

THE STORY PAGE:

Occasionally in the long parade of books that appear every year there are a few that stand out not only for the unique nature of their subject matter, but also for the high standards of art and craftsmanship involved in their production. Scott Gentling's *The One Reed Year* is such a work. It is the result of a forty-five year journey of the mind into the world of the Aztecs as it might have appeared before the coming of Cortes and the Conquest.

As Mr. Gentling himself writes:

"This work is a retrieval from out of time of a vision, just glimpses really, of a world almost completely destroyed, erased like ancient Carthage was by the Romans. There's a quote from the journal of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a Conquistador and eyewitness to those events in Mexico, in which he writes:

Of all these wonders that I then beheld today all is overthrown and lost, nothing left standing.

Diaz had seen it and I wanted to see it, too. I wanted to take others along with me, to show the country Cortes and his army would pass through, heavily populated with many towns and great cities, its countryside completely cultivated and orderly. We would cover the two hundred fifty miles from the coast into the highlands, rising ever higher, westward to the mountain-ringed valley of Mexico seven thousand feet above the coastlands.

¹¹ We would pause in the high place to gaze down on the vastness of Lake Texcoco and the other lakes joined with it, ringed with cities and towns like a pearl necklace all gleaming white, and the other towns, on islands in the lake, like satellites to the great island city of Tenochtitlan itself. With the grandeur of two massive, snow-covered volcanoes, Ixtoccihuatl and Popocatepetl, as a backdrop, this great city in the midst of the lake with its many miles of causeways, its aqueduct, canals, gardens and many temples, markets and splendid palaces, all gleaming white, must have seemed truly dreamlike to these European visitors who had seen nothing in their experiences to compare with it. At two hundred thousand people, Tenochtitlan ranked as one of the largest cities in the world at that time, and because it had been devastated by a massive flood in 1507, the city that the Spanish first saw was virtually new.

¹² The Spaniards wrote about Tenochtitlan's cleanliness and order, its many gardens of sweet-smelling trees and flowers covering the low rooftops and woven amongst the buildings. They said it was a dreamy, quiet place, populated with elegant, well-mannered and generous people. Yet there was no mistaking that it was also a mighty fortress, protected in a number of ways, not the least of which were the removable bridges that could lock an enemy out, or as was the case with Cortes, lock him in. The potential for danger was everywhere, ~~as was abundant~~ *and they saw* evidence of the horrors of human sacrifice on the bloody steps of virtually every temple they

saw. Their feelings at that moment of discovery must have been an odd mixture of admiration and terror. This was Moctezuma's Tenochtitlan, a place of great beauty and high strangeness.

As I have said, my own desire was simple enough: I wanted to see it, too and I was willing to do whatever necessary to bring that about. I began planning for a work that would stand utterly alone in the field of Aztec studies, but to do it, I would have to know it. As an artist, I knew that taking this journey would give me a much deeper understanding of the subject by evoking new levels of empathy while offering a unique opportunity to probe the nature of the experience itself. Since this could not be a conscious effort, I did what I could to create the conditions and means for this to happen.

As for the practical side of this effort, I knew that building scale models I could learn from and that would also serve as future subject matter was a priority. This was a crucial kind of experience in its own right and one not possible by any other means, not even with computers. I realized that I would also have to select from that vast subject a part of it that would explain much more than itself. I chose to focus on the Great Sacred Square of Tenochtitlan and its immediate surroundings because they constituted the heart of that world, the driving force that animated the rest of it.

My book began as a reference I could turn to, one that would combine other people's concepts and my own, into a single source. I chose to start with the Templo Mayor because of its preeminence within the Sacred Precinct. Eventually, however, the book began to take on a life and direction of its own. I decided to go with it. I ended the section on the Templo Mayor and started to concentrate on my own more comprehensive concept. I began to draw plans of those older cities known to have influenced the Aztecs in their own design for Tenochtitlan. Finally, I did a drawing of the first important city the Spaniards encountered after landing on the coast, Cempoala, and this led to a desire to include views of the lands and cities that would be encountered on the way to the capitol of the empire.

Once the direction and scope of the book had been established, I began to focus my studies on the two areas that would help me the most in my work: the archaeology and the religion. Since the Aztec religion was intricately connected with the symbolisms of space and time, this knowledge would be crucial to understanding their symbolic placements of buildings everywhere, especially within the walls of the Sacred Square.

