

# A Coiled Serpent

FORMAL AND ABSTRACT AZTEC EXPRESSION AT THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Emilio Coral García\*

The Nahuatl peoples held “the flower and song,” or art, in great esteem: they considered it the only road to a more authentic form of knowledge, closer to reality, less subject to the relative, illusory nature of the earthly world. This is clear in their extensive legacy to universal art: poetry, architecture, murals, sculpture and textiles were only some of the many disciplines which the Nahuas developed.

In Nahuatl culture, Mexica or Aztec art—at its height between the early fifteenth century and the 1521 Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan—occupies a special place. Being an artist was reserved for only a few particularly gifted individuals and was directly linked with the realm of ritual and divinity, central to Aztec society. For someone to become an artist, different considerations were taken

into account: first and foremost, he had to be destined to it, and that was determined by the position of the stars at his birth; secondly, he had to have “countenance and heart,” which in the metaphoric Nahuatl language means having a strong personality, a meticulously forged spirit.

The Mexicas considered the artist a *tolteca*, or a man of knowledge. The artist was heir to the genius and splendor of the Nahuas’ oldest ancestors, the Toltecs. Different kinds of artists, then, were considered the direct beneficiaries of the rich legacy of Toltec aesthetic traditions and ideals and were called *toltecáyotl*.

Sculpture is one of the most representative disciplines among the vast body of Aztec art. It combines two main characteristics: the monumental nature of Toltec art and the formal plasticity of sculpture in the Gulf of Mexico and the Mixtec region of Puebla, blending great volume with a flexible aesthetic full of movement. These characteristics can be seen in

representations of humans, animals and gods. The latter were symbolized in a multiplicity of images in which the life-death, heaven-earth, night-day duality is a constant. This duality, which makes up the human universe, the result of the interaction of divine forces, was exemplified in the image of two serpents facing each other: life and death in their eternal encounter. This is none other than the encounter of times, just as it appears in the culmination of the monumental *Coatlicue*, mother of the gods, on display at the National Museum of Anthropology and History.

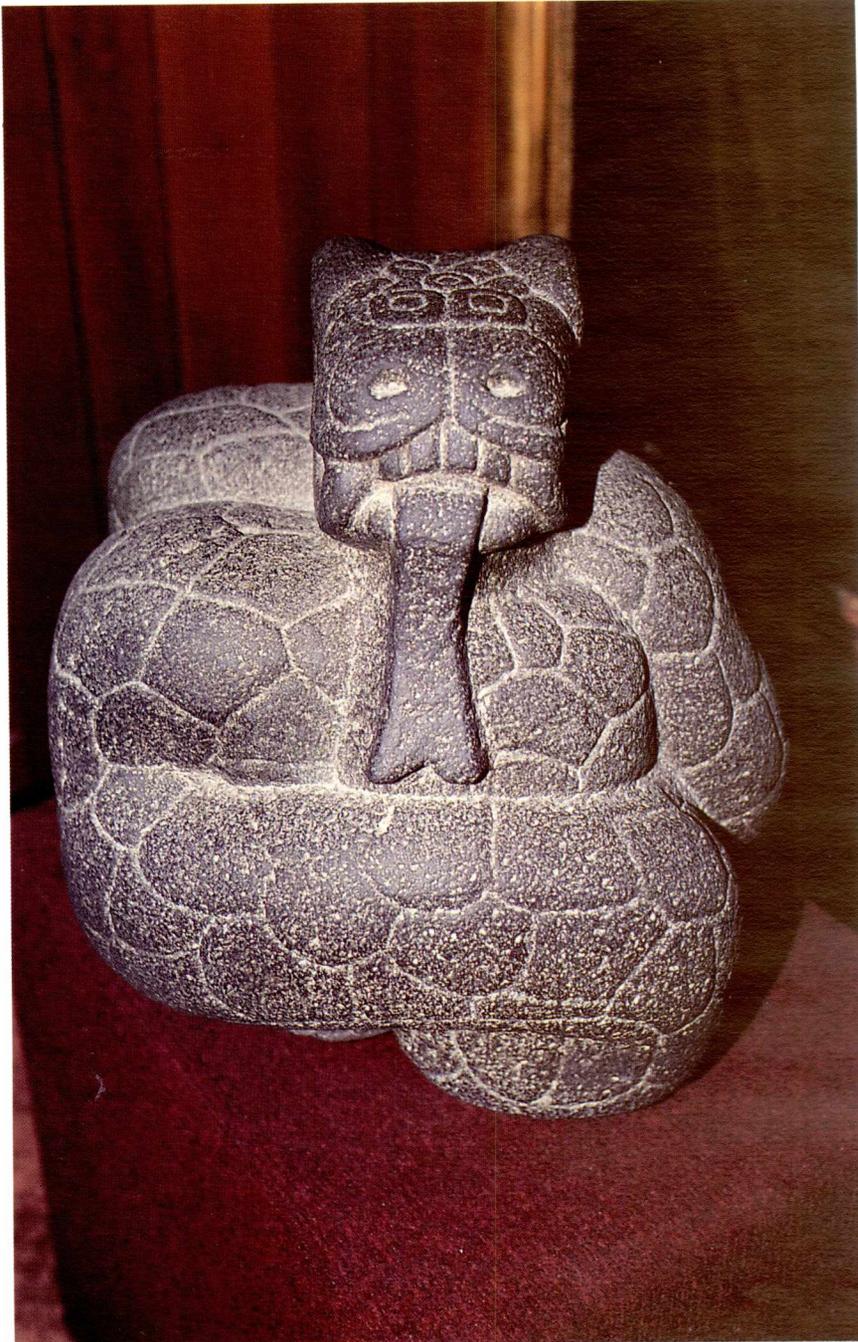
This article deals with a sculpture in basalt of a serpent owned by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and housed in its University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUCA). The serpent is at the ready, prepared to attack, as is often the case in Mexica representations of serpents and other animals, particularly jaguars. The snake’s jaws are open and its fangs and forked tongue are

