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Erin Teeple  
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An Expression of Spirituality: Clothing, Skin, and Bodies in Xul Solar's Early Figure Paintings  
(1915-1926)

by

Erin Teeple

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

May 9, 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

The enigmatic world of the Argentinian painter Xul Solar (1887-1963) is peopled with deities, seraphim, mystics, and human-hybrid creatures. Though his paintings are small in scale, they frame an infinite utopian universe of high mountain peaks and eerie structures. Xul traveled around Europe from 1912-1924, where he encountered, and devoured, knowledge from numerous sources of literature, psychology, art, music, religion and the occult. He eventually had over 3,500 volumes in his personal library, from a vast array of sources.<sup>1</sup> Álvaro Abos notes that a thirst for new religious forms complimented Xul's zeal for all of the scientific advancements of the age. Abos notes that in London, where Xul was between 1919 and 1920, the occult and theosophist groups (those mainly interested in gnosis, and the Kabbalah) were becoming especially popular.<sup>2</sup> Xul first met the mystic Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) while he was in Paris in 1915, long before initiating his well-known long term visionary project, *San Signos* (started in 1924). The Chinese practice of the I Ching was hugely influential to Xul's visionary experience after 1924; however, it was not the only religious tradition he adhered to, nor did his spiritual journey only begin in 1924.

Xul's belief system revolved around the idea that an existence or a Utopia (his own version of heaven) lies beyond the reality of earthly perception. It exists within the past, present, and future simultaneously and it comprises of all lands, all histories, and all people (or at least those who have the mystic knowledge to reach that state of being).<sup>3</sup> Subject matter and its

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<sup>1</sup> "The Museum," El Museo Xul Solar Fundación Pan Klub <http://www.xulsolar.org.ar/museo.html> (accessed October 20, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Álvaro Abós, *Xul Solar: Pintor del Misterio* (Editorial Sudamericana: Buenos Aires, 2004), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Here I paraphrase and synthesize discussions from various sources into a single comprehensive statement on the nature of Xul's utopian vision. Sources include: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires:Ediciones ALBA, 1994), 147-156.; Christopher Green, ed. *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, (London: Courtland



connection to the formal qualities drove much of the artist's work. As Xul himself stated, "The subject must dictate all elements and means to be employed in a picture."<sup>4</sup> Yet the significance of the figures in Xul's paintings from his early years in Europe still largely remain a mystery, largely because they have gone unexplored by scholars. An examination of the materiality of the subject matter, such as the clothing and figuration of the characters, in these early works allows for a deeper understanding of the development and meaning of the artist's vision for his spiritual world.

During his lifetime, Xul Solar was known primarily within the small circle of the Martin Fierro vanguard movement in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Before creating his now better-known works in Buenos Aires however, Xul traveled to Europe in 1912, and remained there for twelve years, creating a number of foundational artworks, before returning to his home city in 1924. He exhibited only occasionally early on his career, including at the *Salón de Independientes* in Buenos Aires in 1925, and in a number of shows arranged by his elite cohort at the *Amigos del Arte*. Therefore, earliest writings about the artist and his works were written only by his contemporaries and those closest to him in his social circle, such as the author Jorge Luis Borges. These earliest accounts of the artist's work tended to be personalized and admiring in nature, as when Borges praises Xul as, "One of the most singular events of our era."<sup>5</sup> The critic Atalaya, who wrote for *La Protesta*, as one of a limited number of voices contributing to the Argentine vanguard movement, comparably praised Xul as, "the genius of the house" in an assessment of

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Institute of Galleries, 1994), 12-14.; Patricia M. Artundo, "With the Eyes of the Spirit: Borges Imagines Xul Solar," in *Xul Solar and Jorge Luis Borges: "The Art of Friendship,"* ed. Gabriela Rangel (New York: The America's Society, 2013), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, "Xul Solar: World Maker," in *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Artundo, "With the Eyes of the Spirit," 45.

the Martin Fierro group after viewing his art at the Salón Florida in 1927.<sup>6</sup> Both Borges and Atalaya note the distinctive quality of Xul's artwork and the connectedness of his unique personality to his artistic vision. Early critics emphasized the originality and personal meaning of Xul's work, whether viewing it in the context of vanguard trends in Buenos Aires or discussing it as an inimitable and isolated phenomenon. This commentary by Borges and Atalaya reflects the initial propensity to define Xul Solar's works as impenetrable or difficult to decipher, without attempts to decode or decipher his complex and layered references.

Much of Xul's Solar's work remained in the possession of his wife Lita after his death in 1963, after which time she and the Fundación Pan Klub (which was conceived of by Xul in the late 1930's) established El Museo Xul Solar in 1986.<sup>7</sup> Scholarly interest in the artist did not resume until after the 1970's.<sup>8</sup> This new wave of scholarship on Xul Solar continued to emphasize the one-of-a-kind-ness of his work, often citing the difficulties in defining him categorically within any one particular art movement or artistic philosophy that was developing during the first few decades of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The one aspect of Xul Solar's oeuvre that has persisted from the earlier scholarship, yet makes it particularly challenging to comprehend his work, is the connection of the artist's creative endeavors to his pervasive and complex sense of spirituality. Xul scholars follow different paths of thought to organize his work and to reach a better understanding of that

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<sup>6</sup> Alfredo Chiabra Acosta (Atalaya), 1920-1932. *Críticas de arte argentina*, ed. M. Gleizer (Buenos Aires, 1934), 267.

<sup>7</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 238-241.

<sup>8</sup> Mario H. Gradowczyk, "Preface," in *The Architectures*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994) 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Adler Gallery, ed. *Alejandro Xul Solar (1887-1963): Rachel Adler Gallery (May 2 to June 8, 1991)*, (New York: 1991), np.; Patricia M. Artundo, "The Journey Within the Journey, or On the Transitoriness of Destination-Places," in *Artistas modernos rioplatenses en Europa: La experiencia de la vanguardia 1911-1924*, trans. Vera Von Kreutzbruck and Jacqui Behrend (Buenos Aires: Fundación Eduardo F. Constantini, 2002), 133.; Héctor Olea, "Xul's Innermost Experience: The Verbivocovisual Presentiment," in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, by Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 63.

spirituality. Some scholars seek to fragment his work into categories and attribute his early interest in the spiritual in art to an underdeveloped understanding of German Expressionism and other European art movements.<sup>10</sup> Others find his spirituality to be inseparable from his overall artistic identity throughout his career, yet emphasize the solidification of his mysticism mainly in the works created after 1924, tending to gloss over the actual belief systems and theologies that had great influence on his artwork.

When the artist was born, he was given the name Oscar Agustín Alejandro Schultz Solari. In 1916 he changed his name to Xul Solar, around the time he met Emilio Pettoruti while living in Florence, Italy. He invented the first name Xul, which is both an inversion of “lux” meaning “the intensity of light” and a play on the pronunciation of his father’s name, Schulz. He altered his mother’s Italian last name from Solari to Solar in order to identify himself with the sun.<sup>11</sup> The artist’s claim to an association with the sun, light, and fire foretells his deep interest in astrology, and other cosmological spiritual beliefs that are evident both before and after this name change. Although the adoption of the name Xul Solar does not coincide directly with the birth of his spirituality, it did indicate the manifestation of a spiritual element of his practice and helped to imply his self-identity as a mystic, and to position him as such in the eyes of his peers.

Xul’s earliest extant paintings were created while he was in Europe, during a twelve year stay from 1912 to 1924. His lifestyle in Europe was peripatetic: he traveled mainly between Italy and Germany, but frequently visited London, Paris, and other cities in between.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the influential Xul scholar Mario H. Gradowczyk, as well as other scholars, have determinedly situated these early works solely in terms of established European avant-garde art

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<sup>10</sup> Green, ed. *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, 5-35.; Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 21-80.

<sup>11</sup> Jorge Schwartz, “Let the Stars Compose Syllables,” in *Visiones y Revelaciones*, ed. Patricia Artundo et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 202.

<sup>12</sup> Artundo, “The Journey Within the Journey,” 131.

movements. Gradowczyk defines these works, from 1914 to 1918 as *Expressionist-Symbolist*, largely based on Xul's choice of mystical subject matter and the emotional turmoil suggested in the artist's journal entries.<sup>13</sup> He categorizes those from 1919-1923 as decidedly *Plasticist-Expressionist*, in which the artist, "tried to reconcile his connection with angelic worlds to archaisms, and in harmony with the avant-garde [formal] ideals he also shared." Gradowczyk approaches the paintings from this category through a lens that focuses on Xul's personal life and impetus behind his art, in which he argues that the aesthetics of these works are a result of a perceived insecurity the artist felt in himself.<sup>14</sup> This author focuses mainly on observed stylistic changes within the artist's works in order to classify them within these particular categories, which he explains primarily through the artist's interest in the current European art movements, most specifically in Kandinsky (1866-1944) and the German Expressionist group *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider, 1911-1914).

In 1912, the very year he arrived in Europe, Xul bought himself a copy of *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach*, about which he stated his interest in a letter to his family writing:

[The Blue Rider is] dealing with the most advanced art of the fauves, futurists, and cubists. These paintings shock the bourgeois for there is no nature, just lines and colours...I do not like it very much, but I am relieved because I realize how alone, without outside influences, I have worked, within a tendency that will predominate in the most elevated art of the future.<sup>15</sup>

From early on, the artist placed the developing avant-garde styles of art in Europe on a pedestal, but clearly it is a pedestal he desired to surpass with his own creations. Certainly, the connection between art and spirituality promoted by *Der Blaue Reiter* interested Xul Solar. Kandinsky, the leader of the expressionist group, formulated the spiritual basis for abstract painting in his

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<sup>13</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 28-29. The term "plastic" signifies "visual art."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, distributed originally in 1910, where he argued that internal spiritual aspirations of the artists allowed for them to transcend the formal aspects of painting, to paint from a personal ‘inner’ vision.<sup>16</sup>

Other scholarship from the 1990’s similarly relies on the categorization of Xul’s artworks, often isolating those he created in Europe from the rest of his oeuvre. In the exhibition catalogue titled *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, the authors Mario H. Gradowczyk, Daniel E. Nelson, and Christopher Green, place an assortment of Xul’s artworks into a classification that they denominate “The Architectures.” Before Xul established himself in the visual arts he was studying to become an architect. His interest in the field informs “The Architectures,” works in which he creates several series of fantastical and colorful structures over the course of his career. “The Architectures” exhibition in London made an effort to group these structures mainly based on stylistic similarities and chronology of their creation. The earliest works the scholars placed into the Architectures, which he painted in 1918, resembled Cathedrals, Mosques, and Temples, as he viewed buildings of worship (especially churches) to be the buildings of the future.<sup>17</sup> Because of their themes, the authors attribute these works to Xul’s mysticism, which they encourage the viewers to understand as “post-Futurist,” as they link his interest in “the mystical” as developing from his contact with Futurist manifestos he picked up while in Italy.<sup>18</sup> These authors locate the true development of his transcendent utopian vision mainly in the “Architectures” that he painted predominantly in Buenos Aires (1918-1958). They argue that the later developments in his style, with an increased interest in geometric forms and a livelier

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, “Xul Solar: World Maker,” in *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Katya Garcia Anton, and Christopher Green, “The Architectures of Alejandro Xul Solar,” in *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994) 22.

palette resulted from a desire to construct a new mythic city, in the Latin American spirit of modernization and an overall desire to “correct” culture in the 1920’s.<sup>19</sup> They attribute the spirituality of “The Architectures” and his landscapes of the period mainly to the goals of the Martinfierristas and the desire for the artist to create an Argentinian identity at this time.

The true difficulty in categorizing Xul’s works stems from the fact that he was creating works from these various categories simultaneously, and not developing each category successively throughout the years. He often made subtle changes in style between individual works within a short period of time, as well as carried one idea over into many artworks created over decades. Defining them by types fragments Xul’s oeuvre, and disrupts any understanding of the overarching spiritual ideas behind them. Overall, these sources view Xul’s early mysticism as an adjective, or a trait of his artwork appropriated from the philosophies of the Expressionists. More recent scholarship on the artist attempts to integrate Xul’s European and Argentinian periods, while dissolving the categorizations that often accompany the analysis of the artist’s work. In her contribution to the exhibition catalogue of *Artistas modernos rioplatenses en Europa: La experiencia de la vanguardia 1911-1924* from 2003, art historian Patricia Artundo immediately denounces the classifications that have been almost neurotically forced upon art since the 1950’s. She highlights a goal of the exhibition of Latin American art as seeking, “to overcome certain analytical categories...and certain prejudices such as that of the ‘passive absorption,’ that seems to negatively mark the appropriations that took place” a problem she sees as common in the scholarship on Latin American art in general.<sup>20</sup> Artundo’s essay endeavors to forego this tendency to categorize, while not discussing artwork as though it were in a vacuum, isolated from all outside influence of the world. Consequently, she is able to delve

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Green, ed. *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Artundo, “The Journey Within the Journey,” 132.

more deeply into Xul Solar's work by first and foremost describing him as nearly undefinable, and driven by a need, "to have personal non-inherited experiences, and the affirmation of extreme individuality."<sup>21</sup> Importantly, this view leads Artundo to consider Xul's artwork on the whole as a consequence or a product of his spiritual motives.

Hector Olea views Xul's artwork from a similar, non-categorical, viewpoint. He acknowledges Klee and Kandinsky as greatly influential on Xul especially in terms of Kandinsky's concept of "Inner Appeal," an ideal for the creation of art, especially concerning what he called the "art of the future." In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, distributed originally in 1910, the German Expressionist discussed the necessity of successful art to be visionary and not only "the child of its age," which Kandinsky says is barren and, "has no power for the future... The other art, that which is capable of educating further, springs equally from contemporary feeling, but is at the same time not only echo and mirror of it, but also has a deep and powerful prophetic strength."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Hector Olea feels "the assumption that Xul was a product of Expressionism must be discarded; above all, Xul was unique" because he constantly jumped between philosophies and theories.<sup>23</sup> Olea does not name exactly which philosophies and theories. In this thesis, I will go more deeply into the specific theologies and ideas to which Olea alludes. Nonetheless, Olea's standpoint points to the limitations of confining Xul's early paintings to specific artistic movements.

In lessening the focus on limiting Xul's oeuvre to the acts of categorizing his work or labeling them in relation to European movements, these authors further integrate Xul's work by viewing it as a whole through the lens of the artist's personal spiritual views. Artundo, for

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>22</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Olea, "Xul's Innermost Experience: The Verbivocovisual Presentiment," 63-64.

example, believes that Xul is identified first and foremost as a mystic, and that his identity as an artist must interrelate with this identity harmoniously. Jorge Schwartz supports this approach, noting that “underlying his thought is a continuous search for the spiritual and the absolute, in which life and art are indistinguishable.”<sup>24</sup> These scholars do not locate the spirituality in Xul’s art, however. They argue that two textual projects-- the artist’s creation of the language *Neo-Criollo* (Neo-Creole, or Neocreol), which evidence suggests he began developing around 1917, and his *San Signos* notebooks (Holy Signs, 1924-1963)-- most clearly exemplify the artist’s pervasive spirituality, and that from these two works the entirety of his other inventive undertakings stem in their entirety.

Schwartz defines Neo-Creole exactly as, “an agglutinative language, a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, conceived to facilitate the creation of a utopian Latin American brotherhood.”<sup>25</sup> Xul is unlike any other Spanish American vanguardist in that he chooses to use Brazilian Portuguese in his writings in addition to Spanish. Nonetheless, Schwartz argues, his creation of the Neo-Creole language was fueled by a desire to achieve pure “Argentine authenticity.”<sup>26</sup> A large part of Schwartz’s article traces Neo-Creole, the way in which it developed over Xul’s lifetime into Pan-Langua (Pan-language, 1933) and later into the *Grafías* (Ideographs, 1935-1963) Schwartz places the origins of the artist’s budding interest in the play with language in 1917 in letters to his parents, who were themselves European immigrants. He learned Italian from his mother, and German from his father, two other languages he spoke in addition to English, Spanish, and Portuguese.<sup>27</sup> Schwartz argues that, “Xul’s writing project cannot be viewed separately from any of his other initiatives.” He also critiques the Neo-Creole

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<sup>24</sup> Schwartz, “Let the Stars Compose Syllables,” 205.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 200-206.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 200.



language as paradoxically an elitist and totalitarian system, which, if successful in its indoctrination, would destroy all other languages.<sup>28</sup> Schwartz is the first to assert the fundamentally Christian orientation of the language of *Neo-Creole* as an example of Xul's overall tendency to seek universality. Xul himself indicated this when he said, "in the universalization of these and other things [language, music, writing] lies brotherhood; brotherhood is the essence of the Christian religion."<sup>29</sup> Xul included fragments and entire words of *Neo-Creole* throughout his paintings, constantly self-corrected and evolved the language over the decades of his life, altering vocabulary and grammatical rules over and over again in an exhaustive quest for perfection.

Daniel E. Nelson leads the charge in translating Xul's Neo-Creole into English, a daunting task, because of the artist's self-correcting over time. Xul's major use of the language was in the *San Signos*, and Nelson most successfully connects Neo-Creole to this mysterious project to which the artist devoted four decades. The *San Signos* first took form in Paris in 1924, "when the occultist Aleister Crowley served as Xul Solar's guide for a month in the arduous process of initiation into the esoteric sciences."<sup>30</sup> From this period of sustained meditation, in which Xul's astral self would leave his earthly body, he would experience visions, sixty-four corresponding to the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching: The Book of Changes*, which dates to the beginning of the ancient Chou dynasty in 1122 BCE China.

Xul wrote the visions by hand in notebooks in English in the 20's and 30's and continued to alter them and translate them into Neo-Creole, which he then typed-out with handwritten

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel E. Nelson, "Xul Solar's San Signos: The Book of Changes," in *Visiones y Revelaciones*, ed. Patricia M. Artundo et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 209.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

revisions, throughout his life. In the translations, Nelson's chief work on Xul Solar, the author defines the *San Signos* as, "a masterpiece of mystic literature written in a language of his own invention."<sup>31</sup> He assures the reader that reading the *San Signos* will help viewers to better understand the rest of Xul's artistic work, and goes more explicitly into the process of the I Ching and the spiritual visions achieved through meditation by the artist<sup>32</sup>. In order to successfully achieve a vision, he says, "with the aid of meditation, [Xul] enters into a state of trance, and leaving behind his physical body, elevates himself into the astral plane. There he encounters a space inhabited by strange ethereal beings: gods, angels, demons, genies and gurus with their disciples."<sup>33</sup> While having visions, the artist/author is transformed himself into one of these beings he contacts in the spiritual realm. When he returns to his terrestrial body that is when he would write about his experience. Paradoxically, though Xul's art is filled with unrecognizable symbols and figures that confound most viewers, the artist has called himself a 'realist' painter. Yet Borges was the first to understand that Xul's painting stemmed entirely from his visionary experiences.<sup>34</sup>

Artundo and Nelson have taken up the task of integrating the artist's spirituality more fully into the discussion of his body of work, including his invented language, despite Nelson's warning that, "The *San Signos* permit analysis and commentary, but something in them will always escape interpretation, which therefore can never be definitive."<sup>35</sup> In 2012, as a result of a joint effort between Artundo and Nelson, Xul Solar's previously unpublished *San Signos* were officially compiled and published into a book, *Los San Signos: Xul Solar y el I Ching*. For over

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Olea, "Xul's Innermost Experience," 63.

<sup>35</sup> Schwartz, "Let the Stars Compose Syllables," 206-207.

seventy years, the artist's notebooks of written and illustrated visions had been seen by less than a handful of people; however, the visual product of his visions-- all of his paintings that came afterwards-- have been visible to the public through certain exhibitions, and even more so since the creation of El Museo Xul Solar.<sup>36</sup>

Xul Solar's artwork is frequently described using the adjectives 'enigmatic,' 'hermetic,' 'esoteric,' even 'unintelligible' at times. Largely, the reason behind these indications of the difficulty of his work is that he came into contact with many beliefs and practices, a profound knowledge influenced his artistic vision. This easy categorization of the artist's body of work as indecipherable of course, results in gaps in the study of Xul Solar's oeuvre.<sup>37</sup> This thesis will focus on one such lacuna: a deep focus on the development of the artist's spirituality in his figural paintings from the years prior to his *San Signos* endeavor. The Xul scholarship, when analyzing his spirituality, mainly focuses on his post-European works, and the projects involving Neo-Creole following the advent of the *San Signos* in 1924, and then his paintings that were considered to be a product of the *San Signos*. It is essential, however, to better integrate the spirituality of his early European works into the artistic vision of the later Argentinian works, to extend beyond the understanding of the way in which his artwork embodied his beliefs, and to demonstrate that his spirituality was much more than mere Expressionist vehicle for aesthetic inspiration. The idea of Xul being a "realist" painter becomes imperative to an understanding of his spirituality; Xul's definition of realism in art is removed from the traditional movement in

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<sup>36</sup> It goes beyond the scope of this paper, however, Xul had an extensive interest in "arts and crafts." He sculpted and assembled masks, costumes, invented instruments, and even designed altars.

