

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

TO REMIND

PRESS PREVIEWS

10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan

Tuesday, September 27, 1983, East Building

Gainsborough Drawings

Wednesday, September 28, 1983, West Building  
Ground Floor Drawings Galleries



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## TREASURES OF AZTEC MEXICO AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. July 18, 1983. In February of 1978 an important stone monument with carving in high relief was found in the heart of Mexico City during utility excavations. This accidental discovery led to the unearthing of the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple, of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec empire.

Sculptures and objects from the recent excavations are combined with other works of art unearthed in and around Mexico City as early as the eighteenth century in a major exhibition, Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan, on view in the National Gallery of Art's East Building from September 28, 1983 through January 8, 1984.

This exhibition presents the most comprehensive collection of Aztec art ever shown in the United States. Many exceptional luxury objects that were exported to Europe after the Spanish conquest in 1521 are reunited for the first time with works which were excavated and remained in Mexico to offer a representative survey of the artistic

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achievements of the Aztecs. As well as from Mexican museums and sites, loans will come from major collections in London, Paris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin, (<sup>no</sup>Stuttgart,) Basel, (<sup>no</sup>Stockholm,) and across the United States.

*Hamburg & Mannheim*

Reflecting the nature of Aztec culture, the art emphasizes complex, religious imagery. It is rarely playful and infrequently functions merely as decoration.

Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325, shortly after the Aztecs migrated to the Valley of Mexico. The name "Aztec" was derived from their original home, Aztlan, the "place of the herons," an area northwest of Mexico City.

According to Aztec belief, the universe had been created and destroyed four times. To create the sun and the moon for the fifth epoch, two gods performed self-sacrifice by throwing themselves into fire. In order to keep the sun moving across the sky and the cosmos working, the gods required a diet of human hearts and blood. Man must follow the example of sacrifice set by the gods.

The Aztecs are best known for their monumental stone sculpture, particularly anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images. The latter constitute what many consider to be the special achievement of the Aztecs. Some animals were portrayed three-dimensionally for the first time in Meso-american art history. In general, Aztec sculpture differs from most preceding traditions in its greater attention to anatomical specifics.

A Colossal Head of Coyolxauhqui of green porphyry typifies the outstanding skill of Aztec stone carvers. The goddess

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was a malevolent sorceress and half-sister of the hero-god, Huitzilopochtli. According to myth, she was decapitated, and thus is often represented by her head alone. The subtlety and polish of the surface of this head balances the size (29 1/2") and solidity of the image.

A Chacmool found in Mexico City in 1943 represents one of the most distinctive types of Mesoamerican images, adapted by the Aztecs from the earlier Toltec tradition. Normally positioned in the vestibules of shrines, Chacmoos are reclining male figures holding receptacles on their mid-sections; their heads are turned to one side at a ninety degree angle. The receptacles can themselves be Cuauhxicallis, or vessels for sacrificial human hearts, and some Chacmoos are believed to represent an aspect of Tlaloc, god of fertility and rain.

A striking life-size Eagle Warrior, composed of four ceramic sections, was originally one of a pair and is one of the few large ceramic figures to have survived to the present. Aztec warriors were frequently depicted in costumes of eagles and jaguars--powerful predators of Middle America. The eagle further symbolized the sun; brave warriors who died in battle were believed to escort the sun on its upward path from dawn to midday.

Aztec sculptors especially excelled in one type of zoomorphic sculpture--serpents. Snake symbolism pervades the iconography of pre-Hispanic Middle America; this creature is the one most often represented in art, with the majority

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of images based on the rattlesnake. Snakes in this exhibition typify the range and variety of this richest category of Aztec animal sculpture.

Included is a Colossal Head of a Rattlesnake measuring 40 1/2" x 42 1/2" x 61 7/8", as well as coiled and knotted serpents in basalt, andesite, porphyry, and granite. There are also representations of two mythic snakes: Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, and Xiuhcoatl, the fire-serpent.

Other highlights of the exhibition include fine examples of Aztec gold and metalwork, wood carving, featherwork, and pottery. Three rare turquoise mosaics--the handles of two sacrificial knives and a small mask of the water goddess--display the Aztec achievement in delicate stone inlay and were among the first pieces sent to Europe after the conquest.

The exhibition is a joint project of the National Gallery of Art and Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University's center for the study of Byzantine and Pre-Columbian cultures and the history of landscape architecture. Coinciding with the exhibition will be a conference on the Templo Mayor at Dumbarton Oaks at which fourteen scholars from Mexico and the United States will present papers and study the exhibited works of art.

The exhibition was selected by Professor H. B. Nicholson of the University of California at Los Angeles and Dr. Elizabeth Boone. Dr. Boone, Director of Studies for Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, is curatorial

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coordinator for the exhibition. A fully illustrated catalogue by Professor Nicholson, with the collaboration of Eloise Quinones Keber of Columbia University, will accompany the exhibition. The installation of objects, incorporating educational materials and a model of the Templo Mayor, has been designed by Mark Leithauser and Gaillard Ravenel of the Gallery's Department of Installation and Design, in consultation with Drs. Nicholson and Boone.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs please contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer), or Marla Price, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202) 842-6353.