The flower world in prehistoric southwest material culture

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Abstract

Uto-Aztecan peoples of Mesoamerica and the Southwest, together with neighboring Pueblo and Mayan groups, share a system of verbal imagery in which a flowery spirit world is evoked, particularly in songs (Hill 1992). The verbal Flower World complex includes several elements, all found in songs in the Southwest and Mesoamerica: 1. The Flower World is the land where the dead go and the land where living beings have their spiritual dimension. The "roads," "patios," "houses," and living beings of the spirit land are "flowery." 2. The spiritual dimension of living beings and ritual objects can be evoked by associating them with flowers or by referring to them as "flowery." 3. Flowers are associated with the soul, the heart, and blood. 4. Flowers are associated with fire; fire "blooms," and blooming flowers "burst into flame." 5. The Flower World complex is often associated with male ritual practice or male domains such as warfare and hunting. 6. The Flower World includes not only flowers but other chromatic images such as colorful birds, butterflies, and rainbows. In verbal art this imagery is largely restricted to a single genre, song. Donald Bahr (1975) reports that song is the most ritually powerful of the three major genres of verbal art among the Pimans, and this ranking holds for other southwestern and Mesoamerican groups as well This chapter traces evidence for Flower World imagery in visual arts in the prehistoric Southwest and explores contexts and chronology for the visual expression of Flower World imagery and its possible links to Mesoamerica. In our survey of material culture, we found Flower World imagery is similarly restricted. It appears primarily in obviously ritual contexts—in ritual regalia and on kiva murals. The imagery appears sporadically on ceramics; flowers rarely appear in rock art. This restriction contrasts with the ubiquitous representations of flowers in all media in Eurasian and Oceanian material culture discussed by Jack Goody in his book The Culture of Flowers (1993). Jane Hill's historical-linguistic methods could not date the Flower World complex. The complex's wide distribution geographically and the fact that components of it exist in verbal art and metaphor in languages of all major branches of the Uto-Aztecan family (with the most elaboration in Southern Uto-Aztecan and Hopi) suggest considerable antiquity. Flower World imagery in material culture, however, is restricted in time and space, again contrasting with the Eurasian-Oceanian complex. The complex appeared in Mesoamerica and the prehistoric Southwest around A.D. 500 and continues into the present (Table 19.1). The earliest Flower World imagery appears in wall paintings from Teotihuacan dated from A.D. 500 to 700 (Pasztory 1988). In the Southwest flowers appear occasionally on Hohokam pottery of the A.D. 500s (Gregonis and Reinhard 1979: 40; Haury 1976), but the first firmly dated imagery attesting a Flower World complex, including colored birds and flowers together, appears in a cache of ritual regalia found at Chetro Ketl—a Chacoan great house—in a room dated to A.D. 1054-1116 (Vivian et al. 1978) and in poorly dated but roughly contemporaneous Mimbres Mogollon material (Cosgrove 1947; Hough 1914; Moulard 1984). Flower World imagery is most prominent in kiva paintings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries both at Hopi sites (Smith 1952) and on the Rio Grande (Hibben 1975). Although realistic flowers are common on Pueblo pottery during the entire postcontact period (see Batkin 1987; Chapman 1953: 121), we believe they derive, at least in part, from European influence, such as Spanish colcha embroidery (Fisher 1979). We argue that the Flower World system of images originated as a recruitment of the flower, a symbol of feminine power (see Goody 1993 for a worldwide survey and McCafferty and McCafferty 1991: 27 for a Nahua example), to masculine ritual practice (for other examples of masculine appropriation of symbols of female reproduction, see Childs 1991; Childs and Killick 1993; Rosaldo 1974: 22; Young 1987). This recruitment may have happened independently in Mesoamerica and the Southwest. This model accounts for the fact that Flower World imagery is most common in ritual regalia and wall paintings, both assumed to be male productions. The sporadic appearance of Flower World imagery on pottery may represent either reappropriation of the symbolic complex by women or blurring of the gendered division of labor, possibly indicating periods of economic and social stress. We suggest that periodic efflorescences of the Flower World complex include the Southwest Regional Cult (Crown 1994), the Katsina religion (Adams 1991; Schaufma 1994; Washburn 1980), and the Mimbres mortuary complex (Moulard 1984). Crown argues that the Southwest Regional Cult was the source of Flower World imagery on Salado Polychrome pottery. Moulard argues that designs on Mimbres bowls, including flowers and birds, represented the spirit world and were vital components of
Mimbres mortuary practice. This Flower World symbolism, then, is associated with iconography of a variety of "partideologies" (Crown 1994).

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As Southwestern cultural traditions evolved, tribes transitioned from a hunting-gathering, nomadic experience to more permanent agricultural settlements. As various cultures developed over time, many shared similarities in family structure and religious beliefs. Extensive irrigation systems were developed and were among the largest of the ancient world. Elaborate adobe and sandstone buildings were constructed, and highly ornamental and artistic pottery was created. Stone Age cultures. Lower or Early and Middle Paleolithic. The oldest burials that attest to a belief in life after death can be placed in the period between about 50,000 and 30,000 bce. The earliest evidence of human activity in any form, on the other hand, goes back more than 1,000,000 years. Such a belief could never be discovered by examining archaeological sources—the material remains—and hence cannot be ruled out for the Early Paleolithic Period. Whether or not the sacrifices in that era involved divine creators or preservers or other beings can only be a matter of conjecture. Features of animalism, magic, and various other views and practices may have played a role, but probably less so than in later epochs.