The Aztec Empire

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Catalogue # 17, fragment of an anthropomorphic brazier, Aztec, fired clay and pigment, 18 by 22 by 9 centimeters, circa 1300 A. D., Museo Universitario de Ciencas y Arte, UNAM, Mexico City

By Michele Leight

The Aztec Empire exhibition at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, which is on view from October 14, 2004 to February 13, 2005, brings the wonders of Mexico's ancient civilization to life in the hallowed, sinuously curved galleries of one of the most famously "modern" art museums in the world, designed by the legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The huge show, which includes 435 objects, is a wonderful cocktail of inspiration, imagination, technical audacity and an affirmation of culture as a bond and a bridge between diverse peoples and ideologies.

The show has many spectacular works such as a fragment of an anthropomorphic brazier, shown above. The fired clay and pigment fragment measures 18 by 22 by 9 centimeters and was executed circa 1300 A.D., and is in the collection of the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Arte, UNAM, Mexico City. The catalogue notes that "The passage of time was one of the main concerns in Mesoamerican society; thus, many depictions of its passage allude to different aspects of the Mesoamerican view of the cosmos." "The original function of this object," the catalogue entry continued, "must have been to decorate a brazier. The three faces depict three phases in which time and humans are closely related. The central face is jovial and full of vigor, referring to the time when individuals are during their most productive years in a society. By way of contrast, the exterior mask has closed eyes, alluding to the opposite phase, death. In between is a period of no less importance, the state that arrives with experience: old age."

The young have a special affinity for Mr. Wright's architecture - as they do with building blocks and Lego - so parents might find the kids more than willing to absorb this unique combination of inspired modern building and ancient art - once they actually get there.

On my second visit to the Aztec show, one sleepy toddler awoke from a slumber in his stroller to the vista of suffused light entering the museum from aloft. Amazed, the infant's mouth formed a wordless "O" as he pointed upward with a tiny forefinger to the famous Frank Lloyd Wright "spiders-web" skylight, framed by the curved runway galleries that allowed his mother easy access with the stroller to the exhibits. He smiled as if to say, "Thanks Ma, this is cool."

Catalogue # 118, Grasshopper, Aztec, carnelian, 19.5 by 16 by 47 centimeters, circa 1500 A.D., Museo Nacional de Anthropologia, INAH, Mexico City

Mama shared his enthusiasm and then directed her son's now harnessed attention to a juicy carnelian "Grasshopper," circa 1500 A.D., from the Museo Nacional de Anthropologia, INAH, Mexico City. It measures 19.5 by 16 by 47 centimeters. Art and cultural appreciation starts young, and this show has kid-friendly artifacts. The juicy critter is carved from red volcanic rock called carnelian. Wonderfully realistic, its legs are tucked under its body as if it is ready to jump. The exhibition catalog includes details of where it was found:

"This spectacular sculpture was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century in the main reservoir and canal system that the Aztecs built in Chapultepec, where a freshwater spring fed into the canals that brought potable water to Mexico-Tenochtitlan. The name 'Chapultepec' translates as 'hill of the grasshopper.' ...Grasshoppers also marked the period following the rainy season, when they blanketed crop fields."

The show contains many benign and beautiful artifacts connected to everyday life and domesticity. Pipes, jewelry, combs, vessels, pitchers and the most covetable bowls and dishes in coral and earth tones, including an Aztec "Solar Plate," 31 centimeters in diameter, of fired clay, circa 1500 A.D., from the Museo Nacional de Anthropologia, Mexico City. The catalog is invaluable for more detailed information:

"This delicate plate...is profoundly symbolic of the sun god, Tonatiuh: the 'midday star,' who, with the eagle, (his guardian animal spirit, or nahual), is the scene's principal motif. The figures depict the sun's daily voyage, as it glides from east to west, bestowing light and warmth upon humanity. The elements that complement the central motif reinforce the astronomical and calendrical features of the geometric designs, which make up the thirteen bands that comprise the celestial planes. The first band uses twenty-nine circles to indicate the twenty-nine-day lunar cycle. The third band contains the Xicalcoliuqui, the plane in which the sun moves, here represented by twenty spirals that symbolize the days of the ritual calendar. Finally, the fifth band is associated with fire through the fifth circles that are equivalent to ten times the value of the quincunx."