<sup>37</sup> Some interesting paths for future studies include finding the actual meaning in all of the numbers and possible arithmetic and astrological symbols in his works, and the possible ties these numbers have to the arithmetic of the Aztec codices, which he took a great interest in while in London, and Munich. The pattern of four seems to be of particular interest for, and hold great meaning for the artist as well: four eggs in one of his first existing paintings, four dead men in another, the *Cuatro Cholas* (four cholas, 1923) watercolor, etc. In addition, continuing Annick Luis' research on Xul's political connections and the effect of Peronism on the later artworks may also be productive.

which painters turned to the grittiness of the subject matter of everyday life. Instead, his idea of realism is internalized. In adopting the title of “realist” for himself and using his artwork to depict a world birthed by his imagination, he plays with the definition of reality and forces viewers to confront their perception of the material world.

The occult and esoteric in the artist’s early works have been given attention prior to this thesis, however often only with cursory explanations. Olea notes that Xul “jumps” between many philosophies and theories (of both religion and art). I believe, however, that Xul’s ideologies are actually more of a careful synthesis of these philosophies, mainly focusing on belief systems that grew out of Gnosticism. Olea, like other scholars, notes the connection to certain beliefs or ideologies; yet they do not develop a discussion of particular philosophies along with Xul’s work. In her analyses, Artundo highlights the fact that Xul’s identity as a mystic must not be overlooked or separated from his identity as an artist.<sup>38</sup> Yet, even she steers clear of defining exactly what type of mystic the artist was and what his specific form of mysticism was and the way it was expressed in his artwork. To define Xul as a mystic is to equate him with those who, according to Moshe Hallamish, “want to ‘lift the veil’ that separates man and the divine: [mystics] want to attain profound spiritual closeness with the divine entity.”<sup>39</sup> For the mystic, the emphasis of understanding a religious experience is largely based on feeling rather than logic or reason. Hallamish further defines mysticism as, “An array of phenomena that are found in most religions....and conveys an intensive inner experience of the supreme religious reality.... Mysticism can be regarded as a sort of religion that emphasizes the

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<sup>38</sup> Patricia M. Artundo, “Working Papers: An Introduction to a Xul Solar Retrospective,” in *Visiones y Revelaciones*, ed. Patricia Artundo et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 191-193.

<sup>39</sup> Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, trans. Ruth Bar-Llan (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1999), 6-7.

direct consciousness and intimate experience of divine presence.”<sup>40</sup> The core belief in such a spiritual world, and the ability to separate one’s soul from one’s body, drove Xul Solar’s artistic practice, which can be seen, I believe, as a form of ritual. His ultimate desire was to bring humanity closer to a utopian spiritual realm through his artwork, via an integration of theologies and ideals.

In order to examine the roots of Xul Solar’s mysticism in his early works, I specifically investigate the clothing, costumes, and figuration in his work. No scholar has previously examined the fashion and forms of the human-like inhabitants of Xul’s utopias. Though I argue that Xul’s early work is not strictly expressionist, Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* certainly became a foundation for Xul’s artistic philosophy. Kandinsky’s theory assumes the existence of the human soul, and argues that a new art form had the potential to affect the soul and to move it towards encountering a divine truth. Kandinsky believed that ancient people, or the people considered “primitives” at this time, had created art that was capable of such spiritual power. He believed that, “like ourselves, these artists sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external form.”<sup>41</sup> Kandinsky, however, emphasized the movement toward pure abstraction and consequently, the emotional effect the loss of figuration would have on the viewer. Xul grasped onto Kandinsky’s idea of the arts as the location for a spiritual revolution, yet he approached abstraction differently, and figuration along with subject matter as a whole remained imperative to his work. Xul maintained the materiality of an earthly world in his works, and much of it is expressed through the design of his figures, including their clothing, and accessories.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 9.

This thesis investigates the various figurative themes in his European works and Argentinian works prior to the *San Signos* that shed the most light on his developing spirituality and attempt to create a universal world: angels, transparent bodies, Pre-Columbian gods, and nationalist armies. Details of the clothing and forms of his figures largely emerged from the artist's imagination; however, they contain a mix of elements from numerous moments of history, theologies, and cultures from around the world. The earliest group of paintings in which the figures' costumes are visible, and therefore play an important role, are Xul's watercolors from 1915 with the angels as his subject matter. A few years later, especially in 1920, Xul's interest in the occult, as well as science, expanded. The consortium of esoteric and anatomical interests synthesized into a sort of religious system that parallels the collage effect of the bodies he paints in a group of his works from the early 1920's. The artist's belief in the esoteric then evolves to include figures from the pre-Columbian pantheon, and his thoughts become more focused on America. Finally, Xul's arrival back in Buenos Aires in 1924 tinged his art with a militaristic nationalism. Themes of war and an interest in uniforms become common in the paintings of his envisioned world. Artmaking was an essential ritualistic aspect of Xul Solar's personal spirituality, with the lofty goal of bringing man closer to the divine. Within these early figural paintings, the artist gave the viewer the most relatable view of his utopian spirit world, and through the depiction of their clothing and bodies, he provided a clear sense of what he understood as the reality of this other world, and its relationship to humanity on earth.



## CHAPTER I

### ETERNAL ANGELS

Xul Solar was in France when he created his earliest extant works including a selection of angel paintings, which often have been defined as experimental because he had not yet solidified his aesthetic style during this period. The artist was at this point transitioning through different levels of abstraction and the geometricizing of figures. He created his angels while he was still known as Oscar Alejandro Schulz Solari. In the watercolors *Anjos* (Angels) and *Dos Anjos* (Two Angels) both from 1915, for example, a number of stylized winged creatures float through a tranquil turquoise realm (fig.1 and fig. 2). The angels are adorned in either green, gold, or dark blue vestments, with golden sash-like garments tied around their waists. The idea of the overall physical appearance of angels has been well established for Christians and the Western world, most solidly from the Byzantine Era and into the Middle Ages, with little change. An androgynous or ‘fair’ human figure with large feathered wings, a halo, and billowing robes suggests the typical ‘angel.’ On the surface, Xul’s angels fit this generic description. Although Gradowczyk describes them as Expressionist, many elements of the angels’ garb and the general appearance as subject matter extend beyond both the received definition of Expressionism and the Expressionist brand of spirituality, mainly in their connection to occult and other alternative beliefs such as Gnosticism, anthroposophy, and the Kabbalah. The clothing worn by Xul’s angles show influences from these belief systems mainly in the way their designs express the passage of time, as well as structure a hierarchy for his unique world.

Xul’s lofty goals to surpass existing avant-garde movements are already hinted at in these portrayals of his angels. In *Inverted Utopias*, Hector Olea marks a connection with the



movement, stating that Xul's angels were "recalling" Paul Klee (1879-1940).<sup>42</sup> Xul's angels, however, pre-date by decades most of Klee's *Celestial Messengers*, which he created at the end of his life, though the famous *Angelus Novus* (once owned by Walter Benjamin) dates to 1920. Stylistically, Xul's and Klee's angels have little in common, yet the overall appearance of their costumes are comparable. In *Dos Anjos* the angels wear long garments that reach down to their calves, and show little decoration. Klee's messenger in the watercolor *Angel Vom Stern* (fig.3) from 1939 is comparably dressed in a simple blue robe covering the majority of the angel's body. Additionally, the wings on the figures by each artist are decidedly large, in keeping with the traditional depiction that many would identify as the Christian angel. However, the clothing and appearance of Xul's angels indicate a spirituality that extends beyond the expressionist "inner appeal," exemplified by Klee's. Xul's angels, unlike Klee's, are solidly fixed in space, with a clear delineation between the figures and the surrounding background. The artist does not use quick expressionistic brushstrokes or sketchy lines to form a suggestion of an angel as Klee does, but rather builds up the angelic figures to give them a more tangible presence.

Xul's natural affinity for the mystical and extra-terrestrial also informed the symbolist strain of his paintings, as Gradowczyk explains, "Xul affirmed himself in a known style: Symbolism. This art movement assigned meaning to forms, without being completely specific or literal. This is a world of suggestion, of ambiguity, of mystery, of what cannot be grasped, of what lies beyond."<sup>43</sup> In Xul's watercolor paintings, from this period, angels, as a well-known symbol in religious, historical, and artistic culture, invoke the multitude of meanings, both overt and mysterious, that such a symbol carries with it. The desire to conceal, and through concealment teach or enlighten those with the minds open to it, was of course not an invention of

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<sup>42</sup> Olea, "Xul's Innermost Experience," 65.

<sup>43</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 27.

the Symbolists, in fact, it coincides well with ancient religious philosophy and especially the philosophies of mysticism.

The artistic and physical representation of an invisible spiritual world has been a debate within a number of religious groups for millennia. The second Commandment condemns idolatry as a terrible sin, and in the eighth century CE, fear of the sin of idolatry led to the destruction of religious imagery in Byzantium. Nonetheless, figural representation of the Christian spiritual world was widespread from the fourth century CE onwards. Iconoclasm and the prohibition of figural imagery in religious art became the main issue concerning art in the eighth and ninth centuries, lasting over a century. To counteract the total destruction of holy imagery, iconophiles argued mainly for its didactic values, especially for the illiterate masses. As Glenn Peers notes the primary defense of images for iconophiles was, “that images could lead viewers from the visible to knowledge of the invisible, however incomplete.”<sup>44</sup> As a way to represent angels symbolically, so that they would be both visible to the masses, and understood as heavenly beings, they were given the shape of man. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, one of the great minds of the Byzantine age, “symbols offer the primary access to God, as they are condescendences that render God accessible to incarnate intelligences.”<sup>45</sup> A reason behind the development of the depiction of angels in human form was a symbolic one; the anthropomorphic shape of the angels quintessentially reflected humanity’s power of intellect.<sup>46</sup>

Angels are particularly special to human perception of the spiritual world (or heaven). Though Christian iconophiles argued for figural imagery as a teaching tool, the figures’ identities as symbols of intelligence likewise required profound intellectual stimulation for comprehension.

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<sup>44</sup> Glenn Peers, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 104

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 91-93.

The angel as an image or a symbol is only, “accessible by an act of exegesis and imparts an amount of intelligible information according to the worth and effort of the person contemplating.... by this means, the angels imitate, as much as they are able, the secret of the ineffable divinity, and envelop themselves mysteriously so as to yield divine illumination,” Peers states.<sup>47</sup> Since the establishment of their artistic representation in religious art, angels have been associated with intelligence.

Portrayals of angels were thus inherently at the center of two converging ideals. The first was that figural imagery can be utilized to teach the masses so they may be able to reach God (especially during the Byzantine and Medieval eras when the majority of Christian followers were illiterate). The second was that holy symbols, particularly angels, are inherently mysterious requiring “study” and initiation in order to fully realize what they mean, and contemplation to ultimately reach that greater understanding of God. In speaking from this more restrictive viewpoint, Peers notes, “it must be said also that the thing which is hidden under un-reveal-able and sacred enigmas is suited most perfectly to the mysterious words, and to rendering inaccessible to most people, the holy and secret truth of the otherworldly spirits. For all persons are not saints and, as scripture informs us, not all have knowledge.”<sup>48</sup>

In representing the angels, firstly as humans, and in choosing them as significant subject matter, Xul invested them with the meaning and history of the symbol of the angel. They too suggest the paradox within the artist’s creative vision of the world, in which he sought to teach and to create a more universal human existence, while also making access to that world fundamentally mysterious and challenging. According to Jorge Schwartz, Xul was creating an artistic language “that is simultaneously transparent and opaque, destined for the masses, yet,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

nonetheless only comprehensible to initiates.”<sup>49</sup> This idea shapes Xul’s spirituality and therefore his artwork from before his visionary *San Signos* project, including his early experimentation with language and the development of Neo-creole. As Schwartz notes, the artist’s Neo-creole language cannot be detached from any other artistic endeavor, or from the artist’s entire spiritual outlook. It was a language with the intention of simplifying multiple languages into one universal language, but would only be understandable to those “initiates” that took the time to learn his system. Before the arrival of Neo-Creole however, Xul painted angels, indicating an early desire to be both inclusive and obfuscatory, beginning with these paintings in 1915. Xul began structuring his mystic utopia with these early paintings, wherein he established the existence of a hierarchy through costume, and wherein the flow of time is unfamiliar. He created a confusion of time, past and present, through the inclusion of details from varied and unexpected sources, especially in the angels’ garb and other accoutrements.

In keeping with the aura of mystery and exclusivity associated with angels, Xul adhered to the medieval trend of dressing his angels in long, robe-like garments, which intrinsically lend his winged figures an aura of authority. Historically, all over the globe, the purpose of a robe is usually, if not always, a ceremonial one, the garment’s past is steeped in ritual, the politics of royalty, and the high art of luxury fabrics.<sup>50</sup> From the beginning, angels in Byzantine and Medieval representations were invested with robes, possibly decorated with liturgical sashes or belts fastened around the waist with varying degrees of opulence.<sup>51</sup> In the earthly world, only those in high positions of power were permitted (and financially able) to don such robes. Since clothing visually marks the rank and function of the wearer, angels clothed in an exemplary way

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<sup>49</sup> Schwartz, “Let the Stars Compose Syllables,” 203.

<sup>50</sup> Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1.

<sup>51</sup> Lyn Rodley, *Byzantine Art and Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 133.

were perceived as existing closer to God's grace. The clothing on Xul's angels does not entirely veer from this symbolic garment, he adorned them in what looks like a nondescript ornamental belt, albeit tied around non-traditional robes.

Furthermore, the artist has differentiated the sizes of the angels and the colors of their robes, alluding to a cosmic hierarchy. The demarcation of angels within a hierarchical system via clothing and other physical features is a facet of numerous belief systems and can be seen in the theology of the Byzantine intellectual Pseudo-Dionysius, and the theology of the heavens of the Kabbalists and Gnostics. For Christians, "Angelolatry surged up from beneath the Church from the peasantry."<sup>52</sup> Theologians did not respond strongly; however artists did. In Early eastern icons, angels are given robes of purple, even though St. Matthew described angels with snow white robes.<sup>53</sup> In Byzantine theology there are nine Orders of angels in the *Celestial Hierarchies*. The ranks of angels are distinguished through garb where the highest wear green stoles, carry golden staves in their right hands and the seal of God in their left, and the lowest dress in "soldier's garb" with golden belts and carry javelins and hatchets.<sup>54</sup>

Just as in the early eras of Christianity, Xul's angel images emerge as a creative interplay between traditional canons, alternative mysticisms, and his personal vision, in which the structure of hierarchy through clothing remains. In the teachings of the Catholic Church, from early Christianity into the time of modern believers and reformers, heaven is depicted as hierarchical, infinitely more rigid and organized than the world of man. During Xul's travel around Europe, the artist took continual interest in a variety of alternative mysticism, including the Kabbalah, the occult of the theosophists, and Aleister Crowley's writings. The robe colors

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Angels* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 26-27.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

and sizes of the angels in Xul's painting adhere closely to the depictions of angels described by the eighteenth century theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, whose work today is regarded as branching out from Catholic Gnosticism.<sup>55</sup> Evidence shows that Xul had been reading books by Swedenborg at this early stage in his career, possibly influenced by William Blake's own great interest in the author.<sup>56</sup> Swedenborg was a European reformer of Christianity, his writings on heaven and hell focused heavily on the identities of angels, borrowing well established ideas from Byzantine and Medieval art and scripture. Swedenborg discussed the organization of the hierarchy of angels in terms of garments and colors of such garments, which Xul clearly adopted as well in this pair of works. In both *Dos Anjos* and *Anjos* the larger angels wear robes in shades of dark gold. They lead their small processions in each painting, while tinier angels follow in robes of deep navy. The colors follow Swedenborg's teachings, that angels wearing golden robes are deemed intelligent, while angels in other colors are of lesser power and further down on the celestial ladder from the grace of god.<sup>57</sup> The clear distinction in size and color in Xul's watercolors creates a difference in status and celestial role that echoes the hierarchies outlined by Swedenborg.

In accordance with Byzantine thought on the representation of angels, Swedenborg too explores the association between angels and human intelligence, in his book *Heaven and Hell* from 1758. In this text, Swedenborg developed this thinking to create associations between the actual physical garments of the angels and the expression of divine intelligence. He explicates: "as light is Divine truth going forth from the Lord, so in the Word, garments signify truths and

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<sup>55</sup> Jos Van Meurs, "William Blake and His Gnostic Myths," in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof Van den Broek (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 271.

<sup>56</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell: From Things Heard and Seen* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1995), 92-96.

intelligence from truths.”<sup>58</sup> In specific reference to angel’s clothing he asserts, “Their garments correspond to their intelligence, and therefore all in the heavens appear clothed in accordance with their intelligence...The most intelligent have garments that blaze as if with flame...they receive their garments from the lord.”<sup>59</sup> Xul adorned the angels in *Anjos* and *Dos Anjos* in golden flames that encase their slender hands and encircle their heads like halos. Once again the larger angels not only have flames on their heads, but also over their hands, while the smaller angels do not wield this power. Thus, in accordance with Swedenborg’s teachings, Xul signifies that his angels are of the highest intelligence, and live in an ordered world where clothing represents social stratification.

Xul’s angels manifest his intense visual engagement with art from a wide variety of cultures, from ancient to modern and East to West, which he explored during his travels through Europe. Clothing in art may be utilized as an indicator of a specific time period, either the one that the artist was painting in, or the one an artist desires the viewers to believe they are seeing within a created narrative. The combination of many different historical references in the physical appearance of Xul’s angels and in their clothes intentionally prevents the viewer from recognizing a time period or culture, creating a sense of “all time.” This lack of temporal specificity speaks to a desire to construct a utopia that exists at all points in history and simultaneously outside of time, perhaps introducing something akin to the medieval philosopher Saint Bonaventure’s concept of the *Aevum*, or angelic time. In heaven, only God may know eternity, and only man knows time, which relegates angels to something of a heavenly inbetween, or as Peter Lamborn Wilson describes it, “a gradation of infinity.”<sup>60</sup> In the 1910’s,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson, *Angels*, 83.

the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1965) took this idea to the extreme; he taught that angels become the impetus for human history and each human soul has an angel guiding them through time to a desired social order. Although Xul may not yet have been in contact with the anthroposophist when he created *Anjos* and *Dos Anjos*, Steiner's theories became imperative to Xul's spiritual vision and its expression through his work.

One way in which Xul creates a sense of the *Aevum*, is through uniformity and repetition, especially when looking at *Anjos* and *Dos Anjos* as a pair. The figural positioning speaks to the standardization and repetition characteristic of religious scripture and echoed in Christian art, in which angels make up armies, and have ranks, creating repetitious imagery through uniformity.<sup>61</sup> An aesthetic device to delay or resist the establishment of time and space, repetition also suggests for the viewer a sense of infinity or oblivion. The design program at the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo of Ravenna, for example, is filled with repetitive motifs, including the white robes in the processional mosaics along the nave (fig.4). The haloed women along one side of the nave stand shoulder to shoulder in a three quarter turn in the same direction. The green fabric edges of their aprons create sharp rhythmic diagonals similar to the sharp edges on the robes of Xul's angels, along with the repetition of their elegant yet stiff poses.

The costumes in Xul's early angel paintings create a uniformity similar to that of the angels and other holy figures of these early Italian mosaics, giving the sense of infinite spiritual totality that Xul strove to communicate. The repetition of the figures' sharp edges, their wings, long red hair, and slender, robed bodies creates a rhythm that encourages a psychic meditation. The composition of the angels resembles a processional frieze, where the honored members slowly make their way in a single direction, again harkening back to an ancient time to formulate

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 33.



an image of his desired utopian future. Xul even seems to fight against the natural fluidity of the watercolor medium to create a relief sculpture-like appearance. The rigidity of their edges delineate the angels from the background as though they are carved into their space. The repetition manifests the past seamlessly into a vision of the future.

