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Reading Assignment Part ONE:

The Art of the Mesoamerica

BY "native arts," we understand those products of skilled craft that originate within an indigenous community, that are intended for its own use, and that are expressive of its own mentality and values. Opposed to native aboriginal arts are those that are foreign, alien; they originate outside the community and are incomprehensible to it. In this chapter, we describe the arts of native peoples who were conquered and colonized by Europeans between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. It will be obvious to readers of this book how different—in principle, antagonistic—the art forms produced by the foreign conquerors and the conquered natives are in function, style, and meaning.



With the exception of the pre-Columbian peoples of North and South America, native cultures only occasionally produced monumental architecture, sculpture, or painting. The native genius for design often appeared in relatively small sculptures in stone, wood, metal, bone, and perishable materials of many kinds. Painting was often done on a variety of framed and unframed surfaces and in a variety of media, and its ornamental systems were applied in ceramics, weaving, embroidery, basketry, jewelry, costume, and utensils. In this chapter, we are also concerned with many works of these sorts.

THE PRE-COLUMBIAN ART OF THE AMERICAS

Among the native cultures of the world, those that flourished in the Americas before contact with European explorers are exceptional in several important respects. We have remarked in passing that these New World cultures are distinguished by monumental architecture, sculpture, and painting, as well as the craft arts. In addition, some of these groups, like the Maya, had a highly developed writing system and knowledge of mathematical calculation that made possible the keeping of precise records and the creation of a sophisticated calendar and a highly accurate astronomy. Although they used Stone Age technology, did not use the wheel (except for toys), and had no pack animals but the llama, pre-Columbian peoples excelled in the engineering arts associated with the planning and construction of cities, civic and domestic buildings, roads and bridges, and irrigation and drainage systems. They mastered complex agricultural techniques using only rudimentary tools of cultivation. Their works, left in ruins by the Spanish invasions or abandoned to the forces of nature, are being reclaimed from erosion and the encroachment of tropical forests. Today, ever more important discoveries are being made, and now the ruined cities can be visited and marveled at as among the most prodigious creations of human hands.

The origins of these peoples are still a matter of some dispute, centering primarily about the chronology of their arrival in America from Asia. They crossed the now sub-merged land bridge "Beringia," which connected the shores of the Bering Strait, sometime between 30,000 B.C.E. and 10,000 B.C.E. These Stone Age Asian nomads were hunters; their only tools were made of bone, pressure-flaked stone, and wood. They had no knowledge of agriculture but possibly some of basketry. They could control fire and probably built rude shelters. Over many centuries, they spread out until they occupied the two American continents. By about 3000 B.C.E., a number of the migrants had learned to cultivate wild grasses, setting the stage for the maize (corn) culture that was basic to the early peoples of the Americas. As agriculturists, the nomads became a settled people and learned to make pottery utensils and lively figurines of clay. Metals were used for ornament, not for tools; these peoples never developed a metal technology. With these skills as a base, many cultures arose over long periods of time. Several reached a high level of accomplishment by the early centuries of the Christian era.

MESOAMERICA

The term Mesoamerica (Middle America) names the region that comprises Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and the Pacific coast of El Salvador, triply referring to its geography, ethnology, and archeology. The Mexican highlands are a volcanic and seismic region. In highland Mexico, great reaches of arid plateau land, fertile for maize and wheat wherever water is available, lie between heavily forested mountain slopes, which at some places rise to perpetual snow. The moist tropical jungles of the coastal plains yield rich crops, when the land can be cleared. In Yucatán, a subsoil of limestone furnishes abundant material both for building and carving. The limestone tableland, covered with jungle, continues into the Petén region of Guatemala, which separates Mexico from Honduras. Some of the most spectacular of Maya ruins are located in the region of Yucatán and the Petén, where dense jungle is interspersed with broad stretches of savanna. The great mountain chains of Mexico and Guatemala extend into Honduras (which is seventy-five percent mountainous) and slope sharply down to tropical coasts. Highlands and mountain valleys, jungle and coastlines, with their chill, temperate, and humid climates, alternate dramatically.

The variegated landscape of Mesoamerica may have much to do with the diversity of languages spoken by its native populations; a very large number of different languages are distributed among no less than fourteen linguistic families. Many of the languages spoken in the preconquest periods survive to this day: the Maya tongue still can be heard in Guatemala; the Náhuatl of the Aztecs is spoken in the Mexican highlands; the Zapotec and Mixtec languages linger in Oaxaca and its environs. Diverse as the languages of these peoples were, their cultures otherwise had much in common: maize cultivation, religious rites, myths, traditions and folklore, social structures, customs, and arts. Yet, some (like the Maya) were distinguished as rich in total achievement; the Toltecs were renowned as great builders and organizers; the Aztecs were reputedly implacable warriors; and the Mixtecs were known as master craftsmen in gold and turquoise. As their history becomes better known, the cultures of Mesoamerica, taken in sum, are revealed as rivaling more familiar great cultures of the world.

Archeological investigation, with ever increasing refinement of technique, has been uncovering, describing, and classifying Mesoamerican monuments for more than a century. Since 1960, when important steps were taken in deciphering the hieroglyphic script of the Maya and in the systematic interpretation of their pictorial imagery, evidence for a detailed account of Mesoamerican history and art has fallen into place. Like the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, many Maya rulers now can be listed by name and the dates of their reigns fixed with precision. This accomplishment reinforced the general Mesoamerican chronology, which is now well established and widely accepted. The standard chronology is divided into three epochs, with some overlapping of subperiods: the Preclassic (Formative) extends from 2000 B.C.E. to about C.E. 300; the Classic period runs from about C.E. 200 to 900; and the Postclassic begins in about 900 and ends during the first several decades of the sixteenth century. The principal regions of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica are the Gulf Coast region (Olmec culture); Chiapas, Yucatán, and the Petén (Maya culture); southwestern Mexico and the region of Oaxaca (Zapotec and Mixtec cultures); and the Valley of Mexico (Teotihuacán, Toltec, and Aztec cultures). The expansion and wide influence of the principal cultures, however, has made for a fairly even distribution of important archeological sites throughout Mesoamerica.

