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A Metaphor in Stone:
Coatlicue and the Meaning of Art

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Every day the tour buses and private taxis make the pilgrimage from the hotel district of Mexico City to the ancient ruins of Teotihuacán. Early mornings are particularly busy, as tourists are generally advised to avoid the combination of altitude and mid-day heat, especially if they plan to ascend the Pirámide del Sol, (the Pyramid of the Sun). After the exhilaration of making it to the top, it's actually the descent that will get to you. After a hour or two, the bus and taxi drivers will gather their weary passengers and the pilgrimage will proceed in reverse; this time to the cool, darkened halls of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology) – the perfect place to spend the hot afternoon and to rest a bit while shuffling around the air-conditioned carvings and statues. But who can rest when confronted with *her*? Who is she – this grotesque, monolithic creature of stone known as Coatlicue – “she of the serpent skirt”? Is this a work of art – perhaps something less, or something much more?

“Horror and awe, ” is what the great Mexican poet, writer, diplomat, and Nobel laureate, Octavio Paz, remembers feeling upon his introduction as a young man to the pre-Columbian art of his country (10). Horror and awe are surely intertwined when facing Coatlicue, much like the writhing serpents woven together to form her skirt, or the human

hearts, hands, and skull strung together as her necklace. Atop her shoulders, two rattlesnake heads with fangs bared mirror each other for eternity. (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Coatlicue. <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/coatlicue>. Web.

Through what Paz describes as her “psychic radiation,” the “enigma of the massive block of carved stone paralyzes our sight . . . the statue is an object that both attracts and repels us, both seduces and horrifies us” (31). Paz reveals that in the four hundred years since the unearthing of the enormous statue, she has turned from “goddess into demon,

from demon into monster, and from monster into masterpiece” (30). Our contemporary sensibilities want to see an object of aesthetic or anthropological consideration; at the same time, from someplace deep within the psyche, we cannot help but be aware that we are in the presence of the sublime, of the *mysterium tremendum*. Paz explains: “Without ceasing to be what we see, the work of art reveals itself as that which lies *beyond* what we see” [italics mine] (31).

Paz’s description of an encounter with the stone statue called Coatlicue describes a level of “aesthetic arrest” that I believe is palpable when one is in the presence of great, or true art – whether ancient or contemporary. Within the labyrinth of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Coatlicue reigns, along with the magnificent Aztec Calendar Stone, or *Piedra de Sol*. The creators of both objects were the “Mexica” of the central Mexican highlands, who have been more commonly referred to as Aztec. Contemporary Mesoamerican scholar, Kay Almere Read explains that the title “Aztec” is primarily a nineteenth-century revival, and that the people of the region called themselves Mexica (76). Both terms are currently still in use however, with Paz having favored the more common “Aztec”.

If it can be argued, as Paz does, that great art of any era can be objectively identified and actually *felt*, then an exploration of the ancient art of the Aztecs, or of one stellar example such as Coatlicue, must begin with the criteria that Paz espouses. In *Essays on Mexican Art*, Paz moves with fluidity between the pre-Columbian world and that of the twentieth-century, with special attention paid to a variety of artists including Orozco, Tamayo, and Izquierdo.

During the 1940’s, Paz lived in New York City and would spend many hours alone at the Museum of Modern Art where he encountered the work of Braque, Gris, Picasso and

Mondrian among others. He would combine his newfound knowledge of European Modernism with his familiarity of the indigenous art of the Americas, formulating his theories on the underlying power shared by the best of both:

I never liked Mondrian, but through him I learned the art of stripping down to the barest essentials. Little by little I threw most of my beliefs and artistic dogmas out the window. I realized that modernity is not novelty, and that being truly modern meant returning to the beginning of the beginning. (19)

His acquaintance with the Mexican artist, Rufino Tamayo and his wife Olga, who were also living in New York at the time, confirmed for Paz his notion of a “psychic subsoil”: “Myth and reality: modernity was the oldest antiquity. But it was not a chronological antiquity; it lay not in the time before but right here and now, within each of us” (20).

Considering Coatlicue specifically, Paz writes:

The Great Coatlicue takes us by surprise not only because of her dimensions . . . but because she is a concept turned to stone. If the concept is terrifying – in order to create, the earth must devour – the expression that gives it material form is enigmatic: every attribute of the divinity – fangs, forked tongue, serpents, skulls, severed hands – is represented realistically, but the whole is an abstraction. The Coatlicue is, at one and the same time, a charade, a syllogism, and a presence that is the condensation of a *mysterium tremendum* . . . a cube of stone that is also a metaphysic. (41)

Paz’s suggestion of a “psychic subsoil,” clearly brings to mind C.G. Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. In addition, Paz’s obvious fondness for myth, and his frequent use of one of Jung’s signature phrases – the *mysterium tremendum* – seem to indicate Jungian influences in Paz’s thinking about art.

