



## The Aztecs

15 October 2020 to 22 June 2021

From 15 October 2020 the Weltmuseum Wien is hosting an exhibition that showcases the legendary art and culture of the Aztecs. This comprehensive show offers visitors the first-ever chance to get to know the Aztecs in their cultural context.

In the early sixteenth century, at the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs who called themselves *Mexica* ruled large parts of Mesoamerica. A nomadic people now named after *Aztlán*, their mythical place of origin, they eventually settled on a number of small islands in Lake Texcoco, where around 1325 they founded the city of Tenochtilan, today's Mexico City. In the fifteenth century the Aztecs ruled over a large and powerful empire, and in the sixteenth century they are among the best-documented Mesoamerican civilizations.

The exhibition begins with the periphery of the Aztec Empire (c.1430–1521) and Mexico's natural and cultural riches, from where it moves to the heart of the Aztec Empire and its capital Tenochtitlan, which functioned as both its economic hub and its religious and cultural centre. After walking through the imperial palace of Emperor Moctezuma, visitors enter the empire's centrepiece: the sacred precinct, home to the most important temple, the Templo Mayor.

On show are over 200 artefacts and loans from Mexican and European museums, among them the Museo del Templo Mayor, the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico-City, the Musées Royaux d'Art et de Histoire (Brussels), the National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen), the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), the Museum Volkenkunde (Leiden), the Museum der Kulturen Basel, and the Museum am Rothenbaum (Hamburg), as well as artefacts from the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien and the Imperial Armoury of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.

Conceived in close collaboration with Mexican archaeologists and scholars, the exhibition presents the results and findings of recent research and excavations.

Also incorporated into the exhibition is the renowned ancient Mexican feather headdress on show in the permanent collection of the Weltmuseum Wien, which comprises hundreds of long quetzal feathers and over a thousand small gold plates. This precious headdress is the only one of its kind to have survived. Between 2010 and 2012 a collaborative project brought together Mexican and Austrian scientists and scholars who carried out comprehensive research on its history and a thorough cleaning and restoration of the artefact.

The special exhibition *The Aztecs* was conceived and curated by the Linden-Museum Stuttgart in collaboration with the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico. Its first stop was Stuttgart (2019/20), and later in 2021 it will move from Vienna to the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.



## EXHIBITION THEMES

### Module 1

#### The Aztecs: Five hundred years after the invasion

In 1519, the Spaniard Hernán Cortés and his troops invaded the Aztec empire. This invasion resulted in the 1521 downfall of the greatest indigenous empire in Central America. Five hundred years after these events, this exhibition is attempting to tell the story of the Aztecs from their own perspective, beginning on the outside and advancing towards the heart of the empire.

The Aztec empire was ruled by an alliance of three city states: Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco and Tlacopan. As a multi-ethnic empire, it was home to many cultures, languages and peoples who all paid tribute to their masters. The name Aztecs itself is a creation of European scientists; the inhabitants of the capital city Tenochtitlan referred to themselves as *Mexica*. They spoke the language of Nahuatl. Although the Europeans made every effort to destroy local cultures, indigenous resistance ensured that many aspects of this great civilization have been retained until today. Local languages, foods and rituals have survived the centuries and are now spoken, eaten and practised by people across the globe.

### Module 2

#### Society: Everyday life and divine nature

The core of the Aztec empire was located in the densely populated valley of Mexico. Before the Aztecs were conquered, fifty city states (*altepeme*) dominated the valley. They were in political competition, but a network of trade routes and markets provided for a wide exchange of goods and ideas. The population was multi-ethnic, and more than forty languages were spoken.

The valley of Mexico was strongly urbanised. Each city state was arranged around a temple, a palace and a market place. The cities were inhabited by the elite and the priests, as well as craftspeople and traders. The population who lived outside of the cities were farmers. Families provided for themselves and grew their own food. They also wove their own textile wares, fashioned their own ceramics and created their own tools.

Plants, animals and landscape each had a religious value. The ritual calendar structured human life. It defined the best times for sowing and planting, and was also used to help plan important life events.

### Module 3

#### War: An empire built on conquest and tribute

Warfare played an important role in the history and society of the Aztecs. Their military prowess helped them establish their regional power in the valley of Mexico. Access to tributes by conquest of other city states was the main incentive for going to war. The Aztecs therefore tried to win a province by promising protection in return for tribute before attacking with an army.



