INTRODUCTION

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I began with the desire to speak with the dead.

STEPHEN GREENBLATT, "Towards a Poetics of Culture" (1989)

Linda Schele often said that the primary focus of those who study ancient cultures should be the revival of the voices of the ancient peoples who created those cultures. Agreeing with Linda, the contributors to this volume interpret the past not as a dead and static series of events but as an active and animated influence that has messages for both Native American and Euro-American cultures today. The primary means of listening to these ancient Native American voices has been the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop held at Texas State University in San Marcos since 1993. The workshop is sponsored by the Center for the Study of the Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America (CASAA) and hosted by the Department of Anthropology, Texas State University–San Marcos. No endeavor of this magnitude can be successful without adequate funding. Fortunately for the workshop, the Lannan Foundation of Santa Fe, New Mexico, has generously provided that funding, and the workshop participants will forever be indebted to that foundation.

Objects produced by Native American artists and craftspeople during the Mississippian period (AD 900–1600) in the Eastern Woodlands of the United States (Map 1) are the common currency of our workshop discussions. Created from copper, shell, stone, and clay, many of these objects are equal in beauty and craftsmanship to the objects produced in the ancient Andes or Mesoamerica. Unfortunately, even though this corpus of Mississippian artistic production has been the subject of two major art exhibitions in recent years (Brose et al. 1985; Townsend and Sharp 2004), it has not gained the recognition from the broader public that it so richly deserves. During the Mississippian period certain of these finely crafted objects, particularly those created from copper and shell, undoubtedly functioned as items of great ideological significance and, like many of their Mesoamerican counterparts, almost certainly were "employed as social currency in the realm of ritual regal gifts" (Reents-Budet 1994:4).

MAP 1. Mississippian archaeological sites were located over a large area of the central and southeastern United States. This geographical area is remarkable for its large number of rivers and streams and the rich alluvial lands that are the product of this riverine environment. The earliest archaeological sites that are clearly Mississippian are located in the vicinity of the ancient city of Cahokia in Illinois. This region is also the original location of the Braden style. The largest number of Braden style objects, however, is found at the Spiro site in Oklahoma. The area of eastern Tennessee and northwestern Georgia is the location of the Hightower style. Eastern Texas, western Louisiana, and southwestern Arkansas were the location of the Caddoan style. The symbols and motifs that are found at Moundville appear to be part of a style region that includes south-central Mississippi and southern Louisiana.

The participants in the Mississippian Iconographic Workshop are a diverse group of archaeologists, anthropologists, folklorists, art historians, and upon several occasions Native American religious practitioners. All of these individuals bring with them their enthusiasm and desire to communicate with the Native American past through an interdisciplinary approach. Each participant has his or her own set of questions or research agendas, but all are committed to the free flow of ideas through the interaction of different approaches. One methodology in particular, however, has emerged as being particularly rewarding.

Essentially, this methodology begins with the division of the participants into a series of subgroups. Each subgroup organizes itself around a particular structural or iconographic problem. The members of the subgroup amass a corpus of photographs and drawings of objects that are central to the problem that they are addressing. These drawings are grouped into categories. Each object is then examined through the process of structural analysis. This exercise reveals patterns of shared icons. These patterns are organized into groups of equally shared elements, symbols, motifs, and themes. Each category is examined and compared for commonalities of symbols as well as shared motifs and themes. A search of ethnographic literature is conducted to see if these iconographic patterns can be linked to general or specific aspects of Native American ideology and belief systems. Even in instances where no link can be revealed, the pattern stands as an area of potential future research.

This methodology is not new. It has been used to recover meaning from the symbol systems of both Mesoamerica and South America. When applied to the art and symbolism of the Mississippian peoples, this methodology has provided significant breakthroughs in regard to our understanding of both style and meaning. Among these breakthroughs is the recognition of a Greater Braden style that almost certainly originated in the region of Cahokia. Additionally, the importance of ethnographic sources from the Southeast, the Great Lakes, and the northern and southern Great Plains has become evident. In fact this recognition of the significance of ethnographic literature in the recovery of meaning from ancient Native American art has “proved to be the Rosetta Stone that led to many of the interpretations presented herein” (Steponaitis 2007). Finally, the recognition of style regions, the focus of this volume, is seen as the key to understanding Mississippian art and its associated sociopolitical landscape.

