Gems & Jewellery

Winter 2023 / Volume 32 / No. 4

THE 2023 PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH RAPHAEL GÜBELIN

HISTORY OF TURQUOISE IN MESOAMERICA

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The double-headed serpent known as Maquizcoatl is represented in this mask made from turquoise, wood, pine resin, spiny oyster shell, conch shell and other materials. It is currently on display at the British Museum. Photo by Geni.

TURQUOISE

Celestial Gemstone of Mesoamerica

Sandrine Martin explores the history and significance of turquoise to the people of the pre-Columbian Americas, particularly members of the Aztec Empire.

Exalted by great civilizations throughout ages, turquoise is one of the oldest gemstones known to man. An opaque blue-green copper-aluminium phosphate mineral that is relatively rare and found in dry geological environments, turquoise was historically mined in a wide mineral-bearing stratum extending from Egypt through Iran and Tibet. Nodules usually form between other stones and rarely appear as large pieces. Thus the gem is most often fashioned as cabochons, and is also used for carvings, mosaics and to produce small items such as beads.

Due to the unique color of turquoise, the material's name has become the common word used to describe the slightly greenish shade of cyan and similar colours. Its legendary hue mainly depends on the content of copper and iron in the rock: copper enhances the blue, while iron brings out the green. The most desirable colour, sometimes referred to as 'Persian blue', originated from the legendary mine in Nishapur, Iran. Archaeologists have found that the gem was first utilised in western Iran around 7000 BCE (Hole et al., 1969) and was known to the Egyptians before 5500 BCE. In China – which hosts one of the main modern-day deposits – the first archaeological evidence of turquoise being mined and used in ornamentation dates from the mid-Neolithic period (approximately 3300 BCE). Highly praised by pre-Columbian societies, the first use of turquoise in Mesoamerica dates to around 600 BCE. Today turquoise is primarily sourced in the American Southwest, Iran and China. Other deposits include Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, Israel and Mexico.

A seated stone figure of Xiuhtecuhtli, known in Aztec mythology as the Turquoise Lord. This figure is located at the British Museum. Photo by Simon Burchell.

For many civilisations, turquoise was a powerful symbol of fertility, joy, nobility, power and that which is divine. Praised in cultures of the Old and New World as a bringer of good fortune, a talisman and a sacred gem, the present article focuses on Mesoamerica, especially the Aztec civilization, where turquoise was revered as a gemstone with significant royal and religious significance.

HISTORY AND USE OF TURQUOISE IN MESOAMERICA

Green- and blue-coloured stones were highly esteemed in ancient Mesoamerica from the middle of the eleventh century BCE to the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century CE. Jadeite was, for a long period, the preferred gemstone among pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures such as the Olmec (2500– 500 BCE).

While the first use of turquoise in Mesoamerica dates to around 600 BCE, Weigand (1997) noted that the gem became widely present by the end of the Late Classic period (600–900 CE). The demand for the gem continued to grow through the flourishing Toltec civilization (ca. 900–1168 CE). Taube (2012) indicated that 'there was a virtual cult of turquoise at Tula', the ancient capital of the Toltecs. Its use increased after 1300 CE, surpassing jade as the most valued and widespread gemstone within the region. Relatively soft, and thus easy to carve, turquoise also provided the artisans with a unique palette of hues and shades. Its blue-green colour, which held great significance for Mesoamerican civilisations, conferred the gem with the symbolic meanings of fertility, growth, abundance and life itself. Typically fashioned of minute tesserae elegantly associated with other materials, such as feathers, shells and mother-of-pearl, and delicately glued onto a wooden backing (Izeki), turquoise mosaics count among the most celebrated items of ancient Mesoamerican artistry and craftsmanship, including masks, religious artifacts, royal regalia and complex mosaic artworks.

