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Traces of an Identity: An Approach to Aztec Art

Beatriz de la Fuente

Mexican art is a novelty in the field of universal culture and even in ^{our own} Mexican culture [OK?

Quote was unclear without more]. . . . Through its manifestations it summarizes and synthesizes the entire history of our becoming who we are. To try to understand Mexico without including its art is to eliminate the most fertile source for understanding what we are.

—Justino Fernández¹

Introduction

Understanding humankind through its creative output has been the task of art history since it came into being as a discipline. Through artistic manifestations, this branch of history seeks to understand the human being as the creator of images. Such images narrate stories of times and places both near and distant.

Not all the creations that we today consider artistic ones were the subject of art-historical inquiry from the inception of the discipline; only two centuries now separate us from its beginnings as a field of knowledge. When art history began within the Western tradition, its self-defined task was building an understanding of certain works, the majority of which originated in the West. Under such conditions were terms, methodologies, and

strategies developed for delving deeply into the meanings of such objects.

It is sufficient to recall books with such titles as *The History of World Art*, in which the artworks of the “world” were limited to surveys starting with the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira and ending with the European and United States avant-garde. The art of Asia, Africa, and Latin America was omitted or at best included as an appendix in a comparatively small number of pages. ^{yes} [The ordering here makes this paragraph sound as if these books are from before the late nineteenth century. Is that what you mean? I think my art history book was like this as well!]

However, when the communications media flourished in the late nineteenth century, that narrow Western world became aware of the vastness of human expression. Thus its horizons were broadened, and it began to investigate the artistic possibilities of other previously ignored work. In the eyes of the nascent discipline of art history, many non-Western objects suggested a complex and fertile discourse.

The “new” forms were different from the familiar and accepted canon. For this reason, those terms, methodologies, and strategies developed to solve art-related questions had to be ^{extended} broadened, adapted, and reinvented to take into account the problems presented by the recently accepted artworks. Because of art’s potential to provide information, there was now access to knowledge previously unimagined about the people who created these works and about their historical and cultural circumstances. In that way, art history, eager to decode information, changed in keeping with the demands of the works and their roots in different times and latitudes in the course of human development.

1. Justino Fernandez, *Estética del arte mexicano*, no. 9 [This should have complete information for a note: article title, volume and issues numbers, paged, if possible, and especially the date. Is this the 1972 work

p. 9, USAJN, 1972

Consistent with the original purposes of studying art history, these “other works,” among them objects produced in ancient Mexico, have slowly been incorporated into the universe of this humanistic inquiry. Before they were considered within this sphere, their history had been long and eventful; yet it took centuries before their expressive qualities and originality acquired a preeminent place in Mexican art, and their universal quality was recognized.

The history of rejection and acceptance of the works created by the peoples of **Mesoamerica** ^{yes} [OK?] before the Spanish Conquest clearly illustrates the alternation of scorn and comprehension accorded by Western culture. It is common knowledge that in the sixteenth century the gates of the old continent were opened onto a new, enigmatic, mysterious world.² This parallel world awakened the curiosity, wonder, uneasiness, and interest of everyone who arrived. As a result of the Conquest, Mesoamerica was revealed to the eyes of the West through the diversity and abundance of its creations. [Note: I don't ^{OK} think it is necessary to define Mesoamerica here.] Through architecture, sculpture, mural painting, ceramics, and other forms, the artistic project of ancient societies became a fertile field: unexplored, ambiguous, confusing, and seductive.

The spaces, volumes, times, textures, lines, colors, rhythms, and movements of the “new” objects unfolded and thereby suggested a language of their own, which appealed to the senses of those accustomed to perceiving in another way. These properties revealed the difference and otherness of an art that expected to open up a dialogue with those looking at it. Deciphering the meaning of those forms has been the task of diverse eras, people, and lines of

provided in note 2? Or something else?] ✕

² Fernández, *Estética del arte mexicano* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972), p. 9. ✓

thinking, from the Conquest to the present day. In transition to the legitimation of pre-Hispanic art, terms such as *pagan* and *exotic* have been used to describe its forms and qualify its meanings.

