

2 August 2000

Dear Carmen,

I know that you are in a hurry to get this text to press, but I have some important disagreements with the text that you faxed to me. Most of the facts are correct, but the organization of the essay needs work and there are needless repetitions. You have my permission to use your text, but because it might be read by experts, I would prefer that you not use my name on the essay.

I have taken the time to write a more accurate and scientifically appropriate paper for you that is probably too long for your needs. You do not have to print it all, and I have even marked a couple of places where you might end the text without harming it. If the catalogue is going to accompany exhibit, you might have my text Xeroxed separately in full for your guests to pick up at the show.

I hope that this does not inconvenience you too much, but it is important to me that my writing on the Aztecs be the best it can be, especially if it is going to be read by people like Eduardo Matos etc.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Stuart", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

THE BUTTERFLY AND RELATED SYMBOLS IN THE ART OF PRE-HISPANIC MEXICO.

The ancient peoples of Mexico were great observers of natural phenomena, seeing in the endless cycles of nature deep philosophical and religious meanings. Clear evidence of divine power over their lives was observed in the daily and seasonal movements of the sacred sun, moon and stars which signalled the times of rain and drought, of planting and harvesting, of peace and war. In other words the cycles of life, death and rebirth which defined the lives of all living things including human beings. Of the many symbols that these ancient peoples found in natural cycles the butterfly, flowers, corn, fire and the serpent were among the most important expressions of this process and were interrelated in both simple and complex ways.

Few other natural creatures so profoundly symbolized the stages of human life and the transformation of man's spirit better than the butterfly. It begins its life as a tiny egg almost appearing out of nowhere. It soon develops into a larval caterpillar, snake-like but with legs and a segmented body. Its resemblance to a serpent, however, unites it with the symbolic meaning of that creature, one of the most ancient and powerful representations of the life force. When the snake shed its dead skin it was thought to be reborn from its own essence. Likewise, when the caterpillar matured it too eventually shed its skin as it transformed itself into a mummy-like chrysalis, appearing dead and with a hard skeletal shell. In the cold of winter snakes also entered a death-like torpor often gathering in large numbers for warmth in caves like the intertwined rattlesnakes of the great earth goddess Coatlicue's skirt. The fiery warmth of the spring sun (the Aztec god Tonatihu) eventually brought renewed vitality. The snakes seemed reborn out of the earth, and the chrysalis mummy bundles of "dead" caterpillars split and yielded forth resplendent flying butterflies - to ancient eyes the reborn spirits of the dead in exultation.

The butterfly's close association with the warmth of the sun and with flowers united its symbolism with that of the fire god who was the ultimate source of life and the spirit. Often called "Ineffable Flower" in Aztec hymns, the god of fire always presided on the surface of the earth over the four cardinal directions as the center and Axis Mundi. As patron of the Axis Mundi he and his female form also occupied the highest realm of heaven as well as the volcanic fires of the underworld. Since the fire god determined the moment of human conception when the spirit entered man's life, he dictated the date of a man's birth and hence his fate. Thus the god of fire was the god of time as well.

Because the fire god ushered man's soul into this world,

it was he who had the power to release the soul back again into the realm of the spirit which occurred when the body was cremated. As with the life cycle of the butterfly, the fire god too was subject to his own metamorphosis from birth to death and rebirth. As Xocotl - Otontecuhтли he was probably worshipped by the Aztecs as the divine spark called out of the heavens by the sacred fire drill to ignite the new fire. As Ixcozauhqui he became the vigorous yellow flame bursting forth like a flower or a fluttering butterfly. Finally, as the old fire of ash, glowing embers and feeble blue flame he was known as Xiuhtecuhtli Huehuetotl awaiting to be reborn by fire drill or by human breath blowing new life back into the coals. It is no wonder, then, that Aztec warriors and nobles upon death were wrapped and bound in ceremonial garments including a cape for the shoulders called a butterfly cape; Then after the many appropriate ceremonies this pupa-like bundle was burned, allowing the god of fire to release the spirit of the dead as a butterfly or nectar feeding bird to inhabit a flowery paradise for at least four years. Thus the spirits of dead warriors and worthy ancestors and butterflies were seen as one and the same to the ancients, and this was probably so at least from the time of the Olmecs.

By the time Teotihuacan ruled much of central Mexico, the spirits of the dead were worshipped by means of elaborate clay censers often covered with butterfly, bird and flower symbols. These have been found in great numbers, not just at Teotihuacan but as far south as Guatemala. After the fall of Teotihuacan and the rise of Toltec power at Tula, the spiritual imagery of the butterfly was retained as the chest armor of the atlantean columns standing atop the so-called Temple of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. Carved as human figures armed for war, these columns probably represented the ancestral dead, warrior spirits wearing the butterfly insignia over their hearts.

