

right to rule over new lands. Whatever the facts, the truths of the migration message, of the transformation of a chosen people who earned the favor of their tribal god through endured hardships, could be shared by all the inhabitants of the new Tenochtitlan. All the different groups with their own interests and identities, then, could be united to some extent under a single mythic idea that everyone could agree upon. An attempt to make Mexico-Tenochtitlan the grand center of a new kind of quasi-empire is well illustrated by the Mexicas' incorporation of foreign gods into their own pantheon. In fact often the tribal gods of conquered provinces were brought to Tenochtitlan and placed in a kind of confinement at Cihuacoatl's temple at Coatlan only to be carried back briefly to their worshippers for important ceremonies.

history and
Foundation stories are a universal phenomenon to cultures around the world including our own Judeo-Christian tradition. In some ways Constantine's great council of Nicea in the early fourth century was convened to reach a consensus about Christian doctrine, a codified belief by fiat that would discourage heretical movements and unite Christians under one authority. The story of the Aztec migration from Aztlan to the creation of a kind of new Aztlan with Mexico-Tenochtitlan never, I believe, had the force of law, but for the Mexica the annual reenactment of these stories in their many sacred ceremonies gave Itzcoatl's version of their past the unquestioned power of truth. And what is more to the point, the myth worked.

It has even endured the conquest and the cultural invasion of the country to become today for many Mexicans a unifying force. The myth continues to explain how with the historic travails over the last five hundred years, the people have managed to survive as Mexicans, the possessors of a uniqueness that is in part the gift of the ancient gods to a chosen people. With the rise of political movements in Mexico and among those of Mexican descent in the southwestern United States to challenge the status quo in both countries has come the grito of "La Raza, of "Indigenismo," of "Chicano Power" to effect social change. Mexico's art, music, literature, and cuisine have spread far beyond her borders, bringing her unique blend of indian and Spanish culture to many countries but especially to the United States where many Mexicans believe the original Aztlan once stood.

Although Norte Americanos remember little of the U.S. Mexican war of 1846-48, that trauma will always be part of Mexican consciousness. The humiliating loss of Texas and related territories in the previous decade set the pattern for even greater humiliation and loss of land including New Mexico, Arizona and California as the spoils of war to satisfy the Manifest Destiny of the colossus to the North. Over the last thirty years or so, with Mexico's economic problems, has come a vast movement of its people north again looking for opportunity

and a new life. For some it has been the symbolic reversal of the ancient mythic migration of the Aztecs from Aztlan, a return home, Mexico's own Manifest Destiny. Modern life, the global economy, the seemingly inexorable lure of U.S. popular culture for people everywhere will present new cultural challenges for Mexicans and those of Mexican descent. The process of transformation which is the message of the Aztlan myth continues. The journey goes on.

As artists and students of pre-colombian culture since the early 1960's my brother Scott and I have been uncommonly lucky in our timing. The last four decades have been illuminated by unprecedented discoveries and revelations about the ancient peoples of Mexico. Progress in the decipherment of Maya glyphs and the excavation and restoration of cities that once lay mysteriously shrouded by jungle only a few decades ago have made these people live again. As the veil was pulled back on their past, actual personalities were given names and the triumphs and defeats of various kingdoms could now be written into the book of human history.

On my first visit to Mexico City in 1962 with Bill Gordon, a boyhood friend, we stopped over for only one day before going on to his grandparent's villa in Cuernavaca. Somehow I managed to persuade my reluctant friend to come with me to the Zocalo, the great central square of Mexico City today as it was in pre-Hispanic times. Our guide took us first to the old National Museum of Anthropology and History where I beheld for the first time its collection of Aztec art which seemed to me to be gloomy and depressing and strange despite its obvious plastic power. I had no idea what deities I was looking at or any comprehension of symbols and iconography of the works. We later visited the nearby National Cathedral where we saw huge grey stone fragments of a plumed serpent and the frightful aztec ^{snake} on Bishop Zumarraga's tomb in the bowels of the basilica.

After we emerged from the church we strolled about the square until I noticed what looked like an archaeological excavation across Argentina Street. I was to learn that it was part of the western stairway of the temple of Huitzilopochtli. To the north, under a concrete canopy, the stairs of what would have been the twin temple of Tlaloc disappeared into solid earth. The visible balustrades each ended in great stone serpent heads. So this was the Great Temple of the Aztecs, of Moctezuma and Cortez, of Bernal Diaz and the conquest of Mexico.

(see next page)

Off to the side was a small museum containing, ~~as I recall,~~ a model of the temples and other structures of the sacred precinct which once surrounded the Great Temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. It was a spectacular visualization of Ignacio Marquina's seminal ^{researches} ~~researches~~, a truly exciting recreation ~~rivalling~~ ^{giving} but giving truth to the vivid descriptions of the Conquistadors. I was totally smitten. Thankfully, the museum was selling a small booklet on the model and Marquina's researches. I added it to Scott's and my small library of pre-colombian books, and it has been a source of inspiration for us to this day, though our own researches and the archaeological revelations of the last twenty years have led us to conceive a different plan for the sacred precinct of the Templo Mayor.

There were no "indios plasticos" performing when I first visited the Templo Mayor thirty-seven years ago. There was no glorious national museum of pre-colombian peoples in Chapultepec Park, no modern Templo Mayor Museum. You could not help but feel that the Aztec past was no more than a few dusty neglected artifacts stored in an old colonial building rarely visited by tourists. There was no Coyolxauqui Stone then, no Sun Stone of Moctezuma the First, no Tlaltecuhтли del Metro, no life-size ceramic eagle knights or death gods, all of which are images familiar to Mexicans today. At that time these and other treasures were underground and silent. And to me all was mystery and likely to remain so until my twin brother began to take an interest in the Aztecs as well. In doing so he started a dialogue with me that has continued to this day, and it is he that has created so far the models and most of the paintings and drawings for our book "The One Reed Year."

In the course of our researches over the years we began to collect examples of Aztec and Mixtec art to study and accompany our models, paintings and drawings. Each of our more than one hundred objects of volcanic stone, obsidian, crystal, gold, turquoise mosaic and clay has been chosen to illustrate some facet of ancient life and beliefs as far as we can understand a culture so long removed by time and language from our own. We continue to be lucky witnesses to the many exciting discoveries in Aztec art and archaeology and the new insights into Aztec thought and culture which have enriched Aztec studies. We have also had the honor to meet many of the scholars who have played a major role bringing these ancient people to light. Our project, the product of dedicated amateurs, has been greeted with an enthusiasm by these professionals that has been truly gratifying, and when we are finished we hope that we too can contribute to this growing fund of knowledge.

The very positive response of average Mexicans and area Mexican-Americans as well as gringos has proved to me that there is something important in this work, though we would have done it if it weren't so. In studying the Aztecs Scott and I have learned how to view other vastly different cultures as well, and this will probably hold us in good stead as our globe continues to shrink and multiculturalism increasingly touches all our lives. As far as our own studies are concerned I doubt

that we shall ever feel that we have learned enough. The Aztec world was too vast and complex for that. So I guess that our own pilgrimage of discovery will continue until we can do it no longer, and when the time arrives to sum up our efforts I only hope that we will have been able to share the excitement we felt when we first read Bernal Diaz del Castillo's immortal descriptions of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and that, through our efforts, we might go beyond words to capture in models, paintings and drawings some idea of what it felt like to look upon these vanished marvels.

Stuart Gentling, September 27, 1999

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