Romancing the Aztec:
Emanuel Leutze's *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have asserted that American history painting developed as a response to the need for a unique American pictorial language, premised on the idea that it would instill values consistent with Americans' political and cultural identity. In his *Storming of the Teocalli* painting, German American history painter Emanuel Leutze used the lithographs by the English architect Frederick Catherwood of ancient Maya ruins as a visual reference for *Storming of the Teocalli*. The large stele, the sacrificial stone block, the architectural design ornamentation, and the large stone feathered serpent monument have been reworked to fit into the narrative of the Spanish conquest. Leutze used the ancient Maya elements in his Aztec *Teocalli* painting to offer a sense of historical authenticity at the cost of mixing two distinct indigenous civilizations. Moreover, Leutze's painting reflects his Düsseldorf training, use of the findings of contemporary writers and architects, as well as artistic licenses, and ability to bring ancient Maya ruins as Aztec to life in the Western cultural imagination.

Emanuel Leutze's painting, *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops* (1848, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut) depicts a pivotal moment in history: the Spanish empire's conquest of the Aztec in 1521. The composition details the infamous battle between the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and the last Aztec ruler (*tlatoani*) Cuauhtémoc. The conquest is shown taking place in a location sacred to the Aztec, atop its most important *teocalli* (Templo Mayor), an architectural monument dedicated to the gods of war and rain, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, respectively, at Tenochtitlan in present-day Mexico City.[1] Leutze's painting (Fig. 1) captures the beholder's imagination as the violent battle provides an up-close view of the violence of the Spanish conquest. Leutze stages the battle as if on the steps of a grand Aztec stone temple, which he depicts as an elaborately carved, stepped pyramid topped by a monumental stele that is interrupted by the upper edge of the canvas.

Modern scholars will quickly note that Leutze's "Aztec" architecture, ornamentation, and clothing all depict Maya, not Aztec elements. Leutze transcribed these cultural and material elements from a visual source that depicted Maya architectural ruins. Like others of his time, Leutze mixed Aztec and Maya elements freely. In doing so, the painter created a unique artistic interpretation, fusing the Aztec and Maya into a powerful, romanticized view of the pre-Columbian past. By closely looking at Leutze's sources, and by unpacking the way in which Leutze used storytelling and illustration from his own time, I argue that Leutze used Maya ruins as a cultural substitute for the Aztec in order to give the *Storming of the Teocalli* a form of

[1] "Tlatoani" was the historical title used for dynastic rulers in the Aztec triple alliance. Cuauhtémoc is the name of the last ruler engaged by Cortés. "Teocalli" literally means "temple of God" in Nahuatl.

historical authenticity. The result was to bring ancient Maya artifacts to life in the Western cultural imagination and to turn them into Aztec icons.

Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868) was a German-American history painter who held and continues to hold a prominent place in American art for paintings that represent the nation's ideals during the mid-nineteenth century. He is most celebrated for *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and for his painting, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1861) commissioned for the stairway of the U.S. Capitol. Leutze belonged to the so-called "Düsseldorf School" of American painters who studied at that German city's art academy during the 1840s and 1850s.[2] Not surprisingly, he took on the style of detailed, theatrical naturalism that characterized the teaching at Düsseldorf.

When Leutze painted *Storming of the Teocalli* for a Boston patron, he had not yet produced *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and he was less well known in the United States than he would be after 1851. Although his ambitious rendition of Cortés's conquest over the Aztec soon gained Leutze important recognition in Boston and New York. Unfortunately, by 1975, the painting had faded from public view and was listed as unlocated in the catalogue raisonné of Leutze's paintings published that year.[3]

The limited interest in Leutze's *Teocalli* no doubt stems from the dominance of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* 1851 over any inquiry into Leutze's *oeuvre*. While

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[2] For a good pictorial survey of the American painters who trained in Düsseldorf, see The Düsseldorf Academy and the Americans (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1972).

[3] Barbara S. Groseclose, *Emanuel Leutze, 1816–1868: Freedom is the Only King* (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975)

numerous publications—of Leutze's time and more recently—look closely at *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, *The Storming of the Teocalli* resides on the margins of any inquiry of his corpus. Perhaps this lacuna is due in part to the chaos, the struggle, the battle, that resides within the composition of the *Teocalli*, and that viewers themselves may struggle to make sense of a painting that is unlike any other that Leutze has painted. Yet Leutze's ambitions in creating the painting are undeniable. It is a large canvas, filled with a complex composition of some two dozen figures, who engage in a battle of life and death marked by details that create an unforgettable effect.

To organize his melodramatic storytelling, Leutze uses the temple's structure to create a clear foreground, middle ground, and background. He also divides his composition in half vertically, with mainly Spaniards on the left and Aztec on the right. A Spanish soldier, who has fallen onto the temple steps closest to the viewer, introduces the carnage. A few steps above the fallen conquistador is a stone terrace where the fighting takes place. The combatants include Cortés and his soldiers, the semi-nude Aztec king, two nobles who are identifiable by their feathered headdresses, and the semi-nude Aztec warriors. Amid the fighting between the Spanish, with their guns and swords, and the Aztec, with their spears, arrows, and clubs, Leutze adds two religious personages. At the left, a Franciscan friar kneels and holds a crucifix over a fallen Aztec warrior, who resists the friar's effort to convert him to Christianity. Behind the Aztec king stands a native priest with an obsidian blade in his mouth, holding an infant to the sky as if in the act of ritual sacrifice. As ceremonial smoke rises, a kneeling Aztec woman looks up at the infant as if she is the mother of the soon-to-be-sacrificed child. On the temple's roof, where two urns emit thin plumes of smoke, the fighting and panic continue. There, women and children

have taken refuge; yet a group of conquistadors has also climbed onto the roof to raise the Spanish flag. Beyond is a mountain range, a valley, and Aztec dwellings barely visible to the naked eye. Smoke billows from that area, suggesting that a destructive fire will ultimately envelope the entire scene.

Leutze's precise, highly detailed painting style extends to the artifacts and stone objects in the composition. The viewer sees an Aztec who drums with human bones on an unusually decorated leather drum. The temple front shows intricate designs of skulls, braids, and circular shapes; its upper level is covered with geometric pattering. The most notable carved object, a large stone serpent's head in the right foreground, confronts the viewer with its mouth wide open and a long tongue.

