Through a Glass, Darkly: A Study of Mirrors in Aztec Art

Introduction

As Hernán Cortez and his men made their way to the shores of Mexico, they may have dreamed of the vast treasures in the unknown lands to the West and the shimmering caches of gold that would soon fill their coffers, launching them to the greatest heights of Spanish society. Meanwhile, Motecuzoma II paced his palace chambers, contemplating the dark omens that announced the approach of a sinister band of invaders who would bring an end to his empire. We can imagine his worry and confusion as these strange signs visited upon him a growing kind of terror for which he could not find the language to describe. There is no way Motecuzoma could have envisioned the scale of destruction that awaited him and his people nor the profundity of the changes that the unknown invaders would bring; however, with the help of sages and diviners, Motecuzoma was already encountering clues as to the identity and nature of these unknown beings. Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who recorded the stories and cultural customs of native informants in his cultural encyclopedia, The Florentine Codex, describes eight such clues or omens. Of these eight, perhaps the most curious is the seventh omen, in which the royal hunters discovered a bird with a mirror on its forehead:

A seventh omen: at one time the fisher folk who hunted or snared with nets took captive an ashen hued bird like a crane. Then they went to show it to Moctezuma, [who was] in the Tlillan calmecatl.¹ It was past noon, still daytime. On its head was as it were a mirror, round, circular, and as if pierced in the middle, where were to be seen the heavens, the stars—the Fire Drill [constellation]. And Moctezuma took it as an omen of great evil when he saw the stars and the Fire Drill. And when he looked at the bird’s head a second time, a little beyond [the stars] he saw people who came as though massed, who came as conquerors, girt in war array. Deer bore them upon their backs. And then he summoned the soothsayers and the sages. He said to them: “Do you not know what I have seen there, which was as if

¹ Footnote from Bernardino de Sahagún, The Florentine Codex: General History of the New Things of Spain, Translated from the Aztec into English, with notes and illustrations, Book 12: The Conquest, edited and translated by Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and The University of Utah, 1963), Chapter 1, pg. 3 the Tlillan calmecatl is explained as a palace reserved for times of mourning and apprehension “la llevaron a presencia de Mocteuzoma, el cual por entonces estaba en unos palacios que se llamaban Tlillancalmecatl (quiere decir, palacios teñidos de negro) y parece que como tenía otros palacios para alegrarse, ricamente edificados, este Tlillancalmecatl tenía para recogerse en el tiempo de adversidad y tristeza.”
people came massed?” And when they would answer him, that which they looked at vanished. They could tell [him] nothing more (Figure 1).

The strange mirror presented a sort of magical portal that allowed the emperor to extend his gaze beyond the strictures of time and space that confined human sensorial experiences. While this story may seem specious to modern-day readers of Sahagún, such portents would be taken quite seriously among the Nahua-speaking members of Pre-Columbian and early colonial society. In Aztec cosmovision knowledge did not have to be restricted empirically and--under special circumstances--could transcend the realm of earthly human activities.

For this shift in awareness to occur, one needed to be carefully trained in the art of seeing and knowing. Through such training, a priest, diviner, or ruler could make contact with deities and prognosticate future human affairs as they coincided with a greater cosmological order structured on a matrix of sacred time.

In order to accomplish these tasks, certain accoutrements or instruments of sacred knowledge could be used; chief among them were the painted codices, incense, tobacco, hallucinogenic substances, implements of autosacrifice, and mirrors. This final instrument is at once one of the more mundane objects of the ritual paraphernalia as well as one of the more elusive. For Motecuzoma, the magical mirror that came to him with the strange bird told a story about the future destiny of the Aztec empire; however, for modern readers, this anecdote tells of a rich cultural past, refracted to us through the surfaces of the pages written about it. While it may be impossible to know the full wealth of meanings associated with Aztec mirrors, we may reflect on the rich moral philosophies of these people and their polysemic ways of viewing the world.

Mirrors are ubiquitous amidst the archaeological objects discovered at sites in Mesoamerica, dating from as early as the Olmec cultures, although no mirrors have yet been excavated at the Templo Mayor archaeological

2 Sahagún, The Florentine Codex, Book 12, chapter 1, 3. Spanish original is quite a bit different than the English translation of the Nahuatl by Anderson and Dibble: La séptima señal o pronóstico es que los cazadores de las aves del agua cazaron un ave parda del tanmaño [sic] de una grulla y luego la fueron a mostrar a Motecucoma que estaba en una sala que llamavan Tlillancalmecac, era después de mediodía, tenía este ave en medio de la cabeca un espejo redondo donde se parecía el cielo y las estrellas y especialmente los mastelejos [sic] que andan cerca de las cabrillas como vio esto Motecucoma espantose. Y la segunda vez que miró en el espejo que tenía el ave de ay a un poco vio muchedumbre de gente junta que venían todos armados encima de caballos. Y luego Motecucoma mando llamar a los agureros y adivinos y preguntolos no sabeys que es esto que e visto? Que viese mucha gente junta. Y antes que respondiesen los adivinos desapareció el ave y no respondieron nada.2

complex.\textsuperscript{4} However, textual and pictorial sources belie the value of these objects in Mesoamerican art production and cosmovision, where they functioned not only as the symbolic paraphernalia of certain gods, but also as divinatory tools and luxury possessions. In this paper I would like to investigate some themes relating to the function of mirrors in Aztec material culture, particularly the ways in which mirrors participated in Aztec vision as surfaces of reflection and as windows onto another world. Mirrors privilege a specific Mesoamerican aesthetic that is not merely connected to the brilliant appeal of polished surface and precious material. Rather, the presence of these objects in specifically ritual contexts signifies their participation in a hierarchy of ways of seeing, as he or she whom the mirror reflects transforms into an active agent of esoteric knowledge and power. The mirror is thus transformed into a site of reciprocal epistemologies.

Furthermore, I will argue that the kind of knowledge that can be obtained from the mirror depends not only on who is doing the looking; it is also dependent on what specific type of mirror they are looking at. In order to demonstrate this I will compare two types of Aztec mirrors: the obsidian mirror and the turquoise mosaic mirror or plaque. I argue that these mirrors, while they both reflect the power of their respective supernatural possessors as well as those who learn to read their surfaces—namely priests and rulers—they signify two distinct kinds of light and reflective knowledge as well. While the obsidian mirror reflects, according to Nicholas Saunders, the dark light of Tezcatlipoca associated with nighttime and sorcery, I speculate that the turquoise mosaic mirror or plaque may be associated with solar imagery. It may also be linked to the Mexica rulers, who incorporated turquoise into their royal costume in a variety of ways, indicating the symbolic value of this precious stone in the ontological hierarchy of Empire.\textsuperscript{5} In order to examine this hypothesis, I will look at descriptions of mirrors in some textual sources, namely Sahagún, the \textit{Treatise on Superstitions} written by the 17\textsuperscript{th} century priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, an Inquisition record, the \textit{Crónica Mexicana} written by Alvarado Tezozomoc, and the \textit{History of the Indies} written by Fray Diego de Durán. For pictorial sources I will examine some images from the

\textsuperscript{4} I learned this in a recent conversation with Dr. Lopez Lujan.

Codex Borgia, glyphs on imperial sculptures, as well as specific extant examples of obsidian and turquoise discs and encrusted mirrors.

