

Press Release

## **TEOTIHUACAN – THE MYSTERIOUS CITY OF PYRAMIDS**

**21 February – 30 May 2010**

**Teotihuacan is situated about 50 kilometres north-east of Mexico City. Between 200 and 650 BC, a thousand years before the Aztecs, it was already a powerful economic and cultural centre. Once the largest city in pre-Columbian America, Teotihuacan with its monumental pyramids has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987.**

*In 2010, with this spectacular, landmark exhibition, Mexico celebrates the bicentenary of its independence and the centenary of the Mexican Revolution.*

During the 1st century BC intensive settlement took place in several places on the high plateau of central Mexico. The greatest concentration of population was in Teotihuacan: between the 3rd and 6th centuries the city's influence extended across the whole of Mesoamerica.

Teotihuacan was one of the largest cities ever built in pre-Columbian America. Its layout clearly indicates unified planning and is an imposing expression of centralised power: a 50-metre wide processional avenue, the 'Street of the Dead', forms the central axis of the city which is laid out like a chessboard. The avenue links the two greatest monumental structures in Mesoamerica – the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. The pyramids are flanked by numerous temple platforms and palace complexes: brightly coloured murals rich in symbolism adorned their walls, their pigments applied to the plaster when it was still damp.

Throughout the city, most people lived in multi-apartment residential compounds. There were neighbourhoods in which different crafts were concentrated, and also distinct enclaves for people from different regions of Mexico, who retained much of their own original culture.

Thanks to well-established trading networks, diplomatic relations and military conquest, Teotihuacan was able to widen its sphere of influence beyond the central plateau to many areas across Mesoamerica. The city's vast wealth was based to a considerable extent on its monopoly over trade in obsidian. Near Teotihuacan lie the biggest obsidian sources in Mesoamerica, and in the city itself hundreds of workshops have been discovered in which this volcanic glass was carved. Other important exports included beautifully decorated ceramics, especially cylindrical tripod vessels. Apart from thriving commerce, warfare also

played a key role in the city's prosperity. Through successful military campaigns, Teotihuacan expanded its power as far as the Maya region in the south of Mexico, and much of its wealth would have come from huge tribute payments.

Teotihuacan flourished for more than 500 years until a devastating fire in the 7th century marked the beginning of the decline of the Pyramid City. At the time of the Aztecs in the 15th and 16th centuries the city had lain in ruins for almost a thousand years. It was the Aztecs who gave this mysterious place its name: Teotihuacan, 'where men become gods'. According to their myths of origin it was here that the present world was created.

The exhibition presents some 450 artefacts from Mexico: colourful murals, precious ceramic vessels, figures carved from obsidian, wonderful jewellery, and stone sculptures. The stone masks which were so typical of Teotihuacan, originally painted and richly inlaid with precious stones and mussel shells, were extremely lifelike and expressive. The mask which appears on the front of the flyer for the exhibition was once entirely covered with pieces of turquoise. The nose decoration, the eyebrows, and the glyph on the forehead are emphasised with red mussel shell. It was found in a cave on the Pacific coast of western Mexico. Perhaps it got there through trade or a military campaign. It is possible that such masks played a role in burial rituals.

The exhibition also gives a first glimpse of some spectacular recent finds such as the sumptuous grave offerings from the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent and the Pyramid of the Moon. The Pyramid of the Moon was built in seven phases and in each of them the already existing building was incorporated into a larger structure. At the start of each of these enlargements important rituals were celebrated during which humans were sacrificed and buried in the pyramid together with abundant grave offerings. In one of these graves a unique human sculpture was found, with wide-open mouth and jewellery including earpieces and necklace. Its dark body consists of a wooden core which was covered with several layers of serpentine; mouth, teeth, ears and ear lobes consist of stones and mussel shells in other colours. This sculpture was originally the centre of nine serpent-shaped obsidian figures arranged in a circle.