The faces of the angels from the teens may be, as Gradowczyk says, “similar to the Egyptians of the old kingdoms, although they may perhaps derive from Pre-Columbian codices.”<sup>62</sup> Given Xul’s interest in blending diverse forms to create universal imagery and the illusion of ‘all time,’ perhaps his angels are a blend of ancient ethnic characteristics and styles. Their formation also precisely resembles those faces in Minoan paintings of women from 1400 BCE and earlier. Xul may have come into contact with such art during his travels, including his visits to the British Museum, which had already obtained much of its classical antiquities collection by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> The way in which the forehead slopes down into the nose bone in one graceful line was a shorthand way for painters to create faces on paintings and pottery, a famous example in which this shorthand is particularly visible is ‘La Parisienne,’ a wall-painting from the Palace at Knossos (fig.5). The angels’ faces in Xul’s paintings, much like the woman in ‘La Parisienne,’ are in a profile view, yet their eyes are large and fully visible as if viewed from a frontal positioning. The gendered depiction of the seraphim in *Anjos* is particularly anomalous. The visual similarity of the angels to *La Parisienne* links Xul’s angels to traditions older than Christianity, in which angels are almost always depicted as men, and sometimes androgynous. Christian angels are meant to be the intellectual and therefore masculine counterpart to the emotional, and therefore feminine, humanity.<sup>64</sup> In the beliefs of the

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<sup>62</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> The British Museum, “History of the Collection,” Britishmuseum.org, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/the\\_museums\\_story/the\\_collection.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/the_collection.aspx) (accessed December 20, 2017).

<sup>64</sup> Wilson, *Angels*, 62.

Kabbalah even, the wisdom and its embodiment in both the human and the divine is gendered as feminine.<sup>65</sup> In the speculations of the early Christian gnosis, angels could be portrayed as women as well. The first edition of the gnostic scripture *Pistis Sophia* was printed in 1896, and would have been available to Xul, as Gnosticism was a facet of Theosophist knowledge, which he is known to have explored in Europe.<sup>66</sup> The female features of Xul's angels, and the feminine cut of their garb highlights the artist's early studies of a multitude of mysticisms, which he was putting into practice by synthesizing these beliefs into his own artistic vision.

Another notable divergence from the classical depiction of these holy messengers, and in support of the theory that Xul's utopia was meant to exist in a state of "all-time," is the style of the angels' robes. While figures wear decorative belts, patterned with what could be rubies and other jewels, fastened around their waists, the artist has clearly foregone the multitude of fluted folds common to the typical holy investiture of these divine beings, as in the Ravenna mosaics, and countless Byzantine and Medieval renderings of angels. Instead, in *Anjos* and *dos Anjos*, the smooth edges of the figures' robes speak more to the sleek lines of the apparel in religious sculpture from Ancient China and the east. For example, in an earthenware figure from the Western Han dynasty from the Second Century B.C.E. (fig.6) the smoothness of the dancer's dress is comparable to the robes of Xul's angels, as is the V-neck cut of the neck opening of the dress, and the way the figures are elegantly and dynamically curved at the waist, in poses too unnatural to be a part of the ordinary human world. This Han dynasty funerary sculpture was believed to negotiate between the human realm and the spiritual one, to guide souls after they died.<sup>67</sup> Xul's angels are similarly meant to act as intermediaries between the human and spirit

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>66</sup> G.R.S. Mead, trans., "The Pistis Sophia," *The Gnostic Society Library*, November 27, 2009, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://www.gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/index.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Denise Patry Leidy, *How to Read Chinese Ceramics* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 72.

worlds. The movement of the long gowns, of the angels and of the Han dancer, serve both to cover and to accentuate the supernatural grace of the figures represented. Before he arrived in London, Xul had originally planned to go to Hong Kong; his interest in Eastern culture had been established before his studies of the I Ching.<sup>68</sup> The clear Asian influence in the angel's robes may speak to the Chinese perception of the sacredness of the art object and its believed power as an intermediary between a human reality and a spirit realm.

Despite the mix of ancient and historical influences drawn on by the artist, the angels also express a modernity pertinent to the progressive avant-garde of the early twentieth-century. The short sleeves and central slit on the dresses of these angels are in fact shockingly modern for these heavenly figures, suggesting a sense of vogue this is perhaps advanced even for the 1910s. Aspects of the clothing and figural forms reflect contemporary fashion, as in the 1912 plate for the magazine *Les Modes* by the illustrator George Barbier depicting two fashionable women donning the most-current evening wear (fig.7). The woman on the left wears a golden robe with a smooth silhouette, short sleeves and with a scarf wrapped snugly around her waist. Xul's angels echo this fashionable apparel, most especially in the exposed arms, thick belts, and high waistlines.

The "exotic forms" of the emerging Art Deco trend in fashion were influenced by the avant-garde art movements, particularly the colors and lines of the Fauves and the interest in orientalism in Paris.<sup>69</sup> The physical appearance of Xul's angels record the Japonisme craze that entered Europe in the late nineteenth century, as well as the fascination with ancient Egypt and other antiquities in Art Deco. The large earrings the angelic women don further bring the past of numerous geographical areas into the present, and beyond into Xul's envisioned future. The

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<sup>68</sup> Artundo, "The Journey Within the Journey," 123.

<sup>69</sup> Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 32.

large gold triangles and circular earring shapes on the avenging angels in *Anjos* appear Egyptian and Mesopotamian, but appear in this artwork painted right on the cusp of the rise of these modern stylistic trends like Art Deco. Fashion trends before and after World War I looked back to ancient cultures as can be seen in the utilization of Egyptian hieroglyphic prints decorating the lower part of the dress of the fashionable women in Barbier's *Les Modes* illustration, fusing these antiquities with modern day chic. In *Dos Anjos*, the small seraphim in navy blue holds up her left bracelet clad wrist to present a large ring on a slender finger. The motion is reminiscent of the exaggerated and affected poses typical of Parisian fashion plates, including Barbier's figures who theatrically show off their jewels. The smaller angel in *Dos Anjos* also fashionably bends her wrist to also display a large ring. Xul merged the ethereal aesthetics of Byzantine and Medieval angels with the sense of up-to-date familiarity with his own modern-day urban environment.

Xul's spiritual beliefs bring his envisioned utopia into the realm of "realism." He believed that he was recording a vision from another heavenly dimension and that through art-making, he brought it into the human dimension. Xul looked to all of these alternative sources at this early stage in his career, diverging from traditional Catholic doctrine to structure his own vision of heaven. All angels are messengers of God, or gods, in both monotheistic and polytheistic traditions, and they move between earth and heaven, between two realms of existence, a physical reality, and a mysterious holy place.<sup>70</sup> Messages and the transferal of knowledge through both image and language later came to the artist's practice, with the incorporation of Neo-Creole into his paintings. The subject matter of these pre-Neo-Creole, however, first embody the spiritual realm he sought to illuminate. The costumes and the overall

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<sup>70</sup> Wilson, *Angels*, 37.

presentation of the artist's seraphim of 1915 clearly harken back to figures of ancient art from a number of mythologies. The artist's portrayal of holy figures early on in his career provided the foundation for the intense spiritual exploration throughout the entirety of his body of work. The *Anjos* establishes the artist's own desire to reach god, and to create a stronger connection between god and man. Angels are quintessentially a reflection of the viewer, or as Swedenborg explained it, "Although the archangel is by nature invisible, and in this way unperceivable, the image is made according to the means available to humanity."<sup>71</sup> Angels' visible forms may change according to their situations, and with the way humans perceive them. The style of robe, the traces of the ancient world, and modern elements are all essential to the identities of Xul's angels and the way they are meant to be perceived by a modern and even a future audience. A view of the angel's clothing suggests that early on, Xul introduced a hierarchy as a social structure into his utopia, which exists between moments of human history across the globe and the sacred infinity of heaven.

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<sup>71</sup> Peers, *Subtle Bodies*, 97.



## CHAPTER II

### CITIZENS OF THE COSMOS

Like the angels inhabiting it, the world of Xul Solar is paradoxical in that it represents an invisible world, yet physicality and the material quality of that world are all-important. His world is a synthetic one, entirely constructed and fabricated into a bizarre utopia that reflects a ‘real’ internal or spirit world that concretizes his spiritual journey. It is a world belonging solely to the artist, but one he desires to share with the world or even desires as a replacement for the entire universe. In his painted world, the costumes his figures wear are part of the totality of their identity. His use of bodies and nudity therefore must be viewed in the same light. At the time Xul Solar was in Europe the cold automaton of futurism and the wild primitivist body of the ‘native’ were competing ways of portraying the human figure in art and literature. Like his contemporaries, Xul’s physical representations of the body were stylistically far-removed from classical representations. Nonetheless, similarly to the Greeks, Xul sought perfection for the human body, albeit a spiritual one, rather than a rational one. Although Xul did not say it outright, Artundo attributes a “spiritual crisis” as the driving reason behind Xul’s trip to Europe.<sup>72</sup> The artist did seek out and come into contact with a number of religious and spiritually oriented people, including Crowley, who in 1909 created the *Aster Argentinum* doctrine. Xul met the occultist Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), and the Buddhist monk Allan Bennett (1872-1923) in London in 1919-1920. According to Artundo, one of the motivations Xul had for moving to Germany in 1921 was to meet Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), the founder of the esoteric spiritual movement of Anthroposophy.<sup>73</sup> The ways in which Steiner’s teachings

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<sup>72</sup> Artundo, “Working Papers,” 194.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

inspired Xul's artwork have not previously been explored in depth. I would argue however, that depiction of Xul's bodies adhere closely to the Anthroposophical teachings of Rudolf Steiner, especially in the revelation of the astral body, his specific idea of a spiritual brotherhood, and the connection of the soul to the cosmos.

The portrayal of a number of Xul's nude figures seem to demonstrate visually Steiner's theories on inner evolution of the soul, and the connection between the physical body and the soul. Xul brought back books by Steiner with him to Buenos Aires and he attended one of Steiner's conferences in January of 1923 in Munich. According to Teresa Tedin, he was greatly influenced by "philosophical, artistic, religious and spiritual focus of anthroposophy."<sup>74</sup> Steiner sought to create a spiritual science in order to observe the evolution of the human soul the way a scientist might observe changes in the natural world.<sup>75</sup> Swedenborg's religious ideas continued to influence the artist, especially his ideas about the body-soul connection. Rudolf Steiner further shaped the ideas of gnosis and theosophy to fit the cultural environment of the twentieth century. In a lecture from 1918, Steiner asserts that "The Greco-Latin epoch of civilization, lasting from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to approx. the 15<sup>th</sup> century, was the period of the development of the Intellectual Soul, or Mind-Soul; the development of the Consciousness-Soul (The spiritual soul) has been in progress since the 15<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>76</sup> Xul latched on to the idea of the Consciousness-Soul, and also with Steiner's idea of a hierarchy of man's being in relation to the divine. Steiner proposed the existence of different levels of man's being, which are (from closest to the divine to the furthest) the Ego, the astral body, the etheric body, and the physical body. He called these

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<sup>74</sup> Teresa Tedin, "Biographical and Artistic Chronology" in *Visiones y Revelaciones*, ed. Patricia Artundo et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 246.

<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Steiner, "The Work of the Angels in Man's Astral Body," (lecture, trans. D.S. Osmond, Zurich, October 9, 1918), Rudolf Steiner Press, np. <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/19181009p01.html>

<sup>76</sup> Steiner, "The Work of the Angels," np.



layers “the sheaths of man,” which all function together, and where the higher sheaths most often go unrevealed to the human consciousness without the spiritual practice of clairvoyance.<sup>77</sup>

The way in which Xul approached the representation of human bodies is a quite literal interpretation of Steiner’s ideas concerning the soul and the corporeal form. A major tenant of Anthroposophy is this separation of man’s being into a number of ‘states’ or levels. The upper states—the etheric-body, the astral body, and the Ego—are unobservable. Steiner’s mission was to make these invisible states visible, and not only visible, but observable as the natural world is observable, in the form of a concrete “soul-science.”<sup>78</sup> Xul was known to be intrigued by anatomy, and the physical aspects of humans were at the center and the starting point of his undertakings. He saw an infinite possibility in the manipulation of the human form, a process that began with the human representations in his artwork, but that he believed could one day be achievable as “real life” manipulations of the body in the future.<sup>79</sup> By combining modern scientific ideas of anatomy and the spiritual enlightenment of the soul, the artist created an innovative aesthetic, where human skin is transparent and the underlying organs are visible. This transparency is particularly noticeable in a number of his watercolors from 1923 including *Ña Diáfana [Lady Diaphonous]* (fig.8), *Por su Cruz Jura [By your cross I swear]* (fig.9), and *Hipnotismo [Qero sisisi hipnotismo no no] (Hypnotism [I want yesyesyes hypnotism no no])* (fig.10). He dramatically displayed the figures’ rib bones as decisive black lines connected to a dark geometric breast bone. In revealing the skeletal structure of what is meant to be a living being, situated in a narrative scene, Xul differentiated himself from his avant-garde colleagues. Even the radical stylistic innovations of the nude body made by Picasso and Matisse, while

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Aldo Pellegrini, “The Artist in Search of Universality,” in *Xul Solar: Collections of the Artworks in the Museum*, ed. Mario H. Gradowczyk, (Buenos Aires: Pan Klub Foundation, 1990), 30.

certainly diverging from academic models, still approach classical idyllic fullness without ever giving away any sense of an underlying skeleton or anatomy.

This type of transparent nudity in Xul's painting tends to have more spiritual implications in terms of the artist's overall vision, because the highly unusual portrayal of the body suggests the "sheaths of man" outlined by Steiner. In Xul's figures the rib-cage is a visible layer over hearts, lungs, intestines, esophagi, and even the twisting veins of a nervous system, all exposed as if illuminated by a light source brilliant enough to penetrate the entire body. This effect is most prominent in *Ña Diafana*, in which a woman grasps a green serpent, holding it up to her face while the sun moves through an eclipse over a sparse landscape. The tendrils of hair on the figure's face fall like ribbons past her shoulders and red streamers of flame or smoke emerge as an effect of her communion with the reptile. The torso of the goddess occupies the majority of the central space of the painting, and Xul has made her into an imposing figure by cropping her body at the top of the head, just above her decorated eyes, and just below her waist. By using small quick brushstrokes all along the straight dark lines and geometric shapes of her body, the artist created a glowing yellow aura that both surrounds her and emits from her. The effect of her aura enhances the magical quality of her manifestation, and makes it seem as though her own soul is in fact the luminous source causing her innards to be presented for the viewer's inspection. In the complex system of the sheaths of man, the astral body is where most of the spiritual activity takes place as the angels reside, monitor, and influence a human's soul there. The Ego and the etheric bodies act as filters between the highest divinity (heaven) and the physical body.<sup>80</sup> In a way, the artist has created a diagrammatic image of these invisible bodies made visible through the physical body.

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<sup>80</sup> Steiner, "The Work of Angels," np.

As a precursor to Steiner's thoughts on the astral body and angels as spirit guides, Swedenborg had a similar take on the human body and the divine, which Xul clearly understood as well. Gradowczyk briefly notes Xul's interest in Swedenborg during his "expressionist-symbolist" period of painting angels, yet his thoughts on the human body and its link to spirituality were also influential on the artist as well. In his book *Soul-Body Interaction* (1769) Swedenborg describes instances when angels taught him about human anatomy, separating each organ from the whole, while noting that each organ is connected to, unified by, and given life by heaven. He wrote about his mind, but not his body, being in heaven, and witnessing heaven breathing:

Then I was told by angels that this is the source of the heartbeat and breathing of each and every creature on earth. The reason the physical movements are not synchronous is that the heartbeat and the breathing of the lungs that occur in heaven descend into a kind of continuum and thereby into an energy; and the nature of that energy is such that it stimulates these motions in different ways depending on the state of each individual.<sup>81</sup>

During Swedenborg's spiritual journey, he learned about the function of each organ individually, and the influence each organ has not only on the workings of the body, but also because of their connection to the human soul. The Swedish theologian teaches, "The five outer senses—touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight—have specific correspondences with inner senses; but these correspondences are virtually unknown nowadays because hardly anyone knows that any correspondences exist, let alone that there are correspondences of spiritual realities with natural ones or of elements of the inner person with elements of the outer, which is the same thing."<sup>82</sup> Just as his thoughts informed Xul's angel, Swedenborg's influence once again arises in

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<sup>81</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Universal Human and Soul-Body Interaction*, Trans. By George F. Dole (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 88.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

the form of Xul's figures, in which the interior organs and layers of anatomy are positioned in a collage-like affect, creating something of a unified separate-ness. As Swedenborg describes in *Soul-Body Interaction*, "These matters cannot help but seem paradoxical to people in this world, because their only concept of the good of love and the truth of faith is that they are abstractions of some sort, powerless to accomplish anything...they are the source of all perception and sensation, all strength and activity, even in people on earth."<sup>83</sup> Xul's translucent humans from 1923 represent a similar disarticulation of the human body, where each body part and organ becomes a symbol or a living "piece of" a larger whole. In *Ña Diafana* he represents her heart like a red badge of honor pinned to her chest, and hints at an intestinal track with a swirling arabesque line. Employing that innovative transparency, Xul makes the cooperation between the organs of the body and the divine body visible, so the viewer may witness this connection.

Because of the distinctiveness of its translucency in the artist's renderings, skin ironically becomes a central focus in the work. The illusion of the coherence of these figures is created through dark, straight illustrative lines, which generate a structure around their visible interiors. The removal of the flesh of the figures consequently eliminates references to their race and ethnicity, thus adhering to Xul's quest for universality. The idea of the astral body became imperative to Xul's later visionary experience and writing the *San Signos*, in which the artist also combined ideas from the I-Ching and the teachings of Crowley; however, these 1920 paintings, as a product of the artist's spiritual journey go beyond anthroposophy to rely on the teachings of Swedenborg to form the aesthetics of the transparent human bodies.

They make a nod to the beliefs of the Ancient Aztecs as well. The removal of the skin of his figures reflects the ritualistic flaying of sacrificial victims, a practice vital to the ancient

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 89-91.

Aztecs, a culture that became increasingly central to Xul's work. These characters are surrounded by glowing auras, and have control of snakes, linking them to Aztec rituals of healing.<sup>84</sup> For the Aztecs, the flaying of sacrificial victims served to elevate their souls, as gifts to the deities. At times, the flayed skin would then be worn by priests and others, as a sort of transfer of power from the chosen victim.<sup>85</sup> Xul both visually and metaphorically removed the skin of his figures, an act that elevates their souls. In *Por su cruz jura*, a naked man kneels at a cross with his arms raised, the internal musculature of his buttocks and the structure of his genitalia clearly visible. The cross the man swears to has even sides, which suggests the Mesoamerican cross, where equal sides signified a 'vast expanse,' such as that extending across the four cardinal directions.<sup>86</sup> The nudity of the worshipping figure coincides with this idea, as very little Christian imagery depicts nudity, save images of Adam and Eve. Aztec ritual in turn, regularly included nudity, especially in terms of both the undressing as well as flaying of sacrificial victims.<sup>87</sup> In a vision from Xul's *San Signos* the skin of the penitent becomes thick and disfigured by the sins he committed. In *Neo-Creole* Xul created the word "crustas" (instead of the Spanish "costras") to signify this thick crust of skin, and in a climactic moment of his vision, an angel peels away the crusts of disfigured flesh from his body to discover his luminous astral body beneath.<sup>88</sup> Within Xul's synthesis of theologies, the exterior of the human body becomes a source of pain and hindrance, a type of spiritual burden. With the removal of the

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<sup>84</sup> Adriana B. Armando and Guillermo A. Fantoni, "Dioses y Códices Prehispánicos en la Obra de Xul Solar," *Ciencias Hoy*, January, 30, 1997 accessed August 30, 2016, <http://cienciahoy.org.ar/1997/01/dioses-y-codices-prehispánicos-en-la-obra-de-xul-solar/>

<sup>85</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the things of New Spain: Florentine Codex*, Translated from the Aztec into English by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, School of American Research, 1950), v.II, 54

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 47.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel E. Nelson, "Un Texto Protético: los *San Signos* de Xul solar" in *Los San Signos. Xul Solar y el I Ching*, ed. Patricia M. Artundo, (Fundación Pan Klub, Buenos Aires, 2012), 51.

burden of skin, the figures in the 1923 watercolors are thus meant to suggest spiritual enlightenment, through an apparent magical unburdening (lightening) of their physical being.

The style in which Xul paints his bodies suggests the synthesis of the spiritual and the scientific, and a similar combination drove Steiner to formulate his radical theology. Just as he turned to fashion to update his angels, Xul looked to science to modernize his cosmic bodies. Only two decades before Xul left for Europe, the German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen had made his discovery of the X-ray public.<sup>89</sup> Through the utilization of an X-ray effect, with the organs and interior anatomy completely visible through translucent skin, Xul enhanced the magical qualities of his figures, while simultaneously drawing attention to the reality of anatomy and the physical construction of the human form. The effect of the X-ray was also intriguing to the futurists during the first decade of the new century, largely for the technical advancement of vision and the visual aesthetics of light's ability to penetrate solid mass. In the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting from 1910," when discussing a desire to turn away from the classical nude, the futurist artists exclaim, "Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies, since our sharpened and multiplied sensitiveness has already penetrated the obscure manifestations of the medium?"<sup>90</sup> Xul too, transformed the nude body of academic painting utilizing an X-ray aesthetic; yet in his world he replicated the mechanical functions of the X-ray and suggested that they are producible through the power of the human psyche as it is given to the person by God or as a holy gift.

