be “the first of the Americanists” (Brunhouse, 79). He further considered all other investigators of the ancient American cultures to be unworthy rivals.

Waldeck seems to have based his claim to pre-eminence, in part, upon his putative credentials as an extraordinary personage and an unequalled artist. Official documentation regarding Waldeck’s early life was almost entirely absent from European archives. Waldeck was therefore free to create an apocryphal autobiography. He listed an improbably early birth date as 1766. He designated Paris, Vienna and Prague as birthplaces. He attributed the noble titles of count and duke to himself. He described

himself as the artistic apprentice of the three famous painters of France – Jacques Louis David, Joseph Vien and Pierre Prud'hon. Together, these fabrications formed an aura that Waldeck was a man of suprahuman vigor, a person of unexcelled worldliness and an artist of unparalleled attainment (Cline).

Waldeck also seems to have based his claim to pre-eminence as “the first of the Americanists” upon his questionable credentials as an explorer. Waldeck’s memoirs placed him in the center of cultural imperialism. Waldeck described himself as a participant in four colonial enterprises. According to Waldeck, he was part of the expedition of Francois Le Vaillant to the interior of southern Africa between 1783 and 1785 (Le Vaillant 1790, 1796, Volume I, ix-x). He described himself as accompanying the military campaign of Napoleon in the Middle East in 1798. Waldeck included himself in the privateering activities of Robert Surcouf, a French corsair who operated in the Indian Ocean (Hale 141-142). Finally, Waldeck said that he served under the British admiral Thomas Cochrane in the Chilean war of independence in 1819.

Each of Waldeck’s four expeditionary claims is unsubstantiated. Despite their fictitious nature, these claims are indicative of factors that shaped Waldeck’s career in the Americas. Firstly, the claims indicate Waldeck’s attraction to the pose of the colonial adventurer. Secondly, the claims establish Waldeck's credentials as an investigator of wide experience. Thirdly, the claims reveal Waldeck’s awareness of ethnography, imagery and activities that exotified and exploited non-Western peoples.

But Waldeck could also base a legitimate claim to pre-eminence as an “Americanist” upon some verifiable experiences. These experiences involved Waldeck’s work as one of the earliest illustrators of Maya and Mexican antiquities and sites. In

1822, Waldeck was hired by a London publisher to assist in the preparation of a manuscript on the Maya site of Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico (Cabreva). Between 1825 and 1836 Waldeck lived in Mexico. While he had many occupations, Waldeck did devote almost a year to the study of the Maya site at Palenque and almost two years to the study of Maya sites in Yucatan. During both these periods, Waldeck explored Maya ruins, proposed decipherments of Maya glyphs, filled notebooks with sketches of ancient sculpture and architecture and prepared his theories for eventual publication (Waldeck 1825-1826, 1826-1829, 1832-1833, 1834).

On one level, Waldeck's images can be evaluated in terms of their accuracy by modern standards. Some renditions exhibit a high degree of accuracy. One such example is Waldeck's drawing, *Temple Figure* (Baudez, figure 9). The drawing documents a relief in the Temple of the Cross at Palenque. Today the figure is known as a Maya god associated with warfare and death. However, Waldeck was prone to attribute Old World sources to ancient American cultures. Waldeck, therefore, identified the figure as an aspect of the Hindu god Vishnu. While the identification is blatantly incorrect, the drawing itself is accurate both in its general composition and in its details.

Other images by Waldeck embedded accurate depictions of indigenous elements within European conventions of composition. One such representation is the *Pyramid of the Serpent* at Xochicalco (Baudez, plate 10). Here the shape of the architectural terrace and the relief sculpture is reasonably accurate. However, the lush landscape with its leafy trees owes more to French painters such as Poussin and Claude Lorraine than to Mexico. The site is, in fact, located in terrain that is arid and desert-like.

Other renditions by Waldeck transform indigenous motifs into Old World designs. One such example is Waldeck's drawing, *Stucco Reliefs* (Baudez, plate 23). This drawing reshapes the long-nosed Maya rain god Chaak into an elephant. Another such image is Waldeck's colored drawing, *Temple Façade*. This illustration has Egyptianized a Maya structure at the site of Tonina (Baudez, plate 33). These illustrations were cited as proof of the Asian and Egyptian origins of Maya civilization not only by Waldeck, but also by a succession of later authors (Smith, Thompson).

In addition to understanding Waldeck's images in terms of their level of archaeological accuracy, Waldeck's depictions can be evaluated on a different level. His illustrations can be seen as a unified body of imagery that reveals the ideals of sensibility. These sensiblist ideals were paramount in the European encounter with the Americas.

Sensibility is a tradition of philosophy and science that flourished in 18th and early 19th century France. This tradition was founded on assumption that knowledge arose from the inseparable combination of sensation and sentiment. The central axiom of sensibility was that feelings were responses to the world outside the mind and were the inevitable bedrock of natural knowledge. Therefore, sensibility incorporated the unshakeable conviction that sensation and emotion were fused (Riskin, 15, 189).

The transposition of sensibility to indigenous ancient cultures can be seen in Waldeck's emphasis on the faculty of sight. Sensibilists gave primacy to sight in terms of the action of the five senses on the mind itself. Waldeck attributes a diminished faculty of sight to indigenous peoples. In *Making Tortillas* (Baudez, figure 4). Waldeck has depicted an indigenous household succumbing to European cultural mores. Christian images on the wall indicate the replacement of native religion by Catholicism. A mestizo

muleteer purchases a meal of tortillas from the indigenous women kneeling before him. The subordination of indigenous men is indicated by their physical placements on the floor and in the doorway. Still another distinction is made, in this case in terms of the faculty of sight. While the mestizo gazes down at the women, one of the indigenous men is asleep and the other turns his gaze to the distance. The Europeanized gaze is an instrument of cultural dominance.

