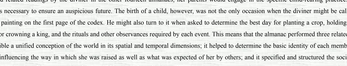
Chapter One

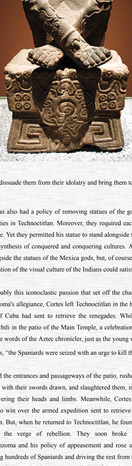
Civilization and Barbarism in the New World

Nowhere is the connection between the underestimating of indigenous artworks, the day-land, and the phrasing and subjugation of their creators, or the other, more evident than in the event that most dramatically inaugurates capitalism as a global system: the discovery and conquest of the Americas. Since the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists and scholars have produced a wealth of evidence, both theoretical and historical, that[1]

Columbus conducted his first voyage of discovery the same year the Spanish monarchs restored Granada from the Moors and drove them and the monotheistic Jews from Iberia, made by the intimate, if hateful, relationship between Christian and Muslim, whose events and prisms he brought with him to the Americas (the ethnically Christian spoke that impacted Jews. The emergent European universal and self is an attempt to flood a desert scene into Spherism. In the land of Spherism, the Sun is everywhere and the Sun is nowhere. Spherism is a mirage, a desert mirage, a mirage of the desert, a desert mirage of the desert. Spherism is a desert. Spherism is a desert. Spherism is a



The Codex Fejervary-Mayer, then, was more than a collection of paintings destined to be viewed contemplatively one day in the Liverpool Museum where it now resides. It was part of an integrated mode of individual and social existence, a self-generated form of life that could only function as an obstacle in the path of the juggernaut of nascent capital. For the especially brutal forms of slavery and semi-dependent servitude involved in primitive accumulation in the New World were hardly compatible with the autonomous production of worldviews, identities, and social practices by clients, diviners, and their shamans. It is therefore not surprising that, in their need to maintain the conditions of a relentlessly comprehensive domination in a potentially hostile environment, the Spaniards burned nearly all the painted books of divination as well as those concerning cosmology, genealogy, and mythic and secular history. And it is also no wonder that they did not stop there. Twenty-five years after the conquest, almost no Aztec art remained publicly visible. What survived were objects buried in the rubble of devastated cities and those hidden by the Indians from the view of their conquerors.

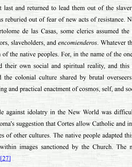
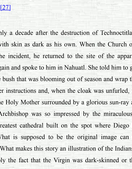
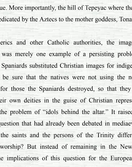


At this point, the second dimension of the hermeneutic framework through which Europeans first interpreted indigenous American art becomes relevant. The Spaniards destroyed the art of the Aztecs in the service of the global capitalism they were in the process of helping to create, but they did so in the name of the medieval Catholicism much of Europe was about to leave behind. What could be more evident than the fact that the devil, the enemy of humankind, had devised the statues, monuments, and painted books of the Indians in order to lead them away from knowledge of God and into the torment of eternal damnation? In annihilating the visual culture of the Aztecs, the Spaniards were uprooting idolatry and thereby preparing the way for the salvation of souls. Cortes began this evangelical work as soon as he had been welcomed into Technocitlan by Montechuzoma. As he writes to Charles V in his second letter:

> The most important of these idols, and the ones in whom they have the most faith, I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps; and I had those chapels where they were cleansed, for they were full of the blood of sacrifices; and I had images of Our Lady and of other saints put there, which caused Montechuzoma and the other natives some sorrow. I made them understand through the interpreters how deceived they were in placing their trust in those idols which they had made with their hands from unclean things. They must know that there was only one God, Lord of all things, who had created heaven and earth and all else and who made all of us; and he was without beginning or end, and they must adore and worship only Him, not any other creature or thing. And I told them all I knew about this to dissuade them from their idolatry and bring them to the knowledge of God our Savior.[23]

The Mexicas also had a policy of removing statues of the gods from the cities they conquered. But they housed those statues in an important temple of foreign deities in Technocitlan. Moreover, they required each conquered city to maintain a cult of Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Mexicas, in its main temple. Yet they permitted his statue to stand alongside that of the city's own patron deity. In this way, the imperial expansion of the Mexicas took the form of a synthesis of conquered and conquering cultures. At one point Montechuzoma suggested that Cortes place the images of the Holy Mother and saints alongside the statues of the Mexica gods, but, of course, the Spaniard could not accept such syncretism. His God was a jealous one. Nothing short of the annihilation of the visual culture of the Indians could satisfy Him.

It was probably this iconoclastic passion that set off the chain of events that was to result in the total destruction of the imperial capital. After securing Montechuzoma's allegiance, Cortes left Technocitlan in the hands of his lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado, in order to meet an army of 1000 soldiers that the governor of Cuba had sent to retrieve the renegades. While Cortes was away, Alvarado and his men were invited to attend a festival in honor of Huitzilopochtli in the patio of the Main Temple, a celebration involving an elaborately decorated statue of the god made from a paste of ground chicalote seeds. In the words of the Aztec chronicler, just as the young warriors who were participating in the fiesta reached the most beautiful point in their Dance of the Serpents, "the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants."[24]

They sealed the entrances and passageways of the patio, rushed at the dancers with their swords drawn, and slaughtered them, in the process severing their heads and limbs. Meanwhile, Cortes had been able to win over the armed expedition sent to retrieve him and his men. But, when he returned to Technocitlan, he found its people on the verge of rebellion. They soon broke with Montechuzuma and his policy of appeasement and rose up in arms, killing hundreds of Spaniards and driving the rest from their city in what the conquistadors were to call the "night of sorrow." Cortes was able to regroup his remaining forces and to raise a massive army from the cities and villages that had been subjugated by the Mexicas. With the combined Spanish and Indian troops, he laid siege to the imperial capital in May of 1521, cutting off its supply of food and fresh water. After eighty days, the Mexica defenses collapsed. As Cortes advanced into the center of the city, he destroyed every building in his path, while using the rubble to fill in the canals. When he was through, perhaps as many as 200,000 Mexicas were dead. The conquistadors tortured survivors to get them to reveal the location of gold and threw many of those who had nothing to say to hungry dogs. They celebrated their victory by feasting on pigs and wine that they brought in from Cuba by ship. The city of Technocitlan, which Cortes himself had called "the most beautiful thing in the world," was now a pile of ruins. In the center of those ruins, the Spaniards built a cathedral.

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