

1. HEAD OF A WARRIOR AND OR PRIEST. Clay. Height 13.5" AZTEC c. 1460.

Our knowledge of Aztec figurative sculpture in clay has been and still is regrettably limited. This remarkable large head is a case in point. It was once part of a complete life-size figure found with another identical figure sometime around 1900 when the two are recorded as entering the collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Historia in Mexico City (INAH). Because of their accoutrements, the figures were identified as priests or warriors of a Huastec death cult imported into the Valley of Mexico by the Aztecs.

The origin of the pieces is obscure. One source says that they came from the city of Huexotzingo on the eastern shore of Lake Texcoco. This may, however, have been the donor's smoke screen hiding the fact that they may have had a Mexico City origin, for at that time there was at least one major excavation being carried out in downtown Mexico City - not for archaeology but for sanitation purposes with the digging and laying of new sewer lines. Interestingly, the engineer in charge of these operations was none other than Porfirio Díaz Jr. son of the reigning president of Mexico.

These sewer works which were being carried out in present day Guatemala Street and a block north at the corner of Donceles and Argentina Streets were unearthing so many ancient artifacts that Leopoldo Batres, superintendant of monuments, urged the government to tighten up security to prevent the further destruction and looting of the national heritage.

That our two ceramic figures may have been a part of the materials already looted would not be apparent for nearly eighty years - until Eduardo Matos Moctezuma carried out his famous excavations of the Templo Mayor very near the early twentieth century digs of Batres and Díaz. At the time the two figures entered the collection of INAH no one seemed to know what to make of them. There were no known comparable Aztec clay pieces from the capital for comparison. Their style had elements of East Coast and even Mixtec workmanship, and for some reason scholars thought they might even be of Toltec origin. Others believed that the figures were so odd that they were simply fake. For whatever reason, they were placed in storage in the back rooms of the museum and all but forgotten.

It was not until Eduardo Matos (1978-82) excavated two life-size clay sculptures of eagle knights at the so called Precinct of the Eagles not far from Díaz's 1901 digs at Argentina and Donceles Streets that these earlier figures were re-considered. Clearly, the Huastec knights and the eagle knights were so closely related stylistically that they might have been made in the same workshop. If the newly discovered eagle warriors were made in Tenochtitlan, then the Huastec figures were probably made in there as well. Unfortunately by this time they had been neglected for so long that only one figure remained intact. The head of one of the sculptures - the head we later acquired - had vanished. It eventually entered the famous collection of Jay Leff who displayed it in 1966 at the Brooklyn Museum. The other, complete figure, now occupies an

Brooklyn Muaseum. The other, complete figure, now occupies an honored place in INAH's Mexico Hall only a few feet away from the great Aztec sun stone.

What unites the two Huastec figures to the cult of death is their head gear, a turbin-like headdress immitating unspun cotton and long cotton earrings which are identical to those which can be seen on several surviving sculptures and codex depictions of skeletal deities. These accoutrements, however, can also be seen adorning the goddess Tlazolteotl in the Codex Borbonicus. It has been noted that this goddess's cult was imported from the tropical cotton growing lands of the Huastec peoples of the Panuco region along the Gulf of Mexico. The figure at INAH also wears shell armbands identical to several found at Huastec sites. We know from Sahagun's 16th century commentaries that the very important harvest festival of the Aztecs called Ochpaniztli honored Tlazolteotl as the earth goddess under that name and her other various incarnations as Toci, Teteoinan, Coatlicue, Cinteotl and Chicomecoatl.

Ochpaniztli refers to the sweeping of the roads in preparation for war after the harvest was completed and men were freed from agricultural duties to participate in military campaigns. The earth goddess Tlazolteotl was honored in her guise as Chicomecoatl-Teteoinan (patroness of man-grown foodstuffs, especially corn, and Mother of the gods). Also recognized at Ochpaniztli were her offspring Cinteotl (mature corn) and Itztlacoliuhqui (frost). Sahagun tells us about an important race run by this goddess and her companions symbolizing the hurried march to war. He tells us that from a sacred precinct a man dressed as the goddess appeared at the end of the ceremonies and was finally presented to the public surrounded and guarded by priests and nobles. The sacred precinct was almost certainly the Coatlan enclosure which in my brother's model of the Templo Mayor is placed at the northern terminus of the sacred road that runs in front of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. The Coatlan is the navel of the earth, the sacred grain bin for next year's seed corn, the place of beginnings and endings. It is from here that she begins her ceremonial race and running mock battle with the young warriors of the city.

