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AZTECS

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE EXHIBITION



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Royal Academy of Arts
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A guide for secondary students

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Education Department

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COVER

Cat. 233

Mictlantecuhtli (detail)

c. 1480, Aztec

Fired clay, stucco and paint

176 x 80 x 50 cm

Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabé

INSIDE BACK COVER

Cat. 65

Stamp (detail)

c. 1500, Aztec

Fired clay

5 x 8 x 4 cm

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabé

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Introduction

The Aztecs were a mighty civilisation which flourished in Central America between 1325 and 1521, when they were forced to surrender to an invading Spanish army led by Hernán Cortés. From their magnificent capital, Tenochtitlan, they governed a vast empire that stretched from present-day Mexico to Guatemala, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans (see map). They are often remembered as a fierce and bloodthirsty race, merciless in battle and engaging in human sacrifice to appease their various gods. However, as this exhibition shows, the Aztecs were also an extremely civilised and sophisticated culture. They produced highly skilled and sensitive art, conceived perhaps the most advanced calendar of the time, and built extraordinary temples in clean and well-organised cities.

The 'Aztecs' exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts represents the largest survey of Aztec art ever to have been staged outside Mexico. It brings together more than 380 works of art from collections in the United States, Europe and Mexico, many of which are being shown abroad for the first time. Organised thematically, room by room, the exhibition explores all aspects of Aztec religious, social and economic life through the sheer diversity and range of artefacts on display: from monumental stone sculpture to miniature gold objects, and from intricate turquoise mosaics to rare pictorial manuscripts (or codices).

Fig.1
Map showing the extent
of the Aztec Empire

Mountain High Map relief © Digital Wisdom Inc., 1995-2002

The Aztec migration myth

The beautiful hand-painted codices mentioned above tell how the Aztecs migrated from their homeland, Aztlan ('place of whiteness' or 'place of herons'), down through



Mexico in search of land to settle. According to the myth, the Aztecs' tribal leader, Huitzilopochtli ('left-sided hummingbird'), foretold that his people should settle where they saw an eagle on a cactus with a snake in its beak. After a long journey, the Aztecs arrived at a lake, called Lake Tetzco, in Mexico's central highland basin. In the middle of the lake was an island, and on this island was the strange sight that Huitzilopochtli had predicted.

Having arrived at their promised land, the Aztecs claimed the island and its surrounding fertile land, and, in 1325, founded a city they named Tenochtitlan, 'the place of the stone cactus'. They began to build a spectacular temple in the centre of the city (later called the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple, by the Spanish), which they dedicated to Huitzilopochtli.

In time, Tenochtitlan would grow to become a beautiful and prosperous city of about 250,000 inhabitants, the heart of a vast Aztec empire. When the Spanish arrived to conquer the Aztecs in 1519, they were awestruck by the great pyramids towering over the sacred centre, the dazzling palaces and colourful markets selling a bewildering variety of food and luxuries.

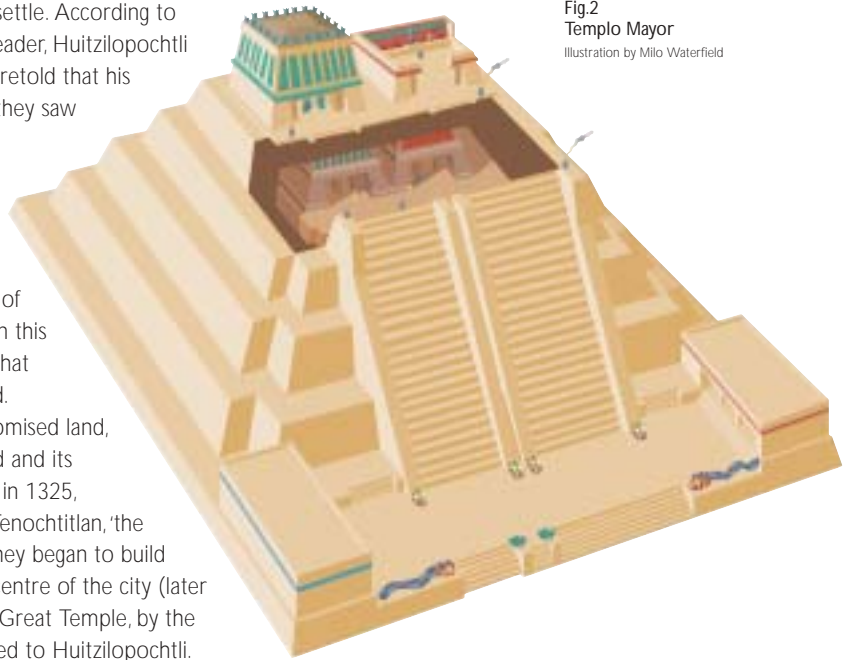


Fig.2
Templo Mayor
Illustration by Milo Waterfield

'With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes.'

Bernal Diaz, a 26-year-old conquistador (Spanish conqueror) who fought in Cortés' army, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s.