Aztec society comprised two classes: the general population, Macehualtin, and the nobles, Pipiltin. Success as well as courage in war were important pathways for social advance. The capture of an enemy warrior guaranteed the capturer's advance into the meritocracy. Captured warriors were delivered to the capital city as prisoners of war, where they lived for months or years before being executed in the course of rituals that took place at Templo Mayor. The concept of war was deeply ingrained into Aztec society. When a woman died during childbirth, she was honoured as a fallen warrior.

#### Module 4

##### City and Palace: Life in luxury

In 1519, Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world with an estimated population of about 200,000 inhabitants. It was situated on an island in the lake of Texcoco and was planned in such a way that each house could be approached by canoe. Dams with streets provided secured roadways to the mainland. Aqueducts provided the city with fresh water. Numerous markets ensured that there was a wide array of food and goods on sale. These included the largest marketplace of the empire, the market of Tlatelolco. Products from throughout Mesoamerica were bought and sold here.

The elites lived in great luxury in the city centre. Materials of great value – such as quetzal feathers, gold and obsidian – were delivered to Tenochtitlan as tributary payments. There, they were turned into luxury objects. The palace of the Huei Tlatoani, the ruler of the Aztec empire, housed his living quarters as well as the administrative centre of the empire.

#### Module 5

##### Templo Mayor: The centre of the universe

At the heart of the Mexican cosmos lay the Holy District, a place where religion, state power and economic activity met. It measured about 440 by 380 metres and comprised numerous temples, schools and universities, ball game fields, parks and gardens. Priests conducted daily rituals, noble youths were educated and the Huei Tlatoani (the emperor) was installed here. Tributes that were collected throughout the empire were delivered to Templo Mayor as offerings to the gods. These gifts and sacrifices ensured the continued existence of the world and of human life. They were offered by the Mexica as signs of their gratitude to the gods for the suffering they had endured when they created the universe.

The deities of conquered peoples were guarded in the temple of Huitzilopochtli, affirming the supremacy of the Mexican protective god. Foreign rulers were invited to attend rituals and ceremonies. This provided the Mexicans with an opportunity to demonstrate their enormous wealth and power.

#### Module 6

##### Cosmology: The creation of the world

The Aztecs believed that the world was created by gods. Humankind owed its existence to these deities. In the beginning, there were only the two gods of creation. These original deities were male and female, a



duality that continued to structure the world. Together, they created further gods, hundreds of them. These deities created the universe as well as all living beings.

When the world was created, space and time were also shaped. Time and the calendar began with the first sunrise. The world was divided into four corners. All things revolve around the *axis mundi*, a central tree located at the centre of these corners. The gods continue to support their creation until this day: a difficult task that makes them deserving of human gratitude. Only honouring and the offering of presents will ensure their continued provision for humankind. The creation has to be renewed at regular intervals by being reconstructed in the form of rituals.

#### PROGRAMME & EVENTS

A programme of events will take place alongside the exhibition, with a particularly wide-ranging number of events available for children and young people.

#### CATALOGUE

The publication of a catalogue in German and English supplements the exhibition.

360 pages, 21.5 × 27.5 cm, hardcover

€ 30

## PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

Press photographs are available in the press section of our website free of charge, for your topical reporting: [www.weltmuseumwien.at/presse/](http://www.weltmuseumwien.at/presse/)

### Quetzal-feather headdress

Feathers of the quetzal, cotinga, roseate spoonbill, squirrel cuckoo, kingfisher; wood, reed chips, fibres, paper, cotton, leather, gold, brass

H: 130 cm, W: 178 cm

Mexico, Aztec, around 1520 AD

KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien

Inv. no. 10.402

© Photo: KHM-Museumsverband



### Mictlantecuhtli

Ceramic, pigment

H: 176 cm; W: 80 cm; D: 50 cm

Mexico, Aztec, Late Period, between 1430 and 1502; found in the "House of Eagles" as one of two almost identical sculptures

Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, D.R. Secretaría de Cultura – INAH, Inv. no. 10-264984

© Photo: D.R. Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología, Secretaría de Cultura – INAH



### Brazier, water and fertility goddess Chalchiuhtlicue

Ceramic, pigment

H: 55.2 cm; W: 64.3 cm; D: 49.4 cm

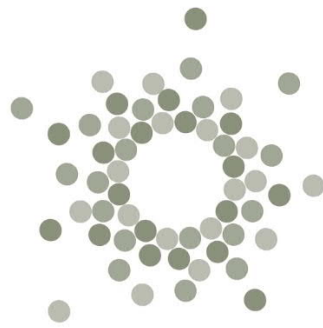
Central Mexico, Aztec, late period, early 16th century; discovered near the sacred district of Tlatelolco

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, D.R.

