

The Public Face of Mexica Grandeur

In my work in Mexico it soon became clear to me that Mexican popular culture was beginning to embrace certain aspects of its pre-Hispanic past from a safe psychological distance. This narrative of *Indigenismo* was able to consume ideas about ancient pre-colonial grandeur through museums and a development of national assimilationist policies. More so than you would see in New York City, Boston or Washington, DC, Mexico's pre-conquest world is on public display especially in the nation's capital, Mexico City. By clicking on the image below a video begins with a cab taking me to the magnificent National Museum of Anthropology with a display of some items from the imperial Mexica state, whose ruined capital sits under the pavement of contemporary Mexico City. The opening shot unveils a mammoth stone statue thought to be the rain god, Tlaloc. To inaugurate the museum in 1964, [it was removed from the town of Coatlinchan](#), just south of Texcoco, under the strong protest from residents. Tales of curses abound related to the taking of the monolith. Most high school kids in Amanalco would tell you that since the movement of the statue, Central Mexico has suffered from drought caused by an angry rain god.



[Statue in front of the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City]

The video gives viewers a glimpse of some of the magnificent art and monuments created under Aztecs and a replica of their capital prior to the Spanish Conquest. But, to really see the public face of *indigenismo* and the representation of Mexica culture it is important to visit the Zocalo, the central square in Mexico City. This site is one of the largest city plazas in the world and is ringed by important structures such as the National Cathedral, Presidential Palace and one of the world's great urban archaeology sites – the *Templo Mayor* (the Major Temple). In 1978, electric company workers digging in the area stumbled on a 10 foot carved stone disk weighing over 8 tons and later found it to be associated with the main temple at the heart of the Aztec ceremonial center. Set behind one corner of the Zocalo, a walkway takes visitors around the excavated area which also includes an ultra-modern museum documenting this site. Here is a central place where parents and school groups bring children to learn about this heritage, all juxtaposed with the architectural history of the conquest.

Especially on Sundays when admission to the Templo Mayor is free, the plaza functions as a festive arena, partly dedicated to connecting people to the very heart of *indigenismo*. Mixed together are vendors of Aztec stylized art and jewelry, healers of many stripes and “Aztec dancers,” who in recent

years are sometimes overshadowed by local hip-hop performers. Toward the end of the video you see a brief segment of a performance of the Aztec dancers and their usurpation of indigenous iconography and identity. The dancers performing are urban dwellers whose parents have never spoken Nahuatl and who have no obvious connection to indigenous culture. They have appropriated an interest in the indigenous imaginary of the Aztec Empire and its popular representation by creating an informal economy of costumed performance. This is similar to the history reenactors in places like Colonial Williamsburg, where 21st century people take on the guise of colonial era slaves, masters and artisans. When I show the video of the Aztec dancers to people in Amanalco, they tend to smirk, or with an unamused demeanor say things like, "I don't know about this, it has nothing to do with us."