

Aztec Art & Architecture

Art in the Aztec empire, like its culture and religion, came from a long history - a history of many different tribes. Techniques and themes in Aztec art were influenced by hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of artistry in this part of the world.

The common people were not generally allowed to even own works of art. If you were creating and selling art, you may be an exception, but some of the art would have to go to the upper classes. They were the ones that generally were the keepers of the precious objects in the empire.

Neither did the civilization keep all its art to itself. Ancient Aztec art was traded, and much of the materials used were imported from other peoples.

Themes in ancient Aztec art

The people of the empire had an appreciation for a wide variety of insects, birds, fish and animals. A lot of their art reflected this. Jaguars, ducks, monkeys, snakes, deer, dogs - all these were common themes.

Of course, a lot of the art that has been preserved was religion related. The gods were often depicted, and they themselves often resembled animals of various kinds. The drawings of the gods were often sharp and angular, brightly colored. Art would often show gods, or priests dressed as gods in a ritual, or Aztec warriors in their finery.

Common types of art

There was a rich variety of art in the empire. Richly colored clothing, architecture, ceremonial knives, head dresses - many things were adorned with jewels and feathers. It is said that the emperor never wore the same clothes twice. His head piece that supposedly belonged to Emperor Montezuma II is a splash of bright green

feathers, embroidered with gold and blue. Noble families had ear pieces, bracelets and necklaces.

Stories were commonly written in pictures, giving more opportunity for art. The pictographs may show the most recent conquest, or the sacrifices of the priests, or even daily life.

Common art features statues made of stone, as well as Aztec masks, pottery, shields, knives, carved pillars and painted walls. Art could be made with gold, silver, copper, jewels, feathers,

coral, clay and stone, to name a few. As mentioned before, many of materials were not native to the region, but had to be bartered for.

Mosaics are very common in ancient Aztec art. Masks would be covered in turquoise, or shells (as seen in the image above).

Characteristics

Ancient Aztec art was actually very *lifelike*. Many of their statues of people, as well as animals, look amazingly



realistic. They also show age, and a great deal of expression. The art looks alive - but then again, much of it is about death itself. It reflects the people's passion to avoid death and disaster, and then to conquer even that if it came.

Architecture

Aztec architecture relied heavily on cosmology, astronomy and religion, their massive cities reflected their beliefs and it's an important key in understanding their history and culture, and how this affected their buildings and construction. The most dominant pieces of architecture are the temples of the Aztecs. These temples perfectly represent how the Aztecs architecture is powered by their desire to sacrifice to their gods and their religion and beliefs.

Building materials used by the ancient Aztecs

The Aztecs used primitive tools like stones, chisels and blades for their construction, rudimentary tools by modern standards, but it didn't hold the Aztecs back. They focused on building strong foundations since the soil on their ground was susceptible to sinking due to the warm and often damp climate. The Aztecs used a colorful and easily cut volcanic stone called tezontle to form the base of their constructions. The Aztecs additionally used local stone materials like rubble and limestone that were found in the area, and these were often traded as well.

Aztecs mostly carved their stones for decorations, giving their buildings and materials a unique look that added texture and visual punch to their buildings. The carvings were naive for the most part with a very two dimensional quality. They were also keen on local wood materials and used pine and oak wood from the forests for their beams and doors.

Symbols incorporated into Aztec architecture

Aztec architecture was full of symbols. These symbols were used to add decoration, style and incorporate their beliefs into their architecture. Some of the figures that were commonly used in Aztec buildings and architecture include:

- Eagle – The eagle was representative of the sun and of warriors
- Serpents – Serpents represented water or fire
- Conch shell – The Conch shell was an important symbol of fertility
- Frogs and sea creatures – Represented Tlaloc Symbols



Aztec temples and shrines

Some of the most powerful and iconic Aztec architecture is of course the striking Aztec temples. The temples in Mesoamerican and in particular with the Aztecs were seen as a way to get closer to the gods. The Aztec people built temples and pyramids in numbers, from the largest temple, the Templo Mayor to the Sun and Moon Pyramids which still stand proud today.

These Aztec pyramids and temples always had double staircases that faced west towards the sun. The temples share similarities with the Egyptian pyramids but unlike Egyptian pyramids, the tops of the Aztec temples were flat.

Inside these majestic Aztec temples, the walls were decorated with paint and statues. Their staircases comprised of 13 steps which had astronomical influence. At the end of these staircases were dragon-like figures called stone serpents heads. They were commonly thought to have been built to ward off evil spirits. There would also be a highly revered eagle, the nahual of Huitzilopochtli-Tonatiuh. These are common in most of the Aztec temples.

Shrines were built by the Aztecs and sometimes dedicated to a specific God. These were places of worship or a place for offerings. The shrines found honored the Sun god, the Eagle and the Jaguar.

An Aztec Emperors palace

The emperor and ruler of the Aztecs would have a very large palace. It had a very large courtyard and had two stories. Gold panels, paintings and carvings cover the walls. There would be numerous rooms, each dedicated to a specific use. A large staircase is located in the center of the grand home.

The Aztec ceremonial plaza the sacred precinct

The Great Temple and the core of the city, was surrounded by a ceremonial center. This area was a collection of massive structures specifically used for religious ceremonies by the Aztecs. These structures include temples, ball courts, priest houses and were surrounded by the houses of the very important Aztec nobles. Farther away from the center of this area would be the markets and the houses of the lower class. The gardens or Chinampas extend on to the lake where crops were grown, and on the west side of the precinct was their bathhouse, the tozpalatl.

Aztec architecture in summary

The Aztec people created some of the most impressive temples and pyramids the world has ever seen. These majestic and powerful structures were built stone by stone, by hand, and must have taken the Aztecs a long time to complete. Their motivation was to get closer to the skies, where they could sacrifice to their gods from atop their mighty pieces of architecture. In all their architectural endeavors though, the Aztecs maintained a unique visual style.

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