

## 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 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 now certain that the great temple of Tezcatlipoca indeed faces west as we had determined and not north as the museums had shown. The ballcourt near the western gate of the sacred precinct did indeed run from east to west as we thought and not north to south according to the official view. There were other tantalizing clues that we were basically correct in our conclusion that there was a great northern precinct or courtyard at the end of the north to south road. It cut off the avenue's access to the northern gate to create the most sacred part of the Templo Mayor, the Coatlan.

These are not simple technical observations. They go to the heart of the meaning of the Templo Mayor and how it functioned as a human-made model of the cosmos, a calendar in stone, and a mnemonic stage upon which the cyclical ceremonies of the seasons and major events in Mexica myth and history were reenacted.

After Archaeologist Matos introduced me to the audience, I felt that those present really wished me well. As the slides of our models, drawings and paintings appeared, the oohs and ahhs from the spectators were gratifying. My presentation lasted one hour and twenty

minutes. I remember that the talk (which Carmen Parra's staff had translated for me) seemed so much more beautiful in Spanish.

When I finished, there was loud, enthusiastic applause, then Professor Matos gave a twenty minute critique. This was followed by statements from scholars, some supporting Scott's and my conclusions and other rigorously disagreeing. Gradually the atmosphere became more cordial and the gathering morphed into an informal party.

Later that evening an older Mexican gentleman, elegantly dressed, approached me. Unfortunately I did not quite catch his name. He seemed knowledgeable, and listened patiently as I told him of my archaeological tour that day and how it was making me doubt our ideas and wonder whether what Scott and I had done was a waste of time. Such uncertainties had always plagued us.

He put his hand on my shoulder and gently admonished me, saying that he too was a life-long student of Pre-Columbian cultures. He said that it was the nature of our search for truth that what we achieve, if we achieve anything, represents only a step or two on a long ladder leading to greater knowledge and understanding. In his nearly sixty years of study he had been witness to an incredible explosion of knowledge that had rendered some of his hard-won theories obsolete while others seemed confirmed. Although he had seen some of his cherished ideas overturned, not once had he thought that his search had been a waste of time.

"Think of how far we have come since 1790 when Mexican archaeology began with the accidental discovery of the famous calendar stone and the great goddess Coatlicue buried in the Zocalo. By that time nobody remembered anything about the real Aztecs. Myths and lies but mostly silence." He pulled out his pipe, lit it and kept talking as he puffed.

"Most Mexicans of Spanish descent did not care for the Indian past. The Mestizos and the people of pure indigenous blood observed a few of the ancient traditions but rarely knew why they did."

He went on to say that for more than two and a half centuries native Mexican peoples had been told that they had been saved from a savage and barbarous life, that everything native was mean and perverted. If as scholars our search for knowledge has any purpose other than simple curiosity, it is perhaps to restore some measure of respect for cultures that were already ancient and wonderfully developed when Europeans discovered the so-called New World.

The gentleman thanked me for praising past scholars. I had called them the giants upon whose shoulders Scott and I now stood. He also expressed gratitude for our work and that the sheer number of our paintings and drawings had given him a wonderful vision of Mexico's past that he had not had before. It made little difference to him or should to us if some of the details of our vision would change as we learned more; the big picture we were creating seemed right to him and was well worth our years of hard work. And the model we had constructed of the Sacred Precinct, though also subject to possible change,

seemed to offer an excellent opportunity to understand the nature and orientation of Aztec religion and myth as we now understood them.

I could not have expressed our aims better.

I cut this from 2650 to 1383 words. I think it still expresses your thoughts.

Stuart Gentling

Fort Worth, Texas

December 30, 2002

May 29<sup>th</sup>

Images we need for catalogue.

We need these right away. Meaning by june 10.

Figure 17. A slide of your Ehecatl –costumed figure.

Figure 20. slide of the Head of Tlaltecuhтли

Figure 21. Slide of the underside of the rattlesnake sculpture

Figure 23. Slide of portrait of cortes

Figure 24. slide of the portrait of Cuauhtemoc

I edited your statements for length . They are great at creating an atmosphere and personal intrigue. Look them over. Stu's is still a bit long.

Please take a look at the essay I wrote and how it fits in with the catalogue pages.

I put little headers in the catalogue so you could see how it all fits. I hope you like it.

More soon...

Love

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### Further Reading

Matos, Eduardo Montezuma. The Great Temple of the Aztecs: Treasures of Tenochtitlan. Translated by Doris Heyden. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

Pasztory, Esther. Aztec Art. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983; University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

Townsend, Richard. The Aztecs. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

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