A final phase of the evolution of the soul, in accordance with Steiner's teachings, is to achieve what he terms brotherhood, on the physical plane of existence. In brotherhood, each

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<sup>89</sup> Simone Natale, *A Cosmology of Invisible Fluids: Wireless, X-Ray and Psychical Research around 1900*, (Italy, University of Torino, 2011), 263.

<sup>90</sup> Umbro Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, trans. Robert Brain (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 27.

human will understand, on a fundamental level, every other human, resulting in global peace. Steiner stated: “but we must confront every human being with the full realization that in him something is revealing itself from the divine foundations of the world, revealing itself through flesh and blood. To Conceive man as a picture revealed from the spiritual world...this is the impulse laid by the Angels into the pictures.”<sup>91</sup> He proclaimed that brotherhood, “is the one principle in accordance with which the Angels form pictures in man’s astral body.”<sup>92</sup> Steiner believed that in the future, once people become conscious of the Angel working within them, and of their astral body, they will have the ability to recognize the astral bodies, and therefore the divinity, in others. Without noting Steiner or elaborating on his beliefs, Belén Gache briefly describes the interactions between Xul’s figures as follows: “the affected person is hypnotized and induced to see his own body on the inside, that is, the divine power gets into the astral body and thus makes the interior anatomy visible to the hypnotized, making it possible to perform an internal check of the status of all its organs before proceeding to address the body of the affected area.”<sup>93</sup>

The watercolor *Hipnotismo (Qero sisisi hipnotismo no no)/Hypnotism (I want yesyesyes hypnotism no no)*, demonstrates this process in which two figures, a standing man, and a seated woman, interact with one another in an indeterminate space. The two figures have been hypnotized so they may view their own and each other’s insides. The woman reaches into the man’s intestines, possibly to hinder his advancement towards her, while the man’s gaze

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<sup>91</sup> Steiner, “The Work of Angels,” np.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Belén Gache, *Xul Solar y la Representación del Cuerpo*, II Simposio de Arte Argentio y Pensamiento Crítico organizado por la Asociación Argentina de Críticos de Arte, October, 29, 2005, accessed September, 5, 2016, <http://findelmundo.com.ar/belengache/aaca.htm>. “...la persona afectada es hipnotizada e inducida a ver su propio cuerpo por dentro, es decir, ella se introduce en su cuerpo astral y es así capaz de ver su corazón, sus pulmones, su hígado etc., realizando un chequeo interno del estado de todos sus órganos antes de proceder a dirigirse al órgano o el lugar afectado.” \*All translations have been done by myself unless otherwise stated.

manifests itself physically as an orange arrow directed towards her seated body. Steiner's lectures and writings did hint at hypnotism as well as sleep walking and the roles different states of consciousness played in the evolution of the soul. He believed that important angels' work occurs during states of consciousness when humans tend to be less aware of their physical bodies and their senses. In states of hypnosis or sleep, one may be more at risk of losing themselves or the path to salvation, but this state may also allow for them to become more clairvoyantly aware of their souls.<sup>94</sup> The X-ray effect on the figure's bodies in Xul's paintings suggests that his figures become more aware and connected to themselves, and therefore open to a greater spiritual, and in turn physical connection with others. The physical appearance of human bodies in Xul's paintings accordingly evolves both to accommodate and to extend beyond the ideals of Steiner's beliefs. Throughout the year of 1923, Xul continued to experiment with human forms, in an effort to understand and to demonstrate to others, the courses and extents that this type of human evolution through brotherhood could take.

In a progression of interaction between bodies from *Hipnotismo*, in which the figures struggle with the revelation of their astral bodies, the artist further deconstructs and reconstructs human figures, until facets of multiple bodies conform into one being. The watercolor *Pareja* (Couple) from 1923 (fig.11), at first appears to be a portrait, where the sitter's face and shoulders, in three-quarters view, look out at the viewer amidst a decorated yellow background. The artist mounted this particular work on card to create a frame, which enhances its presence as a portrait. The face and body of the sitter is however, fragmented, and the two halves of the face are misaligned. Each half shares a thin pink nose, and different colored eyes meet in a knowing gaze, strengthening the idea that the work depicts two individual souls in the midst of shifting

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<sup>94</sup> Steiner, "The Work of Angels, np.



into a singular body. Xul pushes this sense of transformation even further in 1924 with *Septupulo* (Septuplet) (fig.12) in which several sentient heads comprise a single being. Xul formed the heads and body parts from varying geometric shapes, some of which seem to float freely in space, yet he linked them as one through the magic of the layering of their semitransparent skin, and their matching jade green eyes. Xul's bodies here reflect the change in physical reality that occurred as a result of recognizing the divinity in others.

The transcendent and universal outlook of Xul's utopia may be largely attributed to his interest in Anthroposophy. The unification and peace through brotherhood and the evolution of consciousness in Steiner's system extends outwards to the entire universe. Other heavenly bodies are a part of the same system and have their part in the system and therefore have an effect on the soul, since the different sheaths of man correspond to planetary "rulers." According to Steiner, through deep meditation using clairvoyance, one's astral body may travel to other planets.<sup>95</sup> From 1919 onwards, with the adoption of the name Xul Solar, the artist links his identity as a mystic to the sun. Steiner teaches that the "ether" self, which is a level just below achieving the "astral" self, is tied to the activity and the power of the sun.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps in a self-conscious way, the artist does not have the audacity to proclaim he's achieved the level of clairvoyance or spiritual enlightenment beyond the ether-self. Steiner upholds that, "In that realm [of the ether-self] the knower of supersensible worlds observes the supersensible nature not only of the Earth, but of other heavenly bodies."<sup>97</sup> Xul strives to prove himself as a knower of supersensible worlds, and includes astrological bodies and planetary symbols in the majority of his works that involve the transformation of the human body. In *Septupulo*, four planetary forms float amongst

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

the figure's seven heads, including a golden Mars, a red Earth, and an oblong eclipsing sun. Earth and Mars are represented in the forms of their astrological or alchemical symbols as well, which gives the composition a more divinatory quality. The planets are intermeshed with the space of the figure's many heads, as though they have physically met with the planets through their thoughts and spiritual knowledge. Similarly, in *Ña Diafana*, her transparent skin is accompanied by the presence of eclipsing suns and other planets represented as colorful hovering spheres. Elements of space, especially of the sun, become pivotal in a majority of Xul's paintings from this time and onwards, linking human with human, and expanding outward to human and the universe.

Proceeding from his interest in Anthroposophy, the artist later becomes deeply invested in astrology, where he would create natal birth charts for friends, and he would hold long astrological meetings in Buenos Aires with any who desired to join, to learn of the ways in which they were affected by the movements of the planets.<sup>98</sup> As Borges said of Xul, "For the Greeks, the city of their birth was their country, and that is why we speak of Heraclitus of Ephesus, Zeno of Elea, and so forth, and the stoics had the extraordinary idea that a man did not have to be exclusively a citizen of his city, his "polis," but rather a citizen of the cosmos, a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the universe, or according to the German tradition, a *Weltbürger*."<sup>99</sup> Xul's painted figures aimed to be citizens of this cosmos.

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<sup>98</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 153, 237.

<sup>99</sup> Rangel, ed., "*The Art of Friendship*," 9.



## CHAPTER III

### REAL GODS

While Xul Solar was in Europe, during the first two decades of the new century, anthropologists and dealers were bringing objects and artwork in from Africa, the Pacific Ocean colonies, and the Americas. These works intrigued the Europeans for their distinctive aesthetics, which were very unlike those of conventional western art.<sup>100</sup> Many European artists, such as Picasso, perceived these types of objects as primitive, and viewed elements of non-Western material culture as, “a vehicle for a polemical attack on conventional art, a way of imposing an aesthetic chaos on the fixed orders of western representation.”<sup>101</sup> In Europe there was less interest in the art of the Americas; however Xul took a strong interest in ancient Mexican art and culture. He was clearly interested in the primitive art trend; however, his stylistic idiosyncrasies along with the decorative elements with which he clothed his figures suggest that the actual spiritual beliefs of the Aztecs were more influential on his formation. As Artundo explains, “For him, the Pre-Columbian world- with its system of beliefs and rituals- was still ‘alive’ and, being the new artist that he was, he felt capable of reshaping it and providing it with a new meaning.”<sup>102</sup>

In addition to the actual objects from Africa and the Americas, there were a number of sources on pre-Columbian culture available to Xul at this time. During the first two years of his stay in Europe, he made two trips to London, during which time he took two walking tours through the British Museum. He bought two written guides during these trips, which confirm his

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<sup>100</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 23.

<sup>101</sup> Maurizia Boscagli, *Eye on the Flesh: Fashions of Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century* (Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1996), 169.

<sup>102</sup> Armando and Fantoni, “Dioses y Codices”, np.

interest in the pre-Columbian art held there.<sup>103</sup> Research and written studies on early American culture boomed in Germany and spread to France and the rest of Europe. Accompanying the objects arriving to Europe from around the globe were the comparative analysis of the calendrical and astrological systems of Mexico by Alexander Von Humboldt whose *Personal narrative of travels to the equinoctial regions of America during the years 1799-1804* was published in 1807, Mexicanist studies of Ernest Theodore Hamy such as *Decades Americanae: Memoires d'archéologie et d'ethnographie américaines* (1885-1902), and the monographs of Eduard Seler were also published within the first decade of the twentieth century. Illustrated works from travelers and artists were released from the late eighteenth century, and facsimile editions of the Mesoamerican codices began circulating at this time.<sup>104</sup>

Xul was in London between 1919 and 1920, and while there he was enveloped in the occult world. In 1923 he traveled to Munich, where he was able to read a number of new studies on Pre-Columbian artwork.<sup>105</sup> Some of the codices most likely available to him were the *Codex Magliabechiano*, which is actually a colonial pictorial book created in the native style before 1566 that was perhaps copied from an original Aztec codex (many if not most of which were completely destroyed). Codex Magliabechiano (now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence) became known in the early 1600s when it was found in Europe in the collection of Antonio Magliabechi, a royal librarian for the Medici. *The Borgia Codex*, a pre-conquest work, the *Florentine Codex*, which contains books written by the Franciscan Friar Bernardino de

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<sup>103</sup> Artundo, 192. This thesis centers on a reading of the pre-Columbian inspired clothing, armor and style incorporated into the large figures of a number of Xul's paintings from the early 1920's. An examination of the connection between Aztec codices and Xul's Neo-creole texts and later divinatory studies could also contribute to the understanding of his mysticism.

<sup>104</sup> Armando and Fantoni, "Dioses y Codices," np.

<sup>105</sup> Alvaro Abos, *El Pintor Misterio*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2004), 69.

Sahagún, and a number of other codices were also then in circulation and likely served as sources of inspiration for Xul.<sup>106</sup>

Costumes and clothing were of central importance to the culture and overall lifestyle of the Aztecs and other pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations. In his depictions of pre-Columbian deities and figures, Xul paid close attention to the detail given to their apparel. In pre-contact Mexico, clothing indicated individual social standing and in a sense, upheld the social structures of entire empires. As a result, the Aztecs, Mixtecs, Chichimecs and other Mesoamerican peoples had strict sumptuary laws to regulate apparel.<sup>107</sup> Sahagún's texts are major sources for information on the Aztec clothing, as they recorded first-hand accounts. In his well-known books, *Historia general de las cosas de nueva España* (General history of the things of New Spain) now collectively called the *Florentine Codex*, since it is held in the Laurentian Library in Florence, Italy, the Friar went into great detail about the Aztec way of life, and the costumes integral to that society. Patricia Anawalt's book, *Clothing Before Cortés* utilizes and elaborates on Sahagún's ethnographic expedition to create a comprehensive view of the costumes of the Mesoamerican world. According to Anawalt, Aztec society was highly striated and sumptuary laws were held so strictly that breaking such laws would result in the perpetrator's death.<sup>108</sup> Wearing clothing above one's status was considered disrespectful to the gods, and therefore threatened the existence of mankind. The Aztec way of life was centered around their belief system, which hinged on war and sacrifice to a large host of gods. The elaborate costumes worn by gods, priests, and god-imposters ritualistically held together this way of life, and was a mode to manifest physically the power of their spiritual world.

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<sup>106</sup> Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 18 and 96.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 18-21.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 21.

When Sahagún arrived on the soil of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan, he was terrified to behold the idolatry committed by the Aztec peoples in their worship. In the *Florentine Codex*, the friar wrote on multiple occasions about the pervasiveness of idolatry in the Aztec way of life, explaining that: “these men can make a god by carving a figure out of a tree. They worship the wooden shape, they bleed for it.”<sup>109</sup> He continued, “God is exceeding wroth; he consumeth the idolaters with fire. For idolatry offendeth our Lord God; it is the worst of all sins.”<sup>110</sup> To the Franciscan friars, and extending to all of sixteenth century Catholic Spain, the Aztecs were thus a damned civilization, almost entirely because of their unwavering belief in the holy power of their artistic creations. This idolatry was embodied by the spiritual concepts of the *teotl* meaning god or spirit, and sometimes demon, and *teo*, the root word used to describe both ritual objects such as masks and effigies, and any sort of powerful feeling, even or moment in time that seemed supernatural or beyond ordinary or earthly circumstances. Idolatry set Aztec life apart from western thinking and formed the excuse for Cortés and the Spanish to destroy an already well-established civilization. Xul’s belief in his divine visions and spirituality, and his art as a medium for transferring the spiritual world into the actual world derived from the Aztec concepts of *teotl* and *teo*, and became a powerful way for him to deploy his art has a way to readdress that historical moment of conquest.

As Xul began to consider a return to Argentina, in some works he started to focus on American history. During his stay in Munich, and just before his return to Buenos Aires, Xul created a number of paintings, in which the figures either resemble or directly represent Mesoamerican deities. His 1923 paintings entitled *Tlaloc*, *Nana Watzin*, and *Iao* are pivotal works containing central figures related to Aztec deities and their mythology. Adriana Armando

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<sup>109</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 57.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

and Guillermo Fantoni argue that Xul was largely attracted to early Mesoamerican culture (rather than Argentinian) because of the fervency of its spirituality and worship (especially the cyclical and divinatory aspects of the codices and belief system). In simplified terms, in the Aztec belief system the deities are all related and interrelated, into an extremely complex system of ascending and descending types, all in accordance with the rhythm of the cosmos and of the rhythm of nature on earth.<sup>111</sup> According to Gradowczyk, Xul's motivation for painting *Tlaloc* and his other Aztec inspired works was his desire to return to Argentina. Perhaps viewing Ancient Mexico as something of a birthplace for Latin American culture and creativity, he turned to such Pre-Columbian sources, which helped connect the artist to his Latin American roots.<sup>112</sup> The ideas of universality and brotherhood that Xul retained from Steiner reflect in his shift to a vision centered on America and the idea of unifying all of Latin America. He viewed his works at this time as a means to subvert history by, in a way, bringing back the concept of idolatry. Every detail given to his figures are believed by the artist to be divinatory. He intended them to embody spiritual experience, as in the concepts of *teo* and *teotl*; consequently, I denominate them, 'real gods.'

Xul's interest in primitive cultures thus did not inherently hold the same sentiment as that of the European avant-garde in general. In his rediscovery of material culture from the American world, the "religious, astrological and esoteric concerns of the artist seem to have played as important a role as the influences of primitivism," Armando and Fantoni noted.<sup>113</sup> Certain elements of pre-contact Mexican beliefs, influenced his artistic production, such as the craftsmanship of the Aztec *tlacuilos* or scribes, and most importantly the concept of the *teo*. The

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<sup>111</sup> Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 108.

<sup>112</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 88

<sup>113</sup> Armando and Fantoni, "Dioses y Códices" np. "*las preocupaciones religiosas, astrológicas y esotéricas de artista parecen haber desempeñado un papel tan importante como las influencias del primitivismo.*"



powerful “feeling” of the *teo* was the mechanism that allowed God impersonators and artistic renderings of gods to stand for the actual god itself.

As Robert F. Townsend notes, the word *teotl* and its root, *teo*, “illustrates the curious, inextricable equivalence of the deity, deity impersonator, priest, and the natural element-- an association utterly alien to modern Western thought.” In the Pre-Columbian world, as in other ‘pre-modern’ cultures, the visual representation of the deity could be the deity itself.<sup>114</sup> The concept involved the relationship of the deities to human perceptions within the belief system, and the artwork and material culture as the nexus of this relationship. The inextricable connection to a divine world of gods and the creation of material culture and the artistic image corresponds with Xul’s previously formed ideals regarding the occult and gnosis. Xul already had a clear desire to make modern religious art objects, which became strengthened by his new knowledge of the Aztec *teo* and *teotl*. Figural artistic representations in Pre-Columbian art were largely sculptural, and sculptural representations of gods were the gods themselves. Though the codices, recorded of daily life, they were also considered powerfully divinatory. These concepts both bolstered and transformed Xul’s ideas about spirituality in art, leading him to the consideration that his creations were spiritual objects in themselves. Echoing Kandinsky’s ideas about spirituality in art, and unlocking an ultimate truth, Xul’s Pre-Columbian themed paintings became reworkings of the original Aztec codex pages. He was not entirely imitating the imagery and material culture of Mexico, but adopting and adapting it to bring the same sense of power to his art objects that would fit appropriately into modern society.

The objects and the various *teo*, including the codices, were considered by the Aztecs to be a medium that linked the material and spiritual worlds. Townsend explains, “The Aztecs

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<sup>114</sup> Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 116.

regarded the things of their world—both transitory and permanent—as inherently charged to a greater or lesser degree with vital force or power.”<sup>115</sup> In a sense, therefore, Xul’s representations of deities and supernatural beings work through the same mechanism of the *teo*. The dressing-up of a figure in specific ritual clothing was one of the major transformative factors of Aztec ritual. The overall physical appearance, including natural physical features as well as ritual clothing of a priest or a sacrificial victim was imperative to linking the earthly and spiritual realms. Images in the codices were also instructional, providing worshippers with guides for living in proper service of a spiritual world, so that existence could continue. The focus and deliberate detail with which Xul rendered his Pre-Columbian inspired figures’ costumes help to define and identify them, while also giving ancient deities new life in a modern world.

*Tlaloc*, one of his 1923 works, embodies Xul’s engagement with Pre-Columbian concepts of spirituality (fig.13). The manner in which Xul represents Tlaloc accomplishes two things: his alteration to Tlaloc’s original clothing and the figuration of the deity transforms the concept of literal self-sacrifice upon which the Aztec religion hinged on in order to make it fitting for a modern era, and secondly, he humanizes the deity in order to draw him into reality, in a way that the original codices did not. The title directly identifies the painting’s central figure as the powerful Mesoamerican rain deity, present in the pantheon of the Aztecs, as well as those of the Chichimec, Mixtec, and other central American cultures. Surrounding Tlaloc are his name and other words written in Xul’s signature script. He includes the word “water” in different languages, including “atl,” the original Nahuatl word for water. The words identify the deity and his life-giving function, as well as allude to the divinatory aspect of the codices through the written word. In Xul’s painting, Tlaloc takes a step across rough, serpent infested seas. He

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

stands grounded with his arms outstretched and his mouth open. His strong stance suggests that he is in the midst of using his supernatural powers to maintain the balance between heaven and earth, to nourish it with rain. Translucent electric-blue force fields seem to emerge from his hands, and a lightning bolt trailing behind a rainbow explodes from his mouth, while his head jerks back to show the force of the charge shooting from his body.

Armando and Fantoni, note Tlaloc's duality as the rain god who in the Aztec belief system represented both life-giving and destructive forces of water. In Xul's centralized representation, the god spans and controls both heaven and earth, showing he is a synthesis of opposites, a balanced composition that is both life giving and lethal.<sup>116</sup> Xul's composition, with his unique use of flatness and transparency, and the central figure's strong stance, evokes the feeling of the rain god's powers. Sahagún, in his ethnographic studies of the Aztec civilization, describes Tlaloc as "the provider" and attributed to him the rain, which nourishes the crops. Tlaloc's judgment, powers and influence on the physical earth were therefore of utmost importance to human survival and serving him was crucial, as he was also thought to be responsible for draughts, drownings, and thunderstorms.<sup>117</sup> Aztec life, as well as the life of other Mesoamerican civilizations, was strongly embedded in the geography and the rhythm of the seasons and the environment. As Townsend puts it, "The pragmatic business of obtaining food went hand in hand with a sense of periodicity, rhythm and cyclic recurrence, and with the notion of belonging to the land." For the Aztecs, the *Tlaloque*, or helpers to the central deity who can be thought of as 'little Tlalocs,' and the priests who ritually served them, were thought to be

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<sup>116</sup> Armando and Fantoni, "Dioses y Códices," np.