While not addressing pre-Columbian art specifically, Jung’s essays on art compiled in “The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature,” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 15), echo and reinforce Paz’s thoughts on what makes great art – or perhaps Paz’s *Essays on Mexican Art* mirror Jung’s thoughts. Ultimately both men make compelling arguments regarding the essential

factors that enable some artistic creations like Coatlicue to stand out among others – captivating us with their power and depth.

Jung describes a type of art that seems to arise from the collective unconscious:

... a work of art is not a human being, but is something supra-personal . . . Indeed, the special significance of a true work of art resides in the fact that it has escaped from the limitations of the personal and has soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator . . . One might almost describe it as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, employing his capacities according to its' own laws and shaping itself to the fulfillment of its own creative purpose . . . [with this type of art] we would expect a strangeness of form and content, thoughts that can only be apprehended intuitively, a language pregnant with meanings, and images that are true symbols, because they are the best possible expressions for something unknown – bridges thrown out towards an unseen shore. (*CW* 15, para. 107-108, 116)

Jung's description could easily be applied to Coatlicue; the "cube of stone" that Paz describes as "a metaphysic." Jung's poetic metaphor comparing symbolic art to "bridges thrown out towards an unseen shore," parallels one of Paz's key statements on art's ability to function as an integral part of a culture, as it did in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica:

Art was not an end in itself, but a bridge or talisman. A bridge – the work changes the reality that we see for another: Coatlicue is the earth, the sun is a jaguar, the moon is the head of a decapitated goddess. The work of art is a medium, an agency for the transmission of forces and powers that are sacred, that are *other*. The function of art is to open for us the doors that lead to the other side of reality. (40)

The "other side of reality" could certainly be thought of as the realm of Jung's archetypes – the *a priori* forces that move and shape human life, with or without our consent or participation. The forces and powers that are "sacred," or "other," might also describe "nature" in all of her beauty and terror, or perhaps the "sublime," the "ineffable," or the "transcendent."

In *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico*, Laurette Séjourné, describes what she terms the “transcendent principle” palpable in archaic Mexican art and architecture:

... what moves us so deeply in many Pre-Spanish works of art is precisely the transcendental principle within them; for the mere craftsman, however perfectly he knows his job, can never achieve a masterpiece that will overcome the barriers of history and touch the deepest things in us. It is not possible to explain the fascination which the religious centres of ancient Mexico hold even for the most casual visitor, except by recognizing the spiritual qualities that gave rise to their construction . . . (6-7)

I believe that this “transcendental principle” can indeed be felt when faced with the goddess Coatlicue. What we know of her myth is based on sixteenth-century Nahuatl accounts translated and recorded by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún in *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana*. Coatlicue’s story is intertwined with that of her son, Huitzilopochtli – the god, whom according to legend, led the ancestors of the Aztecs from Aztlán, their place of origin, to Tenochitlán – the magnificent floating city which would eventually be destroyed by Cortés and the first Europeans. The legend goes as follows:

While sweeping the temple at Coatepec (“Serpent Hill”), a feathery ball descended upon Coatlicue like a lump of thread. She took it and put it in her bosom close to her belly. When she looked for it later, she could not find it. But she did find herself pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. This immaculate conception infuriated Coatlicue’s daughter, Coyolxauhqui, and her four hundred brothers. They plotted to murder their unmarried, yet pregnant, mother.

Before they could act, Huitzilopochtli emerged from “her entrails” fully grown, brandishing his signature serpent staff which he used to vanquish all of the brothers and his sister, Coyolxauhqui. He beheaded and dismembered her, rolling the body parts down the hill. He then assumed his place at the head of the Aztec pantheon. (From Séjourné, 159, and Cortez, 360-61).

In this tale, Séjourné describes “pursuit and death . . . [as representing] precisely the creative meeting of matter with spirit . . . the archetypal image of the dynamic meeting of

opposites . . . (159). Along with Paz, her thoughts on the underlying meaning of Coatlicue, (as both work of art and myth), resound with a decidedly Jungian and transpersonal emphasis.

