The Iconography of Mirrors at Teotihuacan

From Olmec times to the period of Spanish contact, polished stone mirrors were an important component of Mesoamerican costume, ritual, and iconography. Although mirrors of the Formative and Postclassic periods are well known, there has been little interest in the intervening Classic Period of highland Mexico. In two previous studies, I noted that representations of mirrors are extremely common in the iconography of Teotihuacan (Taube 1983, 1986). However, until now, there has been no detailed discussion of mirrors at Classic Teotihuacan. In this essay, I will describe particular forms and types of Teotihuacan-style mirrors, both actual examples in the archaeological record, and their representation in Teotihuacan art. I shall demonstrate that at Teotihuacan mirrors were more than simple ornaments of dress. These ancient mirrors expressed a rich body of esoteric lore, much of it also present among Postclassic and even contemporary peoples of Mesoamerica. The varied meanings and uses of mirrors at Teotihuacan will be elucidated by their form and contexts in Teotihuacan iconography, by data from archaeological excavations, and finally, by mirror symbolism known from other cultures of ancient Mesoamerica.

Formal Identification of Teotihuacan Mirrors

Three types of mirror stone were used at Teotihuacan: mica, obsidian, and iron pyrite. This study will focus upon the most elaborate mirror type, the circular mirror of pyrite mosaic.

Circular mirrors of iron pyrite mosaic are fairly common in the archaeological remains of Teotihuacan. They are composed of iron pyrite tesserae glued upon a thin stone disk, usually...
Mirrors Worn at the Small of the Back

In costume, the largest and most complex of the circular medallions tends to be the back mirror. It occurs as a part of belt assemblages and frequently has a pendant tassel of cloth, feathers, or tails (Figure 3). It is quite clear that this device is an Early Classic form of the Postclassic tzacuautlalli, a mirror worn at the small of the back. In the art of Postclassic highland Mexico there are innumerable examples of back mirrors. Some of the finest examples appear with Early Postclassic Toltec figures. Long ago, Seler (1902-1923:5:275) interpreted these back elements as mirrors at Chichen Itza. Later excavations at Tula and Chichen Itza provided striking confirmation of his early identification. The large Atlantean warrior columns unearthed by Jorge Acosta at Tula each wear the back device, here rendered with smoking serpents within the four radiating quadrants (see Figure 12c). Actual mirrors of this design have been excavated at Chichen Itza. Here four Xiuixcoa—turquoise or fire serpents—appear in the turquoise rim encircling the central pyrite mosaic (see Figure 19d).

Numerous depictions of back mirrors occur in Classic Maya art, often on pieces exhibiting strong Teotihuacan influence. The Teotihuacan warrior figures on the sides of Tikal Stela 31 provide two views of an Early Classic back mirror (Figure 4a). Whereas the left figure displays the mirror face within its encircling rim, the opposing figure provides a view of the mirror back. The pair of short vertical lines near the edge of the disk probably depicts the holes drilled for suspension, now held by lashes of cord. Yet another Early Classic Tikal piece, a two-part effigy incensario, contains an excellent representation of a back mirror, complete with a pendant tassel (Figure 4b). The four Late Classic sculptures from Tikal Burial 195 each depict God K presenting a similar back mirror (Figure 4c).

3 A circular device virtually identical to Teotihuacan mirror medallions appears on a series of stone heads reportedly from the Rio Balsas region of Guerrero. In the center of the disk, corresponding to the pyrite mirror face, there is a small inlay of iron pyrite (see von Winning and Stendahl 1968:Pl. 40). It is widely recognized that the stucco facade at Acanceh, Yucatan, is rendered in strong Teotihuacan style. No less than five of the stucco figures wear back mirrors (see Seler 1902-1923, Vol. 5).
The Early Classic Esperanza phase tombs at Kaminaljuyu contain graphic information regarding the use and form of Early Classic pyrite mirrors. Two of the individuals in Tomb B-I were found with pyrite mirrors placed at the small of the back (Figure 5a). One of the mirrors, that found on Skeleton 2, had a backing richly ornamented in Classic Veracruz style (Figure 5b). The carved surface was placed face up, against the back of the body. This indicates that even with finely carved mirror backs, the pyrite facing, not the backing, was the displayed surface of Classic period back mirrors.

The archaeological occurrence of back mirrors in burials is not restricted to Kaminaljuyu. In the recently discovered burials at the Temple of Quetzalcoat at Teotihuacan, mirrors are similarly placed in the small of the back. In Burial 190, no fewer than fifteen individuals were interred with back mirrors (Sugiyama 1989a:97).

