

The Resplendent Quetzal and His Feathers



The iridescent turquoise and blood red chest
give this feathered creature
its name, “The Resplendent Quetzal.”
The Mexica people loved this bird above all others
and called it *Quetzal*, which means precious.

The Resplendent Quetzal is among the rarest of birds.
In pre-Columbian times, it was highly prized by all
Mesoamerican civilizations.

The cloud forests of Mesoamerica provide their only refuge.



Cloud forests are found high above
the hot tropical rainforest of the lowlands.
In isolated ravines in the highest mountains,
from Costa Rica to southern Mexico,
where the air is thin and cool;
where clouds gather and cling to the mountainsides;
where a dense mist permanently wets every leaf, every surface,
and water drips onto the jungle's fertile floor.
There, the Resplendent Quetzal makes its home.

TOTO TLAMACAZQUI

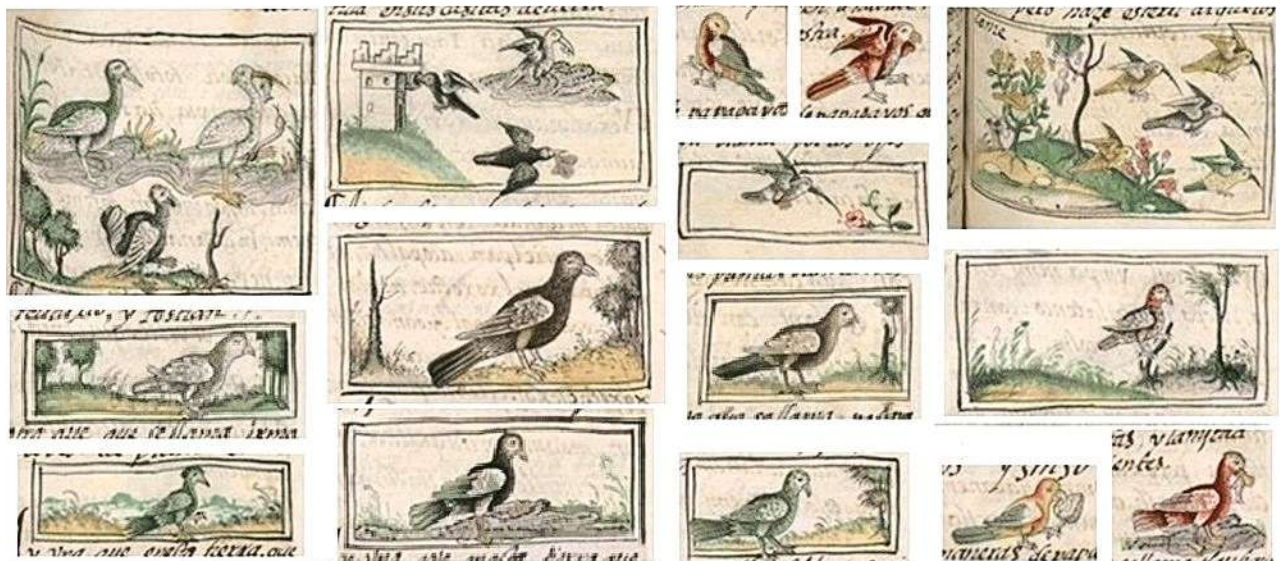
Aztec birdkeepers

Toto tlamacazqui, Aztec birdkeepers, were highly educated and skilled ornithologists, proficient in the care of each bird species.

They developed a method for breeding the Quetzal in the *totocalli*, Aztec aviaries, a phenomenal feat that could not be equaled for 500 years.

When the male Quetzal reached his breeding age at year three, he produced long iridescent turquoise tailfeathers. When the full beauty of the plumes was realized, they were carefully plucked, leaving the Quetzal to grow new tailfeathers for harvesting every six months.

Aztec scribes prepared drawings of the hundreds of bird species found in the Tenochtitlan *Totocalli*.

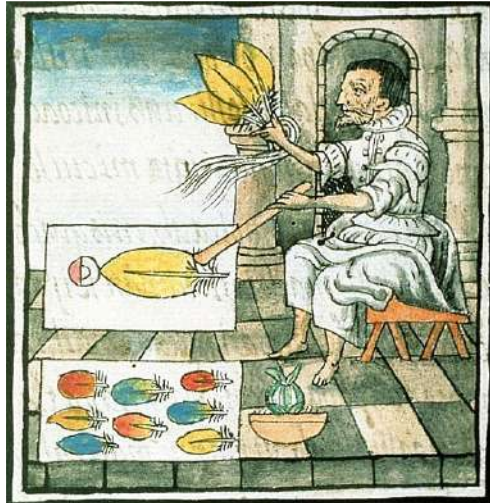


Samples of bird species found at the Tenochtitlan Totocalli, as painted by Mexica scribes, Florentine Codex Book 11 (1577)

AMANTECAS

Aztec feather artisans

Amantecas, or feather workers, adorn royal headdresses and a wide variety of specialty items for religious ceremonies and military gear. Quetzal featherers could be worn only by royalty, priests, and generals.



Florentine Codex, Book IX (1577) by Mexica scribes, under the direction of Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún

Huey Tlatoani,

"Great Speaker," Emperor of the vast Aztec Empire,
wore Quetzal plumage in his headdress.



This headdress is made of gold, gilt bronze, leather, paper, cotton and other fibers, and feathers from the Quetzal, cotingas, roseate spoonbill, squirrel cuckoo and kingfisher.

Five hundred years later,
this time ravaged Quetzal plumed headdress still survives at the
Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Only seven original pre-Columbian featherwork artifacts exist today.



Ahuizotl, Aztec Ceremonial Feather Shield, the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna

This 500-year-old ceremonial shield, known by its *nahuatl* name, *Ahuizotl*, depicts a coyote threatening destruction.

It is made of feathers from the blue cotinga, scarlet macaw, green Quetzal, yellow oriole and roseate spoonbill,

arranged in rows with several sheets of gold and intricate gold metal work.

Aztec Featherwork



Shield with Tlaloc Water design



Shield with geometric design.



Fan used to keep the Tlatoani cool.