Gallery 1 Antecedents

The objects on display in Gallery 1 all pre-date the rule of the Aztecs and so are known as antecedents (preceding things or circumstances). For 2500 years before their arrival, Mexico had been home to many civilisations, including the Olmecs, the Maya and the Toltecs. The Aztecs were the last of these great cultures to settle there, and, as a result, were heavily influenced by the already established groups around Lake Tetzco. In order to integrate themselves into the area, they adopted the native language, Nahuatl, and copied artistic styles and techniques from other Mesoamerican cultures. (Mesoamerica is the term used to describe the central region of the Americas inhabited by native civilisations before the arrival of the Spanish.) The warlike Aztecs also formed alliances with nearby communities to consolidate their military strength and expand their ever-growing empire.

Perhaps the two greatest influences on Aztec art and culture in general came from the ancient cities of Teotihuacan and Tula. Before its decline in 700AD, Teotihuacan had been a wondrous city of about 200,000 people, with extensive temple complexes and specialist craft districts. Historically, it was a site of vital importance to the Aztecs, who revered it as the City of the Gods ('Teotihuacan'). They also incorporated a number of Teotihuacano gods into their pantheon (family of gods), including Tlaloc, the rain god, and Chalchiuhtlicue ('she of the jade skirt'), the goddess of lakes and streams. A principal deity, the ruler-priest known as Quetzalcoatl ('feathered serpent'), was adopted from a later civilisation: the Toltecs.

Many of the objects in this gallery are from Teotihuacan; the skilled craftsmanship and the exquisite mosaic patterning of burial masks such as cat. 13 would have been greatly admired by the Aztecs.

Cat. 13

Mask

c. 450, Teotihuacan

Stone, turquoise, obsidian and shell

21.5 x 20 cm

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City,
CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabe

Tula, 'place of reeds' and home to the Toltecs, thrived a few hundred years after Teotihuacan, and left a similarly influential legacy (a gift handed down) to later Mesoamerican cultures. The Aztecs believed the Toltecs were the founders of civilisation and applied the name 'Tula' or 'Tollan' to a number of great ancient cities in praise. The Toltecs were credited with the invention of painting and sculpture, and were considered the unequalled masters of both pictographic writing (writing with pictures and symbols) and the mosaics of multi-coloured feathers that adorned shields. In fact, the Aztecs called their craftsmen *tolteca* in honour of the refined art of the Toltecs, and gave them a privileged position in society, working for the nobility.

Progressing through the exhibition, it is quickly apparent the extent to which the Aztecs took their inspiration from Teotihuacan, Tula and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures, adopting everything from the simplest stone-cutting technique (a practice known as lapidary) to complex calendrical systems and a particular view of the world. Over time however, they also developed their own original style and iconography, which sprang from a uniquely Aztec perspective on warfare, religion and cosmology (the study of the cosmos).



Gallery 2 The Human Form

In Gallery 2, the human form is represented in a variety of different styles and media. Aztec artists rarely created realistic portraits of individuals, instead relying on a standard repertoire of figure types and poses: seated male figure, kneeling woman, standing nude. For this reason, Aztec sculpture is often interpreted as being very rigid, stylised and expressionless, conforming to a set artistic formula and established 'rules' of representation.

In fact, the Aztecs had an extensive and highly scientific understanding of the human body, and some Aztec sculptures are very naturalistic, displaying wrinkled foreheads, hunched backs and gap-toothed grimaces. However, this is more commonly true of portrayals of old gods or elderly men than of the idealised forms of vigorous, youthful males.



Cat. 44
Hunchback
c. 1500, Aztec
Stone
33 x 16 x 12 cm

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City,
CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabe

'Whatever the artist makes is an image of reality; he seeks its true appearance ... He makes a turtle ... its shell as it were moving, its head thrust out ... its neck and feet as if it were stretching them out.'

Florentine Codex, 1579

Cat. 72
Rabbit
c. 1500, Aztec
Stone
33 x 22 x 24 cm

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City,
CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabe

Cat. 44 Hunchback

This old stone hunchback with his bony ribcage and short limbs is a particularly good example of the honest and often humorous realism for which Aztec artists are today admired. He wears a loincloth and sports the hairstyle characteristic of warriors, with a lock of hair tied with cotton tassels on the right side of his head. The hunchback would have been watched over by Nanauatzin ('he [covered] with pustules') who was the patron deity of deformed humans. According to the Spanish, men affected by deformities were fed and cared for until a solar eclipse took place, when they were the first to be sacrificed.

Comparing the hunchback's simple loincloth with the more elaborate clothing and adornments of other figures in this room, do you think he was a particularly high-ranking member of Aztec society? Within the hierarchical (graded) social structure, the lower classes, which consisted of farmers and slaves, would have worn cheap, plain clothes such as loincloths. In contrast, the few wealthy, noble Aztecs were attired in brilliant, feathered costumes, decorated capes, braided hair and gold jewellery. Find further examples of people from each class in this gallery.