Secretaría de Cultura – INAH, Inv. no. 10-1125

© Photo: D.R. Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Antropología, Secretaría de Cultura - INAH





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Greenstone figurine with calendar signs  
Serpentine  
H: 34 cm; W: 17.5 cm; D: 7 cm  
Mexico, Teotihuacan, 250 –750 A.D.,  
re-worked by Aztec artists  
Museum am Rothenbaum Hamburg,  
Inv. no. FSB 264  
© Photo: Paul Schimweg



Greenstone figurine with calendar signs (detail)  
Serpentine  
H: 34 cm; W: 17.5 cm; D: 7 cm  
Mexico, Teotihuacan, 250 –750 A.D.,  
re-worked by Aztec artists  
Museum am Rothenbaum Hamburg,  
Inv. no. FSB 264  
© Photo: Paul Schimweg



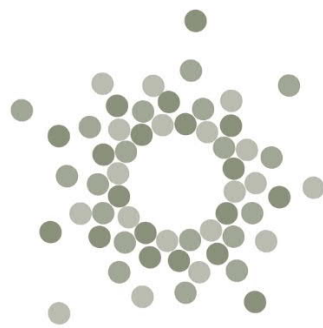
Bird head mask  
Wood, turquoise, spondylus shell, resin, mother-of-pearl,  
malachite  
L: 29 cm; W: 15.5 cm; H: 13.5 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, between ca. 1350 and 1521 AD  
Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha. Inv. no. Eth7R  
© Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha



Skull mask  
Human skull, flint, sea shell, pyrite  
H: 19 cm; D: 13 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, 15th century; discovered within  
the Templo Mayor, ofrenda no. 11  
Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, D.R.  
Secretaría de Cultura – INAH, Inv. no. 10-162934  
© Photo: Gliserio Castañeda, D.R. Secretaría de  
Cultura – INAH







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Eagle's head

Stone

H: ca. 100 cm; W: ca. 120 cm

Mexico, from the area of Tehuacán, Puebla, Mexico;  
Aztec, between ca. 1350

and 1521 AD; Discovered at the foot of a mountain

Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels,

Inv. no. AAM 69.11

© Royal Museum of Arts and History, Brüssel

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Staff or statue attachment

Wood, turquoise, spondylus shell, resin, mother-of-pearl, malachite

H: 29 cm; W: 12 cm; D: 17 cm

Mexico, Aztec, between ca. 1350 and 1521 AD

National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen,

Inv. no. ODIh.41

© Photo: National Museum of Denmark, Roberto  
Fortune

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Stamp, monkey

Ceramic

H: 5.3 cm; W: 4.5 cm; D: 3.5 cm

Mexico, Aztec, between ca. 1350 and 1521 AD

Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.

Coll. no. RV-2971-57

© Photo: Irene de Groot

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Pulque beaker

Phyllite

H: 37 cm; D: 18 cm; D: 26 cm

Mexico, Aztec, beginning of the 16th century

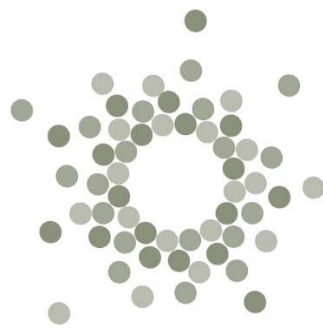
KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien,

Inv. no. 6.069

© KHM-Museumsverband

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Carrier figure  
Volcanic stone, pigment  
H: 78.5 cm; B: 34.5 cm; D: 26 cm  
Mexico, Tlaxcala, 1000–1500 AD  
KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien,  
Inv. no. 59.144  
© KHM-Museumsverband



Cuahxicalli (Eagle Bowl), sacrificial bowl  
Stone  
H: 6.5 cm; D: 16 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, around 1500 AD  
KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien,  
Inv. no. 59.896  
© KHM-Museumsverband



Jewel in the shape of a heart  
Gold  
H: 4.1 cm; W: 2.6 cm; D: 0.1 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, Late Period, early 16th century;  
discovered within an ofrenda at the Templo Mayor  
Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City, D.R. Secretaría  
de Cultura – INAH, Inv. no. 10-654079  
© Jorge Pérez de Lara, D.R. Secretaría de Cultura –  
INAH