The association of the butterfly with the spirits of dead warriors made it inevitable that the butterfly would be connected with the sun, that ultimate celestial warrior. And the daily stages of the sun roughly paralleled a warrior's life. At dawn the sun appeared as a virile young soldier, Cuauhtleamitl, fully armed and ready for battle to drive away the stars. From the eastern horizon until he reached his zenith at noon he was accompanied by the spirits of dead warriors in the form of butterflies and birds. At noon he left those spirits behind and was joined by the Cihuateteo, the divine women who died in childbirth and were honored as warriors. They traveled with the sun as he weakened in his descent toward the western horizon, as Cuauhtemoc, the descending eagle. Although the sun did not actually die as it vanished in the west, in the Aztec mind its disappearance was a kind of symbolic death. But after its perilous nightly journey under the earth it emerged in a kind of fiery rebirth on the eastern horizon. In late Aztec

iconography the sun was closely connected to images of the butterfly, fire, tied bows of paper and cloth and even the classical X shape of Ollin - the Aztec symbol of movement and the life force seen at the center of the famous Aztec calendar stone. All these images have similar shapes. In fact Nahui Ollin "4 Movement" was another name for the sun and the painted image of the X shaped Ollin sign displayed on a great banner inside the Temple of the Sun was interpreted by the early chroniclers as a butterfly, (YOU MAY END THE ESSAY HERE)

The same cycle of birth, maturity, old age, death and rebirth that united the destiny of man with the cycles of the butterfly, the sun, and fire also described the life stages of that most basic foodstuff of Mesoamerica, corn. The hard dried corn seed at planting time was often thought of as bones. The seed could even be likened to a human skull, the same image used to describe the "dead" sun in the underworld. The boney corn seed was planted into the womb of the earth with a phallic-shaped digging stick. Like the emerging butterfly or the snake shedding its skin, the new corn sprout burst through the kernel's own hard skin to emerge into the sunlight. The green unripe ear of corn, the xilotl was worshipped as the young virginal corn goddess Xilonen. The mature ripe corn became deified as Cinteotl-Chicomecoatl, sometimes thought of as male, sometimes female. As the old hardened seed corn enclosed in its dried husk, corn was honored as Ilamatecuhtli-Tocihuatl "Old Grandmother." This dried seed corn, now symbolically dead, was stored in the grain bin to await planting and rebirth with the warmth of the next spring sun.

There was one god in the Aztec pantheon whose iconography embraced almost all the symbols mentioned above. His name was Xochipilli, "Flower Prince" who probably originated among the Mixtecs of Puebla and Oaxaca. By the time he was imported into the Valley of Mexico he was primarily thought of as the patron of the palace folk, both nobles and serving people, as well as the god of feasting, music and revelry and of games, especially patolli and tlachtli, the famous Mesoamerican ballgame. His calendar name was Macilxochitl, "5 Flower."

Many images of this god survive, especially in the form of Mixtec figural clay braziers or fire containers called Xantils. The word "xochitl" or "flower" appearing in both his names almost certainly refers to fire. As Xochipilli "Flower Prince" the god was associated with Tlazohpilli - Piltzintecuhtli the valiant young princely sun. As Macuilxochitl "Five Flower" he was again identified with the god of fire who, as has been noted, always occupies the center of the four worldly directions, a place thought of as the fifth direction. A great number of the beautiful decorated ceramic bowls and plates which have survived from Cholula - because they were probably made for feasts and festivals - displayed not only the four-petalled flower of Xochipilli, but also his tricolor blanket. To these

symbols were often added the sign of the sun ray, called the tonallo, which stands for the sun's heat. Almost always included was the well known step-fret design, the xicalcolihqui, which defines the bowl as a sacred center or navel, a place of offerings and an abode of the fire god. Finally there often appeared along the rims of these bowls painted corn cobs marking the four directions.

When Xochipilli is shown in person, either in sculpture or painted in the ancient books he is easily recognized by his singular face paint. On both sides of his mouth and extending along his cheeks are painted designs. On the face of one version of Xochipilli can be seen two butterfly wings. On each cheek of another a hand is painted. And on still another a flower adorns both sides of the god's face. Since the hand is associated with the number five and with the fire god as the sacred center and Axis Mundi, it joins the butterfly and the flower signs in defining Xochipilli as at least in part a god of fire and in part a representative of the sun. The close relationship of the growth of corn to the seasonal movements of the sun finally unites in Xochipilli the qualities of a god of corn.

It is not difficult then to see how Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl evolved into a god of feasting, and music, and rejoicing, for he was one of the gods responsible for the abundant corn harvest, always a cause for celebration. Each of these festivals began with the drilling and lighting of a new fire. As the flames bloomed forth and rose into the air, no doubt many of celebrants seated around the fire saw for an instant in the fluttering flames the wings of the butterfly that lovely symbol of the ageless metamorphosis of spirit into matter and matter into spirit.

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Stuart Gentling is a painter and author living in Fort Worth Texas. He and his twin brother Scott have shared a lifelong interest in the ancient cultures of Mexico. They are currently working on a book of paintings, drawings and essays on Aztec Mexico on the eve of the Conquest to be published by the University of Texas Press and titled "The One Reed Year."