
Director's Letter



THE MOMENTOUS ENCOUNTER

The Dutch map that adorns the cover of the *Bulletin* this year represents a European view of the Americas some time after Columbus's first voyage to the New World. In commemorating the 500th anniversary of that event, we do not mean to endorse the negative aspects of the conquest, but rather to recognize the implications of a feat that changed the way the world was perceived and shaped the reality of the Americas.

The course of our history can only be fully appreciated by bearing in mind the pre-Columbian heritage. Nations are usually measured only by their most recent actions and achievements, but the ideologies, problems, and aspirations of the present have their origins in the people's cultural and intellectual legacy. Many historians have declared the Americas to have been a *tabula rasa* prior to 1492; however, that date cannot be considered a starting point so much as a turning point. The indigenous peoples of these lands did not lack a history, sciences, or arts, as testified by their use of wax, knowledge of astronomy, construction of temples and palaces, creation of sculptures, ceramics, and textiles, and practice of medicine. Much of that heritage is only now being rediscovered. Today, beset by serious ecological problems, we would be well advised to revive the original inhabitants' reverence toward nature and harmonious relationship with the environment.

In the unprecedented interchange that followed the encounter, the world became one. Across the ocean from Europe came beasts of burden and a variety of arts and crafts, while in the opposite direction flowed fabulous products such as cacao and rubber. As time passed, another export emerged: the respect for human rights that governs modern thought was in large part driven by the spirit of liberty that flourished in this hemisphere. While France was in Napoleon's grip, more than a dozen republics were being born in Latin America, and they are now more than a century and a half old.

Whatever our individual perspective, the encounter between the two worlds was a momentous event that defined what the people of the Americas would become. The intermingling of races and the mixture of rich and varied cultural currents that began at that time prepared the way for the diverse community we now enjoy. This anniversary is, then, an opportune occasion to remember what we were, celebrate what we are, and affirm what we will be. Free from the rancor of the vanquished or the arrogance of the conqueror, our efforts must be dedicated to constructing and sharing a future of brotherhood, development, and health for all.



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