The coloring in *The Storming of the Teocalli* is dominated by ochre and black for the human characters, and tones of gray for the temple and its stonework. The areas of rising smoke create contrast with their tones of gray and brownish red. The effect is vivid, thanks to a pale blue sky, which sets off an orange glow on the uppermost part of the temple, and a soft yellow at the horizon that highlights the early morning. Touches of contrasting colors guide the viewer around the combatants. For example, a Spanish soldier wears a red shirt and green pantaloons; Aztec wear gold necklaces; the Aztec ruler's gold headdress has turquoise beads and turquoise feathers, while his loincloth and cape are brilliant white. Finally, multiple lighting sources add clarity and impart drama even to inanimate objects. It was important to Leutze that heads, hands, and stone objects all be illuminated. The result is a scene where light, color, architecture, and artifacts each play an important role.

Previous research on Leutze's *Teocalli*

Only a few scholars have scrutinized Leutze's *Storming of the Teocalli*—and less so from an art-historical perspective. *The Storming of the Teocalli* has been mainly investigated by four art historians, Barbara S. Groseclose in 1975, William H. Truettner in 1991 and 1995, and Jochen Wierich in 2001 and 2012, and Karsten Fitz 2007.

Groseclose places Leutze within the broader context of historical painting in nineteenth-century American art. She emphasizes Leutze's technical skill and his ability the capture the dramatic intensity and the historical importance of a scene as important features of his history painting generally. Groseclose does not offer a visual analysis of the *Storming of the Teocalli* specifically focusing instead on his most studied works, *Columbus Before the Queen* (1843) *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1861). She includes *The Storming of the Teocalli* in her catalog of paintings.[4] There Groseclose tells the reader that Leutze's personal library contained a copy of historian William H. Prescott's (1796–1859) *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), and that the commission of the *Teocalli* was likely due to the popularity of Hernán Cortés at the time.

Truettner considers how the painting shaped Americans' perception of Native American and pre-Columbian cultures, as well as the narrative of conquest and colonization.[5] His main point is that the *Teocalli* embodies historian William H. Prescott's concern for the legitimacy of

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[4] Groseclose, *Freedom Is the Only King*, 78.

[5] William H. Truettner, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

the conquest.[6] This is evident in the equal footing Leutze has given the Aztec and Spaniards in the *Teocalli*. Moreover, Truettner asserts that the violence and sacrificial elements in the *Teocalli* would have been easily digestible to contemporary audiences, since indigenous "savagery" already had a foothold in contemporaries' minds, given the tales of horror recorded by white settlers west of the Mississippi.[7]

In 1995 Truettner published an analysis of the *Teocalli's* iconography and its reception at the 1991 Smithsonian exhibition, "The West as America," for which he acted as a lead curator.[8] In that essay, Truettner stresses the importance of the historical, social, and political contexts in which the *Teocalli* was composed. He highlights that the reception of the painting changed over time and encourages the reader to revisit and reevaluate known historical narratives presented to us in history paintings. Yet Truettner never offered an in-depth, comparative analysis of each element in the *Teocalli* painting. Nor was his description especially even-handed; he dismisses the *Teocalli's* design as an "architectural nightmare" with "hideous figures of Mayan origin."[9] His description is instead limited to a small assertion about how chaotic the pre-Hispanic designs were.

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[6] William H. Truettner, "Prelude to Expansion," in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 55-63

[7] Truettner, "Prelude to Expansion," 63.

[8] William H. Truettner, "Storming the Teocalli-Again: Or, Further Thoughts on Reading History Paintings," *American Art* 9, no. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 56-95.

[9] Truettner, "Storming of the Teocalli-Again," 87.

Wierich and Fitz offer the first analysis of German literary influence on Leutze. They provide a window into the ways in which Leutze struggles through and with history.[10] Wierich tells us that depicting Cortés for Leutze was challenging as the conquistador was not easily molded into the larger historical narrative of the Americas like Columbus. For Wierich, Cortés made it difficult for Americans to view the pre-Columbian past as being part of the history of the United States because they were confronted with a historical figure who did the dirty work of expansion. Fitz provides insight into the impact that the Düsseldorf school had on the American painters in the nineteenth century, more specifically through Leutze's representations, or what Fitz refers to as Leutze's "interpretation of history."[11]

The contributions of Groseclose, Truettner, Wierich, and Fitz all offer valuable insights. Groseclose translated and interpreted the German literary source material, improving our understanding of the way in which Europeans understood Leutze's *Teocalli*. Although she did not write much about the painting itself, her work gives a useful foundation for understanding *Teocalli* and Leutze's approach to it. Truettner gave new material to analyze through the process of reception study, and for Wierich and Fitz, their modern interpretation and analysis of the philosophical zeitgeist of Leutze's time is crucial to understand his way of thinking.

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[10] Jochen Wierich, "Struggling Through History: Emanuel Leutze, Hegel, and Empire" *American Art* 15, no. 2 (Summer, 2001): 52–71

[11] Karsten Fitz, "The Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Emanuel Leutze, And German-American Transatlantic Exchange in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2007): 15–34.

The Research Problem

Together, past scholarship on Leutze offers valuable information and provides a useful foundation to further study *The Storming of the Teocalli*. However, what is missing is an interpretation of the painting, an interpretation that considers closely the architectural and iconographic elements within the picture because through these elements Leutze challenged previous ideas about history painting.

Curiosity about Leutze's *Teocalli* seems to have been limited simply because *Washington Crossing the Delaware* has so overshadowed the painter's other productions. While numerous publications look closely at *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, leaving *The Storming of the Teocalli* on the margins of Leutze investigations. Perhaps this scholarly lacuna is due in part to the struggle, the battle, and the chaos that resides in the composition of the *Teocalli*, that viewers themselves struggle to read a painting that is unlike any other Leutze has painted.

Many more questions about this enigmatic image still need to be addressed. None of the aforementioned authors have said much about the role of architectural ornamentation in Leutze's *Teocalli* painting. Truettner tells us that Leutze referred to recently published visual sources but does not expand on this point. Having described the pre-Columbian ornamentation as ugly, he misses the agency of the Aztec that is an undeniable part of the painting. What is glaringly missing is an interpretation of the painting that looks particularly at the architectural and iconographic elements within the picture because, through these elements Leutze has challenged previous ideas about history painting.

