



*These things are all so precious they are valued at 100,000 florins. All the days of my life I have seen nothing that touches 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 my feelings about what I saw there...*

The gold disc (an Aztec calendar?) and the other precious metals have long since been melted down. But a few pieces have survived from what Dürer saw that day: ornate ceremonial spear-throwers crusted with gold, a tiny jade frog, an obsidian blade. Most remarkable of all, the featherwork sent to King Charles can still be seen: shields, fans, standards and cloaks, a mosaic depicting the demon Ahuizotl; and, even now, nearly 500 years after they were made, although their colour is somewhat faded, the green quetzal plumes and blue macaw feathers, when breathed on, or gently brushed, still fluff out. In their vivacity and strangeness, they conjure up the shock of the new felt by the many during that astonishing time when treasures of the Aztecs and the Maya, or the gold of the Incas, landed in Europe.

'It was a miracle,' said the conquistador Cieza de Leon, 'that these wonderful lands had remained unknown to the rest of the world through all of history, and were saved by God to be discovered in our time...'

*The Shock of the New* THE DISCOVERY OF THE NEW WORLD has been called the greatest event in history. It had a profound impact on the imagination as well as on the economies and cultures of the world. The scene Dürer describes epitomizes this collision of worlds: an extraordinary moment when things from an unknown continent came into European Renaissance society.

The conquistadors brought back exotic foods which would change the diet that Europeans had followed since the Stone Age: potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, maize, sweet potatoes, avocados, guavas, pineapples, tobacco and chocolate (a good Aztec word) are just a few of them. They also brought back samples of New World flora and fauna – magnolias from Central America, lupins from the Andes, and dahlias whose quilled petals were hybridized in Aztec gardens. They brought back parrots, macaws and toucans to satisfy the curiosity of the rich.

There was also human freight. Columbus had already shipped bemused Carib Indians back to Europe; now Cortes transported Mexican ball-players and jugglers to perform before the king in Seville. Later, they went to Rome and 'juggled a log with their feet...before a delighted Pope'. In Paris, Amazonian Indians acted out their forest lives in circus shows; a Brazilian chief was presented to Henry VIII, and an Eskimo man and woman, from Baffin Island, impressed Londoners with their dignified bearing and modesty.

Artefacts made by these peoples were coveted by collectors, as they still are. Jade figures, turquoise masks, Aztec sacrificial knives – all found their places in antiquarians' cabinets alongside ancient Greek votive phalli and Roman coins. Elizabeth I's astrologer, John Dee, owned an Aztec obsidian disc and conjured spirits through his 'devil's looking glass'. Such things could thrill, inform, evoke a sense of wonder – and drive men mad. Images of New World Indians appear on Renaissance mausolea, and church pews, in sculptures by Bernini, and paintings by Velasquez. And the idea of the New World informs poems, plays and works of literature as various as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Montaigne's *Essays* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with its problematical and ironical commentary on the 'Brave New World'.



Other aspects of what has been called the 'Columbian exchange' between the Old and New World, were almost inconceivably destructive. The *Conquista* unleashed violence, death and destruction on a scale unknown until then. Smallpox, malaria, measles and many sexually transmitted diseases were among the bequests of the Old World to the New. Syphilis, perhaps (although this is still controversial), came the other way – from the New to the Old.

The impact of disease, as we shall see, was shattering – a holocaust (it may be called) unparalleled in history. Several tens of millions of people died during the sixteenth century. An equally momentous consequence of the Conquest and its pandemics was the slave trade with Africa, which the European colonial powers used to replace the devastated workforce throughout the Americas. This is estimated at one million people in the first century, but increasing until, in the eighteenth century, it is thought there were as many as seven million slaves in the New World, with eleven million people transported from Africa by force over the whole period. It was the largest movement of population in history. In the light of these horrifying statistics, it is no wonder that it was in the sixteenth century, and in Spain, that the fight began to establish universal human rights and to globalize justice (see page 267) – a fight which still goes on.

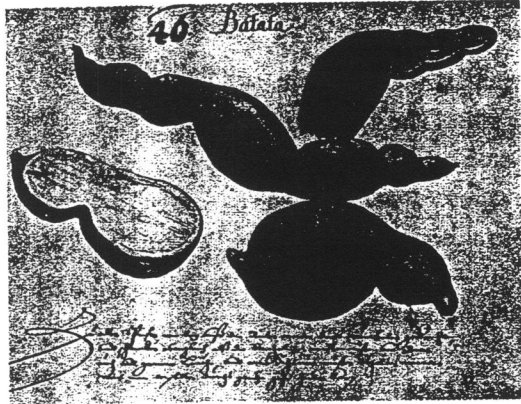
At the root of this amazing expansion was the lure of gold. The Age of Discovery was also the first Age of Capital. The bankers of Europe helped to finance the expeditions of the conquistadors. When he first touched the New World, Columbus asked for gold, 'for with gold one may do what one wishes in the world'.

In Mexico, Cortes, with his finely tuned irony, told the Aztecs that he and his men 'suffered from a disease of the heart which is only cured by gold'. Cieza de Leon was inspired to sail to Peru after seeing the Inca gold unloaded in Seville: 'As long as I live I cannot get it out of my mind.' All of which perplexed – and, in the end, disgusted – the native peoples. The half-Inca historian Waman Poma



portrayed an Indian asking a Spaniard: 'Do you actually eat this gold?' And the Spaniard replies, 'Yes, we certainly do!' The last of the great Incas, Manco himself, bitterly remarked, 'Even if the snows of the Andes turned to gold still they would not be satisfied.'

The encounter of the two worlds, then, was both a physical collision and a collision of mindsets. And these are, therefore, not only stories of conquest and exploration, heroism and greed, but stories about changes in the way we see the world; changes in our view of history and civilization, and in the way we understand humanity and nature.



The conquest of the New World also had a tremendous effect on the economies of the world, with reverberations extending far beyond the frontiers of Europe and the Americas; it accelerated a shift in the centre of gravity of the old Eurasian landmass to the lands of the Atlantic seaboard; it outflanked the traditional civilizations of China, India, Persia and the Arab world. The conquest saw the appropriation by European countries of a whole continent with its people and natural resources: the beginning of the modern globalization of politics and economies, of information technology and

culture. And, in this light, the story of the conquest gains a poignancy today as its consequences unfold across the world. That is why Karl Marx and others have called it 'the greatest event in the history of the world'.

### *What Cortes Didn't Know*

EVENTS MOVED SO FAST AFTER COLUMBUS that it is easy for us to treat the conquest almost as a *fait accompli*: a continent simply waiting to be appropriated by the winners of the game of History. But that is by no means how it appeared to those who were living at the time – the Spaniards or the Native Americans.

The discovery of the New World, as we call it from a European perspective, took place over quite some time, centuries rather than years. It unfolded in people's minds as well as in physical space, and it would be a mistake to imagine that, in its early stages, the Europeans had any idea that a vast and populous continent was waiting to be discovered.

▲ The flora and fauna of the New World were objects of fascination and desire to rich Europeans. Parrots and other exotic birds were much sought after, and the potato, native to the Andes, became a staple of the European diet.

For all the high culture of the Renaissance, theirs was still a credulous age with undeveloped ideas of geography and comparative ethnology. Nothing in their past history had remotely prepared them for what was about to happen. Their understanding of Creation was