MESOAMERICAN CHRONOLOGY

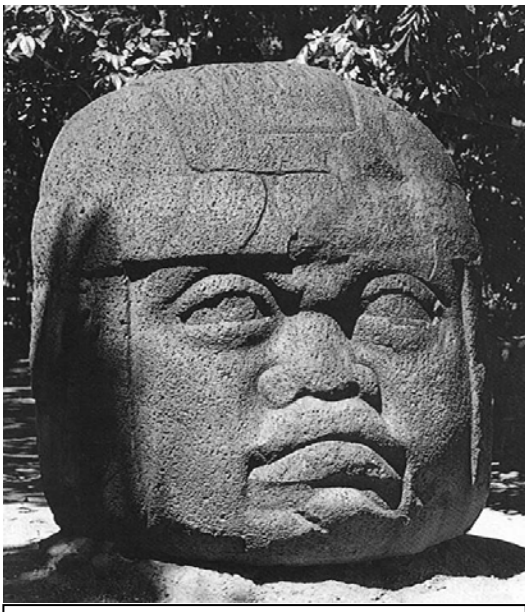
2000 B.C.	1000	B.C.	A.D.	1000	1519
PRECLASSIC (FORMATIVE)			CLASSIC*		POSTCLASSIC
Olmec (Gulf Coast region) <i>La Venta, San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes</i> Colima Maya (El Petén) <i>Nakbe</i>			Teotihuacán Maya (Yucatán, El Petén) <i>Tikal, Copán, Yaxchilán, Jaina, Bonampak</i> Zapotec (Oaxaca) <i>Monte Albán</i> Huastec <i>El Tajín</i>		Huastec <i>El Tajín</i> Mixtec <i>Monte Albán</i> Maya/Toltec (northern Yucatán) <i>Chichén Itzá</i> Toltec (central Mexico) <i>Tula</i> Aztec (Valley of Mexico) <i>Tenochtitlán</i>

*Many of the cultures listed in the Classic period actually originated during the later Preclassic. The Classic period was the period in which they achieved their unprecedented magnificence.

Preclassic: 2000 B.C.E.—C.E. 300

VERACRUZ AND TABASCO: OLMEC Olmec culture is known as the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica; the religious, social, and artistic traditions largely reach back to it. Though we know little of its origins and history, its influence is traced readily through the wide diffusion of its institutional forms, its monuments, arts, and artifacts. Excavations in the neighborhoods not only of Tres Zapotes, San Lorenzo, and La Venta, the principal Gulf Coast sites of Olmec culture, but in central Mexico and along the Pacific coast to El Salvador, indicate that Olmec influence was far more widespread than was once supposed, and that it was decisive for all subsequent Mesoamerican cultures as the origin of the distinctive features they all shared.

Settling in the tropical lowlands of the Gulf of Mexico (the present-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco), the Olmec peoples cultivated a terrain of rain forest and alluvial lowland washed by numerous rivers that flowed into the Gulf. It was here that social organization assumed the form adapted and developed by later Mesoamerican cultures. The mass of the population—food-producing farmers scattered in hinterland villages—provided the sustenance and labor that maintained a hereditary caste of rulers, hierarchies of priests, functionaries, retainers, and artisans. These were located by rank within enclosed precincts that served ceremonial, administrative, and residential functions, and perhaps the economic purpose of marketplace as well. At regular intervals, the whole community convened for ritual observances at religious-civic centers such as San Lorenzo and La Venta, which now can be regarded as the formative architectural expressions of the structure and ideals of Olmec society.



17-1 Colossal head, Olmec, La Venta, Mexico, 1500-300 BCE. Basalt, 8' high, 21' in circumference.

At La Venta, earthen platforms and stone enclosures mark out two great courtyards; at one end of the larger was a volcano-shaped clay "pyramid" or mound almost 100 feet high. The La Venta layout is an early form of the temple-pyramid, plaza-courtyard complex that will be characteristic of Mesoamerican "urban" design.

Facing out from the plaza are four colossal heads of basalt that weigh about 10 tons each and stand between 6 and 8 feet high (**FIG. 17-1**). Almost as much of an achievement as the carving of these huge stones was their transportation across the 60 miles of swampland from the nearest known source of basalt. The heads are hallmarks of Olmec art; a number of others like them have been found at Tres Zapotes and the earlier site of San Lorenzo. Archeologists have now been able to determine that they are images not of gods but of rulers. Both San Lorenzo and La Venta were violently overthrown, and the great heads were deliberately defaced, perhaps for ritual reasons or as the result of the vandalism of particularly hostile invaders.

Though the Olmec worked primarily in basalt, they also created beautifully wrought statuettes in jade representing humanoid creatures with jaguarlike muzzles, doubtless reflecting the cult of a jaguar-god (**FIG. 17-2**). The Mesoamerican motif of the animal-man deity here makes an early appearance.

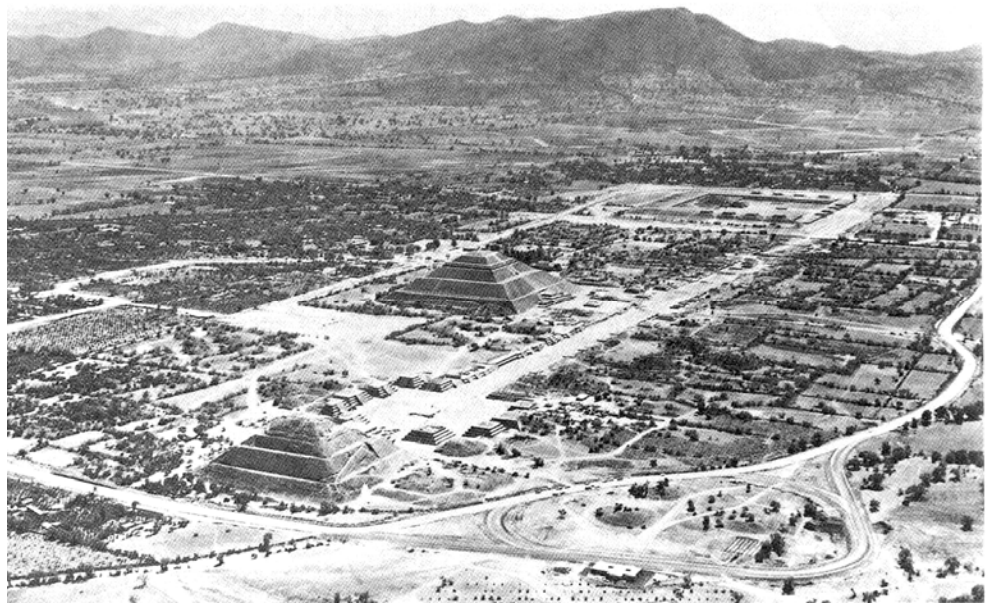
17-2 Ceremonial ax, Olmec, from La Venta, Mexico, 500-300 BCE. Jadeite, 11½" high. British Museum,



Classic: C.E. 200 -900

VALLEY OF MEXICO:

