

# 'Circa 1492': Aztecs, Inkas, and the ineluctable necessity of progress

Part 3, by Nora Hamerman

Earlier articles in this series focused on the contribution the artists of the European Renaissance made to the world in the era when Christopher Columbus sailed west to reach the "Indies" in 1492, and found two new continents, North and South America. In this article I will discuss the evidence presented in the current National Gallery of Art exhibition in Washington, called "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration," about what was profoundly amiss in the societies encountered by Columbus and those who followed him to America.

Today it has become "politically incorrect" to speak of the Discovery, and obviously, the Americas had been "discovered" long before Columbus landed on Hispaniola, by the indigenous peoples who lived here, who originated many millennia ago in Asia, as well as by previous European navigators such as Leif Ericson from Scandinavia. The real issue is not the discovery as such, but the civilization of discovery, and related to that, the program of evangelization of the Americas. The issue is the bringing to these shores of the notion of man as the *imago viva Dei*, the living image of God, which was the heritage of western Judeo-Christian civilization.

This process was the key to realizing the full potential both of the people who lived in the Americas, and of those who have come to inhabit these continents over the ensuing five centuries, as millions of immigrants from all over the world have arrived, settled, and, especially in Ibero-America, intermarried with the descendants of the people who lived here before Columbus.

## Laying to rest the Black Legend

According to the "Black Legend" which was begun by the anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic propaganda machines of the Dutch, English, and French in the late 16th century, the Spanish conquistadors were a band of uniquely cruel, unscrupulous, and greedy exploiters who wantonly slaughtered the peaceful natives of the Americas. The Black Legend (a term coined in 1912 by a Spanish historian) was based on a report by Spanish missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, which itself

included much-exaggerated figures, but which was addressed to the Spanish Crown, for the explicit purpose of reforming certain inhumane practices of the Spanish civilians who exploited Indian labor in the New World. The Las Casas report was successful in its reforming aims. But in the meantime it was repackaged as a piece of anti-Spanish calumny by a Dutch printer, who provided fictitious but highly effective "illustrations." It took on a life of its own for centuries to come, being revived throughout the 19th century in the United States to justify such U.S. aggressions against Spain and Hispanics, as the Mexican War of 1844-46, and the Spanish-American War of the 1890s.

The "Black Legend" has been refuted in a speech by Fernando Quijano printed last year in *EIR* (See Oct. 19, 1990, p. 30); and in an essay by Thomas P. Sanchez, printed in (of all places!) the Smithsonian Institution's catalog for its current "Seeds of Change" exhibition, where Sanchez points to this as the source of derogatory stereotypes which still bedevil Hispanic-Americans.

Today a new twist has been added to the "Black Legend": the ecologist drivel that insists that the descendants of the indigenous people, called "Indians" by Columbus, should have never been disturbed in their primeval purity, but should have been allowed to persist in their native spiritual traditions. This twist is perhaps not so new when one considers that the British monarchy, one of the primary beneficiaries historically of the "Black Legend," is the primary sponsor of efforts to grab the tropical rain forests, under the guise of keeping them for nomadic Indian tribes, and of efforts to promote the pagan cult of Gaia, the earth mother, in place of the God of Judaism and Christianity, as *EIR* has documented elsewhere (see page 13 of this issue).

Of course, this entire campaign is viciously racist. The racist premise is that Christian civilization is intrinsically "white European" (although St. Paul, who brought Christianity to Europe, was a Levantine Semite, and St. Augustine, who formulated its Platonic philosophical system, was African) and that "native Americans" must rather adhere to something which allegedly grew out of their own blood and soil,

no matter how degrading it might be and threatening to their physical survival. Behind that, lies an assumption, that Indians are not rational beings capable of assimilating the abstract philosophical conceptions of Europe: precisely the issue over which the Spanish missionaries fought against slaveholders and oppressors of the Indians, in the 16th century.

### How bad were the Aztecs?

Prof. Michael D. Coe, of Yale University, announced at the Oct. 8 press conference which opened the National Gallery's "Circa 1492" show that the presence in this exhibit of some authentic Aztec illustrated books would convince people, once and for all, that there were Aztec artists on the same level of greatness as Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer.