Catalogue # 202, Solar Plate, Aztec, fired clay, diameter 31 centimeters, circa 1500 A.D., Museo Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

It is truly amazing how accurately the Aztecs plotted out the solar system and the universe without so much as a pair of binoculars - let alone the advanced telescopes that scientists, astronomers, celestial mechanics and physicists use today.

Catalogue # 305, Lip-plug with the figure of a cox-cox bird, Mixtec, gold and jade, 4.3 centimeters long, 1.1 centimeter in diameter, circa 1200-1521 A.D., Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca, INAH

One of the exhibition's smaller but very fascinating objects is a gold and jade lip plug with the figure of a cox-cox bird. The Mixtec object is dated circa 1200-1521 A.D., and is 4.3 centimeters long and 1.1 centimeter in diameter. It is in the collection of the Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca, INAH. The catalogue notes that it was used as a body ornament

and was "passed through the perforation of the lower lip so that the head of the bird came out of the opening." "Such ornaments," it continued, "were known as *tentetl* (stone for the lip) and in the period after contact with the Spanish, they were called *bezotes* (lower lip rings). The gold setting is made by melting, and the stone is a spectacular green color.... The perforation shown in the beak undoubtedly served for the placement of feathers similar to those placed in nose ornaments. Probably this bird represented the sun and was used by priests or lords as an insignia of power."

Catalogue # 284, warrior's teponaztli, Aztec, wood and shell, 14 by 15 by 60 centimeters, circa 1500, Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

Another extraordinary object is a "Warrior's teponaztli," a double-tongued slit drum carved from a hollowed-out piece of wood that the catalogue describes as "one of the most interesting musical instruments in the pre-Hispanic tradition." "Still used today," the catalogue continued, "it is played by hitting its 'tongues' with rubber-covered sticks; the hollow part acts as the drum's resonator." This teponaztli is made of wood and shell and measures 14 by 15 by 60 centimeters and is in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, in Mexico City. The Aztec drum is dated circa 1500 and depicts a reclining human figure.

Catalogue #256, Macuilxochitl teponaztli votive, Aztec, stone, 35 by 72 by 26 centimeters, circa 1500, Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

Another teponaztli is depicted in a stone sculpture that is known as a Macuilxochitl teponaztli votice. This Aztec sculpture is dated circa 1500 and measures 35 by 72 by 26 centimeters and is in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, in Mexico City.

The catalogue provides the following commentary:

"A number of Aztec ritual ceremonies were carried out using musical instruments to accompany songs and dances. These included flutes made of clay, conch shell trumpets, and horizontal drums (*teponaztlis*). The latter, made of hollowed-out tree trunks fashioned into double-tongued slit drums, were played with sticks made of deer antlers or other materials. This sculpture, which was used for ritual purposes, depicts a teponaztli dedicated to the patron god of music, Xochipilli-Machuilxochitl. The instrument is supported by a ring of knotted fibers known as a *yahual*, while the end of the drum are covered with jaguar skins, symbolic of the god's rank. His nose and eyebrows are fashioned from a flowering plant, while his eyes take the form of elongated palms. His mouth is in the shape of a stylized butterfly, and he wears the magnificent earspools characteristic of Xochipilli."

To set the current exhibition in the context of global civilizations of the times, the Aztec Empire of the 13th to the 16th century was a counterpart of the European intellectual movement in the sciences and the arts known as the Renaissance, which reached its peak in the 15th century. As the show demonstrates, the Aztecs drew on even older civilizations to reinforce their stature, and the arts were considered every bit as important to them as the sciences - which is always a sign of superior intelligence.

Millions of Mexicans live in the United States, and at the exhibitions' press preview Jorge Hierro, Executive Director of Institutional Relations for Banamex, one of the sponsors of the show, thanked Thomas Krens, Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for "the opportunity to take the best of Mexico to the rest of the world."

The Consul General of Mexico in New York, Arturo Sarukan, described the show as "an opportunity to appreciate the creations of people of other countries; he called it a "new curatorial trend, a true challenge for the organizers and the public," and one that offered Americans an alternative view of Mexicans to "illegal immigrants and drug pushers."

Peter Jennings selected Felipe Solis of the Museo Nacional de Anthropologia e Historia of Mexico and the exhibition's guest curator, as "Person of the Week" on ABC's World News Tonight on October 14th, 2004, and included commentary demonstrating the curator's obvious love for his people, country and culture that echoed in his impassioned comments at the press preview:

"The Aztec Empire represents a glorious epoch, characterized by the legendary magnificence of its kings, its capital and its deities. Open your eyes to know these people," he said.

