Spring 1996

Review of Berrin and Pasztory, eds. *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*

Barbara E. Mundy
*Fordham University, mundy@fordham.edu*

**Recommended Citation**

Follow this and additional works at: [http://fordham.bepress.com/art_hist_facultypubs](http://fordham.bepress.com/art_hist_facultypubs)

Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](http://fordham.bepress.com/art_hist_facultypubs)

The stone mask, blank-gazed and impassive, was the work of art most closely associated with the Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacan (200 BC - 750 AD), whose remains lie about 40 km to the northeast of Mexico City. Though only three such masks, of the hundreds known, have been excavated at the site, the mask is the city's best emblem. Like the mask, Teotihuacan is singularly unreadable. No question remains of the city's importance. It was one of the largest New World settlements, with as many as 150,000 people at its height and outposts as far south as Guatemala. Even the Maya fell under the sway of its style of war and iconography. Yet, how can we understand it? Teotihuacan has produced no written texts that we can recognize, no known calendrical notations, and no historical ruler portraits, all of which have been crucial to the historical construction of other Mesoamerican sites. Without a historical scaffold, we have been somewhat at a loss for how to explain Teotihuacan's art and here art does not illuminate history. The imagery of Teotihuacan is largely iconic, with little interest in narrative scenes that might offer clues to life in the city.

Instead, Teotihuacan's architecture has been our text, its syntax laid out in the detailed site map created under the direction of Rene Millon and the University of Rochester in the 1970s. This map is the Teotihuacan scholar's bible, the genesis of all exegesis. On this map of the grid, rigidly planned city, we can trace the script of history, beginning at the center. Here lie the two great pyramids, begun sometime around the first century, that were the nucleus of an ever-growing settlement, and perhaps the locus of an early ruler cult. Then, in a sudden configuration around 200 A.D, the focus shifted down the city's great axis, the Street of the Dead, to the south, where the high-walled and, internally wide-open Ciudadela is found. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent lies within, decorated with tenoned serpent heads and masks. Such prominent architectural sculpture was never to be seen again at the site. Then the city took another turn, unique in Mesoamerica, pouring its energies into building block after block of single-story apartment complexes, each one laid out on the city's preset grid. No more colossal architecture was built, just houses for four centuries or so. The map enshrines this orderly city with its well-housed populace. It offers few clues to the cataclysm of ca. 750 A.D. when the city imploded and its inhabitants sacked and burned ceremonial buildings. Their fury spent, Teotihuacanos then fled the city, and the site was abandoned. How can we explain this fiery collapse?

The Teotihuacan map also returns a blank stare at other questions that remain, questions running the gamut from ideology to material existence. The essays in the catalogue Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods admirably fill many gaps. Together they are a long-needed introduction to the city and its art, bringing together the work of eleven art historians, curators, and archaeologists, for an overview of the history and current research. Millon, who has spent much of his career on the city, offers a wide ranging, speculative essay on its history and social structure during its ten centuries. In contrast, Ruben Cabrera Castro, a Teotihuacan archaeologist, reconstructs a relatively brief moment, the building of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. The beginning and the completion of the building's construction were punctuated by the interment of at least 120 humans, perhaps double that, probably all of them sacrificial victims. These finds, and others, have altered pre-1960s assumptions about the city being governed by a benevolent theocracy, and show its repressive, or at least sanguinary, machinery.

For me, the essay that most vividly evoked the character of the city was written by Kathleen Berrin, a co-editor of the volume and a curator of the show that accompanied it. Berrin discusses what, for the most part, the other essays give short shrift, the art objects of the exhibition. Although the essay is purportedly a description of the classes of objects in the show, Berrin hits a resounding chord. She writes of the fragility of most Teotihuacan art. Reduced to this, her insights sound almost simpleminded, but the essay is not, for it captures the most perplexing contradiction of the city. Artworks from Teotihuacan, such as clay censors, were fragile because they weren't intended to be moved. Their makers assumed a highly stable environment, like a niche in an apartment compound, where ritual art could rest for centuries. At the same time, these works were fragile because they were not meant to last. They were embodiments of a Mesoamerican sic gloria mundi. Interpreted thus, the artworks, holding the promise of their own destruction, seem to prefigure the city's own demise.

Berrin's essay does much to recapture the spirit of the extraordinary 1993 exhibition in San Francisco which pushed its viewers into seeing Teotihuacan afresh. For instance, the omnipresent stone masks, with their blank and lifeless gazes, were displayed in small individual niches along one wall, each separately lit, a presentation that seemed to cancel out their ubiquity, heightening, as it did, the subtle shapes of lip and brow, and the small, yet infinite variations of media. Before my eyes, the face of Teotihuacan came to life.

The catalogue shows the different approaches that scholars have taken towards the city, revealing at times the fault lines of interpretation that divide the different authors. It and the accompanying exhibition are milestones for the study of Teotihuacan, along with the contemporaneous volume of essays, Art, Ideology and the City of Teotihuacan edited by Janet Catherine Berlo and
published by Dumbarton Oaks. Together, they pave the way for a single, sustained interpretation of the city, for which students of Teotihuacan still hunger.

Barbara E. Mundy