

Feb. 18, 1993

Dr. John M.D. Pohl
Pathway Productions Inc.
5101 Whitsett Avenue
No. Hollywood, California 91607

Dear Sir,

Here is the signed contract. I'm sorry about the delay. As you know, Scott and I have been hard at work on the Bass mural commission, but that only accounts for part of the delay. Although we want to cooperate in every way possible to make your segment on the Aztecs a vivid experience for your viewers, we must tell you that we do have some reservations about including two of our paintings in the project - especially the published part of it should a book be created to follow the film. We were somewhat reluctant to let the Denver Museum use the same two works in their catalogue, namely the Templo Mayor view (after Marquina's plan) and the Xochitecpacalli. We consented, because we wanted to be a part of such an important exhibition, and they did not seem to be bothered by our mildly stated reservations. Like most museums they preferred to adhere only to their own agenda and preconceptions.

Both these paintings are older works which we think (especially the Templo Mayor view) represent outmoded concepts. That is why it was so important that those pictures be properly credited i.e. The "Templo Mayor, view after Marquina 1980" to place it in the proper context of our work. The Denver Museum people promised to do this and then didn't. We assume that you favor this view because it closely resembles the model on display at I.N.A.H. and would be acceptable to Matos et al. You know that Scott and I have the greatest respect for the work of Marquina and Matos, but we have, even by using the same research as these men, reached some very different conclusions about the appearance of the great ceremonial center. We know what is known about the Templo Mayor, and we know what is not known. Since we are not motivated by political or professional pressures, Scott and I are, I think, freer to question officially sanctioned views and to look for newer images not tied to old concepts.

Scott's model of the ceremonial center now, alas, only about two-thirds complete will, we hope, change the way interested people will look at this piece of real estate. In the book we are going to do (if we live long enough!) we will discuss all the current research and deal with opposing views, many of which have always been guesses as have been our own views. Some day when you see our model and read our book you will be able to return to the letters of Cortez, the books of Diaz del Castillo, Sahagun, Duran etc. and even the surviving Aztec accounts of the fall of Tenochtitlan and locate many of

these religious and historical places in a way that has not been possible before. I know that it is immodest for me to say so, but I really do think that Scott and I can do it - and will do it. I only regret that opportunities like the Denver show and your film project have fallen into our laps before we are ready. Since we are not accredited researchers but amateurs in the real meaning of the word, we must do everything possible to earn the good will and trust of the people in this complicated field who really count. It is frustrating at times that experts frequently want to use our images but ignore what we have to say about this subject. I really believe that Scott and I have focused on the Templo Mayor and Sahagun's list of 78 buildings with a scrutiny not matched since the writings of Marquina. I'll give you a case in point.

When I was attending the Denver symposium last October, by sheer chance Edward Matos took a seat next to me. I happened to have one of Scott's black notebooks with me, and I showed it to him. He expressed immediate interest, and as he thumbed through the notebook he would stop and whisper comments to me, trying not to disturb the lecturers or the closely packed audience. He was quick to point out while looking at Scott's master plan of the ceremonial precinct that we had placed the great tzompantli in the wrong place and had pointed it in the wrong direction (~~facing~~^{running} north to south) and likewise that we had oriented the Teotlachco ballcourt wrongly by showing it running lengthwise east to west.

Well, Scott and I know the reasoning behind Matos' view. We also happen to know that there is absolutely no conclusive evidence that the elongated platform discovered underneath Guatemala street in the Metro digs of the late sixties, a structure that runs east to west, was in fact a tzompantli - no perforated skull fragments, no remains of the sixty foot tall posts that might have supported the skull rack. Even the dating of this building is uncertain. Stylistically the architecture has both earlier Teotihuacan elements with later, Aztec alfardas. The remains transported to INAH for display show the painted traces of sashes or bows, a motif I generally associate with fire. To the best of my knowledge there were no trenches dug to the north or south of the structure to find out the northern and southern limits of the platform. The digging had to be done quickly, since it was basically salvage archaeology. It might have been a tzompantli. It might have been a place where old and weathered skulls were burned. No one really knows. It might even have been part of the ballcourt, since sashes seem to have some underworld connotations as well. The considerable depth of the structure and the fact that it was not destroyed by the Spanish may indicate that it was part of an earlier architectural phase and was buried by later phases, especially the massive remodeling completed under Ahuitzotl in 1487 which we think made some very fundamental changes to the great temenos.

