

3 May 2000

Virginia Fields
Curator of Pre-Colombian Art
5905 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90036

Dear Virginia,

Scott and I would be pleased to loan you Scott's model of the Temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc for your upcoming exhibition, "The Road to Aztlan, Art from a Mythic Homeland." I realize that a curator has his or her own vision about how an exhibition should look and how each chosen object relates to the central theme and sub-themes of the show. I also know that at times some remarkable pieces have to be rejected for various reasons which can make your job a most difficult and maddening one.

Knowing this, I still must say that, with all our models and paintings to choose from, you should pick only the Temple of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc is puzzling. I know that you do have space considerations which are always a problem with large comprehensive exhibitions, but I urge you to think about Scott's model of the ball court (Tezcatlachco) or perhaps the Temples of Quetzalcoatl, Cinteotl and Xochipilli which are very small but wonderfully detailed. They were quite a hit at the 1992-93 Denver Museum show "Aztec." That Museum also used a number of photographic blowups of our Aztec Paintings and included three of our paintings in their excellent catalogue.

Although I realize that I have little hope of changing your mind or altering your plans, it makes me feel better to at least suggest the use of at least one painting that I believe is very appropriate. Since your exhibit will deal with the ancient myth of Aztlan and how it has survived in some ways today, I felt certain, when you visited us at our studio, that you would be interested in our large painting of the Golden Eagle perched on a nopal cactus, a serpent in its claws and with a background presenting an epic view of the island cities of Tlatelolco and Mexico-Tenochtitlan as well as the lakes of Mexico and Texcoco, and the great volcanoes of Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl.

It is true that our eagle is not depicted on the island at the sacred spot near the Templo Mayor where the mythical event occurred. But if you understand the nature of the myth and what we think we know of Aztec thinking, the Axis Mundi depicted by the eagle and the cactus tree is a movable one and probably provided the mythic sign to many wandering Mexica bands

as they stopped at various places in and around the Valley of Mexico. The concept of Aztlan, or a mythic homeland of a nomadic people and their mythic destination as well, is also a very fluid one, hence its survival to the present day. We have in fact appropriately placed our eagle and cactus on the slopes of Cuauhtepetl or Eagle Mountain which lies on the mainland northwest of Tenochtitlan.

If you look at a modern map of the Valley of Mexico, you will see a number of mountains with the same names - Tonanzin, Zacatepetl, Coatepetl and Cuauhtepetl to name a few. These are only the surviving names; there were many more mountains, hills or promontories which, in my own opinion, once bore these names or their synonyms. You have probably noticed that there are a number of Tollans or Tollancingos as well. Why? Because every Aztec settlement had to have ancestral connections or reflect in its topography something of the ancient homeland.

Every new city was, in some way, a model of Aztlan, especially those who could afford an expensive priestly hierarchy and grand festivals. But only a few cities could actually be built on islands in lakes as was the original Aztlan. The nahuatl word for city is "altepetl" which means "water mountain". Every city needed water for its people, and every city needed an elevated place to communicate with celestial forces, a plaza or courtyard for terrestrial ceremonies and a cave for worshipping the gods of the underworld, the natural requirements for an Axis Mundi. Mountains usually met these needs as a source of water from springs and natural runoffs and as a place of caves as well. For cities built on the plain but close enough to a source of water, the mountains were man made and the caves as well. One of the names of the Great Temple we know was "Coatepetl" or "Serpent Mountain." The Maya name for a temple structure was "huitz" which also means "mountain." Therefore the concept of a mythic Aztlan offered the paradigm for all Aztec cities. Time and human existence flowed on in endlessly repeating cycles. The establishment of new cities, new Aztlans, simply ended or completed the nomadic cycle that began with the abandonment of the original Aztlan.

Each new city, then, was a conscious model of the mythic ancestral city. The invading nomads all seemed to regard the city of Culhuacan on the southern shore of the valley lake as the city of the purest and most aristocratic Toltec ancestry. Culhuacan means "Place of Ancestors" and recalls the original Culhuacan Mountain near Aztlan where the seven caves which gave birth to the Aztec nations were located. By associating itself with the original Culhuacan the new Culhuacan made a claim to impeccable aristocratic connections.

