

State of the Arts

An Exploration of the Effects of Spanish Colonization on Traditional Taino and Aztec Artwork

By Connor Wolfe

In the Spanish Empire's unerring search for wealth in the New World during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, they decimated multiple flourishing societies throughout the Americas. While historians continue to explore the downfall of these American empires, it is clear that artifacts provide a vital way of understanding how Indigenous societies changed over time in the centuries leading up to and in the decades after the conquest. Art has a remarkable ability to communicate across time, and it provides a clear window directly into the core values of civilization. Understanding the creative wealth of the Aztec and Taino societies, and how Spanish colonization altered them, offers insight into the extent of cultural destruction these people experienced. The Spanish were too focused on gold, amassing property, and the "inferiority" of native peoples to realize the cultural and creative wealth hidden between the looming Aztec pyramids of Mexico and the Taino villages dotting the Greater Antilles Islands.

The Tainos were prolific wood and stone carvers, materials which they used to create a variety of religious

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figures, including deity figures called zemís.¹ The process of creating a zemí was strict and steeped in tradition: the carver had to first gain the approval of the spirit living within the object, and carvers could only form them out of trees and stones that were significant in some way (shape, color, or another characteristic).² Shell and resin inlays emphasized details of the wooden figure's body. Tainos used a flat surface connected to the skull and spine of the effigy during ritual activities. In other forms, usually carved of bone, two tubes lead from a chamber above the figure's head through which participants would inhale hallucinogenic substances. The Tainos believed these figures contained a divine spirit, so Tainos heavily protected and worshiped the figures.

The Taino people used wood carving to create everyday items, including furniture; for example, they carved long hardwood logs into recliner seats and stools with animalistic legs and faces. The other primary material used to create household items was the abundant clay on the Caribbean islands, used to create pottery. Taino people seldom painted their pottery; although, they often carved it with geometric or religiously significant designs. Stone weapons and tools were also abundant throughout the islands, which Tainos chiseled and sanded to form blunt edges and needle points useful for defense or material collection. Made of greenstone, a material considered valuable and often exported, the tools were exceptionally durable. Pre-conquest Taino art shows a

¹ Deity figure (zemí), Taino, Dominican Republic, ca. CE 1500 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, 1979.206.380). See image list.

² James A. Doyle, *Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Winter 2020), 22-25.

thorough mastery of material manipulation to serve multiple functions.³

Compared to the Tainos, Aztecs attached a much larger economic value to art and its creators. Artists enjoyed high social status, and artists of the same medium often lived and worked in dedicated communities. One of the most influential artist groups in Aztec society was potters. They supplied almost all the vessels and surfaces required for everyday life, including skillets, grinding instruments, mixing containers, and storage jars. The Aztecs revered potters for their products' inherent usefulness, while they appreciated metal and feather workers for the value and beauty of their creations. Aztec metal workers were perhaps the most advanced in the world at the time – much more advanced than the Spanish – and mainly worked in gold. Metal workers spent their entire lives mastering the craft, and Aztec nobility highly sought their elaborate and lifelike figures of birds, plants, and even humans. Similarly, feather workers spent substantial effort perfecting their skills to create colorful outfits, headdresses, and figures.⁴ In an Aztec text, the writer described Aztec creations as Spanish conquistadors are looting them from Tenochtitlan: "ornaments made of quetzal feathers, richly worked shields, disks of gold, the necklaces of the idols, gold nose plugs, gold greaves and bracelets and crowns."⁵

When the Spanish stumbled upon the Caribbean in 1493, they discovered people rich in culture. Unfortunately, the

³ Doyle, *Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean*, 22-25.

⁴ Rebecca M. Seaman, "Sciences and Arts of Pre-Conquest Aztec," *Choice Reviews Online* 51, no. 07 (2013): 342-43.

⁵ Miguel León Portilla, *Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 68, <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/2027/heb02772.0001.001>.

lustrous sheen of the gold that the Spanish believed filled the surrounding hills blinded the Spanish from noticing this artistic erudition. According to the Spanish, the Tainos were "semisedentary chiefdoms" of "local-minded subsistence farmers and fishing folk." This lack of enthusiasm toward accumulating wealth angered the Spanish.⁶ They believed the Taino and Aztec cultures were foul and inferior to European traditions, and the Spanish used this idea as justification to forcibly convert natives to Catholicism in the name of salvation. When the natives resisted, they were enslaved or destroyed as punishment during the Spaniards' ensuing "scorched earth strategy."⁷

Iberian explorers expanded their presence in America during the following decades. They believed native art was perverted and demonic, so the Spanish often destroyed them and inserted traditional Catholic images in their place. Furthermore, Iberians authorized conquistadors to enslave all Tainos who engaged in these "unnatural" practices.⁸ Young Taino children were sent to Spain for education at Catholic schools, intensifying their conversion. Scholar Lynne Guitar explains that although "the Crown does appear to have had the Indians' best interests in mind," the Spanish still subjected Taino adolescents to "forced education and religious indoctrination."⁹ This removal of native youngsters from their native environment undoubtedly catalyzed a reduction in the

⁶ Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2011), 63.

⁷ Jane Landers, "Worlds Colliding," 12.

⁸ Jane Landers, "American Centuries," 3.