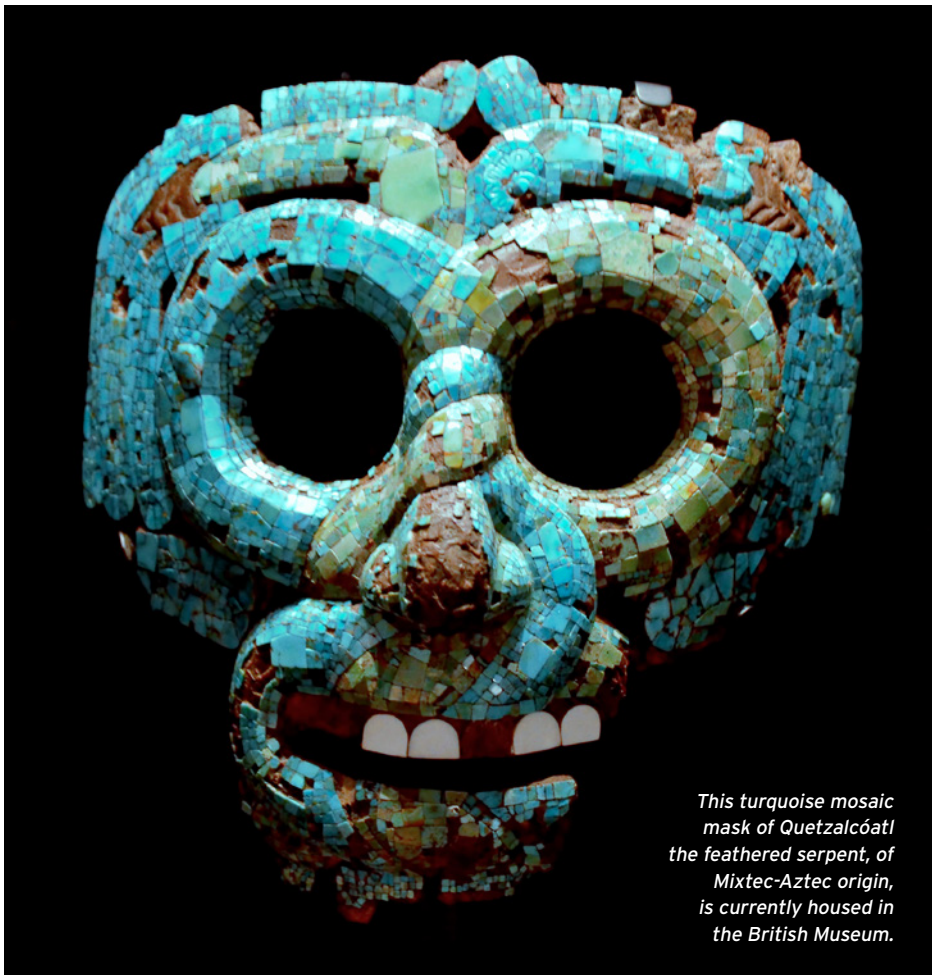
By the time of the Aztec imperial years of the Late Postclassic period (ca. 1430–1519 CE), the Mexica – as Aztec elites were known – were fervent consumers of turquoise. Their fascination for the gem largely derived from the Toltecs (Taube, 2012). The gem became "the most esteemed form of royal regalia, with the *xiuhuitlzoli* royal crown of the Aztec emperors made of turquoise. The royal ceremonial attire also included the *yacaxihuitl* nose ornament, the latter of which was also used by nobles and heroic warriors" (Taube, 2012).

With the rise of their capital city, Tenochtitlán, the Aztecs emerged as the dominant force in central Mexico starting ca. 1345 and continuing until 1521, with an empire covering at its greatest extent most of northern Mesoamerica. The most important sources of income for their empire were tributes and taxation. Fierce warriors, they continuously engaged in military interventions and imposed the conquered regions to pay a tribute, generally in the form of local materials and luxury items. These included animal skins, tropical bird feathers, fine jade and turquoise. The sixteenth-century *Codex Mendoza* shows items received as tribute in the Aztec capital, including turquoise masks from several provinces in the empire (Smith, 1998).

> In the iconography of the Mexica people, turquoise serpents, or *xiuhcoatl*, are related to celestial events.

At the height of the Aztec Empire, between 1428 and 1521, many Mixtec towns came under Aztec rule and paid tribute to the emperor, with gifts including gold and turquoise. One of the major civilizations of Mesoamerica, the Mixtecs were famed for their exceptional mastery of jewellery, in which gold and turquoise figured prominently. The refined work of Mixtec artisans and artists was highly regarded throughout ancient Mesoamerica, and their craftsmanship was much prized in Tenochtitlán and greatly influenced Aztec art and, thus, pieces that incorporated turquoise.

Turquoise In Aztec Cosmology And Religious Practice. The term for turquoise in Nahuatl was *xihuitl*, a term that can also mean 'year', 'comet →



This turquoise mosaic mask of Quetzalcóatl the feathered serpent, of Mixtec-Aztec origin, is currently housed in the British Museum.

(meteor)' and 'herb'. Turquoise was also associated with 'blue-green hues' and the intense reds and blues seen in firelight (Basset, 2015). The finest gems were called *teoxihuitl* – with the prefix *teotl* often translated as 'god' – meaning 'fine turquoise'. The word *xiuhtic*, for 'blue', also derives from the term *xihuitl* (Thouvenot, n.d.).

The Aztecs believed that turquoise came from a place called Tlalxicco, or 'Place of the Earth's Navel', the symbolic centre of the earth. Researcher Patrick Johansson suggests that Tlalxicco may once have been known as Tlalxiuhco, or 'In the Place of Turquoise', the home of Xiuhtecuhtli, who was known as the Turquoise Lord (Bassett, 2015). The Aztecs worshipped Xiuhtecuhtli as the creator of all life and as the god of fire, among other roles. He was also considered the mother and father of all deities that resided in the centre of the universe (Olivier and López Luján, 2009).