Mirrors in Mesoamerica—Some Background

While the oldest known mirrors in the Americas correspond to Andean cultures, the oldest Mesoamerican example comes from the Olmec culture and has been carbon dated to around 3,130 years old. Examples of mirrors from archaeological sites range in size and shape, with the majority presenting a round, concave structure with a few examples presenting a convex structure. Several distinct materials were used to create mirrors, each with varying degrees of reflectivity. Those made of iron pyrite have the highest degree of reflectivity of around 55%; however, because iron pyrite deteriorates over time, few preserved examples of these survive. Several examples of badly corroded mirrors from the Classic period at Teotihuanacan have been mistaken for paint pots, pot lids, or resin-painted discs. Other materials used to create mirrors include Magnetite, Hematite, Mica, Quartz, Obsidian, Jade, Turquoise, and water, the last of which is most likely the oldest form of mirror and the prototype for the development of mineral mirrors. Water mirrors may have evolved from the observation of pools of rain water or ground water, whose glistening surfaces must have inspired nighttime observers as they wondered at the reflections of the heavens on the otherwise pitch dark surface of the earth. Obsidian mirrors, on the other hand, were purposely fashioned out of a single piece of stone, as were other examples of hard stone mirrors. These would have been hewn out of a larger piece before being flaked down to the appropriate size. Finally, the mirror would be burnished and polished until the desired reflectivity was achieved.

Pyrite mirrors and the turquoise plaques, on the other hand, were often composite designs created out of numerous fragments of stone glued to a stone or wooden backing in various layers of design. For the creation of

---

6 Lunazzi, 2.
7 Ibid., 2.
9 Taube, 170.
10 Lunazzi, 8.
11 Examples of uniform pyrite mirrors are known, see Nelson, et al, 2-3.
these objects, several layers of distinct mineral were employed, consisting mostly in hematite, silicon, carbon, potassium, iron, aluminum, and pyrite. These mirrors were constructed in layers, with a backing of pyrite, followed by a middle layer of binding material composed of a clay into which was worked a final layer of finely crushed pyrite. Much like in the creation of ceramics, these mirrors would have been baked and burnished. Because the layers could be manipulated according to the desires of the artisan, the size of these composite mirrors tends to vary greatly, while the extant obsidian mirrors tend to be of a much smaller size, with several rectangular rather than circular extant examples. The turquoise plaques or turquoise encrusted mirrors may have required several additional steps to achieve the desired complexity of adornment. For turquoise portions of the mirror, it appears that the stone was applied to a backing of some kind, following the tradition of mosaic-making.

While the various functions of the mirrors remain poorly understood, they may have had a utilitarian purpose in some instances, such as self-contemplation, performances, communication, and as fire-starters. On the surfaces of painted Mayan vessels, for example, the use of mirrors in everyday and ritual life is portrayed with a poignant sort of grace: mirrors are portrayed in dancing scenes (Figure 2); they are presented in the throne room (Figure 3); and they figure into vanity scenes where elites primp themselves as they dress, emphasizing their ubiquity in everyday Mayan visual culture (Figure 3). As luxury possessions, mirrors seem to have fascinated the Maya as they did other Mesoamerican societies. They are uncovered in burials, on the sides of temples, and in other important archaeological contexts, indicating a pan-Mesoamerican preference for these objects. Indeed, the fascination with the polished surface coincides on some level with a fascination with the Self, as mirrors provide the unprecedented opportunity to review one’s own visage in an intimate setting, discovering the detailed features of the gazer’s body, wondering at the meaning of their inner life. This knowledge of the Self is a universal obsession from Narcissus to the present day, where our daily routines are ruled to some extent by the time we gaze at ourselves on the shimmering surface of mirrors. Even the legend of the vampire, who is said to have no

---

12 Ibid., 2-3.
13 Ibid., 4.
14 Ibid., 4.
15 Personal communication, Dr. Elizabeth Boone.
16 Ibid., 2.
reflection, reveals the way in which humanity has come to understand its own essence vis-à-vis the experience of reflection.

Although it is tempting to detain ourselves on the precious, shining surface of these objects, the cultural value of mirrors was not always inextricably linked to their ability to reveal intimate, discrete truths, as demonstrated by the numerous references made to mirrors in philosophical conceptions of the universe as well as in oral tradition. Alfredo López-Austin has offered the interpretation that the Aztecs may have envisioned the world itself as an enormous mirror, located on the torso of the earth diety Mayahuel (Figure 5); Karl Taube reiterates this theory as well in his analysis of the iconography of mirrors at Teotihuacan, where mirrors appear to be omnipresent in sculpted and painted examples. As in the greenstone Mayahuel example, circular mirrors are commonly positioned on the chest of carved figures.

The Divinatory Use of Mirrors

In the ritual context, however, the meaning and function of mirrors was somewhat more complex, as they were used as divinatory instruments for scrying. Scrying is a modern term, derived from the English term “descry,” meaning to reveal, and perhaps does not accurately convey the Mesoamerican practice of divination with reflective surfaces. Nonetheless, it may be a useful starting point and a helpful comparative tool as I progress in my analysis of Aztec mirrors. In much of the literature discussing the divinatory use of mirrors, pools of water, crystal balls, or other reflective surfaces, this term is used to indicate the practice of seeing the future and other kinds of paranormal activities reflected on the surface of a shiny object. Thus, the practice itself is etymologically as well as physically linked with material objects whose particular aesthetic qualities—shiny, unblemished surface, even coloration, weight, and beauty—have a direct relationship with the object’s aura.

---

18 Alfredo López-Austin, “Iconografía México. El monolito verde del templo mayor” in Anales de Antropología 16 (1979): pp. 133-153. López-Austin avers that the circular disc located on the greenstone monolith, who he interprets as the earth diety Mayahuel, is a representation of a mirror: “…el espejo que Mayahuel tiene sobre su vientre…representa la superficie de la tierra,” 145. On page 149 he claims that the earth was conceived of more specifically as a large mirror of water: “La superficie de la Tierra…se concebía como un enorme espejo de agua del que se elevaba la nube de vapor.”

19 Taube, 193.
20 Ibid., 178.
Few detailed descriptions regarding the specific use of mirrors were recorded during the early colonial period, making it difficult to understand the ways in which they might have been used for divinatory or other purposes. It has often been assumed that a practice quite similar to scrying was employed, wherein the possessor of the mirror would gaze at the surface and read the strange distortions or patterns of reflections. This process may have been accompanied with the blowing of ritual tobacco, incense, chanting, the reading of codices, physical manipulating of the supplicant, or other varieties of ceremonial behavior. In this way, the mirror must be understood as an object that permits the multi-sensorial participation of human agents. The smell of smoke, the sounds of chanting, the suspense of approaching the dark, shining surface, would have contributed to an overpowering synesthesiac experience, permitting specialists to access the world of the glistening mirror.\(^22\)

Alongside with the anecdote told by Sahagún, traces and threads in the archives point towards specific uses and attributes of mirrors used at the time of conquest. In the *Procesos de Indios Idólatras y Hechiceros* recorded during the 16\(^{th}\) century, a case was registered by the Inquisition regarding a certain Don Pedro, known among the natives as “el Señor de Tacuba, Teteplanquetzcaci” (The Lord of Tacuba, known as Teteplanquetzcaci). Don Pedro, who was evidently a nobleman of great prominence at the time of the Spanish invasion of Tenochtitlan, was said to have ordered an evacuation of the city after consulting his mirror, which foretold the destruction of the Mexica:

