

**PORTRAITURE IN  
CENTRAL AMERICAN  
ART, PP.434-450**

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## Portraiture in Central American Art

By HERBERT J. SPINDEN



**A**MONG the human beings represented in ancient Mexican and Central American art are there actual portraits of individuals? Accustomed as we are to judge the works of alien peoples in the light of Europe, hardly one of us has not been tempted to see likenesses of old-time rulers in the graven stone faces at Copan, Chichen Itza, and other Maya cities, and to catch the personality of men from the masses in the little heads of baked clay that strew the fields from Central Mexico to the lakes of Nicaragua. But mere human interest is, after all, a dangerous guide to knowledge.

*Aztec Representations of Historical Persons.*—The Aztecs were the ruling race when Cortés planted his flag in New Spain. While the seat of their power, in the Valley of Mexico, was somewhat outside the area of the earlier and more magnificent civilizations of Central America, nevertheless this nation must have acquired by inheritance from the preceding peoples many ideas and conventions in art. It may therefore be significant that one looks in vain for acknowledged portraits among Aztec drawings and sculptures. In the native codices, or illuminated manuscripts, and on the commemorative monuments that have come down to us, there are many references to historical personages made through the device of combining the personal hieroglyph of the individual with a conventional figure devoid of all facial and bodily peculiarities. In these representations the details of dress and ornament may vary enough to indicate rank and place of abode.

On the Stone of Tizoc, commonly called the Sacrificial Stone, the figure of Tizoc, who was war-chief of the Mexicans from 1483 to 1486, is distinguished by the personal hieroglyph. Excepting the head-dress, his costume belongs to the Aztec war-god Huitzilopochtli or to his wizard brother Tezcatlipoca. The man held prisoner by Tizoc bears the hieroglyph "little net", Matlaltzinco, and stands for an important tribe inhabiting the Valley of Toluca. This tribe was reduced by the Mexicans in the year 1478, possibly under the direct leadership of Tizoc. We have no reason to believe that an individual chief of the Matlaltzinco tribe is portrayed in the captive. In all the other pairs of figures carved on the periphery of this great drum-shaped stone the victor is the Aztec war-god (Huitzilopochtli or Tezcatlipoca),

## SPINDEN—CENTRAL AMERICAN PORTRAITURE

while the victim personifies some vassal town or province. The place-name hieroglyph is enough to make clear what town or province is meant, but Dr Seler professes to see regional differences in costume among the captives.

Both Tizoc and his successor Ahuitzotl are pictured on the stone commemorative of the completion of the great temples to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc bearing the date Eight Reed, 1487. This sculpture is carefully executed and fairly well preserved. The two rulers stand on opposite sides of a bundle altar and each pierces his ear with a large awl made from a human femur. The sacrificial blood, flowing outward and downward in a stream, enters an "earth mouth" beneath

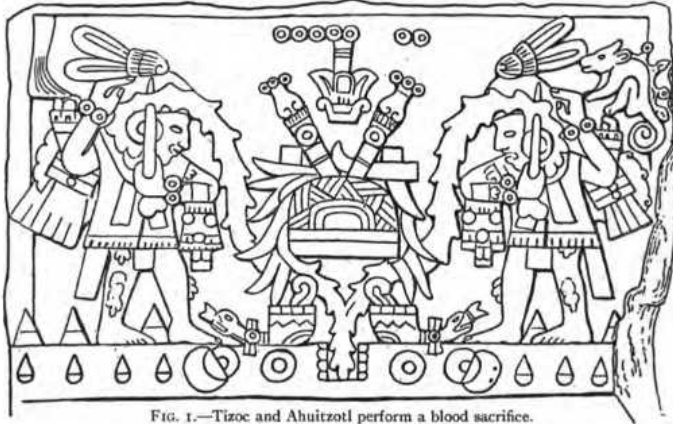


FIG. 1.—Tizoc and Ahuitzotl perform a blood sacrifice.

the altar. The costumes of the two chieftains are alike. Besides the bone awl each carries a ceremonial pouch over one arm and has at his foot a serpent-headed incense burner. Again the personal hieroglyph furnishes proof of identity, and individual traits do not appear. It must be admitted that on these two monuments the conventional figures are much smaller than nature.

When we turn to the illuminated Mexican manuscripts we find the pictures of historical persons to be entirely formal except for differences in dress. Associated hieroglyphs again disclose the personality. Examples of stereotyped human beings from the Codex Telle-

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riano-Remensis are given in figures 2 and 3. The conquistadores are distinguished from the Mexicans in this record by beards as well as by dress, but Spanish facial types are not closely followed. Under the year 1541 the death of Pedro de Alvarado, called Tonatiuh, or Sun, by the Mexicans on account of his yellow hair, is recorded, as well as the baptism of the natives by the friars. The characterization is by dress and style of hair-dressing.

*Ideal Portraits of Aztec Gods.*—In spite of this failure to discover accredited portraits of historical personages in either the sculptures or

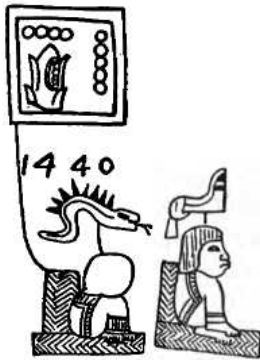


FIG. 2.—Itzcoatl dies and is succeeded by Moctezuma I. (Codex Telleriano-Remensis.)

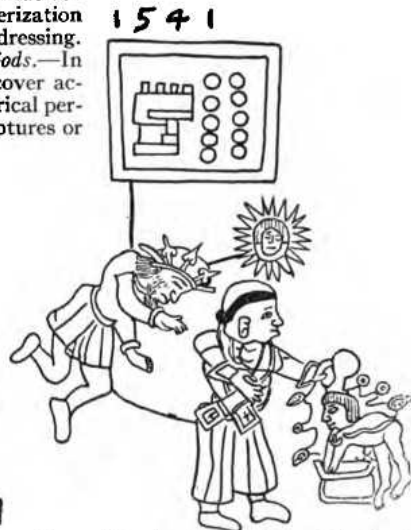


FIG. 3.—Pedro de Alvarado dies and the Spanish friars baptize native children. (Codex Telleriano-Remensis.)

the manuscripts, we must be prepared to admit that the concept of the portrait was almost if not quite realized in the faces of the greater gods. Many of the Aztec gods were, to be sure, characterized by faces so grotesque and unhuman that we cannot justly compare the gross differences in their features with the more subtle differences in contour and expression among human beings. But while such divinities as Tlaloc and Ehecatl have to be thrown out of consideration as being too little humanized, the same ruling does not hold against, for instance, Chalchiuhtlicue, Goddess of Water. She is personified as a



AZTEC GODDESS OF WATER. IDEAL AND CONVENTIONAL PORTRAIT  
(American Museum of Natural History)







ARCHAIC CARICATURES FOUND IN MEXICAN GRAVES  
(American Museum of Natural History)