Coyote or young wolf  
Basalt  
H: 39.8 cm; B: 21 cm; T: 23.3 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, between ca. 1350 and 1521 AD  
Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, D.R.  
Secretaría de Cultura – INAH, Inv. no. 10 47  
© Photo: D.R. Archivo Digital de las Colecciones del  
Museo Nacional de Antropología, Secretaría de  
Cultura – INAH





Sculpture in the shape of a snake  
Stone  
H: 34 cm; W: 23 cm; D: 30 cm  
Mexico, Aztec, between ca. 1350 and 1521 AD  
Museum am Rothenbaum Hamburg,  
Inv. no. B3637  
© Photo: Paul Schimweg



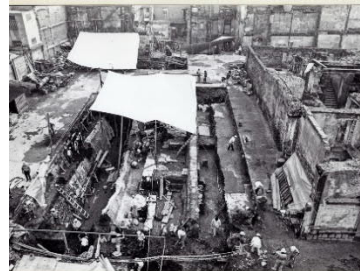
## Archaeological Excavations

Courtesy of Proyecto Templo Mayor

The excavations by Manuel Gamio and the discovery of  
the Templo Mayor in 1914  
© Proyecto Templo Mayor, Photo: Anonym



The excavations by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and the  
complete exposure of the Templo Mayor in 1978  
© Proyecto Templo Mayor, Photo: Anonym



Excavation of the monolithic stone sculpture of the  
goddess Tlaltecuhltli at the foot of the Templo Mayor  
© Proyecto Templo Mayor, Photo: Leonardo López Luján



Dedicatory offering box found under the Tlaltecuhтли monolith

© Proyecto Templo Mayor, Photo: Jesús López



The Wall of Skulls, Huei Tzompantli

© Photo: Oliver Santana



The PAU team at work under the direction of Raúl Barrera Rodríguez

© Photo: Ignacio Urquiza



The PAU team at work on the excavation of the Temple of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl

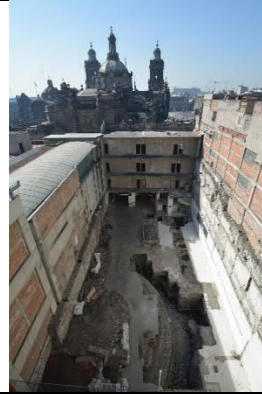
© Photo: Raúl Barrera Rodríguez



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View of the excavations of the Temple of Ehecatl-  
Quetzalcoatl

© Photo: Raúl Barrera Rodríguez



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Monolithic stone sculpture of the goddess Coyolxauhqui  
on the platform of building stage IVb of the Templo  
Mayor

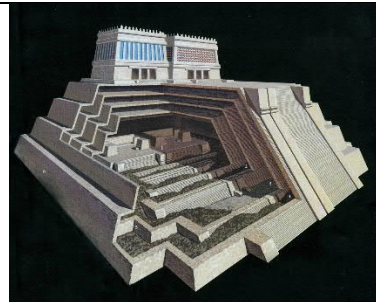
© Proyecto Templo Mayor, Colour reconstruction:  
Michelle De Anda and Fernando Carrizosa



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The construction phases of the Templo Mayor

© Grafik: [www.latinamericanstudies.org](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org)





## OPENING HOURS

Daily except Wednesdays  
10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

## TICKETS

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information/#tickets>

*NEW:* The Annual Family Ticket for two adults and up to three children or teens under the age of 19 for only € 79! For more information, please visit <https://www.khm.at/en/family/>

## CONTACTS FOR YOUR VISIT

Information, questions & suggestions  
+43 1 534 30-5052, [info@weltmuseumwien.at](mailto:info@weltmuseumwien.at)

Cultural education & outreach programme, guided tours, and programme registration  
+43 1 534 30-5150, [kulturvermittlung@weltmuseumwien.at](mailto:kulturvermittlung@weltmuseumwien.at)

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Journalists visiting the KHM-Museumsverband for professional purposes are entitled to free admission to its exhibitions and locations. For this purpose, you need to register via [info.pr@weltmuseumwien.at](mailto:info.pr@weltmuseumwien.at) at least two working days in advance. We request that, in addition to mentioning your medium, you also specify the date of your visit and attach a scan of your valid press pass. Many thanks for your understanding!

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