

**“AZTECS”, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2002 - 11<sup>th</sup> April 2003. A Comment on Communicative Shortcomings**

Amber Standifer

Institute of Archaeology, UCL

The Aztecs – mention of the ancient Mexican civilisation brings to mind a people surrounded just as much by majesty and opulence as mystery and viciousness. Visions arise of spectacular stone ruins buried deep in the jungle, embedded in tangles of snake-like green vines. The voyeur in all of us cannot help but peek guiltily around the corner at the mention of human sacrifice, both fascinating and grotesque. A civilisation in Central Mexico known as much for their rapid rise to domination in 1325 as for their quick and violent topple from power with the arrival of Cortes and the Spanish in 1521; the Aztecs continue to captivate our minds and hearts. The “AZTECS” exhibition, held at the Royal Academy of Arts from November 2002 to April 2003, undoubtedly relied on this modern captivation to lure audiences; however, expectant visitors would find that the exhibition did not even begin to whet their appetites for the fascinating, mysterious or grotesque. Indeed the treasures were many and wonderful, but for all the potential the exhibit had to allure and seduce with those treasures, it left me with an unsatisfied emotional hunger.

It was not a lack of artefacts that kept the exhibition from ultimate satisfaction. As the largest gathering ever of Aztec art outside of Mexico, the exhibit showcased an immense collection of Aztec artefacts from collections from all over the world. Such an impressive collection may have done little for many visitors, though, to whom these artefacts may have said nothing when standing alone. Interpretation of the objects was kept to a minimum at the exhibit, with most text appearing on large book-on-the-wall panels. With an average of three ‘novels’ in each of the ten rooms, visitors could hardly be expected to read and learn from them all. Sadly, much of the most interesting information was unwisely placed at the very end of these large panels, while the attention span of a typical visitor waned somewhere in the first third. Visitors could not expect to look for a communication alternative in the individual object panels, for these plaques were small and often gave no more information than name, date and donor museum. Moreover, the majority of them were impossible to read. Positioned practically on the floor and left in darkness, any interested visitor had to kneel down on the ground and squint to read them.

Perhaps even more damaging to the power of the artefacts was their almost total lack of contextualisation. Returning to the objects some of their original context is an effective way of giving them a voice, allowing them to woo visitors’ imaginations. I would have appreciated seeing images of the beautiful Tenochtitlan, or other Aztec sites, where these objects were first given life. The Royal Academy failed at this, however, choosing instead to showcase these archaeological artefacts in traditional art museum isola-

tion, despite claims that “AZTECS” aimed to examine the culture, as well as the art, of the civilisation. I would not exactly call the setting of the objects sterile, as an effort was made to place the objects against a more ‘exotic’ carnelian red rather than stark museum white, and the lighting was dimmed to ‘gloomy’. Despite these (*scarcely*) gallant efforts, however, the museum could not disguise that they crammed so many objects in each room that they were left with no choice but to display them as traditional glass-case or pedestal objects. They were simply museum objects – ripped from their original context and put on show in an old lord’s neo-Palladian mansion in Piccadilly. Sadly, little attempt was made to return to these objects some of their original setting or meaning. At one point in the exhibition, we read that the Aztecs never created “art for art’s sake”. Aztec art was made for function and symbolism. It seems, however, that the exhibit planners themselves ironically ignored one of their own points in their choice of display and communication methods. The Aztec objects in this exhibit were celebrated for their aesthetics, not for their purpose.

It was the passive mental experience offered to visitors by exhibit planners that made for the ultimate disappointment. Between book-on-the-wall facts and a near total lack of original context, we visitors were left with no role to play ourselves and with no outlet for personal interrogation. Our job in the exhibit was simply to gather and store facts, bland as they were. There was little opportunity provided for guests to formulate their own questions – or even begin to have those questions answered. The textual information offered to me, a student with a keen interest in museum communication, was a carbon-copy of the information offered to a 60 year old art historian, a 40 year old mum of two, and her 10 and 16 year old children. There was no interaction, and as such, there was no diversity in the ways in which this exhibition could be appreciated, with perhaps the exception of the guided and audio tours (discussed below). As much potential as there is in an exhibit of this nature to actively involve the audience, “AZTECS” kept the audience at arm’s length, prescribing us all to the role of ‘privileged guests’ rather than the demanding clients we, as today’s museum visitors, actually are. By keeping visitors at bay, the Royal Academy failed at the one thing all exhibit planners strive to do – reach the audience. They not only forgot our basic interpretation requirements, but worse yet they ignored us as active, thinking participants altogether.