According to Nicholson (1971), Xiuhtecuhtli 'served as the archetype of all rulers'. His *nahual*, or spirit form, is Xiuhcoatl, known as the Fire Serpent, and whose Nahuatl name translates to 'turquoise snake'. He was associated with youthful warriors and with rulership. Taube (2012) explains that Xiuhtecuhtli "was explicitly evoked during Aztec rites of imperial coronation." Taube further notes, "However, in accession ceremonies, it was not only the god, but the turquoise that he embodied in particular ornaments, such as the *xiuhuitzolli* crown and *yacaxihuitl* nosepiece."

This Mixtec funerary mask, with some turquoise mosaic intact, is found at the Santo Domingo Cultural Center in Oaxaca, Mexico. Photo by Adam Jones.

A turquoise mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, at the British Museum.

Connected with fertility, renewal and transformation, the serpent played a prominent role in the Aztec cosmology and religion. The Mexica considered serpents to be powerful, multifaceted creatures that could bridge the separate spheres of the underworld, water and sky (Vila Llonch, 2009). The word for serpent, *coatl*, is associated with several gods, including Xiuhcoatl and Quetzalcóatl, who was the patron of the priests. Also known as the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcóatl was one of the most important gods in Mesoamerica, particularly for the Toltec and Aztec civilisations.

In the iconography of the Mexica people, turquoise serpents, or *xiuhcoatl*, are related to celestial events. Maquizcoatl, the double-headed serpent considered to be the bearer of bad omens, was one of the names given to the supreme Mexica god Huitzilopochtli. A sculpture of this double-headed serpent, now at the British Museum, is emblematic of Aztec art. Carved in wood and decorated with turquoise mosaic, coral and shells, it was probably worn on ceremonial occasions as a chest ornament (Vila Llonch, 2009).

Another of the most prominent gods in the Aztec pantheon, Tlaloc – known as 'He Who is the Embodiment of Earth' or 'He Who Makes Things Sprout' – is one of the oldest deities of Mesoamerica. His origins are traced back to the Olmec and Maya civilisations. Tlaloc's name derives from the Nahuatl word *tlalli*, which means 'earth' or 'soil'. The god of rain, water, lightning and thunder, Tlaloc is the patron of agriculture and is associated with fertility. A mask formed of two intertwined and looped serpents worked in contrasting colours of turquoise mosaic, believed to

represent either Tlaloc or Quetzalcóatl (who are both associated with serpents and turquoise), is currently at the British Museum. The striking blue and green colours of the mosaic evoke the waters and vegetation. Known as Quetzalcóatl Tlaloc Tlamacazqui, the priest who served Tlaloc in the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan may have worn a mask like this as part of his ritual attire (Vila Llonch, 2009).

Use of Turquoise in the Mosaic Masks of Mesoamerica. Nourished with a shamanistic religious heritage, masks played an important role in the political, social and religious fields in the cultures of Mesoamerica. Used to honour and pay homage to the forces of nature, masks also played a crucial role in ritual ceremonies, serving as a ritual agent of transformation (Markman and Markman, 1989). They enabled political and religious leaders to assume the identity of the gods, and to create communication bridges between the worldly environment and the supranatural realms. The most powerful and prestigious masks were made of the rarest and most precious materials. Along with conch and mother-of-pearl, turquoise was one of the highest prestige materials in the pre-Hispanic cultures, especially in the Aztec period (1325–1521 CE).