Ancient works of great originality and beauty have always evoked paradigms in modern art and sculpture - and vice versa. The textural qualities of some of the stone pieces in the Aztec show evoke some of the sculptures at the retrospective exhibition of Isamu Noguchi at the Whitney Museum of American Art on exhibit at the same time, just as Noguchi's sculpture reminded this reviewer of the ancient artworks from Mexico viewed barely a week earlier at the Guggenheim - pounded, windblown and patinaed by centuries of heat, wind, dust, burial and the plain old passage of time.

Noguchi is the master of surface texture created in modern times to simulate ancient effects, while the magnificent sculptures of The Aztec's have earned their textures through longevity. Try to see "The Aztecs" and "Isamu Noguchi" in the same week and marvel as the years and civilizations fuse and melt away in the ageless, universal language of great art.

Catalogue # 237, Xicahuaztli, is an impressive Aztec stone sculpture that measures 110 by 26.5 by 15 centimeters and is dated circa 1500. It is in the collection of the Museo Arquelogico del Estado, "Dr. Roman Piña Chán," in Teotenango. The Aztecs believed that the sun was armed with a fire serpent, according to the catalogue, "for its struggle against the forces of darkness." "In its more beneficent nature," the entry continued, "its rays fertilized and accelerated the growth of vegetation. Thus, the appearance of objects with frank phallic associations should not come as a surprise; these can be understood as the sun's rays or penis. This sculpture is the symbolic representation of that element; the upper section depicts a great *chalchihuitl* (jade symbol of preciousness) and the ray that consists of four superimposed triangular sections."

Catalogue #237, Xicahuaztli, Aztec, stone, 110 by 26.5 by 15 centimeters, circa 1500, Museo Arqueologico del Estado, "Dr. Roman Piña Chán," Teotenango

The Aztecs associated coyotes with sexuality and appreciated its strength and cunning. They were also, according to the catalogue, "objects of veneration...: people prayed to the god Huehuecoyotl for health and long life." "Moreover," the catalogue continued, "the coyote was the emblem of an important military order. These creatures were represented in sculptures and reliefs in very diverse styles and poses. This sculpture depicts a coyote sitting on its haunches, its abundant, long fur covering its entire body in imitation of the rhythmic placement of a quetzal's feathers. Coyotes were patrons of the amanteca, the featherwork artisans of pre-Hispanic Mexico; this connection explains why coyotes were depicted with feathers." The coyote is beautifully stylized in marked contrast to some of the larger and more memorable sculptures in the exhibition.

Catalogue #110, Coyote, Aztec, stone, 38 by 17 by 13 centimeters, circa 1500 A.D., Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

Not as dramatic but strangely moving, is a stunning Olmec anthropomorphic mask, circa 1100-600 B.C., in the collection of the Museo del Templo Mayor. Carved from greenstone, it came from a region within the present states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla and is the oldest known object in the Templo Mayor.

Catalogue # 49, anthropomorphic mask, Olmec, greenstone, 10.2 by 8.6 by 3.1 centimeters, circa 1100-600 B.C., Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City

Kids, however, might not find all the objects in the show so charming as the Aztec culture can be awesomely ferocious and terrifying.

Like several recent major exhibitions at the Guggenheim, the show's installation has been specially designed (see The City Review article). For his show, Enrique Norten of TEN Arquitectos + J. Meejin Yoon created an undulating ribbon wall covered with dark gray wool felt along the museum's ramps. According to the museum's press release, "As it bends and peels to accommodate the various scales of the works on view, the wall creates new spatial experiences along the ramps," adding that "By focusing on the experience of the perimeter and periphery, as opposed to the center, the project accommodates the curatorial themes of the exhibition, while at the same time providing a smooth and non-uniform system for displaying an array of artifacts."