<sup>117</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 7.

responsible for the prosperity of the crops and the stability of the seasons, and therefore, Tlaloc is one of the central deities.<sup>118</sup>

Tlaloc appears in a number of Aztec and other Central American codices, and although his costumes are not exactly the same in every depiction, they have certain similar features, which would allow the learned viewer to identify him visually. Sacrificial victims could stand as the gods themselves, yet in the codices the god impersonators are often differentiated from the depictions of the ‘real’ gods’ via their clothing. In the first book of the *Florentine Codex*, for example, Sahagún lists and describes the Aztec gods, including their appearance and garb. He describes a sacrificial Tlaloc’s visage as being “covered with soot; his face was painted with liquid rubber; it was anointed with black; his face was spotted with a paste of amaranth seed dough. He had a sleeveless cloud-jacket of netted fabric; he had a crown of heron feathers; he had a necklace of green stone jewels. He had foam sandals, and also bells. He had a green and white plated reed banner.”<sup>119</sup> In this description, Tlaloc’s main item of clothing is a “sleeveless cloud-jacket,” which was worn by warriors of all classes in the Aztec civilization. As Anawalt notes, the *Ichcahuipilli* was an open, short, and quilted or padded jacket, which can be seen on a figure from *codex Telleriano-Remensis* (fig.14).<sup>120</sup> This first-hand visual information given by Sahagún does not easily match up with Xul’s painted depiction of Tlaloc however. Xul’s figure is barefooted, his clothing covers a majority of his torso the way an *Ichcahuipilli* would not, and his skin does not appear to have been ritually blackened or covered. Comparing Xul’s Tlaloc with the Tlaloc of Sahagún’s writings can perhaps rule out the painted figure’s identity as a

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<sup>118</sup> Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 108.

<sup>119</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Anawalt, *Before Cortés*, 39-40.

sacrificial victim, and demonstrate that more so, Xul's figure resembles the artistic representation of the actual god himself present in the codices.

The depictions of the 'real' Tlaloc are shown in a number of codices, in addition to *the Florentine Codex*, including the *Codex Vindobonensis*, and *Codex Magliabechiano*. Each Tlaloc has been illustrated with varying levels of elaborateness of costume. The ensemble Xul's Tlaloc wears most closely resembles a Mesoamerican kilt. Anawalt categorizes the kilt, or what is comparable to the Western idea of a kilt, as a draped garment, one that likely came directly from the loom without cutting or sewing. The majority of Pre-Columbian Mexican clothing was wrapped around or draped over the body as it preserved and utilized the most amount of fabric with little waste. The kilt fitted to the wearer's waist and was secured with a belt. It was a garment almost exclusively reserved for male deities.<sup>121</sup> In *Codex Vindobonensis*, Tlaloc wears a kilt, and has a chevron detail on his belt, which could be matched up with the rhythmic 'V' design on the torso and skirt of Xul's modern Tlaloc (fig.15). This chevron design was a common symbol of warfare, which was pivotal to Aztec religious belief since the bloodshed of war, in the name of the gods, ensured the prosperity and the continuation of human life.<sup>122</sup> The decorative elements on Xul's Tlaloc are interconnecting and repetitive arrows, suggesting an updated version on the ancient chevron design.

By incorporating an altered version of the chevron on Tlaloc's costume, Xul acknowledges the historical significance of warfare to the Aztec way of life. Yet, he transforms the design, perhaps to resurrect the power of the deity in present day, yet lessening the focus on physical warfare and bloodshed as the only way to appease the god. The belt laces of the Tlaloc from the *Vindobonensis* codex are depicted behind his back. In an image of another kilted figure

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 106.

in the *Codex Vindobonensis*, called Monkey 3, the character's belt is pulled tight and his belt straps hang long on either side of his hips (fig.16). This variation relates to the kilt style shown in Xul's depiction of the god. Mauve ribbons dangle beside the Argentinian Tlaloc's waist, also showing that his belt is pulled tight with the straps hanging loose at the sides. The idea that Xul's Tlaloc wears a tight belt tied in the back with straps hanging down is further supported by the shape of the figure and his cinched-in waist. Xul clearly did not model Tlaloc or his clothing after one particular Aztec depiction, but brought together various features of Aztec garb to create his own type of modern deity.

The ritual texts of the Aztecs contained calendars, prose, instructional imagery, narrative imagery, records of daily life, and complex arithmetic.<sup>123</sup> The imagery of god impersonators were more instructional for the process and law of rituals. In representing Tlaloc not as a sacrificial victim, but as the god himself, Xul removed the focus from violent sacrifice, and instead emphasized the true existence of the deity. Xul further strengthened the relationship between humanity and deity, and deity and the environment, through other iconographic anomalies. Xul included text in the image in order to keep the divinatory quality of the ritual texts, however the composition is far more narrative than images of deities in the codices. The Aztec gods were often depicted as static, and almost more as symbols than as living beings, whereas Xul's Tlaloc is depicted in action, in the midst of releasing his power. He has painted Tlaloc in what appears to be a moving environment with rough water and a fluctuating atmosphere, which gives Tlaloc's image an element of organic realism.

The accuracy with which Xul represents certain costume details is striking, and shows his purposeful observation of the codex facsimiles. He clearly dressed his Tlaloc in a similar

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<sup>123</sup> Gordon Brotherston, *Painted Books from Mexico*, (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 133-142.

manner reminiscent of the Tlalocs in the codices, and he positioned him in a similar stance with torso facing forward while his legs and face are in profile. The artist has taken an original artistic approach to portray this particular Aztec god, mainly in the use of color, a more modern geometricizing of his body, and his customary collage, layering, and transparency. These unique elements in Xul's painting style mark a departure from traditionally opaque depictions of the gods. As in his psychic bodies, the complexity of the transparency and layering of details with his adept use of watercolor, creates a flow between the surrounding environment and the figure himself. Xul composed both the figure and his surroundings with floating geometric shapes. In this composition, Tlaloc's arms appear to show through the decorative elements at his shoulders, and his legs appear to be wrapped in pink where they are submerged in water. Visually, the combination and confusion of the elements of the character's clothing along with his body and the surrounding atmosphere create a tension between ephemerality and physical inseparability. The fusion of man with god and god with the world modernizes the ancient concept of *teo*. Once again, this visual merging of human and divine reinforces the ideal of the painting as a modern spiritual object, in that it maintains elements of the original codices, while also bringing the deity into an earthly space. The divinatory aspect of the original codices is maintained through the portrayal of the figure and most especially through the inclusion of text with words of Neo-creole and the ancient Nauhatl, yet the artist developed these elements to create something akin to a postcolonial codex page, in which the spiritual connection the Aztecs believed existed between the earth and the gods becomes visible and material. Although it was painted while he was in Europe, *Tlaloc* signals the development of Xul's particularly American brand of spirituality, which challenged the existing European spiritual ideals in art, bringing consciousness to an American identity through the depiction of Aztec gods.

Other aspects of Tlaloc's costume in Xul's watercolor have been changed more drastically from the traditional costumes depicted in the codices. These differences nevertheless strengthen the idea of *teo* in his representation. First, Xul simplified Tlaloc's headdress significantly in comparison to all known depictions. In one particular representation of Tlaloc from the *tonalamatl* (fig.17) he wears his typical ornate headdress. In its most elaborate visual form, Tlaloc's headdress is made up of a jaguar head with a gaping, fanged maw. Even in its simplest depicted form, such as the headdress in *Codex Magliabechiano* (fig.18), Tlaloc's headdress is still quite elaborate with a veil and different types of feathers. Xul has foregone any of the opulence of the god's headpieces, however, and painted the headdress with blocky forms that resemble thick black hair. Directly from his scalp shoots a mauve cylinder, with three ribbon-like forms sprouting from it. The longest and uppermost ribbon is periwinkle, beneath it is one of vibrant turquoise, and the lowest and smallest is a muted green. Additionally, Tlaloc's cheek has what appears to be golden bells attached to it, which would have been an element of the original Tlaloc mask as Sahagún described it, while here it appears attached to the deity's own skin. Instead of the traditional Tlaloc mask, which hides or dehumanizes the face of the wearer, Xul's Tlaloc has a curved mustache directly above his slightly opened mouth, wide gaping eyes, and a severely pointed beard jutting from his chin, bringing his appearance closer to that of a human man.

Xul has simplified the deity's headdress, in effect reducing it into a generic symbol for "headdress" that loses the specificity to Tlaloc, since Xul then uses it to crown the other Pre-Columbian inspired deities as well. The simplification of his headdress allows for the god's hair and face to show more. His pointed beard, curved mustache, goggled eye and circular earring all echo those of the Aztec *teotl*'s powerful rain mask. Instead of these features being a part of a



mask, however, they indicate attributes of his actual face. The changes Xul made to the ritualistic headdress and mask further humanized the god. Tlaloc's face is now identifiable as a human face, and he has human hair, cut and parted in a modern fashion, updating his appearance. The changes Xul made to Tlaloc's apparel demonstrate his attraction to the concept of *teo*, and the unique relationship between gods and humans in Aztec spirituality. In the Aztec culture, the gods were brought into the physical realm via artwork, clothing and the rituals and beliefs attached to their material culture. In Xul's painting, Tlaloc's mask is replaced by the god's actual face. The appearance of Xul's Tlaloc combines both divine and human traits to uphold the ancient connection between the earth and the gods, yet in a way that veers away from the idea of physical sacrifice and sacrifice through violence, to revitalize the ancient mythologies for a modern audience.

The watercolor on paper entitled *Nana Watzin*, also from 1923 further exemplifies Xul's adoption of elements of Pre-Columbian mysticism for the formation of his own spiritual views (fig.19). According to Armando and Fantoni, the name *Nana Watzin* is Xul's version of the traditional Nahuatl name *Nanahuatzin*.<sup>124</sup> He maintained the phonetic sound of the Mexican name while giving it a contemporary Americanized spelling. In an essay from *San Signos*, Nelson makes an intriguing connection between the Aztec myth of Nanahuatzin, this particular watercolor, and the journey of the protagonist (or the artist himself) in *San Signos*. As Nelson describes it, the watercolor *Nana Watzin*, "represents, in narrative terms, the path repeatedly followed by the penitent who is both the first person narrator and the protagonist of the *San Signos*, written in 1924."<sup>125</sup> *Nana Watzin* was however painted in 1923, before Xul began this

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<sup>124</sup> Armando and Fantoni, "Dioses y Codices," np.

<sup>125</sup> Nelson, *San Signos*, 49. "representa plásticamente en términos narrativos el camino que corre repetidas veces el penitente que es a la vez el narrador en primera persona y el protagonista heroico de los *San Signos*, escritos a partir de 1924.

visionary project that occupied him for the rest of his life. Arguably, this painting is a precursor to that spiritual journey, and has elements of the narrative quality of that journey.

*Nanahuatzin* was a central character in the Aztec creation story of the sun and the moon. The Aztecs believed that the sun was created in Teotihuacan at the beginning of the fifth era. All the world was in darkness up until this point, when the gods gathered together to choose who would carry the burden of being the sun. As Aztec mythology told it, two gods, Tecuciztecatl and Nanahuatzin, volunteered as sacrifices to become the Sun, so they could lift the world from darkness and human life could exist. The volunteers were Tecuciztecatl, who was wealthy and had beautiful and costly sacrificial materials, and Nanahuatzin who was an impoverished and diseased deity.<sup>126</sup> Tecuciztecatl, after many tries, was unable to muster the courage to throw himself into the sacrificial fire, but when it came time for Nanahuatzin to throw himself in, he did so without hesitation, and became the sun. This act brought courage to Tecuciztecatl, who threw himself in after, and he then became the moon.<sup>127</sup>

Xul clearly identified the titular figure of the painting through narrative and through a textual label written above the figure himself. Nana Watzin's position in the narrative clearly corresponds to the fate of the Aztec Nanahuatzin. He occupies the most central space with huge flames rising up from a cauldron to snake around his slender body. Unlike the Aztec portrayal of Nanahuatzin from the Borgia Codex (fig.20), in which the god emerges from the fire in full warrior regalia, Xul's god is depicted unclothed, shown in the moment before he is consumed by flame. Xul's naked depiction of the Aztec god suggests that Nanahuatzin has shed his simple

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<sup>126</sup> Townsend, 120. "Tecuciztecatl laid out a sacrificial kit of the costliest materials. His fir branches were of Quetzal feathers; his grass balls were of gold; his maguey spines were of greenstone; while the reddened bloodied spines were of coral. His incense, moreover, was of the best kind. The other volunteer, and impoverished deity named Nanahuatzin, could only afford green rushes, pine needles, actual maguey spines, and his own blood; and for the incense, the scabs from his sores."

<sup>127</sup> Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 120-121.

ritualistic clothing of paper upon confessing his sins.<sup>128</sup> The deity appears inside of a fiery caldron, in the moment just before his transformation into the sun, at the time in the Aztec narrative when life still exists in darkness. The god does however still wear a headdress, similar to that in *Tlaloc*, an element of decoration to signify the figure's status. Although he does not wear specific clothing items, he is literally dressed in holy flame. The geometricized limbs of orange and yellow fire do not burn and destroy his skin, but instead decorate Nana's body rather magnificently. Flame, light, and the sun, which appear visually and as words in text, become significant symbols of power to Xul's spiritual identity, and here he may once again be drawing on the concept of Swedenborg's most enlightened angels dressed in flames. Nanahuatzin was a humble figure in Aztec mythology, and in his imagery, Xul equates his humility and brave sacrifice with enlightened intelligence.

Although Nana Watzin is simple to identify in the work with cursory background knowledge of the Aztec myth, the corresponding identity of the second figure in this painting is more of a mystery. The figure's clothing, however, holds clues to an identity, and therefore to the overall reading of the artwork.<sup>129</sup> In the Aztec creation story of the Sun and the Moon, the second character Tecuciztecatl is male, a seemingly likely candidate for the figure in question. The figure in Xul's painting however, wears a long skirt that falls below the knees. Xul's close study of Pre-Columbian art would have made him aware that Aztec males were forbidden from wearing skirts that fell past their knees. This hard law emphatically rules out Tecuciztecatl as the second figure.

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<sup>128</sup> Nelson, *San Signos*, 51.

<sup>129</sup> Armando and Fantoni do not clearly ascertain the name of the second figure in their article. Armando and Fantoni, "Dioses y Códices," np.

The garments the mysterious figure wears can be identified as a *cueitl*, which is a basic, calf-length skirt worn by Aztec women of all social standings, in both domestic and ritual settings, and a *huipilli*, which was a common tunic-like garment. The *cueitl* was associated with ritualistic drinking, and women wearing in these skirts are frequently depicted kneeling.<sup>130</sup> A name in Nahuatl, other than Nana Watzin's, marks the altar upon which the caldron rests. The golden letters spell out *Tlazolteotl*, which was the name of 'the weaver woman' goddess, or the goddess of the earth and of filth in the Aztec pantheon. As with Tlaloc and other Aztec deities, Tlazolteotl has a dual nature. She both inspires lustful and lecherous behavior, while also purifying such sins.<sup>131</sup> As one of seven Aztec "night lords" she governed certain aspects of birth and has the duties of a midwife, and therefore appears at times represented squatting and giving birth.<sup>132</sup> *Codex Mendoza*, created just after the conquest and held in Oxford Universities Bodleian Library since 1659, includes a woman who, similar to the figure in Xul's painting, kneels and wears a *cueitl* and a *huipilli*, where she is spooling yarn, a typical task for women in the codices (fig.21). Although the figure in Xul's painting is not weaving, her kneeling pose and the way in which her *cueitl* shapes her body matches the depictions of human women from the codices. She may not be Tlazolteotl herself; yet she may embody the feminine presence and the power of forgiveness of the goddess in human form.

Humanity did not exist before Nanahuatzin jumped into the sacred fire, yet in Xul's painting he allows a human to be witness to the event. Furthermore, the woman's clothing is a vibrant pink, and tight fitting, which are modern alterations to ancient clothing. In a continuation from *Anjos*, the artist confuses time periods through the depiction of clothing in order to create a

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<sup>130</sup> Anawalt, *Before Cortés*, 33.

<sup>131</sup> Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 47.

<sup>132</sup> Brotherston, *Painted Books of Mexico*, 132.

cyclical or infinite reality, that deeply links the world of the supernatural to the world of humans. The image carries the idea of “purification, cosmic transformation, and spiritual transcendence,” that Nelson noted with regard to Xul’s impending spiritual journey.<sup>133</sup> As well, the artist’s alterations to the Nanahuatzin story imply a transcendence of time. Through the anachronistic and inaccurate insertion of a female worshipper, Xul creates that deeper link between the human and the spiritual for which he consistently strove.

The main figure in the painting *Iao* (fig. 22) from the group of 1923 Pre-Columbian inspired paintings, is not named after a particular Aztec or Mesoamerican deity. Armando and Fantoni do not include *Iao* in their discussion of Xul’s Pre-Columbian inspired works and it has remained unstudied in the artist’s oeuvre.<sup>134</sup> I would argue, however, that *Iao* exemplifies a critical juncture between Xul’s first angelic messengers, his transparent nudes inspired by Anthroposophy, his Aztec deities, and his future *San Signos* project.

Though Xul did not overtly identify *Iao* as a Pre-Columbian deity, as he did with *Tlaloc* and *Nana Watzin*, facets of the figure’s clothing and the overall composition can be related to early American material culture. The palette in *Iao* is the most similar to that of the codices, as he used a more subdued and limited hues than the bright psychedelic color scheme of *Tlaloc* and *Nana Watzin*. That cornflower yellow, which can be seen in *Iao*’s garment was a particularly common color in Aztec artwork. The colors used came from such things as flowers, tree sap, soil, cactus beetles.<sup>135</sup> The deep earthy red of the wings and the blues and greens emulate the use of organic materials for pigment. Additionally, the dark ink outline of the figure and the parchment-like appearance of the paper connect it to the Mesoamerican codices as well. *Iao* is

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<sup>133</sup> Nelson, *San Signos*, 50.

<sup>134</sup> I was able to see *Iao* in an exhibition in New York City in February 2016. <http://www.languageofthebirds.org/>

<sup>135</sup> “Codex Corner: Colours,” Aztec Mexicolore, [www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/writing/codex-corner-colours](http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/writing/codex-corner-colours), (accessed November 16, 2016), np.

most likely meant to be a reference to the supernatural being *Yao* or “Eee-a-o,” a primordial *Archon* originally belonging to the gnostic belief system.<sup>136</sup> The common representation of the archon Yao however, is a creature whose “face is that of a seven headed snake.”<sup>137</sup> Xul’s representation of the supernatural being does not correspond to the description from gnostic scripture at all; instead he adopts the shape of his transparent “enlightened” men, dressed in clothing both reminiscent of Mesoamerica and transforming beyond that. At this point, Xul is moving more urgently between spiritual worlds than in previous works, and Iao is something of a critical transitional figure. Pre-Columbian paintings still inform certain aesthetics of Iao’s composition, but Xul creatively develops the figure’s garb to present a unique personal and universal vision for a new America.

Like Tlaloc, Iao has a decidedly humanoid shape, and fills up the majority of the space in an ethereal landscape, surrounded by stormy clouds, rough waters, and bizarre and hazy atmospheric effects. Two snakes may be a nod to the gnostic form of Yao; however, snakes and serpent-like creatures are rather common in a number of Xul’s paintings regardless of the major figures depicted. The works in which the human characters interact or control the snakes, evoke a connection to Aztec beliefs, where magicians had the power to control snakes in healing rituals. The snakes in Xul’s paintings may also be a reference to a chief deity Quetzalcoatl, often embodied as a plumed serpent.<sup>138</sup> The exact meaning of the snakes as a symbol in his paintings has been debated over the years, but he most likely included them in many of his paintings because of the widespread importance of snakes in many belief systems around the globe, not only of Mesoamerica. Because of this universal significance, the snake furthered Xul’s attempt

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<sup>136</sup> Michael Jordan, *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2004), 86.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Phillip Smith, *A Dictionary of Gnosticism* (Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 2009), 260.

<sup>138</sup> Armando and Fantoni, “Dioses y Códices,” np.

at unifying ideas from multiple belief systems. It represents another being that acts as a conduit for interaction between the earth and utopia.

Iao's costume references certain elements of the Aztec dress, which further connects him to the other Pre-Columbian gods, and helps to shape his identity within Xul's own growing pantheon. Based on Anawalt's descriptions, and a number of visuals from the Aztec codices, at the most basic level, the character Iao most likely dons either a loincloth (*maxtlatl*) or a hip-cloth, paired with bright red sandals. Both the *maxtlatl* and the hip-cloth were worn by men of all classes over the age of thirteen, from the slaves to the highest honored warriors, priests, and rulers. The garments leave the torso and legs exposed while covering the genitalia from the waist to the upper-thighs. Because these clothing items could be worn by any member of Aztec society, the social standing of the wearer was denoted by decorative elements on the garment.<sup>139</sup> In Xul's painting, the garment that reaches to Iao's upper thighs has been painted in a flat, opaque yellow, and has been dappled evenly with small brown spots. The designs on Iao's hip-cloth may represent leopard or jaguar fur. The combination of the animal fur and the snake further underscore the importance of animals in a ritualistic context and as symbols. Only the most honored warriors wore fur.<sup>140</sup> A snaky green border lines the top of the loin-cloth, while narrow streamers of blue, white and dark green flare out from around his waistline. A simple depiction of a man dressed in a hipcloth from *codex Telleriano-Remensis* echoes the way in which Iao's garment is tied around his lower body, however the decorative elements of Iao's hipcloth fall in the front as multicolored streamers, rather than in the back as it is portrayed in the codex (fig.23). The decorative animal print and streamers signal the high social standing of the figure, elevating his status through the inclusion of certain accoutrements.

