

THE GENTLING Paintings

Several of the Gentling paintings in this exhibition may be enigmatic to viewers familiar with past Gentling shows and who may not be aware of their studies of Aztec culture. Both twins are not only interested in ancient Mexico but also devote many of their works to contemporary subjects which show the often unconscious survival of ancient beliefs in contemporary Mexican life. I discussed all the paintings in this show with Stuart Gentling the other day. Here are a few of his comments on the works.

Ralph Carr

(1) COATL, I have been interested lately in doing a number of dramatic black and white studies of Aztec carvings, especially subjects of great symbolic significance. Here I have drawn the underside of a large Aztec sculpture of a rattlesnake. The snake is a powerful symbol of the life force in all its manifestations. In order for this sculpture to achieve maximum magic power the artist had to carve it as realistically as possible which meant that in this case he carved the snake's complete underside, scales and all. But there is more. The coils of the snake move inward toward a mystic center. They also radiate outward from it. The snake not only symbolizes the powerful life force; it is, when depicted coiled, also the symbol of the center of earth and the entrance to the underworld, the beginning and ending of all life.

(2) OCELOTL, The Aztec word for Jaguar. This animal symbolizes the powers of the night and the destructive powers of the earth. I have shown this large carving which is in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City against the Aztec symbols of stars (half-opened eyes) which symbolize the night sky and the underworld. I have also restored the Jaguar sculpture's spots which in the Aztec mind also stood for stars. The jaguar was the animal form of the supreme deity Tezcatlipoca, the creator and destroyer of the universe. This animal was also closely associated with royalty and rulership.

(3) TOWARD EASTERN POINT, PROUT'S NECK, Last summer I was invited to dine with friends who had a vacation house at Prout's Neck, Maine, just south of Portland. On this peninsula were the homes of the great American painter Winslow Homer and his family. Here from the 1880's to 1910 Homer painted some of his best seascapes. Homer is one of Scott's and my artistic idols, and the coast around Prout's Neck looks unchanged since Homer's time. I couldn't resist the opportunity to paint the same rocks that Homer saw and painted. It was a wonderful way of communing with the world of this wonderful artist, perhaps America's finest.

(4) SOUVENIR, The French costume here is authentic and dates from about 1795. It shows its age. The old velvet, the few remaining sequins and the worn embroidery probably hint at a time in its existence when it, like a lot of other original garments, was used in theater work. Infact, Scott and I found an old theater playbill dating from 1901 in one of the pockets. On the paper, in an elegant handwriting, were recorded several names and what appeared to be loans in English pounds to possibly other actors. At least that's what we would like to believe. The 18th century is one of Scott's and my favorite eras for study, and our costume collection brings us close to that age in a very unique way. This is one of Scott's finest works.

(5) PROUT'S NECK", This scene at Prout's Neck, Maine depicts the surf and rocks just below Winslow Homer's studio. No wonder he loved this area. The rocks, powerful abstractions in themselves, and the ever changing sea were a constantly renewing source of inspiration for Homer.

(6) TELLTALE, A summer sailboat at the southern tip of the South Harpswell penninsula in Maine. The season is over. The boat has been brought up on land for the winter. Soon it will be covered with a tarp and staked down. The only thing moving now in response to the changing winds of Autumn are the little red threads of the telltales in the rigging.

(7) HARD SCRABBLE, This is a watercolor study I did years ago from memory of John Graves's gate to his farm near Glenrose, Texas. The place is called "Hard Scrabble" which is also the title to one of John's most popular books. Arguably Texas's finest writer, John is famous for guarding his privacy. Here the gate is locked, and the road winds mysteriously back into the cedar breaks, both to me powerful symbols of John's love of privacy and his mysterious nature.

It took me seven years to persuade John to write his celebrated essay for our elephant folio "Of Birds and Texas." I was suffering from cataracts at the time I painted this. You can tell by the overly vivid blues of the shadows on the road. After my eyesight was corrected I decided to leave the color as is, a record of that time in my life.

(8) TONANZIN, The Aztec word for "Our Mother." Here I have depicted a small Spanish colonial sculpture of the Virgin Mary adorned with the brilliant green feathers of the Quetzal bird. These feathers were more valuable to the Aztecs than gold, and only royalty could wear them. In this image two cultures - the indian and the European christian have come together. If you look closely, you can see that the lace of the Virgin's petty coat has the design of four-petalled flowers. The Aztec word for flower is "xochitl." When combined with the word "quetzal" the resulting word is "Xochiquetzal," the name of the young mother goddess. She is the goddess of springtime and fertility, and she was patroness of Aztec artists. Every ancient indian looking at this figure would recognize this - a fact that

escaped all but a very few savy spanish missionaries. The prayers that the indians offered these plume decorated votive images of the Virgin were thus also being offered to their own traditional goddess right under the noses of the disapproving conquerors.

(9) TLALXICO, Aztec word meaning "Navel of the Earth." In the garden of a fashionable rancho near San Miguel de Allende in Mexico I noticed a block of carved stone serving as a pedestal for a potted plant. The rancher knew only that the stone was ancient and was quite surprized when I told him about it.

The block was the center section of a reclining Aztec water deity traditionally called a "Chac Mool." Originally the complete figure showed the deity reclining on its back with knees drawn up at one end and head and chest raised at the other end as if the figure were doing abdominal excercises or sit-ups. Of the torso only the hand and part of the knee remains. The hand is holding a sacred vessel on the figure's stomach upon which the potted plant stands. The vessel is literally resting on the Chac Mool's stomach and navel. Both vessel and navel represent the magic center of the earth from which all life emerges. Infact every hole in the ground, whether a cave or a hole to plant a seed becomes a magic navel of the earth.

Notice the flowers. They are blue, the color of the god of Fire, Xiuhtecuhtli whose name in Aztec literally means "Turquoise Lord." Blue also symbolizes water as does the Chac Mool. Thus we have here two potent symbols for both water and fire whose union - moisture and warmth - is essential for life. Atl-Tlachinolte, "water and fire" is life itelf. There is much more to this sculpture, too much to discuss here, but it is a magical piece. The blue flowers, of course, were an accident, an unintended coincidence, but the ancient ones would have known and would have recognized this stone remnant as a sacred altar which in fact the Chac Mool was in pre-colombian times.

One last note: it is poignant to see how the Spaniards had this piece carved up to make a building block for a new colonial structure, probably a church. But look how carefully the indian slaves preserved the magic "navel" intact even though the stone would disappear into the fabric of a new Christian temple. The new church would become more sacred to the indians than the Spanish missionaries ever realized. There are many, many instances of the Aztecs trying to preserve remnants of the old faith by hiding sacred objects within the walls and foundations of the conqueror's buildings.

(10) MAYA LORD, Scott painted this small work for Carolyn Tate's new book on the Maya city of Yaxchilan. The painting depicts the fresco remains of the head of a Maya nobleman. The painting has an abstract power beyond its iconography, and both impressed Scott. Slowly but surely recent discoveries are giving us a clearer vision of these mysterious people.

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