



Coatlicue, Aztec Mother of Gods. *Photograph by Leo Katz.*

# The Hypnotic Power of Coatlucue: A Psychological Interpretation

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The Spanish churchmen who in 1790 discovered Coatlucue, Aztec Mother of the Gods, a five-ton stone idol half-buried in the main plaza of Mexico City, feared its demonic power and buried it again. In 1803 it was rediscovered by Humboldt and placed on public exhibition (Reed, 1966). However, it was not until the twentieth century that the hypnotic power of Coatlucue was fully understood. The psychological interpretation of the Aztec Mother Goddess was worked out by Leo Katz (1945) an Austrian artist who has lived in North America since 1921 (Rosenberg, 1959). It is the object of this paper to bring to light some of the innovative ideas of Leo Katz and his introduction of a modern, psychological interpretation of Pre-Columbian Mythology as demonstrated by his writings on Coatlucue. When Sigmund Freud's first works were published, the idea and study of unconscious forces gradually became respectable despite the initial opposition from the academic and medical professions. Katz had reason to be very grateful; finally he was able to discuss his own point of view regarding the human unconscious with other individuals.

Katz also was intrigued by Freud's discovery (e.g., 1936) that some complex personality problems had been represented in ancient, classical mythology. In later years, Freud also studied Egyptian myth, religion and culture. Katz (1971) recalls, "The last time I talked to Freud was in the remarkable Egyptian collection of the Museum van Cutheden in Leyden. The conversation revealed that he had finally taken an interest in the culture of Egypt. His last book (Freud, 1939) was about Moses, the Egyptian."

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C. G. Jung (e.g., 1938) also concentrated on the religions and philosophies of the Far East, discovering similarities between paintings or drawings of his patients and Eastern religious symbols such as the mandala. Katz kept hoping that the psychoanalysts would pay attention to the rich material of Pre-Columbian mythology. To stimulate this interest, he presented his account of the artistic and archaeological significance of the Aztec figure, Coatlucue (Reed, 1955) in which he showed the similarity existing between modern surrealist symbolism and this pre-Columbian statue. Commenting on this phenomenon, Katz (1971) stated:

Men of antiquity poured their wisdom and genius into the problem of forging mental bridges between conscious knowledge and the unfathomable depth of the unconscious forces of man on the one hand, and the impenetrable mysteries of cosmic vastness on the other. We cannot revive or imitate the mythology of past ages. We have to create and build bridges, but we can start by digging for ancient symbols still alive in the collective unconscious and use them for new artistic versions of scientific cosmic acquaintance. In other words, we need most desperately a way of combining as many aspects as possible in order to combat the tragic frustration and fatigue that results from specialization in unrelated information and to defeat the fatal horror of being suspended in mid-space between the abyss of one unconscious world and the ever-growing discoveries of cosmic worlds with their countless universes. We have to connect, again, our life consciousness with the powerful worlds within and without, worlds of which we are inextricably a part. Freud and his followers were initially interested in psychopathological problems and thus they amputated the cosmic or astromythological sections from the original and grand mythological organism. Therefore, I had to recreate my own "Astro-Mythological Psychology" to bridge these gaps in modern man's consciousness.

In what he refers to as "Astro-Mythological Psychology," Leo Katz has discussed the significance of the basic legends which recur in many cultures. He has projected the inner unconscious struggle into the skies and sees the mythological bodies in the heavens. In this way he relates man's innermost psychic patterns to the immediate physical environment and to the world of countless galaxies (Levin, 1959). Katz (1945) states:

... Many amazingly rich periods of considerable duration produced art which according to all our instincts might be of great significance. Yet, without a knowledge of the external and internal influences which conditioned such a particular art expression we stand before closed doors. We must study geographic situation, climate, economic and social conditions (external influences), mental and spiritual development, and the attitude towards life and the world as expressed respectively in magic, mythology, religion, philosophy and science (internal influences).

An example of this insight can be found in Katz's discovery and treatment of the myth surrounding the Aztec figure of Coatlicue, "The Lady with the Serpent Skirts." This massive earth-mother fertility deity pre-

sents a hypnotic and horrifying physiognomy formed by the masterful joining of two serpents' heads in profile, creating a full face frontal view effect. Picasso, in our day, has made many drawings and paintings experimenting with similar profile-full face combinations; Katz (1971) feels, however, that Picasso has never achieved the masterful, haunting, hypnotic impact of the Coatlicue artist. This was not a sculpture created only for art's sake; every detail of it was designed for a vital symbolic impact upon the beholders. As Katz (1945) notes, "No matter how much most Pre-Columbian sculptures . . . seem to defy our powers of interpretation, one can hardly escape the impact of the incredible vitality and creative passion which these carved stones emanate."

