

When George Kubler says that so few “native art motifs” persisted beyond the conquest that it is more correct to speak of an extinction than a survival, he is signalling his own “realist” approach to the question. He implies that those modern writers who speak of survival are presenting the effects of the conquest in an excessively positive light.¹ Succumbing to wishful thinking, they too eagerly attribute perseverance, resourcefulness, and adaptive ingenuity to the Mesoamerican peoples. He was thinking no doubt of Anita Brenner—later in the same essay, speaking of “false and imaginary survivals” of Maya forms, he disparages those who everywhere see “idols behind altars” (21/69)—but also of more orthodox academic scholars like Alfred Neumeyer and John McAndrew. Kubler implies that such observers overrate the significance of the formal survivals. There is no way to spin the catastrophe, he suggests; “survival” is a euphemism since by the eighteenth century the Mesoamerican civilization was a “corpse.” The content of that culture, the “vital meanings” of the symbols and observances, had been forgotten. Rare was the persistence of preconquest themes in the “artistic utterance” of the peoples of Latin America (15/66). More practical, noncommunicational aspects of preconquest life—certain plants or animals, or useful crafts—were more likely to survive than symbolic expressions of a cosmology (34/73).

The brusque and peremptory tone struck at the start of the “Colonial Extinction” essay is not unfamiliar to Kubler’s readers. In some of his other writings he was less categorical about the quality of the interaction between Indigenous and invading peoples, for example in his text of 1946, “The Quechua in the Colonial World,” which tells a complex story about the transformations of Inca

society under Spanish rule; or the 1966 essay on “Indianism, *Mestizaje*, and *Indigenismo*” in which he disavows his own more extreme assessment of 1961.²

And yet already that 1961 essay was riven, for after the opening paragraphs Kubler seems to backtrack, conceding that quite a few Indian motifs and forms did after all survive the conquest in various ways, so relativizing his own title, which is suddenly revealed as a meta-scholarly gambit rather than a defensible historical thesis. His assiduity in classifying those survivals suggests that he might have been ready to relax his originally stated principle that the echoes of preconquest artistic forms were “symbolically inert,” no more than inarticulate “death cries” (15/66). He sorts the survivals into five types: juxtapositions, convergences, explants, transplants, and fragments. He appears to allow that some “residual preferences and symbolic forms” did persist; that is, they were not so inert after all (17/68). So, for example, the Franciscans and the Pueblo Indians worked out a compromise between traditional post-and-lintel construction and the clerics’ desire to bring floods of light into the dark naves. A mid-sixteenth-century house in the Yucatán marked the doorway as a meaningful boundary with a serpent-fang motif borrowed from the Maya tradition. And so on.

Kubler’s last category, “fragments,” is especially bleak, consisting of “odds and ends” of native ornament “torn from context and repeated as ‘empty’ decorative themes.” The most abundant category is the modern category of “tourist souvenirs decorated with archeological themes.” These “empty revivals,” initially a late nineteenth-century “industrial phenomenon,” are “without meaning beyond the vague evocation of place.” A version of this that appealed to “upper-class taste” appeared in the twentieth century: Kubler mentions the silver jewelry of the expatriate American artists William Spratling and Truman

2. George Kubler, “The Quechua in the Colonial World,” in Kubler, *Studies*, 39–50; George Kubler, “Indianism, *Mestizaje*, and *Indigenismo* as Classical, Medieval, and Modern Traditions in Latin America,” in Kubler, *Studies*, 75–87, here 78.

1. George Kubler, “On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, ed. Samuel K. Lothrop et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 15; this was reprinted under the same title in *Studies in Ancient American and European Art: The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, ed. Thomas F. Reese, Yale Publications in the History of Art 30 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 66. In this essay, the page number of the original is followed by that of the reprinted essay, in the format (15/66).



FIGURE 1. William Spratling (1900–67), Quetzalcoatl head brooch (prendedor cabeza de Quetzalcóatl), 1938–44, sterling silver, $2 \times 3\frac{1}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ in. (5.08 × 8.26 × 3.81 cm), Gift of Ronald A. Belkin (M.2013.4.11), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles (digital image ©2020 Museum Associates / LACMA; licensed by Art Resource, NY)

Bailey (fig. 1), whose designs based on Mesoamerican motifs appealed “to the moneyed and discriminating traveler” (30/71).

