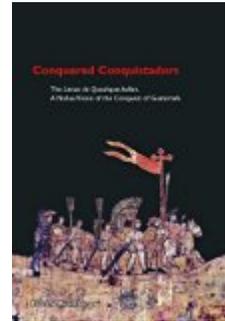


Florine G. L. Asselbergs. *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan: A Nahua Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala*. Mesoamerican Worlds Series. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. xv + 372 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87081-899-8.

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The Nahua Lienzo de Quauhquechollan and the Reconstruction of Indigenous Histories of the Conquest

The initial publication of John B. Glass and Donald Robertson's "Census of Native Middle American Pictorial Manuscripts" in the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* some thirty-four years ago marks a beginning of a scholarly unblinking, for this long catalog allowed Western scholars to peer into a largely unfamiliar corpus from (mostly) Mexico and Guatemala.[1] The census included hundreds of pictorial histories—indigenous ones, accounts that had existed, like underground springs, beneath Spanish-language histories, sometimes partaking of their content and their form, and sometimes following distinct logic and conventions, but often offering a completely different understanding of the history of the colonial period from local and indigenous perspectives. At the same time that Glass and others were undertaking the massive bibliographic and archival labors needed to identify and define this corpus, other scholars were developing theoretical models that allowed room at the table for such "unconventional" indigenous histories—no longer was history to be just the story constructed by the victors or the powerful, and no longer were the narrative conventions practiced by Western historians to be accepted as natural or inevitable. Florine G. L. Asselbergs's book, *Conquered Conquistadors*, the result of her doctoral work under Maarten Jansen at Leiden University, comes out of the union of these two currents. The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan, a painted cloth panel that is the subject of her book (and listed in the Glass-Robertson census), hung for years under glass at the Museo Casa de Alfeñique, an eighteenth-century mansion whose dim

exhibit halls held the kind of sundry collections typical of local museums across the globe: dusty furniture from centuries past, displays of regional costume, and albumen prints of local sites. When I first saw the work more than twenty years ago, the museum offered little help to visitors in unraveling its complicated pictorial narrative; encased in glass, painted on cloth and on (seemingly) permanent display, this fragile document seemed also to be in danger of fading entirely from view.

Asselbergs's book (as well as a 2005 restoration of the document) does much to rescue the work from its twentieth-century purgatory. The book includes a reduced-size photographic reproduction of the manuscript, which, at 3.25 x 2.35 meters, is one of the larger lienzos known. And as a result of Asselbergs's assiduous work, its content is now much clearer. She argues that its pictorial narrative is a sixteenth-century account by Nahua-speaking residents of the region of Quauhquechollan (whose center is today known as San Martín Huaquechula in the modern state of Puebla, Mexico) of *their* conquest of Guatemala in 1527-29. These indigenous conquerors set out to take this foreign territory, lying some thousand kilometers away, as part of a second wave of troops surging south from Central Mexico under the control of Jorge de Alvarado, the brother of the more famous initial leader of the Guatemala campaign, Pedro de Alvarado. And it was, in many ways, *their* conquest. They heavily outnumbered their Spanish leaders (this second wave may have involved between five thousand

and six thousand indigenous soldiers, with Quauhquecholtecas joining other indigenous armies), they knew the lay of the land, and they were adept at the strategies of indigenous warfare. The Quauhquecholteca fighters were compelled to go: they were obliged to serve Jorge de Alvarado as part of his *encomienda* grant, but like other indigenous soldiers, they were probably also motivated by the promise of a share of the spoils. Once the conquest had been completed, these indigenous troops were largely forgotten and their immense contribution to the Spanish colonial project expediently overlooked. Asselbergs argues that the lienzo was created in the early 1530s as a record of this indigenous contribution, perhaps in order to remind Spaniards of their historical debts. Its artists used only pictography to tell their tale and little tags with names written in alphabetic script seem to have been added after its initial creation.

As reconstructed by Asselbergs, the pictorial history begins in Quauhquechollan, with a Spanish-Nahua parley, before the troops set out on their journey. The narrative of the manuscript follows a winding road that moves through both time and space, across a schematically depicted landscape, and threading through memorable events. Pictographic names identify places, and through an analysis of these names, Asselbergs argues that the lienzo traces the trip of Quauhquecholteca soldiers across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, then up to highland Guatemala into the territory of Maya-speaking peoples, the K'iche' and Kaqchikel among them. Most of the right side of the manuscript contains battle scenes of clashing armies as indigenous strongholds fell, one by one, before the Central Mexican armies. Not surprisingly, the role of Spaniards is minimized, and most interestingly, both they and the Quauhquecholteca are pictured as chalk-white figures, a chromatic alliance against darker-skinned enemies.

The book is useful not only for its close-grained analysis of the pictographic content of the lienzo (this dominates chapters 7 and 8) but also for the context it provides, with chapters on the known history of both the conquest of Guatemala and the region of Quauhquechollan, and a discussion of the conventions of pictographic writing used in the manuscript. In addition, Asselbergs provides useful discussions of other known manuscripts from Quauhquechollan in chapter 3. Chapter 9 discusses other indigenous depictions of the conquest. In sum, As-

selbergs's book is a valuable addition to the growing literature that explores the role of indigenous armies in the conquest of the Americas, as well as offering voice to men who considered themselves to be conquerors, but whose own history was subsequently marginalized within the colonial order. Its attentive reading of the manuscript itself, and the ease with which the viewer can follow along by virtue of the accompanying reproduction, is also a model of clear and careful art historical scholarship. The language is straightforward and direct and the book admirable in its strong focus and organization.

My most recent encounter with the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan came not in Puebla, Mexico, where the restored manuscript is still housed, but in Guatemala, the very land whose violent conquest was commemorated by the lienzo's indigenous conquistadores. At an exhibition in the Universidad Francisco Marroquin in 2007, the manuscript was present in the form of large-scale photographs (the fragile original would not travel outside of Mexico). Here, the lienzo was presented as the earliest example of Guatemala's own cartographic tradition, that is, fit into a proto-history of a nation that would be born in the nineteenth century. The university has since produced a digital restoration of the original, easily accessible via the project's terrific Web site.[2] In its escape from the halls of the Museo Casa de Alfeñique into cyberspace, where it will exist for the foreseeable future, and its inclusion in three contemporary narratives—a pluralistic history of the Spanish conquest that includes indigenous conquistadors, the history of the Guatemalan nation that reaches back to the colonial period, and the use of digital technology that allows new access to the past—the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan shows the vibrancy of an indigenous historical tradition in ways that scholars who labored to open the field, like Glass and Robertson, might never have predicted but would be proud to witness.

Notes

[1]. John B. Glass with Donald Robertson, "A Census of Native Middle American Pictorial Manuscripts," in *Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources, part 3*, ed. Howard F. Cline, vol. 14 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert. Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975), 81-252.

[2]. See <http://www.lienzo.ufm.edu/>.

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