



ADRIANA CANALES UCHA

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Mr. Stuart Gentling
Present

To whom it may concern:

I would like to have your authorization for this text, to the Carmen Parra's catalog and send me, please, your curriculum (it is short, four lines). So its necessary to take the answer quickly.

Waiting to hear from you soon,

I remain

Cordially yours

Adriana Canales Ucha



Butterflies in the Art and Religion of Pre-Hispanic Mexico

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Cyran

We may never know just when butterfly symbolism first appeared among the ancient peoples of Mexico, but no doubt their history must almost certainly have begun in the formative stages of early civilization. The reason seems obvious. Few other natural creatures so clearly symbolize the transformation of life better than the butterfly, which begins its life as a tiny egg almost appearing out of nowhere, then soon develops into a snake-like creature with legs and a strange segmented body. Eventually it seems to actually die, shedding its skin and becoming encased in a hard almost skeletal form which in time regains movement, splits open, and reveals a totally different creature of great beauty, attracted to the power of the sun and which, through the miracle of flight, spends its new existence flying from flower to flower feeding on nectar. A true indigenous metaphor for the passage from death to paradise.

We have scant evidence of butterflies in the very early art of Mexico, but by proto-Olmec times we have examples of apparent crysalis or pupa imagery in Olmec sculpture.

All early peoples were great observers of natural phenomena and often found deep philosophical and religious meanings in the daily workings of nature. The ancient cultures of Mexico were no exception. The seasonal cycles of the sun and the moon and the stars, which coincided with times of rain and times of drought, were clear evidence of divine power over their lives. And often they found the most profound metaphors for human existence in daily observances of the workings of nature.

When the ancient peoples of Mexico became farmers, they even saw the ages of man written in the growth cycle of corn. The dried corn seed itself, often thought of as bones, was planted in the earth's womb with a digging stick that was thought of as a symbolic phallus. The young ear of corn, the *xilotl*, was thought of as a young virginal girl and was worshipped as the corn goddess *Xilonen*. The mature ripe corn was deified as *cinteotl-Chicomocóatl*, ~~god of a bisexual deity~~ —sometimes thought of as male, sometimes female. As the old dried corn ~~with the dried husk~~ dried husk the corn was thought of as the old goddess *Ilamatecuhtli—Tocihuatl* or old grandmother. The dried corn kernel had symbolically died and become bones again, to be stored in the grain bin until the season of rebirth arrived and the seed would be reborn in the earth as new corn.

Another very powerful metaphor in nature that was closely associated with man's destiny was the butterfly. Called "papálotl" by the Aztecs, images of the butterfly appeared very early in ancient Mexican art. The metamorphosis of the butterfly from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to a lovely, flying creature that glories in sunlight and feeds on the nectar of flowers symbolized the cycles of life and death and rebirth—the mythical metamorphosis of the soul.

The flickering, fluttering movements of the butterfly reminded the ancients of the flickering nature of fire—the most ancient symbol of the life force. Another symbol of the life force, the serpent "cóatl" possesses a shape very similar to the caterpillar. The metamorphosis of the "cóatl", its symbolic "death" as a chrysalis, a kind of mummy, and its "rebirth" as a butterfly symbolized the passage of the soul of warriors and other deserving notables who did not descend to the ninth level of the underworld, the realm of the death god miclantecutli only to disappear, but became butterflies or even birds living for 4 years in the paradise of the sun—The Tamoanchán.

Again fire plays a very important part in the metamorphosis of the warrior's soul. When a deserving Aztec died, his body was carefully washed (a symbol of re-immersion in amniotic fluid), then clothed in several layers of symbolic vestments, and finally wrapped with cord. After several days of obsequies, the body is finally cremated. It is literally transformed back into the spirit world, the butterfly is the released soul.

* The justly famous censers from classic Teotihuacan found in great numbers are thought to be shrines to individual dead family members whose souls can be "resurrected" when the sacred fire is re-kindled. All these censers have flower, butterfly, and bird motifs as their decorations. In later Aztec iconography, the ~~used~~ images of fires, butterflies, tied bows of paper and cloth, and even the classical x shape of Ollin—the Aztec symbol of movement and the life force seen on the famous calendar stone, are all related to the symbolism of the butterfly and the promise of rebirth.

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