

Sacred and Poetry: Scott Gentling and Stuart Gentling's Vision of Tenochtitlan

By Carolyn Tate

Painting 7. Gate of Xoloco, where Motecuhzoma first met with Cortés and his soldiers.

The Templo Mayor is visible in the distance.

Of all the cities the Spanish encountered in North America, Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire, most inspired their admiration. They marveled over the royal palaces, ^{The Temples} the zoos and aviaries, and the bustling markets with amazing varieties of goods.

According to legend, Tenochtitlan was founded around AD 1325. ^{TECHNICAL} (EP-50) Originally it was a ^{precious} ~~precious~~ island settlement in Lake Texcoco, with a magnificent view of the

surrounding volcanoes. Hernan Cortés and his soldiers arrived in 1519, the year One ^{of the AZTEC CALENDAR} Reed, in which the return of the vanished god Quetzalcoatl had been predicted. By that date, the city, its white walls gleaming like silver, supported about 200,000 residents.

Many people also visited daily to trade at the markets. They came via canoes or walked ^{Many long} ~~along~~ one of the ^{four long} ~~four long~~ causeways that linked the island to the ^{surrounding} ~~surrounding~~ mountains. ^{cities}

(2) ^{The traveler arrived at} No matter how a ^{person} ~~person~~ traveled to Tenochtitlan, the Templo Mayor (^{Great} ~~Major~~ Temple) was visible, rising above most other temples from within its walled Sacred Precinct. Within this enclosure, stone sculptures and mural paintings portrayed symbols and beings from Aztec stories of the world's creation. On grand monuments, artists juxtaposed these mythic images with the deeds and events of Tenochtitlan's rulers. Dates in the Aztecs' cyclical calendar linked political histories with their creation stories, creating repeated layers of significance for each monument. This city-as-symbol was not like a modern industrial city. Tenochtitlan was not simply an accumulation of dwellings and businesses. Instead, its center contained ritual spaces and buildings whose spatial organization reflected a metaphoric use of astronomical alignment and served as stages for rituals that integrated people with their cultural history, mythic origins and sacred landscapes. The art and architecture proclaimed the Mexican ^{MEXICAN AZTECS} ~~tribe~~'s concept of their destiny as imperial rulers. ^{multi-level}

See page 5

However, the Spanish paid little attention to the strange, indecipherable imagery that surrounded them. The twenty-two months from the time Cortés entered Tenochtitlan, in the Year One Reed, ^{to the New Calendar} to the time the Spanish defeated Cuauhtemoc, the last emperor in August 1521, left little time for sightseeing. In a rare descriptive comment, Cortés' soldier, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, remarked that the buildings were "made very splendid with many kinds of stone with pictures on them, which gave much to think about....I say again that I stood looking at it and thought that never in the world would there be discovered other lands such as these....Of all the wonders that I then beheld today all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing."¹

^{mostly as buried ruins}
Today, Tenochtitlan exists ~~only in fragments~~. It emerges gradually, arising from below Mexico City in bits--a stairway here, a colossal goddess sculpture there, a small circular temple elsewhere. From these traces, and from the highly biased 16th-century writings by the conquerors, scholars have reconstructed various interpretations of the Aztec capital, its social and economic systems, its creation stories and beliefs. Truly the image we have today of Tenochtitlan exists as imagination, as desire to know the city its destroyers called "a wonderful thing to behold." ^{Not really true, we have lots of information}

The Gentling's
This desire—to visualize the wondrous city-- has fueled the careers of numerous archaeologists and historians of ancient Mexico. For a pair of twins from Ft. Worth, Texas, who are trained as artists, it has been a preoccupation for nearly 40 years. The exhibition "1519/^{The} One Reed: Wonders of Aztec Mexico" presents Scott Gentling and Stuart Gentling's concepts of Tenochtitlan. They have based their vision on the factual data (archaeological fragments of Aztec existence) and informed it by years of study of the 16th century sources and recent publications by archaeologists and art historians. To this scholarly information, they have added their own artistic grasp of the symbolism of Aztec religion and aesthetic sensibilities.

To date, the Gentlings have produced 25 paintings, 20 models of individual Aztec structures, and a model of the entire Sacred Precinct. Dozens of drawings fill a series of notebooks. In these, Scott Gentling has documented his visual explorations of the cities

encountered by the Spanish on their march from Veracruz to Tenochtitlan in 1519 and many views of the Sacred Precinct. He has sketched the available sources for Aztec architecture, including ceramic models of their temples made by the Aztecs, actual buildings, and drawings made after the conquest. He has recorded his musings on the appearance and symbolism of the city as well as the process by which he built the models. Despite all this work, the Gentlings do not see the project as finished. It is an ongoing exploration that will respond to new information and ideas. Their intent with this project is twofold. First, they want to satisfy their own desire to portray the city as Cortés and his men would have seen it in 1519 or One Reed. Secondly, they want to elicit dialogue by proposing their ideas in a specific visual form that can be analyzed and debated.