One of the most impressive stone sculptures is the so-called Jaguar of Xalla. The palace complex of Xalla, which includes 29 buildings and eight large squares, is situated north of the Pyramid of the Sun, and may have been one of the residences of Teotihuacan's rulers. On the eastern side of the central square once stood the temple of Tlaloc, the god of rain and storms, and this is where the monumental jaguar – assembled from twelve separate pieces and vividly painted – was found. The Jaguar of Xalla is a symbol of power. But it also stands for war and for the fertility of the earth which is alluded to by the side pieces which are decorated with flowers.

Despite all this knowledge, only a tiny fraction of Teotihuacan has been explored and understood. Even now, we still do not know with any certainty who its inhabitants really were, or what they called themselves and their city. Who were its rulers and where did they reside? With so many unanswered questions, an air of mystery still hangs over this extraordinary place.

## ORGANISATION

This exhibition was conceived by the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, with the support of the Fundación Televisa A.C. It is co-produced by the musée du quai Branly, Paris, the Museum Rietberg Zürich and the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.

## SPONSORS

The exhibition is supported by the Vontobel Foundation and by Thomas Schmidheiny

## CATALOGUE

«Teotihuacan: Geheimnisvolle Pyramidenstadt» (German Edition)  
Musée du Quai Branly und Felipe Solis (Hrsg.), 480 Seiten,  
ca. 530 Farbabbildungen, 24,5 x 29,5 cm, Éditions Somogy  
CHF 68.00, ISBN 978-2-7572-0296-8

«Teotihuacan: Cité des dieux» (French Edition)  
Musée du Quai Branly et Felipe Solis (éd.), 480 pages,  
env. 530 illustrations en couleur, 24,5 x 29,5 cm, Éditions Somogy  
CHF 68.00, ISBN 978-2-7572-0295-1

## PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

2 March – 6 April 2010

**Teotihuacan – Metropole Alt-Amerikas** (Lectures in German)  
Ringvorlesung der Volkshochschule Zürich. Anmeldung: [www.vhszh.ch](http://www.vhszh.ch)

7 mai 2010

### ***klangkunst***

*Concert by the Zurich Chamber Orchestra (ZKO) in the Museum Rietberg*

The ZKO under musical director Muhai Tang presents its musical interpretations of themes relating to our special exhibition with works of Carlos Chávez and Manuel Ponce.

Advance booking starts March 2010: Museum Rietberg or [billettkasse@zko.ch](mailto:billettkasse@zko.ch), [www.zko.ch](http://www.zko.ch)

8 and 9 May 2010

### **Fiesta Mexicana**

The sound of mariachi bands, folk, crossover and modern music, the smell of enchiladas, frijoles and arroz dulce will make enthusiasts of Mexico revel in wonderful memories! As you stroll among the colourful market stalls, stopping for a refreshing drink of agua de limón, ponche or tequila, you could imagine you were in a zócalo, the pulsating main square of a Mexican city.

## INFORMATION AND CONTACT

Further information and download of photographs on [www.rietberg.ch](http://www.rietberg.ch)

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Opening hours:	Tues – Sun 10 am – 5 pm   Wed and Thurs 10 am – 8 pm
Holidays:	2 – 5 April, 23 and 24 May, 10 am – 5 pm; 13 May, 10 am – 8 pm
Admission:	adults CHF 16   reduced CHF 12   up to the age of 16 free
Public guided tours (in German):	Sun 11 am   Wed 6 pm   Thurs 12.15 am
Guided tours in English:	+ 41 44 206 31 11 / 31
Artworks in dialogue (in German):	Interactive guided tour for adults ( <a href="http://www.rietberg.ch">www.rietberg.ch</a> )
Access:	Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz») No parking; disabled parking available.
Events:	<a href="http://www.rietberg.ch">www.rietberg.ch</a>
RailAway offer	By train to Museum Rietberg: <a href="http://www.railaway.ch">www.railaway.ch</a> 20% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.