

Art of the Aztec Empire

LD 7: Aztec and Pre-Aztec Architectural Interpretation

Introduction: The architecture of Mesoamerica, as that of many ancient societies, was fashioned to convey both political and religious messages about the power and authority of the ruling class and its king. Aztec society developed a complex iconographic and architectural vocabulary for the expressed purpose of portraying the cosmos, polity, and empire, and the place of society within this complex mosaic of worldview and belief. Today, we will examine the social and ritual contexts of Aztec and pre-Aztec architecture as portrayed within the pages of several pre-Hispanic and early Colonial period codices or screen-fold books.

Instructions: Using the following resources, prepare to identify the social, ritual, political, and cultural contexts within which architecture and architectural monuments are illustrated. Having reviewed a broad range of individual monuments from other sites, much of what we will attempt to do today will be to attempt the identification and cultural and social reconstruction of the types of activities identified with particular types of ancient monuments. For example, in what contexts, and by virtue of what types of associated activities, can we interpret the symbolic and ceremonial importance that might have attended the use of round or circular structures in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan?

1. Where the interpretation of the full-color reproductions of the Codex Borgia and Vindobonensis Mexicanus I are concerned, an interpreter of Spanish will be required...preferably one interpreter per codex manuscript.
2. Students will assemble into groups around the main codex copies, as well as with respect to the book versions of other similar manuscripts.
3. Identify Aztec and pre-Aztec monuments and buildings within the manuscripts with those activities, symbols, and deities with which they are associated.
4. Take into account numerical symbolism (e.g., the numbers 2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 18, 20, 22, 52, 260, etc.), as well as color symbolism (e.g., particularly the use of the colors, blue, red, white and black)
5. Work to identify the types and kinds of activities associated with the monuments or buildings that you have chosen to examine and analyze.
6. Attempt to reconstruct the iconographic vocabulary or framework represented.

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), Inehnemí Aztekatín: 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: Oráculos y Liturgia, Anders, Jansen, Reyes Garcia, 1993), and Vindobonensis Mexicanus I (Origen e Historia de los Reyes Mixtecos, Anders, Jansen, Perez Jimenez, 1992)