Catalogue # 1, Xiuhtecuhtli, Aztec, stone, shell and obsidian, 112 by 38 by 31 centimeters, circa 1500 A.D., left; Catalogue # 2, Coatlicue, Aztec, stone, turquoise, shell, and pigment, 115 by 40 by 35 centimeters, circa 1500 A.D., right; both Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City, donated in the 19th Century by Josefa Atecechea

At the base of the rotunda are three striking Aztec sculptures, circa 1500 A.D. Two of them are Xiuhtecuhtli and Coatlicue, both large and imposing figures that were donated in the 19th Century by Josefa Atecechea to the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, in Mexico City. The former is composed of stone, shell and obsidian and measures 112 by 38 by 31 centimeters. The catalogue provides the following commentary on this work:

"The Aztec sculptural tradition is known for its images of the culture's principal deities, such as this spectacular devotional statue of the god Xiuhtecuhtli, who is depicted as the sun personified as a vigorous youth. His hands, which appear to be in motion, were used to hold standards. He is clothed in a maxtiatl (loincloth) tied around his hips. In addition, he proudly wears a cloak as well as sandals; both are adorned with rays representing sunlight. Shell and obsidian inlay decorates Xiuhtecuhtli's eyes and mouth, giving the figure a realistic appearance. The figure has several perforations in its head, in which locks of human hair would have been placed."

The second figure, Coatlicue, measures 115 by 40 by 35 centimeters and is composed of stone, turquoise, shell, and pigment. The catalogue provides the following commentary on this work:

"At the height of its military might, expansion, and cultural influence, the Aztec empire imposed its own tradition of sculpture in the regions near the Valley of Mexico. This figure of the earth goddess, Coatlicue comes from Coxcatian, a town in the Valley of Tehuacan (in the south of the modern-day state of Puebla) whose sculpture was particularly influenced by the Aztecs. Coatlicue's name means 'serpent skirt'; she was important because she was the mother of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztecs' patron god. The glyph for the goddess's calendrical name, derived from the 260-day ritual calendar, is carved on

the back of the sculpture's head.... Mosaic inlay of turquoise and shell is preserved on the figure's skull-like face. In addition, traces of pigment remain on her sash and her skirt of intertwining serpents."

The third major Aztec sculpture on the rotunda floor is a gigantic and fearsome stone serpent head and which is dated circa 1250-1521 A.D. It measures 90 by 92 by 155 centimeters and is in the collection of the Museum Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City. This type of sculpture was usually placed along the stairs of temples as "protection" for the god. Shown bearing its fangs, this serpent is not easily ignored or forgotten.

Catalogue # 3, Serpent head, Aztec, stone, 90 by 92 by 155 centimeters, circa 1250-1521 A.D., Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

Catalogue # 30, Mictlantecuhtl, Aztec, fired clay, stucco and pigment, 176 by 80 by 50 centimeters, circa 1480 A.D., Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City

Even more impressive than the Xiuhtecuhtli and Coatlicue statues is one of Mictlantecuhtl. The fired clay, stucco and pigment statues measures 176 by 80 by 50 centimeters and is dated circa 1480 A.D., and is in the collection of the Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City. The catalogue provides the following commentary on this fabulous work:

"The god of the underworld, Mictlantecuhtl, has been majestically rendered in this sculpture made of clay in five anatomical segments. It represents the numen in a threatening guise. He has claws, appears to be almost fleshless and to have rotting scabs, and has holes on his head, which were probably used to hold curly hair. From his chest hangs a representation of a liver, which was believed to house the *idiot*, a kind of soul associated with the underworld and the passions. The god presided over Mictlan, the destination of those who died from old age or common sickness. It was believed that Mictlantecuhtl craved human blood, so it was given to him in offerings. This sculpture was found next to a similar one in the building known as the House of the Eagles, north of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitian."

One of the highlights of the exhibition is the Aztec Eagle Warrior statue of fired clay, stucco and pigment. It measures 170 by 118 by 55 centimeters and is dated 1440-1469 A.D., and is in the collection of the Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City. "This imposing sculpture," the catalogue remarked, "represents a standing man wearing a helmet in the form of an eagle, from whose beak the warrior's face emerges. His costume also includes stylized wings, its feathers made of stucco, and the talons of a raptor. Executed by highly skilled artisans, the work was assembled from five sections of molded and modeled clay with an internal support. Although the figure was previously thought to represent an eagle warrior, more recent research suggests that it may have been a different evocation of the sun following its trajectory across the sky. This extraordinary sculpture is one of two found in the House of Eagles, an imposing, neo-Toltec building in Tenochtitian in which Aztecs performed penances, prayers, autosacrifices, and offerings."