In a great many Teotihuacan representations of mirrors, the edges of the disks are separated into a series of petal-like curving bands (Figures 2, 6a–b). Although these bands often appear to represent feathers, in other instances, they may actually refer to a solid portion of the mirror. At Kaminaljuyu, the pyrite face of one Early Classic mirror was found to be composed of a central disk surrounded by six curving pieces (Figure 6a). A fragmentary Early Classic mirror excavated at Zaculeu bears a similar pattern, although here the curving petals appear to have been fashioned from single plates of iron pyrite (Woodbury and Trik 1953:233). The overall pattern of the Zaculeu piece is strikingly similar to mirrors represented in Teotihuacan art (Figure 6b).

Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946:127) note that during their excavation of the Kaminaljuyu Esperanza tombs, jade was found with most mirrors, usually in close association with the reflective pyrite surface. Due to the corrosion of the pyrite, it was frequently difficult to determine the original orientation of the jade. Nonetheless, they were able to reconstruct some of the original assemblages. The face of one pyrite mirror was flanked by jade flares, giving the overall impression of a pair of ear spools (Figure 6c). This same assemblage appears with Teotihuacan-style representations of mirrors. On one incensario, the mirror and flares are modeled three dimensionally, with mica occupying the central mirror space (Berjonneau et al. 1985:Pl. 172). Mirrors with identical pairs of ear flares often occur as back mirrors in Teotihuacan murals (see Figures 2c, e). Here the stone spools are rendered as two concentric circles on the mirror rim.

In a great many representations of mirrors at Teotihuacan, a spool appears in the center of the mirror face (see Figure 2c). In this case, it is usually rendered in profile, with the bell-shaped outline clearly visible. At first sight, this could serve to discount a mirror identification; such an element would clearly inhibit the reflective quality of the mirror. Nonetheless, virtually identical jade spools have been found on actual back mirrors. In the Teotihuacan tombs, such spools were never found on tombs without mirrors. The significance of these representations is that they demonstrate that mirrors with a central spool were not reflective, and therefore were not used for their reflective quality. Instead, they were probably used as symbolic representations of mirrors.
excavated Early Classic pyrite mirrors at Kaminaljuyu. In Tomb A-IV, a jade spool with a central carved disk was found on a pyrite mirror (Kidder et al. 1946:Figs. 26, 143b). Although making no mention of similar mirrors in Teotihuacan art, Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946:127) suggest that both this flare and another example were originally placed in the center of iron pyrite mirrors. On Yaxchilan Stela 11, there is a Late Classic Maya representation of an elaborate back mirror with the central spool or flare (see Figure 19c). In this case, a pendant tassel is pulled through the center of the flare.

A Teotihuacan mural currently on display in the De Young Museum of Art, San Francisco, displays an interesting version of the back mirror (Figure 7). Here the central mirror surface contains a glyph-like element probably representing a jade face pendant. In Teotihuacan murals, similar pendants are frequently found falling in streams. The placement of jade upon mirror faces appears to have been a relatively common practice in the Maya region. In the Esperanza phase burials at Kaminaljuyu, jade beads were found placed with pyrite mirrors (Kidder et al. 1946:127). A cache from Early Classic Quirigua was formed of three bowls with matching lids containing a vast amount of worked jade (Ashmore 1980:38, 39). Wendy Ashmore (personal communication, 1988) notes that at least two of the bowls appear to have contained the remains of pyrite mirrors. In one Late Classic Maya cache at San Jose, Belize, a single large jade bead was placed against a pyrite mirror (Thompson 1939:184).

The practice of placing carved beads and pendants on pyrite mirrors continued into the Early Postclassic period at Chichen Itza. A pyrite and turquoise mirror—of the type commonly worn as tezcacuitlapilli at Chichen Itza and Tula—was discovered on the jade inlaid jaguar in the inner Castillo at Chichen Itza. A finely carved human-head pendant and other jades were placed on the central mirror face (Eroza Peniche 1947:248, Fig. 15). A cache in the Temple of the Chac Mool contained another pyrite and turquoise mirror; here a large jade sphere, a human-face jade pendant, and beads of jade and shell lay on the pyrite center (Morris et al. 1931:186-188, Fig. 120). The reason for the placement of pendants and other jade objects on pyrite mirrors may be partly due to the value of the pyrite mirrors. According to Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946:131), “nothing produced in aboriginal America seems to rival these plaques in the matter of skilled and meticulous workmanship.” In burials or dedicatory offerings, precious jade would be an especially appropriate item to accompany the obviously esteemed mirrors.