TEOTIHUACAN The time period designated as the Classic period in Mesoamerica witnesses the rise and flourishing of great civilizations that are on a par with those of the ancient Near East, which in many respects they resemble. Though these advanced civilizations originate in the later Preclassic, it is in the Classic period that they achieve their unprecedented magnificence. We have seen at Olmec La Venta an embryonic form of the temple-pyramid-plaza layout. At the awe-inspiring site of Teotihuacan, northeast of modern Mexico City, we can observe the monumental expansion of the Preclassic scheme into a genuine city. The carefully planned area covers 9 square miles and is laid out in a grid pattern, the axes of which were oriented consistently by sophisticated surveying (**FIG. 17-4**). At its peak, around 600, Teotihuacan may have had as many as two hundred thousand residents; it would have been at that time the sixth largest city in the world. Divided into numerous wardlike sectors, this metropolis must have had a uniquely cosmopolitan character, with Zapotec peoples located in the western wards of the city and Maya in the eastern. The city's urbanization did nothing to subtract from it as a religious center; its importance as such was vastly augmented. Teotihuacan was later known throughout Mesoamerica as "the place of the gods"; it was visited regularly and reverently by later Aztec kings long after it had been abandoned.



17-4 Teotihuacan, Valley of Mexico. Pyramid of the Moon (foreground), Pyramid of the Sun (center), the Citadel (right background); all connected by the Avenue of the Dead; main structures c. CE 50 – 200, site c 100 BCE – CE 600. Aerial view from the

The grid plan is quartered by a north-south and an east-west axis, each 4 miles in length. The main north-south axis, the Avenue of the Dead, is a thoroughfare 130 feet wide. It connects the pyramid of the Moon complex with the Citadel, which houses the well-preserved Temple of Quetzalcoatl. The pyramid of the Sun, the centerpiece of the city and its largest structure, is oriented to the west and rises on the east side of the Avenue of the Dead to a height of over 200 feet. The imposing mass and scale of the monuments at Teotihuacan are early indicators of the great feats of the Classic period.

Although the pyramids here do not yet have the regularity of shape characteristic of other Classic period pyramids, they do exhibit the basic elements of form: solid stone construction; superposed, squared platforms, diminishing in perimeter; and ramped stairways ascending to a crowning temple (the probably perishable temple is missing at Teotihuacan). The pyramids at this site at once recall the ziggurat of Mesopotamia and the stepped pyramid of Egypt. Since these New World structures were built more than two millennia later than their Near Eastern counterparts, we have no good reason to suppose that they were influenced by the earlier works erected halfway around the world. Yet, it is interesting that intensely religious civilizations in two different hemispheres seem to agree in their selection of the pyramid form for the worship of their gods.

At the south end of the Avenue of the Dead is the great quadrangle of the Citadel. It encloses a smaller shrine, the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (the "feathered serpent," a major god in the Mesoamerican pantheon). Its sculptured panels (**FIG. 17-5**), long protected by subsequent building, are well preserved. The six



Detail of Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the Citadel, Teotihuacan, Mexico, 3rd century.

terraces of the temple are each decorated with massive, projecting stone heads of the feathered serpent, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, which alternate with heads of another goggle-eyed figure. Linking these alternating heads are low-relief carvings of feathered-serpent bodies and seashells, the latter reflecting Teotihuacan contact with the peoples of the Mexican coasts. The stone temple and its carved decor manifest that mutually reinforcing union of monumental sculpture and architecture that reminds us of the powerful ensembles distinguishing the art of the ancient Near East, Hellenic civilization, and the Gothic world.

The influence of Teotihuacan was all-pervasive in Mesoamerica. Colonies like Cholula, on the Mexican plateau, were established widely. Others adjoined the southern borders of Maya civilization, in the highlands of Guatemala, some 800 miles from Teotihuacan. Political and economic interaction between Teotihuacan and the Maya in southern Mexico and Guatemala linked the two outstanding cultures of the Early Classic.

GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, YUCATÁN: MAYA A considerable number of strong cultural influences stemming from the Olmec tradition and from Teotihuacan were active in the development of Classic Maya culture, which has been called "the most advanced, sophisticated, and subtle civilization of the New World"; certainly, Maya culture is exemplary of the whole of Mesoamerican achievement. As with Teotihuacan, Maya civilization's foundations were laid in the Preclassic period, perhaps as early as 400 to 50 B.C.E. (Archeologists working in the jungles of Guatemala at the site of Nakbe currently are excavating the ruins of an early Maya urban center dated about 800 to 600 B.C.E. This discovery pushes back dramatically the time at which Maya civilization is supposed to have begun and will alter significantly our historical picture of that society.) At that time, the Maya, who occupied the moist lowland areas of Guatemala and Honduras, seem to have abruptly abandoned their early, more or less egalitarian pattern of village life and adopted a hierarchical, autocratic society. This system evolved into the typical Maya theocratic city-state, governed by hereditary rulers and ranked nobility. How and why this happened is still in doubt. The change was signalized by stupendous building projects. Stone structures rivaling those of Teotihuacan in scale rose dramatically, covering square miles of territory with vast, enclosed complexes of terraced temple-pyramids, tombs, palaces, plazas, ball courts, and residences of the governing elite. The new architecture, and the art that embellished it, advertised the power and interrelationship of rulers and gods and their absolute control of human as well as cosmic life. The unified institutions of religion and kingship were established so firmly, their hold on life and custom was so tenacious, and their meaning was so fixed in the symbolism and imagery of art, that the rigidly conservative system of the Classic Maya lasted almost a thousand years. Maya civilization in the southern region collapsed in about 900, vanishing more abruptly and unaccountably than it had appeared.

Though the causes of the beginning and end of Classic Maya civilization are obscure, the events of its history, beliefs, ceremonies, conventions, and patterns of daily life presently are being revealed in minute detail. The Maya now enter upon the stage of world history as believably as the peoples of other great civilizations. The distorting lenses of myth and legend, which made this group almost akin to the fantastic characters of science fiction, have been removed. This more accurate picture is the consequence of the documentary bequest of the Maya on the one hand and the work of modern archeology on the other.

As we have seen, the Maya possessed an elaborate writing system and highly developed knowledge of arithmetical calculation. These accomplishments enabled them to keep exact records of important events, times, places, and people. They were able to establish the all-important genealogical lines of rulers, which certified their claim to rule, and could construct astronomical charts and tables. They contrived an intricate but astonishingly accurate calendar. Their calendric structuring of time, though radically different in form from ours, was just as sophisticated and efficient. The sixteenth-century Franciscan chronicler of the Maya of Yucatán, Bishop Diego de Landa, declared that time reckoning was "the science in which they believed most and which they valued most highly" of all their achievements. In addition, the Maya mirrored themselves in carved and painted imagery. Though strictly conventional in style, their images, with their hieroglyphic "captions," have great descriptive value.

