



Susan D. Gillespie

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37(6):68-69, 1984

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THE BOOKSHELF

Aztec Art, by Esther Pasztory.
322 pages, frontispiece, 75 color plates,
319 black-and-white plates, bibliography.
Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York 1983
\$60.00

Pre-Columbian Mexican art continues to fascinate us centuries after the native civilizations were destroyed by the Spanish conquerors. Among the many books available on this subject, *Aztec Art* is the first devoted exclusively to the art of the Aztec people of central Mexico. It explores the diversity of their artistic media and forms of visual expression, ranging from the major state-sponsored architecture, stone monuments and other forms of "elite" art to minor decorated household implements, the "lower class" art. This broad coverage makes the book indispensable as a reference for specialists, but it is written for the general public as well. Technical jargon is minimal, and a glossary explains the many native terms.

The Aztecs inhabited the Basin of Mexico, now the site of Mexico City, in separate, often antagonistic city-states. In the latter part of the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1200-1521), they conquered much of southern Mexico north of the Maya area, exacting tribute from the subjugated provinces. When Hernando Cortes and his *conquistadores* arrived in 1519, this tribute empire was headed by the most powerful of the Aztec cities, Tenochtitlan, whose last ruler was Motecuhzoma II (Montezuma). Much of what we know about the Aztecs really concerns the people of Tenochtitlan, and it is the artworks of Tenochtitlan which form the basic corpus of Aztec art.

Although the vast majority of native art was purposefully destroyed by the Spaniards, who saw it as idolatry, a few small pieces of perishable material were spared, having been sent to Europe by the early conquerors. Most of what has survived, however, has been unearthed in archaeological excavations in and around Mexico City, including the recent exposure of the *Templo Mayor*, the major pyramid of Tenochtitlan, and is thus almost all of non-perishable media, particularly stone.

The author provides a long introductory chapter to familiarize the general reader with the history and culture of the Aztecs. Those knowledgeable in Mesoamerican prehistory may wish to skip this chapter, which presents no new information, and begin with Pasztory's theoretical contribution and major theme—the role of Aztec art in society. The Aztec civilization lacked a writing system capable of expressing and communicating ideas, beliefs and traditions. This lacuna was filled by art, especially the

"elite" art and architecture, which are the principal concern of the book. A salient feature of Aztec art is its intended communicative function, most clearly manifested in the many pieces which incorporate a complex of symbolic motifs with multiple layers of meaning. The author's objective was to identify these motifs and explain their meaning in order to provide information on Aztec culture which cannot usually be gained from archaeological evidence or post-conquest ethnohistoric accounts.

The extent of information derived from this art is limited by the fact that most of the "communication" was apparently of a philosophical or religious nature, relating humans and their society to the gods and the cosmos. For instance, Pasztory identifies most of the stone sculptures as particular deities, or as having functioned in a religious context. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of religion in many aspects of Aztec culture is well documented so that more secular themes, such as conquest and domination, are identified even as they are expressed in a religious idiom.

Since the material from which the artworks were constructed is closely related to their function and context in society, the text is divided into individual chapters devoted to a single medium or art form: architecture, major and minor stone sculpture, the "codices" (post-conquest books with picture-writing in the native style), lapidary arts, wooden objects, featherwork, and ceramic vessels and figurines. A great asset of this book is the author's intention to include every known major work of Aztec art and as many of the minor pieces as possible. As expected, the famous Calendar Stone, the colossal statue of Coatlicue (the goddess "Serpent-Skirt"), the Stone of Tizoc, and the Temple Stone are all meticulously described and illustrated. But there are also many relatively unknown objects, scattered in European museums, mentioned in obscure publications, or only poorly illustrated elsewhere, which have all been brought together and made available in this single volume.

The text is primarily descriptive, focusing on each piece in turn, but some comparisons and generalizations are noted. For example, the iconographic themes displayed in various materials—stone, wood, ceramics, and the codices—are found to be quite different, even while there is some sharing of the symbolic motifs. Thus, an analysis of only one of these art forms would yield an incomplete picture of the Aztec belief system. Comparisons with the art of other Mesoamerican cultures reveal similarities which may elucidate pre-

historic cross-cultural interaction, but they also demonstrate the distinctiveness of Aztec art. While the artisans may have borrowed from outsiders, or drawn on the rich artistic heritage of their forebears in Teotihuacan and Tula, the artwork of the Aztecs developed on its own course, from its own inspirations. Even the different Aztec cities within the Basin of Mexico had separate artistic conventions, as Pasztory is able to show in those few cases where exact provenience is known.

