

ALBRECHT DÜRER

ON VIEWING AZTEC GOLD

The Mexica (Aztec) king Motecuhzoma greeted Hernan Cortés in 1519 with gifts of gold, silver, and precious stones, including jewelry, ornaments, headpieces, disks, garments, shields, and helmets. Cortés sent the tribute to Charles V, king of Spain and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who placed them on exhibit in 1520. Albrecht Dürer, the master German artist, viewed the exhibit in Brussels and extolled its beauty in his travel journal.

_____27 August 1520

At Brussels is a very splendid Townhall, large and covered with beautiful carved stonework, and it has a noble, open tower. . . . I saw the things which have been brought to the King from the new land of gold, a sun all of gold a whole fathom broad, and a moon all of silver of the same size, also two rooms full of armor of the people there, and all manner of wondrous weapons of theirs, harness and darts, very strange clothing, beds, and all kinds of wonderful objects of human use, much better worth seeing than prodigies [myths, fairy tales]. These things were all so precious that they are valued at 100,000 florins [guilders] All the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle Ingenia of men in foreign lands. Indeed I cannot express all that I thought there.

None of the Aztec art sent by Cortés to Spain is known to exist today. Many of the gold and silver works were melted down and other pieces thrown away. See discussion at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org/toah/ hd/ingd/hd_ingd.htm.



Cleveland Museum of Art

Warrior pendant, Aztec, 14th century, cast gold-silver-copper alloy

Dumbarton Oaks

Snail shell necklace, Aztec, cast gold