Because the capital of New Spain, now Mexico City, was erected upon the foundations of Aztec buildings, the locations of most of the Sacred Precinct buildings are still conjectural. Archaeology has revealed some clues. The Sacred Precinct is thought to be 500 yards long on each ^{SIDE} ~~side~~, covering an area of about 35 acres.² Since 1978, excavations conducted by the Mexican Institute of Archaeology have located the Templo Mayor's foundations and lowest levels. Traces of the Eagle-Warrior Hall have appeared just north of the Templo Mayor. Excavation shafts under the cathedral have exposed traces of a long colonnaded platform running east-west that corresponds to the structure labeled 35 and 37 in the Gentlings' plan. Sixteenth-century sources strongly suggest that the Temple of Tezcatlipoca was just south of the Templo Mayor, facing west and the discovery of some stairs seem to corroborate this. And it is generally accepted that a ballcourt ran east-west with a Skullrack on its east side, as shown in the Sahagún drawing. But much remains unknown.

There are other interpretations of these structures

photo of Model

The Gentlings' Model and Plan. The Gentling brothers' major contribution to the problem is Scott's three-dimensional scale model of the Sacred Precinct. Since they are not archaeologists, the twins ^{feel} ~~are~~ free to explore possible solutions to the question. They have developed the model fairly recently, after decades of experimentation and

refinement. By lighting it to correspond to a particular time of day and year, they use the model as a basis for their more recent paintings. From the model they drew a plan. Only the Gentlings' plan proposes locations for all the major temples listed by the 16th-century chronicler Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. Their plan also allows the many Aztec rituals described by Fray Diego Durán and others to be logically choreographed within the Precinct's plazas and buildings. They base this plan primarily on the archaeological evidence and on two 16th century images, the Nuremburg Map of 1524 (that accompanied Cortés' second letter to Charles V) and the drawing from Fray Sahagún's Florentine Codex that is considered to represent the Sacred Precinct. The problem is that these two sources conflict. Could one of them contain a printing error?

Catalogue page 9

Scott's drawings of Sahagún & Nuremburg

The Nuremburg map. The Gentlings hypothesize that the European printer who created the Nuremburg map ^{may have} ~~had~~ ^{received} been given two preliminary drawings from which to make his finished print. One depicted the lake with its island, but had a blank section in the center where the Sacred Precinct was. Supporting this idea is the fact that the Sacred Precinct of Tlatelolco remains blank on the Nuremburg Map. A more detailed drawing, perhaps at a different scale, depicted the buildings in Tenochtitlan's Sacred Precinct. In combining these drawings in the final map, Scott thinks the printer mistakenly placed the image of Tenochtitlan's sacred square upside down. To explore this idea, Scott drew a "corrected version." In this drawing the monuments assume their known places in relation to the Palace of Motecuhzoma II and to the foundations of buildings that have been excavated. Catalogue page 10

New proposals about the Sacred Precinct. Coatlan. The Gentling plan makes several new proposals about the Sacred Precinct. The brothers place ^{AN ENCLOSED PLAZA WITH BUILDINGS} a building at the center of the north side of the Precinct and suggest that it is ^{the} Coatlan / Tlilan, a sacred shrine for the many forms of the Earth Goddess, including Cihuacoatl, Tonantzin, and Chantico. It would have held the most sacred fire of the land, in a temple conceived as the womb of the Earth Goddesses. This proposed northern complex forms the terminus of a major north-south sacred road within the Precinct. Comparing the "corrected" Nuremburg Map to the drawing published by Sahagún, both show a large building to the north. The

from their studies of Olmec
archaeology, urban planning
the gentling observed that
similarly