History of Leutze's ambitions as a history painter

Any investigation into Leutze's painting should begin with a biographical sketch.[12] Emanuel Leutze was born in Germany in 1816 at Schwäbisch Gmünd, Kingdom of Württemberg. In 1825, at nine years old, his parents brought him to the United States, first arriving in Virginia, and then later in Philadelphia. Leutze's first interaction with art happened while he was attending to his bed-ridden father. During the hours of sitting by his bedside, tending to his ill father, Leutze began drawing portraits to pass time. By 1831, Leutze's father died, and to support himself, he began to sell portraits at five dollars each. Leutze later went on to work with John Rubens Smith, a Philadelphian portrait painter and art educator. In 1840, after working on portraiture commissions, Leutze's paintings helped him gain a small following before his first major history painting, *Columbus Before the Council of Salamanca* (1841), which depicted Columbus as a refined visionary. Later, Leutze honed his drawing skills and painting ambitions in Germany, at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Leutze arrived at Düsseldorf in 1841, where numerous other Americans would be trained around the mid-nineteenth century.[13] The academy was the center of the historical and genre painting, and American magazines reported on the experiences of the American students

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[12] For biographical information see; Barbara S. Groseclose, *Emanuel Leutze, 1816–1868: Freedom is the Only King* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975); Jochen Wierich, *Grand Themes: Emanuel Leutze, Washington Crossing the Delaware, and American History Painting* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); and Raymond L. Stehle, *The Life and Works of Emanuel Leutze* (Washington, 1972).

[13] Karsten Fitz, "The Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Emanuel Leutze, and the German-American Transatlantic Exchange in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2007): 16.

studying and working in the city, including Leutze.[14] Importantly, Leutze trained at the school under German history painter Karl Friedrich Lessing (1808–1880).

While at Düsseldorf, Leutze was primary concerned with the technical skills training that the academy offered. Having an anti-academic attitude, Leutze only lasted one year at the academy while working directly under director Wilhelm von Schadow (1788–1862). Leutze was most fond of and heavily influenced by Lessing. By 1842, he traveled across Europe to study the works of Peter von Cornelius (1783–1867) and Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874).[15] During Leutze's travel, he visited Rome and Venice to study artworks by Titian and Michelangelo. During this time, he completed *Columbus Before the Queen*. In 1845, after an extended stay in Italy, Leutze returned to Düsseldorf to marry Juliane Lottner. Leutze made Düsseldorf his home for over a decade during which time he painted the *Storming of the Teocalli*.

The Commission

In 1847 Leutze began painting *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops* at the request of a wealthy Bostonian, Dr. Amos Binney III in 1847. Binney sought to have Leutze paint an image from the history of America that closely followed the literary sources of the time. It was Binney's second purchase of a painting that featured Cortés, one of four commissions in

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[14] Fitz, "The Düsseldorf Academy of Art," 16.

[15] For readings on German painters, see the following: Alfred Wolzogen, Peter von Cornelius (Germany: C. Drucker, 1867); Susanne Niedernolte, *Klecksende Kunstler: das Berliner kaffeekleckalbum Wilhelm von Kaulbachs, Michael Echters und Julius Muhrs*, (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2010); and Karsten Fitz, "The Düsseldorf Academy of Art, Emanuel Leutze, and the German-American Transatlantic Exchange in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Amerikastudien* 52, no.1 (2007): 15–34

all.[16] Likely, the motivation for these commissions was Binney's close relationship with his friend and fellow Harvard graduate, the historian William H. Prescott.

In accepting Binney's commission, Leutze seems to have had his own set of ideas about how to interpret the painting's subject. In 1846 he had just completed a large history painting, *The Iconoclasts* (Fig. 2), which depicted seventeenth-century Protestants destroying religious imagery in a Roman Catholic church.[17] The crowded composition included a number of figures whose poses and situations—such as distressed women appealing to the heavens—would be repeated in *Teocalli*. Beyond the re-use of figures and compositional groups, *The Iconoclasts* predicted Leutze's continuing interest in religious turmoil that resulted in *Teocalli*.

After Binney's death, *The Storming of the Teocalli* became the property of his widow Mary Ann Binney, who exhibited it for the first time from July to September in 1849 in New York at the galleries of the American Art-Union, which reviewed the painting.[18] The Art-Union's review labeled the *Teocalli* as Leutze's best work to date. The *Teocalli* painting was displayed at least five more times. Of those, the Boston Athenaeum exhibited the work in 1850,

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[16] Luther Terry, Leutze, Daniel Huntington, and Peter Rothermel were the four painters. See Charles J. F. Binney, *Geneaology of the Binney Family in the United States* (Albany N.Y.: Joel Munsell's Sons, 1886), 131-32. For Rothermel's painting, see Thomas English, "Peter F. Rothermel." *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art* 10 (January 1852): 15. The painting by Rothermel commissioned by Binney is titled "*Noche Triste*." It was exhibited in 1848 at the Boston Athenaeum, with Binney's wife listed as its owner. The painting's currently location is unknown.

[17] Leutze's *The Iconoclasts* of 1846 was long known to Leutze scholarship only by its title as a "lost" painting. In fact, it was purchased by the hotel magnate Ruggles Sylvester Morse in 1859 for the mansion he built for himself in Portland Maine. The painting has hung in that mansion ever since. Now known as the Morse-Libby Mansion or Victoria Mansion, the property is a National Historic Landmark.

[18] "The Gallery.—No. 3," *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 2, no. 4 (1849): 6–8

1855, and 1868 under two different titles, as "Attack on the Temple of the Aztecs by Cortés," and as "The Assault on the Teocalli." New York's Fine Arts Mutual Association exhibited it in 1865; it then appeared at the National Academy of Design from 1868 to 1869.[19]

The painting's reputation receded during the 1860s and afterward. On the Wadsworth Atheneum's website, the provenance section for *Teocalli* states that Binney's son William Greene Binney inherited the painting from his mother; it descended in the family until it was placed for sale with James Maroney of New York in 1982. The painting now resides at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Connecticut and is currently on display.

The *Storming of the Teocalli* as a History Painting

In the context of history painting, Leutze's *Teocalli* stands as unique artistic endeavor. Few mid nineteenth century American history painters concerned themselves with the depiction of the Spanish conquest. Although themes of the Native American were present, very few painters addressed the pre-Columbian past let alone the Aztec.[20]

Peter Frederick Rothermel (1812- 1895) was one American painter to address the pre-Columbian past, coincidentally at the behest of Leutze's patron Amos Binney. Beyond a mutual patron, Rothermel shares interesting similarities with Leutze. Like Leutze, he first studied

[19] Truettner, "Storming the Teocalli-Again," 94.

