

Archeological Collections in Mesoamerica and New Spain

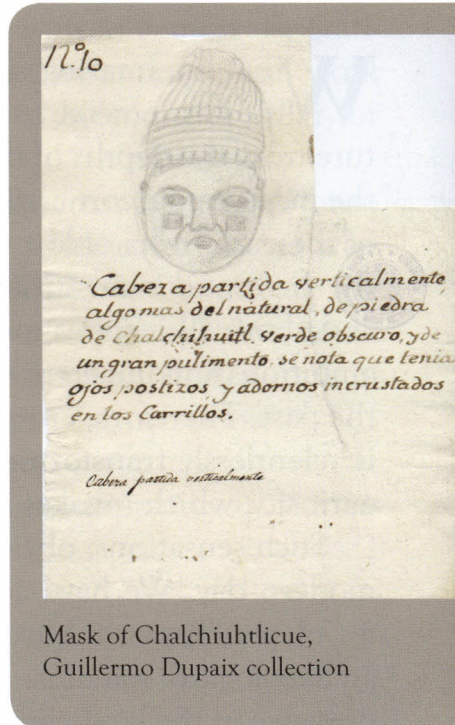
■ LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

What an amazing sight it is to see a humble piece of pottery emerge from the bowels of the earth, a sculpture from the depths of the sea, or a sumptuous palace from the most remote corner of the jungle! The sudden appearance of these survivors of lost worlds—their unsettling presence in the here and now—attracts, astonishes, and intrigues us, and above all inspires us to embark on the most seductive, ambitious and uncertain of voyages, to wit, the journey into the past. Therefore, any vestige of antiquity, however small, is relentlessly transformed into that obscure object of our curiosity, which invokes both reason and imagination.

Such sensations, obviously, are not exclusive to us in the modern day. We have accounts indicating that the societies of pre-Hispanic Mexico felt a similar fascination with archaeological remains. But they usually attributed their presence in the landscape to the supernatural powers of portentous, ancient beings. This is because their vision of the remote past was as malleable as the future, the product of a play of mirrors that reflected both historical chronicles and mythical narratives. The sixteenth century Nahua, for example, denied that the great pyramids at Teotihuacan had been built by mere mortals. Such a belief likely arose from their awestruck comparison of the monuments of the Classical Period with their own, much smaller temples. From this perspective, the majestic Pyramid of the Sun could only be understood as the work of gods, giants, or legendary

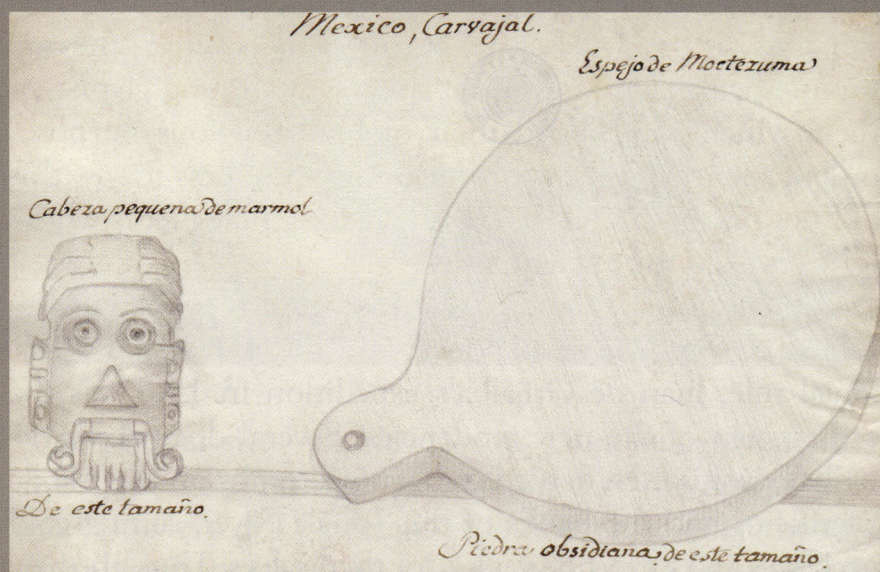
peoples such as the Toltecs or emigrants from the mythical paradise of Tamoanchan. In fact, in the Postclassic Period the entire archaeological metropolis was invested with a divine aura: it was worshiped as the place of origin, the cradle of the Fifth Sun, and the center of the human diaspora.

