

Double-Headed Serpent

Artist – unknown Aztec c.1400-1521

Medium – wood, turquoise, oyster shell, conch shell, hematite and copal

Size - 20.3cm high, 43.3cm wide, 5.9cm deep

British Museum, London



Unknown Aztec, *Double-Headed Serpent* (front), circa 1400-1521, wood, turquoise, oyster shell, conch shell, hematite and copal, 43.3cm wide, 5.9cm deep. Collection The British Museum (Am1894,-.634). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum



Unknown Aztec, *Double-Headed Serpent* (back), circa 1400-1521, wood, turquoise, oyster shell, conch shell, hematite and copal, 43.3cm wide, 5.9cm deep. Collection The British Museum (Am1894,-.634). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum

Animals are represented in art across the world in many different ways, sometimes naturalistically, at other times symbolically. Animals can relate to specific beliefs, religions and historical events. Created in a non-European tradition, this three-dimensional work of art from the Aztec culture of Mesoamerica was associated with myths and legends, as the description 'serpent' rather than 'snake' suggests. Now on display in the British Museum, it is regarded as a sculptural work of fine art but when it was made it also had a practical function.

- Looking at the photographs above, what suggests this?



It was a **pectoral** – an ornament, part of a complex regalia that was worn on the chest during rituals and religious ceremonies – to indicate a high social status. It is similar to the one seen here (left).

Person dressed as Tlaloc, the Rain God, depicted with a double-headed serpent pectoral on his chest; Codex Vaticanus B, 3773, pl. 45. Digital image courtesy of Zierys Faksimiles

- Read the description at <https://smarthistory.org/double-headed-serpent-2/> and outline the symbolism of the double-headed serpent within Aztec culture:

“The two heads in this snake is the symbol of dualism, which was a fundamental part of the Aztec religion. All the deities have a dual nature - male, female, birth, death, night, day, generation and destruction.” (Adriane Diaz Enciso)

- Read the transcript of Neil MacGregor, a previous director of the British Museum, discussing the work: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode78/>
- Who wrote the accounts of the Aztec Empire available to us today?
- Why should we be wary of them?
- Read the entry on the British Museum website:
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am1894-634
- Fill in the missing parts of the grid, then label the images on the opening page:

Material	Technique	Part of the serpent	Symbolism/significance
Cedrela/Spanish cedar wood			
Spondylus princeps (red thorny oyster shell)			Wealth and power over the sea
		Teeth	
	To colour the resin red	Inside mouth	
	Mosaic of c.2000 pieces/tesserae attached with tweezers of fishbones and polished; some precise, some random. Designed to impress		
Beeswax		Around eye sockets	
			'the glue of faith'
	Adhesive to attach mosaic pieces		

➤ Some parts are now missing. What might it have looked like originally?

- To find out more about the Aztec mosaic technique watch from 4.49-7.33 minutes of the 14 minute video 'Masterpieces of the British Museum' from c. 2015:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2LLQ6EYPrw>
- Visual Analysis: Write a short description of the form of the work using the information above, but also include at least 5 key adjectives to suggest its power.

The work originated in the Aztec Empire of Central America in the present state of Mexico. See map. For more information about Aztec culture see: <https://smarthistory.org/introduction-mexica/>

Map of the Aztec empire in 1519. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia



Timeline

Date	Event	Significance
c.1300-1521	Aztec culture dominates Mesoamerica	
1519		Aztec legend had told that Quetzalcoatl floated out into the Atlantic, and would one day return as a bearded and fair-skinned man
	Montezuma II, the ninth ruler of the Aztec Empire, is killed	
	Tenochtitlan falls	

1522		The end of a great civilisation when 90% of population died from smallpox
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To summarise, Neil MacGregor referred to the *Double-Headed Serpent* as:

- (1) “a document of the Aztec Empire at the height of its artistic, religious and political power” and also as:
- (2) “evidence of the systematic oppression of its subject peoples, that ultimately destroyed it”.

