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Teotihuacan

The City of the Gods

Around 150 B.C.E. in the midplain of Mexico, one of the most remarkable cultures in Mesoamerica arose and flourished for nearly a thousand years. The center of this unprecedented civilization was the first "complete" city in the New World--it was, by all standards, a stunning metropolis--and though this urban complex dominated the Valley of Mexico for hundreds of years, we do not know and may never know its true name. Nor do we know from where its people originated, what language they spoke, or exactly why and how, at the end of the seventh century, the city--most probably from within--was cataclysmically destroyed.

When centuries later, the Aztecs first came upon its ruins, they were so profoundly impressed by what confronted them, they revered the city as one that only Gods could have built; and engraving it in their legends, they called it Teotihuacan, The Place Where Men Become Gods, now usually translated as The City of the Gods. In our own century, Teotihuacan (Táy-oh-tee-wah-kán) is the most visited archaeological site in Mexico and is still one of the least understood.

From May through October, 1993, the first extensive exhibition to be presented on the art of Teotihuacan has been splendidly and skillfully installed in the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco. This unique exhibit, which will not travel but be dispersed at the end of its term, is the fruit of over 15 years of restoration, repatriation, and negotiation by dedicated individuals on both sides of the border, and involved an intensive degree of international cooperation.

The culture of Teotihuacan is often confused with that of the Maya and the Aztecs. Although the Maya were contemporaries its culture was utterly different, while the Aztec civilization did not appear until 600 years after Teotihuacan was destroyed.

In its prime, Teotihuacan's population numbered close to 200,000, second only to Constantinople. It covered more area than ancient Rome. In part, its prosperity was due to its bountiful natural resources and agricultural skills. But exposed to its artifacts,

especially in such a complementary setting, one is struck by the authority of Teotihuacan's comprehensive and unified approach to what we would distinguish as the sacred and the profane. A felt presence throughout the exhibit seems hard to deny and may be one reason why it attracts so many. This power, when translated on a grand scale and intensified through ritual and probably a set of disciplined codes for daily living and worship, can either arouse or intimidate a society to achieve the extraordinary. There is evidence that for three or four hundred years of Teotihuacan's ascendancy--from about 300 to 650 C.E.--this society fostered inspiration rather than compulsion in its people to maintain a focus both on their sense of the sacred and on their formidable material accomplishments.

During this period of the city's flowering, the people were guided by a priestly elite. Yet manifestations of ruling hierarchies, even the names of kings, do not seem to appear in the art of Teotihuacan. Most of its art was notably conceptual and abstract with narrative representation playing a small role. (This important and intriguing fact has, however, made the deciphering of its glyphs all the more difficult, though progress is now beginning to be made.) There is a conspicuous lack of the portrayal of military conquest and no depictions that glorify any of its rulers. In fact, the warrior caste itself seems to have become dominant only near the end of the Teotihuacan term, during its "decadent" phase (undoubtedly hastened by severe famine and drought). Human sacrifice, widespread during this general period of Mesoamerican history, may have been practiced only in the earlier and last phases of Teotihuacan's life span.

The society appears to have been remarkably integrated and harmoniously functioning. The city kept its walls permanently open, as much a testament to its genuine force as to its intent to be generous when possible to its own citizens while also welcoming in the surrounding peoples.

The influence of Teotihuacan extended all the way from northern Mexico to Guatemala. It was the major crossroads for Mesoamerican traders, a world-class economic power; it was, in fact, the first major state in all of Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan served as the spiritual, artistic, and technological heart of this entire region and beyond--even for

centuries after its own destruction.

Teotihuacan was laid out in quadrants and may have been the first major city ever constructed on a strict grid pattern. The gravity and eloquence of the rectilinear design is apparent even in the exhibit's large models depicting the central core of the city. In consistency of vision--a vision that lasted for nearly a millennia--attentiveness to detail, and capacity to solve practical problems on a vast scale, Teotihuacan is one of the most impressive examples of successful city planning in human history.

Its center was dominated by a main avenue--a broad boulevard 130 feet across and named by the Aztecs The Avenue of the Dead--; the two major pyramids, built in the early stages of Teotihuacan's existence; and the Citadel, a massive esplanade of monumental proportions finished around 200 C.E.

The superhuman majesty of Teotihuacan's pyramids and temples--themselves echoing the presence of a dark mountain rising in the background--overpower one's initial view. But we know that the city was also replete with splendidly decorated buildings, spacious boulevards, and artfully channeled streams. The two-mile length of The Avenue of the Dead itself is considered to be one of the most remarkable concentrations of monumental architecture ever conceived.

The two pyramids, whose actual names are lost to us, were called by the Aztecs the Pyramid of the Moon and the Pyramid of the Sun. Both were bases for temples that had capped their summits and were most likely associated with the two gods that Teotihuacan most revered--a nature goddess and a storm god.