Yet even when completed, I knew this book would be but one part of a far larger and more ambitious body of work we envisioned, one that would encompass many other aspects of the Aztec world such as the infrastructure of the island city, its canals and gardens, its markets, zoos, palaces and domestic architecture. We both knew it probably would be more than we could ever hope to do, but it was our aim nonetheless. I say "we" because, from the very beginning, my late twin brother, Stuart, had been equally involved in this research, concentrating primarily on the iconography and symbolic thought of the Aztecs, making his work a perfect and informative complement to my own.

Stuart's knowledge and insights were prodigious and vast. It was fascinating to watch him in conversation with the finest minds in the field, to the delight of all. He once gave a lecture on our project in Mexico City, to about forty of that country's most accomplished archeologists and Aztec scholars. He gave it in Spanish. Though I was not there, I was told by someone who was that they all gathered around him afterwards and one of them, Senior Leonardo Lopez Luján, director of the Zocalo excavations, asked him to be at the Cathedral at nine the next morning. There they met and spent the next few hours underground as Senior Luján showed Stuart the entire range of excavation and discovery that had happened there. Later, in the study rooms of the Templo Mayor Museum, he was shown recent finds from those excavations, including large fragments of a priest's Xicolli or vest, hand painted with the circles within squares motif of a fire priest, with a red finger at the bottom, flawlessly crafted. All of this had been a great honor, especially for a gringo, and a special sign of the respect they had for our efforts. This kind of thing happened many times over the years, creating a kind of network that came about naturally as people interested in this subject learned about our project.

Our paintings, drawings and models have been in several major museum exhibitions including the Musée du quai Branly (The Louvre), the British Museum and best of all, the Templo Mayor Museum in Mexico City. In 2003, the collection was also exhibited at the Fine Art Galleries of the Buddy Holly Center in Lubbock, in an exhibition, *1519 / The One Reed Year*, curated by Carolyn Tate. Some of the views have been used as reference material in larger works as well, such as *500 Nations, An Illustrated History of North American Indians*, and most recently included in the catalog for the exhibition *Ballplayers, Gods and Rainmaker Kings* at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ten years ago, I was commissioned by The Houston Museum of Science & Natural History to paint a picture of Tenochtitlan's Sacred Square that was reproduced as a massive photo mural and installed on an entire wall with backlighting, like a giant, transparent slide. It ~~now~~ lords over the entire room of their pre-Columbian art collection. This museum is now home to the entire collection of models, paintings and early drawings done for *The One Reed Year*, all except a few works in private hands sold years earlier. The remarkable thing about all of this is that neither my brother nor I ever promoted this project nor was it ever funded from the outside.

That brings up the question of logistics. How was such a demanding, time-consuming effort possible for two people with little money and little time for such sideline interests? Stuart and I were professional artists whose livelihoods came from the sales of our works, a decent living but hardly the kind that could fund such a project. When people look at my models or the drawings and paintings, what they see is but the tiniest tip of the iceberg. What they don't see are the thousands of hours of scholarship, the years of model building, the many working trips to Mexico, the hundreds of discussions with experts in the field or the deeply ongoing conversations between ourselves.

To answer the above question I can say only that we couldn't afford to do it. It was very expensive, way too expensive but somehow we continued and willingly suffered for it. Ironically, the years, decades really, that this project took to mature was a blessing because it did just that: it matured in an unforced, natural way and became all the better for it.

(graw)

It should also be said that *The One Reed Year* project was but one of our many interests and should be seen in that perspective. Painting and music have always defined me in a more complete way, while my other interests in History, Architecture, Natural Science and many more, were pursued with the same intensity as those of my profession. In fact as I have grown older I begin to sense the great unity of all of these interests despite their seeming differences. I realize, as well, that I have always more or less had this view but had never given it a voice. I also know that it was the same for my twin brother, Stuart. We had a conversation about this once and boiled it down to one concept: a love of the dramatic, the one thing all of our interests had in common, and ancient Mesoamerica had this drama in abundance.