For the Aztecs, the human body and spirit were intimately linked to the natural and supernatural worlds around them. The state of their own being could therefore have a direct impact on their surroundings. If the aim of Aztec life was to maintain harmony, it was believed that a balanced body and life led ultimately to a balanced society and natural order.

Gallery 3 The Natural World

The variety of objects in Gallery 3, from minuscule fleas to green-veined pumpkins and large coiled serpents, highlights the importance of the natural world in both daily life and, more profoundly, in Aztec religious and cosmological beliefs. The room contains carefully observed sculptures of domesticated animals such as dogs (cat. 70), as well as wild coyotes (cat. 69) and untamed jaguars (cat. 71). It also includes detailed representations of some of the staple foods of the Aztec diet.

The Aztecs explained the distinguishing features and roles of different animals through elaborate and often entertaining myths that were recorded in manuscripts such as the Florentine Codex. One such story tells how, when the moon was born at Teotihuacan, it was so blinding that one of the gods threw a rabbit at its face to dull its glow. This is why, for the Aztecs, a full moon appears to contain the silhouette of a rabbit (see cat. 72). There are many examples in Aztec art in which gods such as Quetzalcoatl, the 'feathered serpent', take a hybrid form, in his case a snake-bird, combining the features or qualities of two animals to emphasise aspects of the deity's mythical or supernatural powers.

As Aztec society was largely agricultural, it was reliant on the weather (which was sometimes unpredictable or harsh) for a good harvest. When the Aztecs first settled around Lake Tetzaco, farmland was relatively scarce and so they created floating fields called *chinampas*, which were arranged in a grid pattern with canals between



each block. Here they cultivated pumpkins (cat. 67), avocados and tomatoes (from the Nahuatl *aguacatl*, *tomatl*), sweet potatoes, chillies and beans, as well as maize and corn which they used to make pancakes known as *tortillas*.

The market – a bustling, vibrant and noisy place central to Aztec daily life – was where farmers, traders and craftsmen came to exchange their produce. One Spanish conquistador later commented: 'We were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise it contained' (Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s). Valuable items such as gold dust, quetzal feathers and cacao beans were used to barter for goods of equal value: turkey cocks and hens, quail, rabbits and deer; ducks and other water birds, maguey syrup and honey (Florentine Codex, 1579). Cacao beans from the cacao pod (see cat. 39) were also used by the Aztecs to make a chocolate drink (*xocolatl* or *xocoatl*, 'bitter water'), which only the nobles could afford and which, until the arrival of the Spanish in 1519, was unknown beyond the Americas.

Gallery 4 Gods of Life

The Aztecs had about 1600 different gods and goddesses – one for every aspect of their lives. The various deities were believed to exert immense power and influence over everything people did and, as a result, were worshipped devoutly by all levels of society, both at domestic shrines and also in elaborate public rituals. These ceremonies, led by priests who often 'became' gods for that time, were highly theatrical and dramatic affairs, integrating festive dancing in fantastic costumes with bloody human sacrifice.

Although Aztec deities can be broadly divided into male and female, those of life and death, and those of creation and destruction, they were far more complex than being either purely good or evil. Many were dual in nature, incorporating a particular quality, gender or role (such as life-giving) with its opposite (in this case, life-extinguishing). The supreme deity Ometeotl ('two-god'), for example, combined both male and female aspects in his role as creator-god. This duality (double nature) reflected one of the dominant principles of Aztec religion and thought: that the cosmos was organised into binary opposites, such as night and day, fire and water, cold and heat.

Cat. 99 Xipe Totec

Examine cats 92–98 and especially cat. 99. These are all idols made for the Aztec god of fertility, Xipe Totec ('our flayed lord'), whose cult was related to the earth, vegetation and agricultural renewal. The highly textured, bobbled surface that these sculptures have in common is meant to represent flayed human skin. In Aztec rituals, enemy captives had their hearts removed before being skinned alive as a sacrifice to Xipe Totec. Priests then cloaked themselves in the flayed skins in religious ceremonies to signify the rebirth of young plants.



Cat. 99**Xipe Totec**

c. 1500, Aztec

Fired clay and paint

97 x 43 x 20 cm

Museo Regional de Puebla, Puebla,
CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabe**Cat. 138****Anthropomorphic brazier**

c. 1500, Aztec

Fired clay and paint

91 x 76 x 57.5 cm

Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepozotlan,
CONACULTA-INAH
Photo Michel Zabe

'From them (the gods)
we inherited our
pattern of life which in
truth they did hold...
Thus before them do
we prostrate ourselves;
in their names we bleed
ourselves; our oaths we
keep, incense we burn,
and sacrifices we offer.'