It is important to note, however, that there has never been a need within the workshop format for a consensus on any specific iconographic issue. In fact, disagreements and discussions generated by those disagreements have often led to an expansion of the methodological envelope in which we conduct our research. One telling difference of opinion is the lack of an agreed-upon label to apply to the iconographic corpus with which we conduct our research. When the workshop first began, this was referred to in the literature as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex or SECC (see Chapter 1). At our annual meeting in 1998 one of this volume's editors (James F. Garber) conducted a discussion whose aim was to define the SECC. After an hour of fruitless dialogue, however, no consensus could be reached. No discussion in the last eight years has changed that impasse. But all the participants could agree that the material dated to the Mississippian period and that a large number of the symbols were first visualized in the art of the Ohio Hopewell culture (AD 1–400). Many participants also agreed that to identify the corpus as a southeastern phenomenon was a mistake, since its geographical range was recognized. Scholars also disagree about the use of the term “complex” as a description of what appears to be some form of interaction among related regional complexes. They recognize, however, that certain symbols not only cross the stylistic boundaries described in this book but can be found in distant cultural areas such as the American Southwest (Lankford 2006).

To date no common label has been forthcoming. But the corpus appears to be perceived in three ways. Some of the workshop participants prefer that no label be applied. Others wish to retain the old SECC designations because they are ingrained in the literature (King 2007b, 2007c) but acknowledge that it is not a single complex. Finally, a third group approves of the label “Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere (MIIS)” to describe the interrelated regional ideological complexes of the Mississippian tradition (Reilly and Garber 2007).

Reilly and Garber organized the annual Texas State workshop into smaller groups of conferees focused on different geographical areas for the task of examining the nature of the regional aspects of those putative culture zones and the resulting influences on the iconography. For several years the individuals in the groups studied particular sites and their art forms from the regional perspective, producing iconographic papers, and only then focused as a group on a comparative study of the regions in relation to each other.

This volume contains the papers resulting from this approach, clarified by dialogue and criticism within the group.

The chapters are loosely organized by area. They cannot truthfully be called “regions” at this point, for none of the discussions focused primarily on trying to define the boundaries in terms of geology, geography, style, culture, or iconographic corpus. The zones continue to have undefined boundaries, and no attempts have yet been made to identify types of unity or connectedness. Instead, the groups have focused on particular collections of art in an attempt to discern the nature of the corpus and to identify some of the rules governing the artists and their iconographic production as well as their distribution. They made a final attempt to compare the areas studied in terms of their politics, culture, and iconography, but the results are so tentative that they do not appear in this volume. The discussions that the comparisons have sparked have not yet matured enough to withstand public gaze, so they are better left for the future.

Instead of presenting large conclusions, this book offers a series of smaller studies focused on specific (local) art forms and their contexts. The closest thing to a general study is Chapter 1, which offers a historical overview of the academic tension between the general view of Mississippian iconography and the local view, so even that study is focused on the regional. In Chapter 2 James Duncan, operating on the widely accepted hypothesis that the Cahokia phenomenon was largely Siouan in origin, explores the historical religious beliefs of the Osage as a possible ethnographic path to understanding some of the iconography found far from Cahokia, such as at Spiro.

After Duncan’s presentation of the Osage religion as it is currently understood by practitioners, the rest of the chapters are organized in a loose geographical way: the Middle Mississippi Valley (a term that will please no one, since it ignores the delineation of Central and Upper Mississippi Valley so dear to the hearts of many), the Lower Mississippi Valley, the Cumberland Valley, Moundville, and Etowah and the Upper Tennessee Valley.

Two chapters look at iconography in the Middle Mississippi Valley. In Chapter 3 James Brown provides a formal identification of the Braden art style as a regional art developing through time. This long-awaited study buttresses his argument that in the regional development of art in the Mississippian world the Braden style emerged as a (the?) major source of the corpus that became known as the SECC (Knight et al. 2001:131). In Chapter 4 Carol

Diaz-Granados follows the argument that the Braden style was seminal in Mississippian iconography. She examines the images of the rock-art of Missouri west of Cahokia that date from early Mississippian times. By identifying them with the Braden style, she lays a claim that the early corpus of the classic iconographic images was regional (local) despite its later appearance in many far-flung sites as the core of Mississippian iconography.

