

# The Aztec Pantheon

and the Art of Empire

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## EXPLORING THE FLORENTINE CODEX

### *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire*

J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa

March 24 - July 5, 2010

LOS ANGELES—Vital information about Aztec civilization comes from post-conquest pictorial manuscripts that were created in colonial Mexico. Of these manuscripts, none has proved more valuable than the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1575–1577) by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590). Known more familiarly as the Florentine Codex, this iconic chronicle of Aztec culture and history from the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Italy will return to the “New World” for the first time in over four centuries for the exhibition *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire* (at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa from March 24–July 5, 2010).

Arriving in Mexico in 1529, Sahagún taught Latin, rhetoric, and theology to indigenous youths training for the priesthood in Mexico City at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, the first university in the Americas. In the late 1540s, he was commissioned by the Franciscan order to undertake a systematic investigation of the rapidly vanishing world of the Aztecs as it existed before the Spanish Conquest. Working with his students and native elders, the friar embarked on a thirty-year project to describe the Aztecs in Spanish as well as the local Nahuatl dialect—“a treasure,” according to Sahagún, “for knowing many things worthy of being known.”

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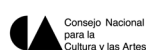
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Sahagún's project was controversial from the outset, yet he succeeded in assembling an incomparable account of native religion, astronomy, customs, commerce, and natural history, as well as the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. After the Council of the Indies and the Holy Office (inquisition) banned all works written in indigenous languages, his magnum opus was sent to Spain and later presented to the Medici Library in Florence. Copies of the codex circulated after the friar's death in 1590, but the original text only came to the attention of scholars in the early nineteenth century.

As a pioneering ethnographic enterprise, the codex represents an extraordinary effort to spread the Christian faith through cultural understanding rather than coercion. Illustrated with over 2,400 images, the manuscript opens with watercolor images of the chief Aztec deities, many of whom are identified with classical gods: Huitzilopochtli, for example, is called *otro Hercules* (another Hercules), while Chicomecoatl is equated with the Roman goddess Ceres because both held sway over agricultural fertility. Drawing parallels with Graeco-Roman mythology helped Spanish readers interpret the beliefs of their New World subjects.

Several passages reveal the influence of Virgil's *Aeneid* and other ancient Roman texts read by Sahagún's bicultural students at Tlatelolco. With Latin as the common language, a dialogue between Renaissance Europe and Mesoamerica took root. "The Florentine Codex witnesses an extraordinary moment—beyond a European effort to understand another civilization, we can also hear the native students speaking back, and articulating their Aztec heritage with classical and Christian perspectives to create a dynamic colonial culture on their own terms," explains Claire Lyons, curator of antiquities, J. Paul Getty Museum, who co-curated *The Aztec Pantheon* with John M. D. Pohl, adjunct professor of art history, UCLA.

The Florentine Codex is a centerpiece of the exhibition and will be on view through July 5, 2010. This marks the Codex's first trip to North America since it entered the collection of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence in the 1580s.

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Image caption and credit information:

*Aztec Deities*

Bernardino de Sahagún

Spanish, 1499–1590

*Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain), also called the Florentine Codex vol. 1, 1575–1577

Colonial Mexican

Watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding

Open (approx.): H: 32 x W: 43 cm (12 5/8 x 16 15/16 in.)

Object (above deck, approx.): H: 16 cm (6 5/16 in.)

Closed: H: 32 x W: 22 x D: 5 cm (12 5/8 x 8 11/16 x 1 5/16 in.)

VEX.2010.2.28

Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, Italy, FI 100 Med.Palat. 218

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