

FORT WORTH MUSEUM OF SCIENCE & HISTORY

October 7, 1971

Mr. Stuart Gentling
4801 Harley Street
Fort Worth, Texas 76107

Dear Stuart:

I would have very much liked to have had you represented in our publication on the Middle American Indian collection. As Carol undoubtedly told you your article was too long for our purposes and we would have had to do some editing. The article was delivered to us with the comment that you stated that we were not to "touch a word." (The marks on your enclosed essay are not ours. We are returning it as we received it). Frankly, I can understand your feelings about your wanting the context of the article to remain exactly as you intended it; however I have never seen a writer yet who did not have editorial revisions made on a copy for publication. In the articles that I have been fortunate enough to publish, editors have torn them to pieces, it has hurt at times but to get published I have had to live with the editors comments. Also, I have finally realized that editors are the needed outside party who sees the "boo-boos" that I made because I am so close to the feelings and thoughts of the copy. I might add, we have as you may know, one of the best editors available who is a national editor for the college board examinations and who has published rather extensively with her husband who holds the chair in English at the University of Texas in Arlington. All of the other articles in the publication were edited, not severely, but brought up to a certain uniformity that I felt was paramount for this publication. When you see a copy I hope you see what I mean.

I sincerely hope that this does not offend you as I appreciate the tremendous amount of time that you spent on your essay. Those individuals who do not write are unaware of how much blood, sweat, tears and old fashioned hard work goes into writing. So again your effort is much appreciated. I like your ideas and possibly you will do something else for us in the future.

Sincerely yours,

Helmut J. Naumer
Executive Director

HJN:bs

The Aldenhoven collection is not a ^{large} ~~great~~ collection. (It is not a big collection.) In fact, in my opinion it is not even a collection at all, but a lovingly assembled product of a deep personal vision, the vision of Mrs William E. McKay. I say this because there has been no attempt to make a collection of these works of art, no attempt fill in the gaps that would have made a more complete cultural and chronological list. This places a considerable burden upon the uninitiated viewer, because it forces him, perhaps for the first time to accept these pieces as individual objects and to evaluate them on their individual formal qualities. I can not help but feel that Mrs. McKay and the director Mr. Helmut Naumer had this in mind as they worked together to acquire these objects. I also can not help but feel that there is much wisdom in this approach inspite of the esthetic burden the uninitiated must bear. For though it is necessary to eventually understand the chronological and cultural context of these pieces, it is so easy to regard them only in these contexts and to miss the beauty, yes even the magic, that so much ^{of} ^{art} ~~this~~ ^{was} possessed before the coming of the Europeans.

I said that the Aldenhoven collection is not a great collection. I meant that. However, that is not to say that there are not great ^{works} ~~works~~ of art in the collection. ^{There are, and there many of them} ~~There are many of them~~. Yet to the viewer ^{who} ~~who~~ is looking for the first time, many of these fine pieces will not yet speak to him with their eloquence, ^{their} ~~power~~ and beauty. This is probably because at one time or another in our lives we have all been partially blinded by the stigma of the term "primitive," a word too often applied to the arts of those peoples who are not descended from our own Hellenic-Italian-Northern European tradition. This is a shame, a deep shame, for it has driven many people away from the arts of other people. It has created a bias that ^{has} ~~has~~ narrowed our awareness and made our own world more little. It is not in the purview of this brief and limited article to discuss what is primitive and not primitive in art, nor to compare it with European art. This practise is at best confusing and can rob the sense of vitality from the arts of both cultures. What I shall offer in the next ^{few} ~~next~~ paragraphs is my own personal view of ^{the} ~~pre-colombian~~ ^{world} ~~art~~, and I offer ^{this} ~~my~~ view in the hopes that some ^{of} ~~the~~ magic, and beauty, and wonder which the arts of these people hold for me may in some small way rub off on the viewer and excite him as it ^{has} ~~excited~~ me.

I think it may be stimulating to the viewer who is confront^{ing} pre-colombian art for the first time and confronting it with a European bias, to give him a glimpse of this new world as it opened up before the amazed eyes of those who led the first European confrontation, the Spanish conquerors. What did they see when they first landed on the tropical shores of this new land and moved inland toward the mountains, to the great highland city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the capitol and seat of Aztec power? What they saw from Yucatan, to Veracruz, from Cholula to Tenochtitlan was not a new world but a old world, a world in which many of the greatest cultures of Mexico — the Olmeca, the Maya, ^{the Teotihuacan,} the Zapoteca — were but distant historics, having long before fallen through conquest and decline. But the Spanish ^{knew} little or nothing of these older cultures. What greeted their eyes was a new, ^{demanding} ~~remaining~~ aggressive, vigorous culture which had swept the country from highland Mexico, but which had established itself to accomadate ^{as well as} ~~as well as~~ a life which had changed little in thousands of years, inspite of the great deal of local cultural variation. Mexico was well populated at the time of the conquest. The Spanish passed through many large cities on their way to the Aztec capitol, but nothing prepared them for the sight that they were to see when they entered Tenochtitlan itself.