Catalogue # 27, Eagle Warrior, Aztec, fired clay, stucco and pigment, 170 by 118 by 55 centimeters, circa 1440-1469 A.D., Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City

Catalogue 283, "Xipe Totec," Aztec, fired clay and pigment, 97 by 43 by 20 centimeters, circa 1500, Museo Regional de Puebla, INAH

One of the most striking and haunting sculptures in the exhibition is "Xipe Totec," an Aztec fired clay and pigment work that measures 97 by 43 by 20 centimeters. Dated circa 1500, it is in the collection of the Museo Regional de Puebla, INAH. "The planting ceremony was one of the most important rituals conducted by the Aztecs, given their belief that out of death germinated life, a cycle necessary for their survival," the catalogue observed, adding that "The ritual for the god Xipe Totec consisted by flaying a warrior or female victim and then dressing the priest performing the ceremony in the skin of the sacrificed. The priest would wear the skin for several days, until it began to harden and shrink, at which point it would come apart and allow the priest's healthy body to emerge, symbolizing the cycle of death and life."

Ever since my childhood exposure to the Aztecs at The Museum of Mankind at its old headquarters at Burlington House in London, I have been a huge fan of Aztec creativity, so in my case Mr. Solis was preaching to the converted. The show at the Guggenheim is biased towards the most pleasing aspects of Aztec civilization and it is noticeable that there are far fewer sacrificial daggers and references to human sacrifice in the Guggenheim exhibit than there were at Burlington House; gory as it seemed back then in the tender teenage years, the daggers got and maintained my attention for life, so my only criticism of this show would be the down-playing of the ritual violence that was ever-present in the lives of this particular ruling elite.

The young, who are wise and fooled by nothing, are fascinated by the less tolerant human tendencies in any given culture, and it would not have hurt this show to include more of that aspect of the Aztec ruling class.

As the young know from playground politics and the history books they are required to read throughout their schooling, all cultures have a violent artery, or less than perfect underbelly - not the least of which being the British who used hanging, drawing and quartering well into the 18th century to punish wrong doers and to entertain the crowds who flocked to these barbaric rituals as we might now go to the theatre or rock concerts - this was a good three hundred years after the Aztec empire. I studied the Tudors in depth - and therefore mentally endured many beheadings and gruesome executions - so I have no illusions. To my knowledge the Aztecs never beheaded a queen in public.

It was only recently that the electric chair was put aside as being an unnecessarily barbaric means of ending a convict's life - but art, in the form of Andy Warhol's lurid silkscreen images, reminded us of the barbarism inherent in our own civilization, as did those gruesome, jade handled daggers at The Museum of Mankind. They instantly connected my childhood sensibilities with the relentless obsession of all civilizations with death, ritual and punishment. So before anyone gets on their high horse about human sacrifice - which the Aztecs practiced to appease the gods, not as a punishment - check the history books.

One can only hope that the end came fast for the poor victims, because thousands were ritually sacrificed over the years at Aztec rites and ceremonies. In fact Aztec armies sometimes went out to conquer other peoples specifically to obtain more prisoners for sacrificial offerings. There are numerous ritual vessels at the show that were used to contain the extracted hearts. One thing is certain: human life was cheap back then and the eye-contact required to end the life another human seems so much more violent now than a speedy bullet. Ultimately the Aztecs were confronted with their nemesis - the conquistadors - with their sophisticated steel arms and armor, their horses and their smallpox.

When shows like "The Aztec Empire" are set in a modern environment, both the old and the new become magnified - and somehow more beautiful. It is a fitting juxtaposition as diverse cultures cross over and seek dialogue with one another as part of globalization, a concept that Mr. Krens has very actively pursued in his expansion of Guggenheim museums.

Art often seeks to foster tolerance and understanding between peoples and nations and modern architecture accentuates the ancient magnificence and feats of engineering of early and inspired patrons of art like the Aztecs.

The Aztec civilization spanned 3000 years in its entirety, and the most memorable pieces of this exhibition were created at different phases of the Empire's rule. The capital city of the Aztecs was Mexico Tenochtitlan, a stunning and sophisticated feat of urban planning. This metropolis was conceived as the axis mundi, or the epicenter of their sacred universe. The city was made up of four original neighborhoods in which the entire tribe was accommodated when it was founded. The central quadrangular space housed the most important ritual building, the first among them being the Templo Mayor, dedicated to the worship of Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of war, and Tlaloc, the god of rain.

Whenever an Aztec governor ascended to the throne the architectural complex was expanded. By the end of the 15th century the monumentality and greatness of the Templo Mayor had spread throughout Mesoamerica. Elegant figures modeled in clay, like "The Eagle Warrior," decorated the complex, and fortunately for us the Aztec devotion to their deities lead them to deposit hundreds of offerings - which have been recovered by archaeologists and exhibited in museums.