Mirrors Worn upon the Chest

Along with serving as back devices, circular mirrors are frequently worn on the chest of Teotihuacan figures. At times, they are supplied with the flanking pair of spoons observed on many Teotihuacan back mirrors, thereby firmly identifying them as such (Figure 8). Breast mirrors with two rim flares are extremely common on Teotihuacan figurines; in a recent publication, von Winning (1987:2:57) considers this device, “el pectoral con dos bolitos de barro,” to be a specific trait of one figurine type. Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946:126) note that in the Early Classic tombs at Kaminaljuyu, large mirrors were often placed on the breast of the deceased. In the region of Escuintla, Guatemala, mirrors of similar scale often appear on the chest of incensario figures. Here they also occur with the flanking spoons on the mirror rim (e.g., Helmuth 1975:Pl. 23c). In a great many examples at Escuintla and Teotihuacan, the mirror face is occupied by forms of the Reptile Eye glyph, a sign that is still not fully understood (e.g., Helmuth 1975:Pls. 26, 27).

Mirrors Worn in Headdresses

In Teotihuacan costume, mirrors are quite frequently placed in the center of headdresses worn by women, men, and gods (Figure 9). When worn by figures, these mirrors occur in a broad variety of headdress types. However, Teotihuacan headdresses also appear as isolated iconographic motifs. In this context, the headdress is of a very specific form (Figure 9d–e). This device, termed the Feather Headdress Symbol by James Langley (1986:114), is a broad headdress with a feather crest emanating from the top and frequently the sides. In the center of the Feather Headdress Symbol, circular mirrors may be prominently displayed.

Figure 7. Detail of Teotihuacan back mirror with probable jade head in center; from a mural on display in the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco.

Figure 8. Breast mirror appearing on Teotihuacan figurine; note pair of flanking spoons (from Seler 1902-1923:5:463, Fig. 54a).

Figure 9. Mirrors appearing in center of Teotihuacan-style headdresses: (a) figurine head with mirror in headdress (from Seker 1902-1923:5:463, Fig. 54a); (b) Teotihuacan-style figure with headdress mirror, note flare in center of mirror, Stela 23, Kaminaljuyu (after Parsons 1986:Fig. 190); (c) Teotihuacan Tlaloc with headdress mirror (after Miller 1973:Fig. 202); (d) headdress occurring in Teotihuacan mural (after Miller 1973:Figs. 210-211); (e) headdress occurring in Teotihuacan mural (from Langley 1986:Fig. 32).

Figure 10. Image of the Feather Headdress Symbol, circular mirrors may be prominently displayed.
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Large Mirrors Not Worn in Costume

Unlike mirrors made from a single stone, there is virtually no limit to the potential diameter of
mounds suggests that mirrors are too large for personal adornment. Instead, they seem to have been placed on altars or held in the arms during particular rites. Three of
the Teotihuacan figurines contained within the hollow figure from Becan, Campeche, hold
very large mirrors to their chests (Figure 10a–b). A remarkable Late Classic cache excavated
at Monte Albán contained sixteen figures, three holding large rimmed disks. Elizabeth Easby
and John Scott (1970:Fig. 163) have identified these Zapotec circular devices as mirrors. The
Classic scene, a man holds a great rimmed mirror that dwarfs the mirror worn upon his back
(worn at small of back (after Kerr 1989:89).

The Iconography of Mirrors

The varied forms of Teotihuacan mirrors are interesting in their own right, but clearly they
were more than articles of beauty and adornment. In many scenes, they appear in strange and
still poorly known contexts, curiously combined with seemingly disparate elements. Given
our limited understanding of the iconography, a symbolic interpretation of Teotihuacan mirrors
is no easy task. However, there are constructive avenues of approach. For one, there is the
complex iconography frequently appearing on actual Teotihuacan mirror backs. In addition,
the form and archaeological context of excavated mirrors can provide valuable clues to their use and significance.

Aside from actual mirrors and their archaeological associations, Teotihuacan representations of mirrors also present detailed symbolic information. In the art, mirrors could
be readily depicted not only as they appear but also as they were symbolically perceived,

frequently by the substitution or juxtaposition of other distinct elements. Although extremely
important, direct substitutions frequently alter the form of the mirror. It is thus useful to have
a firm context in which the varied forms interrelate. Costume serves this purpose very well,
because the forms can be readily translated to the human plane. Thus, for example, circular
pools or giant eyeballs can be readily identified as mirrors when they appear on Teotihuacan dress. I have noted three areas where mirrors commonly appear in Teotihuacan costumes:
against the lower back, on the chest, and in the center of the headdress. In the context of these
specific regions, many varied motifs substitute for the mirror face. Those to be discussed are
mirrors as human eyes or faces, flowers, fiery hearths, pools, webs, shields, the world or the sun,
and caves or passageways.