Sahagún drawing shows a priest bringing fire to a temple in the north. Similarly, many earlier cities of central Mexico had buildings approached by stairs at the terminus of a major north-south avenue. These include Teotihuacan (AD 150 – 750), where the “Pyramid of the Moon” forms the end of the north-south “Avenue of the Dead.” Many scholars think that this pyramid is associated with a Goddess, since it replicates the mountain behind it, called by the Aztecs “Tonan” or Tenan” (“our mother” or “mother of stone”). Furthermore, in the plaza of the “Pyramid of the Moon” was one (possibly two) enormous stone statues of a goddess. At night, the North Star hovers directly above the actual Pyramid of the Moon and also the proposed Coatlan or northern building at Tenochtitlan. All other stars seem to pivot around the North Star. This heavenly display formed in the ancient mind a skirt of stars for the earth mother. One of her Aztec names was Citlalicue, meaning “Stars are her Skirt.” The Gentlings further propose that this was the shrine for the most sacred fire of Chantico, an ancient fire goddess. They note that only two priests, the most august and holy leaders, were permitted to enter her inner shrine, the Tlilan or Place of Darkness. ~~One of these high priests would have been the king, Motecuhzoma.~~ The Gentlings place his Fasting Palace adjacent to this northern complex.

M's "prime minister" who could enter as well as another priest of the Tlilan - The Tlilan Tenanacac

Divine Ballcourt. The Gentlings' second major proposal concerning the plan of the Precinct situates a large ballcourt at the foot of the Templo Mayor, bounded on the east by the Templo Mayor itself, and on the west by the Skullrack. This ballcourt runs north-south and ~~is also~~ ^{was actually} part of the great north-south road. Sahagún described a Teotlachco or “Divine Ballcourt” but no other scholars have included it in their plans. Only one ballcourt been located with assurance, the one adjacent to the western gate and that runs east-west. This is visible in the Gentling Plan as building 13. The twins place the Divine Ballcourt here for several reasons. First, Sahagún's drawing of the Sacred Precinct shows two deities, ^{probably} Xochipilli and Macuilxochitl, who are patrons of games, including the ballgame, in what would be the end zones of this ballcourt. Also, the symbolism of the Templo Mayor as Coatepec, one of the Aztec mythical mountains, calls for a ballcourt at its base. The Aztec migration story relates a fateful incident in which their tribal deity, Huitzilopochtli, kills his sister Coyolxauhqui and beheads her at a ballcourt at the foot of

Sahagún mentions two ball courts
the Teotlachco (Ball court & Miconow) and
the Teotlachco (Divine Ballcourt)

No, M's
I think
could possibly have to enter permission to
enter

Coatepec, Snake Mountain. Among its other meanings, the Templo Mayor probably represented this story, since a huge stone depicting the dismembered Coyolxauhqui sat at the foot of the southern of the twin temples, that of Huitzilopochtli. In the Gentlings' ^{mind} ^{Coyolxauhqui} plan, that circular ^{was} stone, its shape resembling a ball, ^{was} would have been adjacent to the Divine Ballcourt.

Catalogue page 11

Drawing from page 32 of orange notebook showing Coatlan, Teotlachco, Huey Tzompantli

^{Huey Tzompantli}
Skullrack. Finally, the Gentlings propose that the Great Skull Rack, the ^{Huey Tzompantli} Tzompantli, that so impressed the Spaniards, formed the west side boundary of the divine Ballcourt, opposite the Templo Mayor. Both Sahagún's drawing and the Nuremburg Map show a great skull rack in this location. Fray Durán described this Tzompantli as being 180 feet in length. Thirty steps led to a platform thirty feet wide. All along the center of the platform were poles "as tall as a great tree" about six feet apart set up to look like a palisade. Holes were drilled about eighteen inches apart to allow for the passage of horizontal poles. The skulls were drilled through the temples and threaded on these horizontal supports. Andrés de Tapia, one of the original group of soldiers with Cortés, claimed that the skull rack contained 136,000 skulls. When Scott built the model using the dimensions described by Durán, he found that the maximum number of skulls it could hold was 8,000 – 10,000. "Tapia's skull rack would have to be as tall as the Empire State building or as big as the great temple itself if it was going to contain anything like this number," Scott wrote in his notebook. The Gentlings point out that captives were treated like honored sons of captors. The skulls of warriors who died in battle or by being sacrificed publicly were raised skyward on the Skullrack as a great honor, thus symbolizing stars. The Gentlings think that this particular skull rack honored the victory of Huitzilopochtli over his sister Coyolxauhqui and their 400 brothers, the starry warriors of the south. They believe it was renovated by Motecuhzoma II along with several other temples.

Catalogue page 12

P 9 View of the Sacred Precinct looking east.

