EMPIRE AND THE LIMITS OF ANALOGY: AZTECS AND ROMANS IN MALIBU

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THE AZTEC PANTHEON AND THE ART OF EMPIRE
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When the Spanish set out to invade the Aztec empire in the sixteenth century, their crusade to convert the barbarian was entangled with a more venal purpose: the *quinto real* (or "royal fifth"), a twenty percent tax levied on the mining of precious metals that was considered by the Holy Roman Emperor to be his legal due from states in possession of gold. In the event, the conquistadors would have to wait a few years longer to secure a share in the fabled gold of the Americas, yet what they happened upon in the meantime was a discovery that would complicate the religious objectives of their mission no end: a civilisation as ancient and elaborate as their own, which had, moreover, retained its links with the distant past through an unbroken tradition of religious and ritual practice.

For a few months last spring, some of the treasures of this civilisation were placed on show at the Getty Villa, alongside documentary and artistic records of the efforts made by the Spanish to assimilate Aztec myth and religion to the cultural ties of western Europe—including, most importantly, the newly discovered traces of classical antiquity. The objectives of this exhibition mark a deliberate effort on the part of Michael Brand (director since 2005) to extend the Getty's frame of reference beyond the ancient Mediterranean by including in its program of events and exhibitions material taken from Other ancient cultures. These, we are told, will take on new meanings when displayed in the spirit of comparative archaeology alongside the museum's permanent collection of Greco-Roman antiquities.

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From this perspective, the rich heritage of Aztec culture might well be seen as a logical choice. Here the Getty curators can avail themselves of a ready-made narrative of cultural assimilation and comparison provided by the colonising activities performed by the Spanish following their conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century.

The correspondence between the objectives of the Getty curators and those of the Spanish conquistadors, whose military and cultural exploits were on display, will not have been lost on many viewers: the ambitions of the Museum replicate the ambitions of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain, to reimagine the Pillars of Hercules at the western edge of the Mediterranean as a portal onto the New World rather than as the delimiting boundary of the old one. Yet the parallel might well have inspired the curators with a little more caution: what one man bills as a worthy attempt to broaden the horizons of the collection, will be viewed in more cynical terms by another as an attempt to extend the Getty's own imperialist gaze. All the more so in view of the timing of this exhibition, which was scheduled to coincide with the bicentennial of Mexican independence and the centennial of the Mexican revolution. In a city of 4.7 million Mexicans—the largest Hispanic community in the world outside Mexico City—this fleeting gesture of acknowledgement to the ancient heritage of the immigrant population prompts all manner of reflections on the place of Mexican history in Los Angeles, and on the role that institutions like the Getty play in casting that history as an outsider.

In following the agenda set by the Spanish to frame Aztec culture in Greco-Roman terms, the curators of this exhibition confront viewers throughout with the question of who is drawing the analogies between Aztec and classical antiquity: the cultural imperialists of Renaissance Spain? Or their latter-day counterparts in twenty-first century Malibu? The exhibition contains a balance of materials that witness the efforts of both: on the one hand, documents and artefacts recording Cortes' conquest of Tenochtitlan and the subsequent efforts by the Spanish to colonise Mexico's religious culture and national mythography; on the other, a set of sculptural artefacts representing the Aztec pantheon and other features of Mexican religious life chosen by the curators and set alongside a discrete selection of the Getty's permanent collection of Greco-Roman antiquities to "illustrate" the Spanish narrative of cultural syncretism. As an exposition of the cultural colonialism performed by the Spanish on sixteenth-century Mexico, the historical experiment makes for fascinating viewing; as an excuse for comparative archaeology on the part of the Getty's curators, it is harder to commend.

In themselves the Aztec sculptures deliver an awe-inspiring exhibition: a statue of Xipe Totec—the "Flayed God"—stands a metre high, open-mouthed and swathed in a bodysuit of beaded terracotta to represent the flayed skin of a captive killed by ritual execution whose lacerated skin was subsequently worn by a priest dedicated to the deity. In another room, a basalt statue of Xochipili, god of royal feasts, games, and dance, sits cross-legged and apparently entranced atop a platform engraved with mushrooms and other hallucinogenic plants. Images of the hero Quetzalcoatl abound, his head emerging from the jaws of a serpent, its skin covered in the plumage of a quetzal, to convey the triple nature of the hero-cum-god as man, snake, and bird. Visitors to the Getty will have been grateful for the chance to view these representations of Aztec deities and to learn about the national myths and stories in which they star.