With these ample documentary materials, modern archeologists have deciphered numerous additional elements of Maya writing in the last three decades. They have made a precise historical record from the calendar and have clarified the iconography of symbol and image. All of these advances have enabled them to bring into ever-sharper focus a true picture of the civilization of the Maya.

Time reckoning, like all the arts and institutions of this civilization, was religious in purpose. It aimed to bring human life into the closest possible correspondence with the rhythmic pulse of the living cosmos—the movements of the stars, the diurnal career of the sun, the changes of the seasons, the fluctuations of the climate, and the growth of crops. Within the vital universe of the Maya, all things—animate and inanimate—were interlinked by occult affinities; arts like astrology and divination were practiced to recognize these affinities and determine their influence on human action, while rituals were performed to control them.

Whole populations of greater and lesser gods filled the Maya pantheon and were represented in their art: gods of the Overworld, the Middleworld, the Underworld; gods of the points of the compass; gods of wind and stone, of water lilies, trees, maize, jaguars, jade, serpents, hummingbirds; even a god of the number zero. The business of religion was to gain access to the gods, to propitiate them with sacrifice and manipulate them with magic. By rituals of sacrifice a god could be summoned up. The celebrants of the rituals, through a vision induced by hallucinogenic drugs or by massive letting of their own blood (usually both), could then unite their essence with that of the god, though only for the duration of the rite. In this mingling of human and divine, the distinction between natural and supernatural disappeared.

This commingling of human and divine also applied to Maya statecraft, for statecraft and religion were one. The ruler was not merely godlike; he (or, at times, she) was a god. Kingship and deity shared the rule of the cosmos as well as the rule of the state. In art, the Maya ruler was shown holding the sky in his arms, controlling the motions of the sun and Venus (the morning and evening star), those most ancient and august twin gods of the Maya pantheon. Rulers and gods reciprocally existed, the rulers requiring the gods for the preservation of the state, the gods depending on the ruler for their honor and sustenance. One could not exist without the other. It was in the ritual ceremonies of bloodletting and human sacrifice that the natures of god and king, of divinity and humanity, were commingled.

In the mythology of the Maya, the gods created human beings by self-sacrifice. Fashioning them from maize and water, they brought them to life with their own blood. The reciprocal relationship between humans and gods required that human beings strengthen and nourish the gods. The blood of the gods had to be replaced by human blood; blood had to be perpetually supplied in order for the gods to survive. The most sacred and necessary function of Maya religion was, therefore, the procurement of human blood for the nourishment of the gods. The life of the gods, the state, and the cosmos demanded blood sacrifice.

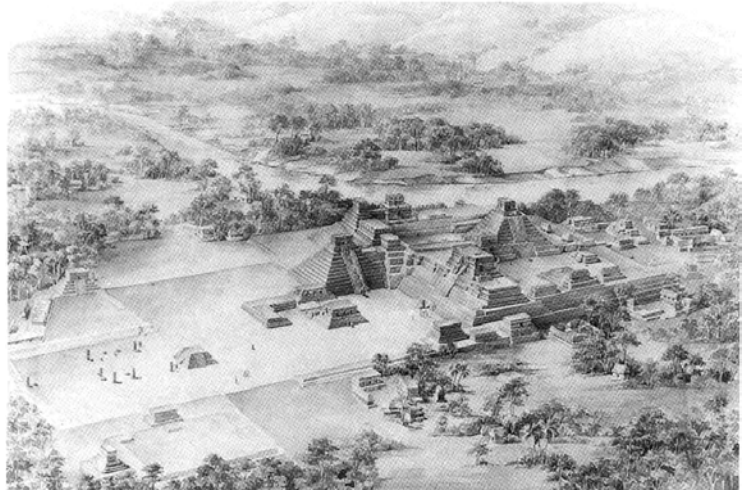
On all occasions of state, public bloodletting was an integral part of Maya ritual. The ruler, his consort, and certain members of the nobility drew blood from their own bodies and sought union with deity in ecstatic vision (the vision quest). This ceremony was regularly accompanied by the wholesale slaughter of captives taken in war. Wars between the Maya city-states and foreigners were fought principally to provide victims for sacrifice. After prolonged participation in bloodletting rites, these individuals were stretched out on specially designed altars or bound to scaffolds placed on high temple platforms. Their hearts eventually were cut out, and their bodies hurled down the steep stairways. Many captives were forced to play the fatal ballgame in courts laid out adjacent to the temples. The losers of the game were decapitated or otherwise killed. The torture, mutilation, and execution of the victims of the blood ceremonies presented the public with spectacles of profoundly religious import. It has been said that blood was the very mortar of the structure of the Maya system.

[Reading Assignment Part TWO:](#)

ARCHITECTURE The relationship of the Maya politico-religious system to Maya architecture is obvious. The enclosed, centrally located precincts, where the most sacred and majestic buildings of the Maya city were raised, were intended as settings for those religious-civic transactions that guaranteed the order of state and cosmos. The drama of the blood ritual took place within a sculptured and painted environment, where huge symbols and images proclaimed the nature and necessity of that order. The spacious plazas were designed for vast audiences, who, stimulated by drugs, drums, and dancing, were exposed to an overwhelming propaganda. The programmers of that propaganda, the ruling families and troops of priests, nobles, and retainers, carried its symbolism through in their costumes. They were clad in extravagant profusions of vividly colorful textiles and feathers, each ornamental article having meanings that linked it to supernatural persons and powers. On the different levels of the painted and polished temple platforms, before sanctuaries glittering in the sun, the ruling classes performed the offices of their rites in clouds of incense to the music of maracas, flutes, and drums. The architectural complex at the center of the city was transformed into a theater of religion and statecraft.

In the stagelike layout of a characteristic Maya city center, its principal group, or "site core," was the religious and administrative nucleus of a population settled throughout a suburban area of many square miles. Because it has more hieroglyphic inscriptions and carved monuments than any other site in the New World, Copan, on the western border of Honduras, was one of the first Maya sites to be excavated and one of the richest of them in the trove of architectural, sculptural, and artifactual remains that is still being recovered and studied.