A View of the Sacred Precinct. Having developed their model and plan of the Sacred Precinct, the brothers began to paint views of some of the proposed vistas. In this panoramic view, our viewpoint is from the roof of a building just inside the gate of mirrors, looking east. To our extreme left rises the temple of Yacatecuhtli within the Pochtlan, the complex of the merchant-priests. To the right of that, the ballcourt appears, surrounded by a low wall decorated with feathered serpents. Beyond that looms the Great Tzompantli. The Templo Mayor, with the shrine of Tlaloc on the north and that of Huitzilopochtli on the south, both facing us in the west. Further to the right, the tall temple of Tezcatlipoca also faces west. In front of that, four smaller temples face east: from left to right they are the Temple of Macuilxochitl / Xochipilli, that of the Cinteto (house of corn deities), The circular temple of Quetzalcoatl / Ehecatl, and to the right, the complex for the Knights of the Sun. In the right foreground is the Quetzalcoatl Calmecac, which is a monastery or school.

The Aztec Eagle. (See cover) Tenochtitlan means "Among the Stone-Cactus Fruit." To the Aztecs who lived there, Tenochtitlan stood at the center of the world and they drew its image in several ways. According to their histories, it was founded after a long period of migrations that brought them from Aztlan. As they traveled they experienced mystical events. Once they were reborn from Chicomoztoc, Place of 7 Caves, the womb of the earth. Another time their tribal deity, Huitzilopochtli, was reborn from the womb of Coatlicue, the Earth Mother Goddess of the Valley of Mexico. Huitzilopochtli told the Aztecs to look for a place where an eagle rested on a cactus in the middle of a lake. Several 16th century Aztec drawings illustrate this scene of foundation, where the eagle, cactus and rock form a vertical axis of sacred centrality. As the Gentlings painted it, they did not attempt to copy the Aztec images. The decisions they made demonstrate their deep knowledge of the terrain. They placed the eagle ^{near} on Cuauhtepec (eagle mountain), northwest of the city of Mexico. This location provides a good view of the valley. It also indicates the concept that sacred centers are movable; they are created by ritual. In this way, each Mesoamerican city-state became the center of its universe.

Catalogue page 13

P1 view of Motecuhzoma's palace

The paintings of Motecuhzoma II's palace displays the vast open spaces of the courtyards. Cortés wrote that two or three such courtyards existed. The Nuremberg map and the Mapa Quinantzín provide sketches of palace types. The Spanish described much about the food and entertainment Motecuhzoma enjoyed in the Palace, but little about its appearance.

Catalogue page 14

Painting 15, Cincalco, altar of the Cihuateteo

One aspect of their project that fascinates me as an art historian is that the Gentlings have used art objects as primary evidence in their proposals about Tenochtitlan. For many years they have studied the design, color, proportion, and linear qualities present in Aztec art objects that they have collected. This has allowed them to paint the city's proportions and decoration with an acute awareness of Aztec aesthetic notions. They have not adopted an Aztec style but prefer to show us their ideas of Tenochtitlan in a naturalistic style that is permeated with their attitude of wonder. In a way, this naturalistic style of rendering reveals the distinctiveness of the Aztec imagery they reproduce, as in Stuart's painting of an imaginary temple interior. Many of the objects he shows actually exist or are depicted in post-Conquest codices. On the altar are the five Cihuateteo or goddesses who died in childbirth. The skulls and crossbones on the textile are taken from actual altars. Together this panoply of Aztec images form a series of multivalent references to the goddesses of fertility, honored in this dark interior with flowers, incense, and the lifeblood of humans.

(text may run over to page 15)

catalogue page 15

P10 Aztec palace south of Tenochtitlan, with view of Popocatepetl

In this work, we see an open room looking out onto a vast courtyard. The pleasant room we see contains 12th c Mixtec polychromed pottery. The Gentlings suggest that these nobles collected such beautiful antiques and might have stored them in the basket, to be brought out for special occasions. A caged bird provides song while a painted bird perches in a stylized flowering tree over a bench with symbols of fire. This image and that of the medallion on the central pier are taken from a sculpture now in the National Museum in Mexico City. The medallion consists of green feathers around citlalin, shells

*Note: The standard name for these shells is "Cuexetli" or "Cuexetli"
and are worn on the tassels of the Citlallixic or
"star skirt."*

called "little stars." Streams of water come from center of the medallion while shells on the four corners create a quincunx design. Stylized xiuhcoatl or fire serpents appear at the bottom of the pier, above a wreath of greenery that would have been placed to enliven the room for a special event. Outside, a sculpted monkey sits on a platform in the garden. Each building has a distinct façade. Across the courtyard is one supported by red columns. At the center of the picture we can see the almenas, or typical roof decorations above a wall of four sloping bodies. To the extreme left is a latticework pavilion, like one described by Bernal Díaz. The step-fret design on the frieze of the temple under the mountain echoes the designs on the woman's garment, similar to one illustrated by Sahagún.