Don Pedro tenía un espejo que llamaban ellos *nahuatezcatl*, que quería decir espejo de adivinaciones o adivino, y encima del dicho cu, sacó el dicho Pedro en el presencia de Cuanacotzi, señor de Tezcuco, y de Ocuitzi, señor de Escapuzalco, y del dicho Pablo, y también lo había de ir a ver Cuathmotzi, y no pudo ir porque desmayó, y que aunque también estaba encima del cu; y la ceremonia se hizo a las espaldas de las casas de los idólos que encima del cu estaban, porque los xipianos andavan en el patio; y como el dicho Don Pedro dixo sus palabras de hechicerías o encantamientos, el espejo se escureció, y no había más de una partecilla clara en que se parecieron pocos maceguales; y llorando, el dicho Don Pedro, dixo al dicho Pablo: “digamos al Senor—que era Cuathemotzi—que nos baxemos porque a México hemos de perder;”

\(^{22}\) This, of course, is mere speculation. I am thinking of the divination practices described by Barbara Tedlock in *Time and the Highland Maya*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992) wherein she describes the multifaceted experience of learning and performing divination with seeds and crystals in a traditional Quiche community. Also see a short article also authored by Barbara Tedlock, *Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualization, Narrative, and Interpretation in Folklore*, Vol. 112 No. 2 (October 2001): pp. 189-197.
y así se baxaron todos: el espejo era grande y redondo, y que los llevo el dicho Señor de Tlacuba, porque era suyo.23

Don Pedro had a mirror that they called nahuatezcatl, which went divinatory mirror. Atop the temple, Pedro took this mirror out in the presence of Cuanacotzi, the Lord of Tezcuco, Ocuitzi, the Lord of Escapuzalco, and Pablo. He also tried to show it to Cuathmotzi, but could not, as he had fainted. He, too, was atop the temple where the ceremony was performed—behind the houses of the idols—because the Spaniards were roaming around the patio [main plaza]. Don Pablo said some enchantments, and the mirror darkened; there remained just a small part that remained clear in which appeared a few indigenous men. Crying, Don Pedro said to Pablo: “let us tell the Lord—who was Cuathemotzi—that we must depart from here because we shall lose Mexico.” And so all of them left; the mirror, which was large and round, was carried by the said Lord of Tlacuba, because it was his.

As in the case of Moctezuma’s strange bird, this mirror had the power to reveal the future of the Mexican lords and their subjects. Unlike the story of the omen, however, this anecdote provides specific evidence as to how the mirror was activated by the recitation of special spells as well as the way in which context and audience shaped these ritual performances. Furthermore, it indicates that these mirrors were considered to be special objects of possession that denote the social status of the owner. Don Pedro, a powerful lord, was the only character in the story able to correctly activate, interpret, and transport the object, because its power effectively signified the Lord’s own special talents and social privileges.

As late as the 17th century, evidence of divinatory mirrors attests to a prolonged attachment to the special qualities of these objects and confirms their use in ritual ceremony. However, the recorded evidence indicates at least a certain degree of evolution in the uses and concepts surrounding mirrors, as native diviners engineered creative responses to the massive extirpation campaigns of the colonial period. For example, mirrors were evoked linguistically in prayers or spells in order to diagnose a patient or to view across long distances and through time, similar to the mirrors of Moctezuma and Don Pedro. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, a priest involved heavily in conversion efforts, recorded several spells from the Guerrero and Morelos regions of Mexico in the early 17th century that include multiple references to divinatory mirrors, even in instances where the priest does not make it clear whether or not a mirror was used in the ceremony.24 For example, in a spell for maize divination, the doctor

24 See Alarcon’s comments on ceremonies and spells in Michael D. Coe and Gordon Whittaker, Aztec Sorcerers in Seventeenth Century Mexico: The Treatise on Superstitions by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, (Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, State University of New York at Albany, 1982). In fact, this strange omission seems problematic, as
or *ticitl* was said to recite the following words: “Soon I shall see/In my book/In my mirror./If he comes across a little potion,/Or worsens./I shall see/In my book./In my mirror.”

This spell indicates that mirrors were not only valuable as a symbolic accoutrement to ritual activities, but also that they were understood as surfaces to be read. The placement of the word “book” in the same linguistic register as that of “mirror” demonstrates the parallel interpretations and cultural links that existed between these two objects. This would also seem to corroborate my hypothesis that originally, mirrors and divinatory codices may have been employed as complementary elements in divinatory ceremonies. Although no archaeological evidence thus far has supplied a greater understanding of the exact function of mirrors in ceremonies, the linguistic evidence provided in Alarcon’s treatise confirms the continued ceremonial value of these elusive accouterments through the centuries.

**Mirrors in Fashion**

In other instances, it appears that mirrors were incorporated to Mesoamerican fashion, constituting yet another layer of cultural meaning. Yet, it is important to point out that the esoteric and religious associations may have easily carried over its incorporation into ritual costume where the presence of a mirror, affixed either to the back, the chest, or the forehead, denoted the societal prominence of the wearer. In the Codex Borgia and elsewhere in Aztec pictographic sources, mirrors are common in the regalia of the gods, a fashion which may have been mimicked by the elites for ritual performances and other purposes (see Figures 8 and 9). Karl Taube cites examples of the use of mirrors in Teotihuacan as a part of elite costume, worn either at the small of the back, it does not allow modern readers to identify the specific uses of mirrors in these instances. Whether or not the mirror was actually used in all of these ceremonies, its linguistic presence indicates to me that the prayers evolved from ceremonies where mirrors were used. Following the conquest, linguistic preservation of rituals may help us understand Precolumbian treatment of objects. However, the lack of material evidence makes it impossible to confirm this speculation. Other examples of linguistic preservation of Precolumbian rituals are readily noticeable in Alarcon’s treatise, such as the reference to Copal, Fire, etc. The priest, however, seems to have been largely unconcerned with the ethnographic value of his work, as his commentaries relate mostly to idolatry and a Christian interpretation of the events he witnessed. Nonetheless, this treatise is a valuable resource that must be read carefully to tease out cultural information.

25 Ibid., 214.
26 Taube, 197.
the chest, or in the headdress (see Figure 7). Furthermore, Aztec warriors are known to have attached mirrors to their backs in preparation for ritual battles. It is perhaps all too tempting to imagine the stunning effect of a Jaguar warrior, dressed head to toe in his magnificent costume, raising his glinting obsidian club high under the noon sky while the mirror on his back blazed with the brilliance of the sun as he issued a piercing battle cry, a magnificent and bizarre sight to behold.

The Aesthetics of Mirrors

That mirrors are visually intriguing—beautiful, in fact—-at as well as powerful is not accidental. The aesthetic role of mirrors in Mesoamerican culture cannot be understated, as their reflective qualities connect directly with their cosmological associations with various forms of sacred light. For the Aztec, the fascination with shimmering objects—-from the iridescent beauty of the quetzal feather, the deep green glow of greenstone, the piercing, shining black of jet, the unparalleled glimmer of multitudes of colored obsidians, which ranged from green, to brown, to black, conveys a distinct aesthetic that prizes smooth, richly colored and reflective surfaces. Indeed, it has not gone unnoticed that the indigenous Mexicans were often willing to trade quantities of gold for glass beads, shards of porcelain, and other shiny objects that were considered of little relative value to the Spaniards who brought them. While it may be difficult for a modern reader to comprehend the disjuncture between European forms of value and Mesoamerican forms of value, it is possible to understand how particular kinds of material beauty participated in and evoked a distinct vision of cosmological realities for the Aztec. As Nicholas J. Saunders notes “spiritual essence, manifested as brilliance, inhered in the celestial bodies, meteorological phenomena, fire, water, metals, minerals, shells, ceramics, feathers, bone, blood, and semen, amongst other things. Despite a multiplicity of individual significances, all revealed their inner sacredness by displaying light as ‘surface glitter.’” These glittering essences became more than symbolic visual indicators of

27 Ibid., 174.
28 Personal communication, Willem Vanessendelft.
30 Ibid., 226.
sacrality, as they were incorporated increasingly into a hierarchy of vision, wherein the possessor of the sacred, shiny object, was imbued with societal and cosmological associations of solar and sacred power.

