Aztec

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Term applied to the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of late Pre-Columbian central Mexico (1350–1521) and to the Triple Alliance Empire which arose in the Basin of Mexico (1431) less than 100 years before the Spanish Conquest.

1. Introduction.

When the Spanish arrived in 1519 most central Mexican city-states were tributaries of the Aztec Empire, an alliance of cities of the lake area of the Basin. Founded in 1431 after the defeat of the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, by the 1470s it had expanded well outside the Basin, and the dominant city of the alliance, Tenochtitlan, was transformed into its imperial capital. In the 19th century the term Aztec was popularized as a generic label for the late pre-conquest inhabitants of central Mexico. Some scholars use the term more narrowly for the inhabitants of the Basin (the definition used here), and others for just Tenochtitlan, whose inhabitants called themselves Mexica. Whatever their individual tribal names, the Nahuas of central Mexico shared a common culture resulting from a mix through intermarriage of ancestral barbarians (generically called Chichimecs) who had migrated into the area from the north, and civilized ancestors (Toltecs) who had settled there earlier, after the fall of their ancient city, Tollan (now Tula). Both Chichimec and Toltec pasts were evoked by the Aztecs as representing different valued traits. Moreover, although they considered Tollan as the origin of their culture, two older cities in Central Mexico, likewise abandoned, were also featured in Basin myth and legend. These were Teotihuacan, the place where the sun was born, reportedly, and Xochicalco, which was probably conceived as the place where their calendar was created.

The traits of Basin life during the earlier Middle Postclassic period (1150–1350) are not well understood. The Basin seems to have been dominated first by the city-states of Chichimec Tenayuca and Toltec Culhuacan, and then in the mid-14th century by the Tepanec Empire of Azcapotzalco and the Acolhua Empire of Texcoco. In the late 1420s, the Tepanec Empire was overthrown by the Acolhua in alliance with the Mexicas of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, who had been subjects of the Tepanecs, and the rebel Tepanec city of Tlacopan. The Triple Alliance Empire rose from this War of Independence and with it flowered Aztec art and culture.

Some relics of Aztec civilization remain, but there are large gaps in the record. Mexico City was founded in 1521 on the ruins of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, which had occupied an island in the Basin lake (later the entire lake area was covered with urban sprawl). During the Spanish viceregal period that followed, the

occupants of the city continued to destroy Aztec relics until the arrival in the late 18th century of the European Enlightenment. After this, enlightened Mexicans began to appreciate, collect, and preserve them, as the remains of an antiquity comparable to Europe's Classical past. At this time the recently excavated great Calendar Stone was displayed on the wall of the west tower of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City. As in the case of the Calendar Stone, which was found during repaving of the Plaza Mayor, most discoveries were the accidental result of modern construction. That is, until the 20th century, when Mexicans trained in the new science of archaeology began to conduct planned excavations. The climax was the 1978 Templo Mayor Project—a huge, government-supported exploration in the same central area of Mexico City, focusing on the principal temple precinct of Tenochtitlan. Over the following decades, the project has continued to yield valuable information, and Aztec studies have expanded greatly.