"The Eagle Warrior" soars above the viewer in a dramatically darkened gallery off the main curved exhibit runway. He is both inspiring and intimidating - a reminder of a time when men were men and the only way to prove it was by physical strength and prowess - and victory in battle, once again reflecting the Greek and Roman adulation for warriors.

Images of gods and warriors remain the most outstanding and memorable at this show, mirroring the Greek and Roman pre-occupation with their "power elite" in art and sculpture. Without great soldiers and warriors, the great empires would never have been secure enough from invasion to prosper and leave their mark upon world civilization through their artisans. As with other empires, Aztec society was strictly divided into the nobility and commoners - the former were allowed to accumulate and display wealth, live in palatial buildings, practice polygamy, hold public office, receive tributary payment - and remain exempt from manual labor.

In contrast, the Aztec commoners, who represented the bulk of the population, were responsible for all heavy labor, lived in simple huts, dressed in rough clothing, were required to be monogamous, and were prohibited on pain of death from accumulating or exhibiting wealth. However, there was some leniency for artisans and merchants: while still classified as commoners, they were exempted from farm work, but in exchange they had to pay as tribute the objects they produced with their own hands or those they brought from other territories.

Perhaps this explains the consistently high standard of craftsmanship of Aztec artifacts. Farm work in those days was tough: toiling all day in the burning sun with oxen and plough or digging with primitive instruments in hard, baked earth was far less attractive than making artworks - but one had to have the talent to qualify.

The Aztec religious universe was complex and in many ways mirrored the ancient Greeks and Romans: the dominant god was Huitzilopochtli, who guided them to the site of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the place from which in their own eyes and imaginations they would dominate the universe. He was the solar warrior above all warriors - akin to the Greek god Apollo.

Quetzalcoatl features prominently in this show as he did at the Museum of Mankind all those years ago; he is the god of civilization (not as prominent as the god of war), and patron of the wind. His more venerated brother was Tezcatlipoca, ancestral divinity of nocturnal war and patron of virility. It is interesting that day and night warfare each had a deity - this was before night-vision and other technological aids, so it might backfire on the community to tire out the 'day' warrior god by making him work overtime.

Mother Earth's attributes were also deified: Coatlicue embodied the origin of life; Tlaltecuhtli embodied the final destination of man - and Chicomicoatl was responsible for the creation of food, perhaps the toughest of all miracles to perform in the arid landscape of Mexico in the days before irrigation and dams.

Then as now, food was the cornerstone of survival; all Mesoamerican peoples based their economy on the intensive cultivation of maize, chili, squash and beans, therefore Tlaloc and his companion Chalchiuhtlicue, the gods of rain and water respectively, played a crucial role in indigenous religion. There were a great variety of rites and ceremonies, differentiated in accordance with the worship of each deity, the one already discussed being the well-known extraction of

the heart in which the sacrificial knife was used. Related sacred objects were the altar table where this practice was carried out and the receptacle that contained the human hearts and their blood, the sacred food.

Besides human sacrifices, the Aztecs are probably best known for their writing and calendars, impressive even today for their ingenuity and brilliance. Glyphs, or pictographs, were used to record history, geographic environments and mythic tales; the surfaces on which these were rendered included stone, ceramics, textiles as well as books known as codices, mainly drawn on argave-fiber paper and deerskin.

The numbering system for calendars was based on groups of 20, with a method of circles or dots that each had the value of one. There were two parallel calendars in Mesoamerica: one was a solar, agricultural calendar of 360 working days, to which were added five unlucky days called *nemontemi*.

As might be expected, the Aztecs were not content to sit quietly and enjoy their own success: they aspired to conquer, and they did. From the time when the Aztecs first founded their capital city, Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the religious ideology that would inspire them was evident, and they began military conquests of various neighboring peoples. Based on religious and economic militarism, their territorial expansion allowed them to constitute a powerful empire.

There were many high-points and victories over territories and neighboring peoples during the Aztecs' reign, but the Tarascans, who are represented on the sixth floor of the exhibition, maintained their military and political hold in Western Mexico and established a line of fortifications to mark their border. The consolidation of their empire occurred in 1370. They settled in ancient villages and conquered an extensive territory that included the present day state of Michoacan and bordering areas, their boundaries stretching into the Pacific.