The author also attempts to determine a chronological ordering for the different sculpted pieces on stylistic grounds, since most of them cannot be dated. The monumental art exhibits a progression from crude imitations of earlier prototypes to refined three-dimensional modeling and complex iconography. These works are assigned to four stages which actually, however, refer to the reigns of the rulers of Tenochtitlan, particularly the last three (Tizoc, Ahuitzotl and Moteuczoma II), for each of whom a different style is identified. While the text and illustrations leave no doubt that stylistic variation occurred, more archaeologically dated objects are needed to confirm that this variation is indeed tied to the succession of the different rulers. Nevertheless, a general chronology based on the analysis of art style supplements the otherwise meager data on the evolution of the Aztec state.

The illustrations are an integral part of the book, closely tied to the descriptions. Besides the black-and-white and color plates, line drawings of many pieces are provided to show further detail. The reader is cautioned that a number of textual references to the illustrations give the wrong plate numbers, but the descriptions are sufficient to guide one to the intended photograph or drawing.

The numerous, lavish illustrations and clear, precise explanations of the various objects are reason enough to read *Aztec Art*, but it is the bringing together of so many of the scattered artifacts representing a variety of art forms that makes this book so invaluable. Its comprehensive quality ensures that it will not only be read and enjoyed, but also kept at ready access as a reference text by Mesoamerican prehistorians and art historians.

Susan D. Gillespie is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University, Normal, IL.

Passport continued from page 60

want to see Anatolia's earliest texts—cuneiform signs in old Assyrian on clay tablets, primarily business records of traders.

Kültepe, one of Anatolia's largest sites, consists of the walled city of Kanesh on the mound and the Karum outside. In the center of the mound was an extensive complex used by princes and administrative personnel. At the Karum, trade,

mainly in tin, garments and cloth for copper, gold and silver brought prosperity. Spacious houses were arranged around squares and streets; storerooms and archive rooms were distinct from living areas. You'll see stone cists, graves that once contained rich burial gifts. Raging fires that destroyed Karum Levels II and Ib also preserved history through cuneiform tablets and their cylinder-sealed envelopes.

The double mound of Çatal Hüyük (6500–5600 B.C.), 32 miles south of Konya, marks one of the most ancient cities ever excavated. Mudbrick buildings rising on terrace levels could share a common easily defended entrance. Access to individual homes was via an opening in the roof. Perhaps you'll sense the presence of long-ago people as you examine their storerooms, hearths and ovens. Murals unearthed at Çatal Hüyük include hunting scenes of wild bulls and clear renditions of textiles that resemble today's Turkish carpets.

Practical travel tips

No visa is necessary to visit Turkey, just your valid U.S. passport. Because the central Anatolian plateau is hot in summer and cold in winter, ideal travel times are spring or fall. Your journey north from Konya back to Ankara is 163 highway miles. But mild Mediterranean waters and sandy coves may draw you south.

There is so much to see that planning is not easy, but lots of help is available from the Turkish Tourism and Information Offices in Ankara and 821 U.N. Plaza, New York, NY 10017, (212) 687-2194. Or contact the American Turkish Society, 850 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022. Travel agencies or the Tourism Office can recommend professional guides; rates start at \$1.50 an hour.

Museums and archaeological sites are closed Mondays, but otherwise are open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Entrance fees are low, with an extra charge for a camera in museums.

A sampling of organizations that sponsor group tours: Alumni Flights Abroad, 425 Cherry St., Bedford Hills, NY 10507-1397; Archaeological Tours, 30 E. 42 St., New York, NY 10017; Exprinter Swan, 500 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010; Gray Line, 7 W. 51 St., New York, NY 10019; Lindblad Travel, 133 E. 55 St., New York, NY 10022; Smithsonian Associates, 1278 A&I, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560; Society Expeditions, 723 Broadway East, Seattle, WA 98102; University Museum, 33 and Spruce Sts., Philadelphia, PA 19104; V.I.P. Tours, 3 E. 54 St., New York, NY 10022; and World of Oz, 3 E. 54 St., New York, NY 10022.

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