**Mirrors and Sight**

For the Aztecs, brilliance as an aesthetic preference was connected to cosmovision, as the preservation of human existence relied on the continued motion of the sun through the sky, which ensured the cycles of planting and harvesting, birth and death. The Aztecs also placed a premium on the importance of starlight, moonlight, and the first rays of Venus, the morning star, which, according to Eduard Seler, pierced through the darkness like darts. Humans were also believed to contain a sacred light within them that was associated with their *tonalli*, their essence or soul, which is derived from the root word *tona* which López Austin translates as “to irradiate.” This belief in the existence of an emanating inner life-force or light is further reflected in the writings of Alarcón, who recorded a divination spell in his treatise on superstitions for how to diagnose the state of a child’s *tonalli*:

…they place on the ground a deep vessel with water, and they put the child over it so as to make a judgment according to what appears in the water…they place the child over the water, and if they see that the child’s face is dark in it, as if it were covered by a shadow, they judge the opposition and absence of his fate or fortune as certain. If the child’s face appears bright in the water, they say that the child is not sick or that the indisposition is very light, that he will get well without a cure or just with censing.

In this example, the use of a water mirror is capable of revealing the inner state of a person’s life-giving force, which is ultimately tied to the act of seeing. On folio 63r of Codex Mendoza (Figure 6), which shows a priest gazing to the heavens, a projected eyeball darts across the page followed progressive, dotted strokes. Tellingly, the glyph for “eye” is equivalent to the glyph indicating the stars, emphasizing the idea of productive light and the correspondence between the realm of human existence and the celestial realms. In this example as in others, human vision is thus active and transformative rather than receptive. As Stephen Houston and Karl A. Taube note, “what is crucial here is that the eye is *procreative*. It not only receives images from the outer world,

---

31 Ibid., 226.
34 Coe and Whittaker, 223-224.
but positively affects and changes that world through the power of sight — in short, it behaves as an ‘emanating eye’ that establishes communion between internal will and external result.”

If vision is an action that is initiated by the viewer, then the reflected image indicates a reciprocal exchange with the mirror or brilliant surface, whose own sacred qualities permit access to new kinds of visual knowledge that cannot be attained otherwise. That this knowledge is reflective also indicates how that visual knowledge is specific and selective. The divine mirror therefore privileges a hierarchy of vision that invites select persons--diviners, priests, and rulers, into a conversation with numinous powers. The artistic qualities of the mirror enhance these divinatory connotations, producing stunning images that appear to float above the surface of the object itself. Such mirrors may have been useful in performance rituals, whose illusory properties were capable of producing spectacles that seem disembodied from the surface on which they are reflected.

These aesthetic characteristics seem to be directly associated with vision on both an iconographic as well as a conceptual level. In Book 10 of the Florentine Codex, both the eye and pupil are glossed as tezcactl, which means mirror. For the Maya, the pupils of the square-eyed gods, particularly Itzamna the sun god and aged creator, are denoted by the sign for mirror, which is nen; this symbol can also be found on the brows of other deities. Alarcon’s treatise provides yet another example wherein eyes and mirrors are conflated in a healing prayer for lost eyesight: “Well now, please come forth,/1 Serpent/ 2 Serpent/ 3 Serpent/ 4 Serpent/ Why do you harm/ the enchanted mirror,/ The enchanted eye?” The difrasism “the enchanted mirror, the enchanted eye” places the two nouns “eye” and “mirror” in the same register, thereby implying a symbiosis between the two and their mutual roles in creating a vision of the world that unites the human, corporeal aspect to that of the divine. In other words, eyes and mirrors are prized as conduits and generators of sacred knowledge, whose both active and reflective qualities forge a connection between the earthly realm and the celestial.

35 Houston and Taube, 281.  
36 Lunazzi, 4.  
37 Ibid., 4.  
38 Quoted in Taube, 181.  
39 Houston and Taube, 283-284.  
40 Coe and Whittaker, 234.
At Teotihuacan, mirrors prominently figure in a central position on the forehead of the headdresses of rulers as if in reference to the eye (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{41} In certain instances, these mirrors are rendered stylistically to appear as eyes in the central motif.\textsuperscript{42} The Codex Borgia in particular demonstrates a wide array of headdresses wherein mirrors figure prominently and in a variety of styles and configuration. Cecilia Klein has also postulated that the round shape common to Tlaloc iconography may reference mirrors,\textsuperscript{43} which would be supported by his association with water, the primitive form of mirrors. On plate 67 of the Codex Borgia (Figure 8), the conflation of Tlaloc’s eyes with mirror iconography is particularly evident. His eye, which is rendered as a half circle, is set in a dark blue circular shape divided into fourths with four smaller circles corresponding to each quadrant. Two curling lines emit from this circular shape, reminiscent of smoke, which is used to denote mirrors in other examples of specifically Aztec mirror-associated iconography. When compared with the mirror found on Tezcatlipoca’s headdress on plate 69 of the Codex Borgia (Figure 9), the similarities are quite striking.\textsuperscript{44}

The association between eyes and mirrors is well-documented in Teotihuacan art\textsuperscript{45} than in Aztec art, though this convention may have evolved earlier. One example of this artistic theme is a mask from Teotihuacan which bears two badly corroded iron pyrite eyes (Figure 10). This tradition appears to have been continued in Aztec art as well. Ximena Chávez Baldera has recently shown in a seminar paper on the recycling of skulls in Aztec art that pyrite mirrors were, in fact, commonly used in various effigies and sculptures for display and burial around the Templo Mayor complex.\textsuperscript{46} A particularly elaborate turquoise and jet mask from the British museum demonstrates the conflation of the eye and the mirror to an extraordinary effect (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{47} The mask, designed in the shape of a skull, is inset with two extremely well-preserved convex pyrite mirrors. Pyrite, as noted above, has the highest degree of reflectivity of all of the precious stones regarded by Mesoamerican ethnic groups, and

\textsuperscript{41} Taube, 181.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{44} Another interesting quality of the mirror on Tezcatlipoca’s headdress on plate 69 of the Codex Borgia is that it contains a water symbol, perhaps another referent to water mirrors or Tlaloc.
\textsuperscript{45} See Taube, 163-204.
\textsuperscript{46} Personal communication, Ximena Chavez Baldera.
\textsuperscript{47} Ximena Chavez also suggested a novel perspective on the provenance of this mask. It has been interpreted as a representation of Tezcatlipoca due to the striped patterns. However, this remains to be corroborated. The mask may, in fact, be Mixtec in origin.
was prominently used in mirrors in examples from the Olmec culture, the Maya, Teotihuacan, and the Aztec. As Nicholas Saunders has noted, such reflective eyes might have invoked the eyes of the jaguar, whose own reflective eyes enable powerful night vision.\textsuperscript{48} In the case of this particular mask, whose provenance remains the object of speculation, the eyes may or may not refer to the Jaguar; however, the parallels between reflectivity, sight, and the strange properties of nocturnal vision are intriguing.