This brooch by Spratling, for example, derives its swirling forms from the carvings on a basalt altar in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico, depicting the feathered serpent, the deity Quetzalcoatl (fig. 2).³ Kubler values the work of Spratling and Bailey not for their interpretations of preconquest art, however, but only for their success in reviving some elements of “native technology,” or craft.

Kubler’s brief was to comment on the “survival of native art motifs,” but in this essay he shows little interest in forms as such. He speaks instead like a historian of ideas, culture, or religion, for whom artistic forms are inconsequential unless securely fastened to practices or beliefs. An artistic form, for the historian, is unreliable as evidence because it is too easily detached from its original matrix of meaning.

As a historian of culture, Kubler feels responsible for reporting not on the life of forms but on the human story—what happened to these people?—even if he does this in a rather dry, clinical style, as if he were writing

3. See Penny C. Morrill, ed., *William Spratling and the Mexican Silver Renaissance: Maestros de Plata* (New York: Abrams, 2002), 166–67 and fig. 240.



FIGURE 2. Altar or *cuauhxicalli* depicting a feathered serpent (Mexico), fifteenth to early sixteenth century, basalt. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (11.0-03111) (photograph courtesy of the Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología. -INAH.-MNA.-CANON.-MEX; reproduction authorized by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

a government white paper; and as a matter of fact that is exactly what he was doing in the 1946 essay on the Quechua.⁴ At the same time, Kubler knows that art is something that happens alongside life, and is involved with forms, and is to some extent external to culture; mysterious thoughts which have no place in a government report. He acquired this strange knowledge, the doctrine of the “life of forms,” from his teacher Henri Focillon. But, understandably unwilling to adopt Focillon’s metaphysical phraseology and intuitive style of argument, Kubler mostly lacks a language to express this knowledge.

And so the rift that opened in the 1961 article discloses the incompleteness of Kubler’s art history, what is missing from or unresolved about it. He is unsure about the value of artistic forms untethered from their origins in culture. He was unable to assess, as art, a modern artwork such as Spratling’s brooch, whose status as a cultural expression was indeterminate. Which culture did the brooch represent? it was not easy to say, and in fact there is no stable answer.⁵

4. The report was published in the multivolume work *Handbook of South American Indians*, ed. J. Steward (1940–47), published by the Smithsonian Institution and financed by Congress.

5. Spratling himself was well aware of the problem. He writes in his essay “Twenty-Five Years of Mexican Silverware,” *Artes de México*, vol. 10, *La platería en México* (1955): 87–90: “The bodily transplanting to Mexico, for application to work here, of jewelry designs professionally styled for Madison Avenue (or New Mexico), is imitative and

Literary and film studies have developed a rich vocabulary describing the many ways that works of art draw and build on one another across time: citation, allusion, pastiche, parody, hybridization, remixing, appropriation, assemblage, montage, translation—all the various maneuvers of what was once called *imitatio* and more recently intertextuality, and which amount to the histories of literature and film. In *The Shape of Time*, however, the instant classic published in 1962, a year after the extinction essay, Kubler ignores literature and instead introduces a vocabulary borrowed from mathematics, cybernetics, biology, and linguistics, which he thought sounded fresher and better suited to describe what he seems to recognize as the autonomous, internally generated patterns across the production histories of artifacts. In *The Shape of Time*, Kubler displayed very intense interest in forms no longer securely anchored in linear time: forms grouped in populations or “form-classes” spread across space and time, for example, governed by remote models, and not merely as immediate expressions of religious or mythological content. He says in that book that the form of nearly every artifact derives from a so-called “prime object,” a singular, irreducible invention that sets in motion a branching tree of replicas.⁶ Alongside any other reference, content, or function they may have, forms always refer to something internal to the realm of forms. He speaks of the overall pattern of transformations as something like an aesthetic object: much satisfaction arises, he says, from “the contemplation of a formal sequence, from an intuitive sense of enlargement and completion in the presence of a shape in time” (45). But innovation is not so rare, it turns out; the adjustments that occupy new “serial positions,” so altering the meaning of the whole prior series, are “actually one with the humble substance of everyday behavior” (63–64). Thus, art is at once everywhere and nowhere. The contingency and open-endedness of the divergences generating such formal sequences are illustrated by an appeal to the theory of directed graphs or networks (34n). Entities join and separate (77); replication “fills history” (71).