Even with this brief synopsis of the myth, correspondences to other mythemes from across the globe abound, including but not limited to: A place of origin within the earth (the serpent hill), the miraculous virgin conception, the birth of a fully-grown deity from the side, stomach, or other unusual body part of the parent, evil brothers and sisters, and the creation of a new cosmic order born of destruction.

How much of the legend, as recorded by Sahagún, was influenced by European mythology and/or Christian (Catholic) beliefs will never be known. Still, the symbolic two-ton stone metaphor known as Coatlicue, continues to fascinate and repel in her own right, regardless of the provenance of the myths linked to her.

While one does not need to *know* anything about Coatlicue's "story" in order to *feel* her power, some level of familiarity with her myth, and with the culture of the ancient Nahuatl-speaking peoples, certainly enables a more profound initiation into her mysteries. Eminent Mesoamerican scholar, Miguel León-Portilla offers yet another layer of interpretation:

Coatlicue emerges powerfully as the concrete embodiment in stone of the ideas of a supreme cosmic being who generates and sustains the universe. It adumbrates the cruciform orientation of the quadrants of the universe, as well as the dynamic quality of time, which creates and destroys through struggle; this is the central category of Nahuatl cosmological thought. Perhaps of all the symbols of the Nahuatl universe, the most marvelous is the tragically beautiful image of Coatlicue. (53)

Joseph Campbell references León-Portilla in a variety of his works, and while not engaging Coatlicue at length, Campbell does address Mesoamerican art's ability to create transpersonal and transcendent experiences through symbol and metaphor. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell mentions Coatlicue in reference to folk tales featuring virgin births (311). He expands his thinking on Mesoamerican art in his introduction to *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica*. Here Campbell focuses on the concept of "transformation" as key to the Mesoamerican cosmic system, while acknowledging the sacred role of the artist as the bridge builder between the world of man and that of the gods:

It is through the transformation of sacrifice that man "feeds" gods just as it is through the transformation of the seasonal changes of the earth that god provides food for man. But it is also through the transformation wrought by the artist that the commonplace materials of life become images expressive of the power of the mysterious force of life . . . For the peoples of Mesoamerica . . . as for all the peoples of the earth, it was the artist who was able to render the message of the spirit through his heritage of symbols, images, myth motives, and hero deeds. (Qtd. in Markman, xvi)

The artist or artists who created the figure of Coatlicue will never be known; yet as Campbell acknowledges, their own acts of transformation, (of turning commonplace materials into a "message of the spirit"), astound and enrich us. This artistic aim – to transform common materials into symbolic metaphors of the transcendent – was not, and is not, limited to the archaic artist.

In an essay written for the catalog that accompanied the 1957 André Emmerich Gallery exhibition, "Abstract Art Before Columbus," legendary art critic, Dore Ashton links the concerns of the archaic Mesoamerican artist with those of the best Postmodern creators:

The forms created by the abstract artist today are as richly endowed with significance as the forms of the primitive artist. No painter of value today is concerned with pure form in a decorative sense. He wishes to express truths that are non-discursive, out of the range of verbal communication. (38-39)

Ashton's comments address abstract art specifically, but if we consider the figure of Coatlicue as a montage of representational images comprising one great abstraction, (as Paz suggests), we are offered another confirmation of her "staying power" – the impulse to express truths that are "out of the range of verbal communication" is indeed archetypal and eternal. I would go so far as to agree with Jung that the "truths" have always found a way to express themselves *through* the artist – resulting in works of art such as Coatlicue, which "speak" without words, stirring the deepest levels of the human psyche.

In addition to the many descriptions that I have quoted directly or applied to the figure of Coatlicue, including Paz's marvelous "condensation of the *mysterium tremendum*," there is yet another worthy of inclusion. The union of opposites so strikingly portrayed by the figure of Coatlicue, qualify her as a "hologlyph" – a term that conjoins "hieroglyph" and "holograph" in order to indicate a single image or symbol which contains the "totality," "the alpha and the omega" in equal measure (Smith, 3 August 11). Like the Hindu Shiva or Kali, Coatlicue simultaneously creates and destroys revealing *the* underlying principle of the cosmos—that out of transformation and out of death comes life, and out of darkness comes light until the operation spirals back upon itself, only to repeat again, and again.

Coatlicue is an archetypal *chiaroscuro* in stone. She symbolizes and radiates transpersonal truths from Paz's realm of the "beginning of the beginning" while inspiring reflection on the true meaning of art of any age or culture. This is the essence of her allure, of her repulsiveness, and of her immortality.

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