

MASTERWORKS

THE AZTEC EMPIRE

ART AND CULTURE

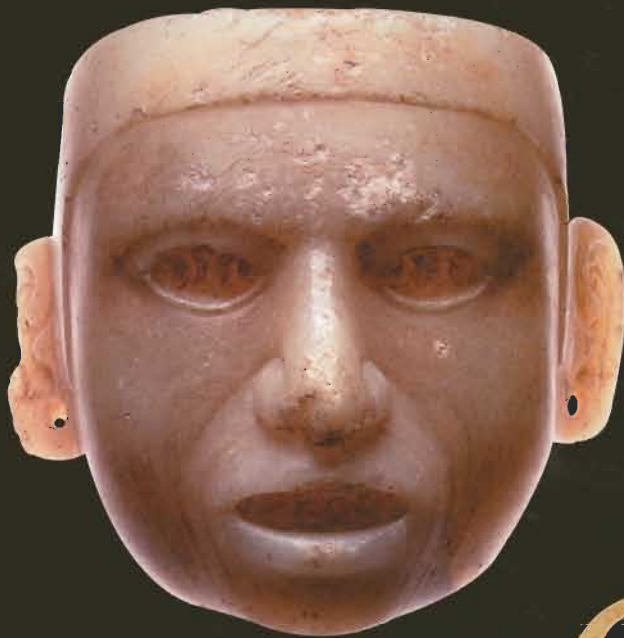
PRODUCED BY LESLIE NEWSOM RASCOE

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Héran Cortés was enticed by rumors of gold and other riches in the Aztec empire. In a vain attempt to keep the conqueror away from the capital, Tenochtitlan, Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma ("Montezuma") sent Cortés valuable gifts, including jewelry and ritual objects. These gifts only spurred the greed of the Spaniards, who hastened to Tenochtitlan and defeated the Aztec armies—with the help of Aztec enemies and a smallpox

*MASK WITH INLAY
Teotihuacan
c. 450
stone, turquoise,
obsidian, shell
Museo Nacional
de Antropología*



epidemic. In the aftermath of the fall of the capital in 1521, countless pieces of gold jewelry were melted down and returned to Spain in the form of ingots. Of the many thousands of pieces of Aztec jewelry, few survived the Spanish conquest.

Prior to 1521, however, jewelry and other objects had been buried in offerings. These surviving works are now on display in *THE AZTEC EMPIRE*, an exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York through February 13, and at the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain from late March through early September 2005. As the most comprehensive exhibition devoted to the subject ever assembled, *THE AZTEC EMPIRE* features more than 435 works from public and private collections, including archaeological finds of the last decade never before seen outside Mexico.

Aztec art covers a wide range of media, from gold and turquoise jewelry to monumental stone sculptures, from delicate feather art to ceramic vessels, and from decorated stone tools to painted man-

ANTHROPOMORPHIC MASK
Aztec
c. 1500
tecalli alabaster
Museo Nacional
de Antropología

EAR ORNAMENTS
Aztec-Mixtec
15th-16th c.
cast gold
Metropolitan Museum of Art
The Michael C. Rockefeller
Memorial Collection

BUTTERFLY NOSE ORNAMENT
Mixtec
c. 1200-1521
gold
Museo Nacional
de Antropología

LIP PLUG
Aztec
c. 1200-1521
gold and jade
Museo de las Culturas
de Oaxaca

FEATHERED COYOTE
Aztec
c. 1500
stone
Museo Nacional
de Antropología



GRASSHOPPER
Aztec
c. 1500
carnelian
Museo Nacional
de Antropología



CHAUCI LID
Colonial
c. 1540
feathers and bark
Museo Nacional
de Antropología



uscripts. Nearly every object on view testifies to the Aztec's aesthetic taste and proficient craftsmanship.

It is difficult to get a clear picture of Aztec culture and life. Cortés and other conquering Spaniards wrote accounts that exaggerated practices such as human sacrifice. Denigration of the Aztecs as savages with barbaric practices helped to justify the conquest and destruction of Aztec culture. This biased view of the "savage Aztecs" remains alive and well in the modern world of popular books and television documentaries. The works of Aztec art on display at the Guggenheim provide an important counter to the biases of historical accounts. These objects give a direct window into many aspects of Aztec culture, from religion to politics to daily life.