A good thread to follow in search of viewpoints about Precolumbian art is Justino Fernández's book *Estética del arte mexicano* (1972).³ *in Spanish* [Guggenheim: Do you want an English translation? *Aesthetics of Mexican Art* (or *The Aesthetic of Mexican Art*). I didn't find an English edition listed in either Library of Congress or New York Public Library catalogue.] In his eagerness to cross the threshold into the past by means of art, the author went back to the sixteenth century. There he confronted the critics of various times to discover their particular contributions to the construction of ideas about the art of ancient Mexico. He found that this artwork was highly disputed, with judgments falling between wonder and fright, praise and scorn. Out of the polyphony he was able to discern two main camps among the critics: those who privileged the craftsmanship and mastery of the works in spite of their diabolical meanings, and those who were wholly focused on the symbolic and religious ideology of the works, overlooking the "perfection" of the images in terms of their adherence to natural models [I don't quite understand the use of "perfección" here. If perfection is equal to Western naturalism, these works would not be perfect. Could this phrase be replaced with the following: "overlooking the matter of whether they adhere to Western notions of naturalism"?]. Mesoamerican artworks took on the meanings of the times in which they were studied, described, and argued over. Therefore, in some cases, the critics resorted to comparisons with non-American civilizations such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Etruscan.

Fernández's peregrinations are confusing and complicated, and the author was not always

able to reconcile form and content. The voice of Manuel Gamio (1916 [**Can you give the book or article name here or in the footnote at the end of the sentence? Americans readers will most likely not be at all familiar with Gamio. The only source I find for that year is** *This title is correct* ***Forjando patria (pro nacionalismo) por Manuel Gamio*, which doesn't sound like the right subject matter**], however, suggested the conjunction of both the signifier (form) and the signified [**Should this be "signified"? The translator used "meaning." The Spanish was "lo significado"**] (content), an effort necessary for arriving at the broadest understanding of indigenous art.⁴

Today art historians still face considerable challenges. Other disciplines can help scholars by providing new perspectives and encouraging them to formulate better questions. Coming from the multidisciplinary approach, advances in the intellectual and emotional comprehension of art of the Mexican past have led to a broader acceptance of non-Western art. This new vision, a true opening up of the world, is one of the signs of modernity.⁵

The evaluation of pre-Hispanic art and its inclusion in the worldwide historical-critical consciousness are relatively new developments that began to gather steam in the late nineteenth century. Those intensive processes have revealed how indigenous art enriched our past and established our cultural history in a centuries-long continuum, among other contributions. However, as George Kubler pointed out in 1991 [**Please provide a footnote for the Kubler source**], we still vacillate between isolation and dissemination, between unity and diversity within Precolumbian art. Recent years have witnessed a new desire to understand this art, to grasp its

3. Ibid.

4. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 45.

Kubler, George

original meanings wherever possible, and to disentangle its religious and cosmological messages.

The process of understanding the art of non-Western peoples has radically changed our knowledge of world art. How this occurred would be an excellent example for a dialectical study: the development of art in the modern age led to a reevaluation of non-Western art, which in turn steered the development of modern art. It is well to remember here the rise of the twentieth-century avant-garde, rooted in Post-Impressionism and branching out through Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism. André Breton had an engaged interest in indigenous Mexican art, of both past and present, and believed he saw in Coatlicue an illustration of the “convulsive beauty” foreshadowing Surrealism.⁶

Longevity is among the greatest virtues of all ancient art, but it also presents the first obstacle to be overcome in understanding the past: the problem of temporal distance.⁷ Navigating among the difficulties is possible if we pay attention to the *trace*, the term used by Paul Ricoeur to designate the representation of what has disappeared. According to the philosopher, the only reference point we have from the past lies in the trace; therefore, the knowledge we have about the past can only come from a reconstruction of the information the trace provides. Insofar as art’s trace acquires an intratemporal nature that allows it to belong to all times, to be understood in all epochs, the original time in which it was made can be re-created. This capacity to transcend the constant barrier of time’s passage turns art into a link between past and present, even if there

⁵ Beatriz de la Fuente, “El arte prehispánico: Un siglo de historia,” in *Memorias de la Academia Mexicana de la Historia correspondiente a la Real de Madrid* (Mexico City: Academia Mexicana de la Historia, 1999), pp. 79–100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 96; Beatriz de la Fuente, “La crítica y el arte prehispánico,” in *Las humanidades en México, 1950–1975* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Consejo Técnico de Humanidades, 1978), pp. 93–101; Beatriz de la Fuente, “El arte prehispánico visto por los europeos del siglo XIX,” *Revista de la Universidad de México* (Mexico City) 29, new era (Dec. 1983), pp. 2–7.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Tiempo y narración*, vol. 3, *El tiempo narrado* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1996), p. 840. [Is Siglo XXI the publisher?] *yes*

is a lack of written data to back its creation, as is the case for the majority of Precolumbian objects.