The Mirror as an Eye

Cecelia Klein (1976:208-212) has suggested that at Teotihuacan and in the later iconography of Central Mexico, the ringed eyes found on Tlaloc and other deities may refer to mirrors. In support, Klein (1976) cites abundant evidence that the Aztec identified mirrors with eyes. Thus, in Book 10 of the Florentine Codex, both the eye and pupil are described as texcatl, or mirror. The association of mirrors with eyes is widespread in Mesoamerica. In contemporary Tzotzil Maya, one word for pupil or eye is nen sat, nen meaning “mirror” and sat, “eye” or “face” (Laughlin 1975:251). Nicholas Saunders (1988:14-19) notes that reflective mirror stones were used to represent eyes in Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacan, and Aztec sculpture. According to Saunders (1988), the Mesoamerican identification of mirrors with eyes may derive from the
strongly reflective quality of jaguar eyes.

At Teotihuacan, mirrors were strongly identified with eyes. Along with the Teotihuacan use of pyrite, mica and obsidian are frequently used in Teotihuacan sculpture to represent the shining pupil. George Kubler (1967:9) notes that eyes in Teotihuacan iconography represent shining brilliance; thus they are commonly found in streams and other bodies of water. On one Teotihuacan-style mirror back excavated at Kaminaljuyu, a series of eyes encircles the rim (see Figure 1). Human eyes are also used to represent the gleaming mirror face. Thus, the shining center of both the headdress and breast mirrors can be replaced with a single large eye (Figure 11b–c). The Teotihuacan identification of mirrors with eyes is so widespread that they may be even rendered in the form of an eye, lenticular but with the raised rim and radiating feathers found with mirrors (Figure 11a).

The Mirror as a Face

Like the Tzotzil and other Maya groups, the Aztec words for eye and face are semantically
related. Thus the Nahua word for eye, ixtehololotli, derives from a word for face, itli (see Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 10:112). Similarly, Teotihuacan mirrors were identified not only with eyes but also with the entire face. It has been noted that mirrors are frequently flanked by a pair of flares resembling earpools (Figure 12a). I suspect that these spools serve to convert the mirror into an animat...
be seen on Teotihuacan-style braziers, where a prominent pair of spools converts the vessel into a human head (Figure 12b); at times, even a nosepiece and jade necklace are added (e.g., Berlo 1984:Pls. 35, 42). In one Teotihuacan mural, a netted, feather-rimmed mirror replaces the face of the Netted Jaguar (see Berlo 1992:Fig. 12). At Early Postclassic Tula, all of the Atlantean column tezcacuitlapilli have faces corresponding to the region of the pyrite mirror (Figure 12c). Although it is conceivable that this face is a reflection of an individual bending over or kneeling behind the Atlantean warrior, it is far more likely a deified personification of the mirror. Among the Huichol, who have perhaps the most complex mirror lore known for contemporary Mesoamerica, circular glass mirrors used in divination are referred to as nealika, a term meaning “face,” as well as the round mirror (Lumholtz 1900:118; Seler 1902-1923:363; Negrín 1975:18-19).

**The Mirror as a Flower**

Teotihuacan mirrors were also compared to flowers. Two of the Esperanza phase mirrors excavated at Kaminaljuyu bear representations of flowers. On one example, flowers are painted near the rim of the mirror back (Kidder et al. 1946:Fig. 205b). The other mirror depicts both frontal and profile views of flowers, here surrounding the mirror face (Kidder et al. 1946:Fig. 53e). On one Early Classic Maya vessel, the center of a tasseled back mirror contains two outcurving bands (Figure 13c). This same pair of curving bands frequently extrudes from the corolla of Teotihuacan-style flowers (e.g., Linné 1934:Fig. 25). The earflare occurring in the center of many Teotihuacan mirrors refers not to a face but to another natural form, a flower (Figure 13a). At times, this central device is notched, much like the funnel-shaped profile representations of flowers in Teotihuacan iconography (Figure 13b).

An incensario excavated in the Teltitla compound bears adorno butterflies upon micaceous breast ornaments, as if the butterflies were gathering nectar off the mirror face.

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7 Although it may seem a great jump—from faces to flowers—it is not, because in Teotihuacan iconography the human face may be rendered as a flower. One Escuintla incensario depicts a human face with pyrite eyes in the center of a great petalled flower; a butterfly is at the lower edge, as if to suck its nectar (see Hellmuth 1975:Cover). In another scene, the flower replaces a face placed in the center of a headdress (Linné 1934:Fig. 25).

8 At the Postclassic site of Tulum, Quintana Roo, petaled disks with two volutes rising out of the center alternate with similar disks containing eyes (see Miller 1982:Pls. 25, 28). It is probable that both petaled disks refer to mirrors, here metaphorically represented as both eyes and flowers.

