

## SCIENCE:

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## COLLECTION OF MEXICAN MAGUEY PAINTINGS.

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT—America's scientific discoverer, as he was called after his return to Europe from this continent—when sojourning in the City of Mexico (1803) took care to acquire a certain amount of ancient hieroglyphic paintings, which, among other relics of Aztec civilization, had once been collected by the Cavalier Boturini Benaducci, yet were confiscated by the government of New Spain, and later on handed over for study to Leon de Gama, a professor of astronomy in whom the learned traveller had found a coadjutor for his manifold scientific pursuits.

In 1806, Humboldt made this precious purchase a present to the Berlin Royal Library, in the shelves of which the large portfolio had been resting, "not disregarded, but unopened," until the year 1888, when it was brought to light for the inspection of the Members of the Congress of Americanists assembled in the same year in the city of Berlin. The collection consists of sixteen sheets of maguey paintings in more or less fragmentary condition, the photographic facsimiles of which were published a few months ago at the cost of the Royal Library, to be its special commemorative gift to the Columbus Centennial Celebration. Only three copies of it have reached the United States. The sheets are about one foot ten inches wide, and two feet six inches long, with the exception of No. I., which shows the considerable length of fifteen feet by one foot ten inches.

The task of interpreting the paintings devolved on Dr. Eduard Seler, Curator of the American Department in the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. The text he wrote forms a book of 137 pages, octavo, with a carefully arranged index. The headings of the sheets are inscribed as follows: No. I.: A list of tribute extending over nineteen years and paid by trimester to a certain temple. II.: A list of the lots of the Royal Domain *Camaca* and of their former usufructuaries. III. and IV.: Fragments of historical-geographical contents, originating from *Huamantla* (Tlaxcalla). V.: Fragment of a household ledger, village *Tecontepec*. VI.: A court proceeding in the city of *Tezcoco*. VII.: Account of certain victuals furnished by the mayordomo of *Mizquiyauallan*. VIII.: Fragment of a cataster-roll, with name of proprietor, area and quality of soil. IX–XII.: Fragments of court-trials (complaints). XIII.: Account given by the mayordomo of *Mizquiyauallan* of work done weekly by women of the pueblo. XIV.: Account of wood, forage and victuals furnished. XV.: An

account of turkeys furnished. XVI.: The Articles of Faith and the Ten Commandments, both in hieroglyphics.

Here, then, at last, some fresh material for study has made its appearance, which the students of Mexicology were a long time yearning for, in view of the scanty and somewhat superannuated stock of Mexican Calendar Codices. If nothing else, the diversity of contents alone must have gladdened the heart of the enthusiastic interpreter, and have paid him richly for the labor bestowed on the work. "I have learned something," he exclaims somewhere. One portion of the sheets (Nos. I., III., IV.), turned out to contain records written in the epoch before the Spanish Conquest; other records reach as far as the year 1571. This fact is of some importance. For in the former the names of persons and places still appear in their primitive ideographic simplicity, whereas in the others the influence of modern syllabic spelling makes itself noticeable—a subject often ventilated with regard to the absolute reliability of certain Codices. On the other hand, some of the sheets afford a graphic insight into the economic comfort of the *curas* and *encomenderos*, by exhibiting the quantity and good quality of all those things that were to be supplied by the parishioners and tributaries for the sustenance of the ample households of their taskmasters. Sheet No. II. is of specific historical interest. It shows us *Moctezuma* II., the Severe, arrayed in file with his successors, generals and other dignitaries, inasmuch as they were authorized by the Spanish Crown to remain keepers and heirs to certain portions of land, up to the demise of the last blood-relative of the unfortunate dynasty. In No. VI. we recognize a painting already published and described by Humboldt himself in his great work: "Vues des Cordillères et Monuments des Peuples indigènes de l'Amérique." He took it for representing "un procès entre des naturels et des Espagnols," the object of litigation being a farm. We learn from Dr. Seler that the object of the process was not a farm, but a claim about the extent and boundaries of the Royal city of *Tezcoco*, whose prominent edifices and hieroglyphic name are delineated on the plan, together with her last King *Teuilotzin* and certain known members of the Royal Audiencia. The last sheet, No. XVI., is a veritable curiosity. It is one of those pictorial illustrations of the Roman Catholic Catechism, which the missionaries used to hang on the walls of the parochial schools for the purpose of helping the natives to learn by heart the principal tenets of the Christian religion. These wall pictures are mentioned by Bemesel and Las Casas. This Humboldt specimen, however, is the first that has cropped out from scores of them that must have existed.

We cannot help expressing our highest admiration for the skill with which the learned interpreter has solved the riddles laid before him. The sense of each of these sixteen problems is as ingeniously grasped by him in its whole, as it is methodically proved and explained in all its details. In this Dr. Seler has shown that he has mastered the true methods of inductive argumentation. But he is also possessed of the great gift, so to speak, of pictorial intuition and vision. Without the aid of this felicitous talent there is not much chance for the interpreter of ideographic writing either to seize the correct meaning of each individual symbol and hieroglyph, or, when he has done so, also to combine the various elements into that text which the native hierophant would have written had he been acquainted with the resources afforded by our alphabet.

V.

—Dr. William Patten has been appointed Professor of Biology at Dartmouth College, Hanover, N. H. The department is a new one and will be well equipped.