

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF BUTTERFLIES IN THE ART AND RELIGION OF
AZTEC 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 manifested in the daily and seasonal movements of the sacred sun, moon and stars which determined 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.

One of the most interesting and profound natural symbols that the Aztecs inherited from earlier cultures and which explained the spiritual destiny of nobles and warriors who had died in battle was the butterfly. This creature began its life as a tiny egg eventually hatching to develop into a larval caterpillar, snake-like in shape. Its resemblance to a serpent united it in the indigenous mind with the symbolism of the serpent - one of the most ancient and powerful representations of the life force. When a snake shed its dead skin during the year, it was thought to be reborn from its own essence. Likewise when a caterpillar matured, it eventually shed its skin as it transformed itself into a mummy-like chrysalis. In the fiery warmth of the spring sun the hardened skin of the seemingly dead chrysalis split open and what emerged was a resplendent flying butterfly.

When an important Aztec died his body was washed and then dressed in layers of ceremonial garments including a cape called the "butterfly mantel." The bundle then was carefully bound. After four days of special obsequies the wrapped body was burned, and it was thought that, through the power of sympathetic magic, the spirit of the dead man was released by the flames to become a butterfly.

In Aztec iconography the butterfly was closely connected to the sun, to fire, to the shapes of tied bows seen on braziers and even the well-known X shape of the calendrical sign of Ollin, the Aztec symbol for movement and the life force seen at the center of the famous Calendar Stone. Infact Nahui Ollin which means "4 Movement" was the calendrical name for the sun, and the painted image of the X - shaped Nahui Ollin sign displayed on a great banner inside Tenochtitlan's Temple of the Sun was even interpreted by the early chroniclers as a butterfly. Also, because of the butterfly's close association with flowers as well as with fire and the heat of the sun, we may assume that flowers can also symbolize the sacred fire god who was often addressed in Aztec hymns as "Ineffable Flower."

One of the most popular Aztec deities who seemed to embody the symbolism of butterflies, fire, sun, flowers and even corn was Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl, the god of the palace folk, of

games, of music, feasting and revelry. His cult probably came from the Mixtecs of Oaxaca and Puebla. In many ways he was the perfect combination of the sun god, the god of fire and the god of corn as well. It is easy to understand how Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl came to represent music and feasting, for he almost certainly presided originally over the abundant corn harvest - always a cause for celebration. Since both his names contain the word "xochitl" which means "flower," that word also helps to define Xochipilli as a fire god, as well as the fact that he sometimes wears the painted facial decoration of a flower or a butterfly around his mouth.

At each of the many festivals over which this god presided a new fire was lit with great ceremony. As the flame bloomed forth and rose into the air, no doubt many of the celebrants seated around the central fire place saw for an instant in the flickering flames that lovely symbol of the ageless metamorphosis of spirit into matter and matter into spirit the butterfly.

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