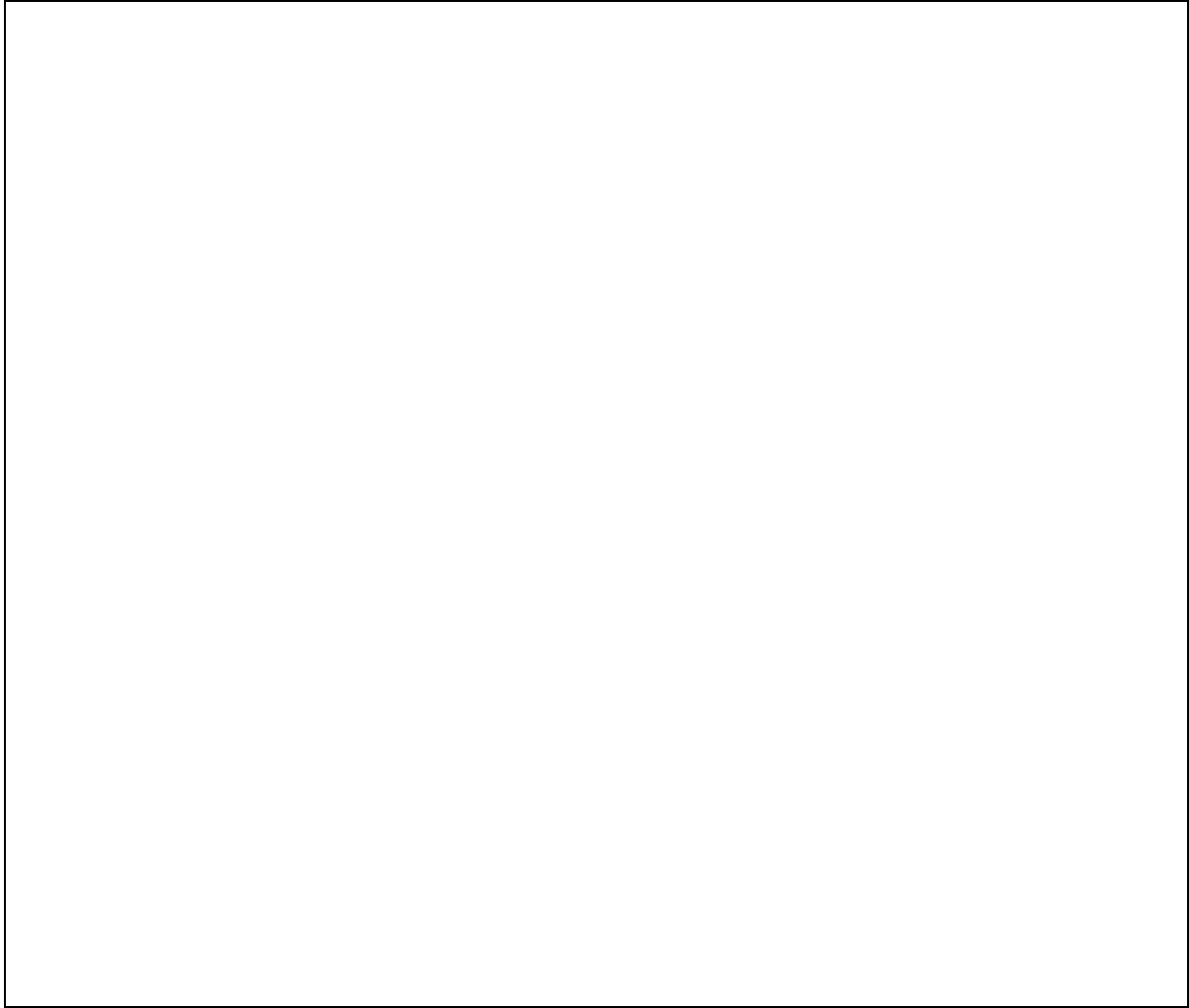
The Aztec *Double-Headed Serpent* arrived in Europe as a result of the Spanish conquest. Most likely, it was presented to the conquistador Hernán Cortés by Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor, when Spanish troops landed in about 1519. By 1521, the Spanish had conquered the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, and many Indigenous people perished due to diseases brought from Europe by the Spanish. The turquoise mosaics, including the serpent, that arrived in Europe in the 1520s caused quite a shock to the Europeans. They could neither believe that a ‘barbaric’, ‘uncivilised’ and ‘violent’ people could create such a great culture and civilisation nor that the elite of such a culture could exist outside of their known world. As a result of this superior colonial attitude, these works of art were initially regarded as just ‘curiosities’.

Nonetheless, such works did enter private European collections. In the 1890s an Italian duchess offered to sell the *Double-Headed Serpent* to the British Museum; in 1894 they paid £100 for it. The work became very fashionable during the 1930s Art Deco period when pieces of jewellery were based on its undulating design. From 1970 to 1997 it was housed in what was then the Museum of Mankind, the British Museum’s Department of Ethnography, located in a separate, leased building in Mayfair. Since the May 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations, museums have had to reassess the history of their collections, often rewriting catalogues and labels and addressing the broader issues of re-interpreting objects with provenance outside the British Isles. For further information see: <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/artefacts/rethinking-the-double-headed-serpent-in-the-british-museum>

The *Double-Headed Serpent* is now part of the British Museum’s main highlights tour:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/three-hours-museum>

- Practise part of an examination question. **Explore how nature has been represented in this non-European tradition work.** (6 marks)

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their answer to the examination question. The box is positioned centrally below the question text and occupies most of the page's width and a significant portion of its height.