Aztec priests' speech to Spanish
missionaries, 1524

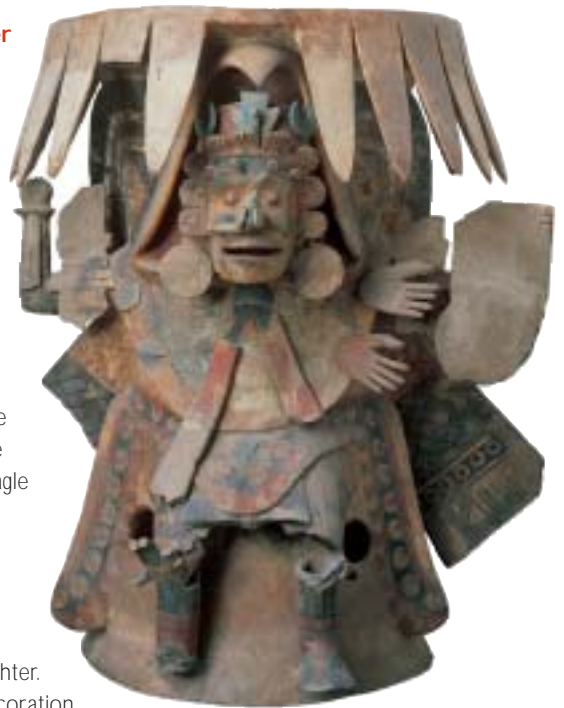
Gallery 5 Gods of Death

As the example of Xipe Totec suggests, the Aztecs often conceived of life and death as bound in an unbroken and unending cycle. The first work in the 'Gods of Death' gallery, the figure with three faces (cat. 130), vividly illustrates this point, its outer death-mask encasing the new life of the young man in the middle. In this respect, the so-called 'Gods of Death' can also be understood as agents of life, and vice versa.

The Aztecs had no concept of heaven and hell as places of reward and punishment. Instead, they envisioned the cosmos as divided into layers, both above and below the earth, each of which received people who had died a particular death. If you had died by drowning or been struck by lightning, for example, you ended up on the celestial (heavenly) plane governed by Tlaloc, the rain god. The nine levels beneath the earth, collectively known as Mictlan (the underworld), were less welcoming and were where the majority of Aztecs went when they died. Although it wasn't quite as grim as the Christian concept of 'hell', the people banished here had to brave such hazards as clashing mountains and flying knives made from obsidian (hard, black volcanic glass).

Cat. 138**Anthropomorphic brazier**

This is perhaps the best preserved of the five brightly painted, ceremonial braziers (fire pots) discovered during the construction of the Metro in Mexico City, near where the Templo Mayor had previously stood. The brazier depicts the fiercely expressive form of a warrior crossing the threshold of death, either killed in battle or sacrificed to the gods. The figure wears an enormous eagle helmet with an open beak, and so can be identified as an eagle warrior, one of the most distinguished military orders that could be awarded to a brave Aztec fighter. The black, red and yellow decoration and facial paint associates him with Yayauhqui Tezcatlipoca, patron of youthful energy and military victory, while the 'halo' of nine feathers around the upper part of his face evokes the planes of the underworld.



Why do you think the warrior is adorned with a necklace of severed hands? Might it be a testament to the number of war captives he took during his lifetime?

And what do you think these braziers (fire pots) might have been used for exactly? Why do they frequently depict warriors? Could they have perhaps been lit for celebrations of military victories or to commemorate the death of a particularly brave warrior? It might help to know that the columns of smoke produced by such ritual braziers were thought to lead the *tonal* (soul) of the deceased to the celestial battlefield.

Elsewhere in Gallery 5 are female figures in aggressive poses, with clenched fists and bared teeth (cats 143, 144, 145). These fearsome figures are *cihuateteo*, the malevolent (evil) spirits of women who have died in childbirth. Like the warrior on the anthropomorphic brazier, cat. 145 wears a garland of severed hands; hers also has skulls. These heroic women were thought to be the female counterparts of male warriors who had died in battle, and were accorded the same high honour in death: to accompany the sun on its daily journey across the sky.

Gallery 6 Religion: priests, ritual and the calendar

The vital role of religion in all aspects of Aztec social, economic and cultural life and at every level meant that priests were highly respected and influential members of society. They lived simple lives and were not allowed to marry, devoting themselves instead to the regular appeasement of different deities in order to ensure cosmic harmony for the Aztec people. In addition to the public ceremonies that they performed, they were also expected to slice their ears open regularly and offer a small amount of their own blood to the gods.

The Aztec ruler was the chief priest, a semi-divine figure who, together with the other priests, could communicate directly with the gods and carry out their will. One of the priests' primary responsibilities was the nourishment of the gods through bloodletting and, more dramatically, through the gruesome act of human sacrifice. Victims had their chests cut open with sacrificial knives (see cat. 153) and their still-beating hearts removed and offered to the gods by priests in blood-spattered feathered capes. The limp body of the victim was then tossed down the steps of the temple and the remainder of his corpse was often later feasted upon by the warrior who had killed him. Rather than being a horrifying spectacle, the Aztecs believed this ritual was necessary to guarantee the continued favour of the gods. They feared that if the sacrifices stopped, the crops would fail, the seasons would not change, and the sun would not rise. Indeed, life itself would end.

As well as religious beliefs such as these, many areas of life were heavily governed by the Aztecs' sophisticated calendars and elaborate counting systems. There were two main ways of measuring time. The 365-day solar or yearly calendar (*xiuhtlapohualli*) was closely linked to the seasons and to agricultural activities such as harvesting. It was made up of 18 'months' of 20 days (360), plus five 'useless' or 'unlucky' days. Each 'month' was dedicated to a particular deity and was distinguished by a different feast.