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<sup>139</sup> Anawalt *Before Cortés*, 22-23

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

In addition to the streamers and pattern on Iao's hipcloth, he wears a headdress similar to Tlaloc's and Nana Watzin's, constructed with a simple band surrounding the head from which multi-colored streamers are attached. Iao's headpiece is even further simplified, with fewer decorative streamers. The headdress Iao wears is also typical of the other headdresses Xul has used to designate the deity status of his figures, which seems to be Xul's simplified, modern take on traditional ritualistic headwear. The figure also dons bright red sandals, which further mark his status using the hierarchical dress code of the Aztecs. Only members of the Aztec upper and ruling classes wore sandals, while the labor and slave-classes went barefooted.<sup>141</sup>

It may be more useful to posit Iao as an angel figure, as an evolution of his first *Anjos* from 1915. Angels were imperative to both Steiner's and Swedenborg's theories on spirituality, and they later became pivotal to the progression of Xul's *San Signos*. Over the span of eight years, the appearances of the more angel-like beings Xul depicts change drastically, from *Anjos* to *Iao*. Iao and the figure in *Ángel en Vuelo* (fig.24), also from 1923, represent the new style of messengers he encountered during his astral trips. The figures have become more geometrized, and they demonstrate his penchant for the transparency of the figure and its surrounding world remains a characteristic that began around 1920. The wings of Iao and the angel in flight appear to be more delicate than those in his earlier depictions. The wings are almost insect-like in appearance, with a differentiation in size between upper and lower wings. These wings can be understood as an aura of the manifestation of the mystical being's power rather than solid physical appendages, just as the rectilinear blue shapes that emerge from Tlaloc's hands exemplify his power. The flying figure in *Iao* and *Angel en Vuelo* pre-figure the "gran ser," or "great angel" that Xul (or the "penitent") meets on his *San Signos* journey. In the text, the great

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 18-21.



angels serve a comparable function of “messenger of god,” and deliver to the penitent the name of Xul.

The angel is also a mirror of the penitent traveler as well. The angel in *San Signos* says, “Am I you, or are you me? If my name is yours.”<sup>142</sup> His experience closes the gap between god and man, as the angels he meets are facets of himself. Iao, while being a reference to a primordial deity is here depicted rather human-like in a Pre-Columbian inspired costume. In this pivotal work, Xul combined the idea of the *teo* with the imagery of a spirit guide in the form of an angel. Xul’s embrace of the concept of the *teo* manifests in the supernatural beings he depicted, and he resurrected deities long ago obliterated by the Spanish conquests, adding them to his own pantheon. The combination of beliefs and cultural elements from various sources present in the composition of *Iao*, both European and American, speaks to the internationalization that would later color the artmaking environment Xul returned to and helped shape in Buenos Aires.

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<sup>142</sup> Nelson, *San Signos*, 51. “¿Soy tú o eres yo? Si mi nombre es el tuyo.”



## CHAPTER IV

### UNIFORMS AND HIERARCHIES

In 1924, after his twelve year stay in Europe, Xul Solar returned to his home city of Buenos Aires along with his friend and fellow artist, Emilio Pettoruti, both motivated to exhibit their work in Argentina and to bring the vanguard home. While Xul was away, Buenos Aires had transformed, due to a skyrocketing of the population from 1,200,000 in 1852 to approximately 8,000,000 by 1914 (largely contributed to by an influx of European immigrants).<sup>143</sup> A line from Jorge Borges's poem about the city aptly describes this change upon his own return to Argentina, a few years earlier in 1921: "you are no longer the same as the time of the Centenario/ then you were more sky/and now you are pure buildings."<sup>144</sup> The change in Buenos Aires signaled the cultural transformation occurring in many countries across Latin America. During this decade, "young intellectuals in Latin America were transforming their official, immobile cultures by publishing magazines, manifestos, and proclamations."<sup>145</sup> When Xul arrived back in Argentina, his works continued to show Pre-Columbian and primitivist influence and subject matter; however, his subjects were influenced by the growing nationalism of the *Martínfierristas*, and their push to transform the Argentinian art scene.

The *Martínfierristas* romanticized and identified with the rural gaucho figure, and adopted *criollismo*, or national pride through an emphasis on a shared Spanish heritage, which lead to an inclination towards militant patriotism in the literature and other creative projects of the Martinfierristas. The group from Buenos Aires published the magazine *Martín Fierro*,

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<sup>143</sup> King, "Xul Solar: Buenos Aires, Modernity and Utopia," 11.

<sup>144</sup> Green, *The Architectures*, 8.

<sup>145</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 126.

whose June 1925 issue contained images of “sculptures from Mexico, ceramics from Peru, and archaeological motifs of the Argentine Northwest, [which] were welcomed as works equivalent to modern pieces of art, and celebrated for their aesthetic values,” as Armando and Fantoni noted. *Martin Fierro*, “selected and celebrated examples of ‘primitive’ art capable of reaffirming the abstract qualities and concepts of the type of art that, in the militant mode, the magazine intended to spread and promote.”<sup>146</sup> This article emblemizes the Americanist orientation of *Martin Fierro*, which it shared with Xul Solar. Although, in retrospect, John King deems the Buenos Aires vanguard to have been relatively conservative, and scholars consider Borges and Xul to be the two most radical artists at the time in their “different reworkings of vanguard ‘criollismo’”<sup>147</sup>

Xul became a leading voice within the *Martín Fierro* group along with Borges and Pettoruti. In an article about Pettoruti, which Xul contributed to *Martín Fierro* in 1924, he declared, “For our America the Wars of Independence are not yet over.”<sup>148</sup> At this point, more overt references to pan-Americanism become obvious in Xul’s work, with an increase in the presence of a multitude of flags, images of “fiestas patrias” (national holidays), and the evocations of Latin American countries through fantastical and mythological characters.<sup>149</sup> Xul took part in the activities of the *Martin Fierro* group, but also stood apart from some of sentiments of elitism and machismo. For him, the ultimate goal was a unified Latin American continent, not only a focus on the reshaping of Argentina, but pushing those ideas to evolve with the eventual desire to achieve internationalism and a unification of the entire world. Xul’s idea of

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<sup>146</sup> Armando and Fantoni, “El ‘primitivismo’ martinfierrista: de Girando a Xul Solar” in *Oliverio Girondo: Obra Completa*, 479. “Selección y valora ejemplares de arte ‘primitivo’ capaces de reafirmar las cualidades abstractas y conceptuales del tipo de arte que, de un modo militante, la revista intentaba difundir y promover.”

<sup>147</sup> John King, “The Avant-Garde and Martin Fierro” in *Xul Solar: The Architectures*, ed. Christopher Green (London: Courtland Institute of Galleries, 1994), 12.

<sup>148</sup> Alejandro Xul Solar, “Pettoruti” in *Martin Fierro*, year I, no. 10-11, sept-oct of 1924, 1, 7-8.

<sup>149</sup> Armando and Fantoni, “El ‘primitivismo’ martinfierrista,” 486-489.

unification continued to inform his vision of a universal utopia. His radicalization largely came from his spirituality, both in the rebirth of Aztec and Pre-Columbian spirituality and culture in his paintings, as well as an interest in the many belief systems and occult theologies he took interest in while in Europe, including the Kabbalah, which he began studying in Europe, but became more evident in his works done in Argentina at a far later date.

Xul's utopia did not completely abandon the earthly ideals of hierarchies and the authority of the uniform; in keeping these ideals he created a connection between his world and a facet of Kabbalistic beliefs. In the Kabbalah, all the elements of the cosmos, "are defined within a hierarchy...any religious system is characterized by diversity because the individual members who belong to it differ in their religious level. It follows that natural stratification is the hallmark of every human society, and the same must be true of the religious society," as Moshe Hallamish has written.<sup>150</sup> A basis for the Kabbalah is that divinity is leveled. A clear hierarchy exists in the macrocosm of the universe down to the microcosm of humanity, and to reach the top, wherein resides an ultimate divine truth and liberation of the soul, one must embark on a spiritual journey, the mystic must enmesh his or her life with the quest for the divine. Scholars, such as Gradowczyk have elaborated on Xul's interest in the Kabbalah with regard to its influence on his works from much later in his life such as the *Pan-Tree (the Universal Tree)* (fig.25) from 1954, the artist's take on the symbolic/visual representation of the world in the form of the Kabbalah "Tree of Life" which has divine levels or *sefirot*.<sup>151</sup> This work relates to Kabbalist beliefs in that there are different planes of existence, and that religion and life are structured into a hierarchy, through which people can ascend and descend through to different states of being. In Xul's *Pan Tree* the highest truth or divinity is represented by circle enclosing a pyramid with an eye in the

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<sup>150</sup> Hallamish, *Kabbalah*, 4-5.

<sup>151</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 185-86.

center. The levels from the earthly realm at the bottom up to the divine, that a meditator may reflect on, are visualized as something of a ladder uniting the planets of the solar system.

Xul's adoption of the Kabbalah into his own spirituality holds onto the idea of the hierarchy, and manifested in his works as early as the 1920's. His hierarchy is presided over and designed by a divinity, not by mankind. This ideal subverts the hegemonic hierarchies of Western imperialism, as his is not a system of punishment or subjugation of the spiritually weak, but grants reward only through enlightenment. The hierarchy is invisible, yet Xul visualized and materialized it in his angel paintings, as well as 1920's works containing groups of numerous figures, including his paintings of armies, where costume propagates empowered identities.

To realize his spiritual vision, now with America at the center, Xul continued to reference ancient American civilizations in which material culture held deep meaning, but began to place it in context of the *Martinferristas*. The works continue to diverge from European manifestations of primitivism. As Maurizia Boscaglia clarifies, in the European cultural environment, "the native body allows the modernist to perform a double gesture of exposure and denial through which he can disguise his own desire, because savagery itself is a costume, an artificial construction, a theatrical disguise with which colonial power 'dresses up' the native. Whether as radical and avant-garde aesthetics as a vogue, primitivism relies on the discourse and practice of colonialism."<sup>152</sup> Xul's adoption of Pre-Columbian culture and styles functions quite differently. Instead, Xul's costumes confuse and combine moments in history to evoke and even 'correct' past injustices; he also removes any sense of savagery from these ancient cultures, implanted there by European modernists. Instead he suggests that violence is cyclical and an ordinary aspect of human history, no matter the geographical area or era. His representations of soldiers

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<sup>152</sup> Maurizia Boscagli, *The Eye on the Flesh: Fashions of Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century*, (New York: Westview Press, Inc., 1996), 170.

are only symbolic of warfare, rather than representative of actual bloodshed. Lastly, the costumes employed in these works reclaim the idea of uniform and hierarchy from imperialism; he utilized them instead to organize, to elevate and to honor all members of his universe.

A fundamental characteristic of the reality of Xul's utopia is the feeling of infinity or 'no-time.' He achieved this perception through the mixing of recognizable material elements, such as clothing, from different historical periods. Such deployment of Aztec uniforms and costumes can clearly be seen in his post-1924 paintings *Milicia* (1925, fig.26), and *Bárbaros* (1926, fig.27). A notable similarity between these two paintings is that in each work, groups of men carry spears in an upright position. Large white equilateral triangles top very thin black lines for the shafts, which create a rhythmic verticality within the compositions, similar to the illustration of four Aztec priest-warriors from *Codex Mendoza* (fig.28). Although the similarities in the uniforms in all three artworks are not readily obvious, the positioning of the spears is the same between the modern and the ancient. The stance of the men, with their torsos frontward and their legs and face profile, are related as well. In *Milicia* the presence of spears seems particularly out of place, as the army clearly wears modern military garb dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The militia men are additionally armed with swords, but those weapons are clearly decorative, hanging unused at their waists.

In addition to the primitive weaponry, details of the soldiers' uniforms in *Milicia* further complicate the establishment of a time period within the painting. In *Milicia* four lead soldiers seem to move around a muted watercolor landscape dotted with simple trees, while other members of the army assemble along the horizon. At first, the four largest figures appear to be clothed in modern western-style uniforms, yet a closer examination, brings to light an allusion to Pre-Columbian garb. In the Mesoamerican world, the only garments with sleeves and pant legs

were the *Tlahuiztli*, or the closed sewn garments of the warriors.<sup>153</sup> The tight fitting one-piece costume covered the entire body of the combatant from neck to ankle, in a fashion comparable to that worn by the soldiers in *Milicia*. In the Aztec world, the overall shape of the close-fitting suit was relatively the same for all *Tlahuiztli*, and the rank and status of the wearer were indicated by added elements such as specific headpieces and attached insignia.<sup>154</sup> In an image from fol. 67r of the Codex Mendoza, soldiers display their different headpieces and shields. Xul adopted this ranking system within *Milicia*, where each ranking officer wears a certain headpiece or other decorative emblem, however, substituted ancient garb with more recent European military garb. In the foreground, the figure closest to the viewer peaks only his head and elongated neck out from the lowermost left-hand corner. This soldier wears a light lavender helmet with a golden spike jutting from the top, a hat that closely resembles, and can reasonably be defined as the armored hat historically known as the pickelhaube, a horned helmet invented in the early nineteenth century and most commonly in use by the Germans until WWI.<sup>155</sup> Moving upward, three large figures are positioned centrally and stand in a diagonal. The upper-left figure is the largest in the painting and given his authoritatively pointed finger, he is the commanding officer. The two lower figures are smaller and the one on the left appears to salute the head officer while they are hurriedly running to their respective tasks. Each of these three figures wears a cocked hat (the head officer's is topped with feathers to further mark his status) a type of hat worn in this 'fore-and-aft' fashion mainly in the early nineteenth century as well.<sup>156</sup> Both types of hats, the cocked and the spiked pickelhaube, were common to a number of European armies including

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<sup>153</sup> Anawalt, *Before Cortés*, 55.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> "Evolution of the Spiked Helmet," Age of Kings Military, accessed August, 30, 2016, [ageofkingsmilitaria.com/helmethistory](http://ageofkingsmilitaria.com/helmethistory)

<sup>156</sup> John Nicholas Genin, *An Illustrated History of the Hat from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time*, (Boston: Harvard College Library, 1933), 46-48.



Germany, Spain, the United States, and France from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The addition of medals, boots, and layers of colored rings around their necks on the central figures further mark their status as officers within Xul's imagined militia. The remaining foot soldiers stand diminutive in the distance, on a fuzzy horizon while their bodies form repetitive 'X' shapes, with legs apart and arms raised, as if in the midst of a war chant to the gods, raising their arms to the heavens in prayer.

Though his world is believed to be representative of a utopia by a number of scholars, the artist does not shy away from themes of war; he shows war as cyclical through time, a recurring aspect of humanity that adds to the 'realism' of his utopian vision. The army becomes spiritual, and is further connected to the Kabbalah in its hierarchical organization. In Xul's paintings, soldiers are representative of a cooperative unit of people, fighting to achieve liberation and an ultimate truth that had been previously lost to humanity. In *Milicia*, the artist creates a parallel between the Pre-Columbian armies of Mesoamerica and the soldiers of Argentine revolutionary history. Although the uniforms in the scene of *Milicia* do not bear markings of any known army, nor do they depict a recognizable battle or historical military event, the painting does in fact reference a critical time period in the history of Buenos Aires. Rather than title the work *Ejército* (*Army*), or name a specific soldier or event, the artist chose the word *Milicia* (*Militia*) because it has special significance to the Argentinian people during the late colonial period of Buenos Aires. In 1807 Buenos Aires, slaves and day laborers were armed and given military wages in order to defeat British forces after they had taken the city from the Spanish in 1806. The city saw a weakening of the market for craft production in general, where specialized labor was replaced by a new system of unskilled laborers and a strengthening military population. According to Lyman L. Johnson, "in this new era of almost continuous emergency, militia

membership came to supplement or, in some cases, displace traditional plebeian identities that had previously attached to craft, workshop, ethnicity, or neighborhood.”<sup>157</sup> At this point, the European control in Buenos Aires was greatly weakened, and the common people were almost entirely militarized.<sup>158</sup> *Milicia* harkens back to this time period in revolutionary Argentina, and does not depict European forces leading Argentinian slaves, but rather all figures in the painting are arguably Argentinian, their military garb representing the remnants of colonial control, which was crumbling by the early 1800s. When Xul painted *Milicia*, he introduced his willingness to fight for an American identity, in a world where the hold of colonialism still had repercussions on the Latin American world.

In *Milicia*, Xul does not “other” the Mesoamerican or the revolutionary soldiers, but instead incorporates those past histories into a futuristic worldview permeated by spiritual beliefs. The militia men wear traditionally European hats of authority, yet a mysterious golden streamer flows from behind the captain’s hat. The striations or rings around the officers’ necks mirror the striations in the trees and the soil of the earth, which visually links them to the surrounding landscape and symbolically evokes the idea of a population having a deep connection to their land. In evoking two separate pasts of Latin America, the more recent *criollismo*, and the much earlier Aztec culture, Xul sought to establish an authenticity in his art, alluding to Americans having a right to the land which not only belonged to America but also brought its citizens a sense of empowerment.

Although *Bárbaros* (barbarians) was painted a year later, the time period it depicts can be seen both as regressive and as a utopian vision of a future army related to that in *Milicia*. In this

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<sup>157</sup> Lyman L. Johnson, *Workshop of Revolution: Buenos Aires and the Atlantic World 1776-1810*, (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>158</sup> Johnson, *Workshop of Revolution*, 265.

painting, a small group of eight shield and spear wielding figures seems to run across a track marked ground, past four scattered silhouettes of slain bodies. The layout of the figures in *Bárbaros* mirrors that of *Militia*, where the verticality of the spears creates a scene similar to that seen in the *Codex Mendoza*. Although it may be assumed that the four black silhouettes are the victims of the barbarian figures, they may be corpses of members of the barbarians themselves; overall, the narrative is rather ambiguous. Their portrayal is neither shameful nor vicious, and the violence of the actual act of war is only hinted at by the presence of weapons and shadows of possible victims. The bodies of the soldiers have a similarly geometricized and ‘X’ shaped bodily structure, as those in *Milicia*, yet the figures’ bodies in *Bárbaros* are more abstracted. The details of the full apparel of only two figures are clearly decipherable, yet all of the figures are noticeably more individualized in form and costume than they are in *Milicia*. The leader in *Bárbaros* wears a necklace, and anklets with purple and black decorated belted pants, while the others wear simpler purple tunic-like garments. Each member in the group has a special headdress resembling yellow lightning bolts shooting upwards from their heads in either direction. The second figure to the left has a diadem, or an added moon-shaped accoutrement to the headdress, creating the idea that each member of this society has a specific role, which may be identified by clothing. Given Xul’s interest in astrology and the connectedness to the cosmological, the figure with the moon-shaped headdress may be something of a priest or someone who has achieved a higher level of spiritual insight within this group. Where the militia officer points with his finger, the Barbarian leader can instruct with only a look, his clairvoyant power is represented by a transparent arrow leading from his gaze, suggesting an evolution of his soul and more complete brotherhood within the group, whose members follow his command.

Each human-like figure, in their existence in Xul's utopia, is carefully clothed and decorated, and therefore is honored and celebrated in his world through this dressing up. The central figures of *Milicia* appear to be decorated officers with medals hanging from their uniforms, however, the artist has used this motif on other non-military figures in other works of art as well. For example, in *Sandanza (Saint Dance)*, a watercolor from 1925 (fig.29), a slender orange figure squats in a balletic plié with similar belts and medals wrapped around the legs. In *Ronda* (circle dance) (fig.30), many of the figures are similarly wrapped and crisscrossed in belts and bands of fabric. In *Bárbaros* two of the central figures have these vibrant yellow belted or banded 'X' decorations across purple fabric. At this time between 1925-27, the figures populating Xul's paintings have been further abstracted and geometricized from his Pre-Columbian deity paintings. Often their bodies appear to be simple branches of rigid rectangular limbs, many of their bodies form an 'X' as well. The 'X' does more than evoke the artist's presence as 'Xul' in his paintings, as Nelson explains in his discussion of the *San Signos* visions. In one of Xul's earliest, and possibly most important recorded visions of the *San Signos*, a demon (or a *teotl*) sears the penitent's torso with a massive burning 'X.'<sup>159</sup> Xul used it as a symbol to tie his entire vision into a profound and coherent system. For the artist, the X is similar in importance and meaning to the Christian cross, and may in fact supplant that symbol altogether, while maintaining the link to a savior and to sacrifice for the greater good. Xul continued to mark his figures' clothing with this symbol to unite the population under that symbol. *Ronda* and *Sandanza*, like *Milicia* and *Bárbaros*, depict groups of people individualized with badges, medallions, diadems, other headwear, staffs, and spears. In a suggestion of Xul's take on the Kabbalistic hierarchy, each figure wears a spiritual 'uniform' as an expression of the

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<sup>159</sup> Nelson, "Un texto proteico," 52.

level of spiritual enlightenment each one has achieved. The clothing worn by these groups of figures broke Xul's work free from the hold European primitivism and spirituality had on modern art, and also differentiated him from the more restrictive goals of the *Martínierristas*. Through the decoration and costumes of his figures he created a world of individuality and universal inclusion, where 'uniforms' enrich the notion of belonging and brotherhood.