[20] An example of this see Benjamin West (1738-1820), *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770).

painting in Philadelphia, under John Rubens Smith (1775-1849).[21] The two lived in the same Philadelphia neighborhood. Both became interested in rendering historical subjects and both attended the Düsseldorf academy. The pair painted similar compositions, although they varied in approach and style.[22]

In 1846 Rothermel completed a history painting depicting Cortés at the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City) for which he turned to William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of the Mexico* (1843) as a source of inspiration. That picture, *Cortés's Invasion of Mexico* of 1846 (Fig. 3) depicts Cortés standing before a landscape setting of the Aztec empire. Cortés is at the right center above Doña Marina his mistress. The Spaniard is wearing an off-white armored suit. His stands at a distance with his back facing the viewer, a sword on his left hip is positioned to imply a Christian cross. To the right of Cortés, a Franciscan monk kneels in prayer. Another figure holds the Christian cross towards the valley of Mexico. Directly behind that figure is a sitting Spanish soldier and an Aztec woman gazing at the Aztec capital. At the far left of the composition, a Spanish soldier and Aztec woman are seen embracing one another, while at the center, from Prescott's narrative, is the cactus in which is symbolized the origin story of the Aztec. In the background, the Aztec teocalli emits plumes of smoke as the battle takes place at a distance.

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[21] As Mark Thistlewaite notes, Leutze's study in Düsseldorf defined his style, while Rothermel, arrived in Düsseldorf with a style already defined. Mark Thistlewaite, *Painting in the Grand Manner: The Art of Peter Frederick Rothermel*, (Brandywine River Museum, 1995), 13.

[22] Thistlewaite, *Grand Manner*, 15.

Although Rothermel's picture contains some of the same elements as Leutze's, Rothermel creates a different Cortés, who wears off-white clothing with an Aztec-like cloak over his right shoulder. Overall, Rothermel's version of Cortés invading Mexico differs drastically from Leutze's. Rothermel's composition is less about brute force and more about the moment of awe that Prescott wrote about when the Spanish first arrived in the Aztec Capital. In contrast to Leutze, Rothermel 's is a symbolic landscape with figures, while Leutze created a painting that followed a European tradition of history painting while setting himself against it.

Part of Leutze's achievement rested on a deliberate playing off a history painting by the most famous of French academicians: the *Apotheosis of Homer* 1827 (Fig. 4) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. This was a monumental painting that Leutze almost certainly saw while visiting the Louvre. Leutze borrowed Ingres' composition, in which historical figures are arrayed along the steps leading up to a Greek temple where Homer sits as high priest. Leutze even recreates classical references, such as the similarity between Homer's white garment and the white toga-like dress that the Aztec king wears. Yet Leutze's picture is clearly not about the classical calm of Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*. *Teocalli* offers a close-up of the famous battle to draw the viewer in, to offer a detailed, almost personal view of the Conquest, showing the atrocities of both sides in a vivid setting marked by pre-Hispanic monuments and architecture. He indulges in this compositional parallel only to emphasize his own differences of interpretation, namely the unfamiliarity of the temple setting, and the energy and tragedy of the battle.

Interestingly enough, Leutze does not depict an actual battle. *The Storming of Chapultepec* by James Walker (Fig. 5) highlights those differences. The Walker painting

highlights the notion of the social and political context of 1848, the year of the completion of Leutze *Teocalli* painting. Likely, the events that unfolded with the Mexican-American war from 1846-1848 impacted the way in which the American audience understood *Teocalli*. The parallels of conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521 to the contemporary events resulted in the idea that Americans could have easily digested the *Teocalli* painting as they were already conditioned about wars news from Mexico. It would not have been far to say that for some the *Teocalli* painting represented a historical and current event for the American viewer.[23]

The Storming of the Teocalli painted just a year after Walker's image, offers a unique kind of engagement. While Walker's painting emphasizes military conquest and contemporary events, Leutze approached the theme of conquest through a romance and idealized framing of the Aztec empire. And, by borrowing from previous history painting such as Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*, he reveals the Spanish conquest as a mythic present.

Prescott as Leutze's literary source

William H. Prescott (1796-1859) continues to be well known for his comprehensive writings on Spain's conquest of the Americas. Born in Salem, Massachusetts and raised in Boston, Prescott studied at Harvard, where he began to extensively study law and later the early Spanish renaissance. His decision to become a historian was due in part to an accident that led to

[23] Walker's *The Storming of Chapultepec* of 1847 depicts the moment of September 13th in which General Winfield Scott, depicted on the lower left of the composition on his white horse, led the United States Army to victory over the Mexican Army. The result was the capture of Mexico City, and the outcome was Mexico's loss of its northern territories in a signed treaty called Guadalupe Hidalgo.

the loss of his eyesight in one eye.[24] His connection to Harvard led him to the acquaintance of Hispanist George Ticknor, as well as Amos Binney, the patron of *Storming of the Teocalli.*

Prescott's best-known work, *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), provided a detailed account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico and subjugation of the Aztec empire. Its story of Hernán Cortés's defeat of the Aztecs captured the imagination of readers and artists alike, including Leutze.[25] Prescott's book was widely popular as it provided an historiographical account of the Spanish conquest combining both dramatic storytelling with historical information. Prescott's work was translated into multiple languages that was distributed internationally and highly popular during the middle of the nineteenth century in the U.S. Having previously written *The History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic* (1837), which established his presence in the field of Hispanic studies, brought Prescott familiarity to the American audience. *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* was widely read and celebrated as an important historiographic achievement.

Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* became an invaluable source for Leutze's *The Storming of the Teocalli*. At the time of his death, the painter's library contained a copy of the book.[26] Leutze would have learned of the work from its huge success and through

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[24] George Ticknor, *Life of William H. Prescott* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), 1, 12, and 18.

[25] For additional biographical information on Prescott, see Harvey C. Gardiner, *William Hickling Prescott: A Biography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022).

[26] Groseclose, *Emanuel Leutze*, 78–79.

the Boston and Harvard connection that Binney and Prescott shared, for Binney commissioned the painting while he and Prescott both served on the board of trustees at the Boston Athenaeum.

Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* provided his reader a transcription of the famous battle between Cortés and Cuauhtémoc. Importantly, it offered Leutze a way to visually transcribe a pivotal moment in European and New World history, the memorialization of the sixteenth-century defeat of the Aztec via the storming of their most sacred temple. Thus, for Leutze, *History of the Conques of Mexico* was a vehicle to transfer Prescott's romantic description of the historical battle his composition. In this respect, Leutze is operating within the framework of history painting since history painters relied on a variety of historical sources to authenticate and depict their subjects. Of these, classical texts, ancient histories, engravings, and archaeological ruins were key resources for history painters.