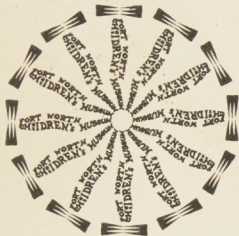
As the Spanish stood on the shore of Lake Texcoco, gazing in wonder out into the lake ^{at} the island city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, what they saw was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of ~~from~~ 350,000 to 500,000 people living on the island and in the tributary cities on the nearby shores of the lake. They saw a city of sixty thousand houses, of temples, of huge, and I mean huge, palaces. They saw many exquisite gardens, and zoos, and open plazas, and markets where every kind of produce in the country was brought and traded. They saw the many long causeways that connected the island with the cities on the shore. They saw the ten-mile-long Dam built by the Texcocan prince Nezahualcoyotl to control the flooding and the salinity of the lake. They saw the great aqueduct which brought fresh water from the ^{fresh springs} ~~fresh~~ springs of Chapultepec across the lake to the city. And all this was covered with white cement and burnished to a shine so that the city on the island and all the cities in the lake shone white in the highland Mexican sun. The number of canals which crisscrossed the island made it a Venice of the new world, and they were covered with some two hundred thousand canoes silently going about their business. And there were trees everywhere, and flowers everywhere, and on the flat roofs of every house a garden so that the city was called by

its ^{own} people, "the green city."

And what about these people? ^{What were they really like?} What did the Spanish see when they first confronted these ~~people~~ highland city ~~people~~ dwellers? What the Spanish saw was a people made rich by war, by the slaves and tribute which war had won for them. ~~They~~ The Spanish saw a vigorous, ruthless, demanding people who worshipped many gods, but who had as their main god, Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. ^{He} ~~It~~ ^{their} was ~~this~~ god, an Aztec god. ^{He} had lifted them from an insignificant tribe of nomadic outcasts to become the rulers of all ~~central~~ central Mexico. He had made them rulers through war, and they in turn had made him the richest and most powerful of all ^{their} gods. ^{and this} Their victories brought the blood and hearts of captives to feed his insatiable appetite, ^{and this} purchased his favor for future victories. And yet this is only one, ^{view of these people, the view most of us are taught in school.} Nowhere ^{we} told of their gentle and refined side. They were ^{an} elegant people, ^{but we tell of} ^{are not told of} their exquisite weaving and featherwork, their elegant manners, their love of songs, of poetry, ~~of drama~~ ^{surviving} of drama (^{as they were} a body of literature which ^{ranks} among the worlds finest). We are not told of their overpowering love of flowers, and of the sophistication of their gardens filled ^{as they were} with fountains and aviaries, and pavilions for the relaxation of the flower-viewing elite. And as for their architecture, nothing survives of the palaces which once could house three thousand people in a single room, or dazzle the eye with ^{their} their brightly painted and burnished walls. Nor can we smell the sweet-scented woods, carved into ^{the} thousand delicately shaped beams ^{which supported the} ceilings of these palaces. Nor do we know anything of their dancing now except from the accounts of the awe-inspired Spanish chroniclers which tell us of their unbelievable complexity. This complexity is likewise extended to their foods, which for variety, beauty, and taste surpassed anything that Europe had at that time. These qualities and many many others, such as their philosophies, ^{res} their sense of time and place, made these people exceptional in the eyes of their Spanish conquerors, the first and only inheritors of the European tradition to see them in their untouched state.

Perhaps it may seem more than a little ironic to the reader who has viewed the Aldenhoven Collection and discovered that there are no Aztec pieces in it, that I should use the Aztecs to illustrate my view of the pre-colombian world. I see no irony in it at all. I use the Aztecs as an example for two reasons. My first reason is, because, as I have already said, European eyes have seen at first hand the brilliance of the Aztec culture, and we have been left fairly good records of it. My second reason for using the Aztec culture as an example, is that it is by no means an exceptional pre-colombian culture, nor is it by most standards the highest culture that pre-colombian Mexico produced. Many of the earlier high cultures of Mexico are represented by superb examples in the Aldenhoven collection, the Maya, the Teotihuacani, the Zapoteca, as well as the diffuse cultures from both the east coast and west coast of the country. One of the obvious strengths of this collection which appeals most to me is how, inspite of the stylistic and cultural and chronological levels which separate the objects one from another, there is an all pervading common thread of Mexican, of human experience which unites these pieces and brings them closer to the viewers own experience. For the unvarying rythms of birth and life and death, of peace and war, of harmony and discord, of songs and joy, of sickness and sorrow, of the triumph of power, of the triumph of death — all these are ^{the} experiences which unite our lives with theirs. It is with great eloquence that ^{and} ~~these~~ art has grasped these eternal themes and it is our great good fortune that ^{it} ~~it~~ has survived the centuries to speak again with fresh eloquence to those of us who wish to listen. Mrs. McKay has heard their song, ^{and} the Aldenhoven collection is the result. Look closely before you pass by, for you too may hear their song, their eternal music.

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