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**The Identification of Mirrors with Faces**

(a) Teotihuacan representation of back mirror with flanking flares resembling sanbpools (after Miller 1973:Figs. 199-200); (b) Teotihuacan-style incensario base with sanbpools, necklace, and nosepiece, Lake Amatitlan, Guatemala (after Berlo 1984:Pl. 232); (c) Early Postclassic depiction of tezcacuitlapilli with face corresponding to area of pyrite mirror (from Tozzer 1957).

An incensario excavated in the Teotihuacan compound bears adorno butterflies upon micaceous breast oraments, as if the butterflies were gathering nectar off the mirror face.
The Mirror as Fire

The common presence of butterflies and mirrors upon Teotihuacan incensarios is not coincidental; both relate to fire. In the iconography of Postclassic Central Mexico, butterflies are frequently identified with flames. Since the work of Seler (1902-1923:4:722), it has been generally recognized that butterflies were identified with flames at Classic Teotihuacan as well. At Teotihuacan, the bright, shining surface of mirrors was compared to fire. 10 The back of one Teotihuacan-style mirror depicts a goddess covered with fire signs; pairs of burning torches flank her headdress and her body (see Berlo 1992:Fig. 20). Trapezoidal eyes conventionally associated with the rims of Huehueteotl censers can be discerned both on her costume and the large flanking torches.

In ancient Mesoamerica, mirrors widely appear with burning hearths or censers. At the Maya sites of Zaculeu and Nebaj, actual pyrite mirrors were placed in Early Classic ceramic censers (Woodbury and Trik 1953:233; Smith and Kidder 1951:69, Fig. 36, nos. 21, Fig. 42, nos. 47, 48). Similarly, burning mirrors are placed within censers on Codex Borgia page 63 and on Vaticanus B page 66 (Figure 14a). In both instances, the mirrors and censers serve as hearths for Chantico, the Postclassic fire goddess. Codex Borgia page 46 depicts another burning mirror, here serving as hearth for a large caret (Figure 14b). With its blue segmented and petaloid rim, the mirror is clearly derived from the Toltec pyrite tezcauitlapilli (Figures 14c, 19d). Like the four smoking Xiuhcoatl serpents surrounding the Early Postclassic tezcauitlapilli mirror face, the Codex Borgia mirror is framed by four burning Xixiuhcoatl. On Codex Borgia page 2, Xuhiuhteohli creates fire in a mirror placed on the back of a Xiuhcoatl (Figure 14c).

10 In a recent study, Coggins (1987) stresses the association of pyrite mirrors with fire in ancient Mesoamerica and suggests that they were an important component of calendrical new fire ceremonies.

The Mirror as Water

Although the glint of the mirror was identified with fire in ancient Mesoamerica, the reflective surface was often compared to a pool of water. This may be seen on Codex Borgia page 17, where a water-filled mirror replaces the conventional smoking mirror worn at the back of Tezcatlipoca’s head; the day sign Atl, or water, is placed upon the mirror sign (Figure 15a). The contemporary Huichol also identifies mirrors with fire. According to one Huichol myth recorded by R. M. Zingg (1938:702), fire first appeared as a mirror. The contemporary Huichol also identify mirrors with fire. According to one Huichol myth recorded by R. M. Zingg (1938:702), fire first appeared as a mirror. In the iconography of Late Postclassic Central Mexico, burning mirrors served as an emblem of Tezcatlipoca, whose name means “smoking mirror.” The contemporary Huichol also identify mirrors with fire. According to one Huichol myth recorded by R. M. Zingg (1938:702), fire first appeared as a mirror.
next to scalloped chevron bands, a Teotihuacan convention for bodies of water (Figure 15d). This same water sign appears on an impressed stamp design from Teotihuacan, here within a petaled feather rim (Figure 15c). Like the cited Postclassic examples, this device seems to represent the mirror as a pool of water.

In Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, the reflective surface of water-filled bowls is frequently used for divinatory scrying. In the Colonial Yucatec *Mental Dictionary, xinka* is glossed as “mirarse al espejo, o en agua” (Barrera Vásquez 1980:565). At Teotihuacan and among the Classic Maya, mirrors were actually placed in bowls, as if they were shining pools of water. At the Maya site of Nebaj, mirrors were discovered within ceramic bowls (Smith and Kidder 1951:69). Similar mirror-bowls are found in Late Classic Maya polychrome palace scenes (Figure 16a). In Teotihuacan iconography, mirror-bowls are relatively common, with the mirror placed upright in a bowl rendered in profile. On one of the mirror backs from Kaminaljuyu, this composition appears beneath a frontally facing Teotihuacan goddess (see Figure 1). An Early Classic Escuintla style *incensario* contains an elaborate form of mirror bowl. Here a mirror with flanking ear flares serves as the body of a butterfly rising or perhaps shining out of a water-filled bowl (Figure 16b).

