

THE MAKER OF GODS...

*Eduardo Matos Moctezuma**

Man has the power to create gods. He makes them with his virtues and defects, with his goodness and evil, with his life and with his death. Pre-Columbian Man lived and died in accordance with the will of the gods, who ruled all aspects of the universe, from the creation of other gods to the different levels of the structure of the universe—earth, sky and underworld—at the same time that they were the lords of time. They created the calendar, fire, the sun and the moon, and, in wondrous portent, they gave Man his place, the center of attention of the gods, paying him back this way for his act of creating them, declining in them the acts of

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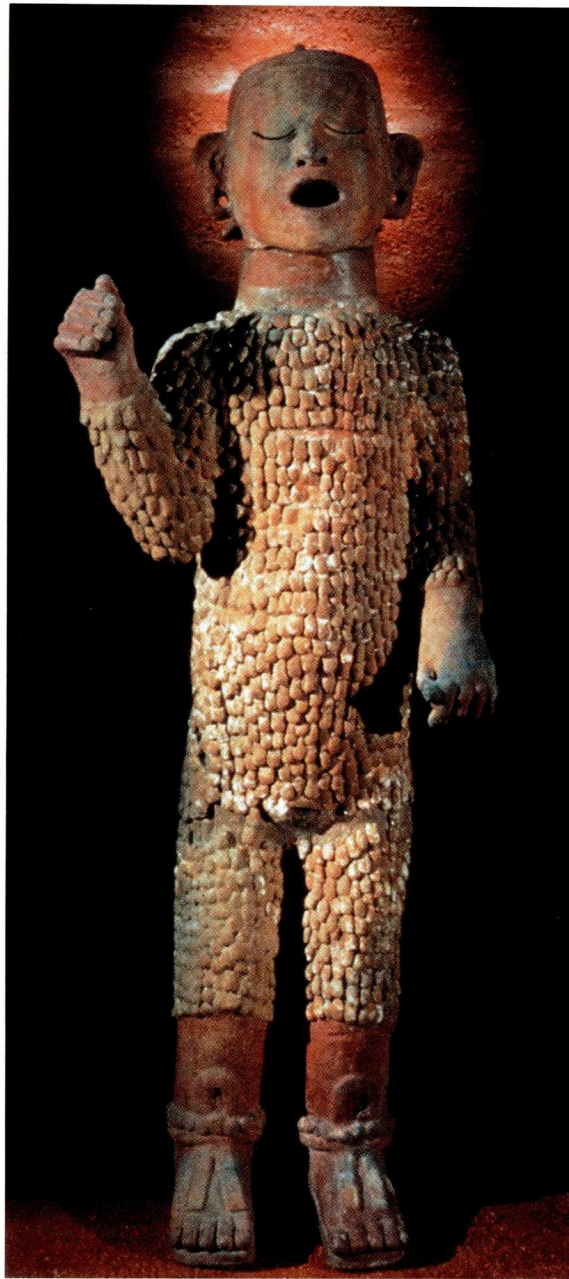


Photos by Rafael Doniz

Statue of a priest dedicated to the worship of Tlaloc, god of water. Gulf Coast.

creation which gain strength and reality through myth. *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (The History of Mexicans Through Their Paintings) tells us how it was the gods' responsibility to carry out those acts of creation. The story says:

Six hundred years after the birth of the four brother gods, sons of Tonacatectli (Tonacatecuhtli), all four came together and said that it was good that they order what was to be done and the law that they should have; and they all committed themselves to Quetzalcóatl and Uchilobi (Huitzilopochtli), so that they two should order it, and these two, by the commission and countenance of the other two, then made fire and half the sun, which because it was not the entire sun did not illuminate much, but rather little. Then they made a man and a woman: the man they called Uxumuco, and her they called Cipastonal, and they ordered them to work the earth, and that she should spin and weave, and that from them would be born the *macehuales*, and that they not be lazy, but that they should always work, and to her the gods gave certain grains of corn with which she could heal, do riddles and cast spells, and even unto today women do the same. Then they made the days and they divided them into months, giving each month 20 days and so they had 18, and 360 days in the year, as will be said further on. Then they made Mitliltatectlet (Mictlantecuhtli) and Michitecaciglat (Mictēcacihuatl), husband and wife, and they were the gods of hell and they put them there; and then they created the heavens, beyond the thirteenth, and they made the water, and in it they raised a large fish,



Xipe-Tótec, god of spring and patron of goldsmiths. Mexica.