Tzintzuntzan became the center of their empire, and was the capitol later known to the Spanish conquistadors. Like the Aztecs, the Tarascans were distinguished by their capacity for war. They were the only indigenous people able to prevent the Aztec empire from expanding into their territory.

All great civilizations come to an end, and the sun began to set on the Aztec empire when the boots of Cortes and a band of ragged European adventurers touched ground on the coast of Mexico in 1519. They brought with them four-legged creatures that could out run the fastest human and which had never before been seen by indigenous peoples: horses. Once they were loaded up on horses in full armor, including steel helmets with plumes which were impervious to clubbing - the chief weapon of The Aztecs - bearing somewhat unpredictable muskets but more importantly steel swords, and formidable spears and lances, they were the ultimate fighting machine - like the tanks of today. No match for the men on the ground. But as we shall see, it was in fact not the weapons but the conquistadors' germs that decimated the indigenous populations, including The Aztecs.

The Spanish conquistadors were only interested in gold and had little interest or respect for the gorgeous Aztec treasures and artifacts wrought in the precious metal, which they melted down as soon as they found it. Only a few precious examples of gold jewelry survive today as a reminder of the glory of ancient Mexico - including some pieces at this show.

Sadly, the religious fanaticism of the conquering armies barred any appreciation - or will to understand - the indigenous societies way of life. They systematically destroyed the majestic Mesoamerican cities and used the ruins to construct what would become colonial cities.

The end came on August 13, 1521 with the bloody taking of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the crowning glory and the capitol city of Aztec civilization by the conquistadors, and the defeat of Motecuhzoma II. The Tarascan governor, Tangaxoan II, was assassinated by the Spanish conquistador Beltran Nuno de Guzman in 1530, but the Tarascans did not put up any great resistance, believing that the European armies were fulfilling the prophecies of the gods.

However, here is how Jared Diamond, winner of the Pulitzer Prize winning "Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies" sees the real demise of this great civilization:

"The importance of lethal microbes in human history is well illustrated by Europeans' conquest and depopulation of the New World. Far more Native Americans died in bed from Eurasian germs than on the battlefield from European guns and

swords. Those germs undermined Indian resistance by killing most Indians and their leaders and by sapping the survivors' morale. For instance, in 1519 Cortes landed on the coast of Mexico with 600 Spaniards, to conquer the fiercely militaristic Aztec Empire with a population of many millions. That Cortes reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, escaped with the loss of "only" two-thirds of his force, and managed to fight his way back to the coast demonstrates both Spanish military advantages and the initial naiveté of the Aztecs. But when Cortes's next onslaught came, the Aztecs were no longer naïve and fought street by street with the utmost tenacity. What gave the Spaniards a decisive advantage was smallpox, which reached Mexico in 1520 with one infected slave from Spanish Cuba. The resulting epidemic proceeded to kill nearly half of the Aztecs, including Emperor Cuitlahuac. Aztec survivors were demoralized by the mysterious illness that killed Indians and spared Spaniards - they were resistant having already been exposed to smallpox in Europe, as if advertising the Spaniards' invincibility. By 1618, Mexico's initial population of about 20 million had plummeted to about 1.6 million."

Catalogue 91, fragment of a mural painting, Teotihuacan, stucco and pigment, 77 by 162.5 by 8 centimeters, circa 100-600 A.D., Museo Nacional de Antropologia, INAH, Mexico City

One of the artifacts I loved the most at the Aztec show had all elements of a great Rufino Tamayo - chalky, suffused earth tones and pigments, fine drawing and heroic subject matter. It is the stucco and pigment "Fragment of a mural painting," Teotihuacan, circa 100-600 A.D. from the Museo de Antropologia, Mexico City.

The mural is one of few surviving paintings, recovered from recent archaeological excavations, revealing the mythical and religious philosophy of the people, and of course their fervently warlike natures. It features a 'jaguar warrior,' once a vibrant red, a color associated with strength and war, now faded like the empire, with his face emerging from the feline jaws of his jaguar-shaped helmet. It is astonishing how many cultures, separated by centuries and continents, have spawned similar feline helmets for their warriors - the English, Germans, Romans, Etruscans to name a few - to inspire and strengthen their resolve and prowess in battle. Splendidly attired in the padded, noble garb of Teotihuacan - no steel armor here to halt his fluid movements - the jaguar warrior holds in one hand a square shield decorated with feathers, and in the other the bleeding-conch used to sound the call to war.