## CONCLUSION

In a nostalgic passage, the Argentine poet Francisco Luis Bernárdez says of the artist,

He was Xul Solar. He was tall enough to stand out anywhere. He wore a beret, and a huge striped sky-blue and white poncho which made him look like a large living flag that wrapped him up in a nostalgic emotion evoking the River Plate. Beside Picasso, who could still be seen there at that time, near the most daring artists of the time, and especially Modigliani, who was his friend and confidant, our compatriot was already behaving in a way that would distinguish him in our eyes.<sup>160</sup>

In his poetic way, Bernárdez has linked the artist's identity directly to his clothing. His physical body and clothing are related to his name, his homeland, and his distinctive personality. His clothing transforms into a flag, the embodiment of the symbol of his homeland, making him into even into an embodiment of the nation itself. The "poncho" style would have been unique to a traditional Latin American style, and with it, he marked himself as a stranger in the European modern scene. The poet visually distinguishes the artist from his European contemporaries primarily through his clothing, and through this visual dissimilarity leads more deeply into his unique personality, behavior, and his nationality. The artist similarly emphasized costume details in his work to speak to his larger spiritual quest. Although scholars are aware of the religious and occult sources Xul immersed himself in while in Europe, and much of his later artworks evidence the combination of these sources more overtly, an examination of the clothing and physical bodies in the paintings containing his more human-like figures, helps to indicate his specific interest in these sources, and their application to his developing spiritual vision within the first decade of his artistic career.

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<sup>160</sup> Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar*, 30.

Overall, the artist employed costumes to create a temporal confusion. One of the major traits of his spiritual reality is its existence through infinity. The robes of his angels are an amalgam of trends from the ancient past to the present. As Schwartz notes, Xul's religious vision, and therefore his art, is "paradoxically opposed—no matter how modern Xul may seem—to two of the greatest myths introduced by modernity: the idea of the new and a fragmented view of the universe."<sup>161</sup> The artist's later interest in the art of Pre-Columbian cultures adds to this sense of "all time" with the addition of cultural elements from an ancient culture whose religious beliefs centered upon the close relationship between a spiritual world and the manipulation of the physical world to achieve spiritual transcendence. Xul adopted and adapted these ideals to his own mysticism, the Aztec notion of ritual to better connect man and the divine, through the creation of the image. The ability for physical, earthly things, including art, clothing, and people, to stand for the divine itself fits well with Xul's artistic vision and his early quest for an "elevated" art form.

Xul was a man of his time, ahead of his time, yet engrossed in ancient beliefs. He imagined every moment of history and all places, attempting to meld diverging concepts into a coherent visual reality. Rather than clashing, the dualities of man captured within his artwork, resulted in a utopian harmony. In his watercolor *Drago* (Dragon) from 1927 (the year he leaves the Martin Fierro group), the serpent, similar to the snakes from *Ña Diafana*, now emerges larger than life (fig. 31). A *teotl*, or a citizen of Xul's universe A citizen of his universe, or a *teotl* rides on the back of a serpent that stretches across the seas from Europe to the Americas. The countries are represented by many flags, which also decorate the mythic snake itself, and suggest the synthesis of his spiritual beliefs and harmony of Xul's international ideals. The dragon and

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<sup>161</sup> Schwartz, "Let the Stars Compose Syllables," 205.



the woman riding it are both adorned in colorful crisscrossing belts and streamers. The commanding woman wears a flowing red and purple robe that suggests her importance as unifier of the lands and synthesis of Xul's spiritual beliefs. Xul was able to balance the rigidity of a spiritual hierarchy, while still making images that were humanizing and appealing to a modern audience. He believed in a world beyond the reality of earth, and he believed in something greater than himself. In this world, the impossible becomes reality all of the time, and Xul found a way to turn the powerful intangibility of love and the soul into the tangible reality of his own envisioned utopia.



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## ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1

Xul Solar, *Anjos (Angels)*, 1915, Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)





Figure 2

Xul Solar, *Dos Anjos* (Two Angels), 1915, Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA) 1994.





Figure 3

Paul Klee, *Angel Von Stern*, 1939, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern

Image Source: [http://www.zpk.org/en/exhibitions/review\\_0/2012/the-angels-of-klee-329.html](http://www.zpk.org/en/exhibitions/review_0/2012/the-angels-of-klee-329.html).



Figure 4

Processional Mosaic, 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Basilica Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Italy

Image Source: <http://wild-about-travel.com/2013/09/magnificent-ravenna-mosaics-apollinare-nuovo/>





Figure 5

“La Parisienne,” Late Minoan period, The Herakleion Museum

Image Source: Sinclair Hood, *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978)



Figure 6

Female dancer from the Western Han Dynasty, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Image Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42178>.



Figure 7

George Barbier, "Chez Poirer" In *Le Modes* (April, 1912)

Image Source: Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013)





Figure 8

Xul Solar, *Ña Diafana* (Lady Diaphanous), 1923, Museo Xul Solar, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)

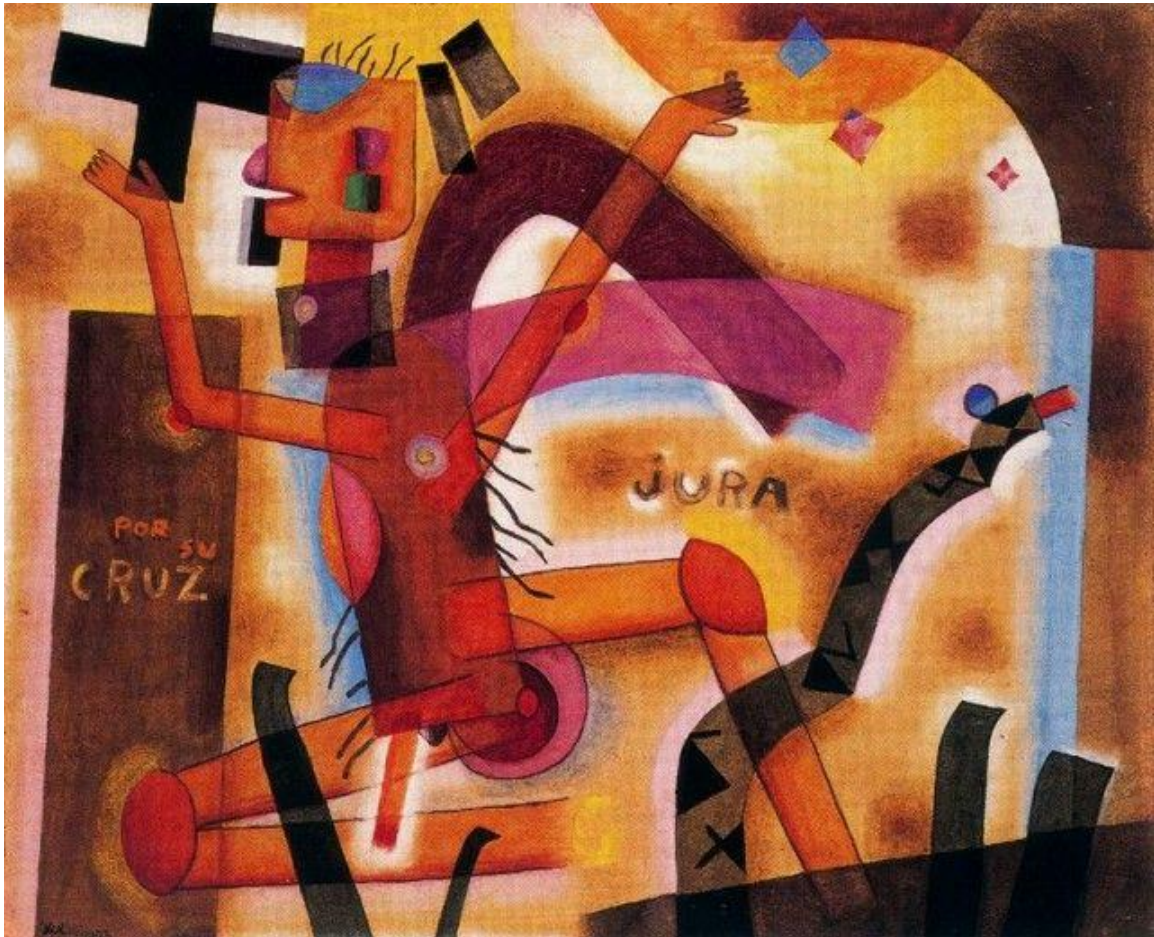


Figure 9

Xul Solar, *Por su Cruz Jura* (by your cross I swear), 1923, The Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)





Figure 10

Xul Solar, *Hipnotismo (Qero sisisi hypnotism nono)* (Hypnotism [I want yesyesyes hypnotism no no]), 1923, The Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)



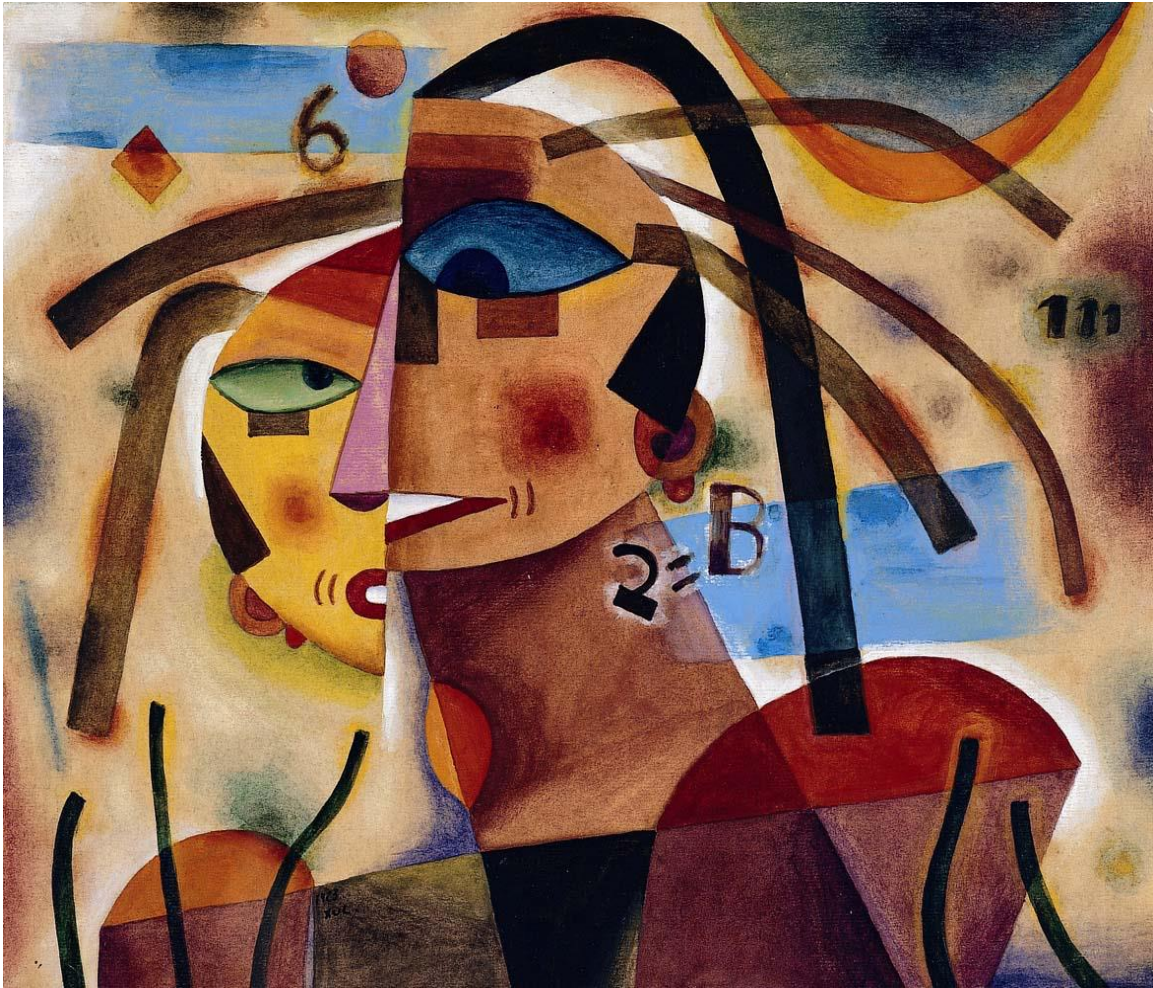


Figure 11

Xul Solar, *La Pareja* (The Couple), 1923, The Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)





Figure 12

Xul Solar, *Septupulo*, 1924, Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)

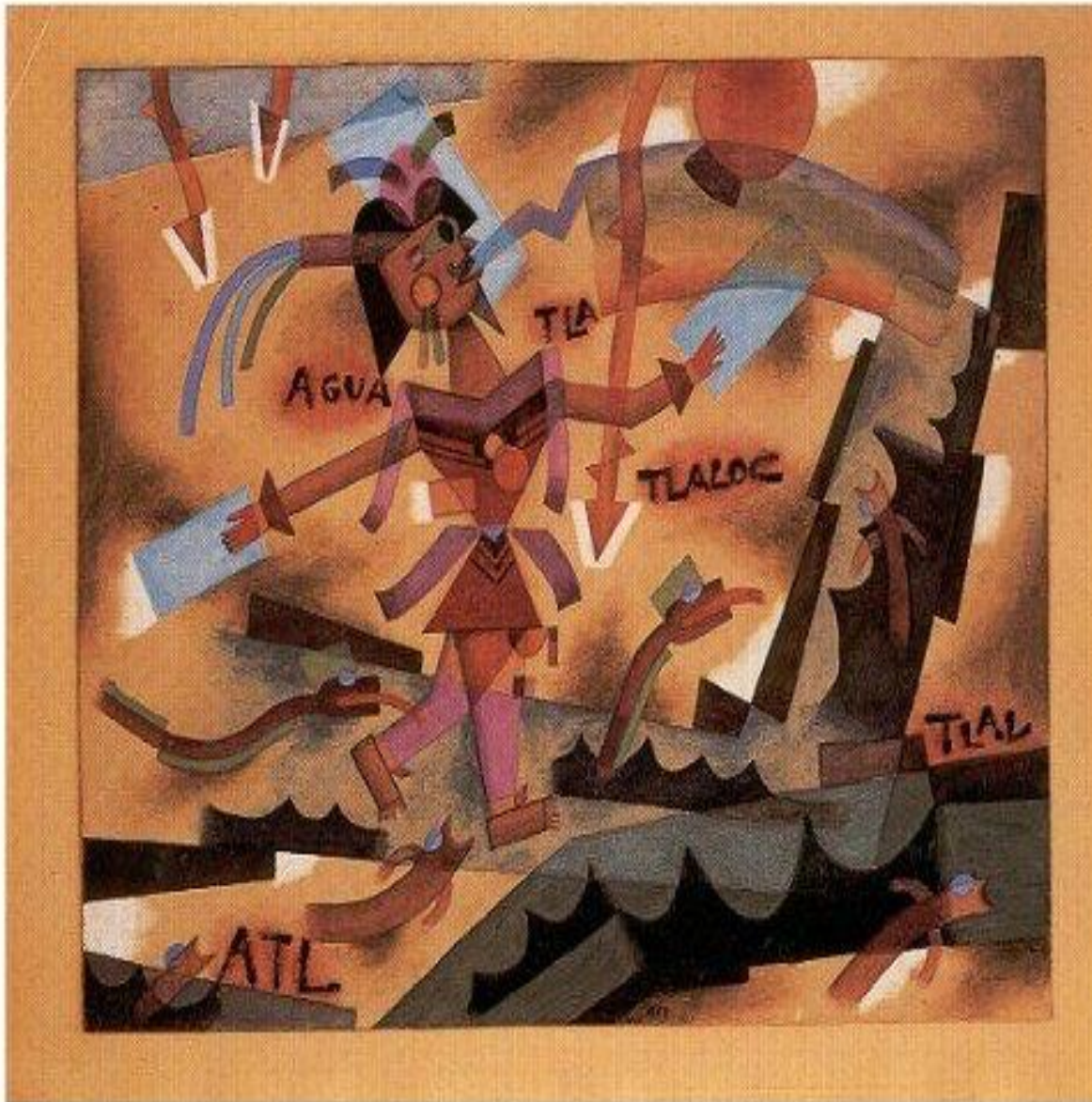


Figure 13

Xul Solar, *Tlaloc* (Rain God), 1923, Francisco Traba Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994



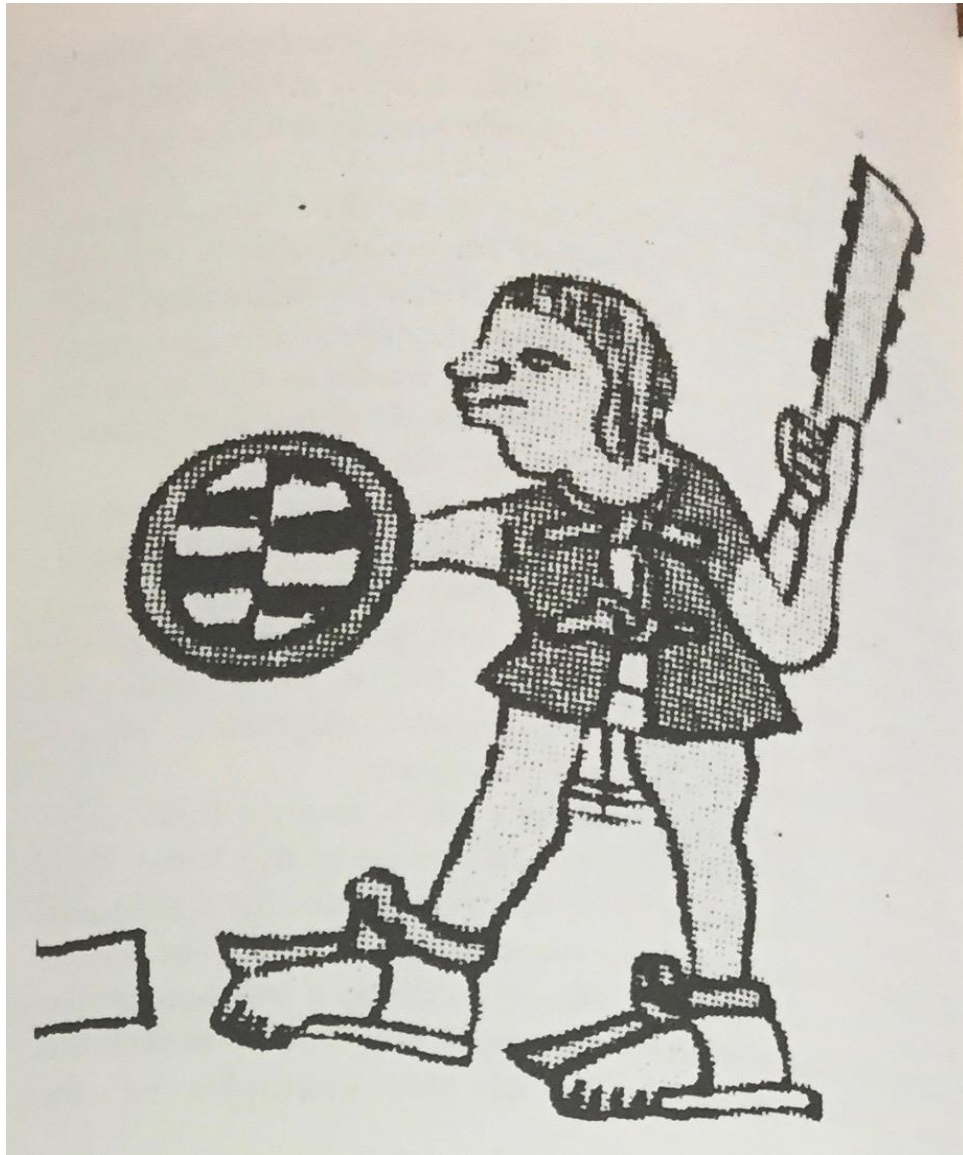


Figure 14

Aztec *Ichcahuipilli* from *Codex Terlleriano-Remensis*, fol. 29r.

