

Introduction

Becoming

The Caribbean islands were forged by volcanic fire, lashing waves, and tumbling rivers, hurricane winds, the accumulated secretions of minute marine creatures, and the grinding motion of tectonic plates. The shores of the islands have been shaped and reshaped by rising and falling sea levels during and between Ice Ages. The geologies of Caribbean islands and island groups can differ radically within a few square kilometers, from coral limestone to volcanic rock. Many native plants naturally favor one geological zone over another and contribute to the region's biodiversity, as do the native fauna (especially reptiles, birds, and marine life), which have evolved in tandem with them. Endemic terrestrial species often have ancestors on the surrounding mainlands from which they have since branched off, sometimes into distinct species. For millions of years, plants and animals have arrived in the islands from South, Central, and North America, brought by wind and sea, by accident, and by migrations. For thousands of years, people have come to these islands. Their subsistence activities have also shaped the natural environment as they have relied less or more on fishing and collecting in brackish estuaries and other coastal zones, fishing in the deep sea, planting on terrestrial flatlands, or farming and gathering in mountainous interiors.¹

Just as humans would have modified their natural surroundings in some ways, the environment would have filtered through their cultural institutions and interior lives to transform them in return, directing their activities, affecting their belief systems, and inspiring artistic expressions. Island life, its climatic conditions, mineral resources, different foods, and unique activities (such as deepwater diving and regularly canoeing back and forth between islands) would have even affected the shape and composition of human bodies. Each group of people arriving in the Caribbean from the surrounding mainlands had

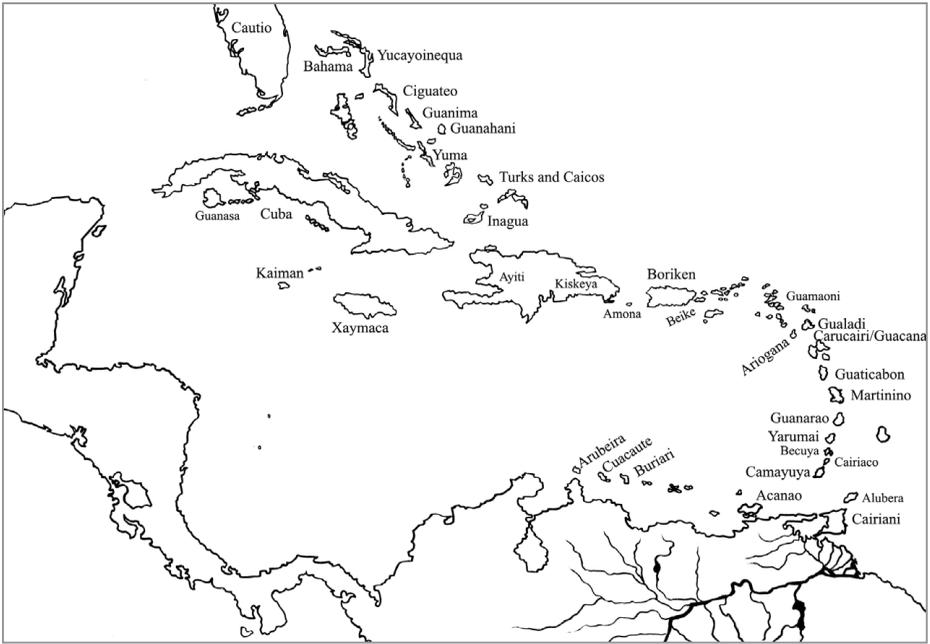
to adjust to a maritime lifestyle, and numerous traces of their transformation can be found in their visual culture.

Naming

On current maps of the world, countries such as China, Europe, Russia, and North America are at the proverbial top of the world, Australia and Argentina are near the bottom, and the Caribbean, Africa, and the Amazon lie across the middle of the globe in the tropic zone. This map, with the north at the top and the south at the bottom, is not necessarily how the Caribbean ancients would have conceived of the earth. For them the “top” of the world might very well have been the east, the place of the rising sun, with the west being the zone of the dying light and realm of ancestors and spirits. Analogies with living tropical lowland people of South America (but also some in Mesoamerica) suggest that the Caribbean ancients might have conceived of a disk-shaped earth, floating on a bowl-shaped ocean, beneath a dome-shaped sky, altogether a sphere with a watery underworld, airy heavens, and an earth core. The three realms might have been united by a symbolic object, place, or conceptual *axis mundi*, perhaps conceived as a pole, a cord, a pillar of tobacco smoke, a sacred tree such as the majestic silk cotton (i.e., *ceiba*), or a cave.²

