

A recent “rediscovery” of an indigenous pictorial map reveals just how much cultural information, teaching, cosmology, and religious practices were encoded in the products of the “red and black” painters. The *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2* is a beautiful 3 × 6-foot painted manuscript from the 1540s, brought into public light by the Mexican philanthropist Ángeles Espinosa Yglesias. It has more than seven hundred images depicting the worldview, pilgrimages, encounters with different ethnic groups, meeting with deities, and ethnobotany of peoples who, though older than the Aztec culture of Tenochtitlan, were eventually integrated into the Aztec empire. The surviving map is actually *stories in pictures*,

David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short History*

that is, a large collection of place names, processions, natural catastrophes, cultural discoveries, myths, and events that cover more than three hundred years of pre-Hispanic history and a territory stretching over several modern-day states in Mexico. If these journeys, symbols, practices, and memories were written out in European script, the resulting epic could well be compared to the grand narratives of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It tells of the long and arduous journeys of the Chichimecs who emerge from the Place of Seven Caves at the pleading of two Toltec priests (Feather Lip and Serpent Foot) from the great pilgrimage city of Cholula. Writing with pictures was not only a way of transmitting information and knowledge but also, as mentioned earlier, the way of bringing "heart," the deepest truths of the community and therefore God and the gods into the viewers' and listeners' minds. This is the power of the painter of stories and the codices, maps, and other paintings of sacred knowledge.

The Aztecs

Sculpture: living stones

When the Spaniards made their march from the coast of Yucatan to the Basin of Mexico they were surprised that the great number and diversity of religious images decorating homes, towns, temples, walkways, caves and heights of mountains, and crossroads surpassed the sophisticated culture of religious imagery in Spain. Maya, Tlaxcalan, and Aztec peoples were seeking contact with divine powers everywhere in the forms of wooden, earthen, stone, and vegetal images of gods, royal families, powerful animals, the sun, moon, and stars, crabs and butterflies, and even fleas. Unfortunately this superb collection of sculptures in various media was the target of Spain's destructive religious campaign against "idols" and "idolatry"—terms that were used to justify the annihilation of indigenous people and their artistic achievements in New Spain. A surprising number of world class sculptures survive because they were either buried by natives themselves during the various reconstructions of their temples or utilized as fill or support in the foundations of the plazas,

churches, and civic buildings they constructed in the colonial period.

Both the ubiquity of these creations and the intensity of the Spanish attacks on them point to their special powers in the Aztec imagination. These objects were venerated because they were considered living, divine beings. Each sculpture, often adorned with clothing and flowers, was understood as an *ixiptla* or god image that was like a skin or shell of a numinous being.

A sign that magical forces were believed to dwell in these sculptures was the Aztec practice of snatching stone and wooden images from conquered peoples' temples and territories and carrying them back, in jubilation, and depositing them in a temple in the center of Tenochtitlan. These captured sculptures signaled not only the defeat of the town they represented but also the Aztec acquisition of the cosmo-magical powers embedded in the statues. As the Aztecs expanded their imperial lands, increased the size of their buildings, and rebuilt the Great Aztec Temple, they also cultivated a superb, virile, artistic program that was most forcefully manifested in the hundreds of monuments depicting gods, warriors, rulers, and cosmic forces.

Wordplay, philosophy, sculpture