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)

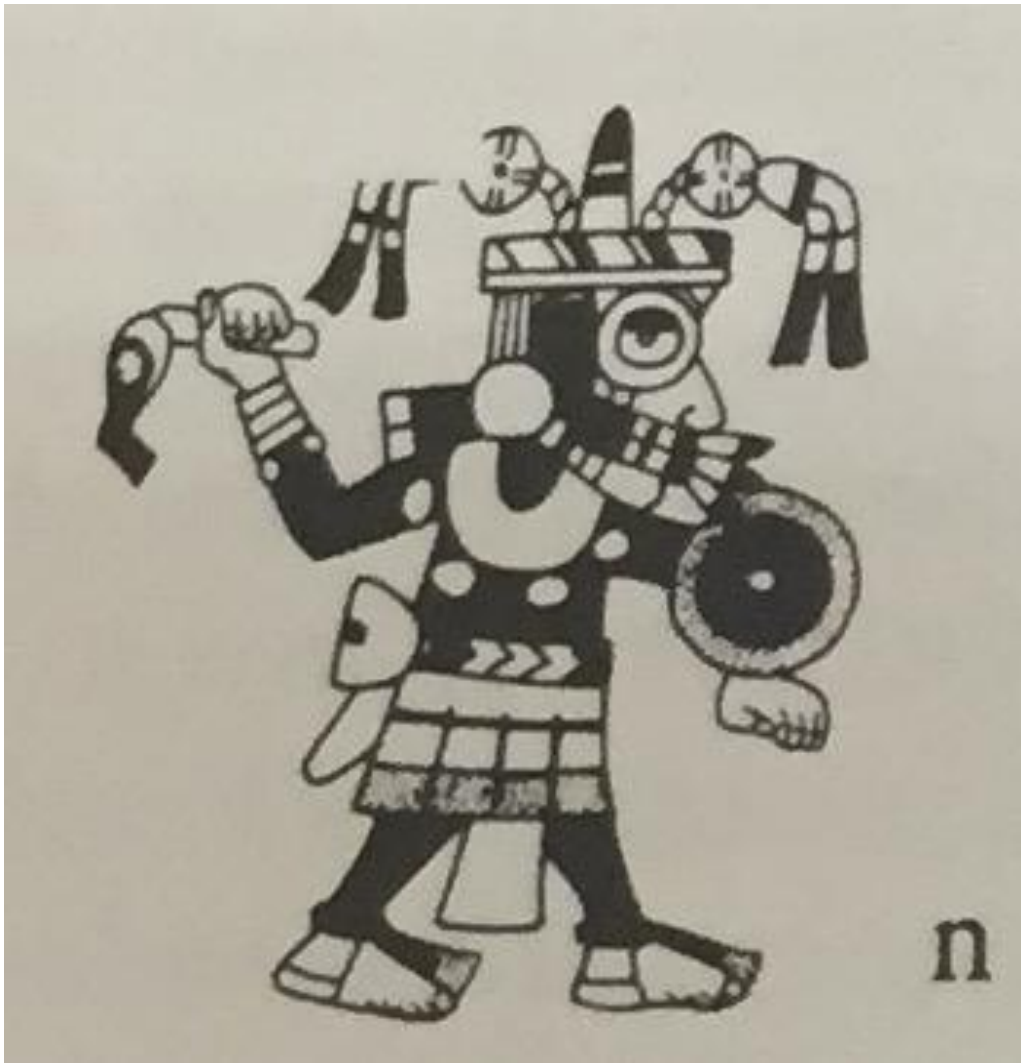


Figure 15

*Tlaloc*, Pre-Columbian, *Codex Vindobonensis*

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices*  
(Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)



Figure 16

*Monkey 3*, date, location

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)

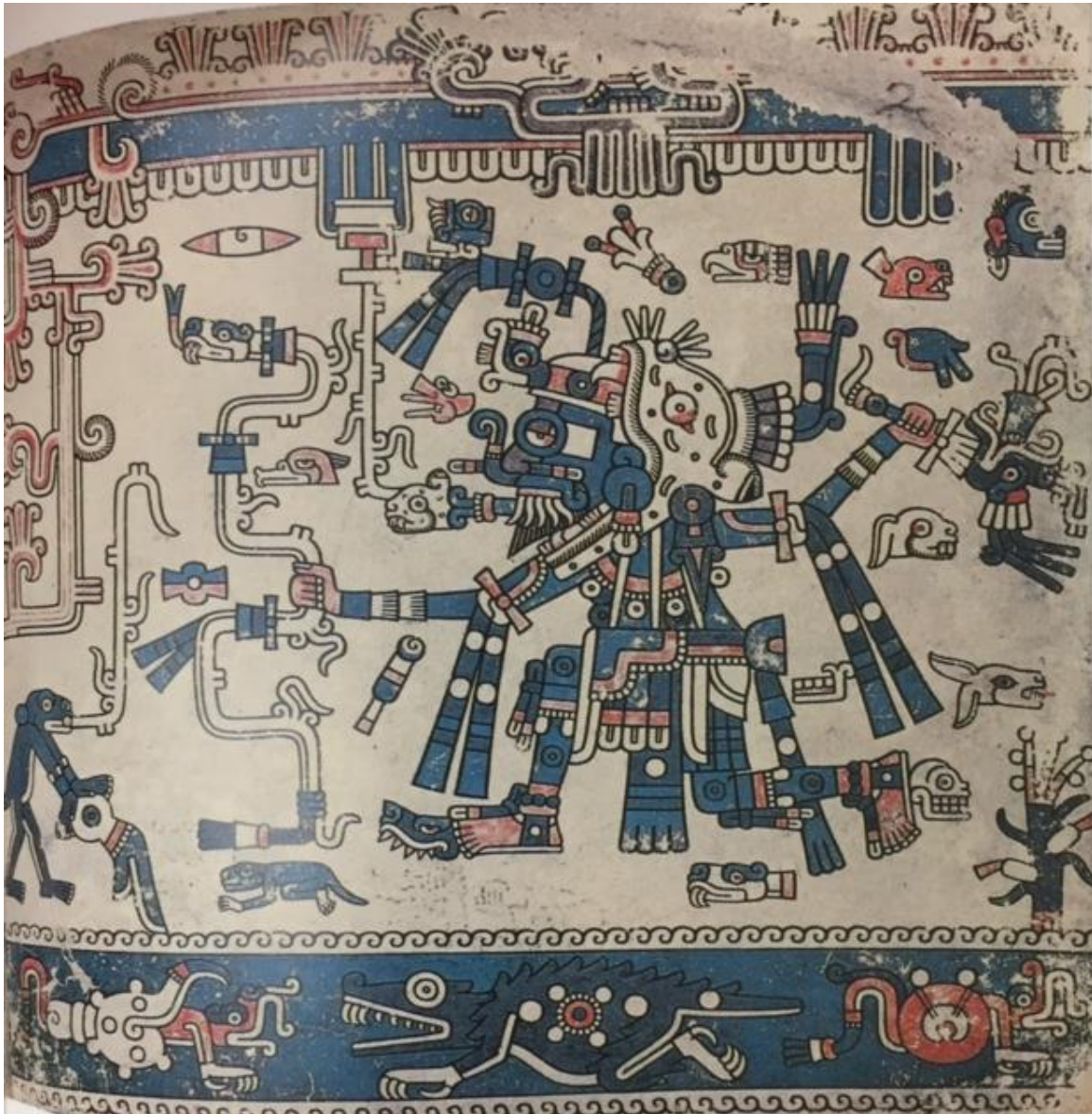


Figure 17

*Tlaloc, Pre-Columbian, the Laud Icon*

Image Source: Gordon Brotherston, *Painted Books from Mexico* (London: British Museum Publishing Ltd., 1996)



Figure 18

*Tlaloc*, 16<sup>th</sup> Century, *Codex Magliabechiano*

Image Source: *Codex Magliabechiano facsimile* (California: University of California Press, 1903)



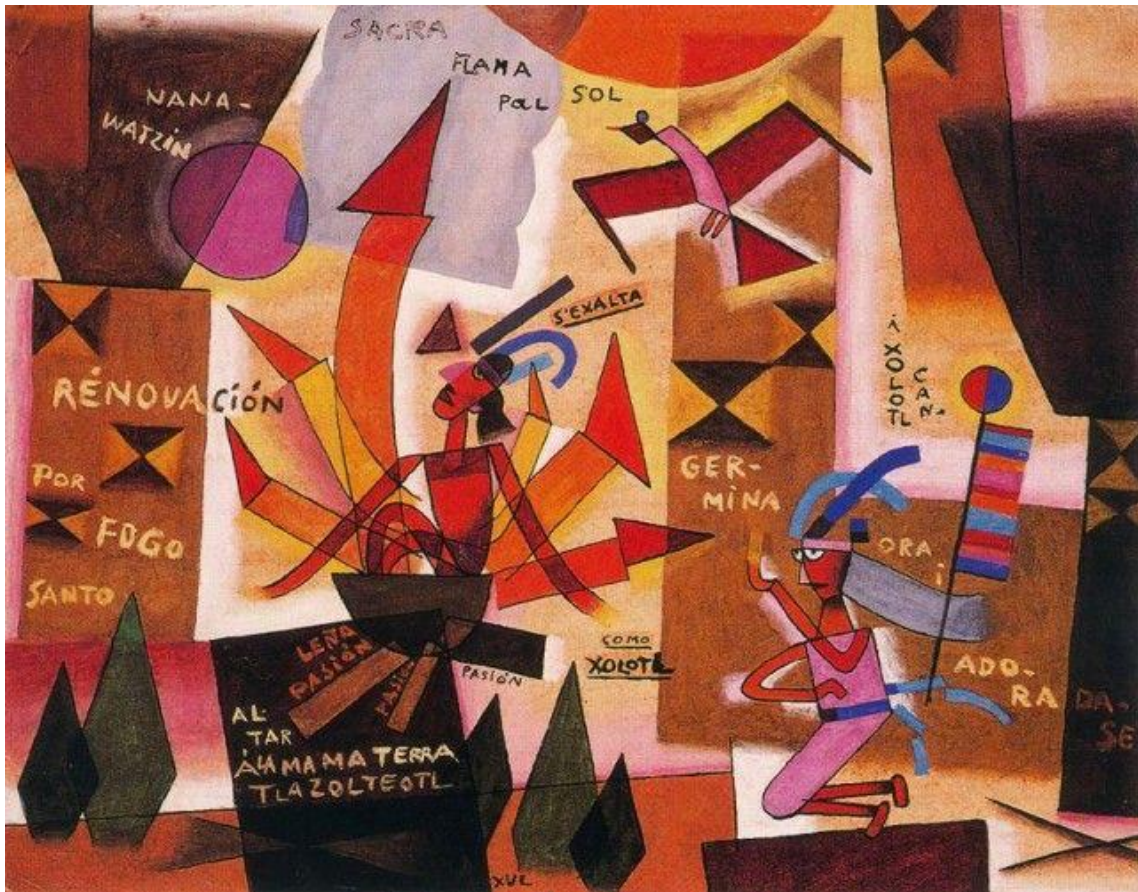


Figure 19

Xul Solar, *Nana Watzin*, 1923, Galeria Vermeer, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)



Figure 20

*Nanahuatzin*, Pre-Columbian, *Borgia Group Codices*

Image Source: [http://www.mediander.com/connects/90315/nanahuatzin/#!/.](http://www.mediander.com/connects/90315/nanahuatzin/#!/)



Figure 21

No Title (Woman Spooling Yarn), 16<sup>th</sup> Century, *Codex Mendoza*

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)





Figure 22

Xul Solar, *Iao*, 1923, Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: <http://www.languageofthebirds.org/>.



Figure 23

Aztec Hip-Cloth from *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 41v.

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)



Figure 24

Xul Solar, *Ángel en Vuelo* (Angel in Flight), 1923, *El Museo Xul Solar*, Buenos Aires

Image Source: The official Facebook of Museo Xul Solar: Fundacion Pan Klub

[https://www.facebook.com/MuseoXulSolar/photos/a.509331289155768.1073741828.183121538](https://www.facebook.com/MuseoXulSolar/photos/a.509331289155768.1073741828.183121538443413/1152342704854620/?type=3&theater)

[443413/1152342704854620/?type=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/MuseoXulSolar/photos/a.509331289155768.1073741828.183121538443413/1152342704854620/?type=3&theater).



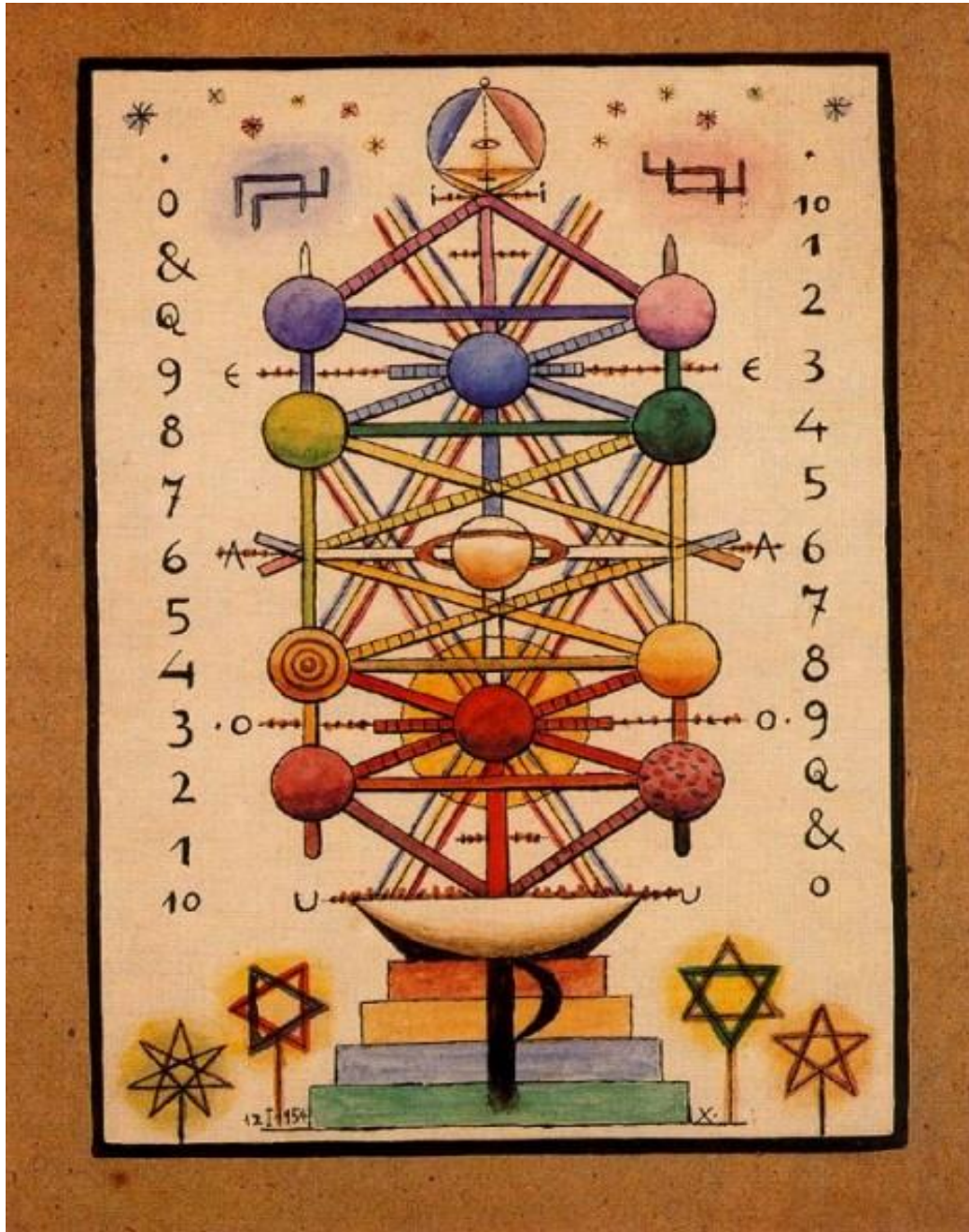


Figure 25

Xul Solar, *Pan Tree* (The Universal Tree), 1954, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)

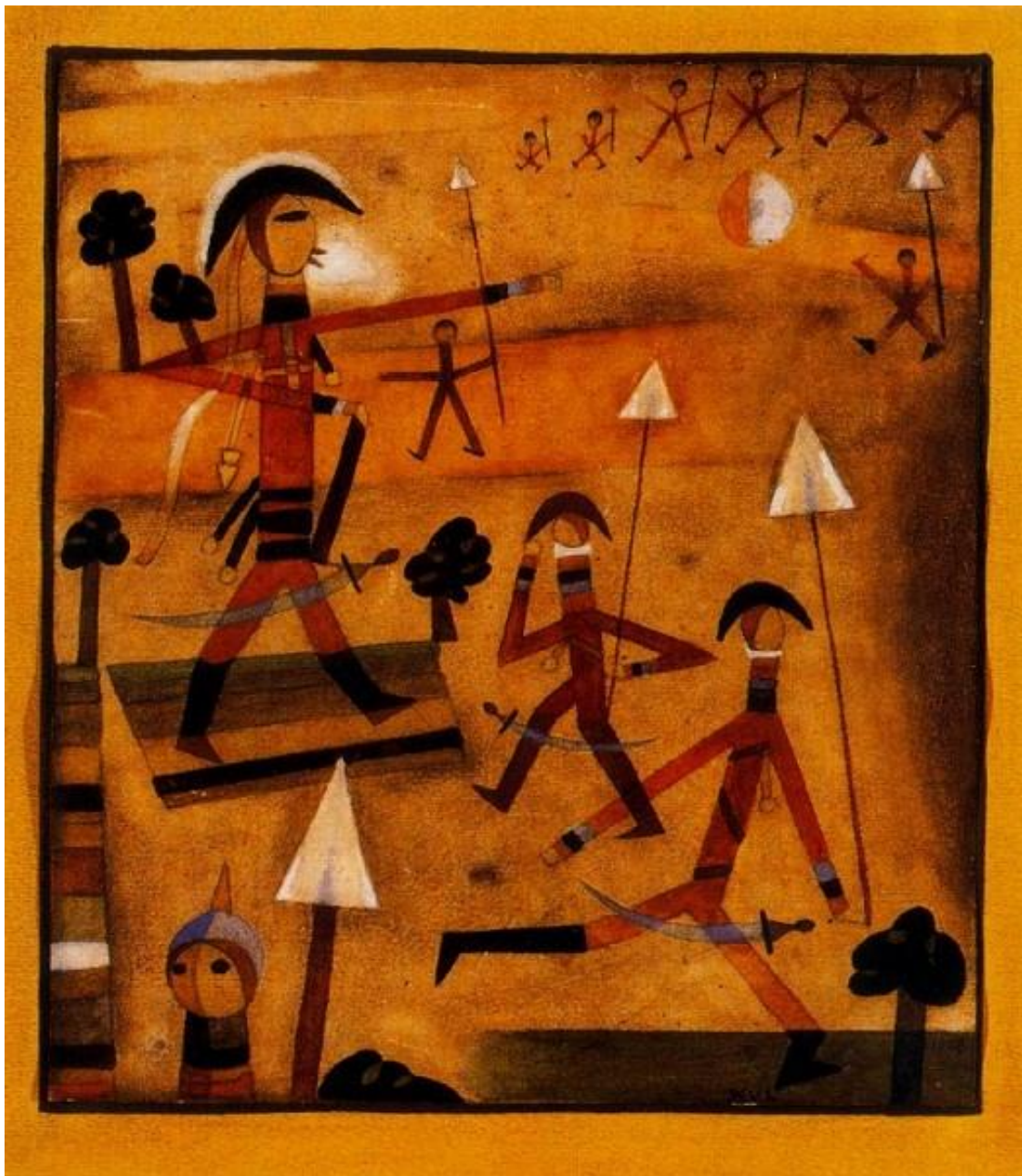


Figure 26

Xul Solar, *Milicia* (Militia), 1925, Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)





Figure 27

Xul Solar, *Bárbaros*, (Barbarians), 1926, Private Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)



Figure 28

*Aztec Warriors, 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Codex Mendoza*

Image Source: Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981)





Figure 29

Xul Solar, *Sandanza* (Saint Dance), 1925, George and Marion Helft Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)



Figure 30

Xul Solar, *Ronda* (Dancing in a Circle), 1925, The Constantini Collection, Buenos Aires

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)





Figure 31

Xul Solar, *Drago* (Dragon), 1927, Museo Xul Solar

Image Source: Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Alejandro Xul Solar* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones ALBA, 1994)