As far as the teotlachco is concerned, a somewhat early sculpture of Macuilxochitl and some balls sculpted in stone found by Batres on escalerillas (Guatemala) street in 1900 are

the only evidence of a possible ballcourt and give no clue as to which direction the length of that structure might have been oriented. However, Sahagun's description of Paynal's famous Panquetzaliztli festival race which began by running through the ballcourt and out the western gate strongly hints at an east-west orientation of the Devine Ballcourt, and this is further strengthened by the Florentine Codex drawing of the Templo Mayor also showing that structure running east to west. Everybody knows that Marquina chose the north-south direction for his model of the ballcourt using Tula and Chichen Itza as his source. No one has come forward to question his opinion or to propose alternative designs*. It is just accepted as gospel. I think Scott and I have made some important discoveries based on our reinterpretations of known archaeological remains and our correlation of these remains with the veintana festivals mentioned by the chroniclers. A ballcourt with a north-south axis is of absolutely primary importance. It deals with the yearly perigrinations of the sun that commemorate and pay worship to the seasons of rain, of planting, of harvest and of war as the sun is propelled northward at the beginning of the year toward Coatlan, the place of origins, the womb of the earth and the abode of ancestors. This northward, earth-pulled sun will become a tlachitonatiuh (note the pun) the plaything of Tlaloc whose mask the sun will wear as he nears his midsummer goal. Tlaloc, god of earth and sustenance and rain but also a death god, readies the earth for planting. The sun is become a hardened corn seed, hardened like bone, like a skull, hard shelled and almost round like a ball thrown north toward Coatlan where Cihuacoatl-Quilaztli, the goddess who can make things grow, and her partner Quetzalcoatl who can descend into the underworld and recreate life and who stole corn from Tlaloc's Tonacateptl and gave it to mankind are waiting to receive it.

At least this is what I see in the ballcourt scene in the Borbonicus Codex. Scott and I see the great north-south ceremonial way of the Templo Mayor as a ballcourt. The archaeological remains hint tantalizingly at this. If one were to close off the northern part of the north-south road with an extension of the stairs (joining the stairs found by Batres in 1900 under the patio of the house of the marquise de Apartado to the stairs excavated by Matos in 1978-82) and find a structure to the west that would match the so called precinct of the eagles excavated by Matos on the east, you would have the shape of a giant ballcourt. If the 180 foot long stairs of the great tzompantli described by Duran were aligned opposite the stairs of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc (which are almost 180 feet in length) you would have a logical extension of a ballcourt shape. This ballcourt imagery is furthered enhanced by the presence of the Coyoxauhqui stone on the apetloc of Huitzilopochtli's temple. In the myth about the birth of Huitzilopochtli, the war god springs forth from the womb of his mother Coatlicue fully armed to defeat his Huitznahuac brothers and sisters threatening the mother goddess. It is told that Huitzilopochtli slew his sister Coyoxauhqui there in the celestial ballcourt, and one version of the myth tells

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Black
White
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Yellow
Blue
Purple
Orange
Pink
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Grey
Silver
Gold
Copper
Iron
Steel
Aluminum
Brass
Zinc
Lead
Tin
Nickel
Cadmium
Mercury
Silver
Gold
Copper
Iron
Steel
Aluminum
Brass
Zinc
Lead
Tin
Nickel
Cadmium
Mercury

of him beheading her there. The presence of the great round stone at the foot of the stairs and the mention of the ballcourt in the myth are very persuasive.

One last observation, most scholars agree that decapitation sacrifices were closely associated with the ballcourt. Tzompantlis have usually been excavated near courts as can be seen at Tula and Chichen. Also the beheading myths of the maya referring to the hero twins in the underworld relate those gods to corn; the beheading of Hun Hunapu is likened to the harvest of an ear of corn. Among the Aztecs there is a festival called Tititl which was observed as the last or second to last veintana of the calendar year. The ceremonies most notably honor the goddess Ilamatecuhtli, the old grandmother, an avatar of Cihuacoatl-Chicomecoatl as goddess of harvested agricultural products - in this case especially as corn. A priest dressed wearing a hideous two-faced mask and tangled hair of a death goddess leads a girl dressed as an ixiptla of Ilamatecuhtli up to the summit of the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Because this is an important end of the harvest ceremony that began with Ochpaniztli, the two Ilamatecuhtlis are accompanied by priests dressed as all the major gods. On the summit of the temple the girl is beheaded, and the Ilamatecuhtli priest takes her head in his hand and holding it out in front of him leads the other priest-gods in a circular dance. After this the Ilamatecuhtli priest descends the temple stairs by himself with backward steps. At the bottom he returns northward toward the Coatlan enclosure at the end of the great ceremonial road, walking backwards with slow and deliberate steps. It is clear that the head held by the priest is the dried corn seed which by being carried back into the 'womb' of Coatlan to be deposited into the earth for future regeneration. Coatlan can also be thought of as a grain storage bin for the next planting year, a yearly cycle illustrated by the two-faced mask of the old corn goddess.