**Tezcatlipoca and the Obsidian Mirror**

The jaguar, or Tepeyollotl, the heart of the mountain, of course, is the nahualli of the god Tezcatlipoca, whose eponymous possession, the dark mirror, was considered a metaphor for rulership and power.\textsuperscript{49} On plate 17 of the Codex Borgia (Figure 12), Tezcatlipoca is depicted with his typical smoking mirror foot, transmutated into part jaguar, two symbols which were deemed as metonymic diagnostic references to the wily god. Although the jaguar symbol in this design is correctly interpreted as a date sign by Elizabeth Boone,\textsuperscript{50} the way in which the artist chose to overlap the date with the mirror foot is noteworthy, as it implies a certain mutability in the possible way in which this image was meant to be read.

Tezcatlipoca, like his nahualli counterpart, had nocturnal propensities and magical properties that allowed him to transcend the strictures that bounded human activity. He was believed to observe the world and human fate, gazing into his divinatory mirror from his temple, or “house of mirrors”\textsuperscript{51} which was “black as jet,”\textsuperscript{52} a material which was called “precious, rare, like the special attribute of a god [Tezcatlipoca].”\textsuperscript{53} Jet, “perfect in its blackness” was a sacred color, associated with the sorceric deity as well as priests who covered themselves in black pitch for ceremonies.\textsuperscript{54} The color black was not only tied to the divine nature of the wearer, but also may

\textsuperscript{48} Saunders, A Dark Light, 224
\textsuperscript{50} Personal Communication, Dr. Elizabeth Boone.
\textsuperscript{54} This black unguent was a delightful mixture of vegetal materials, scorpions, spiders, serpents, and other unimaginable components. One wonders how this must have felt to apply—perhaps stinging or burning the wearer. See Jeannette Favrot
have allowed the god or priest to intervene in the world of the living undetected, as if the transformative power of their shadowy bodies permitted them access to a transliminal world bridging the divine with the mundane.\textsuperscript{55}

However, Tezcatlipoca was identified with another kind of stone, that which was used to make mirrors. Sahagún’s informants do not specify the common material used for mirror-making, naming this stone simply “mirror stone,” perhaps in deference to the special qualities attributed to this type of object (Figure 22).\textsuperscript{56} It is more probable, however, that this “mirror stone” refers to a number of materials used for mirror production, including pyrite, hematite, obsidian, and so forth. The material evidence indicates that obsidian was the predominate stone used to create mirrors in the Late Postclassic period, with several examples housed at museums in the Americas and Europe. The British museum, for example, holds a small, round obsidian mirror used by a royal esoteric advisor (Figure 13) while the Mesoamerican Research Institute (MARI) at Tulane University houses a small obsidian mirror of Maya origin. Elizabeth Boone reports several extant examples of rectangular-shaped mirrors, though the pictorial depiction of mirrors favors round shapes.

Interestingly, images of mirrors in the codices are mostly dark grey or black, indicating a probability that they are depictions of black obsidian mirrors. Perhaps dark obsidian, or iztli, similar in color and luster to jet,\textsuperscript{57} may have favorably compared symbolically to this precious stone known as teotetl or god-stone. The color black, considered sacred in Aztec visual culture, may have also paralleled the nocturnal associations of Tezcatlipoca’s nahualli, the black jaguar, and night sky which may have carried symbolic connotations related to black obsidian. The god’s association with obsidian, obscurity, vision, esoteric knowledge, and mirrors is thus central to understanding the metaphysical connotations embodied in the practice of scrying using obsidian objects.

Obsidian, was ubiquitous in Aztec life and was a central component of material culture where it was used as tools, as weapons in ritual combat, and as sacrificial instruments which, according to Durán, were thought to be

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{55} Sahagún, The Florentine Codex: Book 11, 228.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 228
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{57} Although obsidian is known to appear in several differing colors, it appears that the extant mirrors employed black obsidian. Personal communication, Dr. Elizabeth Boone.
\end{flushright}
crafted from obsidian at Tezcatlipoca’s temple. In Book 11 of the Florentine Codex, Sahagun translates the phrase tentli-iztli, which means to “sacrifice and cut one’s lips before the idols,” iztli meaning “obsidian.” Thus, this particular act of sacrifice became directly associated linguistically to obsidian and Tezcatlipoca. Obsidian blades are one of the primary objects found in sacrificial offerings at the Templo Mayor, many of them which have been embellished for ritual purposes. These objects may have been used for personal blood-letting rituals or heart sacrifices that were thought to keep the sun in motion and feed the earth-monster, Tlatecuhtli, who was thought to depend on human bloods and hearts for sustenance and who would, in exchange for human flesh, ensure the fertility of crops. In this way, obsidian was instrumental in bridging the gap between humans and the cosmos through blood-letting and sacrifice, a tradition which Brundage avers to have been initiated by Tezcatlipoca himself.

Furthermore, obsidian was a central component in various kinds of sorcery, which also served to connect humanity to the unknown. Obsidian and sorcery, however, had a dark side, as did Tezcatlipoca, the necromancer’s patron. Sahagún describes, for example, a technique of preventing sorceric attacks, which required the victim to place an obsidian blade in a pool of water at night, which would disable the evildoer.

At night walked demons—perchance wizards and sorcerers—where they harmed one in one’s home. When the householders saw them, when perhaps some [demon] so [would] harm them, they then placed an obsidian knife in water, behind the door, or in the courtyard. They laid it down at night. They said and it was believed that there the demons and sorcerers would look at their reflections when they would harm one, or there would be death, or sickness would come upon the people.

At once they fled; nevermore would they come to harm one when they had seen the obsidian knife resting in water.

Interestingly, the use of light-colored stone for mirrors was considered acceptable for noblemen, who would have the stone finely polished to use in acts of self-contemplation. On the other hand, dark obsidian mirrors were regarded as potentially dangerous and could sinisterly distort one’s reflection:

---

58 Durán, Book of the Gods, 98.
59 Sahagún, Florentine Codex, Book 11, 227.
60 Saunders, A Dark Light, 224. It is also interesting to note how obsidian blades become conflated with speech relating to sacrificial acts as noted in a recent seminar presentation by Willem Vanessendelft.
61 Personal Communication, Dr. Leonardo Lopez-Lujan.
62 Brundage, 85.
The black one—this one is not good. It is not to look into; it does not make one appear good. It is one (so they say) which contends with one’s face. When someone uses such a mirror, from it is to be seen a distorted mouth, swollen eyelids, thick lips, a large mouth. They say it is an ugly mirror, a mirror which contends with one’s face.64

The dark mirror was reserved for esoteric practices and could only be properly used by a person trained for that purpose. As such, obsidian mirrors were not appropriate instruments in which to witness the presence of the world, but rather could only be used to transcend the boundaries of space and time. These mirrors, therefore, privilege a specific kind of vision that, untrained, could be insidious and unwieldy.

Interestingly, obsidian was also used medicinally in Precolumbian times and still is to this day among indigenous peoples of central Mexico. According to Francisco Hernández, the first doctor to come to the Americas, indigenous people ground obsidian into a fine powder which they used to remove cataracts and sharpen vision.65 This emphasis on vision may yet again evoke the Jaguar, whose own night vision was likened to the reflective and numinous qualities of polished stone. This practice may also reference the numinous power of obsidian as well; in this way, the practical use of obsidian in relationship to vision once again underscores the association between sight, esoteric powers, and shiny materials, indicating the manner in which this material literally infiltrated Aztec vision on multiple frequencies, from the corporeal, to the practical, to the spiritual.

