



## CONTESTED VISIONS IN THE SPANISH COLONIAL WORLD

### DIDACTICS

#### **Introduction to the Exhibition**

Following the conquest of the Mexica, or Aztecs, in 1521, Hernán Cortés took possession of what became the Viceroyalty of New Spain in the name of the Spanish king. Spain soon established a network of civil and religious authority to rule over the immense territory, which encompassed present-day Mexico plus much of Central America and the Spanish borderlands that are now part of the United States. The viceroyalty's capital, Mexico City, was built atop the ruins of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire.

The Viceroyalty of Peru was established in 1548, after Francisco Pizarro and his cohort Diego de Almagro invaded the Inca Empire in 1532 and violently defeated its last ruler, Atahualpa. The new capital was built in Lima instead of Cuzco, the center of Inca authority, and the viceroyalty encompassed present-day Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile.

At first the Spanish, in their efforts to extract the mineral and agricultural wealth of the viceroyalties, instituted enforced labor that imperiled the indigenous populations, which were also devastated by disease and social and cultural disruption.

Although the Spaniards referred to the native peoples of the Americas generically as "Indians" (the Americas were called "las Indias" because Columbus initially thought that he had sailed to the Indian Subcontinent), these groups were not unified politically and did not share a common identity. Their relationship to the conquerors cannot be reduced to that of victors and vanquished; it entailed a delicate process of cultural negotiation, mutual accommodation, and contestation, a dynamic that gave rise to vital works of art, rich in interpretative possibilities.

#### **Tenochtitlan and Cuzco: Pre-Columbian Antecedents**

At the time of the Spanish conquest, Mexico and Peru were each dominated by a single ethnic group—the Aztecs and the Incas, respectively—that had

aggressively extended its political and economic power over a large geographic area. These were the two largest empires ever formed in the preconquest Americas. In the north, the Aztecs' urban government joined forces with two other powerful city-states (Tlacopan and Texcoco) to form the expansionist federation known as the Triple Alliance. The imperialists to the south are known as the Incas.

Each empire believed that the foundation of its capital—Tenochtitlan for the Aztecs and Cuzco for the Incas—was supernaturally ordained. At the center of each capital lay the sacred precinct: the Templo Mayor (“main or great temple”) in Tenochtitlan and the Coricancha (“golden enclosure”) in Cuzco. These centers were considered the *axis mundi*, the place where the layers of the cosmos—the sky and the earth—joined.

The Aztec and Inca imperial governments controlled areas extending for thousands of miles in each direction. Each capital demanded the delivery of tribute and participated in long-distance trade that brought exotic materials to the heart of the empire, demonstrating its wealth and dominance over its frontiers. To unify the diverse peoples that they absorbed, these empires crafted official ideologies that affected the built environment, spaces, objects, images, and rituals. Many of the artworks that survived the ravages of time exemplify these strategies. Despite their efforts, both empires faced contestation to their right to rule, which helped pave the way for the Spanish conquest.

### **Cuzco**

Cuzco, the capital of the Inca Empire, lay at the heart of what the Incas called *Tawantinsuyo*, or land of the four sectors. These quadrants converged near the city center at two adjacent plazas—the Kusipata to the west and the Hawkaypata to the east. The plazas reflected the Inca interest in complementary pairs. The central building of Cuzco was the Coricancha, which stood at the confluence of two rivers. Called the Temple of the Sun by the Spaniards because of its gold-covered walls, the Coricancha was the most sacred building. After the Spanish took over the city, the church of Santo Domingo was built atop the Coricancha. The Inca foundations of the church, still visible today, served as a reminder of the conquest but also of the might of the Inca.

## **Tenochtitlan**

The Aztecs founded their capital on an island surrounded by lakes in the Valley of Mexico; they called it Tenochtitlan ("the place of the nopal cactus"). By 1521 Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of some 150,000.

At the heart of the city was the sacred precinct, home to the Templo Mayor, the twin pyramid dedicated to the Aztecs' patron deities, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés described the city to the Spanish king: "Among these temples there is one, the principal one, whose great size and magnificence no human tongue could describe." After the fall of Tenochtitlan, the city was razed, and the capital of New Spain was built atop its ruins.