Interpreting the great ceremonial temenos of Tenochtitlan is an open field for scholars and students of Aztec culture. Scott and I will always be interested in offering alternative views of these things which future archaeology will test, confirm or refute. As I have already said, no one really knows what the enclosure of the Templo Mayor really looked like. I think that if we did know, Scott and I would not be so interested or compelled to search for images to express with our art. It is to that quest that we have dedicated so much of our time and money and talent, because when it really boils down to it Scott and I simply want to have a glimpse of what Bernal Diaz del Castillo saw and so ably described. We know that others want to see it too, and that is why we are going to try to paint it. A lot of art people who have followed our careers over the years are genuinely perplexed that two devotees of "fine art" are committing so much of their energies to archaeological illustration. Our project is an art project in every sense of the word. All our paintings are mindscapes, and it is extremely encouraging to see how warmly our work has been received by lovers of American archaeology and by people of

mexican descent living in this country. Just this week our Chamber of Commerce magazine came out with their winter issue with a cover story on us and our Aztec project - a chamber of commerce, business publication no less!! I'm sending you a copy. Also, the Dallas Museum wants us to show our work at the opening of their new latin American wing next year. Last year when I lectured on Tenochtitlan at the Dallas Museum, I was told to expect no more than twenty or thirty people to show up. However, the day before the lecture the museum ran a small notice in the newspaper including with it Scott's Templo Mayor view. To everybody's amazement the auditorium was full, and about half the audience were mexican-americans.

Please excuse the length of this letter. I was given this word processor as a Christmas present in 1991, and though I have used it as a typewriter, I'm just beginning to learn to work the machine in the processing mode. I am truly a non-technical person. This is my first letter on the processor, and you, I'm afraid are my victim.

In conclusion I would like to give you Scott's and my "wish list" for your project. We do hope that you might reconsider using the new palace scene - the one with the two women standing in the courtyard with Popocatepetl rising above them. It is not as colorful as the Xochitecpacalli painting done in 1981 merely as a study, but it is a much better and more "educated" view. We would also like you to reconsider using the Malinalco view, since it could easily be correlated with an actual contemporary photograph of that very same view. Please think about it. Also, I am curious why you did not want to use one of our paintings of the temple interiors? Although such works are admittedly speculative - and in real life you would hardly be able to see anything because of the darkness - the images are striking and give some insight as to the visual complexity of Aztec religion. And nothing like such views has ever been attempted before on a serious level. I hope that you didn't reject them, because it might offend modern Mexican sensibilities. I well know how squemish and touchy they can be about this "barbarian" aspect of their glorious indian past. Parenthetically, I must say here that one of the most irritating flaws of Costner's film, "Dancing with Wolves," besides the banal and anachronistic language of the hero's diary and Costner's Malibu accent, was the way he viewed his indians through rose colored glasses. No wonder so many native Americans loved the film, especially the conservative militant ones. Anyone who knows something about the harshness of Indian life on the northern plains, the cults of war and the real status of women, before the coming of the white man, can only sigh and think here they go again. Also, why should anyone who has listened to the rhetoric of indian militants expect them to be any more objective about their history than we are about our own. I do hope that you can resist the temptation to be too politically correct to sooth certain atavistic sensibilities. The splendor and greatness of the Aztec past will survive a closer look at their more sanguinary religious practices, and to look the other way when one knows better does a disservice to history. Please,

forgive the lecture. My word processor makes it so much easier for me to get on my soap box.

Finally, let me say that, if I could have it my way, I would be delighted if you might consider doing something on us and our project in one of your final segments on the status of modern native Americans. You may not have not have anything to do with that part of your series, but I would like the world out there in televisionland to know that there in the suburbs of Fort Worth, Texas are two Americans of European descent, white gringos who are working at no small professional cost to give themselves - and hopefully others who care - an unprecedented glimpse of a truly remarkable people. I think it is a good story, and it is just one small part of a growing movement by people of native and non-native American heritages to restore a sense of wonder and complexity and respect to our visions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, both past and present.

Sincerely yours,

Spurit