The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan were relative newcomers in central Mexico. Their ancestors had migrated from Aztlan in the north only a few centuries before the Spanish conquest. The immigrants settled among the descendants of two great ancient civilizations: Teotihuacan (A.D. 100-600) and the Toltecs of Tula (A.D. 700-1100). When Tenochtitlan emerged as



EAGLE WARRIOR
Aztec, c. 1440-69
fired clay, stucco, paint
Museo de Sitio del Templo Mayor

an imperial power in the fifteenth century, its rulers looked back and claimed the ancient cities of Teotihuacan and Tula as their symbolic ancestors. Aztec priests made Teotihuacan the setting of their creation myths, and Aztec kings claimed to be descendants of the ancient kings of Tula. People went to these ancient cities to dig for sacred relics, bringing back fine Teotihuacan objects, such as *Mask with Inlay*, to rebury in ceremonial offerings in Tenochtitlan. The Aztec kings also commissioned buildings and sculptures to be produced in the ancient Teotihuacan style. Aztec artists later developed their own style of stone masks made of greenstone and alabaster, as seen in *Anthropomorphic Mask*. Although today we are unsure of the uses of these objects, their historical connection to Teotihuacan stone masks seems clear.

Stone sculpture was one of the most important media of Aztec art. Large, monumental carvings, such as the so-called "Aztec calendar stone" on display at the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, were produced by full-time specialists, who worked out of the royal palace. Elaborate symbolism, carved in low relief, promoted a variety of ritual and political messages about the power of

kings and gods. Stone images of gods stood in Aztec temples, where they received offerings of food and blood. Smaller sculptures, including stone boxes and vessels, served as cult paraphernalia. Like most non-western cultures, the Aztecs did not have a concept of art for art's sake, and most objects had clear uses in the utilitarian, ritual or social realms. But some stone animals, such as *Feathered Coyote* and *Grasshopper*, do not have obvious ritual functions and may come close to the notion of art created for primarily aesthetic purposes.

The most diverse medium of Aztec artists was terra-cotta ceramics. THE AZTEC EMPIRE includes finely painted food-serving plates, drinking vessels, musical instruments and several types of ritual objects. When excavating Aztec houses, archaeologists find two main types of ceramic cult items: small figurines used in domestic ceremonies of fertility and curing, and long-handled incense burners used for purification rites. In Aztec temples, archaeologists find the same type of incense burners but not the clay figurines. They also find a whole host of other cult items buried in special offerings in and around the temple. Perhaps the most dramatic ceramic objects were the life-size sculptures of warriors that guarded the entrance to the Eagle Warriors Hall located next to the Templo Mayor in the ceremonial heart of Tenochtitlan. *Eagle Warriors* were elite soldiers who led Aztec armies into battle. The dramatic strength of these sculptures is matched by the technical proficiency of the potters who manufactured them.

Featherworking was a distinctive Aztec art. Feathers were arranged in mosaic form to produce ceremonial shields and battle wear, fans and other decorative and ritual objects such as *Chalice Lid*. Artists started by gluing the drab feathers of common birds onto a backing, then added numerous layers of more colorful tropical bird feathers to produce both geometric designs and representations of deities. Few examples of Aztec featherwork survive, and they are currently the target of much technical scrutiny to determine the materials and methods involved in their manufacture.

One of the remarkable characteris-

tics of Aztec art was its widespread distribution, both geographically and socially. Many of the finest examples of Aztec art have been found not in Tenochtitlan but at other cities and temples throughout central Mexico. Diverse regions were linked together economically by a system of marketplaces and merchants, and socially by marriages and interactions among the noble families of each city-state. Aztec art was not limited to the nobility. Although the finest jewelry—such as *Butterfly Nose Ornament*, *Ear Ornaments* and *Lip Plug*—was probably worn only by nobles, well-off commoners were free to wear expensive jewelry made of obsidian, greenstone and rock crystal if they could afford it. The finest polychrome serving plates were made in the holy city of Cholula, and written sources tell us that Motecuhzoma would only eat from dishes of this type. Archaeologists regularly excavate fragments of these plates at both the palaces of nobles and the houses where commoners lived. Even farmers living far from Tenochtitlan sometimes ate meals from the same kind of fancy serving ware favored by the Aztec emperor.

The objects on display in THE AZTEC EMPIRE are powerful icons of a social reality that was destroyed by conquest nearly five centuries ago. Aztec art today gives us a direct view of a vanished culture and a way of life that have been distorted by writers both ancient and modern. The rewards of this exhibit are both historical and aesthetic. We not only learn about Aztec culture but also experience firsthand the technical and aesthetic accomplishments of anonymous Aztec artists long ago. ■

Dr. Michael E. Smith, professor of Anthropology at the University at Albany, State University of New York, has written six books on the Aztecs, including *The Aztecs* (2nd edition, 2003, Blackwell). He has directed archaeological excavations at numerous Aztec sites.

EXHIBITION SCHEDULE
Through February 13, 2005
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
New York, 212-423-3500
March 21-September 4, 2005
Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain
011-34-94-435-9080
Guggenheim.org