The presence of diverse, multifaceted expression is no longer a novelty in either Mexican or universal culture. Precolumbian art is one of the foundations shoring up faces and identities. The enormous value of the legitimation of Aztec art and of its existence in time lies in its presence both as art objects and as an expression of humanity. [This paragraph is rather confusing. I don't fully understand (in either English or Spanish)the "foundations shoring up faces and identities" ("rostros/faces") and "expresiones diversas y multifacéticas." Can you change this to make your point more clear and direct?]

"I am other!" said Arthur Rimbaud, in a pronouncement that was already an expression of modernity **[Please give a source for this (a footnote), if possible]**. Indeed, we are those others: Art functions as a channel of communication; it serves to integrate. In art we can recognize ourselves individually and together, as if in a dialogue between our heads and hearts.

Mexica-Aztec Art

From the vast body of art produced in Mesoamerica, Mexica-Aztec art stands out as uniquely confident. In the first place, it—together with Olmec art—is primarily a sculptural form. That the viewer can contemplate three-dimensional work from different angles allows for a different kind of perception than two-dimensional art requires **[OK to include "two-dimensional art"? It would be better to state your comparison explicitly]**. Second, we can observe within the diverse forms of Mexica art the profound maturity and self-awareness of a creative people.

As we know from varied studies based on early colonial texts, the defining traits of Mexica art were achieved because of the culture's belief in a conceptual and metaphoric pairing, the

“dialogue between head and heart” and the fashioning of a “deified heart.” **[Can you explain the concept of the “deified heart”? How could someone create one? Was it by communicating with the gods? I don’t really understand the concept of the dialogue between head and heart either. Could one’s own head communicate with one’s own heart and the gods at the same time?]** The objective was to reach a perfect equilibrium between the dual, opposed elements that could be found throughout the universe. This came together through the ideal of knowledge to which the Mexica aspired, which was called *toltecatoyotl*. The person who had a dialogue with his or her own heart was known as a *toltecatl*, today called an “artist.” **[An artist could be either a man or a woman, correct?]** Once his or her creative goals were reached, the artist transcended the sphere of the gods in order to fulfill the tasks revealed by these gods. The artist went to the essence of things to learn from them and teach others about that intimate dialogue. The goal was to preserve the status quo, that is, the present existence of the universe, by giving thanks to and propitiating the spiritual powers. The tangible results of these divine apprenticeships can still be admired in countless works in different mediums: architecture, ceramics, sculpture, lapidary art, literature, painting, manuscripts, silverwork, and textiles.

With this foundation, Mexica art acquired its distinctive note and its originality within the realm of Mesoamerican art, specifically through the remarkable power of its representations. This force was grounded in an unquestionably vital spirit that lay on the thin line between a longing for pleasure and the anxiety of a people confronted by the end of time. In other words, Nahua works spoke of the people’s connection to the very future of the cosmos, and the deified heart submitted itself in eternal gratitude to the gods. In the Mexica vision of the cosmos, the human being was essential.

Formal qualities and communicative energy, united, underlie the vitality of Mexica art.

Most of these works make use of common geometric figures: rectangular, polyhedral, and pyramidal prisms; cones and their various combinations; spheres; ovoids. Images are created through a wise handling of forms and an absolute control over materials, as well as an inexhaustible desire to express the nuances of lives held in check. Although objects may wound space, with elements projecting outward, they can not change it, because they are frozen in time. They advance in space but only so far; except for the rare exception, their movement is stopped in its tracks or forced to retreat, contained without expansion, without taking any risks. The limits of stone, fired clay, wood, or any other material constrain the forms, as if they had been taken prisoner and were struggling to escape. Thus Mexica artworks are imbued with an accumulation of contained emotions that seek integration into the universal; perhaps human time and space aspire to sacred realms outside time and space.

As in the rest of Mesoamerican art, Mexica objects fall into basic groups defined by their type of figuration: **[Should you list “gods” here as well? Humans are discussed below in their own section, “Living Mortals”]** human, zoomorphic, vegetal, and hybrids. **Yet another group is made up of barely insinuated scenes [What does this mean? What we would call “abstract”? Or are the subjects today unclear? Or is the carving so subtle that the images can barely be distinguished?]**. Because both formal and thematic variations abound, and countless artworks were produced, here I will discuss only some key examples of the aforementioned types. Most of these are sculptures executed in stone.