The presence of obsidian in the landscape, as a silicone-based glass generated by volcanic activity, was also a central component in Aztec spiritual and political geography. Several settlements bear the name iztli, meaning obsidian, in their toponyms, including Ytztepepexic, which was founded as an obsidian mine.66 The Pachuca mines near Hidalgo were regarded as particularly significant, producing the finest quality of dark green obsidian that was preferred by the Mexica and figured significantly in the tribute system wherein obsidian reigned supreme as a material staple.67 The toponym for one of the main settlement near the mine, Ytzcohuetzin, further signifies this linguistic and metaphysical connection between the landscape and the Mesoamerican ritual practices. As a final example, the shrine dedicated to Tezcatlipoca was located on the slopes of Popocatépetl,

64 Ibid., The Florentine Codex Book 11, 228.
65 Clark, 315.
66 Saunders, A Dark Light, 222.
meaning “smoking mountain.” When Motecuzoma sent his sorcerers to investigate the newly appeared Spaniards, they returned with a startling message, claiming that Tezcatlipoca had appeared to them in a saddle between two volcanic peaks, predicting the end of the world. Saunders furthermore points out a calendric connection between Tezcatlipoca and the fate of the Aztec, as the god’s feast was celebrated during the same time that the Spaniards lurked on the margins of Anahuac, making their way towards the heart of the empire.

The relationship of obsidian and volcanic activity underscores yet another element that contributed to the imaginative power of obsidian which, like the volcano from which it came, was thought to smoke. Aesthetically, this may refer to the murky quality of the images reflected on the surface, which are not nearly as sharp as those produced by iron pyrite mirrors. Elizabeth Boone mentions that this occluded light does, indeed, appear “smoky” and is a relevant aesthetic feature worthy of consideration. A colonial example of an obsidian mirror or portable altar from the Dumbarton Oaks exhibition demonstrates the strange dark light emanating from the surface, which looks like a dark pool of water or plunging abyss (Figure 14). When tilted, obsidian catches a cloudy or milky light, rendering images distorted, strange, and “smoky.”

The physical experience with obsidian, however, is also of interest in understanding its multivalent properties in Aztec cultural life. As tools of war and sacrifice, obsidian had particularly visceral associations and evoked the piercing of flesh, conquest, and suffering. Three of the nine levels of hell were populated by various obsidian torture devices, including an obsidian wind, obsidian cutting paths, and obsidian places of the dead. Obsidian may also have been used as an instrument of torture for unwieldy and dangerous individuals. In one particularly gruesome episode, an Aztec emperor is said to have punished priests by confining them in cages whose floors were lined with flaked obsidian shards. Here, they were starved and left to bleed to death.

---

68 Brundage, 87 and Saunders, A Dark Light, 225.
69 Saunders, A Dark Light, 225.
70 Saunders, A Dark Light, 225
71 Personal communication, Elizabeth Boone.
72 This object was most likely designed as a small, personal altar designed for a priest of the Franciscan order and was not meant to function as a divinatory mirror. Nonetheless, it provides an excellent example of the special qualities of obsidian surfaces. From Susan Toby Evans, Ancient Mexican Art at Dumbarton Oaks, No. 3, (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 76.
73 Quoted in Saunders, A Dark Light, 224
The transformative power of obsidian, which joined the world of humans with that of the sacred, is furthermore embodied in the way that obsidian is, in essence, a substance that undergoes extreme transformation in the bowels of the volcano that spew it out onto the earth. This process reflects the means by which humans may also be transformed by actions involving obsidian including sacrifice, physical torture, death, and the transcendence of time and space that is experienced in the ritual act of scrying. Obsidian, therefore, is a material with polysemic implications, engaging both the physical senses as well as conceptual and perceptual experiences of the Aztec people. Its’ role as a key component in divinatory mirrors, thus, must be regarded as flexible in meaning and function.

**Iconography of Mirrors in Aztec Art**

In iconographic depictions, obsidian mirrors are treated as patterned circular arrangements crowned with eagle down, stylized flourishes, and curling volutes meant to represent smoke. A mask of Tezcatlipoca from the Dumbarton Oaks Mesoamerican art collection exemplifies this mode of depiction (Figure 15). This mask was probably fashioned for a member of the royal family or a tlatoani, of whom Tezcatlipoca was a patron. This elegant and simple object depicts a young man with a close-fitting headdress. Above each of his two temples are the smoking mirror emblems. The mirror is adorned with eagle down, a symbol of sacrifice, and an elaborate and highly stylized smoke volute which seems to echo the pattern of the 2 Reed glyph on the reverse side of the mask.

In the Aztec Calendar, 2 Reed marks the beginning of the 5th sun and coincides with the birth of Tezcatlipoca. Furthermore, 2 Reed marks the end of the 52 year cycle, which is celebrated with the bundling of the years with the drilling of a new fire and sacrifices performed at nighttime. This festival reenacts the myth of Tezcatlipoca’s participation in the creation of fire for the 5th sun and the “smoking of the sky,” and therefore may have highlighted Tezcatlipoca’s importance to Aztec ritual and political life. On this day, Tezcatlipoca became the New Fire-lighter as well as an Underworld warrior as well as a sort of cadet to the sun patron, Huitzilopochtli. It has been furthermore suggested by Elizabeth Boone in a seminar that Tezcatlipoca may have been associated with

---

75 Evans, 69.
76 Ibid., 69.
78 Ibid., 97, 105.
a pre-Aztec history that was co-opted by Mexica rulers to grant legitimacy to their reign in the central valley.\textsuperscript{79} The ritual mask of Tezcatlipoca, therefore, may bear references to mythic history and the rise of the Aztec as products of both a nomadic, Chichimec past as well as a culturally developed, Toltec past. The presence of Tezcatlipoca in the ritual and visual culture of the tlatoani thus may have had an added mytho-political association that transcended the aesthetic and ritual value of mirrors.

The smoking obsidian mirror acts as a metonymic signifier for Tezcatlipoca in this example as in others, though with added dimensions. As patron of rulers, the smoking mirror god and his tell-tale smoking foot may have come to symbolize rulership, as exemplified by the iconographic program of the Tizoc stone carved during the rule of his successor, Ahuitzotl (Figure 16). Tizoc, who is shown in the act of capture, is dressed in Huitzilopochtli’s headdress, identifying him with the Mexica sun-god patron. His foot, however, is replaced with the glyph indicating smoke, an iconographic convention often connoting Tezcatlipoca and other deities associated with him.\textsuperscript{80} Other “capturing” figures depicted on the Tizoc stone similarly present the Huitzilopochtli headdress and smoking foot, thus effectively differentiating them from cruder dress of their captives. The dual presence of Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca identifiers may indicate the combined value of these two deities for the Aztec or, as Richard Townsend points out, smoke or mist may more generally refer to honor or command.\textsuperscript{81} The relationship between smoke, mirrors, and rulership is fitting, as Emily Umberger has also pointed out the role of the symbolic accoutrements depicted in the Tizoc stone as representative of an Aztec visual project of self-fashioning aimed at marking themselves as superior to the surrounding city-states they had conquered.\textsuperscript{82}

Self-fashioning and the celebration of important dates or actions are also pictorialized in several carved examples from the reign of Motecuzoma II. In 1507 the emperor marked the celebration of the New Fire ceremony with the initiation of a sculptural program that included many excellent examples of Aztec art, including a finely carved representation of a reed bundle, which symbolizes the end of the 52 year cycle, bearing

\textsuperscript{79} From a seminar with Elizabeth Boone, 12 March 2013.
\textsuperscript{80} Huitzilopochtli is also sometimes shown with a smoking foot.
the year glyph for 2 Reed (Figure 17). On the sides are carved the year glyph 1 Flint, symbolizing the birth of Huitzilopochtli and the sun, and the day glyph 1 Death, which references *teotleco,* “the rising of the god.” Both of these glyphs are adorned with elaborate smoking mirrors as well as the symbol for sacred war, fire-water.