\*Researcher and Publicity Coordinator for the Department of Artistic and Cultural Assets of the UNAM Patrimony Administration Office.

plainly visible. However, the rest of its body seems to be totally relaxed: it is as though it were both alert and in complete repose at the same time, an apparent contradiction common in Aztec zoomorphic statues.

The work may be from the fifteenth century since it displays the total realization of sculpture attained in that period. Aesthetically, it is outstanding. The morphology of the coiled snake and the details of its scales are plastically excellent. The head, majestically wrought, portrays the animal's essence using a synthesis of formal means: the eyes are concentric circles surrounded by voluminous protuberances like eyebrows in the upper lids; well defined nostrils are placed on either side of a long line stretching from the upper part of the mouth and dividing the head symmetrically; and, in contrast with other Aztec serpents which have prominent sharp fangs, in this case they are smoothly dissimulated, blended with the lower jaw; in addition, the front teeth, though of a good size, are not especially noticeable.

In the Nahuatl cosmology, snakes were associated with earthly matters, the night, all things feminine, pleasurable and sensual. In the eminently solar Mexica culture, the serpent represented the underworld and darkness, although that did not make it any less important as part of the balance of the universe. In fact, the serpent was one of the most important sacred symbols, associated not only with darkness, but also with precious things, such as in the case of *Xiuhcōatl*, or the turquoise serpent used as a weapon by *Huitzilopochtli* (a link between the



Photos by Arturo Pierra

The coiled serpent, an outstanding example of Aztec sculpture.

blue of the heavens and the green of the earth), or the plumed serpent, *Quetzalcōatl*, simultaneously earth and sky, the sacred serpent which could fly.

Mexica sculpture boasts many representations of both *Xiuhcōatl* and

*Quetzalcōatl*. *Xiuhcōatl* is represented as a serpent whose main feature is an upper mandible extended like a crest, festooned with several eyeballs and which has two arms with hands and claws and a body that looks like blazing torches. *Quetzalcōatl* is symbolized



The details of its scales are plastically excellent.

as a serpent covered with the plumes of the sacred bird, the *quetzal*.

Nahuatl tradition says that the world as we know it was created during the nocturnal transfiguration of *Ometéotl*, the Absolute. This transfigura-

tion is known as *Tezcatlipoca*, or “the smoky mirror,” from which the four directions of the universe emerged: black, the North; white, the West; blue, the South; and red, the East. Night, then, was decisive in Nahuatl cosmolo-

gy; and since the serpent was a symbol associated with the night, the abundance of serpents in Aztec art is not at all surprising, despite the Mexicas calling themselves “the people of the Sun.”

The piece at the MUCA is an important sample of Mexica artistic virtuosity. Besides the qualities inherent to artistic realism, it incorporates elements that transcend realism: the incisors and the size of the canine teeth; the rigorous geometric shape of the facial features, including small ornamental concentric circles almost at the level of the joining of the upper and lower jaw; the eyebrows; and the size of the eyes.

Combining realism with abstraction, the different parts of the statue blend formal simplicity and an aesthetic result of great impact, throwing into relief the Mexica aim of integration. Simplicity leads to complexity; synthesis transmits multiplicity. From this we can infer the main symbolic meaning of this type of representation in which the original *Ometecuhтли-Omecihuatl* duality, the masculine-feminine principle, manifested itself as life-death, rain-fire, light-darkness, plumed serpent-earthbound serpent. However, the artists and *toltecas* always understood these antitheses as part of a single absolute principle, *Ometéotl*, *Ipalnemohuani*, or as *Tloque Nahuaque*. Therefore, the symbol of the serpent, whether in sculpture, relief or a mural, among not only the Nahuas, but also Mexico’s other pre-Hispanic cultures, alluded primarily to one of the facets of the Absolute which, despite its earthly qualities, at any moment might appear covered in feathers and take flight into the firmament. ❧