The Eloquence of the Cosmology

If we start from the proposal that art speaks of the way its creators perceived their place in the world, several Mexica examples quickly come to mind. Perhaps the best known is the *Sun Stone*

[Guggenheim: Is this illustrated? Do you have the exact English title?] It is well-known that the relief represents the Fifth Sun and the entire cosmos. The predominant forms are concentric rings, which contain the very universe from its nucleus (the innermost ring) to its limits (the outermost ring). The deity's face occupies the center, and to his sides we can see his hands or claws that imprison hearts **[Is "his" OK here? Is this god male?]**. The god appears within the *ollin* sign (which means "movement"), four rectangular panels that converge in a circle, like the blades of a fan. These panels include, among **[in between? where are the symbols of beauty?]** symbols of beauty, signs for the various "suns" or preceding eras. This set is encircled by a ring that includes the **glyphs [OK?]** representing the twenty days. Surrounding that is another ring, with solar symbols and rays that cross the borders of the circles. The outermost ring consists of two enormous *xiuhcoatl*, or fire serpents, whose heads face one another in the lower part of the monument; from their open mouths emerge the faces of other gods. Thus the universe is quadripartite and dynamic, even if bounded by circular contours—ultimately contained by the *xiuhcoatl*, which also reflect the universe's dual aspect.

Among additional examples of outstanding Mexica sculpture are representations of the hungry goddess, Tlaltecuhltli, who was believed to live in the lower part of the cosmos. **[Should this be Cipactli-Tlaltecuhltli here? Is Tlaltecuhltli male?]** She can be seen carved on the bottom side of many sculptures, hidden from human sight but omnipresent to the gods and in direct contact with them. She is like contained energy that is invisible to humans but lies within the power of the carved stone. Tlaltecuhltli is noteworthy for her sprawling posture: Her arms and legs are open, and her head is thrown back. Her hair is curly and disheveled, full of spiders and scorpions that crawl through the down on her head. The divinity's face is hybrid, since she is sometimes human, sometimes a fantastic animal with open snout and huge eyeteeth. The deity

opens her jaws and sticks out her tongue, a gesture that transforms her into the personification of a knife, with eyes and teeth. In many examples her hands and feet have threatening, feline claws. A skull-and-crossbones design is typical of her clothing.

The divine images of Tlaltecuhтли accentuate feelings contained, but on the point of exploding. **[Does this discussion refer to one particular sculpture or all (or most) representations of Tlaltecuhтли? Please clarify this in the next sentence. How can it be both unique and common at the same time (“singular” y “común”)? This doesn’t make sense in English without more of an explanation.]** Her pose **[in most sculptures?]** suggests an unequal struggle to free herself from the surrounding rock, which confines and compresses her, as if it were keeping her small. It is no coincidence that this is the deity of the earth, both creator and destroyer, who accepts no restrictions, not even in her images. Indeed, she attempts to emit a war whoop—shown by the knife—through that terrible, open snout.

One of the most magnificent forms in Mexica statuary is the embodiment in stone of cosmology itself, the *Great Coatlicue* **[Author: Is this the sculpture (originally one of four) in the Museo Nacional de Antropología? Gugg: Is there an illustration here?]**. Her pyramidal, cruciform body combines human and animal elements: two serpents face-to-face instead of a head, female breasts that are soft but not spent, a necklace of hands and hearts, arms, and feline claws instead of hands and feet. Skulls, feathers, snails, and serpents make up part of her attire. Her figure is erect, defiant before all creation, bespeaking the great mother who feeds and destroys. It also represents a challenge to the time and space the goddess creates, disrupting and containing them within herself. Thus her image gives physical form to abstract concepts.

This great sculpture of Coatlicue succeeds in communicating the metaphysical and supernatural power of the gods, in addition to the Mexica vision of the cosmos overall. Her image

is the sensation of terribleness cast in stone. It makes the intangible concrete and brings the past back to life. It conforms to space and time, yet simultaneously destroys both to create them anew, challenging the eternal flow of space and time. A vital challenge set in stone, the image of Coatlicue can conquer its own universe.