The Pyramid of the Sun, as high as a twenty-story building and over half a million square feet at its base, was centered directly over one of the numerous caves in the region. Caves were assumed to be passageways to and from the lower world, and scholars believe that the cave under this pyramid was the place where Teotihuacan considered humanity to have emerged into being, the temple marking the center of the earth and the origin of the cosmos. The Avenue of the Dead is perpendicular to the mouth of the cave. The street runs south to the Citadel--a once magnificent civic and sacred complex

of over 38 acres, containing the most important temple in the Teotihuacan, that of the feathered serpent, Quetzacoatl. To the north the street culminates in an enormous esplanade at the foot of the smaller but still massive Pyramid of the Moon, with the sacred mountain looming behind it. Around the major pyramids and the Citadel are numerous smaller temples, pyramids, and platforms echoing the larger structures and arranged with apparent significance that we cannot yet read.

Just as innovative as the city's cosmological architectural vision was the effort invested in constructing apartment compounds for its citizens. This began after the completion of the two colossal pyramids and the other major temples and monuments--in approximately 250 C.E.

The entire population was housed in over two thousand one-story stone and adobe apartment compounds, each holding 60 to 100 residents. Beginning with an inner ring composed of the apartments for citizens with the highest status, then those of the artisans, finally those for the remainder of the population, with the outer compounds occupied by the peasants, this plan eventually became traditional for a wide region of Mesoamerica for well over one thousand years.

These apartments were designed and built on a scale unprecedented in history, and given the space and intention, they were models of design. Colored glistening white with red trim over the stucco, the apartments must have presented a shimmering sight in the Mexican sun. The walls and porches were often adorned with brightly colored frescoes, though some areas were more shoddy and relatively unadorned. Some complexes were built on a plan resembling a Greek Cross: four chambers at the cardinal points around a square court. Often these dwellings were extended to include other rooms, courts, and passageways. Each compound had a somewhat different layout corresponding to the status and size of the families. They were comfortable inside offering natural light and air, with high walls that provided privacy. Columns were used which gave rise to porticos and a number of variations. There were basic areas for living, crafts, and community rituals.

All of the pyramids and apartments were oriented 15 1/2 degrees east of north, the difference being linked to the position of the sun or stars at significant times. The same ritually prescribed orientations were followed for all of the city's buildings. Markers were scattered throughout the city indicating the prescribed deviation as well as true north. The city's planners had faced and successfully overcome immense challenges--some entirely new--such as large-scale design, mobilization of labor, transportation of materials, and plumbing and sewage. In order to cultivate and maintain this flowering microcosm, nothing short of brilliant innovation must have proceeded along many parallel lines: social, political, economic, technological, artistic, and military. And considering the unmistakable originality of their creative productions, even their approach to the sacred might have embodied ideas about which we can only wonder.

As one possible example, glazed ceramic unclothed "host figures," both male and female, were found whose torsos and sometimes even arms and legs were hollowed out and could be taken apart to reveal smaller figurines--often fully clothed in individualized outfits--or other ritual objects inside. Analogously, one thinks of the smaller temples and pyramids arranged about the major pyramids and the Citadel. This presentation of two related scales, one nested in the other, may have had a more exact significance in their religion or their cosmology than just the obvious reverence for the grandeur of the divine or supernatural world. The context into which these ritual objects and ritual buildings might be better understood remains a mystery.

The Teotihuacan mastery of stone sculpture, ceramics, and mural painting were widely recognized throughout Mesoamerica and are evident throughout the exhibit. Their formal style tended toward abstraction in a marked degree. The subject matter was generally religious, often comprising stylized and highly imaginative renderings of the all-important nature goddess and storm god, or priests in a religious ritual, or lesser deities such as the butterfly god, a "fat god," and numerous sacred animals and birds.

Their sculpted standing and seated figures are generally simple, forceful, and impressive from all angles of view. The stone and ceramic sculpture represented here includes

colossal serpent heads, incense burners in the form of complex assemblages, masks of greenstone, serpentine, and onyx, as well as small "popular" figurines mostly representing contemporary Teotihuacanos. The city's thin orangeware ceramics were highly prized luxury items and were exported throughout the region. In this medium, too, they preferred simple, elegant forms typically with highly abstract decorations. Their discerning observation of the natural world is apparent in all media, especially in the representation of animal forms that were often ingeniously incorporated into their pottery and their frescoes.

Mural painting flourished in the city. Murals were usually drawn in outline on wet stucco, then filled in with bright colors. Teotihuacan's distinctive painting style was imitated for centuries throughout Mesoamerica. Their frescoes reveal an irrepressible vitality, sometimes even a lightness that provides a counterpoint to an overall impression of this civilization--that of tremendous power emerging from deep in the earth, blending with what appears to be a singular vision of the world of spirit in a totality we have yet to fathom.

Moving through the exhibit, we are affected over and over by a mystery originating not only in our inability to decipher these glyphs and further penetrate the forms that are vibrating in front of us, but also in the sense that these people knew something with which we either were never acquainted or have forgotten altogether. On my first visit, my three companions were experienced amateur explorers of Mesoamerican ruins. All were equally and profoundly touched by this sense of a knowledge and experience possessed almost, it seems, by the society as a whole as much as by individuals who resided within it.

One can well imagine the disbelief of a seventh century resident of Teotihuacan if it was suggested that in a few hundred years his language, symbols, rituals--vital elements of his civilization and culture--would be forgotten; that their traces would remain almost undecipherable to succeeding generations; and that one day even the name of his city would be pronounced for the last time--perhaps by some dying storyteller--its once commonplace syllables vanishing out of all memory.