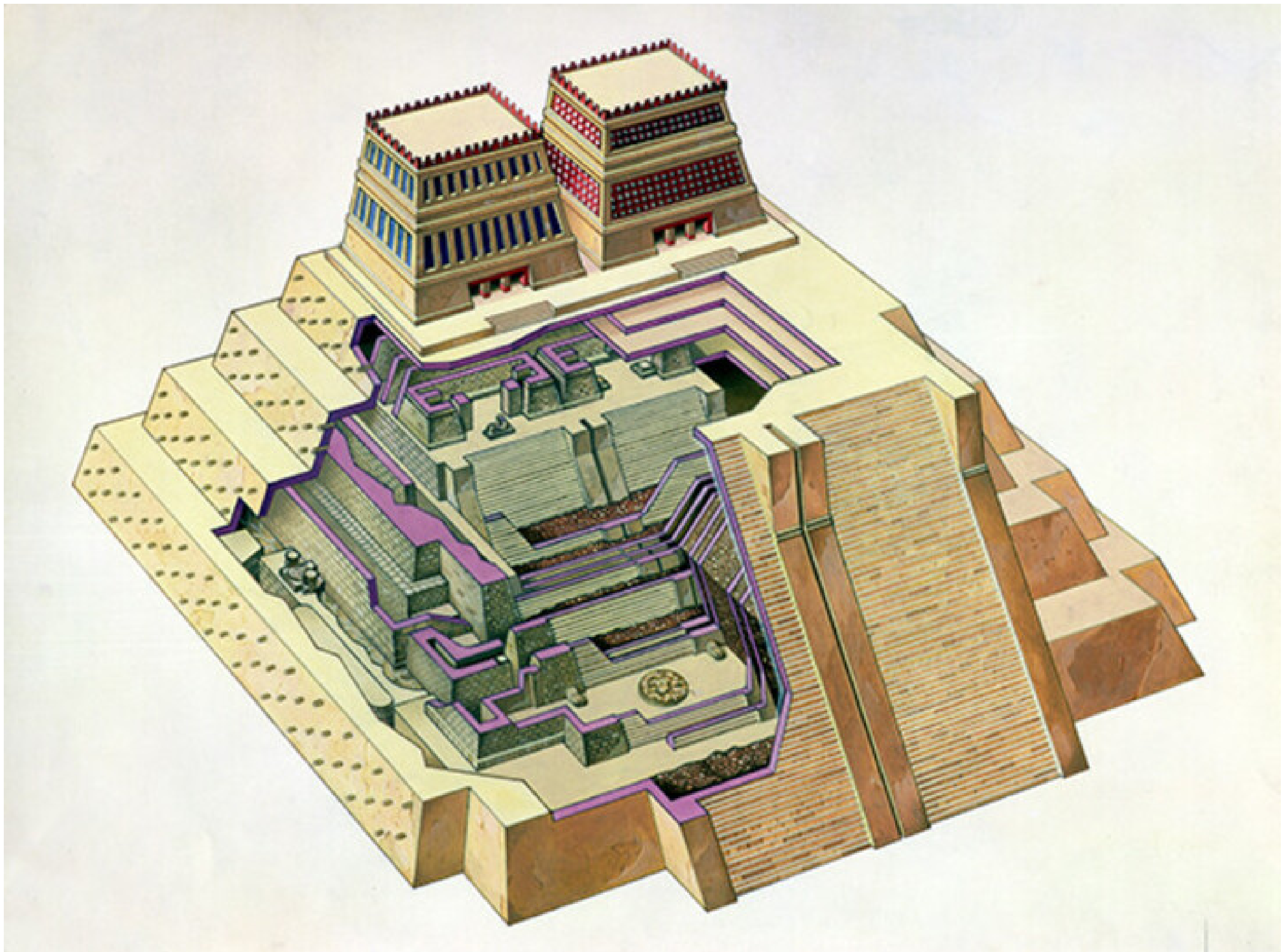
2. Architecture.

Aztec architecture is still represented by only a few whole structures and ruins, and these reveal that Aztec architecture was derived from older central Mexican building types, as always maintained by scholars. However, some of the examples unearthed during the Templo Mayor excavations are recognizable as archaizing structures of forms at ancient sites, which were studied by Aztec artists. Because of them, perhaps we should consider the buildings that were not obvious replicas as likewise references to the past, even though not as obviously. At any rate, we should not characterize this as a lack of originality. In all their art forms, the Aztecs used the past to bolster their claims of an ancient urban heritage that justified their domination of central Mexico.