Another fundamental figure in this vision of the cosmos is Coatlicue's dismembered daughter, Coyolxauhqui. As a mutilated, quartered goddess, she attains in death a dynamic position through the *ollin* symbol, as can be seen in a relief from the foot of the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan [**Gugg: Illustration here?**]. In the Mexica myth her body was cut up by her brother Huitzilopochtli [**OK? Readers will need more information to be able to understand who she is**], who wielded a terrible weapon, a *xiuhcoatl* (fire serpent). As a result of this harsh treatment, her extremities are splayed like fan blades in the relief. We can also recognize elements identifying her as a *ctonica* divinity, that is, a progenitor. Her belly sags from having given birth numerous times; her breasts have fallen through nursing countless children. In another sculpture of Coyolxauhqui, a freestanding work quite different from the Templo Mayor relief [**Gugg: Is there an illustration and caption for this?**], she is depicted without a body. Instead she has only a head, from whose severed neck spews, instead of blood, the sign for *Atl Tlachinolli* (water and fire). The sign is the war cry of Cihuacoatl Quilaztli—Coatlicue's advocate—and the four Tezcatlipocas, among them the brother who murdered Coyolxauhqui.

In these two most famous images of Coyolxauhqui, the goddess represents a death that is in opposition to life yet also leads to life. Thus the grandiosity of the two works discussed here is not limited to their formal treatment but encompasses the deeply rooted religious symbols of the Mexica people. They speak of the outcome of an imbalanced struggle between the beginning and end of life, rendered in cosmic rather than human terms: the battle between life and death, day and

night, light and darkness, masculine and feminine. Coyolxauhqui is the woman-goddess, the divine daughter who is mutilated but not conquered, and the one who is victorious in defeat.

Coyolxauhqui is the paradigm of the Cihuateteo, the women-goddess warriors who were part of Huitzilopochtli's entourage. **[It is unclear what this means: "However, she does not prefigure them, since it is Coatlicue who has that task." I don't think it is necessary. If it is, please explain what you mean by prefigure.]** Representations of such major goddesses always show them kneeling, with skeletal faces but inquiring eyes. Their long hair is curly, as it is with all the gods of death and the underworld, and they are dressed only in skirts. With cats' claws instead of hands, they crouch like feline predators ready to pounce on a victim or eagerly tear at the air. Although expectant, they are restrained, intent upon taking action at just the precise moment, not before. It was believed that at the end of the Fifth Sun, they would descend from the sky, transformed into hungry jaguars, and devour humankind. With the Cihuateteo, the life cycle comes full circle, from the creation to the end of the universe. These deities also delimit the space and time within which other gods may act.

Other Deities

The gods seem to comprise a single system, to which elements may be added or subtracted to define them or expand the pantheon. Most are young women, kneeling or seated on their claws. Those depicted seated usually rest their hands on their knees. Only a few dare to be shown nude, at least in the torso. That timid nudity is associated with Xochiquetzal: She exposes her breasts to the open air and adorns her head with garlands of flowers.

Chalchiuhtlicue can be identified by her simple garments, a *quechquemil* (a short,

triangular cape) and a skirt. Her headdress consists of two tassels that hang on either side of her face; she wears a paper fan at the nape of her neck, typical of the deities of water and fertility. The goddess's various identities are shown by changes of posture and different attributes in particular sculptures. If she is walking, carrying two pairs of corncobs, she is Xilonen; she may have nude or covered breasts. If the paper fan is replaced by a rectangular headdress with four flowers or small rings of folded paper, then she represents Chicomecoatl.

Those are the three basic types of young goddesses. In fact, **Mexica sculptures [OK?]** of women are always goddesses, never humans. The female condition is of no interest except in its sacred capacity as the great mother in all its countless variations.

Males in Mexica sculpture, on the other hand, may be gods or humans. They are almost all young, lacking individuality and any particular expression. Generally reduced to the body's essential features, these sculptures usually lack indications of musculature, although they indicate the clavicles and the bones of the wrists, ankles, and knees. The bodies primarily serve to support the heads, which are conventionalized although closely linked to the **structure of the human face [OK?]**. These faces are always oval-shaped, with almond eyes, straight noses with wide nostrils, narrow lips, and mouths slightly open, usually showing the teeth. (Both eyes and teeth may be inlaid with conch or obsidian.) Emotions or definite expressions are usually absent from these depictions; the faces seem distant from reality. Yet it is worth remembering that such an impression may be attributable to the bare stone, from which painting has disappeared along with the attire made of perishable materials, hair, and headdresses. **[Note: It makes more sense to put all the information about the generalized forms of the bodies together, before the discussion of the faces. I did this.]**

[Does the next paragraph refer to sculpture of both men and women (or gods and

goddesses)? It seems like a continuation of the discussion of male sculptures until one arrives at “These patterns permeate, without distinction, images of women, men...” Can you change the first sentence here?] Although the **simplified [OK?]** bodies and different postures barely manage to offset the lack of explicit emotions and the resulting sense of absence or distance, the forms nevertheless reveal a very special kind of expressiveness, a metaphysical attachment to life. The principle of duality and opposites is concentrated in every sculpture that is fully in the Mexica style. These have great power and dramatic tension, which are accented by the specific features of the faces; mouths are held open, fixed in a moving expression; tension is just barely controlled. In addition, particular postures and a variety of attire and adornments finely tune the elements identifying particular **types or deities [OK?]**. These patterns equally permeate images of women and men—divine and human—young and old. The old can always be recognized by their facial wrinkles and marked ribs.