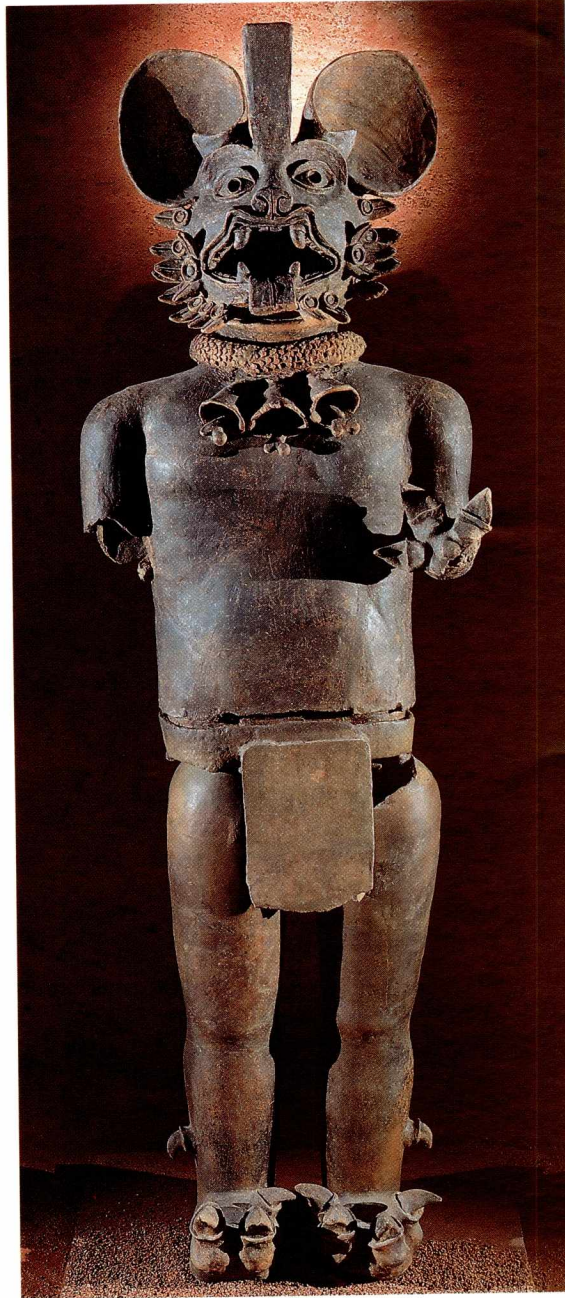
which is called cipoa cuacli (Cipactli), which is like an alligator, and from this fish they made the earth....” (*Historia...*, *op. cit.*, 1886.)

We can emphasize several things about this story. In the first place, duality is a basic element for creating other gods. This is present in the mention made of Tonacatecuhtli, lord of our sustenance, who includes within himself the first creating couple also named Ometecuhtli and Omecíhuatl, the Lord and Lady of Duality. They live in the thirteenth heaven (the Ome-yocan or *Dos* [Two] place) as a dual principle also synthesized in Ometéotl. Two gods will assume the mission of the acts of creation: Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli, and two—a man and a woman—will also be those assigned daily labor. To this must be added the fact that, at the moment of creating the different levels of its universal conception, the creating couple situates two gods in the underworld

to balance Ometéotl. And still there are those who doubt that the essential principle of the pre-Columbian world was duality!