I have selected these quotations carefully, misleadingly. In fact, Kubler’s concept of art, even as expounded in *The Shape of Time*, is more traditional than this. The binarism

a contagion, and not healthy for the development of local materials and local traditions” (89).

6. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 39ff.

of prime object and replica is not so different from the binarisms of art and manufacture, or great artist and derivative copyists. Changing the terminology took Kubler only so far. Maybe Kubler was trying to “forget” what art was. From his father, who in 1906 had written a PhD thesis at the University of Munich on the iconography of the Death and Assumption of the Virgin Mary, he had an art history overly biased toward content.⁷ From his teacher Focillon he had an art history overly biased toward form. To escape this paternal double bind, he invented a new terminology of form. But in the end he reproduced many elements of conventional Western post-Renaissance aesthetics.

The new terminology did produce an effect of innovation. Artists and other readers were inspired by Kubler’s imaginative rearrangement and redescription of the materials of art history. There is no doubt that a new aesthetics, displacing from the center the concept of art, is latent in his art history. The notion of multiple, relative, and nonlinear time frames, which captured the imagination of the artist Robert Smithson, is implied by Kubler’s concept of the form-class.⁸ Still, Kubler never quite says what some later readers wish he had said; namely, that the replica chains deconstruct the original/copy hierarchy (i.e., making him Baudrillard *avant la lettre*). Nor does he say that *all* cultural production is hybridization and appropriation. The artists who read Kubler’s book in the 1960s, including Ad Reinhardt, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris as well as Smithson, may well have read too much into him, finding on his pages a call for a loosening of the bond between content and form, a recognition of the irrational and anarchic nature of the propagation of forms, an invitation to the ironic reassertion of the claims of the replica mass against all “primacies,” or a demystification of an elite culture profiling itself against industrialized or mass culture.

Toward the end of *The Shape of Time*, Kubler sets out a series of binarisms corresponding to content and form: meaning and being, plan and fulfillment, essence and existence (126). He pleads for a restoration of the balance in our studies of art, saying that we have become biased toward the first term in each pairing. And he calls for

7. Frederick W. Kubler, *Die Legende vom Tode und der Himmelfahrt Marias und ihre Darstellung in der bildenden Kunst* (Würzburg, 1906).

8. Pamela M. Lee, “Ultramoderne, or How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art,” *Grey Room* 2 (2001): 46–77; reprinted as chapter 4 in her book *Chronophobia: On Time in Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

a compensatory lean toward the second term, the term corresponding to form. But neither here nor anywhere else does he recognize art as the alienation of forms from reality, so he lay down the premise of an art history built primarily out of forms.

The strength and weakness of form history is that it detaches forms from their makers and from the real scenes of their fabrication. Experience and sensation and thought are externalized as form. We don't "listen to" replicas and recombinations; they are no longer "utterances"; they are beyond good and evil. There is a risk that form historians will never find their way back to anything real. Art history as form history may therefore not be the best way to describe violent cultural discontinuities. When the trauma of the rupture is too great to be ignored, the historian's construction of a continuous form history reads as an offense, a failure of feeling. Kubler himself grasped this, so he resolved neither to deny the human and political reality of the rupture, nor to abstract his art history from it by sticking to the plane of form; both moves might have been expected from him.

In *The Shape of Time*, Kubler makes no mention of Erwin Panofsky's "principle of disjunction," but later he will have frequent recourse to that concept; it becomes his language of choice for expressing the thought that forms have a life of their own and can be said to "survive" even if "torn" from their original context. Panofsky had spelled out the idea in his book *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and delivered the definitive statement of its implications in his *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (1960), which Kubler reviewed in the periodical *Art News* in 1961. According to the principle of disjunction, classical formal motifs were commonly invested by medieval Christian artists with nonclassical meaning, whereas "classical themes were expressed by non-classical figures in a non-classical setting."⁹ It's a kind of cross-wiring of Christian and pagan cultures. The formula is too neat; there are many exceptions; but the attraction of Panofsky's thesis for Kubler was that it did not dismiss medieval Christian art as a chaos of misunderstandings and misrecognitions. Rather, the splitting and recombining of forms and contents was precisely the vital and "artistic" aspect of medieval art. Forms enter into dynamic recombinations, which allow them to override ideological

9. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 20.

ruptures. Panofsky seemed to show that these processes could be the very object of an art history.