In *History of the Conquest of Mexico,* Prescott captures the reader's imagination with Cortés's entrance into the Aztec capital by noting Tenochtitlan's monumental architecture and intricate waterways, referring to it as the Venice of the New World.[27] Importantly, Prescott's book is filled with romantic gestures. For example, he writes "Its shinning cities and shadowy hills, was spread out like some gay and gorgeous panorama before [the Spaniards]. In the highly rarefied atmosphere of these upper regions, even remote objects have a brilliancy of coloring and a distinctness of outline which seem to annihilate distance."[28] It is no stretch of the imagination

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[27] William H. Prescott, "Valley of Mexico," in *History of the Conquest of Mexico* vol. 2., (New York: A.L. Burt, 1843), 51–52.

[28] Prescott, "Valley of Mexico," 51.

to understand Prescott's romanticization of the Aztec and their homeland. Such a vivid narration of storytelling to describe an epic event of human history is meant to pull at the human emotions to pull the reader into history.

Prescott's romantic approach to colonial history is captured in Leutze's *Storming of the Teocalli*. For example, as observed in Leutze's painting, the Aztecs are not depicted as being defeated but instead are shown as having an equal footing in the battle. The idea of a heroic figure is present in both viewpoints, the Aztec king stands victoriously atop the Aztec temple with his right hand raised above his head in full swinging motion, Cortés, opposite of the Aztec king, stands in a similar position. In Leutze's painting, as in Prescott's book, the Aztec are presented as an awe-inspiring society with marvelous architecture, megalithic stonework, and richly colored attire. Such a depiction of the Aztec and their cultural accomplishments serves to underscore Cortés's victory as one of great historical importance.

The historical narrative of the *Storming of the Teocalli* closely follows Prescott's narrative. Prescott's words illustrates my point. He writes:

> Opposite of the Spanish Quarters, at only a few rods' distance, stood the great teocalli of Huitzilopochtli. This pyramidal mound, with sanctuaries that crowned it, rising altogether to the height of near a hundred and fifty feet, afforded an elevated position that completely the palace of Axayacatl, occupied by the Christians. A body of five or six hundred Mexicans, many of them nobles and warriors of the highest rank, had got possession of the teocalli, whence they discharged such a tempest of arrows on the garrison, that no one could leave his defenses for a moment without imminent danger; while the Mexicans, under

> shelter of the sanctuaries, were entirely covered from the fire of the besieged. It was obviously necessary to dislodge the enemy, if the Spaniards would remain longer in their quarters.[29]

Within this paragraph Prescott discusses the Spanish storming the teocalli. It is this passage that is fundamental to Leutze's history painting. Prescott's description of the battle scene atop the teocalli offers Leutze the identification of the Templo Mayor as the exemplar of Aztec monumental architecture, which Prescott qualifies as the great teocalli of the Aztec deity of war, Huitzilopochtli. As such, Prescott's description of the temple sets the stage for Leutze to compose a scene that was elevated to emphasize the tallest section of the teocalli. Thus, Leutze show his audience that the Aztec had monumental architecture. Moreover, within the *Storming of the Teocalli*, Leutze closely follows Prescott's writing as the framing of the scene takes the viewer to the top of the great teocalli and directly into the battle scene. The composition's resulting effect highlights the importance of the battle scene atop the most sacred temple by situating the viewer's sightlines from ground level to top of the pyramid.

The chapter's next paragraph tells the reader of the ensuing battle. Cortés assigned the task of storming the teocalli to one of his lead chamberlain Escobar and one hundred men to set temple ablaze. Leutze use of the smoke and smoke signals within the background of the painting highlights Prescott's mention of Cortés's intention to burn the Aztec Temple. Moreover, the smoke signals that are observed atop the painting coming from two small vases next to the large stone monument suggest that Leutze wanted to show that the Aztec employed smoke signals to

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[29] Prescott, "Valley of Mexico," 51.

send a distress message to the citizens of Tenochtitlan. Yet, despite such a message, they withstood the attack. Prescott writes:

> Cortés assigned this service to his chamberlain Escobar, giving him a hundred men for the purpose, with orders to storm the teocalli, and to the sanctuaries. But the officer was thrice repulsed in the attempt, and, after the most desperate efforts, was obliged to return with considerable loss and without accomplishing his object. [30]

Indeed, Escobar and his men failed to take the temple. As a result, Cortés saw the need to lead the storming party himself. It is this historical narrative that Leutze vividly depicts for his viewership in the *Storming of the Teocalli*.

Prescott's literary source was important to Leutze as evidence for describing Aztec weaponry and clothing. For example, Cuauhtémoc holds an obsidian bladed sword called a *maquahuitl*, which follows Prescott's description of the weapon, which he identifies as wooden and bladed with obsidian rock. However, the club held by the Aztec king has been shortened and contains only a limited number of blades on one side. Moreover, the Aztec warrior in front of Cuauhtémoc holds a sword that does not align to the representations of Aztec weaponry illustrated in the ca. 1541 *Codex Mendoza*.[31] As such, Aztec weaponry in the *Teocalli* painting have been reinvented to fit the needs of a Western imagination. Strikingly, the bow and arrows in

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[30] Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico, 235.*

[31] The *Codex Mendoza* is a secular manuscript that tells of Aztec dynastic history, tribute received from conquered towns, and the life cycle of a man and woman from birth to death.

the *Teocalli* share common traits to those of North American indigenous tribes outside of Mexico.[32] Moreover, the Aztec clothing depicted in the *Teocalli* are heavily romanticized that stems from Prescott's description of the Aztec wardrobe. Prescott tell us that the Aztec had gold bracelets, necklaces, precious stones, and feathered headdresses adorned with gold and stone.[33] This description of Aztec material culture strongly aligns with Leutze's illustration of how Aztec warriors are dressed.

The clothing of the Aztec in the *Storming of the Teocalli* is also intriguing for its classicizing character. The Aztec king wears a white toga, a manner of dress that recalls the regalia worn by Roman emperors. The free-flowing toga is filled with motion that also calls attention to the drapery, another instance that illustrates the Western imagination at work. Here, Leutze identifies his own cultural bias, something that Prescott is also guilty of too.[34] This bias to conflate cultures is essential to Leutze's artistic license to historical accuracy. Again, Prescott is also guilty of such a practice. Indeed, his book makes comparison of the Aztec civilization to that of ancient Egypt. That the Aztec king's regalia is heavily othered or Orientalized in that it resembles ancient Egyptian regalia from the color to the way it wraps around the Aztec king's body is no accident, but a key tenet of the Aztec are romanticized by the West.

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[32] Truettner, "Storming the Teocalli-Again," 94.

[33] See Prescott, *Conquest of Mexico*.

[34] According to Prescott, he draws his historical account from Bernal Díaz del Castillo's first-hand account of the conquest detailed in an English translation of the 1568 *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*.