**The Mirror as a Web**

The circular pyrite mirror also appears to have been compared to a woven disk or spider web. The netted disks appearing in Teotihuacan iconography constitute a form of mirror, here depicted with a loosely woven surface. In one scene, a netted mirror with a central reflective eye is flanked by two types of plants (Figure 17a). One form is the waterily, evidently to denote the disk as a pool of water. The other plant, flanking both sides of the disk, is probably cotton and may refer to the woven nature of the disk. The latter appears in the form of notched circles in the center of florate forms. The same notched circle—Circle 1 of James Langley (1986:304)—commonly appears near the butts and tips of Teotihuacan darts, areas entirely appropriate for bolls of cotton.

Along with the netted disks, Teotihuacan mirrors arc also identified with realistically depicted spider webs. In part, this may be due to the linear patterns created by the mosaic surface, which bear resemblance to cobwebs. In a number of instances, Teotihuacan representations of spider webs do closely resemble circular mirrors. James Langley (personal communication, 1988) has called my attention to an interesting example appearing on a painted stucco vessel in the Musée de L’Homme, Paris. In the partly effaced scene, a spider occurs in the center of a web rendered in the form of a segmented rim with diagonal stays (Figure 17b). The web closely resembles a mirror placed on a crossroads, a convention found at Teotihuacan. On one incised Teotihuacan vessel, a realistic spider web substitutes for the mirror in the center of a headdress, the usual location of the pyrite mirror (Figure 17c). The web center contains a heart surrounded by a circular rim. A good many realistic spider webs contain this central rim, which may refer to a mirror (Figure 17d–e). A fragmentary mural depicts the central rim with interior notching to denote cotton, a taloned foot clutching a heart emerges from the center of the device (Figure 17e).

The identification of mirrors with spider webs continued after Classic Teotihuacan and appears to have been present among the Postclassic Mixtec. Among the contents of Tomb 7 at Monte Alban was a gold mirror back representing a spider (Caso 1965:927, Fig. 57). A mosaic cache, reportedly from a Mixtec area of Puebla, contained a series of turquoise mosaic mirrors (Saville 1922). In the center of several examples, there is a device composed of radiating lines and concentric circles, a form closely resembling a spider web (Saville 1922:Pl. 23). John Pohl (personal communication, 1988) has pointed out to me an interesting series of entries in the sixteenth-century Pedro de Alvarado Dictionary. Whereas the Mixtec term for a bright or clean mirror is glossed as *jaulacue*, or “stone nado,” the word for spider web is “animal nado,” *nado* being a Mixtec term for clean or brilliant. In modern Huichol lore, mirrors and other *nealiska* are identified with spider webs. According to one contemporary Huichol account, the first *nealika*, or “instrument for seeing,” was a spider web woven over a gourd bowl (Negrín 1975). One type of Huichol *nealika*, the “front shield,” closely resembles the centrally rimmed spider web of Teotihuacan iconography. Formed of thread woven upon radiating splints, the front shield contains a central rim, often with a mirror at its center (Zingg 1938:620; Forst 1978:32).

12 At El Tajín, male figures wear back mirrors having a simple form of the netted disk, here formed by two twisted cords (see Kampen 1972:Figs. 22, 23).

13 An unprovenanced silhouette monument, possibly from Kaminaljuyu, depicts an interesting form of the centrally rimmed web, here containing a crouching and possibly aged male (Parrisos 1986:Fg. 151).
The Mirror as a Woven Shield

The Tetitla compound at Teotihuacan contains a series of murals representing an entity that has been identified as a spider goddess (Taube 1983). She stands within a U-shaped foaming bowl identical to the mirror bowls found in Teotihuacan iconography (see Berlo 1992:Fig. 2). Indeed, her outstretched upper garment suggests a mirror placed edgewise in the bowl (see Taube 1983:Fig. 5). However, her garment also refers to another circular item, a woven war shield with a pendant tassel. The tassel, appearing as the rhomboid forming her skirt, is frequently found on Teotihuacan shields (Figure 18e). At Teotihuacan, mirrors were identified with war shields to such a degree that frequently it is difficult to tell them apart. Like the mirror, Teotihuacan shields are frequently round with a raised rim surrounded by feathers (Figure 18). Circular Teotihuacan-style shields often have central tassels that not only resemble flowers but also the single spool often placed in the center of Teotihuacan mirrors (Figure 18b–c).14