We also know that pre-Hispanic people assiduously frequented abandoned ceremonial centers and avidly explored buildings and complexes hidden beneath the vegetation. In those peculiar settings, tinged with silence and desolation, they planned and undertook excavations in search of images, tombs, and all kinds of ritual artifacts. Such operations were not driven by gain, but by the desire to recover singular, precious, sacred, and consequently collectable objects. In effect, these relics, like those discovered accidentally and others passed down from generation to generation, were valued for the exquisite quality of their materials and manufacture. But, above all, their supposed divine nature inspired their new owners to carry them as amulets or to reinter them as dedicatory or funerary offerings in their own temples and palaces. Apparently, such status was afforded not only to complete pieces, but also to fragments. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand why small broken pieces of antiquities formed part of such offerings. Evidence of these practices can be found everywhere. There is documentation of the unquestionable reuse of numerous figurines,



Mask of Chalchiuhtlicue,
Guillermo Dupaix collection

masks, miniature canoes, hatchets, and body piercing tools of the Olmecs and their contemporaries from the Middle Preclassic Period, which have been discovered by archaeologists at sites from the Late Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic Periods. The most noteworthy findings are from Cerro de las Mesas in Veracruz and the Maya sites of Dzibilchal-



Head of Tlaloc and obsidian mirror,
Ciriaco González Carvajal collection, BNAH

tun, Mayapan, Chacsinkin, Cozumel, Uaxactun, Tikal, San Cristóbal Verapaz, and Laguna Francesa. However, Tenochtitlan was the preeminent center as regards the reuse of antiquities. Over a century of archaeological excavations at the Mexica capital, hundreds of relics have been found in the main religious buildings, mainly objects made of greenstone, and ceramic containers. Prominent among them are Olmec pieces and others from Teotihuacan, the state of Guerrero, and the Toltec civilization.

Significantly, many of these pieces were deliberately altered by their owners. The Maya, for example, modified Olmec penitential instruments and pendants by engraving them with images and texts referring to the dignitaries who wore them centuries after they were made. The Mexica substantially reworked Teotihuacan masks, polishing and burnishing them, covering them with obsidian and seashell incrustations and adding large ear ornaments to them before offering them at Templo Mayor. They covered other antiquities with paint and tar or drew symbols and glyphs on them which emphasized their original religious purposes or lent them new, different meanings. Needless to say, this did not prevent them from also creating new pieces whose forms evoked the ancient styles.

This particular vision of archaeological remains was disrupted by the Spanish conquest and the imposition of colonial rule. Juan de Grijalba's expedition in 1518 was the earliest sign of the new tendencies. Several documents describe how his men defiled indigenous tombs on the Isla de Sacrificios and the banks of the Tonalá River, seizing gold necklaces and travertine vessels for themselves. Thus, the new arrivals learned that precious metals could be obtained not only as the spoils of war or as "ransom" in exchange for glass beads. The lesson was not lost on Andrés Figueroa, a Spanish captain who, in Mixe lands, traded crossbows for spades. According to Bernal Díaz del Castillo, he raided the tombs of local noblemen, and gleaned the equivalent of five thousand pesos in gold.

Over the years, these lucrative expeditions became so frequent that the Crown was obliged to issue some half dozen royal charters over the sixteenth century. Their purpose was evidently not to protect the buried heritage, but to secure a tribute for the king. In a widely noted incident in the year 1538, the Count of Osorno, beneficiary of a license to



Teotihuacan mask from the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, Templo Mayor Museum.

“open burial sites” in New Spain, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Cabo Vela, justifiably complained of the new taxes he was being levied: 1.5 percent as a foundry fee, then the royal fifth (twenty percent), and finally half of the remainder for the Royal Treasury. Indigenous people were also implicated in acts of pillage, which, as Toribio de Benavente explains, were motivated by the onerous tributes they were forced to pay their Spanish overlords.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, as the Enlightenment came to New Spain, the pre-Hispanic past was reassessed on scientific and political grounds. Explorations were undertaken at virtually unknown sites such as Xochicalco and Cantona, tales were told of distant ruins like El Tajin and Palenque, and scholarly studies were devoted to monuments that were being exhumed as a result of urban development in Mexico City. Here, in the colonial capital, private archaeological collections were also in vogue,

Academia de S^{ta} Carlos nº 10



The Sad Indian, collection of the Royal Academy of Painting of San Carlos, from Descripción de monumentos antiguos mexicanos, BNAH

amassed by government officials, religious dignitaries, and “learned men,” both European and Criollo. Among these we can mention the Cardinal of León, Francisco Antonio

Lorenzana; local scholars José Antonio Alzate and Antonio de León y Gama; the Sevillian judge Ciriaco González de Carvajal, the Extremaduran botanist Vicente Cervantes, the Flemish captain Guillermo Dupaix, the Prussian naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, and the Catalan Benedictine priest Benito Moxó. These individuals appreciated antiquities not only as useful resources for historical reconstruction, but also as inexhaustible sources of aesthetic pleasure: this shared enthusiasm led them, except for Lorenzana and Humboldt, to meet frequently to show one another their newest acquisitions and to exchange objects, drawings, and publications.