Where was the starting point of the duality principle? Manifested through poetry and myths, duality was present in nature. The need for water for plants to grow led the Mesoamerican peoples to constantly observe the cycles of rain and dry seasons; based on

that they developed a calendar in which the gods had a relationship with both conditions. The very structure of the universe was conceived as having three levels (we have already seen in the excerpt above how they were created) and four directions, ruled each by a god, a glyph, a color and a tree. But this structure is at the same time made up of counterparts: the North was the place of cold, death and dryness; the South was the place of humidity and fertility. Similarly with East and West, to the former corresponds the color red and the glyph for cane; this was the place where the Sun came out after having lit the world of the dead accompanied by the warriors killed in combat and sacrifice, assigned to go with the Sun from dawn to midday; therefore, this was the masculine direction of the universe. This was in contrast with the West, associated with everything feminine, since women who died in childbirth became *cihuateteo*, god-women, to whom fell the lot of accompanying the Sun from midday until dusk; this is why this direction is known as *cihuatlampa*, or direction of women. In this way, then, this world of dualities was significantly shaped in the conception of the universe, in the gods themselves and in the day-to-day activities of Mesoamerican Man.



Bat-Man. Bat worship is linked to the underworld.

Other peoples of Mesoamerica show similarities with this. In the *Popol-Vuh*, the Sacred Book of the Quichés, we can read how the duality Tepeu-Gucumatz creates the earth and separates it from the waters, but its main concern is the creation of Man: “There will be neither glory nor greatness in our creation and formation until the human creature exists, until Man is formed,” said the gods; and then they created the pair of elders, our grandparents called Ixpiyacoc and Ixmucané, the equivalents of Cipactonal and Oxomoco. And they said to them:

Enter into consultation, then, grandfather, grandmother, our grandmother, our grandfather, Ixpiyacoc, Ixmucané; make there be light, make it dawn, that we be invoked, that we be adored, that we be remembered by Man created, by Man formed, by mortal Man; make this be done. (*Popol-Vuh*.)

Finally, Man will be created from corn, the first plant, kept by the gods for men. Once again, duality is present in the old Mayan story when the youths Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué are created; these two must go to the world of the dead, Xibalbá, where after many misadventures on their travels to the underworld, they play the ball game and defeat the lords of Xibalbá.



Tlaloc, god of rain and fertility. Central Veracruz.

The similarities are surprising. We could well say that we are looking at a Mesoamerican religion with regional variations, each with its own particular seal of individuality. The needs of these peoples require similar answers, which Man delivers into the hands of the gods. Something important can be inferred from the words of the *Popol-Vuh* and the Nahuatl stories: Man is the central concern of the gods and he will be created to adore them and

remember them.... And ritual is born. It will be through ritual that men recreate the myths and give homage to the gods: the ball game, offerings, sacrifice, temples, sacred places, everything is for religion. Ceremonies are repeated recalling the acts of creation, the birth of a particular god, the struggle between night and day symbolized in the ball game.... Man, created through the penitence and the ritual death of the gods pays them back and more for having been created. In this way, man maintains the equilibrium of the universe through sacrifice, ritual, blood. It is here that Man becomes divine: he sacrifices himself to make an offering of the most precious thing he has, his life, his heart, since from that ritual death in which the man who represents the god is offered in sacrifice will arise and endure life, the rhythm of the universe, the succession of night and day. A creative act, from the sacrifice of a man and his ritual death will arise life anew, just as from the dry season, and in a constant cycle, is life born anew.

And this is the meaning we have given this presence of the gods. From the world view or universal structure with their levels and directions, to the ritual exemplification in the ball game and in everything that leads us to the adoration of the gods. From there on to the conception of time and the life-death duality which is present from very early times in Mesoamerica. Later into the sphere of the gods of life to end in the face of death.

All this is possible thanks to the creative power of Man. He created his gods by molding clay and carving stone. Just as Man was born of corn and the will of the gods, so were they born of stone, clay and the will of talented hands which knew how to make dead matter come alive.

The gods of Central Mexico and of other areas of Mesoamerica are present with all their ancestral weight and exemplify the fact that, in all eras and under all circumstances in Mesoamerican time and space, they were the work of men who one day decided to leave their power to create in the hands of the gods. ❧