Sahagun notes most importantly that the goddess is impersonated by a man who is the city's strongest runner and who is wearing the skin of a sacrificial female victim. The impersonator begins "her" run accompanied by the great lords of the city, the only ones allowed to gather with her and her priests in the sacred Coatlan enclosure. But closest to her stood her two guardians called Huastecs by Sahagun's Aztec informants. These guardians are possibly the warrior-priests called Tlazolteocuacuacuiltin and may be the very people represented by the two sculptures being discussed.

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See p. 215 "The Hanged God by Motman" which mentions the goddess emerging from Temoacan (Coatlan) house of Etliztli

It is tantalizing to think that these ceramic Huastecs may have indeed been unearthed near the corner of Argentina and Donceles Streets by Porfirio Diaz Jr.'s workmen, for Scott and I believe that this area was very near the Templo Mayor excavations of Eduardo Matos and his team eighty years later, and was indeed the south rampart of the Coatlan enclosure. If true, this would have been the starting point of the Ochpaniztli race. An extension of this platform was finally exposed by Matos and can be seen today beginning with the famous eagle stairs and running east to west and almost certainly under Argentina Street and the early nineteenth century house of the Marques de Apartado where a section of platform and stairs running east and west were excavated in 1902 by Batres but not exposed.

The complete Huastec figure now in the Mexica Hall at INAH can be seen wearing a circular pleated shield and cone-shaped object over his genitals. It is called a cuexcochtechchimalli and is often seen worn by death deities. The pleated shield may be closely related to the pleated paper fans seen worn behind the heads of fertility deities and may refer to heat - an essential ingredient of life. The meaning of the cone is not clear but may be phallic in nature. The Aztecs often ridiculed the Huastecs and their public nudity and cult of the phalis. It is important to keep in mind that in the Aztec world life and death were intimately linked and were interdependent, that there was a very close, unbreakable link between fertility and mortality.

The cult of Tlazolteotl is a perfect illustration of this. Her name literally means "Eater of Filth" a function she performs in both the natural and the moral spheres. In the natural world she represents the earth's power to devour all remains of dead animal and vegetable matter, thus fertilizing the earth in the creation of new life. In the spiritual and moral sphere the goddess Tlazolteotl devours the sins of men who sincerely confess to her through her priests. Thus both earth and man are cleansed and renewed through her sacred agency. That she is frequently depicted wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim unites her to the cult of the male god Xipe Totec who presides over the seasonal rebirth of the sun, over springtime and in fact the sacred nature of renewal itself.

2. FIGURE OF A KNEELING WOMAN. Clay. Height 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ " Possibly east coast Aztec. c. 1460 - 1525?

Although variations do exist in surviving Aztec sculpture in stone, there is still a strong stylistic similarity among the works. Few figurative works in clay survive and little is known about the Aztec contributions to this art form. My limited studies in this are seem to indicate that there was a wide variation allowed in ceramic sculptures and probably less metropolitan (Tenochtitlan) influence on artists working in outlying provinces under Aztec control.

Everything about this figure of a kneeling woman is a puzzelment. When we acquired her she was included in a purchase of several other pieces and was practically a gift. Both the seller and I thought it was fake but a nice sculpture nevertheless and suitable for the garden which is where we put it - in our mother's patio where, quite frankly, it was ignored, infact forgotten for two years. One afternoon while watering the garden I came upon the sculpture almost lost beneath an overgrown hedge. To my horror areas of white restoration plaster had been exposed by two years of rain and snow. I immediately took it home, and Scott and I examined it closely for the first time.

Most of the figure was intact. And it was original! Scott and I had too quickly dismissed the sculpture purely on stylistic grounds, thinking that the maker - the faker, if you will - had gotten mixed up or had whimsically combined Remojadas elements of Mexico's east coast with highland Aztec traits. As Scott restored it, we were more convinced than ever of its authenticity, but that assurance in no way lessened the genuine mystery surrounding the possible origins of this figure.