Although it also regulated human activities, the 260-day ritual calendar (*tonalpohualli*) was more religious in nature, particularly concerned with fate and destiny. It was composed of 13 numbers (represented by a dot for every four units and a bar for five) and an ancient set of 20 signs which, when combined, produced 260 individually named days (such as '1-rabbit', '2-water' or '3-jaguar'), each of which

'... this horrible and abominable thing... every time they want to ask something of their idols, they take little girls and boys, and even adult men and women, and cut open their chests to pull out their heart and entrails...'

The Spanish commander Hernán Cortés, from *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* by Francisco Lopez de Gomara, 1552.



Cat. 171
Xiuhmolpilli
 c. 1500, Aztec
 Stone
 Length 61 cm, diameter 26 cm

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City,
 CONACULTA-INAH
 Photo Michel Zabe

was associated with a different fate. Aztec people were named after the day of the ritual calendar on which they were born. It was thought that the fate of this day would affect their personal destiny.

When the various numbers and signs of these two different calendars were integrated, they produced a combination which would occur only once every 52 years. This 52-year time period became perhaps the most important cycle for the Aztecs, and one which might be considered equivalent to our century. The conclusion of a 52-year period was marked with a New Fire ceremony in which all fires were extinguished. Priests then lit a new fire in the chest cavity of an enemy captive, distributing it to temples and eventually to households. The Aztecs believed that the world had already been created and destroyed four times before, and that their Fifth World was also doomed. It was thought that this ritual of renewal would prevent the destruction of the world a fifth time.

This stone monument (cat. 171) is a *xiuhmolpilli*, or 'year bundle', and represents a sheaf of 52 reeds. It bears the year-glyph '2-reed' which indicates the year in which the New Fire ceremony took place. The year bundle would have been created to commemorate a New Fire ceremony during which 52 of these bundles were burned.

Gallery 7 Rulers and Warriors

Like many agricultural civilisations, Aztec society was hierarchical and a person's social position, and therefore his way of life, was largely determined by birthright.

Although the class structure was reasonably rigid, some social mobility was possible through entry into the priesthood, victory in warfare or success in trade.

The Aztec ruler, however, had to have been born into the right family. As the only figure allowed to wear the precious colour turquoise, he lived in a sumptuous palace with spectacular gardens, a banqueting hall, a large zoo, and gold cutlery. Attended by an abundance of bodyguards and beautiful women (who had to approach him with downcast eyes and bare feet), the ruler possessed an almost godlike status.

The ruler at the time of the Spanish invasion was the ninth Aztec emperor, Motecuhzoma II, who could trace his ancestry back to the first ruler, Acamapichtli. To maintain his luxurious lifestyle, the great Motecuhzoma demanded one-third of everything his people produced in taxes. He also demanded regular payments, known as 'tribute', from the subjects of conquered provinces. As a result, many of the artworks in this exhibition might possibly have belonged to Motecuhzoma.

At the opposite end of the social hierarchy were peasant farmers, landless commoners and slaves (*tlacotin*), most of whom had few rights or luxuries, but who spent their uncomplicated lives growing crops for food and for tribute. A privileged upper class was formed by well-dressed nobles (*pipiltin*) and priests, both of whom played an important role in government and law-making. Many of the intricate ornaments in this room – pendants, lip plugs and ear spools – would have been worn by them. Below the nobles were the merchants (*pochteca*) and artisans, or skilled craftsmen. It was to this middle class that professional warriors belonged.

Young boys would be educated at home by their parents until the age of 15, at which point they would either be trained in warfare, or sent for priestly instruction in writing, philosophy and astronomy. (Girls were educated at home until 15 as well, but then married). Although already respected members of society, warriors could improve their rank by capturing an ever-greater number of victims, and were rewarded with increasingly impressive costumes and precious tribute items. The two most distinguished military orders were that of the eagle (see cat. 206) and the jaguar. To ensure a steady supply of victims for sacrifice even during peacetime, the Aztecs staged occasional battles, which they called 'flowery wars' (*xochiyaoyotl*), with local rival groups such as the Tlaxcalans.

'The great Motecuhzoma was about 40 years old, of good height ... He had a short black beard, well shaped and thin.'

Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s.

Cat. 186
Warrior
after 1325, Aztec
Cast gold-silver-copper alloy
11.2 x 6.1 cm

The Cleveland Museum of Art,
Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund, 1984.37
Photo © The Cleveland Museum of Art,
Cleveland



Cat. 186 Warrior

This gold figurine represents a warrior clutching a serpent-headed spear-thrower in one hand, and a shield, banner and darts in the other. His élite status is suggested by the gold from which he has been made and by his accoutrements (accessories), especially the jewellery and sandals which were reserved solely for nobles or great warriors.

Considering how warriors were represented in Aztec art, how important do you think military victory and expansion were to the Aztecs? Why did they get the reputation for being a warlike and bloodthirsty race?

