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This Essay

My first sight of Mexico City was in 1971 as a passenger in a small private plane descending through a violent dramatic thunderstorm, buffeted by rain and air currents and terrified, hoping like the other passengers, that it didn't show. My brother Stuart, who had been here before, offered his seat as co-pilot for my first view of the valley. As I climbed forward and buckled my seat belt, to my left an opening appeared in the clouds perfectly framing the dark grey eminence of Popocatepetl. Ahead, spread out before me, lay the entire city of Mexico from Tepeac in the north to the lakes of Xochimilco in the south. We were heading in from the northeast and I saw it all.

When we landed, the rain had stopped. Large puddles on the tarmac reflected the stormy skies above. When I stepped out of the close warmth of that small plane and ^{STOOD ON} ~~descended~~ to the ground, legs still rubbery from the flight, the coolness of the thin highland air refreshed and thrilled me. I felt something strangely enchanting and familiar - a kind of knowing. It was an excitement that lives with me still. I looked toward a small hill (Tepetzingo) not far away, turned to Stuart and said, "That place is important, but don't ask me how I know it."

That was the beginning of another even more extraordinary journey. Just before that trip I had reread Bernal Diaz's eye witness account of the Conquest of Mexico which was already

influencing my interests away from my studies of the Maya. Nothing in that work affected me more than his famous observation:

" During the morning we arrived at a broad causeway . . . And when we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land and that straight and level causeway going towards [Tenochtitlan], we were amazed and said it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis on account of the great towers and [temples] and buildings rising from the water and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things we saw were not a dream . . . I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about . . . Of all these wonders that I then beheld, today all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing."

Today we have dozens of Classic Maya cities to explore. Archaeology and restoration work have given us some sense of their world, but the world of the Aztecs was almost completely obliterated by the Spanish Conquerors. The glories of classic Maya urban sites were mercifully hidden from Spanish eyes by a jungle shroud of centuries, but the written languages of the Maya, their histories and almanacs almost disappeared when Bishop De Landa burned their books. As for the destroyers of Tenochtitlan, fortunately for us, there followed in their wake the priest scholars who left us written accounts of the Aztecs

and their customs. So, it is ironic that while almost nothing of Aztec grandeur was left standing, much has survived in the way of information.

Even as I stood for the first time in the Zocalo, the great central plaza of Mexico city, on that evening of my arrival, I thought I could almost see the temples which had once stood in the sacred precinct nearby. Although I had been thinking about it for some time, that evening started me wondering with even more enthusiasm about the possibility that I might use my skills as an artist to recapture some of the vanished splendors of the ancient city. To be honest, I wasn't thinking of a public audience. I simply wanted to see ^{them} it for myself.

I don't know if that night in the Zocalo qualified as an epiphany but its impact was compelling. Thank heavens I had no idea what labors lay ahead or the gulf of ignorance that separated us from our goal. I knew almost from the beginning that in order to depict the temples, palaces, markets and gardens of Tenochtitlan I would have to build them. To give you some idea of how long I have been engaged in model building, my first one, that of an Aztec house at Chiconautla excavated in the 1940's, was begun during the Watergate hearings.

Stuart had been studying Aztec language and religion since 1965 when, as a student at the University of Texas School of Law, he spent all his free time at the UT Tower library copying by hand a rare book of nahuatl grammar. He was already more

familiar with the Aztec gods and religion than I was but seemed less knowledgeable as to the layout and orientation of Tenochtitlan as an island city. Both of us were familiar, however, with Ignacio Marquina's splendid model of the Templo Mayor Stuart had first seen in 1962 displayed in the small museum next to the 1913 digs of the Great Temple. Our copy of Marquina's small book on his model was well worn, but even then my brother and I were beginning to have doubts about the Marquina plan.

On the morning following my first visit to the Zocalo Stuart and I returned to see the modest Templo Mayor Museum, really just a single room housing the large Marquina model. My brother was more anxious for me to go with him to the Museum of the city of Mexico located a few blocks away in a colonial building. There on a wall was a plan of the Templo Mayor done in the 1930's by Ignacio Algocer. At that time we had no idea what kind of scholarship supported Algocer's concept, but Stuart, who had first seen it in 1962, had always been intrigued by how it differed from the beautiful symmetrical building arrangement offered by Marquina's model.

By the sheerest good luck Stuart had in 1963 seen and even explored the excavations being carried out at the nearby great religious precinct of Tlatelolco - a rival city of Tenochtitlan's. He had never forgotten that the buildings he saw there were anything but symmetrically laid out. They were in fact often clustered together like the structures in Algocer's

plan. Unfortunately for us nothing would be published on the Tlatelolco digs for many years to come. But seeds of doubt had been sown about Marquina's model, the "official" version of the Templo Mayor, early in our studies. In our search to find a more believable model we were forced to learn all we could about the nature of Aztec religion and ceremonial practices. My model of the Templo Mayor is still a work in progress and will probably always be. Though subject to change as we learn more, I do believe my model better illustrates the function of the Templo Mayor as described by the earlier chroniclers Sahagun, Duran, Tezozomoc and others, than any ~~others~~ yet constructed.

Two final notes: the paintings and drawings in this exhibition represent only the beginning of our efforts. The demands of our careers as artists seem to allow less time for Aztec studies these days and the painting of Aztec subjects is very time consuming and, frankly, expensive. However, the many years I spent on my models has paid off handsomely. Having beheld them in sunlight, their images have been burned into my visual memory in such a vivid way that I feel I have actually seen the very buildings of the ancient city. In no other way would I have been able to observe and captured in paint the thousand subtleties of shadows and reflected lights and colors that so impressed the Spanish conquerors.

Finally, like many other scholars, Stuart and I are

ambivalent about the morality of collecting original examples of ancient Mexican art. We cannot say enough, however, about the profound help we have received in our study of Aztec imagery, symbolism and artistic styles as a result of simply having these wonderful pieces around us daily. Our collection consists of about 120 Aztec and Mixtec objects in basalt, greenstone, crystal, shell, obsidian, gold, clay and other mediums. Some no doubt could be considered national treasures. Their constant study has opened up literally a universe of insights for us which when eventually published in our book, THE ONE REED YEAR, should substantially add to the understanding of Aztec art and iconography.