Prescott's romantic description of the Aztecs gave Leutze the historical precedent that he required to translate text to image. By following Prescott's narrative, Leutze captured the drama that unfolded during the conquest while at the same time perpetuating his counterpart's romantic approach with oil and brush. In using Prescott's narrative to present the Aztec image to the American public, Leutze piggybacked off Prescott's popularity and the success of *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. In this way, Leutze did not have to invent his battle scene but instead relied on Prescott's historical account as an evidentiary source.

Despite Leutze's reliance on Prescott, he was selective in what he borrowed. For example, in the *Teocalli* painting, the storming event is different from its textual source as it combines several battles that occurred over the conquest. Within the Leutze's composition, these battles are taken from Prescott's historical work but are universalized into a singular episode. These include the infamous *Noche Triste* (*Sad Night*) in which the Spanish withdrew from Tenochtitlan in a disastrous defeat. Leutze's message also differs from that of Prescott in that painter was concerned about the dramatic effect of a scene with prominent religious undertones. Prescott, although a religious person, concerned himself with a true and unbiased account of the conquest, something that he believed that others before him did not have.

Catherwood as an Archaeological Source

For the architectural references in Leutze's *Teocalli* picture, Leutze turned to the well-known lithographs produced by the English architect Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854) that appear in three books. Catherwood's lithographs result from his exploration of the Central America with his traveling companion the American diplomat and explorer John Lloyd Stephens

(1805–1852). In 1839, the pair traveled to the Yucatán jungle seeking to study the cultural achievements of the ancient Maya, their hieroglyphics, stone markings, and architectural ruins, among others, that would pique the interest of the Western imagination about the region.[35] Each of the men had their own premise for entering the jungle; Stephens had a dual role as the U.S. diplomat to Central America, and was a travel writer, while Catherwood concerned himself with the study of the region's architectural ruins and their illustration.[36]

Penned by Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán* was published in 1841, which contained seventy-seven lithographs based on Catherwood's drawings contained seventy-seven lithographs based on Catherwood's drawings. The illustrations depict the pre-Columbian Mayan cities of Copán, Quiriguá, Uxmal and Palenque. In 1843, Stephens followed with *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* that included 120 lithographs by Catherwood of the Mayan cities of Chichen Itza and Uxmal. Unlike Stephens's previous book, this volume posits Catherwood's drawings as the main focal point and acts as a supplemental artistic complement to the previous book.[37] In 1844, Catherwood published the solo endeavor of the *Views of Ancient Monument in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*. The *Views* consists of twenty-five lithographs by Catherwood, each with an accompanying descriptive paragraph that explains

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[35] Dawn Ades, Guy Brett, Catlin Staton Loomis, and Rosemary O'Neill, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 47.

[36] R. Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820–1915* (University of Texas Press, 2004), 50.

[37] John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1843).

monuments, their size and locations.[38] All three publications were highly popular as they offered the first account of the ancient Maya cities for a Western audience.[39]

Yet it is Catherwood's lithographs in the *Views* that is most relevant to my argument because they served as a visual reference for the design elements and ornamentation of the Aztec Templo Mayor observed in Leutze's *Teocalli* picture. More specifically, the large, plumed serpent that sits at the right in the *Teocalli* painting is a direct reference to a plate illustrating *Views* of the *Teocallis at Chichen-Itza* (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). A side-by-side comparison of both monuments illustrates their similarities. The large stone serpent in Leutze's painting is placed at the base of the painting and is slightly at an angle. Its mouth is wide open with its tongue extended out. Each image demands attention as the eye is led, in both images, from the bottom of the image to the top. In the side-by-side comparison, each serpent has a spiral beard at the side of their mouth, a rectangular upper mouth area and rounded bottom lip.

Differences between the two renditions is also evident. In placing the serpent to the right side of the painting, Leutze cuts off the tongue, which Catherwood's lithograph does not. Leutze's serpent shows a limited amount of weathering, while Catherwood's serpent is depicted as severely weathered and damaged as seen by the serpent's tongue broken in parts and by the foliage that is growing around the serpent ruin. The two serpents, while similar, represent

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[38] Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (London: F. Catherwood, 1844).

[39] For more on Catherwood and Stephens' travels in the Yucatán, see Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya*. For an additional reading on the pre-Hispanic past in the Western imagination, see Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*.

different deities. While Leutze understood the importance of depicting the large, plumed serpent deity in *Teocalli* as both the Maya and Aztec cosmologies shared a large, feathered serpent deity, the serpent in Catherwood's illustration represents the Maya god Kukulkan while the feathered serpent in Leutze's *Teocalli* has been reimagined as the Aztec Quetzalcoatl.

This is not the only example of Leutze's referencing of Catherwood's lithographs. We see that Leutze's sacrificial stone block in the *Teocalli* painting (Fig. 8) is drawn from *Idol and Altar at Copan* in Catherwood's *Views* (Fig. 9. It is of a large human skull with arched eyebrows looking directly at its viewer. Catherwood places the cylindrical stone ruin in front of the large stele idol that sits directly behind it. In the background of the plate lies a wall of stones and trees and flora that surround the composition. The lighting and dramatic effects of the monument are echoed in Leutze's painted version of the sacrificial block (Fig. 10). In that version, the ruins come alive—the arched eyebrow, the smashed in nose, the lifeless eyes, the pronounced teeth, and the dramatic lighting effect all serve singular purpose: to present the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice.

Catherwood's plate twenty-one of Maya architecture (Fig. 11) acted as the main visual source for the construction of the Aztec temple design in Leutze's *Teocalli* painting (Fig. 12). Comparing both buildings, Leutze's structure contains a single-entry doorway and elaborate ornamentation directly above it. The figures in both images are placed in the center above the passage and are seated in a crisscross style. In Catherwood's illustration, Mayans are seated in the front of the ruins, while Stephens is observed as if examining the inside of the ruins. For the

intricate design, Leutze flattens the upper layer of the structure and includes an "elephant's trunk" (Fig.13) that wraps around the upper portion of the temple's exterior.[40]

The "elephant's trunk" design is present in both Leutze's *Teocalli* painting and in Stephens's writing. For example, in *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán,* Stephens describes the architecture of a Maya temple at Uxmal. Stephens's text offers a detailed description of the design element including its position on the edifice (Fig. 14). Here, it tells us that Leutze was not only looking at Catherwood's illustration but also Stephens's description. Leutze's "elephant's trunk" design closely aligns to Catherwood's rendering of the ornament. The upper portion of the *Teocalli* painting contains a total of eight elephant trunks. They are placed at each corner of the temple, while six of them are distrusted evenly along the facade of the building in the *Teocalli* painting.