A pleasant deity, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl was frequently represented. He is immediately identifiable from the treatment of the mouth, which resembles a bird’s beak. Otherwise, he takes human form and is seminude and sometimes bearded. He may be standing or seated; **if seated [OK? Or does this apply to both standing and seated figures?]**, his figure may have either a foot or the head turned to one side. If the god takes the form of a spider monkey, it is still composed in a human posture, almost always dancing. For this reason, he is often related to Xochipilli, god of happiness, art, and the renewal of life. The representations of monkeys are bold enough to show movement and even dance steps. Without a doubt, the monkey manifestation endows the sculptures with a greater freedom of articulation in the torso and the extremities. We can thus differentiate these renditions from the static, anthropomorphic images of the same god. In the static works, even though the god’s arms may be apart from the body, the sculptures

remain immobile, failing to penetrate the space around them.

Likewise, many representations of Xipe Totec exist; in them, his figure is straight and proud, and is easily recognized by its costume of human skin. Another common subject is Xiuhtecuhtli, who, seated and submerged in profound, cosmological thought, lives at the center of the universe. He can be distinguished by the headdress decorated with a band of disks and a scroll on his forehead, a kind of schematic bird's head. The image of Xiuhtecuhtli is also adorned with a pair of small **cubes [or drums? Is there a word for these in English? They're not ear ornaments, are they? Are they the "earflares" shown on some gods, such as Hueheuteotl or Tlatecuhtli, or "earspools"?)** from which fabric appears to fall, and with a paper fan worn at the nape of the neck. In some examples he is bearded. Also unmistakable are depictions of Huehuetotl, the only old god, who has been carrying a brazier on his head and shoulders since time immemorial.

There are other variations of anthropomorphic figures that emphasize the human face or head. These are masks that follow the canonical features discussed above and are identified only by their associated signs, **which appear on the works themselves [OK?]**. Tezcatlipoca's smoke and mirror; the date 9 Wind for Ehecatl [**Should this be Ehecatl or Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl here?**]; and the double masks representing Xipe Totec in the skin of a sacrificed person are examples.

But none of these sculptures—whether bodies, heads, or masks—shouts, is prone to outbursts, or changes its emotions. Instead, all offer the certainty of life through the stillness, calmness, and depth of space and time. Perhaps they reflect the contemplative life that seeks the dialogue between head and heart, as the *toltecayotl* recommends.

While the images discussed above are based in the human form, another type of sculpture

hails from a mythological zoology. Some of these figures rank as gods. There is nothing silent or empty about these works; individually or as a group, they speak of the profound link between the sacred and human spheres, and recall the deep relationship between humankind and nature.

Among serpentine forms, the *xiuhcoatl*, the fire serpent encountered above, is depicted with clawed front paws. Its head is distinctive, because an attachment, studded with what are known as “star glyphs,” projects upward and backward from the tip of its snout. Its body is usually covered with designs of butterflies and tongues of fire. Its tail is represented as a series of trapezoids in groups of two or three, finishing in a triangle. This is the burning weapon with which Huitzilopochtli killed his enemies, the complement to the *Atl Tlachinolli*.

The *ahuitzotl* (water dog) is a mammal whose back and tail are made of water; on the end of its tail there is a tiny human hand. This figure typically appears as sculpture, both in relief and in the round, but is shown in codices as well. These creatures are dangerous, as they can pull people into the water—with that little hand—and drown them. They also let out war cries. The *ahuitzotl* is representative of the animated, imaginary zoology of Mexica sculpture.

A magnificent sculpture of fired clay that represents an anthropomorphic bat must also be mentioned in this section. It came from the **excavation of the [OK?] Templo Mayor**. With a distinctive nose and large ears, the wingless bat stands with its feet solidly on the ground and the claws facing frontward. It has elements that link it to the gods of death by flaying **[can this simply say Xipe Totec?]**, such as its necklace and the snails hanging from it. This is another threatening image that was an integral part of the dualities of the Mexica people’s lives.