I will give “AZTECS” planners some credit for their ordered and thematic arrangement of objects. Large as the exhibition was, planners attempted to make the vast quantity of artefacts more digestible by assigning rooms ten broad themes into which objects fit. By consigning each room with a thematic title, visitors might have been able to understand that all the objects displayed within that room related to, for instance, ‘The Human Form’, or ‘Gods of Life/Death’, or ‘Symbols of Status’. Without such a thematic ordering, it would have been impossible for visitors to understand the significance of these objects. One major criticism, however, is that these thematic titles were not emphasised enough. They headed each of the major text panels in the room, but attention was not drawn to them specifically with a larger or highlighted font. This could be particularly detrimental to visitor understanding, for instance in the second room of the gallery, where ‘Antecedents’ was the theme, and correspondingly, all the

objects within were pre-Aztec. This room was vital to developing an understanding of the style of Aztec art, however the information was not communicated efficiently, causing some visitors to miss this crucial theme of the exhibit. In the last several rooms of the exhibit, many exhausted visitors avoided reading the panels altogether. Given that they provided the only explanation of the thematic arrangement, I can confidently say that the exhibit failed in large part to communicate a vital message.

“AZTECS”, for all its artefact diversity, had little diversity in the effective communication medium utilised. Visitors had to get all of their information from standard text panels and audio or tour guides, for the Royal Academy seemed not to have invested in the multi-media craze. In the first room there was a video installation showing a three-dimensional reconstruction of the Templo Mayor and surrounding Tenochtitlan. Watching it was advisable, not for extremely helpful content, but simply because the rest of the exhibit demanded monotonous reading. Opposite the video, and hidden behind the backs of the many visitors watching the reconstruction, was the interactive Santa Cruz map. This was so terribly positioned that you did not get the chance of using it unless you manhandled visitors out of the way, and furthermore the map was found to be of no value. Clear instructions for its use were only given on the audio guide, and once you figured out how to work it, there was neither anything interesting to see nor anything to learn. You were able to enlarge sections of the map and get a detailed look at what the artist illustrated, but exhibition planners gave no interpretation of the illustration. The map was a sadly missed opportunity. With the onslaught of text panels, a little interactive variety would have made for a satisfying reprieve.

A serious accessibility issue was the lack of comfortable physical space provided for visitors. The Royal Academy offered two blocks – essentially no more than empty object pedestals – for seating in each room. Even if you managed to snag one, you would not be comfortable. In an exhibit of this size, it is surprising to not have even the basic need met of a simple place to rest. In addition, visitors could not expect much personal or contemplative space either in this exhibition. The crowds were not capped at low enough numbers to keep bottlenecks from occurring, especially in the introductory room, and large crowds gathered in front of cases during busy periods.

General upkeep of the exhibition seemed to have taken a backseat at the Royal Academy. “AZTECS”, while it may have seen high traffic, had no excuse for peeled off or rubbed out labels after only one month. Similarly, those taking the audio tour would find that many of the numbers needed were erased completely.

If I could have suggested one thing when visiting “AZTECS”, it would have been to take the audio or tour guide. I visited twice, once without any accompaniments and once with both the audio and guided tours – in hopes of an improved experience. I benefited much more from the exhibit the second time around with the guides provided. Not only did it break the monotony of reading, but also it allowed you to learn some interesting tidbits you would otherwise miss. Time permitted, the ideal was to go through both the child’s and the adult’s audio tour. The child’s tour, given in first-person period talk, was a nice alternative. Both audio guides offered music and poetry at times – add-

ing a small degree of cultural context missing from an unaided visit to the exhibition. The guided tour I followed added another dimension to my visit as well. Presenting myth and his own anecdotes, and discussing often forgotten information like how the Aztecs treated the disabled, made for a more rewarding visit.

Despite the exhibition's overall failings in communication, "ATECS" was well worth a visit. It was inspiring to marvel at such a vast array of artefacts gathered together under one roof from collections all over the world. You could improve the overall experience of the tour by using the guides offered, leaving plenty of time and bringing your own imagination. If the monotony of reading or object admiration/contemplation got too much for you, you could always examine half the objects in the room and leave some for another visit, relying on yourself and your imagination to make the Aztecs come to life. They can – and when they do it is an adventure you do not want to miss.

For more general exhibit information, go to <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk> or directly to <http://www.aztecs.org.uk>