From the remains, it seems that most temples were relatively simple pyramids with single shrines on them, and the central temple of a city was a larger pyramid on a rectangular plan with two shrines and two stairways. Even this unusual form is now known to have had earlier precedents at Tenayuca and Cuernavaca. The most important double temple in the empire was the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. Circular temples for the wind god, in Aztec times called Ehecatl ("Wind"), are also old forms, found in distant parts of Mesoamerica and dating back to the beginning the Early Postclassic period (900– 1200). The principal government palace of a city was where the ruler's family lived and all state business was conducted, including the reception of ambassadors and the large feasts which united local and foreign elites. Accounts by Spaniards describe the Tenochtitlan Tecpan (government palace) as a huge structure with multiple courtyards and thousands of occupants; reception and dining rooms; storage areas for tribute, weapons, musical instruments, and other things; water features; and chambers for all branches of government, from judicial to military. Smaller, private palaces were occupied by the nobility, or used by priests and schools. Such multi-purpose sprawling structures would have been standard in Aztec cities, just as they were in earlier times (e.g. the Calixtlahuaca palace).

Examples of archaizing structures are the House of Eagles and the small Red Temples next to the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. One is a Toltec room and the other two are Teotihuacan-style platforms. These structures also feature ensembles of archaizing art works, paintings, sculptures, and ceramics copied from the appropriate ancient sites. Although few such structures have been found, numerous archaizing sculptures and other relics testify to their continued construction in later times.

Aztec architecture also involved larger projects which included engineering (known mostly from hydraulic projects) and the modification of forms in the landscape. Two important sites are at Tetzcotzingo and Malinalco, which are on hills, in particular the rock-cut circular temple at Malinalco. Chapultepec might have had another such ensemble once. Most other Aztec structures consisted of stone-block walls and adobes covered by plaster and then painted. However, might not some of these have had comparably striking forms and contrasts? The reconstructed wall at Huejotla may be an example. Finally, decoration and furnishing were integral to the effects of architecture—freestanding and embedded sculptures no longer *in situ*, paintings now mostly destroyed, and furnishings that have likewise vanished. Unfortunately, only a few hints of these more creative possibilities remain.



Partial cross-section of the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan, w/c on paper, French School, 20th century, (Paris, Archives Larousse); photo credit: Giraudon/Bridgeman Images

3. Sculpture.

In contrast to architecture, sculptures have survived in great enough numbers to be analyzed in groups, to be appreciated individually, and to hint at former settings. This is the medium that best displays the originality of Aztec artisans in both aesthetics and iconography.

The Aztec sculptural corpus was developed seemingly in the Basin of Mexico, from a complex mix of styles in two and three dimensions. Its stages, geographical locations of changes, and inventions can be reconstructed only in broad outlines. Sources included the figurative sculptures and motifs of Tollan (Tula); the two-dimensional imagery of the Postclassic International or Mixteca–Puebla style; and sculptures visible at ancient sites. It is probably at these sites that Aztec sculptors learned the sophisticated aesthetics of massing and surface treatment as well as the general forms and iconography that they copied. Early on the Nahuas translated the deities known to us in the manuscripts of the International Style into three-dimensional figures (e.g. Ehecatl, the wind god). Sculptures were made in great numbers in different sizes and of different qualities of workmanship for the use of all members of society, regardless of social level. This was new to Mesoamerica.

The superior carving and aesthetics of the finest Aztec sculptures developed later, in tandem with Moteuczoma I's mid-15th-century creation of the imperial center. The Imperial Style's first mature monument was the great Coyolxauhqui Stone of about 1469. Sculptures in the Imperial Style are often larger than life, sometimes huge. They were made of polished, unpainted stones or of fine-grained volcanic stones covered with thin coats of paint. The carving is often superb, as is the arrangement of parts in complex compositions. Some works are figural, animal, and plant sculptures in the round, and others are geometric solids covered with reliefs that served as platforms and sacrificial platforms. Other characteristic forms are stone boxes and round containers, seats and platforms in smaller sizes, as well as skeuomorphs (non-functional representations) of drums, weapons, and other objects. Typical in sculptures in the round are contrasting treatments of forms—curved versus flat areas, plain versus relief-covered surfaces, geometrically shaped versus organically rounded forms. Equidistant parallel lines articulate underlying shapes and complex motifs are beautifully balanced and organized in reliefs.