⁹ Lynne A. Guitar, "Willing It So: Intimate Glimpses of Encomienda Life in Early-Sixteenth-Century Hispaniola," *Colonial Latin America Historical Review* 7, no. 3 (1998): 258-259.

creation of Taino art as fewer and fewer Taino children learned about their heritage's artistic practices.

When the Spanish finally arrived at the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, almost 30 years after settling on the Caribbean islands, they found a civilization that expressed itself differently than the Taino. Instead of wood and stone carving, the Aztecs used Mexico's famous gold in their art and religious pieces, which the Spanish seized and immediately melted down into bricks.¹⁰ They paid no attention to the artifacts' sacred nature or artistic value, only caring about the gold's material worth. After "discovering" a culture so rich in precious resources, stopping to consider these resources' spiritual and ceremonial importance to the Aztecs was impossible. The subsequent massacres and destruction of the Aztec empire directly resulted from this avarice.

The Spanish viewed any practices that did not further their two goals of conversion and wealth accumulation as a hindrance they must remove. The ensuing destruction of these civilizations and their way of life was so swift that there was no opportunity for their artistic ideas and processes to be meaningfully conserved or incorporated into the broader cultures of their respective areas. As native people died at alarming rates, the Taino population dwindled, art creation lapsed, and the Spanish destroyed or discarded many artifacts.

Similarly to Taino art, Aztec art immediately declined after the Spanish arrived. Local artists were the only people who continued to create traditional Aztec art during the centuries following the empire's destruction. Only in the late 18th Century did historians begin a more thorough exploration

¹⁰ Portilla, *Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, 68.

of Aztec art and expression.¹¹ Traditional Aztec designs and motifs only grew in popularity, and those iconic geometric depictions of nature and creatures are now deeply intertwined with the Mexican artistic landscape.

As indigenous destruction occurred, the slave trade introduced Africans into the Caribbean to replace the thousands of natives who perished due to disease, overexertion, torture, or execution. The Tainos were so quickly enslaved, displaced, and wiped out by diseases that there was not ample time for the evolving artistic landscape of the Caribbean to absorb their traditional style. It did not take long for African laborers to vastly outnumber the surviving Taino population; most of these remaining Tainos lived in smaller, secluded villages, resulting in Taino's influence on Caribbean culture greatly diminishing. Simultaneously, the multiple art styles of the diverse West African Coast quickly wove themselves into the fabric of American artistic expression, resulting in a fusion incorporating fewer native ideas and more African ones. There are notable examples of Taino art with African influences,¹² but very few remain; not long after the decimation of the Taino, African designs emerged as the dominating artistic style of the Caribbean, and native influences faded into the background. Although Indigenous art styles were prevalent in Caribbean expression, Taino influences were exceedingly rare in contemporary art until the 1970's when the Post-Taino movement began, and artists began to appreciate

¹¹ Mark Cartwright, "Aztec Art," *World History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.worldhistory.org/#organization>, July 27, 2022. https://www.worldhistory.org/Aztec_Art/.

¹² Deity figure (zemí), Taino, Dominican Republic, 15th-early 16th Century (Rome: Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini, 4090). See image list.

the intricate designs and beautiful carvings from the period.¹³ Similarly, art historians only recently started focusing on pre-conquest pieces from the Greater Antilles Islands, and much work remains in this area.

When the Caribbean and Mexico eventually rekindled artistic expression, it differed significantly from the prior outputs of these areas. Mixing European influences from the colonists, African aspects from the slave trade, and the greatly diminished Indigenous population caused a fusion in these areas that contained fewer Taino and Aztec ideas. Only through the dedicated work of archaeologists and historians could the nuanced methodologies, techniques, and ideas incorporated into native art be unearthed and brought to an audience able to appreciate it.

Luckily, the artistic story of the Tainos and Aztec cultures did not conclude all those centuries ago, despite Spanish conquistadors' best efforts. The few artifacts from the period remain invaluable resources for a better understanding of these civilizations, and public interest is only growing. When the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its Tainos collection for the first time in 1982, interest in Taino art history exploded in New York.¹⁴ Likewise, the beautiful metallurgy and featherwork of the Aztec valley have captured the hearts of casual museumgoers and art enthusiasts.

Continued public admiration of themes, motifs, and ideas that existed during the Tainos and Aztec periods, even after the Spanish attempted to convert them into clones of European and Catholic imagery, is encouraging. Every Metropolitan Museum

¹³ Hyatt, Brittany H, and Douglas J Weatherford, "The Taíno Influence on Modern Dominican Art," *Journal of Undergraduate Research* (Oct. 23, 2013), <http://jur.byu.edu/?p=7931>.

¹⁴ Doyle, *Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean*, 42.

of Art viewer whom the zemís of the Tainos wing enrapture and every contemporary art piece that the feather costumes of Aztec ceremony inspire proves the ability of art to transcend the destruction of people, societies, and entire civilizations.

The Spanish tried to ensure that Taino zemís and Aztec idols would never again be targets for reverence. Today, they are more appreciated and respected than ever, displayed in museums worldwide — a flawless ironic twist worth its weight in gold.

Image List (arranged by footnote number)

1. Deity figure (zemí), Taino, Dominican Republic, ca. CE 1500 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, 1979.206.380).



12. Deity figure (zemí), Taino, Dominican Republic, 15th-early 16th Century (Rome: Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini, 4190).



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