The cities with the name of Tollan or Tollancingo likewise were regarded as ancestral cities or models of them. Tollan means "place of Reeds." Tollancingo means "first or earlier place of reeds" or "little place of reeds." Reeds, like grass,

have complex symbolic associations with warfare, ancestors, fertility and water and a visual connection to the long plumes of Quetzalcoatl the god who made possible the creation of mankind and who brought man the gifts of culture and the civilized life of cities. This is why the Toltec city of Tula from which the aristocrats of the southern Valley of Mexico claimed direct descent was called Tollan by the Aztecs. Remember also that "the place of reeds" calls to mind the presence of water just as does the name of Aztlan which means "the place of Herons or waterbirds."

I do not think that we really know the actual name of Tula. And there is some evidence that the Aztecs of the valley at times also called the great ruin of Teotihuacan (itself an Aztec name meaning "place where the gods were made or born") by the name of Tollan. The archaeology of the Great Temple (1978 - 1982) revealed that at least from the reign of Moctecuzohma I (1440 - 1468) there appears to have been a conscious attempt by the Tenochca-Mexica to immitate the architecture and sculpture of Teotihuacan. The burials of Olmec and Teotihuacan artifacts in offerings at the Great Temple also seem to date from this same period. Clearly the Aztec hierarchy was consciously trying to make Tenochtitlan a living model of the ancestral city of Teotihuacan. By the reign of Moctecuzohma II the immitation of Teotihuacan may have ceased as Tenochtitlan claimed its own preeminence in the Aztec world as the ultimate Axis Mundi and place of ancient authority.

Again and again we see through surviving place names and myths and the native historical accounts that the immigrants flowing into the Valley of Mexico and surrounding country in the centuries following the collapse of Teotihuacan and Tula consciously sought to create models of a mythical ancestral homeland. The eden-like myth of Aztlan had over the years been blended with memories of the high cultures and accomplishments of the ruined cities of Teotihuacan and Tula to create the image of an architypal city to be emulated everywhere, especially by those cities like Mexico-Tenochtitlan, Chalco, Texcoco, Azcatpotzalco, Huexotcingo and others who found special success in agriculture, commerce and war.

The placement of our Eagle and cactus at a location outside of the city of Tenochtilan is not so fancifull as it might at first appear. In fact the location, as I have already said, is the southern slope of the mountain called Cuauhtepetl or Eagle Mountain northwest of the Aztec capital. I am tempted to regard all these Eagle Mountains as ancestral or mother mountains. The mountain to the north behind the so-called Temple of the Moon at Teotihuacan was called by the Aztecs "Tonanzin" which means "our mother." The Temple of the Moon clearly imitates this mountain and its cleft. Nearby, to the east of Cuauhtepetl, in our painting is the promontory of the basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe which was built upon the ruins of the ancient

temple of the great mother goddess Tonanzin. One of her most important avatars or nahuallis was the eagle. She was often called Cuauhcihuatl or "Eagle Woman." She was also known as Chicomecoatl (Seven Serpent), Cihuacoatl "Serpent Woman," Coatlicue "Serpent Skirt," and Chantico "In the House" which refers to the eternal flame created at the New Fire ceremony every fifty-two years and kept in Cihuacoatl's temple at Tlillan within the Coatlan enclosure at Tenochtitlan. Fire, like the serpent, symbolized the life force. There were, of course, many other names for the mother goddess which described her awesome creative and destructive power.

Besides Cuauhtepetl, the other mountain names mentioned above also invoked images of homelands and ancestral origins. The Coatepetl mountain "Serpent Mountain" appears possibly three times in the mythical Aztec journey from Aztlan. First, near Aztlan itself as another name for the ancestral mountain of Culhuacan (this is just my guess; I have no proof), then near Tula as the Coatepetl where Coatlicue gave birth to Huitzilopochtli and he destroyed his starry brothers and sisters and became the tribal god of the Mexicas, and, finally, the Great Temple of Huitzilopochtli at Tenochtitlan which was a reconstructed model of the ancestral birthplace of Huitzilopochtli. I might add that the adjoining shrine of Tlaloc next to that of Huitzilopochtli was called "Epcatl" possibly meaning "Shell Serpent" and "Tonacatepetl" meaning "Mountain of our Sustenance." Both the names of Coatepetl and Tonacatepetl basically mean the same thing, "The Mountain of life".