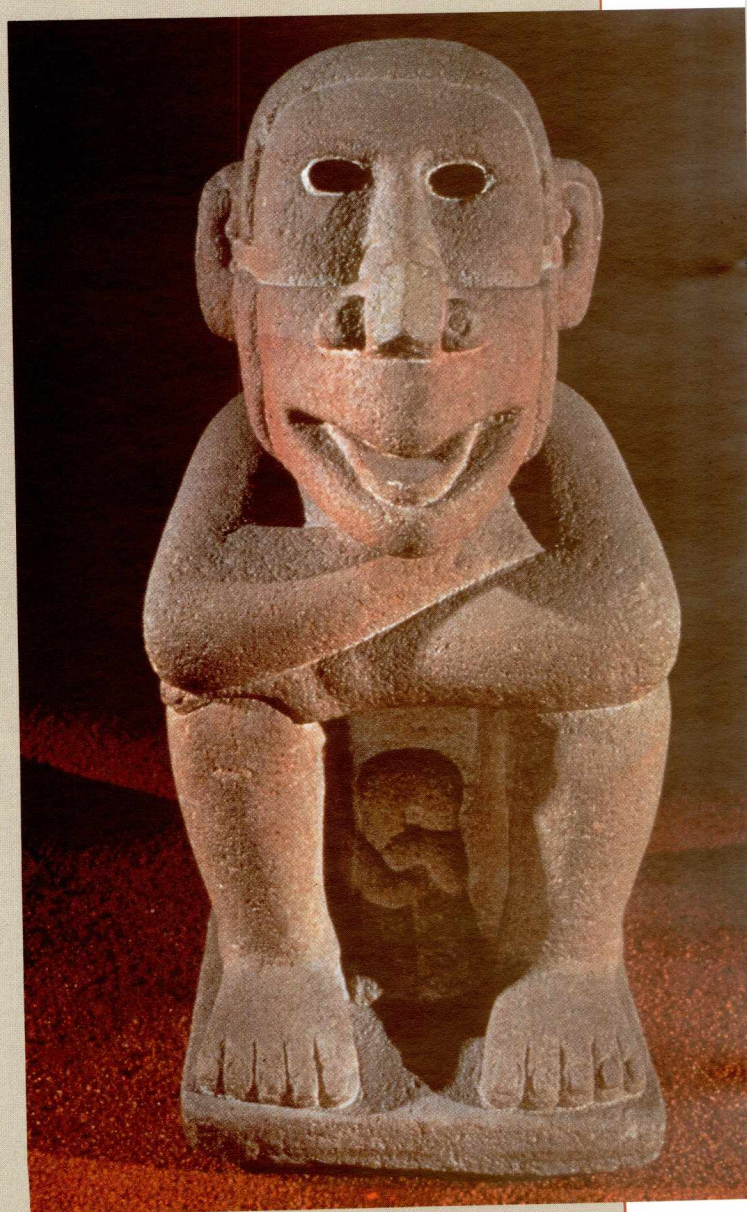
The Gods of Ancient Mexico in the Old San Ildefonso College

(December 9, 1995 - March 24, 1996.)

The archeological exhibit *The Gods of Ancient Mexico*, with 230 pre-Columbian sculptures of different sizes, aims to underline the importance of religion in the daily life and the world view of our ancestors. The exhibit, therefore, uses the pre-Columbian gods as its starting point to deal with their conception of the universe and of the gods, as well as the influence of both in the day-to-day existence of Mesoamerican Man.

Pre-Columbian Man lived and died according to the will of the gods, who ruled over all aspects of life, from the creation of other deities to the different levels of the universe: land, sky and underworld. They were the lords of time. Paradoxically, it was Man who created his gods, who gave them their virtues and defects, their goodness and evil. But he also gave them the power to create, which let them be both lords and masters of men's lives.

This exhibit is original, not only because of its unique topic, but also because it presents previously unknown pieces discovered in recent archeological excavations. The pieces are from the preclassical, classical and post-classical periods and are representative of the Olmec, Teotihuacan, Xochicalcan, Toltec, Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, Totonac, Huastec and Mayan cultures. ❧



Ehécatl seated, god of the wind. Mexica.

Gods of Life and Death in the Pre-Columbian World

Vestiges of the worship of the gods indicate the complex social structures of the Mesoamerican peoples and the relationships among them. Some particularly important pre-Columbian deities —Tláloc, Quetzalcóatl and Huehuetéotl, for example— are to be found in the different regions of Mesoamerica. However, from region to region their characteristics, adornments and attributes vary depending on the period in which they were represented and the specific culture they belonged to.