Aztec carving of a rattlesnake (view from underneath), granite, diam. 530 mm, 1325–1521 (London, British Museum); photo © The British Museum For more information: https://www.britishmuseum.org/ *<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=8864&partId=1>*

After 1570 Aztec sculptures in this style were placed in prominent spaces used by the state. The style is easily recognizable and the sculptures can be ordered in a chronological sequence by hieroglyphic inscriptions, imagery, and style. This is not to say that only sculptures in the new style appeared after this. Many artists and workshops continued to produce images in older, traditional, and different styles, sometimes with traits from the imperial innovations, sometimes not. Nor were all parts of imperial

ensembles consistently fine in quality after this point. The inclusion of lesser sculptures in peripheral locations indicates different levels of training and talent of the artists working for the state (e.g. the colossal sculpture heads on the same platform as the Coyolxauhqui Stone).

Water deity (Chalchiuhtlcue), basalt, pigment, h. 11 3/5 in. (29 cm), 15th–early 16th century (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 1900, Accession ID: 00.5.72); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/50000217 _<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/50000217>_

In Aztec sculpture, the iconographic emphasis is on deities, supernatural figures, and the implements of blood sacrifice. Although ruler hieroglyphs exist and are valuable keys to dates and events, they are relatively rare, and the human figures depicted are small. A common, generic human type has a low hairline, unlined face, fleshy nose, and parted lips, with detailed treatment of ears, hands, and feet (see fig.). Some figures in the round are carved wearing clothing and carrying instruments of war and ceremony, while others, like the life-size temple image of Ehecatl at Calixtlahuaca, wear very little and were intended to be dressed with perishable clothing according to occasion.

Wooden sculptures were made too, but only a few examples have survived—some anthropomorphic deity figures, vertical and horizontal cylindrical drums (see fig.), masks, and *atlatl*s (spear-throwers).

Aztec *teponaztli* (slit-drum), l. 725 mm, 1325–1521 (London, British Museum); photo © The British Museum For more information: https://www.britishmuseum.org/ *<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=663724&partId=1&object=20346>*

4. Painting.

Examples of pre-conquest Aztec paintings are rare, due to their perishable materials. Remains of figural murals are in the Templo Mayor Tlaloc shrine, and archaizing painted decoration is seen on the Red Temple. A mural of striding warriors once visible at Malinalco has disappeared. A few sculptures also have remains of their original paint. The conventions are those of International Style manuscripts like the Codex Borgia (Rome, Bib. Vaticana, fol. 52) and paintings on an altar at Tizapan, Puebla, but with a tendency towards greater naturalism. No pre-conquest manuscripts survived the fires that destroyed Aztec libraries, but the early colonial Codex Borbonicus (Paris, Bib. Assemblée N., Y. 120) is assumed to reproduce the pre-conquest style. Originally, Aztec libraries held numerous painted pictorial manuscripts with pages made of stiffened paper or animal skin that took the form of long sheets that were rolled or folded into pages. These included maps, tribute lists, genealogies, histories, and divinatory books called *tonalamatl*s (“books of days”). Unfortunately, what remain of Aztec paintings are colonial manuscripts and church murals by their descendants in hybrid combinations of native and European features.

5. Metalwork.

Most metalwork took the form of jewelry and decorations in gold, copper, and silver. Spanish reports indicate that large amounts were taken from a storage space in the palace of Axayacatl, the father of the last ruler, Moteuczoma II, but most of the items described by conquistadores, like large disks representing the sun and moon, were subsequently melted down. Only small objects have survived to the present day. Although the Aztecs valued gold highly and associated it with the sun, Aztec territory was disappointing to the gold-hungry Spanish, who sought but did not find abundant sources. There were no mines, and it appears that panning was the method of acquisition. Some examples of decorative goldwork have been found in offering chambers at the Templo Mayor, but these are relatively scarce. Jade and other green-colored stones are found in much greater numbers, as they were symbolically related to the earth, water, and fertility.

Aztec metalwork closely resembles Mixtec metalwork in techniques, usage, and imagery, and it is said that the art was brought to the Basin of Mexico from that area, along with metallurgists. Mixtec and Aztec techniques feature hammering and lost-wax molding primarily, without the soldering, surface depletion, and granulation seen in South America. The center of Aztec metalworking before the Conquest was Azcapotzalco. Like featherworking, this native industry continued after the Spanish Conquest.

