

# CODEx BORGIA

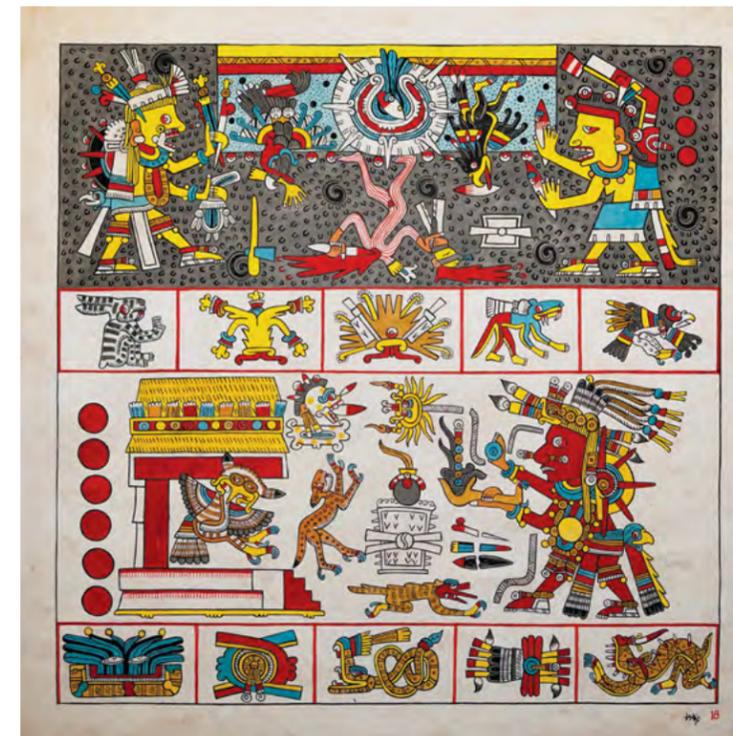
The Codex Borgia is a sixteenth-century painted manuscript (or “codex”) from the Central Highlands of Mexico. Few of these books survived the Spanish conquest, but those that did provide a rare window through which to view native religion and ritual celebrations. The original Codex Borgia manuscript is composed of pages made from deerskin that were gessoed to create a smooth, white surface, and subsequently painted with vivid polychrome hieroglyphs and images. This codex and other native books could be stored in a compact package of folded folios, or opened accordion-style and laid flat on either side for viewing and reading. The pages on display in this exhibition are a reproduction of the Codex Borgia created by Richard Lee Guthrie, the artist who also created the images for the 1993 Dover edition of this manuscript. Richard Lee Guthrie (also known by the pseudonym “Ricky Lee”) painted all 76 folios on handmade amate paper as part of a project with Gisele Díaz and Alan Rodgers. This exhibition marks the first public display of these meticulous hand painted copies of the Codex Borgia.

After Hernán Cortés and his Spanish garrison invaded

the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519, the Spanish sent painted manuscripts like the Codex Borgia, costume ornaments, and statues back to Europe. Cardinal Stefano Borgia in Rome once owned this particular manuscript, said to have been given to him in the late 1700s, before it became part of the collections of the Vatican Library. The manuscript folios on display in this exhibition and the few other surviving books of a similar painting style (often referred to as the Borgia Group) most likely originated in the modern Mexican states of Puebla and Tlaxcala. Unlike the manuscripts created by other native groups in Mesoamerica, the Borgia Group codices do not focus on historical events. Instead, they contain a “count of days”, or *tonalpohualli*, as the ritual calendar was called in Nahuatl. The *tonalpohualli* organized the religious year into periods overseen by various patron gods, and acted as a guide to spiritual leaders to ensure each sacred period was properly celebrated. Diviners also used these calendars to predict the success of marriages, outcome of military campaigns, and the destinies of people born on specific calendar days.