Zacatepetl, "Straw or Grass Mountain" of which a number of mountains by that name still exist in the Valley is yet another name for the ancestral or mother mountain. During the ancient festival of Quecholli the Aztec nobility first performed ceremonies at Tenochtitlan's Temple of Mixcoatl, also known as the Temple of Culhuacan in Sahagun's Florentine Codex. Then, after parading around the nearby Teotlalpan, a cactus garden that was a madel of the harsh and dry terrain of their origins, they left the Great Temple precinct and went to the mountain of Zacatepetl southwest of Tenochtitlan near the city of Culhuacan. (This mountain also bore the name of Tonanzin.) They scattered dried grass and pine needles along their paths and erected small primitive grass huts called zacallis in the manner of their hunter ancestors. They then staged a massive hunt for any local animals which were fenced in there and cared for in anticipation of this ceremony.

This reenactment of their lives as hunter nomads paid homage to their great progenitor god-hero Mixcoatl at whose temple near Culhuacan the great New Fire was lit every fifty-two years. Known as Camaxtli among other Aztec peoples, especially at Huexotzingo, Mixcoatl gave early man the means to make fire, and he invented pulque. He also spread his seed among the virgins of the ancient Valley of Mexico. His most important wife or

consort was the great mother goddess Coatlicue. His bastard child by the nymph Chimalma "Shield Hand" was none other than Quetzalcoatl who brought maize and culture to mankind.

Upon his death Mixcoatl, the quintessential warrior hero, was transformed into a star in the Milky Way among his companion stars the Mimixcoa. Mixcoatl is often translated at "Cloud Serpent," but this hardly describes him. Since clouds share the same symbolic significance as smoke and often refer to "spirit" and coatl can also mean "twin" or "companion" and even "road," a better translation of Mixcoatl might be "Spirit Companion." The Milky Way in its north-south orientation was worshipped as the celestial embodiment of Mixcoatl and his ancestral starry companions. At Teotihuacan I believe the great thoroughfare called by the Aztecs "the road of the dead" also honored the ancestors of the Milky Way and also might be better called the "Spirit Road." Archaeological evidence indicates that this important road was imitated at Tenochtitlan as the great north-south axis of the sacred precinct ending in the north at the Temple of Cihuacoatl in the Coatlan enclosure just as the great Avenue of the Dead (Micaiohtli) ends at the plaza of the so-called Temple of the Moon at Teotihuacan. (see our plan of the Great Temple precinct).

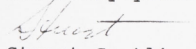
The association of straw and grass with Mixcoatl and the worship of ancestors seems to be a firm one. That the Aztec calendrical date Malinalli, which means "grass," was also closely associated with the pulque cult and war, as well as with ancestors, can be seen from the decoration of the famous Bilimek stone Pulque vessel from the Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Vienna. The large sculpted face on the vessel is a three dimensional depiction of the mallinalli glyph. The armed warriors carved around the vessel recall the hunting ceremonies of Quecholli which honored Mixcoatl. Hunting symbolized warfare where Aztec warriors became, not hunters of animals, but hunters of men as sacrificial victims to serve as food for the gods. Ah, but I am rambling on. Writing about Aztec art does that to me. There are simply too many connections with each work of art for me to ignore. We have also intended our eagle painting to have similar symbolic connections with the Aztec mythic past and historical world view.

I do know that space considerations for your exhibit are paramount. If you should reconsider displaying our painting, we have two versions. One is the drybrush watercolor study for the large oil painting which measures only 24 inches by 23 inches framed. The large oil measures 44 inches by 50 inches framed. The University of Texas is eventually going to publish a two-volume work on our Aztec project to be called "The One Reed Year". When it is published the box containing the books will have this painting for its cover. (A couple of years ago a number of Mexican friends of ours highly connected with the Mexican government tried to get us to give the painting to the President

of Mexico so that he could hang it in his office.) Scott and I just know that it would prove very popular and not just with L.A.'s large Mexican - American community. I think it would make a great poster for an Aztlan exhibit and would sell very well.

Enclosed with this letter are the signed loan forms you mailed to us. I am also sending you a xerox of our small watercolor eagle painting and a painting of our version of the Great Temple enclosure of Tenochtitlan with a list of its temples. The official version is in great need of revision to bring it up to what we have learned archaeologically and through a more thorough scrutiny of original early colonial sources. Please forgive me for taking so much of your time. I am sure that you already have made up your mind about the content of your show, but I don't think that I would be very pleased with myself if I had not at least tried to persuade you. Scott and I wish you every success with your exhibit, and if we can be of any help whatsoever, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely yours


Stuart Gentling