The main problem is that it appears to have been sculpted in a very recognizable east coast style. Her hands with the thumbs placed on the forefinger can be seen in many Mixtec and Remojadas clay pieces - and perhaps some early Aztec works as well. But the outstanding difference between our work and the others of east coast origin is the pose of the woman with her feet tucked behind her in pure Aztec fashion. I have been looking for years and have never seen an east coast ceramic female figure with this distinctive pose. We know that especially after the reign of Moctezuma I artists in Tenochtitlan had begun taking an interest in art of earlier cultures like the Huastec, the Olmec, the Chontal of Guerrero and especially the art of Teotihuacan. Many art works of earlier cultures, some originals and some possibly copies, were found by Eduardo Matos in offering caches at the base of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc during the Templo Mayor excavations. The inclusion of such pieces appears to have given the offerings the an added ancestral legitimacy. It appears as if the Aztec leaders had become almost obsessed with establishing a link between them and the ancient rulers of the Valley of Mexico. We have several surviving examples of Aztec sculpture that were copied from earlier Teotihuacani and Toltec prototypes apparently deliberately excavated from the ruins of those abandoned cities. Since our lady's face has both Aztec and earlier Remojadas

stylistic traits, it is possible that an earlier Remojadas prototype was copied by a later east coast sculptor working under Aztec influence when Tenochtitlan finally conquered much of the area bringing about substantial changes in art and religious iconography. Who knows?

Although the provenance of the piece is a mystery, we are on firmer ground when interpreting its meaning. There is no secular art in the pre-colombian world, none whatsoever. The Aztecs had no concept of a world that was not a manifestation of the gods in every part. A simple sculpture of a kneeling woman, then, is more than that, much more. We have no idea of the exact function of this figure or why it was made, but it appears to represent a macehualcihuatl, a woman of the common people. It is a feminine counterpart of the so called macehualli sculptures, stone figures of Aztec males wearing only a loin cloth and no other diagnostic paraphernalia. Some appear to be ordinary people in the act of prayer or religious vigil or simply guarding the temples. But many of these simple figures, perhaps all of them infact, may be gods. If our figure is an archetype, as she almost certainly is, then what is she an archetype of? In all likelihood she represents to feminine principle itself, that of fertility and procreation in all its feminine aspects. There are a number of unquestionably Aztec sculptures of women wearing only a skirt and with breasts exposed. These are mature women who have already given birth and nurtured young. George Vaillant in his venerable book on the Aztecs has included a particularly fine sculpture of such a woman. Her hair is bound somewhat like our lady's, both interestingly without the tufts of hair or "horns" that often denoted mature, married Aztec women.

The skirt of these figures, though only a simple wrap-around piece of cloth, is a very powerful symbol, for the act of weaving is one of the oldest Mexican metaphors for sexual union. Both the calendrical symbol for "ollin" which means "movement" or "life" and the mat symbol of intertwined reeds denoting ancestral authority and the unity of the people are derived from the act of weaving. The Nahuatl word for skirt is "Cueitl" and denotes immense reproductive power. Coatlicue, "She of the Skirt of Serpents", Citlallicue, "She of the Skirt of Stars" and Yolotlicue "She of the Skirt of Hearts" all hint at the earth's immense creative potential. By her simplicity our lady must surely represent the quintessential mother goddess called Tonantzin "Our Mother" by the Aztecs. (It was her shrine at Tepeyac on the mainland north of Tenochtitlan that later became the church of the Virgin of Guadalupe after the conquest.) As the embodiment of motherhood she is also the mother of the gods and is called Teteoinan.

In the Aztec mind the body of every human being was a potential vessel for the gods, that through fasting, certain drugs and ceremonies and the donning of sacred clothing, a person could be occupied by divine power and become one with the gods. Common Aztec people were not worthless as many have believed. Afterall the great god Tezcatlipoca was their special patron too, and not just the patron deity of lords and rulers. The

common people belonged to the gods, and the gods could not flourish in the world of the Fifth Sun without human intervention from all levels of society. In a very real way the images of ordinary men and women could be seen as models of the gods. It is a lesson to keep in mind in understanding all of Aztec art, that the simplest object, unadorned and undecorated, can possess the most profound meaning. Our simple clay sculpture of an indian woman is exactly that, but she is also the maternal principle itself and thus the mother of all mankind and mother of the gods as well.