

Art of the Aztec Empire

LD 8: Interpreting Aztec Codices and Poetry

Introduction: As with all forms of creative expression, the generation and representation of themes, and thematic content, is part and parcel a primary form of communicating social concerns, values, preoccupations, and critical ideals. The Aztec, who invested considerable resources in the elaboration of their primary ceremonial and religious centers, and administrative precincts, also invested heavily in the creation of histories, religious almanacs, and related sources of recorded information. In fact, Moctezuma Ilhuicamina's tribute list included some one million sheets of paper per year used for the preparation of books and documents, and ceremonial paraphernalia.

Instructions: Today's deliverable is intended to get you into the spirit of learning to interpret the primary themes and concerns of the Aztec people as expressed through their ancient screen-fold books and poetry. Using both the screen-fold books employed in Lab Deliverable 7, and the handout of poetry readings provided by Miguel Leon-Portilla's book, Aztec Thought and Culture, be prepared to answer the following questions:

Part I: The Codex Themes

1. What is the primary social, religious, or other cultural theme represented by the individual manuscript that you studied?
2. Does the manuscript present only one primary narrative or are their several sub-themes represented?
3. What literary details or symbolic content provided in the codices provide evidence of (a) the primary theme, and (b) sub-themes?

Part II: The Poetry

1. What are the primary themes represented in at least five of the thirteen poems provided in the handouts?
2. What do you believe was the Aztec view of life and fate given the narratives provided?
3. What do you believe that the epic poem (Poem M) on pages three and four of the handout has to say about the Aztecs as a people and culture?

Resources: The Codex Nuttall: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico (Nuttall, 1975), Mexican Manuscript Painting of the Early Colonial Period: The Metropolitan Schools (Robertson, 1994), Codice Laud (Martinez Marin, 1961), The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript (Diaz and Rodgers, 1993), Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca (Kirchhoff, Odena Guemes, Reyes Garcia, 1976), Inehnem Aztekatin: Su Caminar de los Aztecas (Carpanta Baron, n.d.), and the full-color reproductions of the Codice Borgia (Los Templos del Cielo y de la Oscuridad: Oraculos y Liturgia, Anders, Jansen, Reyes Garcia, 1993), and Vindobonensis Mexicanus I (Origen e Historia de los Reyes Mixtecos, Anders, Jansen, Perez Jimenez, 1992)