

Tepanec Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent)

and Tlaltecuhltli, goddess of the earth



This large volcanic-stone sculpture is carved in the shape of Quetzalcoatl, the creator and patron of humanity; god of Venus and the sunrise; inventor of the calendar; donor of corn, fire, time, and *pulque* (fermented maguey); and protector of trade. On the base, shown above, there is an image of a zoomorphic Tlaltecuhltli, goddess of the earth.

During the Post-Classical era (AD 900–1521), the rulers of different Mesoamerican groups exercised power delegated by Quetzalcoatl and at times personified him in order to accomplish their mission. In Colonial times, the Spanish had the head of this Quetzalcoatl sculpture cut off—disfigured—and its body drilled to create a base for a Christian cross raised in the cemetery of Coyoacán. The alteration represented—from a Colonial Spanish and Christian point

of view—the destruction of an age of idolatry and the dawning of a new Christian era. This intention is explicit in a letter dated August 25, 1538, and addressed to Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain, in which the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V decreed, “I command that you . . . would have thrown down and removed all the pyramids and temples for idols which were in this New Spain, . . . and you should provide that the stone from them is taken to build churches and monasteries.”

The Coyoacán cross was dismantled sometime between 1850 and 1854, when the French painter Edouard Pingret bought the Quetzalcoatl sculpture and took it to Paris, where George Heye acquired it much later.

—Leonardo López Luján

Tepanec Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), god of life and creation, ca. 1325–1521. Coyoacán, Basin of Mexico, Mexico. Basalt, pigment; 32 x 78 cm. Purchased in Paris from the Collection of Dr. Louis Capitan. 17/5441





INFINITY of NATIONS

ART AND HISTORY IN THE COLLECTIONS OF
THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

Edited by Cécile R. Ganteaume



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