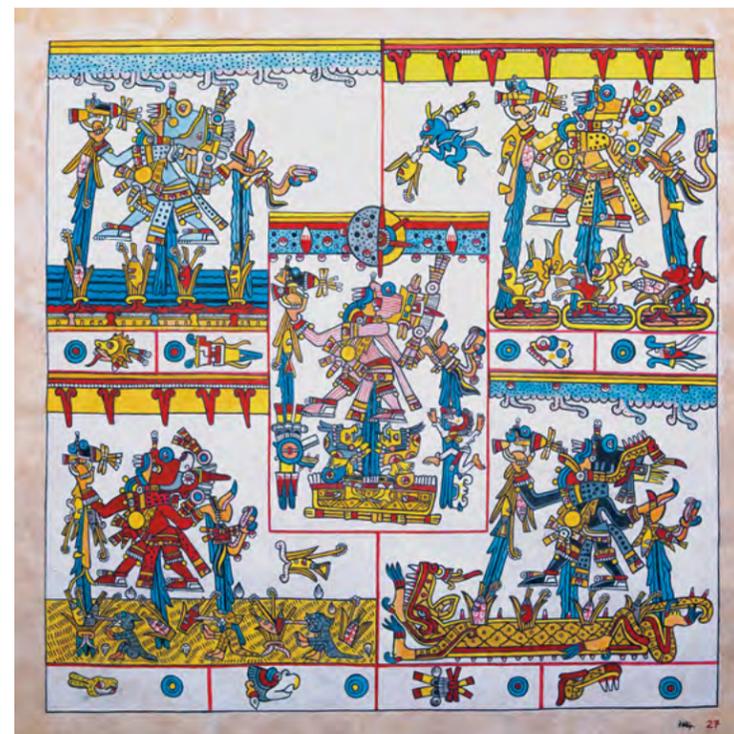


**Panel 50** is one of five that describe the cardinal directions. In Mesoamerican religion, each direction (North, South, East, and West) had its related ritual activities, calendar days, patron gods, and characteristic environment. Here, the large barbed cactus with yellow flowers, topped by a harpy eagle, describes the environment of the North. Above this cactus, the moon deity *Metztli* offers a bleeding heart to a temple that contains the moon. Bloodied flint knives decorate the temple's roof and water pours into it from above. A band of calendar dates separates this scene from two other deities—the Southern sky bearer and old fire god *Xiuhtecuhtli* on the right, and the skeletal god of death *Mictlantecuhtli* on the left. This panel and its four companion panels reveal a sacred, living landscape that requires specific deified actions for agricultural success.

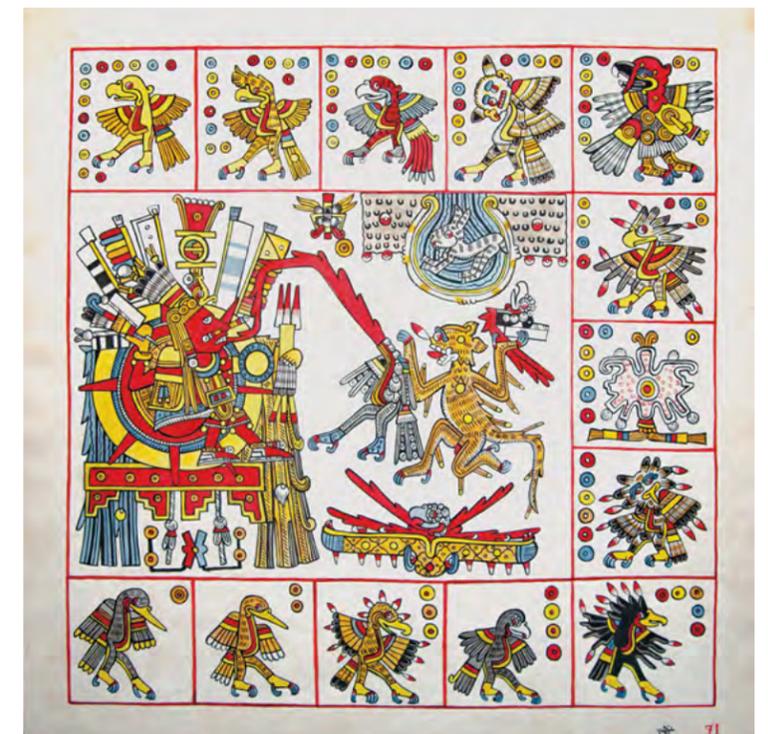


**Plate 18** displays both the beginning and the end of an abbreviated *tonalpohualli*. The calendar wraps around Panels 18 through 20, depicting deities making sacrifices, playing the sacred ball game, and cultivating corn. The bottom register pictures the beginning of this ritual cycle. The solar deity *Tonatiuh* makes an offering of smoking incense from a ladle in one hand and a jade bead in the other. In front of him are broken instruments of sacrifice—a sharpened bone, a maguey spine, and a bloodied flint knife. A temple containing an owl stands adjacent to the sun god. Above, the death god and goddess *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Mictēcacihuatl* offer blood with knives and awls to the moon on a backdrop of darkness. Between them, a red-and-white striped deity beheads himself. In this calendar page, deities model the rituals that humans should enact in order to ensure future prosperity.

