

Moctezuma: Myth Comes To Life In British Museum's Aztec Exhibition

By: Karen Dabrowska

Nose Ornament, AD 1400 – 1521, Mexico . Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia



Exquisite gold treasures, mysterious turquoise masks and mosaic-adorned skulls which grin at onlookers, fanged and feathered carvings of fierce animal deities, vessels used in ritual sacrifice: these are just a few of the weird and wonderful objects that greet visitors to Moctezuma: The Last Aztec, the British Museum's final exhibition exploring power and empire.

The exhibition series started with the Chinese emperor Qin Shihuangdi (whose tomb complex contained the extraordinary Terracotta Army). Then came the Roman Emperor Hadrian and the maker of modern Iran, Shah Abbas.

Now its the turn of Moctezuma II (Angry Lord) the last elected Aztec leader, who presided over a vast, politically complex and culturally sophisticated empire from 1502 to 1520 and was invincible until the Spanish

arrived on his nation's shores in 1519 and changed Mexico's history forever. The exhibition examines the intrigue surrounding the man and showcases the Aztecs' enduring culture until 24th January, 2010.

The conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo who served under Cortes, the man responsible for Moctezuma's downfall, during the Mexican campaign described the Aztec leader in A History of the Conquest of New Spain: "The great Montezuma was



Double-headed Serpent, Aztec/Mixtec AD 1400 – 1521, Mexico . ©
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Teocalli of Sacred Warfare, AD 1507, Mexico. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia



about 40 years old, of good height, well proportioned, spare and slight and not very dark though of the usual Indian complexion. He did not wear his hair long but just over his ears and he had a short black beard, well-shaped and thin. His face was rather long and cheerful, he had fine eyes and in his appearance the manner could express geniality or when necessary, a serious composure. He was very neat and clean and took a bath every afternoon".

Despite the West's fascination with and admiration for Moctezuma his image in contemporary Mexico is an ambiguous one, admits Miguel Baez, of the country's National Institute of Anthropology and History, who worked closely with the British Museum to prepare the exhibition, many of the treasures having come from Mexican institutions or archaeological sites. "He was a great emperor who consolidated the Mexica empire, but he is also seen as the guy who lost against

Portrait of Moctezuma by Antonio Rodriguez. Oil on canvas 1680-97.
Museo degli Argenti, Florence © Su concessione del Ministero per I
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the Spanish, and I don't believe any culture likes a loser", Baez said.

The emperor who lent his name to a stomach upset (Montezuma is an anglicised corruption of his name) was a man who understood how to manipulate the symbols of power in a culture in which nature and society, emperor and cosmos were intertwined.

Tenochtitlan was the capital of Moctezuma's empire with a population in excess of 200,000 - bigger than London, Madrid and Rome put together. It had Venice-like canals, artificial gardens which floated on water and man-made dykes to protect it from flooding. Sweepers kept its streets clean and there were public baths and even public lavatories.

In the market place, gold sliver and precious stones – notably blue-green turquoise – were traded, along with brightly-coloured parrot feathers and jaguar skins. Food of all types was plentiful as was tobacco.

Prized above all else were cocoa beans for mashing into chocolate, a potent bitter-sweet beverage that was highly addictive.

But there was a gruesome side to this magnificent city: human sacrifice was practised on a massive scale. A stone at the top of the steps to the great temple was where men were held down while the high priest slit open their chests with a sharp blade made from flint and plucked out their hearts. The sacrifice was made to the sun: only if the gods were fed blood would the soil be fertile and the rains return. According to the Aztecs the victims, prisoners taken in battle, went willingly to their death, believing that their sacrifice would keep the cycle of life turning.

So why did this mighty emperor allow his fiercely independent people to be subjugated? Clad in a green feather headdress and gold sandals he went to meet Cortes at the causeway gate. In

a speech of welcome, Moctezuma mentioned how Aztec lore spoke of the return one day of a great overlord to whom he would pledge allegiance. Seizing on this, Cortes told the startled Aztec that he came on behalf such a supreme emperor and invited him to submit to his overlordship. Moctezuma agreed.

For a while relations were amicable but they soured when Cortes's men erected a Christian cross on the top of the great temple. As the unrest grew, Cortes seized Moctezuma and

held him captive in one of his palaces allowing him to govern as a puppet ruler.

An uprising began in the city after the Spanish slaughtered thousands of Aztecs whom they perceived as a threat when they gathered in the great temple for a religious festival. It led to Moctezuma's downfall. One story says that he was killed by a volley of rocks and arrows as he stood on a balcony and attempted to calm the uprising. Another alleges that the Spanish stabbed him to death.



Mask of Quetzalcoatl

Highlights from the exhibition, which document the fascinating history of a vanquished, civilisation include:

* A turquoise mosaic of a double-headed serpent, 15 - 16th century AD from Mexico. Linked with several Aztec gods, snakes were associated with different levels of the cosmos, underworld, earth and sky. This would probably have been worn on the chest.

* Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca, one of the the four powerful creator deities. This mosaic, dating from the 15th to 16th century, was based on a human skull.

* Mosaic mask of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. This mask dates from the 15th to 16th century. The eyes are framed by the form of two serpents, one green and one blue.

* The stone disc of Coyolxauhqui. The disc recounts the story of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, who was dismembered by her brother Huitzlopochtli. The disc was found near a shrine dedicated to the latter in Templo Mayor.

* A ceremonial knife with a mosaic handle in the form of a crouching man dressed as an eagle warrior.

Writing in the Independent on 28 September, Philip Hensher argues strongly against the moral neutrality of the exhibition which merely presents the artefacts from the Aztec empire without comment or judgement.

"Often in dealing with the past, we have to hold our noses. However, this approach has definite limits. I hope we will never come to the point where the instruments of genocide of

the Nazis or of the Khmer Rouge are offered to us in aesthetic mitigation. The scale of the Aztecs' barbarism places them on the far side of a line which divides civilisation from its opposite. At any period in history, their customs would have been regarded as abhorrent. Why, with the passage of time should anyone pretend that their hideous artefacts have become morally neutral?" Hensher asks.

Tezcatlipoca mask