It could be suggested that living on islands might have urged the ancients to modify a disklike concept of the earth to the conelike shape of an island on the ocean. This is a shape that seems to have been commemorated in the three-sided shell and stone *cemís/zemís* (pronounced seh-MEEs) that are found only in the Caribbean islands, and which are emblematic of pre-Columbian Caribbean art in general.

The islands of the Caribbean have come to be known by many names. In the colonial period that followed the Conquest they were called the West Indies, a corrective title following Christopher Columbus’s initial misidentification of them as the East Indies (i.e., Indonesia or Japan). Spaniards also called them Las Antillas (i.e., the Antilles) after a mythic group of islands in the middle of the ocean.³ Furthermore, the islands have been grouped and named in several ways directly related to their colonial history under Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and other European and American governments. Of course, before the arrival of Europeans in 1492, these islands had been catalogued and named by the Indigenous⁴ people who inhabited them either permanently or seasonally (compare maps 1.1 and 1.2).



Map 1.1. Map of the Caribbean with known Indigenous names of islands. Source: Jalil Sued-Badillo, ed. *General History of the Caribbean: Autochthonous Societies* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), plate 8.



Map 1.2. Map of the Caribbean showing modern names of islands and regions.

The Antilles comprise a major archipelago, made up of smaller strings and groups of islands, stretching from the northern crown of South America to the Gulf of Mexico. The main groups of islands are the Greater Antilles (i.e., Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico and their surrounding islets and archipelagos), the Lesser Antilles or Eastern Caribbean (i.e., the islands from the Virgin Islands in the north to Grenada in the south, but also including, in this study, Trinidad & Tobago at the delta of the Orinoco River), the former Netherlands Antilles of Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire along the northern coast of Venezuela, and Venezuela's own coastal islands such as Margarita and the Los Roques archipelago. Since the prevailing trade winds in the Eastern Caribbean blow east to west, the most easterly islands of that region are called the Windward Islands. These stretch from Grenada to Dominica. The Lesser Antilles that trail westward from Dominica to Puerto Rico are called the Leeward Islands (map 1.2).

The area of water enclosed by the Greater Antilles and Eastern Caribbean is called the Caribbean Sea. Outlying the Caribbean Sea but often considered part of the greater Caribbean are the Turks & Caicos Islands and the Bahamas in the north, which stretch almost to Florida; and the Guianas in South America, just east of Venezuela. While today's Bahamians do not necessarily consider themselves Caribbean people, their First Nations forebears, the Lucayo, were blood relatives and allies of the Taíno peoples of the Greater Antilles. Thus, the islands of the Lucayan Archipelago (including the Turks & Caicos) are still conceived of as part of the Caribbean in this study.

The mainland South American country of Guyana (formerly British Guiana) and the English-speaking country of Belize in Central America both have close connections with the islands of the Caribbean. Guyana's ancient and continuing interactions with the islands of the Eastern Caribbean have made it a *de facto* Caribbean territory. The inclusion of Belize, however, in modern conceptions of the Caribbean raises the question of whether all the territories that ring the Caribbean Sea might not be considered the Caribbean as well. This is a matter of some disagreement among scholars, but the term Circum-Caribbean has been used to describe the climatic, cultural and commercial interaction sphere that stretches from modern-day Miami across the adjacent Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans and Mérida, and southward to Cartagena and Caracas, and across to the Antilles proper. Belize, for its part, having once been British Honduras, came to be considered, like former British Guiana, part of the United Kingdom's West Indian holdings. The intimate and unfortunate link between Belize and the once British West Indian island of St. Vincent has cemented Belize's histori-

cal place in Caribbean history. In the 1790s, thousands of “Black Caribs” (i.e., Garifuna, descendants of intermarried Kalinago Natives and Africans) were forcibly relocated to the Central American territory after a series of Carib Wars against the British and French in the Lesser Antilles.⁵ Though it falls outside the focus of this volume, Belize’s link to the Caribbean’s Indigenous past and its importance as part of the colonial West Indies lends added fascination to this modern Caribbean and Latin American country that in pre-Columbian times was part of the Mesoamerican Maya world.

