

Pre-Columbian: History of a Word

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Projections

Within the acrylic frame of a billboard, located in the center of Cali, I came across an image a few months ago that has occupied my thoughts ever since: the photograph of a Tumaco sculpture. The billboard, which promoted the Archaeological Museum of Cali (MUSA), featured a photograph of a "Tumaco thinker". It is a clay sculpture made 300 years before the incarnated God of the Jewish people was born. Or, it could date back to 300 AD. We do not know for sure.¹

The sculpture of the thinker has survived for two millennia thanks to its burial underground. The pre-colonial indigenous artifacts that exist today are those that, due to their burial, managed to avoid the process of colonial devastation. In the 15th and 16th centuries, clergy, soldiers, and chroniclers alleged that indigenous people worshiped the devil through images.² They said that "ancient indigenous objects served as a means of communication through which the devil obstructed the natives' conversion; therefore, destroying them was essential to fight him."³ The conquistadors projected their fears and inner demons onto the possessions of those whom they forced to work, to pray, and to do without their language and their land. The surviving relics of this cultural devastation are now known as "pre-Columbian art".

The piece T-08815 from the MUSA collection is a sculpture of a man thinking. Sitting on a trunk, he rests his head on his hand and his elbow on his knee. A head supported by

¹ On the MUSA page, the Tumaco culture is dated as follows: "(300 B.C. - A.D. 300)". See MUSA, "Culturas precolombinas. Tumaco". <http://www.museoarqueologicomusa.com/New/cultura.php?id=22> (accessed October 10, 2022).

² Gruzinski recounts the way in which Oviedo referred to the indigenous images as images of a devil that was "as ugly and frightening as Catholics usually depict at the feet of the archangel St. Michael or the apostle St. Bartholomew". Fernández de Oviedo in Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón hasta "Blade Runner"/1492-2019* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), 29.

³ Carl Langebaek, *Los herederos del pasado* (Bogotá: Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá, 2008), 89.

the scaffolding of the body; a body that exists to serve as a mere pedestal for the head. I imagine that a similar realization must have occurred to those who decided to use the Tumaco thinker as the image of the museum: they superimposed the image of Rodin's thinker onto the Tumaco sculpture. This phantasmagoria gave the sculpture its name.⁴ The Tumaco thinker would, therefore, imply that the Tumaco-Tolita culture encoded the concept of "thinking" in the same way as the European culture that would emerge a little more than a thousand years later. Otherwise, how can we account for the striking parallelism in which both sculptures represent the notion of thought?

As a Mestizo woman from the South of Colombia, I also project the iconography of European art onto the Tumaco sculpture: I see the sculpture and imagine a thinker. Or, perhaps it was my own projection, one that reveals my upbringing, and I speculate that others must have undergone a similar experience to me. I seek solace in the idea that others also saw Rodin in the Tumaco sculpture, finding refuge in my personal disquietude: that of the colonization of the gaze. I wear the T-shirt I bought at the museum as a way of allowing his questions to come into contact with my body. I realize that I have no answers, but the theory of projecting Rodin's thinker onto the MUSA piece T-08815 becomes increasingly plausible to me: we cannot know if this figure is a thinker, since the act of thinking can assume various bodily gestures.

Is it possible to interact with these surviving, unearthed, and displayed objects without projecting Europe's fears and desires onto them? Demons, relics, idols, or pre-Columbian thinkers, their name says more about those who write about these pieces than about the pieces themselves. So, how should we speak about them? How, and why, should we incorporate them into museums? What insights can they offer us at present? Why do we call them "pre-Columbian"? Preciado tells us that "each word in our language contains, as if coiled upon itself, a spiral of time woven from the threads of countless historical

⁴ 4 In the Tumaco catalog. *Arte de la tierra*, the photograph of this piece appears accompanied by the following text: "Hierarchy, power, and war. T-08815. 18 × 16 × 16 cm. Male character in a meditative pose is an "old thinker", seated on a small trunk-like stool". See Tumaco. *Arte de la tierra* (Bogotá: Archeological Museum, 2006, 32.

operations.”⁵ “Pre-Columbian” is a word-coil, and, perhaps, by unraveling the historical knots that compose it, we might discover other ways of interacting with these indigenous images. It is possible that these bird-men, these jaguar-women, and the palpable intertwining of humans with all other facets of the world have more to reveal about the future than the past. For now, let’s remove the term from its everyday use and listen to the resonances of history within it.