This pictorial device is present on the *teocalli* stone (Figure 18), a ritual throne designed in the shape of a temple which was dedicated for the same event. On the front of the temple are representations of the god, Huitzilopochtli and Moctezuma with the year glyph 2 Reed. The sides of the temple throne are carved with the same 1 Flint and 1 Death year and day glyphs, respectively relating to the sun patron and the emperor. As in the reed bundle sculpture, these glyphs bear highly elaborate smoking mirrors and the symbols for sacred war. The presence of smoking mirrors in these symbolic pieces would seem, therefore, to emphasize the association of the smoking mirror with rulership, honor, and conquest as seen in the smoking feet of the Tizoc stone. In these instances, the smoking mirror must be understood in conversation with the other symbols present on the temple, all of which attest to the glory of Moctezuma, sacrifice, the New Fire, and sacred war.

Smoking mirrors were also carved into the monolithic monument known as the Sun Stone or Calendar Stone (Figure 19), appearing on the date glyph 1 Flint, in a reference to Huitzilopochtli as well as the date Glyph 4 Jaguar, which marks one of the previous 4 suns. These examples function as a sort of apotheosis for the emperor Moctezuma II, whose patronage of artistic projects was unprecedented in Tenochtitlan. Moctezuma II as a case study of Aztec aesthetic strategies is intriguing, as he concretized many of the iconographic tropes into a comprehensive, monumental production of material culture.

**Turquoise and Mirrors**

Another aspect worthy of note in Moctezuma’s particularly bombastic brand of visual culture are the repeated references to turquoise in the regal diadem that constitutes his name glyph as well as the presence of the quincunx solar symbol on many stone sculptures bearing solar references. Although I have discussed iconographic attributes of smoking mirrors as relating directly to obsidian up until this point, I would like to offer some remarks as to the possible existence of “smoking” mirrors referencing another precious stone, turquoise, or

---

84 Umberger, *Notions of Aztec History,* 94.
xihuitl. Sahagún’s informants attest to the cultural value of this material, claiming that it is “the property, the lot, of the god; and it means that it is much esteemed.”

Like obsidian, fine turquoise “smokes,” and is used in image-making: “I glue turquoise. I affix turquoise. I affix turquoise to the beam, to the image. I search for turquoise. I excavate turquoise. I removed turquoise.” Turquoise was regarded as a rare material that was particularly difficult to obtain. Few turquoise mines existed, and when it was discovered, it was destined for only the highest status objects of Aztec art.

Karl Taube argues that turquoise may have been used in composite or mosaic mirrors as a symbolic representation of the sun. In his *History of the Indies*, Durán also cites the creation of a mirror that was meant to represent the sun. Indeed, the word *xihuitl* references the solar calendar and is represented by the quincunx symbol that forms a band on the famous monolithic Stone of the Sun. The calendar stone also depicts two *xihucoatl*, or fire serpents, that encircle the central solar figure that Nicholson identifies as the solar god, Tonatiuh. Furthermore, it has been suggested to me in a seminar with Willem Vanessendelft that the quincunx symbol for turquoise was used to denote solar light. Taube, following the interpretation of Hebert Spinden, believes that these quincunx symbols stood in for real turquoise adornments after the style of Toltec turquoise encrusted pyrite mirrors, an argument which would be supported by these many examples where turquoise symbolism becomes mapped onto solar imagery. The Sun Stone, following this line of reasoning, may have made symbolic reference to these earlier mosaic sun mirrors or plaques, incorporating the quincunx symbol in the bands surrounding the central image much in the way that turquoise would have been inlaid around the central mirror on these solar discs.

---

86 Ibid., 223.
87 Taube, 193.
89 Taube, 194.
90 H.B. Nicholson astutely resolved a complicated debate over the central figure of the Sun Stone, which has been alternately interpreted as an earth monster, a nocturnal solar diety, Xiutecuhlti and so forth by various scholars. His assessment of these arguments and final conclusion that this figure should be read as Tonatiuh is quite convincing. See Nicholson, “The Problem of the Identification of the Central Image on the ‘Aztec Calendar Stone,’” in *Current Topics in Aztec Studies: Essays in Honor of Dr. H.B. Nicholson*, edited by Alana Cordy-Collins and Douglas Sharon, 3-14, (San Diego: San Diego Museum Papers, 1993), especially pages 7-14.
91 Personal Communication, Willem Vanessendelft.
92 Taube, 194.
A disk with turquoise mosaic inlay from the Dumbarton Oaks Exhibition catalogue provides an example of the use of turquoise in solar mosaic discs (Figure 20). This particular disc depicts the sun with three solar rays similar in style to the solar rays from the sun disc; however, because the image contains only three rays—which does not match the known solar iconography of the Aztecs—this solar disc has been deemed a fake. However, Susan Evans comments that four other examples of discs inlaid with mosaic decoration are extant, and that some examples have composite pyrite mirrors in their center (see Figure 23 for an example of an Aztec mosaic disc and Figure 24 for a Mayan example of a turquoise-encrusted pyrite mirror). The turquoise mosaic image itself, however, does not seem to have the reflective properties associated with obsidian and pyrite, which leads me to question Taube’s conclusion that such objects would have been understood purely as mirrors. Perhaps symbolically these mosaics functioned as references to mirrors, but their manifold symbolism undermines any attempt to envision these mosaics as mirrors in the traditional sense of the word.

In the case of the turquoise-encrusted pyrite mirrors as referenced by Evans, the case is more compelling. Often associated with solar imagery, these objects combine the technique of turquoise mosaic with the composite pyrite mirror featured at the center (see Figure 24). I argue that turquoise was used to adorn specific kinds of mirrors in order to indicate their preciousness, a status which was symbolic rather than utilitarian. Ultimately turquoise, as a rare and shiny stone, held a rarefied appeal that carried associations with solar imagery, as evidenced by its use in these solar discs as well as its linguistic presence in several words or phrases referencing the sun and fire such as xiuhuitl, xiuhcoatl, and so forth.

Turquoise also had an important imperial connotation for the Aztec rulers who incorporated both the color turquoise as well as turquoise encrusted clothing, jewelry, and the turquoise diadem into regal costume (Figure 22). The royal cape of the Mexica, for example, called the xiuhltalpiltimatl, has at its root the Nahua word for turquoise, xiuhuitl, as does the word for the turquoise diadem, the xiuhuitzolli. The value of turquoise was thought to originate from the Toltec, whose lapidarians constructed fine works of art and buildings using the

---

93 Evans, 183.
94 I have included an example of unknown provenance for a visual (Figure 21) that seems to compare nicely with Evans’s assessment on page 183.
95 Aguilera, 3.
96 Ibid., 3, 7.
stone. It is even said that Quetzalcoatl resided in a building encrusted with turquoise mosaics. The Toltec were also thought to dress in clothing embroidered with the precious stone and wore sandals and other materials that were painted blue.