In its principal group (**FIG. 17-6**), plazas conspicuously occupy the operational spaces, the Great Plaza to the left and the smaller Middle Plaza at the center. The Middle Plaza is enclosed on three sides by the ball court, the towering, tiered pyramid (Structure 101-26) with its steep "Hieroglyphic Stairway," and the so-called Acropolis, with its cluster of pyramids. Beyond the Acropolis to the far right are lower, residential buildings, the so-called Cemetery. The Great Plaza is occupied by tall slabs of sculptured stone (to the left in **FIG. 17-6**), which are meant to be its permanent fixtures. These stelae are images of rulers, whose names, dates of reign, and notable achievements are often carved in glyphs on the



17-6 Principal group of ruins at Copan, Maya, Copan Valley, Honduras, as of late 8th c. Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Reconstruction drawing by Tatiana Proskouriakoff.



front, sides, or back of the stone slabs. Stele H

(**FIG. 17-7**) represents one of the greatest of the rulers of Copan, 18-Rabbit, in whose long reign from 695 to 738 the city may have reached its greatest "physical extent and range of political influence. 18-Rabbit, the thirteenth in a dynastic succession of sixteen rulers, elaborately crowned and wearing ornamented kilt and buskins, makes a solemn ceremonial gesture. His features may be a portrait likeness, which breaks through the archaic mask and stiff frontality into an expression of haughty domination. The dense, deeply carved ornamental details and glyphs that frame the face and figure in florid profusion stand almost clear of the block. The high relief gives the impression of a statue in the full round, though this stela is carved on only one side. A masterpiece of the sculptor's art, this awe-inspiring materialization of the Maya concept of the god-ruler is one of the most memorable works of Mesoamerican art. Remnants of the original red paint are visible on this and many of the other stelae at Copan.

17-7 Stele of the ruler 18-Rabbit, Maya, Great Plaza at Copan, Honduras, late 8th century.

Another great Maya site of the Classic period is Tikal in

Guatemala, some 150 miles north of Copan. Tikal, one of the oldest and largest of the Maya cities, rises above the thick tropical forest that once had invaded it completely. The city and its suburbs originally covered some 75 square miles and served as the ceremonial center of a population of perhaps seventy-five thousand. Central Tikal was not laid out on a grid plan like its contemporary, Teotihuacan; instead, irregular groupings were connected by causeways. Modern surveys have uncovered the remains of as many as three thousand separate constructions in an area of about 6 square miles. The site's nucleus, the Great Plaza, which is



17-8 Temple I (Temple of the Giant Jaguar), Maya, Tikal, El Peten, Guatemala, classic, c 700.

studded with sculptured stelae, contains numerous structures, the most prominent of which are two soaring pyramids facing each other across an open square. The large construction (**FIG. 17-8**), Temple I (also called the Temple of the Giant Jaguar after a motif on one of its lintels) reaches a height of 144 feet. It is the temple-mausoleum of a ruler of Tikal, whose tomb is encased in a vaulted chamber excavated at the level of the plaza. The structure is made up of nine sharply inclining platforms, culminating at the summit in a superstructure composed of a supplementary platform and stairway. These elements serve as a base for a three-chambered temple surmounted by an elaborately carved roof comb. The swift upward drive of the great staircase, forbiddingly steep (and perilous in descent!), forces these elements into the towerlike verticality of the pyramid, elevating the temple unit far above the public concourse. This structure exhibits most concisely the Mesoamerican formula for the stepped temple-pyramid and, freed from its dense jungle cover, the compelling esthetic and psychological power of Maya architecture.

SCULPTURE AND PAINTING Architecture, the dominant Maya art, also provided the matrix of Maya sculpture and painting. Rarely do we have sculpture independent of architecture, whether in high relief, in the round, or freestanding. The sculptured stele resembles the detached panel of a wall, and freestanding sculpture, such as it is, is found on the scale of the ceramic figurine. Painting is bound to architecture; murals are the most common form. But considerable painting also has survived on the surfaces of ceramic receptacles (see **FIG. 17-13**), cups, bowls, and pots, which provide detailed information concerning Maya life and culture.



17-13 Polychrome vase from Nebaj in the Guatemalan highlands, rollout view. Approx. 6 ½" high. Anonymous collector.

A striking sculptured head representing the maize god (**FIG. 17-9**) was found in the ruins of a palace at Copan, where we have already examined the great stela of 18-Rabbit (**FIG. 17-7**). With others like it, the head originally was tenoned into the architectural fabric, jutting out from the flat frieze of a cornice. We have noted the significance of maize as the basic foodstuff of Mesoamerica. The personification of natural elements and forces in Maya religion found embodiment in the figurative arts. Here, in the features of head and headdress, the sculptor alludes metaphorically to ripening corn: the face is the cob, the necklace the kernels, the hair the cornsilk, and the headdress the clustering foliage. The graceful motion of the hands suggests the waving of the stalks in the wind. The closed, heavy-lidded eyes turn inward to the young plant's interior life. In the youthful beauty and sensitivity of the face, we find expression of the very idea of spiritual composure. The work is executed with that deft simplification of appearances into plane and volume that are characteristic of native arts. But here the simplifying process stops well short of total abstraction of form. The peculiar traits of Maya physiognomy are smoothed into a symmetry and regularity that subordinate the real to the ideal.

Farther along toward abstraction, but replete with descriptive detail, are the figures of a carved lintel from Yaxchilan (**FIG. 17-10**), just across the Mexican state border of Chiapas in Guatemala. The calendrical glyphs surrounding the figures date the commemorated event precisely at February 1, 752 (around the beginning of the Carolingian Empire in Europe).



17-9 Maize God, from Temple 22, Maya, Copan, Honduras, c 775. Limestone, 35" x 21". British Museum, London.

On that day, the Yaxchilan ruler Bird-Jaguar (named for the form of his name glyph) took captive a rebellious enemy lord, who is seen crouching apprehensively at his feet. The capture of a nobleman, later to be sacrificed, was probably a feat prerequisite to the rite of Bird-Jaguar's accession to the throne. The humbled captive, his face bloody, makes a gesture of submission or fear. The king, dressed in battle regalia with spear and feathered headdress, looms threateningly above him.

The hard-edged, slablike carving recalls to a degree the low relief of ancient Assyria, the slight projection being flat rather than round in cross section. This feature is characteristic of much Mesoamerican sculpture. Though Bird-Jaguar's image is confined within the formal rigidity of pose befitting the representation of a ruler, considerable visual information is given in the figure of the captive. The sculptor has sharply observed the foreshortening of the legs, for example, and has been able to pose the figure in a convincing posture of shrinking abjection.



17-10 *Bird-Jaguar Taking a Prisoner*, Maya, Yaxchilan, from Chiapas, Mexico, Late Classic, 755-770. Limestone, 31" x 30" x 2 3/4". British Museum, London.



17-11 *Amorous couple*, Maya, Late Classic, 700-900. Polychromed ceramic, 9 3/4". Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit.