*all these symbols
are associated with Spring*

*associated with the fire God
and nobility.*

P 4 Cuicacalli, a celebration room in a nobleman's house.

The mural paintings and crafted objects that enriched the city appear in the brothers' paintings of residential areas. In this painting of an imaginary noble's house, murals cover the walls, much as they did in some residential compounds in the ancient city of Teotihuacan. In this celebration room are images of Huehucoyotl, a deity associated with music, plays a rattle. A huehueltl or large upright drum made of wood and painted is visible on the right. This represents a well-known actual drum found at Teotihuacan. To its left is a teponaztli or slit drum, which creates two tones. A flute rests near the door. We can see the contrast between the elaborately furnished interior and the sparser decoration on the exterior of the palace.

*The drum
is now
in the
Toltec
Museum.*

Catalogue page 16

P12 Aztec patio.

The Gentings based this more modest residential compound on a building excavated in the 1930's in Chiconautla, near Texcoco. Several houses of prosperous people share a courtyard. Above the water tank is a shrine to the water goddess, Chalchiuhtlicue, supplied with fresh flowers.

*I would be better
to say that such
compounds were inherited
by related families*

P 17 Teopan Canal

Many of the paintings included here were made prior to the development of the Model of the Sacred Precinct. These include many of the interiors of buildings and this painting of an imaginary scene along the Teopan canal, one of those that crisscrossed the city.

From these descriptions of the paintings, we can begin to understand the process that the Gentlings used to create their images. In his first journal of the Aztec project, Scott writes that the purpose of his paintings is "to sum up my feelings about this whole subject....my ultimate goal is an artistic one, and always has been—not just a bunch of illustrations no matter how factual. I would like to be able to penetrate that realm where fact and poetry meet and produce something that just might capture some of that special magic this subject holds for me." Although the Gentlings have done prodigious research to identify the facts that can be established about the Aztec capital, as artists they have embellished these with their own poetic view of the Aztec world.

Catalogue page 17

"No place is a place until it has had a poet," wrote Wallace Stegner in his own poem on "Sense of Place."³ Tenochtitlan has inspired poets both ancient and modern.

Painting 3.

View of the Templo Mayor. The Temple of Huitzilopochtli is on the right, and the temple of Tlaloc is nearly hidden by the Huey Tzompantli.

which appears here as a veil of stars.

An anonymous Aztec wrote,
From where the eagles are resting,
From where the jaguars are exalted,
The Sun is invoked.
Like a shield that descends,
So does the sun set.
In Mexico night is falling,
War rages on all sides.
Oh giver of Life!
War comes near...
...Proud of itself
is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan
Here no one fears to die in war

This is our glory
This is Your Command
Oh Giver of Life
Have this in mind, oh princes
Who would conquer Tenochtitlan?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?⁴

Please see enclosed yellow sheet for my idea of a closing

Like so many proud and great civilizations, Tenochtitlan was destroyed. And as with other great lost cities, scholars have tried to resurrect its image in the twentieth century. Once Scott commented to me that it is much harder to make one of the Tenochtitlan paintings than it is to do a portrait or landscape. "With a portrait I can see the subject. I just have to capture the life. With an Aztec painting, I have to study so many sources, then imagine everything." With their blend of fact and poetry, the Gentlings invite us to learn more about the ritual and history of the Aztecs and to envision their events in these spaces.

About 3500 words

Place endnotes on p. 26 of Catalog. Endnotes to Tater's essay.

¹ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517 – 1521. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. 191.

² Michael Smith, The Aztecs, second edition, (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 220.

³ Wallace Stegner, "The Sense of Place" in Where the Bluebird sings to the Lemonade Springs, 1992, p. 205.

⁴ From Miguel Leon-Portilla, Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 87.

It is true that the fabled Tenochtitlan
of the Aztecs no longer stands. In art, in
poetry and in Standard English, however, a
persistent conviction has grown over their
nearly 40 years of close study of this subject
that it might just be possible (based on
what is known and on what is being
discovered almost daily) to capture in a series
of paintings and drawings, some idea of
what it felt like to look upon these vanished
marvels.

The Buddy Holly Center is pleased
to bring together for public viewing many
of the watercolors, oils, pen and ink drawings,
and architectural models which form the
core of this remarkable work in progress.

A future book, entitled "The
One Red Glaze" will result from their
efforts and become a companion reference
for those who continue to be fascinated
by the descriptions of men like Cortes and
Bernard Diaz del Castillo who were permitted
to look on in wonder and pen down
what they saw.

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¹ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517 – 1521. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. 191.

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