In parallel, in Mexico City, the first public collections of archaeological artifacts began to appear, among which we can mention the Cabinet of Natural History founded in 1790 by the Spanish physician José Longinos. Its collection was formed with pieces Longinos had brought from Spain, with others acquired on his expeditions in New Spain and those donated by eleven collectors, almost all of them high-ranking local functionaries. According to the *Gazeta de México*, the collection was open to the public on Mondays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 2 to 5 p.m. Its twenty-four cabinets contained a scientific library; instruments such as microscopes, electrical machines and camera obscuras; and specimens pertaining to the three great kingdoms of nature. The *Gazeta* specifies that cabinet number nineteen contained "soils and antiquities," but regrettably provides no further details.

Far more important was the Academy of San Carlos, founded in 1783. From the outset, the king endowed the institution with a generous budget, top-flight professors, and spectacular didactic collections of paintings, prints, medallions, plaster castings, and books imported from Spain and Italy. To give an idea of its importance, it will suffice to

mention that its art gallery featured works by Ribera, Zurbarán, Cortona, and Michelangelo; its plaster castings included copies of the Laocoön Group, the Venus de Medici, and the Castor and Pollux group, and its library housed works by Piranesi and volumes on the contemporary excavations at Herculaneum. It is fascinating to see that alongside these European masterworks there were at least four Mexica sculptures. According to the writings of Dupaix and León y Gama, these sculptures had been disinterred on the grounds of the Mayorazgo de Mota estate. We refer here to the famous *Indio Triste* (Sad Indian) and the figures of an otter, a toad, and a rattlesnake. Decades later, these very pieces would form part of the core collection with which the National Museum was inaugurated.

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Editorial Coordinator: Gabriela Olmos

English-Language Editor: Richard Moszka

Translators: Michelle Suderman, Padraic Smithies, Quentin Pope, Clara Marín

Design: Germán Montalvo

Research Assistants: Marco Cervera, Roberto Velasco Alonso

Layout & Editorial Design Assistant: César Susano

Design Assistant: Francisco Orozco

Map and Timeline: Magdalena Juárez Vivas

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Table of Contents

Presentation

ALFONSO DE MARÍA Y CAMPOS 11

Introduction

DIANA MAGALONI KERPEL 13

Archaeological Collections in Mesoamerica and New Spain

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN 15

The National Museum and Archaeology

LUISA FERNANDA RICO MANSARD 23

The Collections' Formation: 1955-2011

DIANA MAGALONI KERPEL 33

Ancient Mesoamerican Words on the Walls

MIGUEL LEÓN-PORTILLA 41

Colonial Maya Books on the Walls

MERCEDES DE LA GARZA 45

Mesoamerican Territory and Timeline 52

● INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY AND EARLY PEOPLES GALLERIES 53

The Origins of Man

JOSÉ ANTONIO POMPA 55 - 78

● **PRECLASSIC CULTURE OF THE CENTRAL
HIGHLANDS GALLERY** 81

Foundations of Ancient Mexico

ROBERTO GARCÍA MOLL 83 - 104

● **TEOTIHUACAN GALLERY** 107

“The Place Where Gods Are Made”

EDUARDO MATOS MOCTEZUMA 109 - 133

● **THE TOLTECS AND THEIR TIME GALLERY** 135

Wise Men of Ancient Mexico

ROBERT H. COBEAN & ELIZABETH JIMÉNEZ GARCÍA 137 - 141

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN & MARCO ANTONIO SANTOS ■ 142 - 144

MARI CARMEN SERRA PUCHE ■ 146

ELIZABETH JIMÉNEZ GARCÍA ■ 148 - 156

GABRIELA URUÑUELA ■ 158 - 160

● **MEXICA GALLERY** 163

Late Postclassic Cultures of the Central Highlands

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN 165 - 188

● **CULTURES OF OAXACA GALLERY** 191

The Great Cultures of Oaxaca

NELLY ROBLES 193 - 206

JAVIER URCID ■ 208 - 216

● **GULF COAST CULTURES GALLERY** 219

The Olmecs and Other Peoples of the Gulf

SARA LADRÓN DE GUEVARA 221 - 223, 232 - 242

ANN CYPHERS □ 224 - 230

● **MAYA GALLERY** 245

Maya Civilization

MERCEDES DE LA GARZA 247 - 260

NIKOLAI GRUBE □ 262 - 268

● **WESTERN CULTURES GALLERY** 271

Artists and Warriors

ARTURO OLIVEROS 273 - 284

EDUARDO WILLIAMS □ 286 - 294

MARIE-ARETI HERS □ 296

● **NORTHERN CULTURES GALLERY** 299

Settlers of a Shifting Frontier

MARIE-ARETI HERS 301 - 324

About the Authors 326

Bibliography 331