

The Image of the “Indian” in Early Modern Europe and Colonial Mexico

Rebecca P. Brienen, Ph.D.

The *Visions of Empire* exhibition includes paintings, drawings, and prints depicting events and peoples related to Mexico and the violent European expansion into the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to European and colonial attitudes toward the indigenous peoples of the Americas by addressing the tradition of representing Indians in works of art. While the term “Indian,” as noted elsewhere, is actually based on Columbus’ misidentification of America as part of the East Indies, it has been retained in this essay, because it accurately reflects the European point of view that indigenous Americans could be lumped together as a single group.

Many images of Indians created between 1500 and 1700 functioned as propaganda, encouraging conquest and colonization by showing indigenous peoples who appeared to need both guidance and salvation. At the same time, others used idealized images of Indians to criticize the barbarous behavior of

Europeans in the New World. While the anonymous artists of the Kislak Conquest of Mexico series painted the Mexica of Tenochtitlan in a heroic manner, they did not do so in order to denigrate the Spanish. Rather these images highlight the figures of Hernán Cortés and his men as the great conquerors of a worthy race.

Early European Images of Indigenous Americans

When Columbus undertook his first voyages to the Americas, many Europeans firmly believed that Amazons, one-eyed giants, and cannibals could be found beyond the borders of the civilized world. Even Columbus was surprised that the indigenous peoples of the New World were not “human monsters, which many people expected.” The first published images of the Americas display human figures that are both entirely normal and entirely European in conception. In Columbus’ first letter describing his discoveries (*De insulis inventis Epistola*, Basel, 1493), two Euro-



Figure 1. Christopher Columbus (1451 - 1506). *De Insulis nuper in mari indico repertis in Carolus Verardus: Historia Baetica*. Basel, 1494.

tanus's *Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld* wear this costume (fig. 2). There is, however, no evidence that skirts made only of feathers were ever worn in Mexico, or anywhere else in the Americas. This fact did not stop artists from picturing Indians, regardless of national origin, wearing this imaginary article of clothing well

peans present gifts to a group of naked, shy, and child-like men and women (fig. 1). In very early woodcuts like this one, ethnic difference is demonstrated only by lack of clothing.

Very soon thereafter, European artists began to develop an iconography for the generic (and stereotypical) representation of an American Indian. Requirements included nudity, except for a feather headdress and feather skirt, and men were typically portrayed with bows and arrows. The Aztecs who fall to their knees in front of Cortés and his men in this 1671 image engraved by Jacob van Meurs for Arnoldus Montanus's *Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld* wear this costume (fig. 2).

into the nineteenth century. Sometimes a severed human head also became part of the iconography, because it was widely believed that all Indians were cannibals.

Among the most important images of indigenous Americans were those produced by the Flemish engraver and publisher Theodor de Bry. De Bry's *Grands Voyages* (1590-1634), a highly successful series of accounts of travel to the Americas, established the visual parameters for representations of the Indian in the early modern period. De Bry, who was both anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish, used the medium of engraving to reinforce the Black Legend of Spanish cruelty. In the *Grands Voyages*, the Spanish are guilty of torture and unspeakable mistreatment of the Indians because of their all-consuming desire for gold, although the Indians are occasionally allowed to respond in kind (cat. 20). By depicting the Indians in a highly idealized manner with the bodies of Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, de Bry made Spanish rejection of their humanity appear all the more unacceptable.

The European View of Mexico and its Peoples

When the Spanish first encountered the Aztec empire, they easily recognized its sophistication. It had a large bureaucracy, extensive trade relations, cities, roads, beautiful architecture, refined material culture, highly developed religious practices, and a



Figure 2. Jacob van Meurs, Mexicans and Cortés outside of Tenochtitlan, from Arnoldus Montanus, *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld of Beschryving van America*, Amsterdam, 1671.
Courtesy of Special Collections, Richter Library, University of Miami.

clearly defined political structure. In addition to descriptions of the city and its peoples in the published letters of Cortés and other writers, tokens of material culture circulated in Europe in the form of Moctezuma's gifts, which Cortés sent to Charles V of Spain in 1520. Included here were fine weapons, beautiful clothing, and expertly worked gold objects, many of which were admired for the skill and ingenuity of their craftsmanship. The splendor of the Mexica capital was praised by Cortés in his second letter of 1524 (cat. 13), and the idealized illustration of Tenochtitlan in this work later joined the pantheon of great cities of the world through its inclusion in Braun and Hogenberg's *Civitates orbis terrarum* (1576) (cat. 15). But neither skilled city planning nor the artistic genius of the Aztecs exercised the greatest influence on the European imagination. Rather, it was their religion that both fascinated and repulsed Europeans. In particular, ritual human sacrifice made Cortés and others describe the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan as servants of the devil.

