

Stuart Gentling writes...

On November 16, 2000 I had the honor – and terror – of delivering a paper on my twin brother Scott's and my Aztec researches to a gathering of prominent Mexican archaeologists, anthropologists, and artists. The place was El Aire Gallery, a wonderful Barragán-designed building in the suburb of Tizatlan, southwest of downtown Mexico City. It was owned by a friend and artist, Carmen Parra. As an artist I was further pleased to learn that El Aire Gallery was built in what had once been the garden of Rosa and Miguel Covarrubias and that the daughter of Diego Rivera now lived next door in the Covarrubias house. Both Miguel and Diego have long been heroes of ours. As Mexican artists with international reputations they played a major role in bringing the riches of ancient Mesoamerican art and culture to a wider world audience through their own art and, especially in the case of Covarrubias, through serious groundbreaking research. Artists have always made major contributions to world archaeology since its beginnings as a discipline in the early nineteenth century. El Aire was truly sacred ground. The man who was to introduce me to the audience that evening and who moderated the lively discussion which followed my talk was Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, director of the Museo Templo Mayor and himself a distant relation of the great Motecuhzoma.

The distinguished place and people made this event an exciting culmination of almost forty years of our personal quest to see for ourselves how the vanished Mexica-Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan may have appeared to the first Europeans who looked at it in amazement and wrote down what they saw.

Unfortunately I was too nervous and had little time to appreciate these interesting connections as I contemplated presenting Scott's and my plan of the Sacred Precinct of Tenochtitlan and its Templo Mayor to an audience of Mexicans, many of them experts. Our concept was



Figure 20. Head of Tlaltecuhltl, an earth deity. Charcoal.

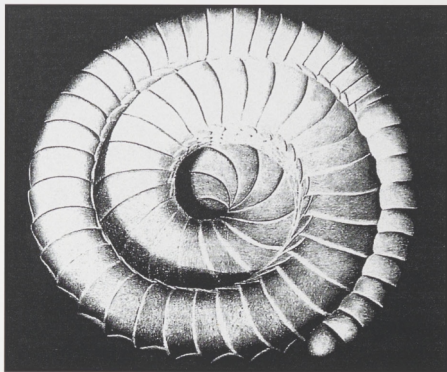


Figure 21. Underside of a Rattlesnake Sculpture. Charcoal.

in many ways in conflict with the model of the "Great Temple" offered by the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Historia and the model at the Museo Templo Mayor.

I was not just nervous; I was exhausted. From 9 o'clock that morning I had been on a dream tour of the major Aztec archaeological excavations. The Templo Mayor investigations had been carried out by Eduardo Matos and his team since 1978 when sewer workers discovered a major Aztec monument, the stone of Coyolxauhqui, while doing street repairs. All these places were off-limits to the public. But today as a guest of Eduardo Matos and Jose Alvaro Barrera Rivera, I had the unique opportunity of finally being able to test our own vision of the Sacred Precinct with the remains of some of the actual structures.

It was truly a day of emotional highs and lows. I had explored tunnels under the Cathedral of Mexico, the National Palace, the colonial house of the Marqués de Apartado and other important sites. I saw with my own eyes definite confirmation of many of our ideas. But before I could give a pat on the back to Scott and myself, I also saw evidence that contradicted elements of our plan. Other remnants of the city seemed simply inconclusive. Such is usually the frustrating result of urban archaeology, especially in a great and busy place like downtown Mexico City that only permits limited investigations.

That evening at El Aire Gallery, I was uncomfortably aware that there just was no time to digest what I had seen that day or to make needed alterations in my speech. My instincts, however, told me not to confess that I now had major doubts. That might negate much of the exciting confirmation of our theories that I had seen that day. I was



Figure 19. Shrine of the Goddess Toci inside the Xoloco Gate to Tenochtitlan. Pen and ink drawing.