Why do you think the gold warrior has openings in his chest and in the back of his head? What purpose could they have served? Considering that the eyes were probably inlaid with obsidian and shell, and also the important position warriors held in society, might these cavities have held other precious stones?

‘The subjects of the lords of Tenochtitlan paid all kinds of tribute – food, clothing, weapons ... The poorest among them, lacking what was necessary, offered their sons and daughters.’

Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, 1581

Gallery 8 Templo Mayor

This gallery is devoted to the wealth of extraordinary artefacts excavated from the most significant religious building in Tenochtitlan, the great Templo Mayor. When the Aztecs first founded their capital, they immediately built a temple on top of which were two shrines dedicated to their two supreme deities: a red one paid homage to the warrior and solar god, Huitzilopochtli, and a blue one honoured the rain god, Tlaloc. Between 1325 and 1521, each successive Aztec ruler added a new outermost layer to the temple out of respect to the gods and, more selfishly, to ensure that his reign would be immortalised within the great stone structure.

Recognising its importance to the Aztec people, the Spanish quickly dismantled the Templo Mayor in 1521, and reused some of the stone in their construction of a cathedral, which still occupies one side of Mexico City's main square today. Fortunately, however, they also recorded their awe upon seeing this amazing building and, in 1978, the discovery of a large stone sculpture of Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, led to the eventual unearthing of the Templo Mayor's long-buried foundations. During the excavation, it was discovered that the preceding versions of the pyramid complex had been preserved intact with each subsequent ruler's rebuilding, and so archaeologists were able to identify seven different layers, peeling each away like an onion skin.

All the objects in this room were found during the excavation. They include commemorative plaques (cat. 223), sacrificial altars (cat. 225), eagle warriors (cat. 228), votive vessels (cats 234–237), burial masks (cats 256–261) and musical instruments (cats 270, 271). The excavations of the Templo Mayor also yielded objects from older Mesoamerican cultures which the Aztecs had held in high regard, most notably a stunning greenstone mask with blood-red teeth from Teotihuacan (see cat. 260). The exhaustive range of offerings suggests that the Aztecs created the Templo Mayor as a model of everything that could be found in the universe, both past and present. The organisation of the four-sided temple structure is also thought to reflect the Aztec world view, in which the earth is understood to be a disk, surrounded by water and divided into four quarters.

Cat. 233 **Mictlantecuhtli**

In August 1994, archaeologists working in the north section of the Templo Mayor discovered this monumental ceramic figure of Mictlantecuhtli, which was one of two sculptures found depicting the lord of death. Although Mictlantecuhtli is identified by a skull face elsewhere in the exhibition, here he is stripped of half his flesh, his hands are enormous claws and his liver dangles from his stomach. Since ancient times, the liver had been associated with death and Mictlan, the lowest part of the underworld, damp and cold, where Mictlantecuhtli lived.

Look at the intriguing holes on Mictlantecuhtli's bald head. What might have originally been inserted there? It may help to know that all deities of the earth and death were thought to have curly hair. Which features, if any, evoke his role as the lord of the underworld?

Examine Mictlantecuhtli's expression and stance. Would you describe the sculpture as naturalistic or highly stylized? What is the lord of death's reaction to his liver popping out? (The liver was thought to be where the human spirit resided.)

Gallery 9 **Treasures**

The Spanish desire for Mexican gold (expressed by Spanish commander Hernán Cortés in the quote opposite) at times gives the misleading impression that this metal was also the most prized substance of the Aztecs. In fact, there was an abundance of gold in Mesoamerica and so the Aztecs valued other precious, rarer materials as much as, if not more than, gold. Among these, the most treasured were probably jade, turquoise and feathers, all of which were used by highly skilled and innovative craftsmen to make the exquisite objects on display in this room.

It was the intensely green-blue stones jade and turquoise which held the most allure for



Cat. 233
Mictlantecuhtli
c. 1480, Aztec
Fired clay, stucco and paint
176 x 80 x 50 cm

Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City,
CONACULTA-IMAH
Photo Michel Zabé

‘Send me some gold, for I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart, which can only be cured by gold.’

Cortés' message to Motecuhzoma II, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 1552.

the Aztecs, their seductive colour reminiscent of water, the essential life force. Often acquired through trade with other cultures, these stones had many decorative uses: they could be inlaid in pieces of jewellery, carved as figurines, or attached to wood to make mosaic masks (see cats 303, 304). Their association with precious, life-giving water, and therefore with life itself, meant that jade and turquoise were also commonly used in representations of Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of lakes and streams. In painted manuscripts such as the Codex Mendoza (cat. 349), the turquoise colour of the speech bubbles which emerge from figures' mouths may imply that they are saying something of significance.

Feathers were often collected as tribute items before being fashioned into shields, fans (cat. 198) and headdresses by the highly respected guild of featherworkers known as the *amanteca*. They were plucked from both local, common birds and from the more exotic species of Mexico's tropical regions, among which was the quetzal bird, whose gloriously iridescent (luminous) plumage was very highly prized by the Aztecs. First sewn onto paper attached to a base of reeds and covered in leather, the feathers were then arranged in spectacular patterns.