## **The Aztec Gods**

The Aztecs left their homeland, Aztlan, and migrated to the Valley of Mexico at the behest of their patron deity Huitzilopochtli ("hummingbird-left"). They founded their capital in the center of a lake where an eagle was perched on a nopal cactus. Huitzilopochtli had prophesied that his people would encounter this vision when they arrived at the promised land.

Gods and goddesses were integral components of Aztec foundational mythology and everyday life. They ruled over the natural forces essential for living—water, fire, and rain—and the Aztec table. Deities were considered active participants in the well-being of the empire and its people. To satisfy the needs of the deities and win their favor, the Aztecs celebrated them with complex monthly festivals that included human and animal sacrifices.

## **Ancient Styles in the New Era**

Ancient techniques and materials were adapted to the creation of exquisite Christian objects in colonial times. How these objects were interpreted by their indigenous makers and audiences, however, is a more complex question with which scholars continue to grapple.

This gallery includes several examples of Andean textiles that were repurposed or transformed to dress statues of Christ or saints, suggesting that its link to ancient forms of ritual imbued the material itself with value for Andean society.

In the early years of evangelization in Mexico, the mendicant orders encouraged the use of feathers (endowed with sacred meaning since

preconquest times and associated with the Aztec patron deity Huitzilopochtli) to create religious objects, including feather paintings with Christian subjects. The iridescence of the materials and the skill with which they were applied captured the imaginations of Europeans. In describing the gifts sent by Hernán Cortés to King Charles V, a Spanish chronicler noted that the king marveled at how "brilliantly the use of feathers replaced that of the brush."

The adaptation of printed Christian images to the precious featherwork of the Aztecs was more than an exercise in copying and translating an image from one artistic medium into another. The sacredness of feathers became associated with Christian forms of veneration, and they were used to adorn triumphal arches, the bases of crosses, monstrosities containing the sacred host, and the litters and canopies (*palios*) in which the host was carried during the Corpus Christi festival.

### **The Andean Uncu**

The men's tunic (*uncu*) was highly standardized in format, dimensions, and construction during the period of Inca sovereignty. Uncus were made of interlocked tapestry with cotton and the wool-like yarn derived from camelids (llama, alpaca, guanaco, and vicuña). The finest cloth (*cumbi*) was woven by specialists and reserved for the ruler and for rituals.

Tunics from various provinces of the Inca Empire were woven in patterns of local origin, such as the eight-pointed "star" characteristic of the far south of Peru. The most common format was a solid or patterned grid. Texts and images by Spanish chroniclers describe Inca soldiers dressed in tunics resembling a checkerboard, symbolic of the Inca administration.

### **Andean Drinking Vessels**

The large metal cups known as *aquillas* and the wooden ones known as *queros* were important ceremonial vessels for drinking *chicha* (corn beer). Always produced in pairs, they were used by the Inca in ritual ceremonies to cement social and political relationships. In colonial times polychrome wooden *queros* were decorated with a colored substance called *mopa-mopa* extracted from a tropical plant. The head-shaped *queros* may be a reference to the facial decoration of warriors of the *Antisuyu* (the tropical eastern slope of the Andes), as well as to "trophy heads": it was standard practice at the end of battles to behead enemies and turn their heads into

drinking vessels. Llamas assumed a religious significance for the Inca, as their fiber was integral in the production of Inca textiles, while jaguars were venerated for their magnificence and power.

### **Conquest and New World Orders**

The dramatic meeting of the Mexica emperor Moctezuma and the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1519 prompted generations of artists and writers on both sides of the Atlantic to recall the collision of two cultures that culminated in the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. No other event in the early history of the Americas captivated the collective memories of so many different groups of people. The images and texts that were created reveal a range of competing views of this pivotal event.

Spaniards emphasized the peaceful transference of rule from Moctezuma to Cortés, blaming Moctezuma's own people for his death. A Nahuatl artist of the famous Florentine Codex, in turn, depicted two Spaniards casting the body of the deceased ruler into a lake. Other indigenous authors recalled the bloodshed of the event and the dissolution of their own ways of life, or they emphasized their roles as allies of the Spaniards in order to curry favor. In contrast, prominent Creole intellectuals emphasized the grandeur of Mexico's ancient past to endow the place with a classical pedigree comparable to that of ancient Greece or Rome.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the depiction of local types gained momentum as a way to showcase the evolving social order under Spanish rule.