The problem with this exhibition lies not in the Aztec artefacts on display, but in the curators' comparative methods—more particularly, in the hazy approach they take to the question of what exactly is being compared in the process of cross-cultural analogising: artistic form, religious content, or some other association relating to the social or ritual function of an image or artefact? Contemporary viewers might prefer not to have to make a distinction between form and content, signifier and signified, but the process of cultural comparison forces us to confront it. For without it, we lose sight of any exactitude in the process of comparing culturally discrete phenomena and fall too easily into a reliance on meaningless common denominators. This latter pitfall is illustrated to painful effect by the curators' attempt at a parallel between the iconographical uses to which Aztecs and Romans put the image of the eagle. Juxtaposing a Roman bronze statue of a spread-winged eagle with a terracotta vessel statue of the Aztec Eagle Cuauhxicalli, the comparison drawn between these "symbols of divine authority" falls somewhat short when we read the curatorial small print: the Aztec eagle is a messenger of the sun, additionally associated with Cihuacoatl, patron goddess of healers and midwives. The Roman eagle, on the other hand, is presented to us as part of Jupiter's imagistic paraphernalia and the emblem of the Roman army. So much for comparisons: the eagle turns out to mean different things—within completely different religious and social arenas—for Aztec and Roman civilisations, and we are left wondering how many other cultures, ancient and modern, use this bird as a generic symbol of power.

Elsewhere, difficulties with the curators' comparative approach emerge not as a result of the looseness of an attempted analogy, but because

of the semantic constraint that it imposes on the artefacts being compared. In one display cabinet, for example, a figurine of a Roman Lar is placed at the end of a series of miniature statuettes of "analogous" Aztec household gods, and an implicit comparison is drawn between them on the basis of content, form, and function: both Aztec and Roman objects represent household gods—tutelary deities that preserve hearth and home—and both sets of figurines are tiny, their size a guarantee of portability (a requisite for veneration within the home, when "home" is on the move). As cultural comparisons go, so far so good. Yet the nine examples of Aztec gods also carry an additional association with the Mexican military, as deities that safeguard the warrior class. This is not, as it happens, a feature that characterises the cult of the Lares. However, the single artefact chosen to represent the "comparable" Roman cult does in this instance have a military association (it was the property of a praetorian soldier), which is emphasised in the curatorial blurb below in order to create a sense of the artefact's commonality on every level with its Aztec counterparts. The status that this single object is made to assume here as a representative token of the entire cultic type means that the military association of this particular exemplar now appears as a defining feature of the cult of the Lares as a whole. Not exactly misinformation; rather, a radical illustration of how the process of comparison can skew semantics.

In this instance, the Aztec artefact determines the meaning of its Roman counterpart; it offers a telling example of the difficulties that face the curators in controlling the bias of their analogising. For although the items chosen to represent the Aztec "pantheon" here are presented to us on the model of an analogous, and comfortingly familiar, Greco-Roman religious system, more often than not they take on a life and voice of their own. Indeed, throughout this exhibition, alterity gains all kinds of unintended curatorial advantages. For one thing, we are given far more information about the Aztec exhibits than about their classical counterparts, which are in the main simply identified as belonging to the Getty, as though this detail in the recent history of their provenance were historical information enough. In migrating to Malibu, it seems, the deracinated Greco-Roman objects have already lost much of their original historical and geographical specificity in the effort of assimilating to their new cultural context; an inevitable symptom, no doubt, of immigration, whether one is a red-figure vase from fifth-century B.C. Athens or a twenty-first-century immigrant worker from Mexico City. Yet again, this has a warping effect on the comparisons drawn by the curators between Aztec and

Greco-Roman culture insofar as the identity of the classical antiquities on display is already blurred: what are these objects? The legacy of Greece and Rome? Or the heritage of Europhile America? These are questions that need resolving before comparisons with another culture altogether can be brought into play.