Living Mortals

In Mexica sculpture, human beings are given special attention, but are robbed of individuality;

they can be recognized by their symbols or emblems. Many of these portrayals are of young men, commoners known as *macehualtin*, who are barefoot and dressed only in short loincloths knotted in the front. Their unadorned short hair reinforces their plebeian status. They maintain an upright posture, even if they are squatting. One or both hands is usually extended partially closed; if they are standard bearers, the hands are hollowed out to hold flagpoles. Another type of *macehual* is identifiable by the placement of the hands on the knees and, in some examples, crossed arms supporting the elbows.

The famous head of an *Eagle Warrior* [**Can you identify this further? What collection is it in?**] is understood as the Mexica ideal of a human being. Simplified and generalized, its features were not drawn from real models. Overall, as a work of art, it is eloquent in its containment of force, as if the warrior were overlooking a battlefield and confidently thinking of his upcoming victory.

With similar formal and conceptual qualities, another eagle warrior—this one, however, is a whole figure assembled from ceramic parts—shares the **expression of community** [**Meaning here is unclear. Please revise**]. Its body is inclined forward, the face framed by a bird's head helmet. The wings can be seen atop the figure's arms, and the claws are at the height of the knees. (This sculpture now lacks the original paint covering it.) None of these elements masks the vital impulse of that dialogue between head and heart. Knowing that he will be part of the cosmic order once the dialogue has borne fruit, the figure is suspended in divine revelation.

The few figures of old people known can be distinguished by the wrinkles lining their faces. The chests of some of these sculptures show clear vertebrae and pronounced ribs. Indeed, their backs are bent, either because age or physical disability has overtaken them or because they have lived through many experiences. Figures of both the old and the young bespeak a conquering people

sure of itself and of its role in the cosmos. Taken together, all these sculptures attest to Mexica pride in their having been chosen by the gods to feed and conserve the universe.

[Should there be another heading here for the plants?] In spite of this emphasis on humans, the Mexica still took special care in creating sculptures of plants and animals. Although flora and fauna are rendered in an abbreviated manner, the essential forms of such works leave no room for doubt about the identity of their subjects. A great many sculptures show the same proximity to visual reality whether they are carved of stone, shell, bone, or wood or are molded or modeled of clay. However, we do not witness in them a desire to precisely reproduce a model. Examples represent, with singular sureness, stretched out cats, sitting dogs, leaning rabbits, and coiled serpents. While their creators were completely confident in their figural representation, they never followed the path of direct mimesis.

What distinguishes Mexica sculptors from those in other parts of Mesoamerica was their will to extract, with unequalled mastery, what is fundamental in the natural forms that surrounded them. The exceptional quality of their production stems from this desire. Sculptures of fleas and locusts therefore remain wonderful objects both for the small size of the original creatures and for the way in which they capture the insects' essence, amplified in stone. (Even their color is suggested through **the choice of stone**: black for the flea, red for the locust. **[OK? Are these stone sculptures? Also, are these examples of two sculptures in total (one a flea; one a locust) or types of sculptures?]** In other examples, such as portrayals of butterflies and spiders, the abstraction of forms leads to beings that bear little resemblance to the originals. They may have altered features or ones added that do not belong to that particular animal.

Among the body of works depicting fauna, representations of reptiles are paradigmatic. Serpents are undoubtedly the subjects portrayed most like the real creatures. Their heads, scales

(whether carved or painted), and rattles are rendered in detail. The forked tongues project out of their mouths, which also display eyeteeth. All these elements, along with the body positions, whether coiled or alert, make the ophidians one of the most extraordinary groups within Mexica sculpture.

Similar qualities can be found in the marvelous vegetal sculptures, especially gourds and cacti, made with fine, colored stones that accentuate the liveliness of their forms. These sculptures demonstrate a savvy mixture of edges and curves, concave and convex areas, which gives form to the plants. The purity of their lines shows a determination to express the animated nature of plants. Once again, Mexica sculptures here display both the extraordinary sensitivity and complete confidence of their creators. Vegetal and animal sculptures represent vitality captured in stone, the intimate and indissoluble union between formal demands and symbolic aspirations. These works reflect the determination and confidence implicit in Mexica art.