When *The One Reed Year* collection sold and left my studio for its new home in Houston, what was not part of that sale and what I chose to keep, was my well-worn book of drawings, also called *The One Reed Year*. Personally, this was the most important and valuable part of the entire effort, the end for which all the rest of it had been done. Years of the most intense, difficult labor and art had gone into it. In the entire, extensive field of Aztec studies and publications there was nothing remotely like it. No one else's studies had ever penetrated so deeply into the Sacred Square of Tenochtitlan, with the intent of getting as close as possible to its actual reality, one that would agree with the description of those who actually saw it. What emerged is the most comprehensive and complete realization of this place ever depicted. Here, for the first time in a model, it is possible to trace where all of the great festivals and mythical reenactments took place. There are many other insights and discoveries, also, which answer to the early description of this place given by the conquerors and the early ethnographers' native informants. Much, of course, is guesswork, but it is powerfully informed guesswork that has resulted in the concept of this place as an integrated, cosmic machine and a model of man's existence within it. It is my belief that an understanding of this place will lead to a greater understanding of the entire Aztec culture and of the Aztecs themselves.

The models which served as subjects for these drawings took years to build, tear down, revise and rebuild. I chose two scales for practical reasons, one very small and the other large enough to draw from at a perspective seen from eye-level. The small scale model used for the Sacred Square with the principle temple was only three inches tall, yet I was able to achieve a level of detail that made it seem much larger in photographs. When viewed in sunlight, its many shadows and reflections worked perfectly for my drawings. With the large scale model, however, I had an entirely different and new experience which led me to a fascinating theory.

Whenever I took one of the large models outdoors into the sunlight, I had the experience, without the need for imagination, of looking at the real thing. This exercise involved playing a trick on the nature of experience as recalled by my visual memory. This memory, trained by decades of

looking and remembering, has developed within me the ability to conjure up any image I wish with photographic clarity, color, light and even an emotional tone. I can see a painting finished, before I ever begin, if I choose to, which is rare. This little trick has allowed me to stand at the base of Tezcatlipoca's temple, look up its massive stairway in blinding sunlight and believe that I had actually been there. I spent hours doing this, building a wealth of visual experience in this way and a peculiar kind of knowing that I believed would reveal itself when needed. Even though these works are drawings, for me, the experience behind them is real. Those who see them feel it, too, often asking me where I had seen such and such a place. What they don't realize is that each drawing is but a fraction of the things I have seen and that all of these other visual experiences inform each other to play a part in the drawings I choose to do.

I chose drawing as the medium for this book, not because I couldn't see these things in color, but because of drawing's power to suggest. Knowing that a drawing can often feel strangely closer to the essence of an idea than other media, I decided it would be congenial with my intentions for this work.

The title of the book, *The One Reed Year*, refers to the Aztec Calendrical date for the year 1519, the year predicted for the return of their exiled god-king, Quetzalcoatl. He and his followers, according to myth, had been defeated by the cult of the god, Tezcatlipoca, and forced to leave the country by the eastern sea, promising to return from that direction in a One Reed Year to resume his rule over the whole land. This man-god's color was white and, according to some, he was bearded.

In one of history's most extraordinarily malignant coincidences, 1519 was also the year that Cortes's expedition landed on the eastern coast of Mexico. While my title refers primarily to the time just before contact when the Aztec civilization was at its height, it is also meant to imply that other event if only by inference.

By the year 2000 of my history, I found that I could no longer afford to continue with the project or the book. I put it up in a bookcase to gather dust with the pipe-dream hopes of eventually returning to it, but the years passed quickly.

Then, in late August of 2006, my brother, Stuart, died suddenly of a heart attack and life as I had known it for sixty-three years ended. Our forty year partnership of investigation, discovery and deep commitment to our Aztec studies was painfully over.

My journal of drawings, unfinished, continued to languish unopened and almost forgotten as more years passed. Other interests and obligations took over my life. Alone now, after sixty-three years of the deepest kind of connection a human being could have with another, I could only think about the project in the past tense. So, I thought to myself, the book would never be finished. It could not have been done anyway. It had been far too ambitious for our time and means. But hadn't we done extraordinary things in spite of that? Had I not accomplished what I had set out to do? Had I not seen the great Tenochtitlan, for myself, in all its moods and glory?

Had I not stood, if only in my mind, with old Bernal Diaz del Castillo, on the southern causeway, looking north toward the city and seen something very close to what he saw and as vividly? Yes! I had.

Then, one day in 2009, master photographer, world traveler, and history buff, Charles Ellenberger, who had been using my studio over at another location from my home, spotted a shabby looking volume lying alone on a nearby table. Thinking it antique, he carefully opened the cover and turned the page..."