Behind this Aztec concept of deity, created more than six centuries ago, there is a human story. But behind the human story of Coatlicue is a cosmic power which continuously devours the sun as it rises and sets into the earth which is represented by her body. The earth is seen as the source of food, life, and death. This single monument has achieved a complete synthesis of human and abstract universal relationships. Simply put, the human story of Coatlicue is presented in this adaptation of an English translation by F. R. Bandler of a Spanish version by Carlos Maria de Bustamante based on the celebrated Latin account by Fra Bernardino de Sahagun (Reed, 1955):

There is a mountain range which is called Coatepec close to the village of Tulla where a woman by the name of Coatlicue lived. She was the mother of certain Indians who called themselves Centzonvitnaoa, and they had a sister called Coyolxauhqui. This woman, Coatlicue, did penance by sweeping every day in the mountains of Coatepec. One day it happened that while she was sweeping, a little feather pellet, like a ball of spun wool, floated down over her, and she caught it and put it near her abdomen, under the skirts. After having finished sweeping, she wanted to take the little ball out, but did not find it, and they say she became pregnant of it. And when the Centzonvitnaoa Indians saw their mother, who was now pregnant, they became angry, asking, "Who has dishonoured and shamed us?" Their sister, Coyolxauhqui, said to them, "Brothers, let us kill our mother, because she has dishonoured us." When Coatlicue became aware of this, she became frightened, but her unborn baby spoke to her and, consoling her, said "Do not fear, because I know what I have got to do!"

At the instant the Centzonvitnaoa Indians arrived, Vitzilopuchtli was born, carrying a shield which was called *teucueli* with one dart. Now Vitzilopuchtli ordered one who was called *Xiuchcoatl* to light a snake made of torches and which was called the *Fireserpent*. Coyolxauhqui was fatally injured, and after she died, torn to pieces, her severed head remained in that mountain range of Coatepec. Vitzilopuchtli rose, armed himself, and went forth against the Centzonvitnaoa, pursuing them and throwing them out of that mountain range.

Katz (1945) points out that this story has all the characteristics of universal mystic symbolism which unfolds according to different keys

applied at different levels or layers. The middle layer addresses itself to man who faced the inseparable trio of reality—birth, life and death. The top layer deals with cosmic events and the bottom layer reaches into man's unconscious dream world. Katz (1945) maintains:

Mythology never takes the risk of turning truth into a lie by separating details from the ensemble from which they are a part. . . . However, we know enough to recognize a sun-myth in the story of Vitzilopuchtli, rising out of the terrestrial womb as a result of an immaculate conception, with the location of sunrise given. His appearance and career could not be anything else but one of a warrior hero, since the artist belonged to a nation of savage fighters with their typical war-psychology and their education for death in contrast to other Pre-Columbian philosophies of an agrarian background.

Katz (1945) points out that the Aztecs were conquerors from the North, the last settlers on the high plateau of Anahuac. They inherited an advanced astronomy as well as other sciences and arts from their conquered predecessors and translated this cultural heritage into their philosophy of a warrior people who believed themselves chosen to rule. Aztec art—as represented by the Coatlicue monolith—mirrors this style of life. Katz (1945) points out that:

Therefore this art has no use for sugarcoating tastes. It revels in its ability to face the stark and cruel realities of life and death without a whimper. Tragedy, human or celestial, did not frighten this people. Terror, man-made or terrestrial, held no ultimate threat.

Katz's psychological interpretation (1945) of the Coatlicue legend begins with an analysis of the relationships among family members, but also comes to terms with the cosmic implications. He notes that:

Vitzilopuchtli's first act after birth is the destruction of his many older brothers, the stars, and of his plotting sister, Coyolxauhqui, the moon, all blotted out by the rising sun. From the point of view of the subconscious, we have a very interesting analysis of Vitzilopuchtli's Oedipus Complex in protecting his mother, and the Electra complex of the daughter Coyolxauhqui against her. It is a perfect Freudian background for the surrealist power of this symbolic image with its skulls, its serpents, its cut-off hands and cut-out hearts, so strongly reminiscent of early surrealist films. . . . In cases like . . . Coatlicue, we are dealing with the age-old struggle to bridge the terrifying gaps between the conscious ego of man and the mysterious dream-life of his subconscious on the one hand, and the unfathomable secrets of cosmic forces on the other.

Katz (1971) feels that the Coatlicue story is a better example of the unconscious archetypes than the more commonly known Greek myths employed by Freud. In Freud's Greek example, Oedipus is not aware that the man he kills is his father. It is not a conscious act of hatred toward the father nor a case of desiring to possess the mother. The story tells clearly how the infant Oedipus was exposed and left to die, and how he

was found and adopted by another king. When he was strong enough to travel, and see the world, he killed a stranger, but not knowing that it was his father. He married his mother, again without realizing his relationship to her. The Oedipus legend is a powerful dramatization of the Greek notion of inescapable fate, but not a true description of a child's primordial feelings toward his parents.