The back mirrors commonly worn by Teotihuacan warriors do closely resemble tasseled shields. John Carlson and Linda Landis (1985:124) note that in the context of Classic Maya sky bands, mirrors are frequently infused in the center of shields. In terms of war, mirrors placed on the chest and lower back of Teotihuacan figures could have had a protective function, to guard either against supernatural powers or the blows of actual weapons. However, the inherent qualities of the mirror itself may have also alluded to war. The Postclassic Tezcatlipoca, the god of the smoking mirror, was considered a warrior. Possessing both attributes of fire and water, the Teotihuacan mirrors recall the Aztec concept of atl-tlachinolli, or “water-fire,” the Aztec phrase for war.15

The Mirror as the Sun

Given their association with a broad spectrum of disk-shaped objects found in the natural and cultural worlds, the round mirrors of Teotihuacan could well have expressed larger cosmological concepts, such as the world, the sun, or the moon. There are strong indications that among the inhabitants of Postclassic Central Mexico, the earth was perceived metaphorically as a great round mirror (López Austin 1979:145; Taube 1983:122–127). However, due to our limited understanding of Teotihuacan signs, it is difficult to make an explicit case for a similar concept among the ancient Teotihuacanos. John Carlson (1981:125) has suggested that concave Olmec mirrors represented the sun and, in support, notes that the contemporary Huichol identify mirrors with the sun. A similar belief is found among the modern Sierra Totonac, who refer to the sun as Espejo Sol, or “sun mirror” (Ichon 1973:107). Among the Classic Maya, mirrors were also identified with the sun. Solar mirror cartouches surrounded by four serpent heads occur in both Early and Late Classic Maya iconography (Figure 19a–b).16 Among the ancient Teotihuacanos, the world, the sun, or the moon could be stylized representations of a flower (Thompson 1950:142). Thus the Classic Maya kin sign mirrors combine the concepts of mirror, sun, and flower.
The Early Postclassic Toltec turquoise mirrors seem to represent the sun, and this is also true for certain Aztec mirrors of the Late Postclassic. Fray Diego Durán (1964:140) mentions a mirror that was to be fashioned for the Templo Mayor, “the shining mirror that was to represent the sun.” One Aztec sculpture depicts a seated figure wearing a smoking representation of the fifth sun as a mirror upon his back (Figure 20a). Long ago, Herbert Spinden (cited in Saville 1922:75) compared the Aztec Calendar Stone to a great turquoise mosaic disk, noting that the sculpture contains a band of quincunxes, the Aztec sign of turquoise (Figure 20b). Had Spinden been aware of the still undiscovered Early Postclassic turquoise back mirrors, he surely would have noted the shared presence of burning Xiuhcoatl serpents on both the Calendar Stone and turquoise-encrusted mirrors. The format of the Aztec Calendar Stone appears to be primarily based on the Toltec style turquoise-rimmed pyrite mirror.

The Mirror as a Cave

The Aztec Calendar Stone represents the face of the fifth sun, Nahui Ollin, passing up through the surface of a turquoise-rimmed mirror. In Mesoamerica, mirrors are widely considered to be supernatural caves or passageways. The mirror presents a world to be looked into, but also one that living beings cannot pass. Thus the Huichol believe that mirrors serve as caves for the gods and ancestors to enter into the human world. On real-life disks, the Huichol can represent this passageway with a mirror or simply a hole placed in the center of the device (Negrín 1975:19; Forst 1978:32). Similarly, the Aztec Anahuatl chestpiece can be either a white-rimmed mirror or only a white ring (Nicholson and Berger 1968:20). In Classic Maya art, not only faces but entire bodies can be found in the center of mirrors. An example is Caracol Stela 5, where figures emerge out of burning petaled mirrors ornamented with hook-nosed serpents (Figure 21a). In Maya art, serpents are commonly found emerging through the face of mirrors (Figure 21b–d). Examples appear at Protoclassic Kaminaljuyu, Late Classic Palenque, and in the Postclassic murals of Santa Rita and Tulum. This concept was also present in Central Mexico. On page 24 of the Late Postclassic Codex Cospi, a serpent emerges through the face of a blue-rimmed mirror (Figure 21e). At Teotihuacan, serpents were also identified with mirror caves. In one Teotihuacan headdress, a pair of plumed serpents flank a shining quatrefoil cave device substituting for the central headdress mirror (Taube 1986:Fig. 9). The Las Colinas Bowl depicts the Teotihuacan feathered serpent passing through a mirror rim (Figure 21f). This motif is repeated on a monumental scale at the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, where two forms of serpents, Quetzalcoatl

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Figure 20. Aztec representation of solar mirrors: (a) figure wearing back mirror containing smoking fifth sun (from Taube 1983:Fig. 36a); (b) Calendar Stone with segmented rim containing day signs and encircling ring of turquoise quincunxes; two burning Xiuhcoatl serpents lie at edge of disk (drawing by Emily Umberger, reproduced courtesy of Emily Umberger).