Tláloc: God of the rain and fertility. He is one of the most respected and frequently represented gods of the pre-Columbian world due to the Mesoamerican peoples' great dependence on agriculture. He also had his bad side: he ordained the crop-killing freezes.

Xipe-Tótec: God of spring. In his honor men were flayed in the rites of *Tlacaxipehualiztli*. The rite celebrated the Earth's changing its dead skin for a new, fresh one which would allow new plants to grow.

Huehuetéotl-Xiutecuhtli: The old god of fire, Lord of the year. He is represented as an bent, toothless, seated old man. This god occupies the center of the universe and represents the duality Ometéotl, the Dual Lord. He is thought to be one of the oldest deities of Mesoamerica.

Cihuateteo: Women who died in childbirth became goddesses and were allowed to accompany the Sun from midday until sunset and therefore inhabited the western region of the universe, called Cihuatlampa.

Coatlicue: Goddess of the earth and mother of the gods. She appears in some Mexica rites as the mother of Huitzilopochtli (god of the sun and of war), of Coyolxauhqui and of the 400 *huitznahuas* (linked to the night powers, the moon and the stars).

Tezcatlipoca: "The smoking mirror," a common god opposed to other gods of the pre-Columbian world. Patron of warriors, princes and warlocks; god of the cold of the night sky; god of providence —invoked in the moments fraught with danger—, who had the gift of ubiquity. He and Quetzalcóatl are the creators of the dual world which ruled everything, representing darkness and evil (Tezcatlipoca) and light and goodness (Quetzalcóatl).

Quetzalcóatl: "The Plumed Serpent," his name indicates the profound duality of the unity of opposites: the sky, symbolized by the bird feathers, and the land, by the serpent. He is a creator and sustainer who presides over science and art. Quetzalcóatl is transfigured in several different forms: plumed serpent, Man-Tiger-Bird-Serpent, Venus (morning) and Xolótl (afternoon) and Ehécatl. When he left Tula, Quetzalcóatl promised to return in the year 2-Cane to avenge the betrayal of Tezcatlipoca and end the reign of his successors, the Aztecs. Since the predicted date coincided with the arrival of the Spaniards, the powerful Aztec king Moctezuma confused Hernán Cortés with the bearded man Quetzalcóatl and surrendered to him, submitting to a premature defeat.

Ehécatl: God of the wind. Represented by the wind which precedes the rain, cleansing and sweeping the plain, sometimes softly and others wildly, to open the way for the providers of the rain, the *tloques*. Ehécatl has a mask in the form of a bird's beak, which allows him to blow.

Chalchiuhtlicue: "The one who wears a jade skirt," this goddess of the water of rivers, lakes, lagoons and the sea is sister to Tláloc, god of rain. According to Aztec myth, she was created by the four gods Xipe, Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli, who were in turn created by Ometecuhtli, the supreme being.

Xochipilli: "Prince or Lord of the flowers," this god cared for the growth of flowers and was also the patron of the players of *patolli*, a game played with darts and seeds on a woven reed board.

Xochiquétzal: Also known as "the precious flower", "bird flower" or "plumed flower", she was the goddess of flowers, dances and the main defender of pregnant women, weavers, embroideresses and painters; she was companion to Xochipilli. Together with the other gods of vegetation, she personified new growth, and therefore youth and games.

Chicomecóatl: "7-Serpent," the most important goddess of vegetation, considered the Lady of maintenance. She was the main ruler of the growing of corn, the basic food in the Mesoamerican diet.

Tlaltecuhli: "Lord of the Land," created by Ometecuhtli, the supreme being. Usually presented as a ferocious frog devouring everything. He is the guardian of human waste, but also the source of the plants it nourishes.

Mictlantecuhtli: Lord of the underworld, together with Mictcacihuatl, Lady of the underworld. They resided in Mictlán, the deepest of the lower levels, reached by the dead only after innumerable vicissitudes. These deities were always represented as skeletons.

Coyolxauhqui: Goddess of the moon, sister to Huitzilopochtli (the Sun) and the stars of the south (the 400 *huitznahua*). The relationship between the two siblings symbolizes the Sun's daily struggle against the nocturnal powers. Huitzilopochtli is born daily to vanquish Coyolxauhqui and her 400 brothers.