Alvarado Tezozomoc describes in detail throughout his chronicle the elaborate dress of the successive Aztec rulers and the overwhelming presence of turquoise in their garments; their fashionable obsession with all things turquoise appears to have been adopted from their Toltec predecessors to suit the sartorial needs of self-fashioning for the new central valley potentates. For example, Tezozomoc describes the regalia bequeathed to Tizoc, which included the xiuhuitzolli (turquoise diadem), the yacaxihuitl (the turquoise nose-plug), and a beautiful “manta de neuqen azul, en medio pintado un sol de oro, que le llaman xihayatl, y debajo de esta manta, otra muy rica, también le pusieron su media mitra azul, sembrada en ella mucha pedrería...” Other ceremonies marking the conquest of nearby city-states or other rituals of state are accompanied by similarly detailed descriptions in the account that attest to the material preoccupations of the Mexica lords, for whom turquoise and solar imagery seems to have figured quite prominently as a central component to their visualized sense of regal authority.

However, because of the presence of turquoise or turquoise symbolism in specifically solar contexts, it may be possible to discuss xihuitl as having a valuable presence in sun imagery that provided a symbolic link between state power and the cosmos. Its incorporation into the regalia of the ruler may have referenced the Toltec past, but I argue that the inclusion of turquoise into Mexica dress and state art might have also visually placed the king as mediator between his subjects and the motion of the sun. The king was the responsible figure for scheduling appropriate sacrificial rituals, sacred warfare, and other activities that would ensure the continued motion of the sun across the sky, the life pulse of humanity. The shape of the turquoise diadem, with its exaggerated triangular shape protruding so notably from the rest of the head-piece, seems to echo the shape of the solar ray and may have been a reference to this iconography. Because of these reasons, I speculate that the presence of turquoise may have had a symbolic connection to sun symbolism as well as Toltec heritage, making

---

97 Ibid., 7.
98 Ibid., 6.
99 Alvarado Tezozomoc, Crónica Mexicana precedida por el Códice Ramírez (1550-1600), (Mexico: Porrua, 1980), 438.
the costume of the Mexica ruler a complex visual statement that implied both a mythic vision of history while it expressed a distinctly Aztec cosmovision. If I am correct, it would be fitting to aver that the turquoise mosaic plaque or mirror would have certainly figured into this complex ontology and may have been directly associated with rulers.

**Conclusion**

While I am unable to confirm the use of specifically turquoise solar mirrors in ceremonies nor can I assert with confidence the specific uses of the obsidian mirror of Tezcatlipoca, I do argue that the materials used to construct these objects carried a wealth of symbolism and cultural knowledge that changed the meaning of their function as mirrors or mosaics. Obsidian mirrors, which have been discussed in the literature, are clearly connected to the sorceric practices and emphasize the transformative powers of its patron, Tezcatlipoca. The possessors of such mirrors, therefore, would have pertained to a hierarchical order of vision and sight that privileged esoteric knowledge and transformative capabilities. On the other hand, mirrors encrusted with turquoise, or mosaic discs, may emphasize solar symbolism, which is furthermore echoed in turquoise’s overwhelming presence in Mexica regal garb. Those who were permitted contact with such precious objects would have understood their regal and solar associations, creating a nexus of meaning wherein a hierarchy of vision was predicated on notions of state power within the greater cosmological order.

Little research has been dedicated to deciphering the symbolism of Aztec mirrors or the cultural biographies of the materials used in their creation. This paper, therefore, is a reflection on the possibilities of interpretation, as I have attempted to demonstrate the synesthésiac and epistemological properties of mirrors. In the complex artistic strategies of Mesoamerican societies, wherein distinct kinds of knowledge were associated with the symbolic accoutrements of cultural value, the sensorial experience of vision became blurred with notions of hierophany. We can understand mirrors, therefore, from a point of view that takes into account both the metaphysical concepts that were attached to their function in ritual contexts as well as the kinds of cultural value that were attached to their materiality. Linking together these kinds of interpretations may be a productive way to think about the junctures between Aztec cosmovision and aesthetics.
In a recent discussion, Dr. Leonardo López-Lujan revealed to me the discovery of an underground hallway at Teotihuacan whose walls, floors, and ceilings were constructed entirely of composite pyrite material. This veritable hall of mirrors is not only an incredible find for archaeologists and art historians—rather, it is a stunning metaphor for the study of Mesoamerican art and cosmology as a whole. The archaeologists have not made their way to the end of that tunnel, and no one is quite sure what to expect when that goal is finally achieved—if, indeed, it ever will be.

Figure 1. Illustration from the Seventh Omen of the Florentine Codex, Book 12

Figure 2. Dancing scene with mirror (lower left corner). Vessel K5233 from Justin Kerr’s Mayan vase database, www.mayavase.com
Figure 3. Mirror in the throne room. Vessel K625 in Justin Kerr’s online Mayan vase database: www.mayavase.com

Figure 4. Elites primping with mirror. Vessel K1454 in Justin Kerr’s online Mayan vase database: www.mayavase.com
Figure 5. The Greenstone Goddess, “Mayahuel,” Museo de Antropología, Mexico.

Figure 6. Folio 63r from the Codex Mendoza
Figure 7. Mural of a headdress with a mirror, Teotihuacan.

Figure 8. Plate 67 of the Codex Borgia with Tlaloc (lower right) with mirror-esque eyes.
Figure 9. Plate 69 of the Codex Borgia with Tezcatlipoca (upper right) with mirror in headdress

Figure 10. Mask from Teotihuacan with badly corroded pyrite eyes (Dumbarton Oaks)
Figure 11. Skull mask with pyrite eyes (Tezcatlipoca?) from the British Museum

Figure 12. Plate 17 from the Codex Borgia, Tezcatlipoca (shown with a smoking mirror foot and a jaguar date glyph on the bottom center)
Figure 13. Obsidian Mirror from the British Museum

Figure 14. Colonial Altar/Portable Mirror from Dumbarton Oaks
Figures 15 a & b. Mask of Tezcatlipoca (front and back) from Dumbarton Oaks.
Figure 16. Line drawing of the Tizoc Stone

Figures 17a &b. Reed bundle sculpture showing the glyph for 1 Reed (top) and 1 Death (bottom).
Figures 18a & b. Line drawing of the teocalli stone, showing the glyphs 1 Death (top) and 1 Reed (bottom).
Figure 19. The Stone of Sun or “Calendar Stone”

Figure 20. Turquoise mosaic solar disc (probably a fake) from Dumbarton Oaks.
Figure 21. Solar disc with central pyrite mirror (badly corroded) and turquoise mosaics. While the provenance of this image may not be Aztec, it provides a good visualization for similar discs described by Susan Toby Evans in the Dumbarton Oaks catalogue.

Figure 21. Folio 16r showing Motecuzoma wearing his turquoise diadem accompanied by his name glyph, which features a diadem and turquoise nose plug, accoutrements of Mexica rulers
Figure 22. Artisans working mirror stone in the Florentine Codex. Lower center—dark mirror stone (obsidian?) and middle left—light mirror stone (pyrite?)

Figure 23. Example of a turquoise mosaic disc from the British Museum.
Figure 24. Turquoise mosaic disc with pyrite mirror from Chichen Itza at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico.

Figure 25. Obsidian mirrors from the Getty Research Institute.
Bibliography