Figure 21. Pre-Hispanic representations of mirrors as passageways: (a) Classic Maya depiction of burning, petaled mirrors containing human figures, note hook-snouted serpents, detail of Caracol Stela 5 (after Boctor and Satterthwaite 1981:Fig. 6); (b) Protoclassic serpent emerging out of notched mirror, detail of Altar 14, Kaminaljuyu; (c) serpent emerging out of mirror with nen reflection sign, detail of Sarcophagus Lid, Palenque; (d) serpent head emerging from mirror worn at back of head, Mound 1, Santa Rita (after Gann 1900:Pl. 29); (e) serpent emerging out of surface of blue-rimmed mirror, detail of Codex Cospi page 24; (f) detail of ceramic bowl from Las Colinas, feather serpent passes through mirror rim (from Taube 1986:Fig. 8b).
and an early form of the Xiuhcoatl appear on a great facade of feathered mirrors. Like the Las Colinas scene, the body of the feathered serpent is depicted passing through the feathered mirror rim (Figure 22). Far from being inert slabs of stone, Teotihuacan mirrors were vital passageways from which gods and ancestors communicated with the world of the living.

Conclusions

In this study, I have argued that pyrite mirrors are extremely common in the costume and iconography of Teotihuacan. The majority of feathered medallions found in Teotihuacan iconography are representations of mirrors. At Teotihuacan, pyrite mirrors were an important component of both ritual and dress. The wearing of circular mirrors on the chest and brow can be easily traced to the Early and Middle Formative Olmec period, although here the devices were usually fashioned of grey iron oxide ores, such as magnetite and hematite, not golden pyrite (Carlson 1981:123, 124; Heizer and Gullberg 1981:112). However, the use of large mirrors on the back seems to have been an Early Classic innovation. This may have been partly due to the increased use of pyrite mosaic, which allowed for larger mirrors to be fashioned. During the Classic period, pyrite back mirrors were widespread in Mesoamerica; they were especially popular at Teotihuacan and serve almost as a hallmark of Teotihuacan costume and influence.

In consideration of the Kaminaljuyu tombs and representations in Classic Maya art, it is clear that pyrite mirror plaques were an important cult object shared between the Teotihuacanos and the Classic Maya. Many of the same forms and attributes found with mirrors at Teotihuacan were also present among the Classic Maya. Unfortunately, Classic Maya pyrite mirrors have received little recent attention. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, an iconographic analysis of Classic Maya pyrite mirrors could shed much light not only on Maya mirror use but also on that of Classic Teotihuacan.

It has been noted that Teotihuacan mirrors did not simply symbolize one object but were identified with a wide range of things, such as eyes, faces, flowers, butterflies, hearths, pools of water, webs, woven shields, and caves. At first sight, this may appear strange, but it is clear that among later peoples of Mesoamerica, mirrors were also thought of in a variety of ways. Thus, among the modern Huichol, mirrors are considered to be faces, fire, the sun, and caves, and they are linked to a wide variety of other objects having similar circular forms. Thus, like the Asian mandala, the mirrors are imbued with meaning and are causally linked to basic objects and even organizational principles of the world. With their identification with eyes, faces, and passageways, it is fairly clear that Teotihuacan mirrors were used in divination, a means of seeing into the supernatural world. The association of the diurnal flowers and butterflies with mirrors suggests that the golden pyrite disks were closely identified with the sun, an association found with the contemporaneous Classic Maya and later peoples of Mesoamerica. Although the mirrors of Teotihuacan display much that is innovative and unique, they also demonstrate the direct participation of this great center in the broader cultural sphere of Mesoamerica.

Figure 22. Feathered serpent passing through feathered mirror rim, Temple of Quetzalcoatl, Teotihuacan.

19 Seler (1902-1923:5:368-369) describes some of the overlapping meanings of the mirror and other circular forms among the Huichol: “Sun-disk, face, eye, mirror, full blown flower, are all cognate ideas. The sun’s disk rising above the horizon is to the Huichol Indian, a nealika ‘face,’ and he also calls the round mirror which he buys of the Mexican dealer, a nealika. The moon, as Lumholtz heard, is a sikuli ‘eye,’ and this word sikuli is equivalent to ‘mirror’ as the same Indian told the traveller” (English trans. in Seler 1939:3:Pt. 3:11).
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