The large red shield (cat. 299) in this gallery is a stunning example of accomplished featherwork, depicting a semi-mythical water creature outlined in gold. It is quite possible that it was part of a shipment sent back to Spain by Cortés in 1522.

Gallery 10 Contact and Codices

In 1519, which was the Aztec year '1-reed', Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors sailed across to Mexico from Cuba, intending to conquer the Aztecs and plunder their gold. A number of years before, Motecuhzoma had received mysterious omens prophesying (foretelling) the arrival of men from the east, and so had sent messengers to the Gulf coast to bring back news of these strange, bearded men. To the Aztecs (who had only ever known canoes), the approaching ships of the Spanish seemed like majestic houses floating on the sea.

The Spaniards first landed in the Tabasco region where the local people gave Cortés a slave, Malinalli (named Doña Marina by the Spanish), who translated for him and later became his mistress. Hearing of their arrival, Motecuhzoma sent the Spanish a large gold sun disc and a silver moon, perhaps in the belief that Cortés was the ruler-priest Quetzalcoatl, returned from the east. These lavish gifts made Cortés even more determined to meet the great Aztec emperor. He led his troops on a gruelling march more than 400 miles inland, during which they crossed two mountain ranges and came across native people who threatened to kill them and eat their flesh with chillies. After 12 weeks, they got their first glimpse of Tenochtitlan, glittering like a jewel in the brilliant blue waters of Lake Tetzoco.

Against a backdrop of colourful flags and beating drums, and walking under a canopy of brilliant green feathers, Motecuhzoma went to meet Cortés. The two leaders greeted each other warmly and exchanged gifts; Doña Marina translated as Cortés promised not to harm Motecuhzoma or the Aztec empire. The Aztec ruler then led the Spaniards into the awe-inspiring city of Tenochtitlan where they were treated like gods in his palace.

However, despite Motecuhzoma's generosity, the Spaniards remained unsure of his intentions and, aware that they were outnumbered, they soon betrayed the Aztec ruler and took him hostage. In angry response, the Aztecs attacked their Spanish guests, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. The kidnapped Motecuhzoma died during the fighting, possibly killed by his own people who were throwing stones at the conquistadors. In desperation, the Spanish finally fled the city by moonlight on 30 June 1520, an occasion that has come to be known as the Noche Triste (Sad Night).

The following year a stronger Spanish army returned, however, to lay siege (surrounding and blockading a place in order to capture it) to Tenochtitlan. The intense fighting which ensued turned the lake red with blood and ended in the death of many more Aztecs, mainly through death and starvation as a result of the siege. Despite fierce resistance on the part of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan finally fell to Cortés on 13 August, 1521.

As planned, the Spanish immediately instigated a campaign to convert the pagan Aztecs to Christianity, erecting churches and commissioning Christian devotional items, such as the cross (cat. 322), triptych (cat. 324) and gold chalice (cat. 327) on display in this gallery. Christian missionaries attempted to bridge the cultural gap by employing traditional Aztec techniques (such as featherwork) and using picture writing to tell the Christian story. By using that which held symbolic meaning and value for the Aztecs

(hummingbird feathers, maize plant motifs), the Spanish hoped to make an alien religion seem more familiar and relevant to them.

As might be expected considering the conviction with which they had practised their own religion previously, the Aztecs' conversion to Christianity was a slow and gradual process. For a while, the two religions existed somewhat uneasily together as the Aztecs were forced to relinquish their many gods and goddesses in favour of one supreme deity. Despite the eventual success of the Christian mission, some Aztec idols were still being worshipped more than three hundred years later. The fertility goddess in Gallery 2 (cat. 41), for example, was discovered in the nineteenth century in a remote region of eastern Mexico, surrounded by devotional offerings and candles.

Cat. 355
Codex Azcatitlan,
folios 22v and 23r
late sixteenth century, colonial
25 folios, European paper;
modern red demi-shagreen binding
22.5 x 29.5 cm