Union of the Human and the Divine

There are many other examples of the same desire for expression [**expression of what? life force? vitality? duality? In English this sounds incomplete**]. Reliefs with varied subject matter interweave mythical and historical matters and show divinities living side by side with humans. Relevant works are the *Teocalli of the Sacred War*, the *Stone of Tizoc*, and the *Stone of Motecuhzoma*.

The *Teocalli of the Sacred War*, replete with complex iconography, simulates the plinth of a pyramid with steps and symmetrical framing, and, at the top, an altar. On its sides, there are images of gods and people in the garb of gods as well as ritual instruments including arrows, shields, *xiuhcoatl*, *cuanhxicalli* (eagle vessels), and *zacatapayolli* (**English TK [Author: What**

are these?]). On the back side is the emblem of Tenochtitlan, an image of Cihuacoatl as an eagle, emitting a war cry, **on top of a nopal [addition OK?]**, as is described in Mexica literature.

Scholars believe the monument commemorates the government of Motecuhzoma II, a dedication at Mexico's Templo Mayor, or a Binding of the Years or New Fire ceremony. It is also said that this object was Motecuhzoma II's throne.

Carved in relief, the *Stones of Tizoc* and *Motecuhzoma* are large cylinders conveying historical subjects. Based on conventional formal language, both celebrate their governments' conquests; their historical nature is indicated by the signs associated with various victories. The image of the sun appears on the upper, horizontal surfaces **of both works [OK?]**, and we can see conventional figures of kings Tizoc or Motecuhzoma I, repeated numerous times, in the side reliefs. They are dressed as warriors and gods. The warlike attire, particularly the smoking mirror on the head [, and instead of a foot **Is something missing here? It is not in the Spanish original either]**, identifies them with incarnations of Tezcatlipoca. The leaders hold various captives by their hair. Based on the accompanying glyphs, the captives can be recognized as symbolic images of vanquished cities.

Mexica visual arts reflect the lively confidence of their creators and of a conquering people. The will of the gods was limited by the vicissitudes of the people who glorified them. For this reason, it was not important to artists to personalize the deities they were representing; individuals and their gods only existed to the extent they were redeemed within the society that elevated them.

Conclusion

Mexica art is a victory cry. It is the dominant Ehecatl; it is Coyolxauhqui dismembered but not

defeated; it is the defiant Coatlicue. It is the assured voice of a conquering people. This quality is what makes it so much different from other artistic expressions of ancient Mexico.

There is no room for doubt in Mexica art; confidence is absolute. This can be seen in the precision of the locust, in the coiled serpent, in the impassive, distant standard bearer, and in the images of Tizoc and Motecuhzoma I. Overall, Mexica sculpture is an expression of power, of the certainty that this people will be defined forever as who they are now. Given that the art is neither personalized nor individualized, it established itself as the single voice of a community united for purposes of domination and to tell the truths of its existence.

To reach these objectives and strengthen an extraordinary artistic will, the Mexica turned to the fine modeling of stone, achieving textures of great eloquence, reinforced by lively colored and inlaid surfaces. The sculptural techniques demonstrate the great sensitivity and profound knowledge the Mexica achieved through the dialogue between head and heart, the *toltecayotl*, and through deepening themselves from within. Ranging from the most sincere verisimilitude to the most pronounced abstraction, the visual arts created by this community emphasize the culture's vigorous and expressive nucleus: the force of life itself.

Undoubtedly, beyond its forms, materials, and subjects, what is most impressive is the profound capacity for communication and deep feeling permeating all Mexica art, especially the sculpture. To receive its message, we must put aside all Western prejudices that suggest that "beauty" must be the indispensable parameter for such communication. Mexica art speaks in its own language, which is simultaneously specific and universal. Its forms are self-referential, bounded, and compact, awaiting the detonator that will expose their most profound meanings. They strive to contain the emotions that are fully integrated within them. Moreover, the works do not interrupt the space or time that surrounds them; rather they freeze space and time for eternity.

In both form and content, this art manifests an enjoyment of life that required sacrifices to achieve fullness. The works express a fatal anxiety that could be controlled through the revelatory dialogue between god and human. They are works that reveal constrained feelings and beliefs, which are neither common to the world's greater cultural heritage nor foreign to humanity's evolution. They comprise a collective cry that, once emitted, dominates living beings and offers certainty to human existence. This dialogue is the product of deep reflection transformed into a formal and symbolic language and concentrated into refined works that still speak to us today. Half a millennium later, the dialogue still bears fruit, making us participants in an ancient vision of the cosmos and allowing Mexica art to remain vital and universal.