So in his essay of 1966, "Indianism, *Mestizaje*, and *Indigenismo*," Kubler was able to redeem the complex, tangled history of the art of the colonial period—the "middle ages" of the Americas, he says—by pointing to disjunctions of form and content. Now the violence of the collision between Spanish and Mexica—which already in the 1961 essay he had compared to the Christianization of the Roman Empire—is subjected to a more sensitive auscultation capable of detecting artistically valuable cross-references and reframings.

In that 1966 essay, inspired by Panofsky's periodization of European art, Kubler also invokes the medievalist Adolph Goldschmidt, a predecessor and mentor of Panofsky, whose concept of *Formenspaltung* or "morphological dissociation," literally "form-splitting," accounted for the constant dismantling and reassembly of the artistic formulas handed down from classical antiquity. These "errors," born of misunderstanding, were according to Goldschmidt the motor of innovation.¹⁰ Thus, according to Kubler, Goldschmidt "was able to describe new forces at work in situations of seemingly senseless destruction."¹¹

So far, so good: the basis, potentially, for a positive assessment of the life of the preconquest forms in the colonial period. And yet Kubler seems not to have absorbed Goldschmidt's lesson. He is blocked because he cannot forget that in Panofsky's account of the European middle ages, and not in Goldschmidt's, the homeless pagan forms are finally reunited in the Italian Renaissance with their proper contents. Panofsky had argued that the artists of the Italian Renaissance, equipped with archaeological knowledge and humanistic learning, reassigned classical content to classical form, and so "succeeded in resurrecting the soul of antiquity instead of alternately galvanizing and exorcizing its corpse."¹² For Panofsky, the medieval disjunction of forms is overcome. Kubler could savor no such resolution of the story he told about the art

10. Adolph Goldschmidt, "Die Bedeutung der Formenspaltung in der Kunstentwicklung," in *Independence, Convergence, and Borrowing in Institutions, Thought, and Art*, Harvard Tercentenary Publications (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 167–77.

11. Kubler, "Indianism," 77–78.

12. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), 205; the quotation marks on two phrases in this sentence have been omitted here because Panofsky was only quoting himself, from an earlier passage in this book (p. 113).

of the colonial Americas. “American antiquity will probably never nourish a full Renaissance,” Kubler writes.¹³ He can narrate, to a certain extent, the interweaving of new and old forms and themes in the colonial period as the aesthetically productive chaos of a disjunctive “middle ages.” But he does not believe that Spratling’s jewelry amounts to a “Renaissance” comparable to the Italian Renaissance. The Quetzalcoatl brooch by Spratling may belong to the modern, postcolonial phase of the history of the Americas, but it only seems to perpetuate and even mock some of the disjunctive citational practices of the colonial period. Kubler’s thinking rhymes, perhaps surprisingly, with the more recent possible critique of Spratling’s jewelry as a form of cultural appropriation, which is a way of saying that the content is not quite dead, it still means something to someone, and its reframing in an aesthetic context (and worse, as jewelry: the cosmos parodied as cosmetics) is unethical.

The question of the cultural legitimacy of Spratling and his jewelry is a Gordian knot of good intentions and false consciousness. One could point out that Frida Kahlo was photographed in 1949 wearing a necklace with a Tlatilco figurine made for her by the American art dealer and silversmith Frederick W. Davis.¹⁴ And yet, who is to say that Kahlo herself did not succumb to false consciousness? There are many ways to redeem the Spratling brooch. The serpent’s head has been extracted from the symmetrical pair of the basalt basin, and so neutralized. The deep, rough-cut swirls are tenser and more dynamic than the contours of the Mexica model. The brooch has a compact, menacing energy, like an automobile accessory,¹⁵ the engine of a powerful motorcycle; or the logo of a college football team. For some, perhaps the authors of the exhibition catalog *Found in Translation*, which surveys artistic exchanges between Mexico and California in the twentieth century, it is redeemed as a camp object, or as a sample of a new, plural Modernism whose criteria of inclusion are no longer dictated by the art historical and art critical journal *October*.¹⁶ Undeniably, there is a working concept

of art that allows for both the Spratling brooch and Mesoamerican sculptures of gods to be housed under a single vast roof on Wilshire Boulevard. Whatever scholars may say, there is a “social canon,” chosen by readers or art lovers, which has a rationality of its own.¹⁷ The community of museumgoers accepts the inclusive concept of art—for some, still not inclusive enough—represented by LACMA.