Unwinding the word-coil

In the last third of the 19th century, the artifacts that 400 years earlier had been conceived as idols, as evil⁶ made from stone, clay or gold, came to be called “pre-Columbian objects”. This new concept was to contest names of older origin that were still in use: antiquities, relics, and even pots. Some, like General Alberto Urdaneta, founder of the National School of Fine Arts of Colombia, chose to use the old theological name “idols” until 1886. This stance was part of a rhetoric that denied the artistic nature of indigenous objects, arguing that the arrival of Spanish conquerors in the country also marked the dawn of civilization and the history of art.⁷

Along with “pre-Columbian”, during that time in Europe, “Americanists”⁸ coined other names that later evolved over the course of history. The terms “ante-Columbian” and

⁵ Paul B. Preciado, “La amnesia del feminismo”, in *Un apartamento en Urano. Crónicas del Cruce* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2019), 112.

⁶ Gruzinski quotes the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who argues that it is imperative to destroy the “idols” to replace them with Christian images, thus: “Their idols were very bad and made them err, and they were not gods but bad things that would take their souls to hell”, and concludes: “Their idols are bad and not good”. See Díaz del Castillo in Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes. De Cristóbal Colón hasta “Blade Runner”/1492-2019* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), 43.

⁷ See Mónica Eraso, “¿Arte precolombino? Raza, estética y evolucionismo en Colombia durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX”, *H-Art, Revista de Historia, Teoría y Crítica de Arte*, 5 (2019): 107.

⁸ The first International Congress of Americanists convened in Nancy, France, in 1875. These gatherings solidified the concept of “pre-Columbian” and served as primary forums for the exploration of America’s history. Schuster and Buenaventura note that while these congresses were initially dominated by European scholars, in particular from France and Germany, they “gradually began to include Latin American participants”. See Sven Schuster and Laura Alejandra Buenaventura, “Imaginando la ‘tercera civilización de América’: Colombia en las exposiciones internacionales del IV Centenario (1892-1893)”, *Historia Crítica*, 75 (2020): 32.

"pre-Cortesian" (referring to the period before the arrival of Hernán Cortés in America)⁹ emerged in the same context. Like "pre-Columbian", they signified a rupture in the timeline of American history, before and after Columbus' arrival. But this was not just a statement: 1492 marked a genuine turning point, not only in the history of America, but in the history of humanity. It represented a politicization of time, wherein Europe claimed the privilege of being the only civilization that fully inhabited the present.

The difference between "ante-Columbian" and "pre-Columbian" is more about sound than meaning. The prefix "pre" echoed the idea of prehistory in the new word. They used a single signifier to label diverse cultures and an extensive period during which native peoples inhabited and evolved before the arrival of the conquistadors.

Let's examine how the weekly publication *Los Andes*, authored by Colombian scholars living in Paris in 1878, explains it. The chronicler from *Los Andes* states that "Americanism" initially emerged as an auxiliary discipline of "prehistory" for the following reasons:

In the ancient continent, prehistoric man is the antediluvian man, whose traces are sought in fossilized bones. However, in the realm of Americanist science, the term "pre-Columbian" refers to the people who lived in America before the arrival of Columbus. In other words, it denotes individuals from our era. To clarify this distinction, the names "ante-Columbian" or "pre-Columbian" have been suggested to describe prehistoric American humans, those who lived before Columbus¹⁰ discovery.

But how is it possible for those from "our era" to be, at the same time, prehistoric individuals? Answering this question will only be possible if we understand that a

⁹ Agustín F. Seguí, "'Precolombino' y palabras relacionadas, con sus equivalentes en alemán, inglés, francés, italiano, catalán, portugués, rumano, holandés, danés, polaco, checo y latín, más algunas referencias al griego, japonés y vietnamita", *Revue de Linguistique Romane*, 57 (1993): 29.