This negative view of indigenous religion is made clear in the frontispiece for the *Grands Voyages*, part IV (fig. 3). The bizarre,

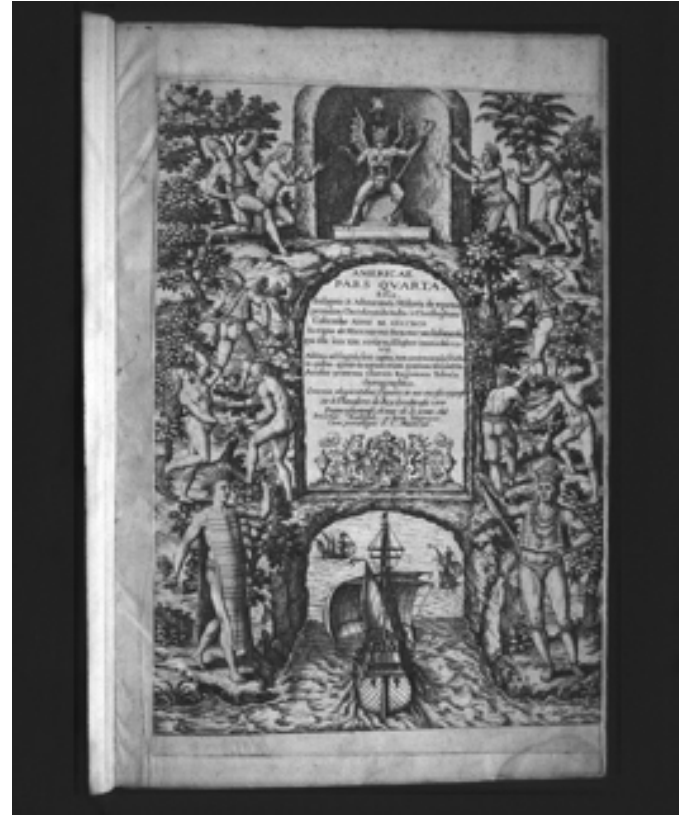


Figure 3. Frontispiece, Theodor de Bry, *Grands Voyages*, part IV. Courtesy of the Jay I. Kislak Foundation.

winged, and wholly demonic figure that sits enthroned in a niche at the top of this image most likely was intended to represent the Mexica god Huitzilopochtli. This Aztec god of war was arguably the most important of the Aztec deities. His temple was prominently located atop the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan. In de Bry's image, he is an evil-looking creature with the claws of a large cat and a giant toothed mouth in his chest. Van Meurs' 1671 engraving of the god for Arnoldus's *Nieuwe en Onbekende Weerld* clearly borrows from this representation. Neither de Bry nor van Meurs demonstrates first-hand knowledge of Mexican representations of the god, or the specialized costume worn by his impersonators. For Europeans, Huitzilopochtli was equated with Mars, the Greco-Roman god of war, and in de Bry's fanciful representation, he symbolizes all pagan idols worshipped by indigenous Americans.

Grands Voyages part IX (Frankfurt, 1601) is the only part of the series to address Mexico specifically, although its text is interspersed with discussions of the Peruvian Inca empire along with the Aztec empire. While one would expect illustrations of human sacrifice at the Templo Mayor to be horrific, there is a highly refined aspect to de Bry's representation of this subject, in which the priests are dressed in elegant, flowing robes. Unlike the senseless and random cruelties of the Spaniards detailed in other volumes of the *Grands Voyages*, here the Aztecs take

human life as part of an elaborate and respectful religious ritual. Contemporary European fascination with Mexica religion resulted in the creation of many images related to the theme of human sacrifice. The Tovar Codex, a sixteenth-century manuscript in the collection of the John Carter Brown Library, includes another image of the great temple in the center of Tenochtitlan, complete with racks displaying the skulls of victims. The Kislak collection includes a nineteenth-century copy of this image (cat. 11b), demonstrating that interest in this aspect of Aztec culture had a very long life.