The heightened faculty of sight and the correspondent cultural dominance are also claimed by Waldeck as his own attributes. The painting, *Self-Portrait with Pedro Lopez*, is set in the Palace of Palenque. Waldeck shows himself towering above an indigenous man (Baudez, plate 22). In one hand, Waldeck holds an axe, an emblem of European metal technology. In his other hand, Waldeck holds a lamp. Unseen by the viewer, the lamp projects the light which makes the scene visible. To the left, Waldeck displays his pens, ink and sketch board on a Maya throne. Waldeck shows himself the role of the scientific investigator whose greater visual faculty permits him to acquire superior knowledge and to attain mastery over his native subject.

The transposition of sensibility to indigenous ancient cultures can also be seen in Waldeck's sexualization of Maya peoples. Sensibility engendered a suspicious attitude toward abstract theory that operated at a remove from immediate physical sensation. Sexual experiences were appreciated for banishing the mind/body of empiricism. The Marquis de Sade was a convinced sensiblist who proclaimed a natural philosophy that justified his sexual excesses.(Riskin, 10, 61; Rousseau and Porter).

Waldeck imputes a transgressive, exotified sexuality to Maya peoples. The painting *Temple of Death* (Baudez, plate 28) is set in a structure at Palenque that has a

complex floor plan. This plan evidently reminded Waldeck of the fabled labyrinth of Crete. The artist accordingly transplanted the Greek myth of Ariadne and Theseus to a Maya context. Two nearly nude women are shown with their male partners. Waldeck portrays himself in the background. He is sketching the tryst in the foreground. This tryst defies the social conventions prohibiting sexual unions between white women and dark-skinned, Maya men. The second nude woman is seated near Waldeck. She is known to be Nichte, Waldeck's teenaged Maya mistress. Waldeck depicts himself in his professional role as an artist and with his European garments. In contrast, Waldeck reduces Nichte to an emblem of Waldeck's sexual virility.

The sexualization of Maya culture is revealed in additional images that Waldeck created of both Nichte and the mythic blonde Ariadne. In *Still Life*, the nude study of Nichte has been altered by the insertion of two elderly males. (Baudez, figure 15). Their presence is unseen by Nichte. The threesome present titillating intimations of voyeurism and potential sexual exploitation. In *Nude with Relief* (Baudez, plate 18), Ariadne reappears before Maya sculptures in the Palace of Palenque (Schele and Mathews, 96). The kneeling figures are accurately represented. However, Waldeck has made them menacing sexual monsters by magnifying their scale, reddening their color and placing the hand of one colossus on the woman's shoulder.

The transposition of sensibility to indigenous ancient cultures by Waldeck can also be seen in the Waldeck's incorporation of the monstrous. Sensibility legitimized the fascination with monsters. Being resolutely anomalous, monsters tamed empiricists' theories by defying them. Waldeck's attraction to the monstrous is evident his painting, *Under the Archway of the Palace* (Baudez, plate 14). The archway has become

impossibly Moorish. Human portrait busts decorate the sides. Beneath the arch are a toothy iguana and a hissing serpent. Their violent coupling becomes a bizarre consummation of the decorous human pairing suggested above.

Still another transposition of sensibility to indigenous ancient cultures can also be seen in Waldeck's proclivity to imbue the natural world with agency. In sensiblists' views, the natural world was guided by active purposes rather than driven by mechanisms. Living matter was filled down to smallest parts with a vital force, a penetrating and active power. Nature had an overarching purpose that was to find proportion and to achieve balance (Riskin, 69).

The vitality and purposefulness attributed by sensiblists to the natural world imbues Waldeck's painting, *View of the Palace at Palenque* (Baudez, plate 13). Here, natural growth is counter-posed with human-built constructions. Human life, represented by Nichte, is counter-posed with animal force, represented by a sleeping jaguar. Broken tree stumps represent natural cycles of growth and decay. The rise and fall of civilizations are suggested by the ruinous condition of the buildings. The panels of hieroglyphic texts on the piers are Waldeck's additions. They suggest the futility of human achievement in the grand passage of time.

In addition to the five physical senses, sensibility posited an internal sixth sense. This sixth sense guided the formation of knowledge. According to sensiblists, this sixth sense could operate best in states of being in which reason was limited and common sensory experience was withheld. Thus, sensibility exalted states of sleep, dreaming and madness. These states revealed the most basic and universal truths (Riskin, p.195)

In *Perspective view of the First Gallery of the Palace*, Waldeck depicts himself in a dream-like reverie. Not only does he show himself as a sensiblist, but he may even be comparing himself to the venerable Michelangelo.

Drawings, paintings and lithographs by Waldeck reveal that the French explorer saw himself as philosopher as well as artist. He functioned not only as a documenter of artifacts but also as a narrator of sensibility. Although the ideals of sensibility ceded to scientific naturalism in the mid 19th century, the themes of sensibility have continued to be applied to the ancient cultures of the Americas. Discussions of Maya culture continue to emphasize subjects of sacrifice, mysterious rites, virgin offerings and incomprehensible deities. At the core of Western treatments of the Maya is our own continuing debate over the role of sense and sentiment in the acquisition of knowledge, as well as our continuing dilemma about the ongoing colonialization of indigenous peoples.

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