Farther south in the Mississippi Valley is an area that has traditionally been overlooked in iconographic studies of Mississippian art, largely because it was not a major participant in the imagery that was used in Antonio Waring's definition of the SECC. In Chapter 5 David Dye undertakes an assessment of the themes present in the Mississippian ceramic art of the well-populated floodplain of the Arkansas and Mississippi deltas and adjacent areas. His brief survey reveals the iconographic richness of the area, despite its exclusion from the "classic SECC" model, and illustrates the value of a more inclusive regional perspective. In Chapter 6 Kent Reilly underscores the point with a focused study of the imagery of the "Great Serpent" in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

The two Cumberland Valley studies are interesting examples of the larger research group approach, for both resulted from team discussion and lab examinations in Texas and Tennessee. In Chapter 7 the full team of Vin Steponaitis, Jim Knight, George Lankford, Robert Sharp, and David Dye presents a complicated analysis of a complex iconographic object, the famed Thruston Tablet found near Nashville in the nineteenth century. Their high-tech approach to the problem of separating layers of an artistic palimpsest is interesting in its own right, and their examination of the separated images offers insights into the meaning of "storyboard" iconographic art.

Three members of that team produced a separate study of female effigy vessels, which constitute one of the characteristic art forms of the Cumberland area. Basing their observations on a large corpus (with contributions of images by Cumberland scholars Kevin Smith and Ian Brown), Robert Sharp, Jim Knight, and George Lankford offer some new observations in Chapter 8 about the rules for producing the ceramic images and suggest some cultural interpretations.

Three chapters are concerned with Moundville art. Jim Knight and Vin Steponaitis, who have collaborated on a classic recent Moundville study (Knight and Steponaitis 1998), join forces again to produce a new style definition. In Chapter 9 they examine the traditional ceramic artifacts grouped

as the “Hemphill Engraved” style, extract and clarify the rules governing the style, and add to the corpus from various media other than ceramics. The result is a new way of looking at a greatly expanded art style and its surprising diffusion. Chapter 10, which also deals with Moundville art, is an extension of an earlier study by George Lankford. He isolates the Raptor image and looks closely at its likely meaning in the Moundville context, arguing that in Moundville usage it took on a unique denotation and function, different from the Raptors of other locations. This study works well as a companion piece to Chapter 14, for the two regional Raptors together provide several provocative insights into the nature of artistic diffusion. In Chapter 11, another study on Moundville art, Lankford focuses on the “swirl-cross” motif emphasized at Moundville and demonstrates some ways in which comparative analysis of imagery in the full corpus can be used to reveal the meanings of such local and diffused iconographic images.

In Chapter 12 Adam King undertakes the characterization of an iconographic style region, termed the “Hightower.” In the process he offers several new insights about relationships and the meaning of art forms. In Chapter 13 Kent Reilly and Jim Garber focus on one particular art theme from that area, a distinctive set of related Hightower-style engraved shell gorgets. By emphasizing theme over style in this case, they offer a provocative suggestion that the series constitutes a “storyboard” art display that calls for a different kind of iconographic analysis. In Chapter 14 King and Reilly probe the meaning of the Raptor as it is found in both imported and local art objects in the Hightower region. The contrast between their conclusions and Lankford’s conclusions regarding the Moundville Raptor underscores the importance of small-scale comparative examination of similar iconography appearing in different sites and geographic areas.

Many of these regional studies highlight the problem of how to identify a basic meaning of an image while recognizing and honoring the nuances and redefinitions that took place in local usage. Another type of regional problem is exemplified in the Spiro site of the Arkansas River Valley, where an astounding number of imported art forms have dominated the discussion of iconography in the region. The articulation of local Caddo art forms with the imported iconographic materials has long been discussed, but without final resolution.

Each chapter in this volume represents a close study of an individual style, image, symbol, motif, or theme within the broader category of

Mississippian-period art. When taken as a whole, however, the contents of *Visualizing the Sacred* provide a cognitive window through which to view the aesthetics and beliefs of a broader yet specific period of the ancient Native American past. Like our preceding volume, *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms*, this volume is first and last a collaborative effort. The rewards of collaborative work are both personal and intellectual in that revelations in meaning are tested, at the time of their inception, by a broader jury. Certainly each workshop participant at some point in the process realizes that these ancient objects are also a language whose interpretation allows an enlargement of the windows through which the ancient American past is viewed. Needless to say, we take great joy in sharing with our peers the revelations in meaning that occur in our workshop context.

Ultimately all of the participants understand that both the objects examined and the interpretations presented in our workshop and in these volumes are, in fact, the voices of the ancient inhabitants of this continent. Through this and future publications these ancient North Americans share their vision of their natural and supernatural environment with both the authors and the readers. In effect the readers of this volume should be left with the understanding that these wonderful works of art and the symbols they carried were created by an ancient and dynamic people whose Native American descendants continue to live in and create vibrant and meaningful cultural traditions.