Finally, also on the topic of naming, this book introduces several terms for the description of visual culture in the pre-Columbian Caribbean. Although there are many books on Caribbean archaeology, this is one of a very few on the pre-Columbian art history of the region. As such, the author must resort to the occasional neologism in the service of art history, which sometimes requires more visually appropriate, “scopo-logic” terms for features and morphologies of artifacts understood to have artistic intent or content, and even for periods and people where these seem to have produced unique styles or forms of art. “Art” is defined here as any image, object, performance, edifice, or arranged space that has as any part of its intended function to be considered on aesthetic grounds.

In this volume, it is also necessary to modify certain archaeological terms to fit the aesthetic and psychological concerns of art history. For instance, archaeologists necessarily must carry on the debate over the use of the term Ceramic Age with regard to the arrival of Arawakan horticulturalists in the Caribbean around 2,500 years ago. The controversy here is in the fact that the pre-Arawakan “Archaic” people are known to have made pottery, and so excluding them from the “Ceramic Age” seems quite inappropriate, especially if they persisted alongside the later arrivals.⁶ Yet while the pioneers of Caribbean archaeology had little or no knowledge of the still rare finds of pre-Arawakan ceramics, their perception holds true that “the Ceramic Age” saw a sudden proliferation in pottery that also marked the arrival of a culturally distinct population. Thus, I have coined the term “Antillean Ceramic Florescence” to more accurately reflect the artistic reality in and on the ground in the ancient Caribbean, where people who made pottery in much greater quantity and of a far different quality arrived in these islands in the fifth century BCE.

Wherever my neologisms appear, I will point them out. Otherwise, I promote and cleave close to archaeological and anthropological terms and concepts as to avoid confusion in this early stage of art scholarship in the pre-Columbian Caribbean.

Legacies

The Antilles were the very first lands sighted by Spaniards in 1492. Columbus's so-called discovery of America was in fact his errant landing in the Bahamas. As the first disembarkation point for Spaniards and their colonial ambitions and cargo of baubles, diseases, and microbes from Europe, Africa, and Asia; deadly weapons; and evangelical zeal, the Antilles bore the full brunt of the Conquest. In this region alone, millions of lives,⁷ thousands of important artifacts, countless vocabulary, hundreds of traditions and solutions along with the revered tradition-bearers who conserved and curated them were lost to humanity.

The catastrophic encounter between the so-called Old World and the curved breakwater of the Antilles would also provide the world with hundreds of terms for often uniquely American species, foods, natural features, inventions, and techniques. If we have picked ripe *guayabas* (guavas) or baked *casabe* (cassava bread) from manioc flour; reclined in a *hamaka* (hammock), either under our *ajoupa* (a house elevated on posts) or on the Apollo 12 spacecraft,⁸ we have spoken but a vestigial part of ancient Caribbean languages, and have preserved part of ancient Caribbean practices. If we lithely navigate a river in a *canoa* (canoe), cross a *sabana* (savanna) on foot or cower from a *hurakan* (hurricane), we are using ancient Antillean languages and reenacting ancient Antillean routines, if ever so clumsily, for the ancients were often our betters in agility, stamina, and the weathering of storms. As we roast meat or fish in the *barbacoa* (barbecue) method over a *bukan* (the structure atop which meat is barbecued), we are not imitating simply the "buccaneers" of more recent pirate days but the Warao, Ciboney, Lucayo and Taíno, Macorix, Ciguayo, and Kalinago of the Indigenous past.⁹

After the Conquest, the Antilles were completely transformed. With the arrival of enslaved Africans to replace the forced labor of dwindling Amerindian populations; with shiploads of ivories, silks, and chinaware linking Asia to Mexico and Mexico to the Caribbean and then to a curious and powerful Spain;¹⁰ and with the replacement of enslaved African labor with that of indentured Chinese and South Asians following emancipation, the Caribbean had become the world's first truly global society. The multiculturalism and syncretism that arose in this collision zone reestablished these islands as a locus of unexpected mutation, spontaneous innovation, and intense creativity. In fact, these islands had been a crossroads since pre-Columbian times.