In fact, these issues of identity hover around a deeper and more pressing irony that derives from the comparative distances from which the various artefacts on display have been drawn: the Mexican exhibits, whilst coming from a geographical location much closer to home, are yet foreign visitors in a museum that grants the accolade of permanence to a Greco-Roman haul originally imported to Malibu from further afield. This set of topographical inversions prompts one to reflect on the series of historical events and cultural hierarchies that conspired to make a collector like Paul Getty locate his cultural heritage in Europe rather than on his own landmass. One of the first things one learns about the Villa upon entering it is that the architects who designed this neo-classical folly were instructed to do so on the model of an archaeological dig—more specifically, the excavational site surrounding the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum on the Bay of Naples. Yet if the archaeological analogy were literalised, and visitors to the Malibu museum paused to consider the layers of history beneath their own feet, they would need to take their minds back only 150 years or so to recall a time when this land, like the rest of California, was Mexican property. The history of California is, then, arguably tied up with that of Mexico in more obviously immediate and inextricable ways than with that of classical Greece or Rome. As one wanders around this exhibition, it is hard to avoid asking what kind of impact Getty might have had on California's perception of her southern neighbour had he chosen to bestow the connoisseur's smile of cultural prestige on Mexican art history by choosing to amass a collection of Aztec rather than Greco-Roman antiquities.

In the book that accompanies this exhibition, Claire Lyons and John Pohl touch briefly on the question of taste that led Europeans since the Renaissance to fetishise the sculptures of classical antiquity as aesthetic objects, whilst excluding Mexican artefacts from this privilege and confining them instead to curiosity cabinets. But the comparisons the curators are drawing in this exhibition will prompt viewers to ask whether that attitude still holds. The market history of Frieda Kahlo's paintings shows how easily (and suddenly) twentieth-century Mexican art could be incorporated into western canons of collectibility. On the day of my visit, viewers' reactions were telling: as I contemplate a set of Aztec figurines,

a well-heeled Angeleno pauses beadily in front of one of them and casts an acquisitive eye: "I could find a place for that. I could take that home," she says to her companion. She turns to the single Roman object placed at the end of the display cabinet for comparative purposes: "You see, that just doesn't speak to me." Evidently Aztec culture does not need classical comparisons in order to appeal to American eyes today. In view of this, it is a little surprising that, in spite of the bicentennial billing, the curators make no mention of attempts made by Mexican nationalists to disentangle their country's history from the ancient past of her colonial oppressors with the advent of independence in 1822.

Empire is not a theme that lends itself readily to comparative exposition. It prefers the hierarchical levels of metaphor to the democratic poles of analogy, and while it may begin by juxtaposing, it will end by substituting. The Spanish drew analogies with Aztec culture in order to assimilate and, eventually, efface the distinctive heritage of their new colony; in following the narrative of conquest from the viewpoint of the victors, the Getty cannot escape complicity with their agenda. Yet, in fact, this isn't quite how it all turns out: for once the hierarchical levels have been set up, it becomes impossible to control what stays above and below the bar. More often than not, therefore, the Aztec artefacts keep overturning the interpretive frameworks imposed on them by those who would explain them to us by saying that they are just like something we are more familiar with. Among the many reasons for which they do so, perhaps the most pressing is that, in this particular display context, they represent a culture that has a more immediate historical currency (and a greater need for exposition) in contemporary Los Angeles than the Attic shapes encased in glass downstairs. For what the curators could not have anticipated was just how out of place this exhibition would make the Getty's permanent collection of classical antiquities appear. As I leave the exhibition, I pass a woman standing in front of a Roman statuette dragged in from the permanent collection for comparative purposes. Before disappearing downstairs to rooms packed with similar objects, I overhear her asking: "What is *that* doing here?" It's a question that will continue to reverberate around the Getty Villa long after the Aztec artefacts have been sent packing back to Mexico.

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