The almost unlimited variety of figural attitude and gesture permitted in the modeling of clay explains the profusion of informal ceramic figurines that illustrate the everyday life of the Maya. Small-scale, freestanding figures in the round, they are remarkably lifelike, carefully descriptive, shrewdly psychological, and often comic. A pair that might be called an "amorous couple" (FIG. 17-11) shows a lecherous old man fondling a courtesan, who replies in kind; he lifts her skirt, she advances her knee. Though apparently no more than an amusing piece of sexual genre, the pair may have religious overtones. The female figure could be the inconstant goddess of the moon, the old man, the god N, a supporter of the arc of heaven. Figurines representing a great variety of subjects regularly are found in tombs among the funeral accessories. This pair comes from Jaina, the Maya necropolis, an island of the dead off the coast of Yucatán. Their mortuary function must be kept in mind as we appreciate their piquant liveliness.

The vivacity of the figurines and their variety of pose are not destructive of the formality of Maya art. Simplification of plane, volume, and contour still is to be seen in the overall form as well as in its details. This same unity of action with formality of design appears at Bonampak (Mayan for "painted walls").

Three chambers in one structure at this site contain mural paintings that are vivid vignettes of Maya court life (FIG. 17-12). As in most Egyptian painting, the figures are rendered in line and flat tone without shading or perspective. They are arranged friezelike in superposed horizontal registers without background settings. Maya painting, like Maya sculpture, is mural; architecture is often its matrix. But, again, the architectural limits do not in any way restrict the scope and circumstantial detail of the narrative; presented with great economy of means, the information given is comprehensive, explicit, and presented with the fidelity of an eyewitness report. At Bonampak, not only can we identify the royal personages who pass in review, but inscriptions give us the precise dates for the events recorded, the days and the months in the years 790 and 791. Like the inscribed dates on the Bird-Jaguar lintel, these impress us with the almost obsessive Maya concern for accurate time reckoning.

The scenes recorded at Bonampak relate the ceremonies that welcome anew heir to the throne; they include presentations, preparations for a royal fete, dancing, battle, and the taking and sacrificing of prisoners. In the scene

representing the arraignment of the prisoners (**FIG. 17-12**), the uppermost register depicts a file of gorgeously appareled nobility wearing animal headgear. Conspicuous among them on the right are retainers clad in jaguar pelts and jaguar heads. The ruler himself, in jaguar jerkin and buskins, is posed at the center and closely resembles Bird-Jaguar in the Yaxchilan lintel (**FIG. 17-10**). Like the latter figure, he is accompanied by a crouching victim who appears to beg his mercy. The middle level is crowded with naked captives anticipating death, already dead, sprawls at the feet of the ruler; others dumbly contemplate the blood dripping from their mutilated hands. The lower zone, divided by a doorway into the structure housing the murals, shows clusters of attendants who are doubtless of inferior rank to the lords of the upper zone. The stiff formality of the grandees and the attendants contrasts graphically with the supple, imploring attitudes and gestures of the hapless victims. In this single composition, we have a narrative of those rituals of blood so central in the life of the Maya and throughout pre-Columbian civilizations in Mesoamerica.

The same symmetrical formality of large-scale mural painting like that at Bonampak is maintained on the much smaller surfaces of painted vases. Our rollout view of a typical vase design shows a palace scene wherein an enthroned lord receives a tribute of capes from a kneeling, elaborately feathered vassal from whose belt hang human heads. The victorious lord wears a sequined turban laced with water lily stalks; behind him is a cushion of textiles of some sort, and in a column of glyphs that divides the repeated scene, there grins the mask of the god of jest. The composition includes panels of glyphs which, like the narrative scene, are repeated.

Doubtless they name the persons who are part of the action and describe the event as actually having taken place. There are two other vases closely related in style to this one, and also historically related, in that all three share in their reading the same event and identify the same central character. The vases memorialize the event and were intended for celebration of the name of its chief actor. These, and vases like them, had a funerary purpose designed to accompany the deceased in his sojourn in the Underworld. They were likely commissioned by the deceased before his death or by his survivors.

Postclassic: 900 - 1521

Throughout Mesoamerica, the Classic period culminated in the disintegration of the great civilizations. Teotihuacan's political and cultural empire was disrupted around 600, and its influence waned. In 700 the great city was destroyed by fire, presumably at the hands of invaders from the north. Around 900, many of the great Maya sites were abandoned to the jungle. Though a later Maya culture continued in northern Yucatán during the Postclassic period, it was strongly subordinated by Toltec influences from central Mexico. The Classic culture of the Zapotecs, centered at Monte Alban in the state of Oaxaca, came to an end around 700, and the neighboring Mixtec peoples assumed supremacy in this area during the Postclassic. Classic El Tajin (Totonac culture), later heir to the Olmec in the Veracruz plain, survived the general crisis that afflicted the others but was burned out sometime in the twelfth century, again by northern invaders.

The war and confusion that followed the collapse of the Classic civilizations broke the great states up into small, local political entities isolated in fortified sites. The collapse encouraged warlike regimes, chronic aggression, and expansion of the bloodletting rite. In Mexico, the Toltec and the Aztec peoples, ruthless migrants from the north, forged empires by force of arms and glorified militarism.

The Mixtecs, who succeeded to Zapotec Monte Alban, were exceptional in that they extended their political sway in Oaxaca by dynastic intermarriage rather than by war. The magnificent treasures found in the tombs at Monte Alban bear witness to Mixtec wealth, and the quality of these works demonstrates the high level of Mixtec artistic



17-12 Temple mural of warriors surrounding captives on a terraced platform. Maya, from Bonampak, Mexico, ca 6th century. Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

achievement. These people were accomplished in sculpture and ceramics. Metallurgy was introduced into Mexico in Late Classic times, and the Mixtec became the skilled goldsmiths of Mesoamerica, renowned for their turquoise mosaic.

The Classic Maya were preeminent in the art of writing and had libraries of painted books. The painted and inscribed book, somewhat inaccurately called a codex (plural codices), was the precious vehicle that recorded religious occurrences, historical events, genealogical charts, astronomical tables, calendric calculations, maps, and trade and tribute accounts. Codices were painted on long sheets of figbark paper or deerskin, which were coated with fine white lime plaster and folded into accordion-like pleats. These manuscripts were protected by wooden covers. Their hieroglyphs were designed to be read in zigzag fashion from left to right and top to bottom. Only four pre-Columbian Maya hieroglyphic codices survive (some scholars accept only three of them as authentic). Bishop Diego de Landa, whom we have met as the Spanish chronicler of the Maya of Yucatán, explains why: "We found a great number of these books in Indian characters and because they contained nothing but superstition and the Devil's falsehoods we burned them all; and this they felt most bitterly and it caused them great grief." Seven historical Mixtec codices survive. A "page" from the beautifully illuminated Borgia Codex (**FIG. 17-14**), one of a group of codices in a clearly related style, shows the god of life, Quetzalcoatl (black) seated back-to-back with the lord of death, Mictlantecuhtli (white). Below them is an inverted skull with a double keyboard of teeth. Both figures hold scepters in one hand and gesticulate with the other. The margins are paneled with symbols of the 20 days of the 260-day Mesoamerican ritual calendar. The fantastic image is an explosion of shapes. The design approaches complete abstraction of visual materials. Were the shapes in less confusion, they would resemble in their taut line and flat, sharp color the face cards of a playing deck.