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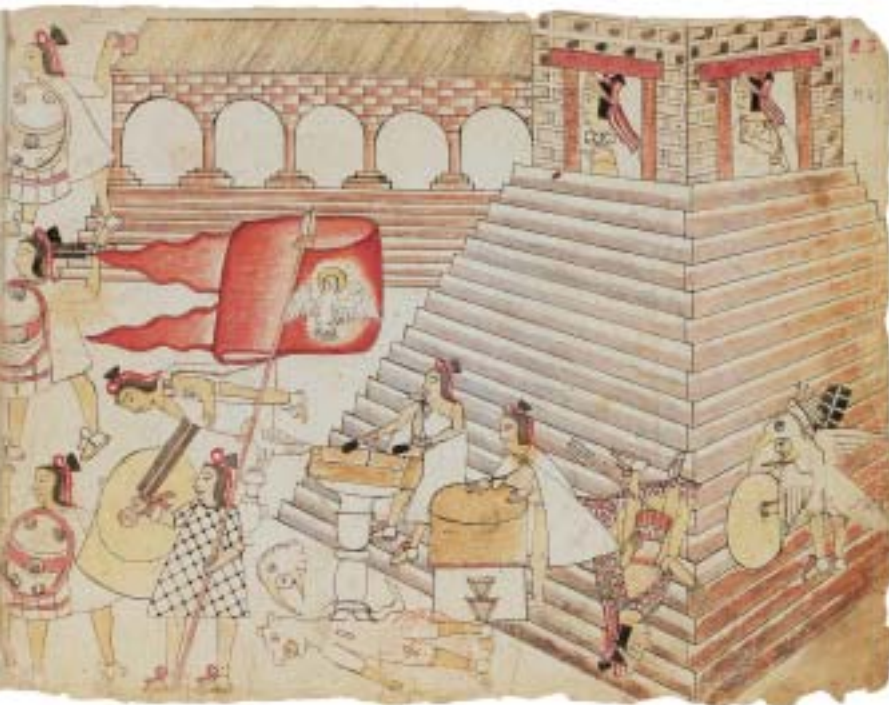
**'This is what our kings
and those who ruled
this city told us: that
you would come to
assume your rightful
place ... Welcome to
your kingdom, lords!'**

Motecuhzoma on first meeting
Cortés, from Bernardino de
Sahagún's book *A General History
of the Things of New Spain*, 1580.

'We fought them off hand to hand... inflicting great casualties on them... they cared nothing for death in battle. They said... Our idols have promised us victory... and we shall not let one of you survive.'

Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, 1580s.

The swift success of the Spanish victory over the much larger Aztec armies can be attributed to a number of different factors. Most significant of these were their superior weapons and military tactics. The Spanish arsenal (weapon holdings) included firearms and cannons – which the Aztecs thought fired bolts of lightning – as well as steel swords and mounted soldiers. Horses were unknown in Mexico and the Aztecs believed that each horse and its rider was a single, supernatural creature. By contrast, the Aztec armies were fighting with small flint knives, spears and feathered shields. Their desire to take enemy captives alive for sacrifice at a later date also contributed to their defeat by the Spanish conquistadors, who had been trained to kill. Lastly, Cortés exploited underlying tensions between Tenochtitlan and other cities such as Tlaxcala, convincing them to become Spanish allies in order to swell his own army.



Cat. 355 Codex Azcatitlan, folios 22v and 23r

Much of what we know about the Aztecs both before and after the Spanish conquest comes from their beautiful, hand-painted manuscripts, or codices (singular: codex). There are many rare and exquisite codices in this final gallery, depicting all aspects of daily life from mundane and domestic pastimes such as cooking, and special occasions such as weddings, to the historically significant defeat at the hands of the conquistadors. During the initial

years of Spanish rule, many codices were destroyed, but some continued to be produced under the watchful eye of the colonial authorities who wanted historical information about the civilisation they had vanquished.

In their codices, Aztec painter-scribes, or *tlacuiloque*, used a form of picture writing which resembled the ancient Egyptians' hieroglyphics or the modern-day comic. This 'writing' included pictograms, phoenetic (sounding-like-speech) signs, religious emblems and even mathematical symbols (to record taxes and tribute payments). Under the Spanish, Aztec scribes were forced to adapt their existing pictorial script, creating new European signs (such as the Christian cross) and slowly introducing alphabetic writing, in order to accommodate the demands of their new rulers.

The Codex Azcatitlan (cat. 355) is one of the most famous examples of a post-

conquest manuscript, that is, a codex that was produced after the arrival of the Spanish. Its folios (sheets of paper) contain vivid scenes depicting the great phases of Aztec history, from the foundation of Tenochtitlan to the arrival of Cortés' army, which is recorded here by folios 22v and 23r.

Identify the following figures on these pages of the Codex Azcatitlan: Hernán Cortés, his translator Doña Marina, a conquistador bearing the banner of the Holy Ghost, some Aztec musicians, an eagle warrior, and some Indian porters carrying supplies.

Does the Aztecs' reaction to the Spanish seem noticeably hostile in this picture? If not, why not? Might Aztec scribes have been asked to document the Aztec defeat by their conquerors after the event? Do you think this pictorial explanation of what occurred seems to have been told from a distinctly Spanish point of view?

The Aztecs and Modern Mexico

When the Spanish defeated the Aztecs in 1521, they demolished much of Tenochtitlan and rebuilt it as Mexico-Tenochtitlan, now simply Mexico City, capital of modern-day Mexico. However, despite also destroying many of the Aztec sculptures and codices that they considered anti-Christian, the Spanish weren't able to completely obliterate this powerful civilisation. Today's Mexicans are very proud of their Aztec past and continue to hold the beliefs, remember the traditions, and practise the art forms of their ancestors. More than two million people still speak the indigenous language, Nahuatl. However, perhaps the most poignant reminder of the Aztecs is the Mexican national flag, which features the legendary eagle, cactus and snake emblem of the long-buried heart of the mighty Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan.