¹⁰ 76.

¹⁰ 76

politicized concept of time is the key to comprehending the peculiar statement we have just encountered. According to the chronicler from *Los Andes*, prehistoric man, who dwelled in “our era,” had never interacted with European civilization. The colonial distinction that is established implies a significant lack of synchrony, spanning at least five thousand years, between the end of prehistory in Europe and its conclusion in America¹¹.

The paragraph is bewildering, not only because it incorporates a theological temporal reference into the emerging field of human sciences - prehistory as an account of what happened before the universal flood¹² - but also, primarily, because labeling a contemporary individual as “prehistoric” is, to say the least, an oxymoron. This contradiction allows us to discern a distinct notion of time, if not an ideological one. However, our Creole chronicler was not alone in this. The illusion that contemporary individuals dwelled in the past was a collective belief rooted in scientific thought. The use of temporal exposition, notably through museums and universal exhibitions, played a pivotal role in conveying this peculiar concept of time.

¹¹ The end of prehistory is usually dated to around 3300 BC.

¹² In effect, Fabian explains that the emergence of anthropological discourse in the 19th century is one of the steps taken, not in the invention of linear time, but in the secularization of the Judeo-Christian conception of time. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object* (Nueva York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 2.

Johannes Fabian explains how anthropology, still in its infancy at the time when our Americanists were coining the concept of "pre-Columbian", introduced a spatialization of time. This hierarchized and spatialized notion of time is what the chronicler from the Andes naturalizes and conveys to the Latin American audience, encapsulating the colonial disparity inherent in the term "pre-Columbian".

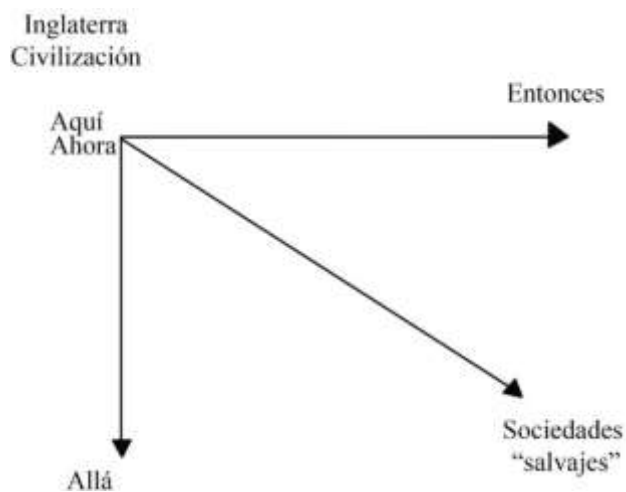


Figure 1. Modern time/space: distance. Author's translation of the drawing elaborated by Johannes Fabian: 27.

It is the politicization of time that creates a division between Europe and "the rest" of the world, establishing an evolutionary timeline in which the "savage" is forever relegated to the past. Denying contemporaneity¹³ to non-European peoples is precisely what enables the assertion that, despite belonging to "our era", the indigenous people who inhabited America before Columbus' arrival were considered "prehistoric" humans. This Eurocentric concept of time persisted in labeling many non-European cultures as "primitive" well into the twentieth century. "Pre-Columbian" maintains this resonant echo, embedding the colonial difference within a seemingly descriptive term.

"Pre-Columbian" is a word forged in the era of European imperialism. Whenever we use it or hear it, we must acknowledge the presence of a temporal fiction, in which the indigenous peoples exist in an eternal past, a time without history, from which their only escape is through European colonialism. We must acknowledge this to then marvel at the word. We should also recognize how effortlessly a process of domination can be concealed beneath a supposedly neutral signifier. Furthermore, we must remember this to be astounded by how, even today in Colombia, it remains very simple to connect indigenous communities with the nation's past, making it difficult to listen to what they have to tell us about the future.