17-14 Death God (Mictlantecuhtli) and Life God (Quetzalcoatl), from the *Borgia Codex*, Puebla/Tlaxcala, Mexico, Late Postclassic, ca 1400. Deerskin, 10 2/3" x 4".

CHICHEN ITZA: LATER MAYA The flat, scrub-vegetation covered, low limestone peninsula of Yucatán lies north of the rolling and densely forested region of central Yucatán and the Petén. During the Classic period, this northern region was inhabited sparsely by Mayan-speaking peoples who settled around such centers as Uxmal. For still debated reasons, when the Classic sites were abandoned after 900, many new temples still were built in this area. A new art style, which can be seen in the late temples at Chichen Itza, is contemporaneous with the political ascendancy in Yucatán of the Toltecs from Tula (a site northwest of Mexico City). The Toltecs ruled at Chichen Itza during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The northern Maya (under heavy influence from the Toltecs) experimented with building construction and materials to a much greater extent than the Maya farther south; piers and columns were placed in doorways, encrusted decoration of stone mosaic enlivened outer facades. The northern groups invented a new type of concrete construction: a solid core of coarse rubble faced inside and out with a veneer of square limestone plates. The region provided plenty of solid material to work with; Bishop Landa wrote of Yucatán: "The whole land is made of limestone!"

The design of the structure known as the Caracol ("snail shell") at Chichen Itza (**FIG. 17-15**) suggests that the northern Maya were as inventive of architectural form as they were experimental with construction and materials. A cylindrical tower rests on a broad terrace, which is supported, in turn, by a larger platform measuring 169 feet by

232 feet. The tower is composed of two concentric walls enclosing a circular staircase that leads to a small chamber near the top of the structure. Windows along the staircase and an opening at the summit were doubtless used for astronomical observation, which has given the building another name the "Observatory." Observation of the stars and of their movements made possible the essential astrological calculations that charted their influence.

The Caracol is one among other notable structures at Chichen Itza—the Temple of the Jaguars, the Temple of the Warriors, and, perhaps most conspicuous, the Temple of Kukulcan (also known as Quetzalcoatl, FIG. 17-5), which is placed upon the summit platform of a great, regular pyramid (and is visible in the background on FIG. 17-15). The "Castillo," as the monument has long been named, is of imposing size, 98 feet high, and each side 182 feet at the base, a majestic symbol of the sacred mountain revered throughout Mesoamerica. Its nine platforms are ascended by stepped ramps on four sides, converging to the temple level. Throughout the structure are inscriptions and reliefs indicative of the Toltec cult of Quetzalcoatl, signatures of Toltec domination of the northern Maya of Yucatán. The Castillo is a kind of paradigm of Mesoamerican architectural form—the great stepped pyramid, with its temple crown, towering above the central plazas of the city.



Reading Assignment Part THREE:

TULA: TOLTEC The colonnaded Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza resembles buildings excavated at Tula, the Toltec capital north of Mexico City. Detailed resemblances between the sculptures of the two sites support the inference that the builders of Tula worked for the same Toltec masters as those who ruled the Maya at Chichen Itza.

The name Toltec, which signifies "makers of things," generally is applied to a powerful tribe of invaders from the north, whose arrival in south-central Mexico coincided with the great disturbances that, as we have seen, must have contributed to the fall of the Classic civilizations. The Toltec capital at Tula flourished from about 900 to 1200. The Toltecs were great political organizers and military strategists and came to dominate large parts of north and central Mexico, Yucatán, and the highlands of Guatemala. They were respected as the masters of all that came to hand, and later peoples looked back on them admiringly, proud to claim descent from them.



17-16 Colossal atlantids, Pyramid B, Toltec, Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico, Early Postclassic, ca 1050. Stone, 16'

Legend and history recount that in the city of Tula civil strife between the forces of peace and those of war and bloodletting resulted in the victory of the militarists. The grim, warlike regime that followed is personified in four colossal atlantids that portray armed warriors (FIG. 17-16). Built up of four stone drums each, these sculptures loom above Pyramid B at Tula. They wear stylized feathered headdresses and, as breastplates, stylized butterflies, heraldic symbols of the Toltecs. In one hand they clutch a bundle of darts, in the other, an *atlatl* (throw-stick). The architectural function of these support figures (they originally were designed to support a now missing temple roof) requires rigidity of pose, compactness, and strict simplicity of contour; where possible, all projecting details are suppressed. The unity and regularity of architectural mass and silhouette here combine perfectly with abstraction of form. The effect is that of

overwhelming presence. These images of brutal and implacable authority, with "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun," stand eternally at attention, warding off all hostile threats to sovereign power, good or evil.

By 1180, the last Toltec ruler abandoned Tula and was followed by most of his people. Some years later, the city was catastrophically destroyed, its ceremonial buildings burnt to their foundations, its walls thrown down, and the straggling remainder of its population scattered throughout Mexico.

TENOCHTITLAN: AZTEC The destruction of Tula and the disintegration of the Toltec Empire in central Mexico made for a century of anarchy in the Valley of Mexico. Barbaric Northern invaders, who again must have wrought the destruction, gradually organized into small, warring city-states. Nevertheless, they civilized themselves on the cultural remains and traditions of the Toltecs. When the last wave of northern invaders appeared, they were regarded as detestable savages.

These "savages" were the Aztecs, the "people whose face nobody knows." With astonishing rapidity, they were transformed within a few generations from migratory outcasts and serfs to mercenaries of the Tepanec imperialists, and then masters in their own right of the petty kingdoms of the Valley of Mexico. In the process, they acquired, like their neighbors, the culture of the Toltecs. They had begun to call themselves *Mexica*, and, following a legendary prophecy that they would build a city where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a serpent in its mouth, they settled on an island in the great Lake Texcoco (Lake of the Moon). Their settlement grew into the magnificent city of Tenochtitlan, which in 1519 so astonished the Spanish conqueror Cortes and his men.

