

## EXHIBITS

# Mexico's Great Era of City Building

**M**exico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," was on view in 1991 at New York's Metropolitan Museum, the San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California. This gargantuan show (and the beautiful catalogue that accompanied it), was in three parts: the indigenous art of Mexico before the arrival of the Europeans; the works of the new civilization that arose after Columbus and the Conquest; and the art of Mexico after Independence in the last century.

What made this exhibit worthwhile was its middle section. It brought together works of art totally unfamiliar to most citizens of the United States, from the viceregal period of the early sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, and demonstrated the true character of the evangelization of Mexico.

### The Fall of the Evil Aztec Empire

All informed writers on the Conquest of Mexico, even the most violently pro-Aztec, admit that the conquistador Hernando Cortés could never have completed the Conquest so rapidly if the non-Aztec Indian peoples had not joined the Spanish armies when they arrived in 1519, happy for the chance to throw off the brutal Aztec oppression. After the Conquest was completed in 1521, the struggle to inaugurate a humanitarian policy in the New World against both the evils of the indigenous pagan society, and the greed and cruelty of many Europeans, began in earnest.

The Spanish Crown promulgated laws against slavery and usury, and tried to curb the abuses of Spanish civilians, the so-called *encomenderos*, against the native population. Encouraged by Cortés, Charles V sent mendicant orders, the Franciscans in the beginning, followed by Dominicans and

Augustinians, to evangelize.

The task would have been daunting, even without the opposition of those Spaniards who sought exploitation of the New World's riches above all. While the Aztecs were the most bestial of the Mesoamerican societies, all of those societies practiced human sacrifice, and all were structured around religious ideologies which viewed history as cyclical. They utterly lacked the notions of the necessity of progress, and of the sovereignty of the individual.

### Three Heros of Christian Humanism

During the 1530's, three men came to power whose impact on Mexico is of world-historical significance: **Bishop Fray Juan de Zumárraga**, **Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza**, and **Judge Vasco de Quiroga**. These men shared a vision of implementing the ideals of Renais-

sance philosophy in the New World. They were prepared to put to the test the premise that every human individual is created in the living image of God.

Several objects in the exhibit were directly linked to these three men. These included an embroidered velvet lapcloth of about 1539, made for Bishop Zumárraga (cat. 118); and a magnificent Crucified Christ from Tlaxala, made of cornstalk paste (cat. 121), a material taken over from pre-Hispanic idol-making and used for Christian sculpture at the impetus of Vasco de Quiroga, the first bishop of Michoacán.

As to Mendoza, it was under his vice-gerency that Pedro de Gante's convent school of San José de los Naturales in Mexico City produced one of the truly amazing objects on display, a feather-mosaic of "The Mass of St. Gregory" (cat. 119) created in Mexico



*Guajajuato, one of Mexico's beautiful colonial cities, constructed according to the ideals of the Italian Renaissance by Antonio de Mendoza, first Viceroy of Mexico.*

ERINS/Diana Teran

City in 1539 and sent as a gift to Pope Paul III (Farnese).

The painting was done in a technique that did not exist in Europe, although the style reflects the compositional and figural skills of European art taught by Gante to indigenous craftsmen. Feather pictures (*amantecayotl*) were the most prized art form of the pre-Hispanic world, where aviaries were kept for purpose of producing the colored feathers.

The Indians under the care of the Franciscans were particularly grateful to the Pope, because it was Paul III who had issued a bull in 1537 proclaiming the rationality of the Indians and the right of the mendicant orders to administer the sacraments to them. As the catalogue entry reports, "In the early years of evangelism in New Spain, some clergy thought the Indians were unfit to receive the sacraments—they were considered incapable of reason—and believed it was unlawful to administer such rites to them." The Pope's historic decision, vindicating the efforts of Zumárraga, Mendoza, and Vasco de Quiroga, was announced in New Spain in 1538-39.

Everything that was accomplished for the good in Mexico pivoted around this idea that the Indian was equal to the European as a child of God, capable of reason, and capable of being educated to realize even projects that were unrealizable on the old continent.

### Building Alberti's Ideal Cities

According to the Mexican scholar Guillermo Tovar de Teresa (who is cited in the catalogue by the American researcher Donna Pierce), Mendoza, the first viceroy of Mexico (1535-50), realized the ideal city plan of the Renaissance in Mexico. He brought to Mexico the *Ten Books on Architecture* of the Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti; Mendoza's heavily annotated copy of the treatise survives.

What might have been considered utopian in Europe became a reality, if only briefly, on the new continent. Viceroy Mendoza overlaid the grid plan which Alberti had developed, on the pre-existing, unfortified Indian cities, starting with Mexico City itself.

The streets were widened and regulated and oriented to optimum ventilation and sunlight, and the plaza was enlarged to a rectangle twice as long as wide, following Alberti's formula. As Pierce relates, "The unfortified town with its monumental plaza and wide straight streets became a source of amazement to European visitors, and was reproduced all over Latin America. Mendoza worked closely with the Franciscan and Augustinian friars to develop a so-called moderate plan for the religious establishments of Mexico, probably also based on the Renaissance formulas of Alberti."

The "fortress-convent" structures usually included a single-nave church, a convent, and an atrium, which dominated the entire surrounding landscape. In these great monastic establishments, built as outposts of Christianity all over Mexico, where the Indians were educated and Christianized, what impresses as much as the beauty is the volume of construction and the degree to which the indigenous population participated in the work. At most, there were a few hundred friars, yet by 1540, Pierce writes, there were approximately fifty establishments, and twenty years later, almost one hundred. In fact, almost all of Mexico's cities today, were built in the first eighty years after the conquest.

How did it actually work? The few capable journeymen who crossed the Atlantic in the early sixteenth century "taught small groups of Indians, who then covered the territory in traveling teams," writes Jorge Alberto Manrique of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in the introduction to the catalogue section on Vicere-



Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepozotlán

Photo: Salvador Lutteroth; Juan José Medina; Jesús Sánchez Uribe for the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga's embroidered lapcloth, 1539. Zumárraga was an admirer of Erasmus who brought a master embroiderer to teach the craft to Indian converts.

gal Art. "On each project they instructed the local populace and supervised the work. This explains the recurrence of similar solutions in widely separated places, as well as the application of methods that required little specialization, such as the cylindrical columns of the cloisters, all with the same bases and capitals. It was a kind of assembly-line construction that answered the need for speed."

Clearly this effort did not represent the violent grafting of a foreign culture upon a native one, as charged by those who say there is nothing to celebrate on the Quincentenary of 1492. Rather it reflected a *higher cultural matrix*, more coherent with the laws of the universe than the genocidal Aztec society to which the native populations had been so brutally subjected. And thus, no matter how many flaws there may have been in the effort to export the Renaissance to the New World, and despite the undeniable cruelties committed by some very un-Christian Europeans who actually opposed the effort, the example and lesson stand for us today.

—Nora Hamerman