Thus, the *Teocalli*'s architectural forms and monumental stone icons were not just a product of Leutze's imagination but instead represents the assignment of the cultural achievements of the Maya to the Aztec. The dramatic illustrations of the Maya ruins at Copán, Uxmal, and Palenque by Catherwood gave Leutze second platform after reliance on Prescott to claim that his *Teocalli* picture was historically accurate. However, the archaeological ruins pictured by Catherwood's lithographs were ancient Maya, not Aztec. Moreover, these lithographs are the product of Catherwood's own romanticized interpretation of a non-Western society. As such, they are not historically accurate images. In this regard, Leutze's picture stems

[40] The elephant's trunk was a term coined by John Lloyd Stephen in *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* to describe the Maya architectural ornament. The elephant trunk was later identified as the Chaac Mask

from Catherwood's artistic license to create lithographs that little to no regard for historical accuracy

Conclusion

As early as 1843, when he painted *Columbus before the Queen Isabella* (Brooklyn Museum, New York), Leutze already had a dual ambition: to make his name as a painter of American history and conquest. In Teocalli, he made use of the history-painting traditions of Europe to create a unique contribution to American history painting. The result was an ambitious image that related to the Americas, not the United States, when very few addressed the pre-Columbian past in history painting, or in fact any kind of painting. *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops* was a unique contribution to the history of the Americas.

Leutze's reliance on William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* and Catherwood's lithographs on the cultural achievements of the ancient Maya in *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops* is beyond clear. Both literary and visual material provided the means for Leutze to offer a painting that was to be understood as a historically accurate representation of the Spanish conquest over the Aztec. It was one filled with all too familiar tropes about the conquest: Cortés's heroism and Aztec savagery. Such tropes go hand-in-hand with Leutze's conflation of different historical events between the Spanish and Aztec in a single picture. Thus, Leutze's framing of the Aztec within the *Teocalli* painting offers the viewer a close look at the way in which the Aztec have been constructed in the Western imagination by history painters and historians rather than presenting a historically accurate picture of the conquesBt.

Leutze's sleight of hand with history is also one of culture. Unproblematically, Leutze recycled Catherwood's Maya lithographs as a stand in for Aztec monumental architecture. That the Maya and Aztec were distinct societies with their own architectural canon was irrelevant. In Leutze's worldview, the Maya and Aztec are interchangeable where their cultural and societal differences are simply erased with oil paint and brushstroke. Indeed, this is Leutze's sleight of hand with culture that makes his painting even more problematic than Catherwood's lithographs. Leutze's manipulation of history and culture are part and parcel of how *The Storming of the Teocalli* invents the Aztec in the Western imagination.

Without a doubt, it is important to continue to revisit history paintings especially those that depict cultural encounters to tease out any new interpretations of what history painting meant for nineteenth-century audiences and what they mean for us today. *The Storming of Teocalli* illustrates one history painters' romantic vision of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. It shows us that history painting once served as historical truths for audiences in their time. The painting illustrates the complexity of history painting in that history painters relied on numerous source material and often had to invent histories. It begs to ask the following question: Is Leutze's *The Storming of Teocalli* a history painting or romantic storytelling?

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Figure 1. Emanuel Leutze, *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops*, 1848, oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Connecticut

Figure 2. Emanuel Leutze, *The Iconoclasts*, 1846, oil on canvas. Victoria Mansion Morse-Libby Mansion), Portland, Maine

Figure 3. Peter Frederick Rothermel *Cortes's Invasion of Mexico*, 1846, oil on canvas. Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Florida

Figure 4. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Apotheosis of Homer*, 1827, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris

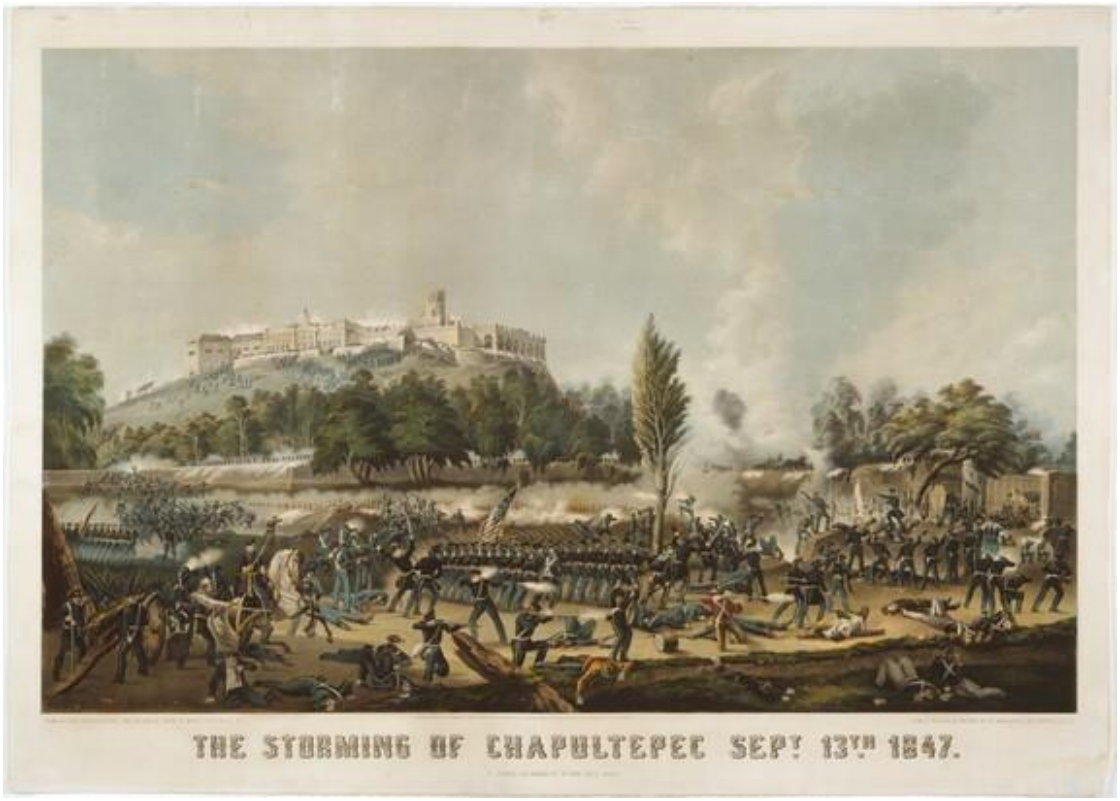


Figure 5. James Walker, *The Storming of Chapultepec*, 1847, lithograph. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