The anthropologist James Clifford has argued that today, in the age of tribal museums and cultural centers, “markets in native art” cannot be judged in the same terms as the “older, ongoing economies in ‘primitive art.’” “Tribal” cultural products “articulate” traditions: they comprise “specific linkages of old and new, ours and theirs, secret and public, partial connections between complex socio-cultural wholes.” “They often perform heritage for both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ differently.”¹⁸ Now, Spratling was hardly a tribal producer. Still, he is credited with fostering the reanimation of nearly lost techniques of the traditional silversmith. Clifford himself may not be willing to open his category of “subaltern and local production” to embrace Spratling’s workshop at Taxco. And yet Clifford always seems to be asking: who is to say whether this or that form means something to a modern, self-identified Mexica or Mashpee? The forms may be cut off from preconquest cosmology, but what matters, to Clifford, is whether a modern Mexican feels connected to that preconquest world, or some idea of it; and that is authenticity enough.

Clifford and other postcolonial thinkers are generally prepared to release such artifacts as Spratling’s brooch into new authenticities. Another approach leading to different redemptions is aestheticism. The scholar Beatriz Barba de Piñar Chan, in a 1973 article surveying the arts of jewelry in Mexico from the beginning to modernity, described Spratling’s pieces as “masterpieces of universal art.”¹⁹ This was not Kubler’s view. Kubler seems to have allowed questions of taste and social class to interfere with

13. Kubler, “Indianism,” 75.

14. Morrill, *William Spratling*, III, fig. 155. Spratling, “Twenty-Five Years,” says that until Davis and he revived the old local artisanship in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “modern Mexican silversmithing generally followed the tradition of Spanish colonial silver” (89).

15. See Erwin Panofsky, “The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator” (1963), in Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 129–66.

16. *Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915–1985*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Los Angeles County Museum of Art [LACMA],

2017). Spratling is discussed in the essay by Ana Elena Mallet and Staci Steinberger, “Design Exchanges between Mexico and California, 1920–1976,” 198–99.

17. Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 67–68.

18. James Clifford, *On the Edges of Anthropology (Interviews)* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 36–37; but see also his “Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections,” in Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 107–46.

19. Beatriz Barba de Piñar Chan, “Mexican Jewelry,” *Artes de México*, vol. 165, *Alhajas mexicanas* (1973): 90–91.

his aesthetic judgment. We saw how he dismissed Spratling's clientele as "moneyed and discriminating travelers." In *The Shape of Time*, he discusses the loss in quality involved in replication, due either to profit motive or to lack of understanding (76). He writes disparagingly of the "muted or commercial recalls" of the village art of Mexico (107). But on the next page he writes admiringly of the citations of Toltec-Maya forms by Frank Lloyd Wright and Henry Moore, and even speaks of an "inverted colonial action by stone-age people on modern industrial nations" (108). Wright and Moore, it would seem, create great art that is *also* a tribute to the ancient American civilizations. Evidently he recognizes the artistic legitimacy only of works by the most eminent artists, and only noncommercial citations of preconquest forms, not those sold on Etsy—"Only 1 available"—or whatever the equivalent was in 1940.

Kubler was unwilling to assert, as his teacher Focillon would have without hesitation, that there are aspects of art that cannot be trapped inside the concept "culture." He was also unwilling to accept the essential vulnerability of artistic forms to cultural reassignment. Art attracts meanings; it starts a new life with every new viewer. If you don't see that, then you won't see the value of Spratling's simplifications of his Mexica model. Indifferent to archaeology, the silversmith omitted and altered elements of the stone altar: there are fewer teeth, the feathers have

become mane-like. Pattern becomes representation. The deep cutting brings out the torque and tension of the curves; the brooch is suspended between planar ornament and sculptural object. The Quetzalcoatl brooch is a talisman; it is incomplete without a body to adorn; it upgrades its wearer and invites the avid touch. The brooch is perpetual motion, like a storm, self-generated and threatening, and a symbol of an unbowed, irresistible potency. But Kubler was unwilling to justify the brooch aesthetically and so allow it to unfold in modernity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Barbara Mundy for the invitation to contribute to this forum, and for her critical reading of an earlier draft of my essay. I am grateful also to Jennifer Josten, who offered me crucial guidance and references.

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