6. Other arts.

(i) Ceramics.

Pottery used by the Aztecs was from a variety of imported and local sources. The commonest local type was a mass-produced orange ware, decorated with fine black lines and motifs unrelated for the most part to Aztec imagery in other media. However, those made in late pre-conquest times introduced new images that parallel sculptural interests—naturalistic plants and animals. Also noteworthy were burnished polychrome ceramics imported from Cholula bearing International Style motifs: hearts, sun disks, flint knives, skulls, and bones. These were the preferred tableware of the last ruler, Moteuczoma II.

Tripod vessel with vulture effigy head, clay with colours, h. 222 mm, 15th–early 16th centuries (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Carol R. Meyer, 1981, Accession ID: 1981.297); image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Small, mold-made ceramic images of various deities are common and probably served as household gods and offerings. One mass-produced mold-made type represents a woman or goddess holding a child dressed as a miniature deity. These may have represented the children chosen from within Aztec society for sacrifice to the rain gods. In contrast to these productions are finely modeled and carved figurines dressed as deities in unpolished raw clay, freestanding or attached to flutes and other implements. These types are found in excavations near large temples, like the Templo Mayor.

The most striking ceramics from the offerings at the Templo Mayor are large vessels with tour-de-force representations of Aztec deities in different techniques, some in seemingly foreign types, like those decorated with burnished polychrome. Given their Aztec imagery, they were commissioned by the elite from the best available ceramists in Tenochtitlan. The same is true of large figurative braziers and life-size anthropomorphic sculptures, comparable in size to monumental stone sculptures and also like the large clay figures characteristic of the Gulf Coast, beginning in the earlier Classic period. In Tenochtitlan, these are best exemplified by the life-sized eagle warriors and threatening skeletal figures discovered in the House of Eagles.

(ii) Featherwork.

The Spaniards were particularly impressed with the beauty of Aztec featherwork—an art they had never seen before—which employed the brilliantly colored plumage of tropical birds in combination with other luminous materials to make spectacular contrasts in colors and materials. Among Pre-Columbian examples are a large quetzal feather headdress and a shield with a gold-trimmed coyote motif. These represent the two principal techniques of featherworking, respectively, the first consisting of whole feathers tied to a base, and the second, of feathers trimmed from the shaft and glued on native paper to form pictorial collages. Surviving Pre-Columbian specimens, most in European collections, are rare and probably represent Aztec gifts from the time of the Conquest. (The same can be said for works in the other valuable materials described below.) A huge range of featherwork warrior costumes and implements once existed but have not survived. Featherworking continued after the Conquest, producing religious garb for Christian priests and altar cloths and images of saints and biblical scenes, as well as colonial versions of pre-conquest native garb for processions and performances for European audiences.

(iii) Lapidary arts.

Aztec lapidaries skillfully crafted a wide array of jewelry for the elite, employing various hard, lustrous stones, like jade (actually jadeite) and green-colored stones (called social jade by modern scholars), turquoise, obsidian, rock crystal, serpentine, amethyst, opal, and agate, as well as jet and amber. Jade was the most valuable of these in Aztec times, because of its beauty and rarity, and also because of its connection with the ancient Mesoamerican past, ancestors, life, and plants.

Aztec figure of an eagle warrior, jade, h. 145 mm, 1325–1521 (London, British Museum); photo © The British Museum For more information: https://www.britishmuseum.org/ *<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=668346&partId=1>*

(iv) Mosaics.

Some wood objects were made to be covered with mosaic tesserae made of combinations of valuable materials, but principally turquoise, probably obtained from other areas of Mexico. The wood was carved to form curved and flat areas and sharp transitions, style traits seen also in some imperial sculptures. These shapes were maintained in the mosaic and emphasized by the patterning of tesserae. Surviving

objects are masks, shields, *atlatl*s and knives, scepters, and pectorals, most in European collections. However, one of the finest examples is a disk covered with tiny turquoise tesserae and featuring figures, which was discovered in an offering cache at the Templo Mayor.

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