Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by APDS Bloggers

Cross-Cultural Encounters in Art: The Florentine Codex [1]

APDS Blogger: Regina Guzmán

Art is an essential part of the culture of every nation. Through it, a nation can demonstrate the best parts of its cultural heritage and share its history and talents with foreign publics on a large scale. *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of the Empire*, currently on exhibit at the Getty Villa, is the most recent example of how Mexico's Aztec antiquities never fail to captivate U.S. audiences.

The exhibition comes at a noteworthy time, as Mexico celebrates the bicentennial of its independence and the centennial of the Mexican revolution. It is the first exhibition on the Aztec Empire to be organized in the city of Los Angeles, as well as the Getty Villa's first venture with art from outside the ancient Mediterranean. Most significantly, the exhibit reveals a defining moment of cultural encounter by displaying Aztec artworks together with 16th and 17th century illustrations that showcase European interpretations of Aztec culture.

The Aztec monuments on display at the Getty Villa (most of them loans from the Museo Nacional de Antropología and the Museo del Templo Mayor in Mexico City) are masterpieces comparable to the most distinguished sculptural traditions, but the exhibit's greatest artwork comes in the form of a three-volume pictorial manuscript known as the Florentine Codex. The Codex is an iconic chronicle of Aztec culture and history that reflects European efforts to understand the New World by drawing references from its own classical past. The Spanish conquest of the Americas coincided with the Renaissance rediscovery of classical antiquity, and as Europeans faced a culture that was profoundly unfamiliar, the Codex became a pioneering piece of work that sparked a dialogue between Mesoamerican and European civilizations.

The manuscript was commissioned nearly a half-century after Hernán Cortés' defeat of the Aztec civilization, under the direction of Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish-born Franciscan friar who had traveled to México to evangelize for the Catholic Church. Sahagún, with the help of native Aztec collaborators and bicultural students from the Real Colegio in Tlatelolco (the first European school of higher learning in México), recorded the gods and goddesses of the Aztecs with over 1,500 watercolor illustrations and captions written in Nahuatl, Spanish and Latin. Most importantly, the Codex identified each deity with his or her equivalent god and goddess in the Roman pantheon, providing a clear parallel between the two great empires. The references to Greco-Roman mythology helped Spanish readers interpret the beliefs of their New World subjects and allowed Spanish missionaries to understand Aztec culture through their own history, philosophy and law.

Beneath the European attempt to understand another civilization through artwork lies the effort of the bicultural students working on the Codex to engage with Spain by narrating their

Aztec heritage through classical and Christian perspectives. The Codex is therefore not only a unique case of a rare effort to spread the Christian faith through cultural understanding rather than coercion, but also a reflection of a broader cross-cultural approach to the roles of religion and art in empires.

The Florentine Codex is a great example of how art has been historically used as a neutral platform through which people connect and understand something that is foreign.

As one of the centerpieces in *The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of the Empire*, the Codex showcases Mexico's rich heritage and sets the stage for continued cultural encounters. Reflecting on the exhibition as a whole, the Aztec experience at the Getty gives Mexico an enormous cultural presence in a city that is so uniquely tied to Mexico's history. The exhibit (enhanced by the accompanying lectures and educational programming) engages publics and scholars alike in a dialogue that is needed for cultural appreciation.

For some time now, Mexico has sought greater visibility in world affairs and with its northern neighbor in particular, yet art exhibits remain a largely untapped and underestimated means for making this happen. Mexico could and *should* use its rich arsenal of art a lot more frequently, increasing its capacity to foster a positive national image abroad and perhaps even setting an example of the value and necessity of cross-cultural art exhibitions.

Regina Guzmán *is a first-year graduate student in the Master of Public Diplomacy program. She grew up in Mexico City and has an academic background in Art History and Media Studies. Her regional focus in PD has been Mexico, with particular attention to cultural diplomacy and art-based exchanges.*

The Aztec Pantheon and the Art of Empire is on exhibit at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa through July 5, 2010.