"The wound heals but the scar remains"

Survivors of a process of destruction, "pre-Columbian" images have emerged from the earth to disrupt our relationship with time. They may whisper: "There are systems of thought that were destroyed". They may whisper: "Projecting the same onto 'the other' will not help you in the process of your understanding". They may warn: "There may be something of their survival¹⁴ in the living culture of indigenous communities today". Pre-

¹³ See Fabian, *Time and the other*, 25.

¹⁴ Survival, says Didi-Huberman, in the Warburgian sense, is not essence, nor archetype. It is, rather, the trace of time on the surface of a given culture. A trace that allows us to have indications of the multiple pasts that inhabit the present of a given culture. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La imagen superviviente. Historia del arte y el tiempo*

colonial pieces represent traces. From traces, we can gain clues, even though we may yearn to uncover truths. There is something silent within them, but it is possible that the tension between their visibility and muteness can serve as an oracle, provided that we can approach them in a different way.

I speak with Edinson Quiñones, an artist from Cauca, of Nasa ancestry. I call him to tell him what I have been thinking and to ask him about some of his work. He responds with great generosity: "There's a lot to talk about, my friend."¹⁵ In 2012, Edinson decided to cut off a tattoo he had on his back: an ink-on-skin drawing of the "God of Coca". It was the image of a sculpture of "Saint Augustine, cut out of his body through a scarification process. He called this painful action "the wound heals, the scar remains". More than a work of art, tearing off the skin and the drawing became part of a personal healing process that later became collective and territorial.

He tells me that Saint Augustine is a name projected "by you". By "you", he means the white-mestizo people who, like me, who impose names and ideas onto indigenous iconographies. He tells me that he cut his skin "to rip the past off his back so he could look at it head on". I consider this act of removing skin as a genealogical process, akin to a Foucault-like examination of the present. By removing his skin, Edinson also removes the gaze that perceives indigenous sculptures as part of the nation's heritage: images made to fictionalize the "discovery" and to encourage tourism. Instead, he reimagines them as guides for a transformative process. In doing so, he takes the place of those who have projected meaning onto them and grants them a different one: that of oracles. When I say that Edinson conducts a Foucault-like genealogy, it's because the French philosopher is one of the deceased individuals with whom I converse from Bogotá when I attempt to understand the world. Like Foucault, Edinson points to the way in which history is inscribed in the body. However, he takes this discovery further:

de los fantasmas, según Aby Warburg (Madrid: Abada, 2009): 45-52.

¹⁵ What I refer to hereafter, when I refer to the conversation I had with Edinson Quiñones, is based on a telephone call we had on September 30, 2022.

he involves the body itself in his methodology. It's a painful and somatic genealogy, but it's also a healing methodology. Edinson speaks with a different dead man, one who is not French, but from Cauca and Nasa: Manuel Quintín Lame.

That piece of the past, tattooed on his body, torn off and looked at head-on, has allowed him to transform himself in recent years. He tells me: "I walk a lot, I walk a lot around this land, and I understand and comprehend it. I have gained the knowledge I now have by sitting with them and by walking. It's through walking with the elders, the custodians of that legacy". "Thinking", I deduce, does not imply for Edinson a static and solitary process, like the one depicted in Rodin's thinker. On the contrary, thinking is an active, collective exercise; an interaction between humans and between people and the land.



Figure 2. Image of the "Colombia is magic realism" campaign, jointly carried out by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism and Proexport, and launched in 2013.

From the scarification process, a bodily record remains: "The pain of my past is stronger than the present" (2013). With this title, he names the record of his action: the cutting of his skin, which is tattooed and preserved between two sheets of glass. What is visible within this record might resemble the depiction of a "pre-Columbian" object. The glass sheets that contain it bear a resemblance to the ones forming the billboard where we encountered the "Tumaco thinker" just a few pages ago.



Figure 3. Edinson Quiñones. "The wound heals but the scar remains". Scarification of the God of Coca. Performance Festival, 2012. Photographs courtesy of the artist.



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