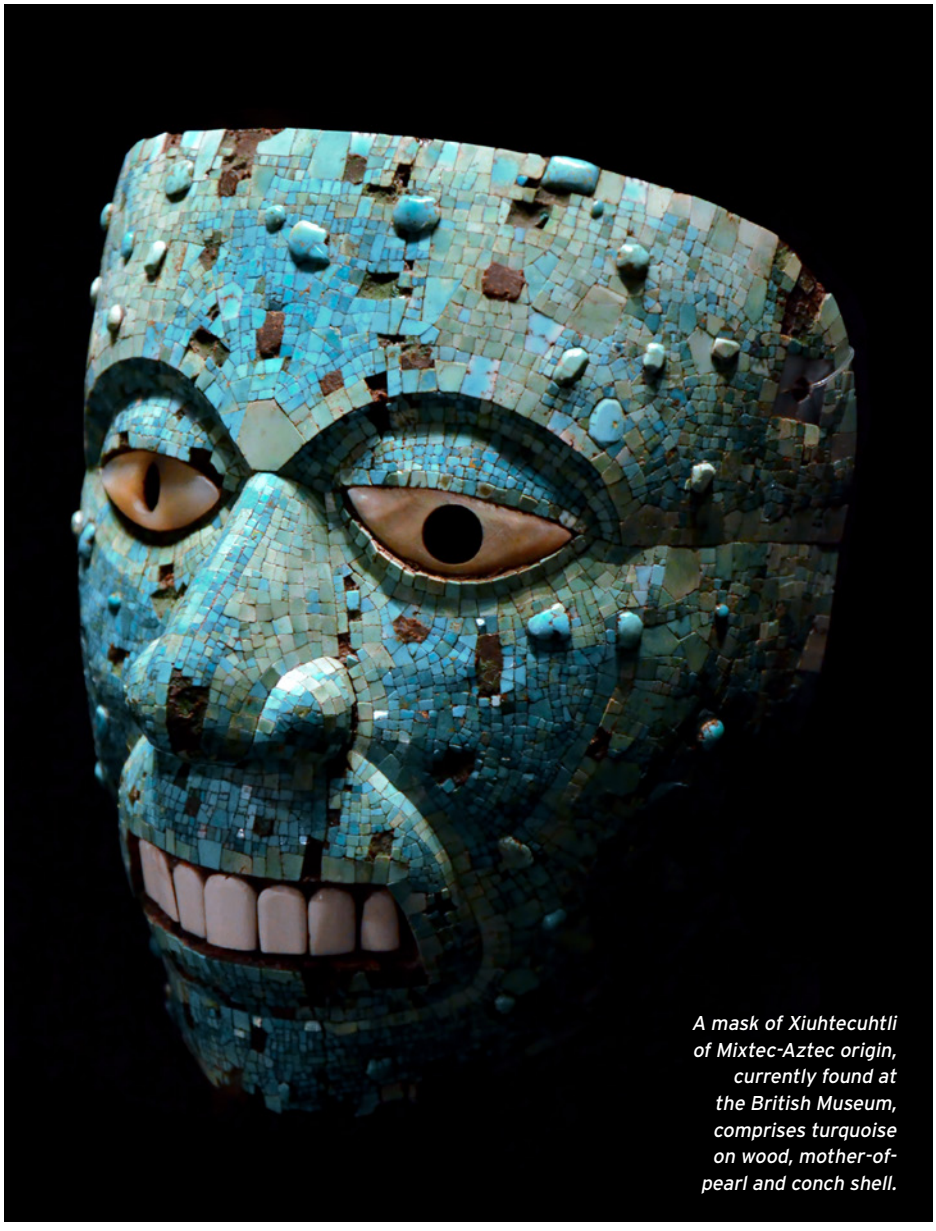
The gem imbued the masks with its divine essence, and thus was believed to invest the wearers with its qualities. According to Markman and Markman (1989), "The mask in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica served in death and life as a metaphor for the ultimate nature of reality." From the earliest time, masks and their accompanying rituals were a part of Mesoamerican life and death. Turquoise mosaic masks specifically were a common feature in the elaborate tombs and burials of Mixtec rulers and important citizens and were also part of the Aztecs' funerary rituals (Markman and Markman, 1989). Additionally, Taube (2012) notes that ceremonial attire made of turquoise, including the previously mentioned *xihuitzolli* crown and the *yacaxihuitl* nosepiece, was used in Aztec mortuary rites for dead warriors.

The skull mask was another way of suggesting the link between life and death, as represented by the funerary mask. The idea of preserving and decorating the skull of an important person is reminiscent of the Maya practice, and several similarly decorated skulls were found in both Aztec and Mixtec offerings. The alternating bands of blue turquoise and black lignite that compose the face suggest the facial painting of Tezcatlipoca (see p. 28, bottom left), the deity this mask may represent (Markman and Markman, 1989). Brought to central Mexico by the Toltecs, Tezcatlipoca (also known as Smoking Mirror) is the god of the Great Bear constellation and of the night sky. He ruled over the Aztec pantheon with Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc and Quetzalcóatl.

Created deep within the 'Navel of Earth' and adorned with a unique blue-green colour, turquoise counted amongst the highest prestige materials in pre-Hispanic cultures, especially for the Aztec civilisation. Identified with fire, the gem 'symbolised the souls of warriors' (Taube, 2012). Metaphorically connected with fertility, abundance, and transformation, turquoise was at the heart of the Aztec cosmology and religion, and it became a potent symbol of nobility and power, widely used in religious artifacts and royal regalia and imbuing the objects with its divine qualities. ■

This article is part of a longer piece that ran under the title 'Celestial Turquoise' on the author's website.

A list of references is available upon contacting the Editor. All photos A ll



A mask of Xiuhtecuhtli of Mixtec-Aztec origin, currently found at the British Museum, comprises turquoise on wood, mother-of-pearl and conch shell.

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