Vitzilopuchtli, on the other hand, acted as a lover and protector of his mother even before his birth. Elements of unconscious desires were consciously enacted in direct ways, making the Coatlicue myth an excellent example of Freud's contentions. This may be one reason why the Pre-Columbian idol contains such a powerful hypnotic effect. Katz has stated that nowhere in the entire history of art has a single moment achieved such a complete synthesis of human and abstract universal relationships (Reed, 1955). Although a father relationship is missing, the legend provides a Freudian background for the surrealist power of this symbolic image. Surrealism, the art of the unconscious and of the dream state, is very ancient indeed. Katz notes (1971), "The main difference between new and old . . . is that modern surrealists are chiefly interested in their own egos and complexes, whereas in cases like Coatlicue, the artists were representing a cosmic struggle."

Katz (1971) feels that this struggle is presented in its most primitive and powerful form by the artists who carved the statue of Coatlicue. The delicately chiseled features and noble brow of the Greek Zeus statues and the benign countenance and the patriarchal bearing of the Supreme Being of the Old Testament are concepts developed from an idealized form of humanity. These portrayals of Deity have little in common with the occult rendering of Coatlicue and the ponderous serpents that produce her almost petrifying physiognomy.

Yet, while the European sculptors functioned in different esthetic environments, the ideas that they projected expressed a similar human need—the desire to know the unknowable, to make some sense out of the often conflicting messages that come from ordinary waking consciousness, from altered states of consciousness, and from the vast universal cosmos. The message of Coatlicue is simply that there is a unity in the universe: inner and outer man are one, humanity and the cosmos are one, life and death are one, even joy and horror are inevitably linked. The human being who can sense this unity, and flow along with it, will live a more fulfilling life than the person, who like Coyolxauhqui, attempts to superimpose his own egotistical constructs upon a universe the design of which is far beyond man's ability to comprehend rationally. Man comes to terms with these existential problems in non-rational as well as rational ways. By using the symbols emerging from dreams and mythology, mankind can become reconciled with the turbulent, flowing, ever-changing cosmos which, for better or for worse, is his home.

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## APPENDIX

Leo Katz was born in 1887, in the Carpathian Mountains, in a part of Austria which now belongs to Czechoslovakia. His parents feared that a child who neglected eating and other biological needs would not grow up properly. Thus, they took away all papers and pencils, only to find him in the morning with bloody fingers from trying to draw with his fingernails in the wooden floorboards. The effort to stop him from drawing had to be abandoned.

According to Katz (1971), the desire to draw started as soon as he was able to hold a pencil. It happened at such an early time in infancy that one could hardly speak of an "ego" that had to be satisfied or expressed. This almost uncontrollable occupation with drawing gradually turned into a strong creative passion when his father, to humor the child, explained that his horses and other figures would "come to life if done without a flaw, but if they are not good enough, they cannot move." Thus, Katz's whole childhood was spent drawing horses and other creatures (or cutting them out with a pair of scissors) and tearing them up as soon as a flaw was discovered or suspected. His was a haunted quest for life and perfection. Katz (1971) feels that this drive had nothing to do with pleasure, self-expression, or any of the typical motivations found among creative children. Rather, it was the urge to create life which had built into it the agonies of an impossible quest. This explains Katz's early positive response to the world's mythologies with their stories of creation and their sometimes tragic heroes. There was no one who could sense what he experienced and later, in school, he was disappointed to find that education only dealt with materially practical and intellectually logical matters. Invisible forces, as well as unconscious and transcendental experiences, were considered unmentionable nonsense by his teachers.

After establishing his reputation as a painter and draftsman in Vienna, Katz was commissioned from time to time to paint portraits. He found that through total absorption in his work, some pictures assumed a life of their own and revealed much about a person that Katz had no way of knowing. In spite of his protests, people would claim they could not keep secrets from him and so he assumed the role of a father confessor for many. For example, a young lady once told him of a repetitive nightmare presenting her mother, regarded by society as a very fine lady, as a horrible dragon. Katz knew from his study of

Freud that this type of dream was a frequent occurrence for girls who lived in fear of their mother while adoring their father, thus considering the mother a dangerous rival.

Many outstanding artists have concentrated exclusively on one form of self-expression. However, Leo Katz belongs to the few whose interests seem to have no limits. In painting, his work covers everything from miniatures to some of the largest murals in the world. He has also painted landscapes, as well as symbolic, unconscious, and cosmic subjects. His graphics (engravings, etchings, lithographs, etc.) are in the print departments of several great museums here and abroad. For a time he was director of the celebrated "Atelier 17" in New York City, and is considered one of the foremost authorities in the esthetics of photography. Other fields of Katz's interest are nuclear physics, astronomy, cosmogony, psychology, and parapsychological research.

Leo Katz lives in the Andrew Freedman Home, 1125 Grand Concourse, Bronx, N.Y. 10452, U.S.A. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Museum of Modern Art (New York), New York Public Library, Brooklyn Museum, Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), Howard University Collection (Washington, D.C.), Baltimore Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Wiggins Collection of the Boston Public Library, the Museum of Norfolk (Norfolk, Va.), Whitney Museum (New York), High Museum (Atlanta), Bezalel Museum (Jerusalem), Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), the Albertina (Vienna), etc.

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