The codices in question, the Fejervary-Mayer in the museum in Liverpool, and the Cospi in Bologna, prescribe the daily rituals of merchants (in one case) and the temple (for the other) according to the intricate formulas of the 260-day astrological calendar. The painted designs show the numerous "gods" of the Aztec pantheon (like the Romans and all other empires, they assimilated new deities from the peoples they conquered), which are depicted as various human-animal combinations, in childishly flat repetitive patterns, with changing attributes, but without any perceptible change in expression or action. To compare these to the achievements of Dürer and Leonardo, whose works in the same show are efforts to *scientifically* grapple with how the human body actually works, and to show the motions of the inner soul through the motions of the body, is indeed a travesty.

Among the other Aztec objects displayed are "labrets," heavy gold lip plugs over 2 inches long, which were worn by the lords on special occasions, through a hole in the lower lip (the number of holes for such jewelry in the faces of the ruling class, makes one wonder how the upper class managed to eat).

As a whole, Aztec sculpture is brutal and repulsive. Huitzilopochtli, the sun god, becomes dominant by murdering and dismembering his sister Coyaxauhqui, the moon goddess, and demands an unceasing diet of human hearts in order to persuade him to return each year and restart the cycle of seasons. All Mesoamerican cultures egregiously lacked any idea of *progress*, a lack which has, astoundingly, been promoted as a sign of spiritual superiority by certain anti-Christian European anthropologists of the last 100 years. The show includes a colossal head of the moon goddess after her death, a vase with the effigy of death, and an image of Xipe Totec, the god of springtime and patron of gold workers. The statue shows a Xipe impersonator. This god's festival was celebrated by gladiatorial contests in which the bravest of captives were slain by captors attired in jaguar and eagle costumes, the victims were flayed and their skins donned by Xipe impersonators for 20 days, after which the reeking skins were thrown into a ceremonial pit.

Then there is the hideous sculpture of Cihuateotl, the deified spirit of a woman who died in childbirth. Women were believed to shed their flesh bit by bit after death until the skeleton became visible, as seen in this volcanic stone. The alleged masterpiece of the Aztec section is the statue and pedestal dedicated to Xochipilli, the god of flowers, poetry, art, and love. He crouches, wears a mask over his features, and his pedestal and body are covered with plant forms. These have been identified in a controversial study by R. Gordon Wasson (formerly of Chase Manhattan Bank) as representing what the Aztecs called the "flesh of the gods," the psilocybin mushroom, a powerful hallucinogen; psychotropic morning glories; and tobacco plants.

Whether Wasson's study is correct or not, no one questions the assertion that flowers were equated to blood in Aztec lore, or that the Aztecs sacrificed tens of thousands of victims, mostly captives, every year to their gods. Nor is the importance of mind-altering drugs in doubt. One of the less unpleasant pieces in the show is a porphyry sculpture of Queztalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, the "benign" deity of one of the many dualistic pairs of good/bad gods which characterized the Aztec pantheon, in which a human face emerges from layers of plumes. According to Coe's catalog entry: "This is one of the supreme examples of the pan-Mesoamerican concept of the *nahualli*: the animal alter-ego into which powerful religious practitioners can transform themselves at will, and back again into their human form. This concept, which can be traced to the ancient Olmec civilization and perhaps beyond, recognizes that the boundary between the human and animal world is at most a very tenuous one [sic!], entirely permeable at times of religious ecstasy, or in some cases, under the influence of psychotropic substances."

Other objects in the show include a human skull adorned with flint knives to form a hideous "nose" and "tongue." Nearby is a sacrificial knife, indicating the purpose of these stone knives—to cut the living hearts out of sacrificial victims, which were offered up to the gods in the reclining statues found throughout ancient Mexico, *chacmools* (oddly, none is in this show).

Although this exhibition, which proposes only to take a horizontal slice of the world's art in the half-century around 1492, includes therefore no Mayan, Zapotec, or other objects from earlier societies, it is known that all of these cultures practiced human sacrifice. Each featured a ball court contiguous to its major temple complex, where the losers of the ritual ball game could be immediately sacrificed at the nearby temple altars.

### Cultures of death

The Taínos were the indigenous people Columbus found in the Bahamian archipelago when he made his first landfall in 1492. Objects from these people, who succumbed to disease or were entirely assimilated into Hispanic society soon after the Europeans arrived, form the next section of the

"Circa 1492" exhibit. They worshiped spirits called *zemis*, in the form of statuettes kept in their houses. Two large ones are in the show, a crouching male figure and a weeping male figure. The catalog tells us that they were used as platforms for inhaling a narcotic powder, *cohoba*, through tubes, which are also exhibited. The priests who inhaled these drugs did so after a ritual purification consisting of inducing vomiting by use of spatulas, also on the show; the resulting hallucinations were interpreted as messages from the gods.