**Plate 27** contains versions of *Tlaloc*, the rain god, identifiable by his round "goggle" eyes and spiked fangs. Two *Chalchihuitlicue* goddesses support the central *Tlaloc* under an eclipse. Here, *Tlaloc* represents a complete 52-year cycle of the Central Mexican calendars as well as a cosmic center, while the other four versions of the rain god represent quarters of this cycle and the cardinal directions. These various godly images comment on the proper periods for planting. The Black *Tlaloc* of the East, for example, stands over a fertile field while the Blue *Tlaloc* presides over a rainy, flooded West. The day signs under each *Tlaloc* link the sacred 260-day calendar to the 365-day secular solar calendar. In such imagery, sacred time is intimately connected to the cyclical movement of the seasons.



**Plate 71** depicts *Tonatiuh* on a bench, presiding over the thirteen layers of the heavens, personified by a menagerie of birds and a butterfly. Below him, the twisted hieroglyph for 4 *Ollin* identifies *Tonatiuh* as the sun of the latest age of creation. Across from *Tonatiuh* a skeletal-jawed animal beheads a quail beneath the moon and a star-lit sky. The sacrificed quail's blood is drawn into the mouth of the solar god as a sacrifice, and the crocodilian jaws of the earth devour the quail's head. In this image and many others in the Codex Borgia, sacrifice powers the sacred environment. The Codex Borgia images reinforce that gods and humans alike must participate in this reciprocal relationship with the animate world.



## About the Artist

Richard Lee Guthrie was born in the early 1950s in West Texas, spending his early years in oil boom towns. A nonconformist from childhood, he came of age in the land of the wind, shaped by the music of the Beatles and the writings of Henry Miller. Known to friends and family as Ricky Lee, Guthrie formed a rock combo that was a local sensation during the Permian Basin's "Summer of Love" and beyond. Guthrie eventually left the small towns of West Texas behind to attend The University of Texas at Austin, where he studied political philosophy and grew interested in the indigenous cultures of Mexico.

Guthrie moved to Mexico permanently in the late 1970s, and his years of adventure and discovery lead him to the Codex Borgia. He grew obsessed with recreating the Codex in its original colors and materials and labored for over twenty years on the project—at times, literally working day and night to produce two complete replicas of the Codex Borgia. While painting, "Ricky Lee" notoriously chain-smoked cheap Mexican cigarettes and downed cup after cup of Nescafé coffee, which undoubtedly contributed to his premature death at only 50 years of age. A tortured, intelligent, inquisitive and artistic soul with piercing blue eyes, he is missed and mourned by his long-time comrades and his family. This exhibition presents Ricky Lee's life's work and marks the first true celebration of his remarkable legacy.

## About the Exhibition

The Codex Borgia exhibition is presented in conjunction with the 2018 Mesoamerica Meetings at The University of Texas at Austin. The exhibition is on view to the public January 26 – February 23 at the university's Visual Arts Center in the Department of Art and Art History.

The exhibition is curated by Astrid Runggaldier, Elliot López-Finn, and Stephanie Strauss.

Astrid Runggaldier is the Assistant Director for The Mesoamerica Center at The University of Texas at Austin. She is a faculty member of the Department of Art and Art History and the curator of the department's Art and Art History Collection of ancient and ethnographic objects from the indigenous Americas.

Elliot López-Finn is a fourth year doctoral student in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin. Their research focuses on intercultural exchange and the reception of ancient or foreign objects by the Nahua of Postclassic Central Mexico.

Stephanie M. Strauss is a Harrington Doctoral Fellow at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research explores the interconnectedness of text and image in early Pre-Columbian art, and builds upon an interdisciplinary background in anthropology (B.A. Yale University; M.A. George Washington University) and art history (Ph.D. UT-Austin, 2018).

Our greatest thanks go to Alan Rodgers for lending the original artwork for the Codex Borgia exhibition to the Visual Arts Center and The Mesoamerica Center.

Additional thanks to the following at the Visual Arts Center:

Callie Anderson, Art Education Graduate Assistant  
Jessi DiTillio, Curatorial Fellow  
Clare Donnelly, Gallery Manager  
Amy Hauft, Acting Director

Mark Kovitya, Installation Graduate Assistant  
Marc Silva, Chief Preparator, and his crew of installers  
Hunter Thomas, Graphic Designer  
Mukhtara Yussuff, Design TA