### **The Devotional Landscape and the Indian as Good Christian**

The ability of Indians to become good Christians was a subject of debate from the time of the discovery of the New World. By the seventeenth century accounts of their capacity to embrace the faith began to be codified in earnest.

Some stories described miracles experienced by Indians soon after the conquest and their natural inclination to partake of the sacraments. Devotions sprang up throughout Spanish America, with hardly a city, town, or village unable to claim a miracle-working image. The Virgin Mary was one of the favorite devotions imported to Mexico and Peru. Known by different names—including Guadalupe, Remedios, Candelaria, Cocharchas, and Cayma—she was often associated with a specific region, becoming the object

of local pride and veneration. Many of the origin stories of these devotions included the figure of an Indian as a maker of the religious effigy or acting as witness to a miraculous apparition of the Virgin or a saint. For example, the fame attained by the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico (who, according to tradition, appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531), was a powerful reason to boast of the region's providential destiny.

Images of pious Indians stood at one end of the devotional spectrum. On the other were the so-called heathen Indians, barbaric nations that dwelled at the colony's frontiers and were thought to be in the devil's thrall. Their conversion justified the Spanish presence in the New World until the end of the colonial period and gave rise to an array of works documenting the atrocities of the still untamed group.

### **Indian Festivals and Sacred Rituals**

Soon after the conquistador Hernán Cortés defeated the Mexica in 1521, their capital, Tenochtitlan, with its striking ceremonial center, was transformed into a Spanish city, the new locus of Spanish power and the setting for the emergence of a host of new political and religious rites. While in many ways these festive apparatuses introduced new forms of ritual and advanced a key new message—the willing submission to the Catholic king—the indigenous communities of Central Mexico had had ample experience with highly ostentatious forms of ritual since pre-Hispanic times. Indian dances (commonly referred to as *mitotes*) and weddings offer a brilliant glimpse into their festive paraphernalia.

In the Andes, the Spanish government allowed the continuation of ancient traditions when they were incorporated into Christian ritual, and native groups drew on their pasts to proclaim their rights as a polity. This is evident in the Corpus Christi procession, the most important religious festival of the Hispanic world, which celebrated the transubstantiation of the body of Christ. In Cuzco, the indigenous nobility occupied a central place in the festival, dressing in Inca-style regalia and re-creating the pre-Hispanic dynasty through performance. Christianized Indians also dressed as "heathen" Indians and engaged in mock battles (as they did in Mexico), coding the Inca as a civilizing force. After the 1780 revolt of the Inca Tupac Amaru, Indian participation and attire were banned from public festivals in an effort to suppress dissension and erase the memory of the lost empire.

### **Memory, Genealogy, and Land**

Heraldry had a long tradition in Europe to distinguish nobles from commoners. The Spanish crown also awarded coats of arms to individuals who proved their loyalty through extraordinary military feats. Blazons were granted to the conquistadores who helped secure the conquest and also to their indigenous allies. Members of the native elite in Mexico and Peru strategically modified these insignias to retain their power under Spanish rule, often combining preconquest and European motifs.

With the advance of colonization, the indigenous elite of Mexico saw its status diminished and its lands usurped. Aware of the value that the Spanish government attached to documents, they created pictorial genealogies and maps that traced their ancestry to famous preconquest rulers, sometimes mimicking pre-Hispanic styles, formats, and materials to lend credence to their claims to privilege. (Pictorial documents were considered admissible legal documents.) Indian communities also produced codices for internal use. Although no pre-Hispanic pictorial genealogy has survived, early colonial copies and adaptations indicate that genealogies were an important pre-Hispanic pictorial genre as well. Many colonial genealogies were outright fabrications, but they prove the importance of the pre-Hispanic past in making claims in the colonial present.

In the Andes, a striking pictorial genre emerged depicting the succession of Inca kings. Commissioned by the Inca nobility in Cuzco and Lima, they served as a type of vindictory memorial of their colonial privileges.