Far away from Mexico and the Caribbean in the Andes mountains, the Inkas ruled at the time of Columbus's discovery. They had a highly developed government centered in Cuzco, and had created a network of roads to unite their possessions. Ablest as administrators, the Inkas appeared to have ruled a gentler society than the Aztecs, with whom they had no contact. Yet the catalog tells us that the small silver figurines in the first Inka gallery, dating from the era of the conquest of Peru, are of *children* who were sacrificed on such occasions as the solstice or the accession of a new ruler.

Between the Andes and Mesoamerica were the "lands of gold," where such cultures as the Diquís of Costa Rica, and the Tairona, Sinú, Popayán, and Muisca flourished. Their finely worked gold jewelry and ritual objects form the final section of the exhibit. However much one may admire the craftsmanship (Albrecht Dürer himself wrote of his admiration for gold objects from the Americas, exhibited in Amsterdam in 1521), a closer look at the subject matter produces an uneasy sensation which is confirmed by the catalog entries. No. 479, "Human Figure with Crocodile Costume and Inset Stone," we learn, likely represents "the opening of the chest to remove the heart in a sacrificial ritual." The same Diquís society produced a peg-base figure carrying a severed head.

From Popayán in Colombia, a "Human Figure Pendant with Headdress" is described as combining a human figure and a bird of prey, merging to produce intermediate forms. "These make clear reference to the themes of human-animal transformation, extracorporeal flights, and drug-induced visions that lie at the heart of shamanistic practices everywhere in the New World." Human-animal transformation? Extracorporeal flights? Drug-induced visions? Are these not precisely the phenomena so powerfully described by Hieronymus Bosch in his painting, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, which appears in the first European gallery of the "Circa 1492" show? Yet while Bosch was intent on depicting the saint's resistance to these satanic forces, the artists of the "lands of gold" exalt them as the very foundation of their *religion*, and hence of their society. The gold was mined by Indian slaves. The miners' lot was greatly improved by the introduction of European technology after 1550.

It is clear that the ideology of all the pre-Columbian American societies in this show was centered on denying the distinction between man and beast, and degrading man to bestiality through psychotropic drugs and human sacrifice. Slavery, polygamy, and concubinage were also standard

practices which violate the fundamental dignity of the human individual, encountered by the Spanish missionaries when they undertook the task of freeing the indigenous Americans from idolatry.

### Is progress needed?

This brings me to Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress emeritus, and the outrageous premise by which he assumes to interpret the "Circa 1492" show. His prefatory essay to the catalog opens as follows: "In our age of overweening pride in man's power over the physical world, this exhibit can balance our view of human nature and be an antidote to the contagion of science." Boorstin's thesis is that the exhibit brings together "the best mementos of both Man the Discoverer and Man the Creator," but "neither then nor now could man live by science alone." The Culture of Creation and the Culture of Discovery are disparate. Discovery is international, progressive, and collaborative. Everyone was marching in the same direction. But "Creation is what men have added to the world. Its hallmark is autonomy, the freedom to make the new. . . . The diversity, the diffuseness, the chaos [sic] is what makes representative works of art." Art outside Europe in this era is "not progress, surely, but endless variety!" And, of course, "In the Culture of Creation there is no correct or incorrect, and in the long run no progress."

Finally, Boorstin asserts that technology is the "bastard offspring of the two cultures" which "can mislead us into the illusion that there is progress in art and that somehow the findings of science can be made immortal." This murderous philistinism hinges on the assumption that as *art*, the Aztec works are just as valid as Dürer's or Leonardo's—that artistic "freedom" could be produced by societies so totally unfree.

But, this is not a matter of *opinion*. As Lyndon LaRouche has proven in his work as the most creative physical economist of our century, a society will die if it cannot achieve what Boorstin calls the "bastard offspring" of those two cultures, whose common root lies in the unique potential of each human mind to exercise creative reason as the "living image of God." As a society reaches the limits of a given mode of social reproduction, it must foster individual geniuses to develop new resources, and it must be so governed that the society as a whole can implement their inventions to create the basis for a larger population at a higher level of culture.

This universal ideal of man inspired the Renaissance, enabling Europe to recover from the Black Death of 1348 and the dark age into which it plunged. Mayan society had died 500 years before 1492 because it could not meet a similar challenge of epidemic disease; and the empires which followed the Mayans in Mexico, repeated the error on a larger scale. By the time Columbus landed, all the American societies had doomed themselves to extinction by their commitment to precisely the dualistic ideology, separating science from art, and reason from faith, that Professor Boorstin propagates today.