The Aztecs were known by those they subdued as fierce in war and cruel in peace. Indeed, they gloried in warfare and in military prowess. They radically changed the social and political situation in Mexico. The cults of bloodletting and human sacrifice, though still practiced, had been waning in central Mexico since Toltec times. The Aztecs revived the rituals with a vengeance—and a difference. In the older civilizations, like the Classic Maya, the purposes of religion and statecraft were in balance. With the Aztec, the purpose of religion was to serve the policy of the state. The Aztecs believed that they had a divine mission to propagate the cult of their tribal god, Huitzilopochtli (pronounced weel-zeel-O-POCH-tee), the hummingbird god of war. This goal meant forcing conformity on all peoples conquered by them. Subservient groups had not only to submit to Aztec military power but also were forced to accept the cult of Huitzilopochtli and to provide victims for sacrifices to him. Thus, Aztec statecraft used the god to achieve and maintain its ruthless political dominion. Human sacrifice was vastly increased in a reign of terror designed to keep the Aztec Empire under control. To this end, tribute of sacrificial victims was regularly levied on unwilling subjects. It is no wonder that Cortes, in his conquest of the Aztec state, found ready allies among the peoples the Aztecs had subjugated.

The ruins of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, lie directly beneath the center of Mexico City. The exact location of many of the most important structures within the Aztec "sacred precinct" was discovered in the late 1970s, and extensive excavations near the cathedral in Mexico City are ongoing. The principal building is the Great Temple (Templo Mayor), a double temple-pyramid honoring the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the rain god. Two great staircases sweep upward from the plaza level to the double sanctuaries at the summit. The Great Temple is a remarkable example of superimposition, a common trait in Mesoamerica. The excavated structure is composed of five shells, the earlier walls nested within the later. The sacred precinct also contained palaces, the temples of other deities (the Aztec pantheon was as crowded as that of the Maya), a ball court, and a skull rack for the exhibition of thousands of the heads of victims killed in sacrificial rites.

Tenochtitlan was a city laid out on a grid plan in quarters and wards. Its location on an island in Lake Texcoco caused communication and transport to be conducted by canals and waterways; many of the Spaniards thought of Venice when they saw the city rising from the waters like a radiant vision. It was crowded with buildings, plazas, and courtyards, and was equipped with a vast and ever-busy marketplace. The city proper had a population of more than one hundred thousand people; the total population of the area of Mexico dominated by the Aztecs at the time of the conquest has been estimated at eleven million.

The Temple of Huitzilopochtli commemorates his victory over his brothers and sister; since he is a sun god, the nature myth reflects the sun's conquest of the stars and the moon. Revenging the death of his mother, Coatlicue (pronounced kwah-TLEE-kway), at the hands of his siblings, he kills them and dismembers the body of his evil sister, Coyolxauhqui (pronounced ko-yoI-SHOW-kee.) The macabre event is depicted in a work of sculpture,

whose discovery in 1978 set off the ongoing archeological investigations near the main plaza in Mexico City. The huge stone disk (**FIG. 17-17**), about 11 feet in diameter, was placed at the foot of the staircase leading up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli. Carved on it is an image of the segmented body of Coyolxauhqui. The horror of the theme should not distract us from its artistic merit; the disk has a kind of dreadful, yet formal, beauty. At the same time, it is an unforgettable expression of Aztec temperament and taste, and the cruelty inculcated by ceremonies of blood. The image proclaimed the power of the god over his enemies and the inevitable fate that must befall them. As such, it was an awful reminder to sacrificial victims, as they were ritually halted beside it preparatory to mounting the stairs that led to the temples above and to death.

The sculpture is marvelously composed. Within the circular space, the carefully enumerated, richly detailed components of the design are so adroitly placed that they seem to have a slow, turning rhythm, like some revolving constellation. (This presentation would be appropriate for a goddess of the sky, no matter her decrepitude!) The carving is confined to a single level, a smoothly even, flat surface raised from a flat ground. We have seen this kind of relief in the Bird-Jaguar lintel from Yaxchilan (**FIG. 17-10**). It is the sculptural equivalent of the line and flat tone, figure and neutral ground, characteristic of Mesoamerican painting.



17-18 Coatlicue (Lady of the Skirt of Serpents), Aztec, 15th century. Andesite, approx. 8'6" high. National Archeological Museum, Mexico City.

In addition to relief carving, the Aztecs, unlike the Maya, produced sculpture unbound to architecture, freestanding and in the round. The colossal monster statue of Coatlicue (Lady of the Skirt of Serpents), ancient earth mother of the gods Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui, is a massive apparition of dread congealed into stone (**FIG. 17-18**). Sufficiently expressive of the Aztec taste for the terrible, the beheaded goddess is composed of an inventory of macabre and repulsive objects. Up from her headless neck writhe two serpents whose heads meet to form a tusked mask. The goddess wears a necklace of severed human hands and excised human hearts. The pendant of the necklace is a skull. Her skirt is formed of entwined snakes. Her hands and feet have great claws, with which she tears the human flesh she consumes. All of her loathsome attributes symbolize sacrificial death. Yet, in Aztec thought, this mother of the gods combines savagery and tenderness, for out of destruction arises new life.

The main forms are carved in high relief; the details are executed either in low relief or by incising. The overall aspect is of an enormous, blocky mass, the ponderous weight of which is in itself a threat to the awed viewer. In its original setting, where it may have functioned in the visual drama of sacrificial rites, it must have had a terrifying effect on victims.

It was impossible for the Spanish conquerors to reconcile the beauty of the great city of Tenochtitlan with its hideous cults. They wonderingly admired its splendid buildings, ablaze with color; its luxuriant and spacious gardens, sparkling waterways, teeming markets, and vivacious populace; its grandees resplendent in the feathers of exotic birds. But when Moctezuma, king of the Aztecs, brought Cortes and his entourage into the shrine of Huitzilopochtli's temple, the newcomers started back in horror and disgust from the huge statues clotted with dried



17-17 Coyolxauhqui, from the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan, Aztec, Mexico City, Late Postclassic, ca 1400-1500. Stone, diameter approx. 11'.

blood. One of Cortes's party, Bernal Diaz del Castillo recorded: "There was on the walls such a crust of blood, and the whole floor bathed in it, that even in the slaughter houses of Castile there is not such a stench." Cortes was furious. Denouncing Huitzilopochtli as a devil, he proposed to put a high cross above the pyramid and a statue of the Virgin in the sanctuary to exorcise its evil.

This proposal would come to symbolize the avowed purpose and the historic result of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica. The cross and the Virgin, triumphant, would be venerated in new shrines raised upon the ruins of the plundered temples of the Indian gods, and the banner of the Most Catholic Kings of Spain would wave over new atrocities of a European kind.