Images of the doomed Aztec emperor also proved irresistible for European illustrators. Portraits of Moctezuma gave a human face to the Aztec empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His image is reproduced in the Tovar Codex, again present in this exhibition in a somewhat bland but respectful nineteenth-century copy (cat. 11a). By the end of the sixteenth century, Moctezuma had been accorded the status of a vanquished but noble ruler. Sixteenth-century European artists produced a number of life-size paintings of Moctezuma, and it was even deemed appropriate to include his image in a French book devoted to great kings of the world, both past and present. In de Bry's *Grands Voyages*, Moctezuma's death is framed as a suicide, calling to mind classical traditions and honorable figures like Socrates.

Moctezuma and the Aztec Indians in the Kislak Conquest of Mexico Paintings

Some scholars believe that Antonio de Solís' *Historia de la conquista de México* (1684) was an important source for the Kislak Conquest of Mexico series (paintings 1-8). As noted in the catalog introduction to these works, paintings and painted screens depicting different scenes from the Conquest were produced by various workshops in colonial Mexico in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The scenes chosen for reproduction were based on the printed histories of the Conquest, including Solís' work in addition to the history by Francisco López de Gómara, among others. A highly learned man, Solís was named official chronicler to King Charles II of Spain in 1661. Using histories of the Conquest that had already been published, Solís is known for imparting a new dignity to the narrative. Whether or not Solís was the primary source for the Kislak series, his theatrical and eloquent manner of writing closely parallels the dramatic baroque style of these seventeenth-century works of art. For Solís, Cortés was the undisputed hero of the Conquest. Although Solís had few kind words for the general population of the Aztec empire, he presents Moctezuma as a ruler on a par with contemporary European kings. In addition, Solís expresses great admiration for the orders of the Jaguar and the Eagle, the highest-ranking figures in the Mexica military.

The Kislak series highlights the figure of Cortés as the main protagonist and noble leader of his troops in their epic struggle for control of Mexico and Tenochtitlan. His armor-clad figure is present in nearly every painting, as he and his captains lead their men in successful battle. Cortés' indigenous counterpart, the Aztec emperor Moctezuma, appears in only three of these paintings, but these works make it clear that he is an elegant and distinguished man. As mentioned in the catalog description, his golden sword, aristocratic nose, full beard, and dignified presence as pictured in *The Meeting of Cortés and Moctezuma/ El Encuentro de Cortés y Moctezuma* reflect contemporary European ideas about the bearing appropriate to a king. Although there was no set iconography for images of the Conquest, this same type of characterization, albeit in a much more generic form, is also present in an illustration of the same subject from the 1724 English translation of Solís (fig. 4). Nonetheless, in both the painting and the print, Moctezuma's Indian identity is secured by his scanty dress, brown athletic body, and his feathered head-dress and skirt.

In the Kislak painting, the artist has paid special attention to the costumes of the indigenous warriors, but the image remains a mixture of ethnographic accuracy and fantasy. The feather skirts are a fabrication, and the actual clothing worn by the leader of the Aztec empire provided considerably more cover-



Figure 4. The meeting of Cortés and Moctezuma, from Antonio de Solís, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (1724), Courtesy of Special Collections, Richter Library, University of Miami.

age. The special costumes worn by the Eagle and Jaguar warriors nonetheless suggest that the artist had access to earlier representations of these groups, such as those depicted in the Tovar Codex (cat. 11C, 11D). This attention to ethnographic detail sets this series of images apart from other contemporary works of the same subject.

The emphasis on Moctezuma and the Mexica as worthy foes, as pictured in the Kislak series, is typical of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings and painted screens that depict the Conquest of Mexico. This emphasis extends to the lack of interest that images in this genre demonstrate regarding indigenous religious practices. In the Kislak series, the Templo Mayor burns in the background of *La caída de Tenochtitlan/The Fall of Tenochtitlan*, but no idols or human sacrifices are visible. The only blood that spills in this painting is that of the fighting armies of Cortés and Cuauthemoc, the last Aztec emperor. In these paintings, the emphasis is on the war, not the justification for it.

Cortés' early reports to the king regarding human sacrifice ensured royal support for the Conquest and the introduction of Christianity. Late seventeenth-century colonial Mexico was, however, a very different place from that described by Cortés. By then, Creoles had no need to demonize the Mexica in order to

justify the actions of the conquistadors; the Conquest was long over, 150 years past, and the missionary work of the mendicant religious orders had proven largely successful. Members of the Creole community, native born Spanish elites, whether or not they were pure Spanish, seem to have regarded both groups as their ancestors, making this largely honorific series of images the appropriate manner of celebrating the Conquest.

SOURCES:

Boone (1989)
Bucher (1981)
Cortés (1971)
Honour (1979), (1975)

Keen (1971)
Cuadriello (1999)
García Sáiz (1999)