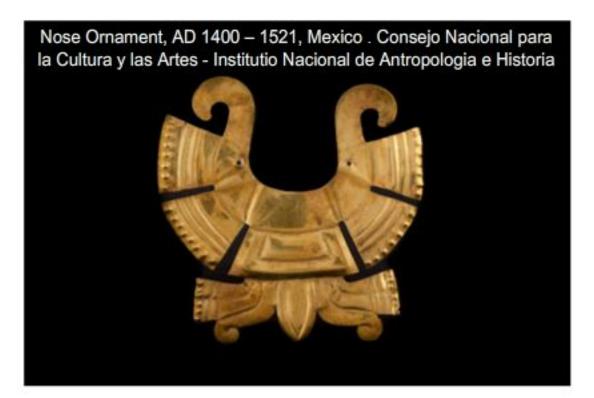
Moctezuma: Myth Comes To Life In British Museum's Aztec Exhibition

By: Karen Dabrowska



Exquisite gold treasures, mysterious turquoise masks and mosaic-adorned skulls which grin at onlookers, fanged and feathered carvings of fierce animal deities, vessels used in ritual sacrifice: these are just a few of the weird and wonderful objects that greet visitors to Moctezuma: The Last Aztec, the British Museum's final exhibition exploring power and empire.

Shihuanadi (whose complex contained extraordinary Terracotta Army), surrounding the Then came the Roman Emperor showcases the Aztecs' enduring Hadrian and modern Iran, Shah Abbas.

Now its the turn of Moctezuma II from 1502 to 1520 and invincible until the Spanish

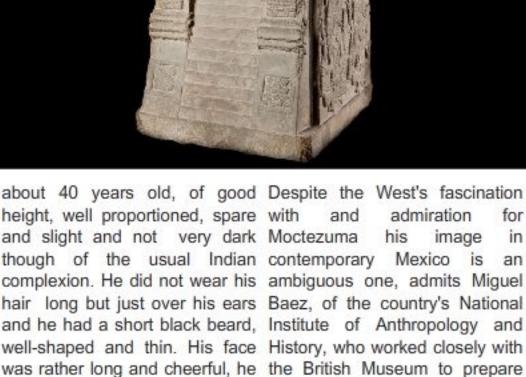
The exhibition series started with arrived on his nation's shores in Chinese emperor Qin 1519 and changed Mexico's tomb history forever. The exhibition the examines the intrique man the maker of culture until 24th January, 2010.

The conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo who served under (Anary Lord) the last elected Cortes, the man responsible for Aztec leader, who presided over Moctezuma's downfall, during a vast, politically complex and the Mexican campaign described culturally sophisticated empire the Aztec leader in A History of was the Conquest of New Spain: "The great Montezuma was



Double-headed Serpent, Aztec/Mixtec AD 1400 - 1521, Mexico . © The Trustees of the British Museum

Teocalli of Sacred Warfare, AD 1507, Mexico. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes - Institutio Nacional de Antropologia e Historia



a

had fine

necessary.

every afternoon".

and admiration his image in though of the usual Indian contemporary Mexico complexion. He did not wear his ambiguous one, admits Miguel hair long but just over his ears Baez, of the country's National and he had a short black beard, Institute of Anthropology and well-shaped and thin. His face History, who worked closely with was rather long and cheerful, he the British Museum to prepare eyes and in his the exhibition, many of the having come appearance the manner could treasures express geniality or when Mexican institutions serious archaeological sites. "He was a composure. He was very neat great emperor who consolidated and clean and took a took a bath the Mexica empire, but he is also seen as the guy who lost against

Portrait of Moctezuma by Antonio Rodriguez. Oil on canvas 1680-97.

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the Spanish, and I don't believe any culture likes a loser", Baez said.

The emperor who lent his name to a stomach upset (Montezuma is an anglicised corruption of his name) was a man who understood how to manipulate the symbols of power in a culture in which nature and society, emperor and cosmos were intertwined.

Tenochtitlan was the capital of Moctezuma's empire with a population in excess of 200,000 - bigger than London, Madrid and Rome put together. It had Venice-like canals, artificial gardens which floated on water and man-made dykes to protect it from flooding. Sweepers kept its streets clean and there were public baths and even public lavatories.

In the market place, gold sliver and precious stones – notably blue-green turquoise – were traded, along with brightlycoloured parrot feathers and jaguar skins. Food of all types was plentiful as was tobacco. Prized above all else were cocoa beans for mashing into chocolate, a potent bitter-sweet beverage that was highly addictive.

But there was a gruesome side to this magnificent city: human sacrifice was practised on a massive scale. A stone at the top of the steps to the great temple was where men were held down while the high priest slit open their chests with a sharp blade made from flint and plucked out their hearts. The sacrifice was made to the sun: only if the gods were fed blood would the soil be fertile and the rains return. According to the the victims, prisoners taken in battle, went willingly to their death, believing that their sacrifice would keep the cycle of life turning.

So why did this mighty emperor allow his fiercely independent people to be subjugated? Clad in a green feather headdress and gold sandals he went to meet Cortes at the causeway gate. In

speech Moctezuma mentioned Aztec lore spoke of the return as a puppet ruler. one day of a great overlord to he would whom allegiance. supreme emperor and invited him to submit to his overlordship. a Moctezuma agreed.

For a while relations were amicable but they soured when Corte's men erected a Christian Cortes seized Moctezuma and

of welcome, held him capitve in one of his how palaces allowing him to govern

pledge An uprising began in the city Seizing on this, after the Spanish slaughtered Cortes told the startled Aztec thousands of Aztecs whom they that he came on behalf such a perceived as a threat when they gathered in the great temple for religious festival. It led to Moctezuma's downfall. story says that he was killed by a volley or rocks and arrows as he stood on a balcony and cross on the top of the great attempted to calm the uprising. temple. As the unrest grew, Another alleges that the Spanish stabbed him to death.



Mask of Quetzalcoatl

Highlights from the exhibition, * Mosaic mask of Quetzlocoatl, civilisation include:

- * A turquoise mosaic of a double- green and one blue. headed serpent, 15 - 16th century AD from Mexico. Linked * The stone disc levels of the cosmos, Coyolxauhqui, on the chest.
- * Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca, the latter in Templo Mayor. one of the the four powerful creator deities. This mosaic, * A ceremonial knife with a dating from the 15th to 16th mosaic handle in the form of a century, was based on a human crouching man dressed as an skull

- which document the fascinating the feathered serpent. This mask history of a vanquished, dates from the 15th to 16th century. The eyes are framed by the form of two serpents, one
- with several Aztec gods, snakes Coyolxauhqui. The disc recounts were associated with different the story of the moon goddess who was underworld, earth and sky. This dismembered by her brother would probably have been worn Huitzlopochtli. The disc was found near a shrine dedicated to
 - eagle warrior.

September. Philip Hensher are offered to us in aesthetic agrues strongly against the mitigation. The scale of the moral neutrality of the exhibition Aztecs' barbarism places them which artefacts from the Aztec empire divides civilisation from without comment or judgement.

"Often in dealing with the past, have been regarded we have to hold our noses, abhorrent. Why, definite limits. I hope we will pretend that their the instruments of genocide of neutral?" Hensher asks.

Writing in the Independent on 28 the Nazis or of the Khmer Rouge merely presents the on the far side of a line which opposite. At any period in history, their customs would with the However, this approach has passage of time should anyone hideous never come to the point where artefacts have become morally