Figure 6. "*Teocallis at Chichen-Itza*," lithograph, in Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (London, 1844), plate XXII

Figure 7. Detail of the large, plumed serpent in Emanuel Leutze, *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops*

Figure 8. Detail of the large, plumed serpent in Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*

Figure 9. *Idol and Altar at Copan*, in Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (London, 1844), plate V

Figure 10. Detail of sacrificial stone block in Emanuel Leutze, *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops,* 1848

Figure 11. Las Monjas, Chichen-Itza, in Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monument in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (London, 1844), plate XXI

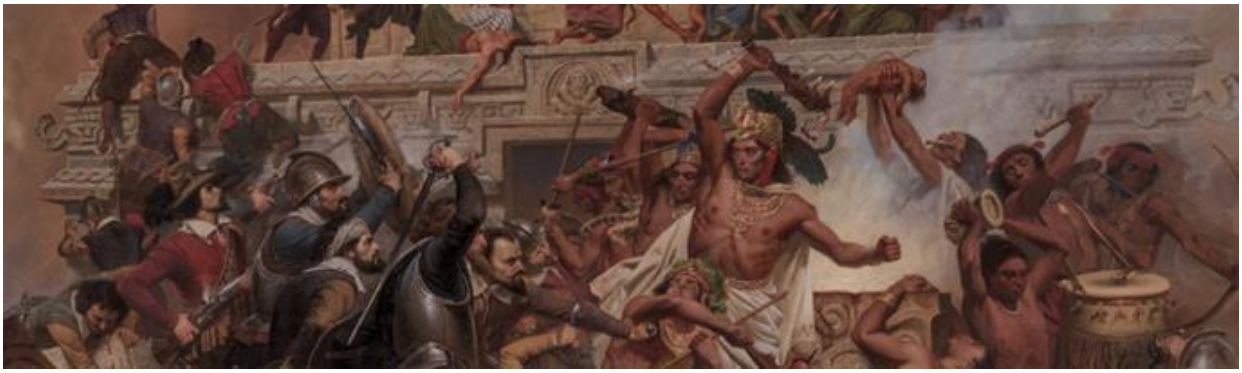
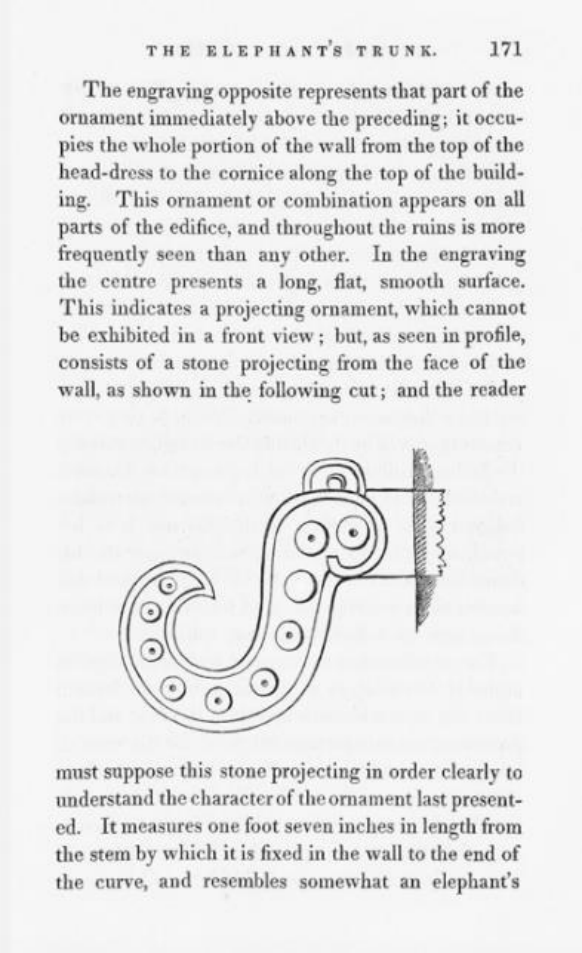


Figure 12. Detail of temple entrance in Emanuel Leutze, *The Storming of the Teocalli by Cortés and His Troops,* 1848.



THE ELEPHANT'S TRUNK. 171

The engraving opposite represents that part of the ornament immediately above the preceding; it occupies the whole portion of the wall from the top of the head-dress to the cornice along the top of the building. This ornament or combination appears on all parts of the edifice, and throughout the ruins is more frequently seen than any other. In the engraving the centre presents a long, flat, smooth surface. This indicates a projecting ornament, which cannot be exhibited in a front view; but, as seen in profile, consists of a stone projecting from the face of the wall, as shown in the following cut; and the reader

must suppose this stone projecting in order clearly to understand the character of the ornament last presented. It measures one foot seven inches in length from the stem by which it is fixed in the wall to the end of the curve, and resembles somewhat an elephant's

Figure 13. The Elephant's Trunk, in John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (New York, 1843), vol. 1, p. 171

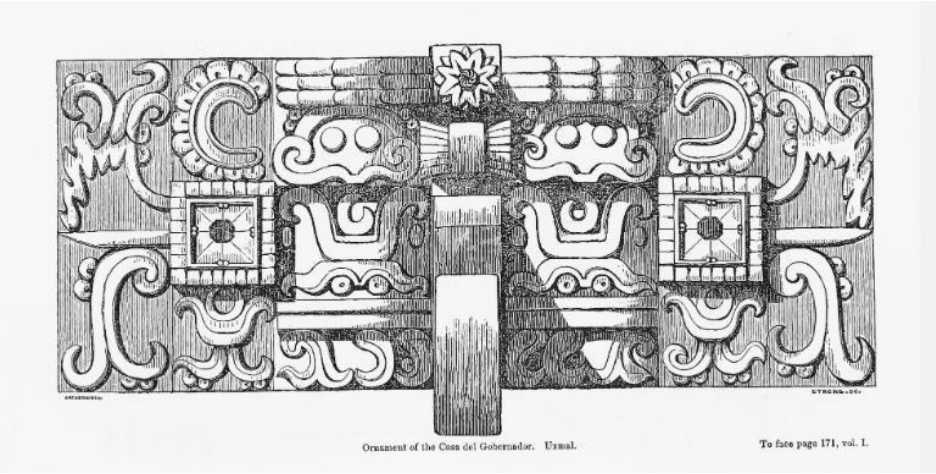


Figure 14. Ornament of Casa de Gobernador at Uxmal, in John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, (New York, 1843), vol. 1, opposite p. 171