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Knife Blade (Tecpatl)

Aztec, Late Postclassic Period,
ca. 13th-16th century

Obsidian

height 26.7 cm; 10 1/2 in.

Provenance:

Collection of Salomon Hale (1897-1964);
thence by descent.

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The present artwork is an Aztec knife blade known as a *tecpatl*. These stone blades are typically leaf-shaped, with two blade edges and two broad, flat sides which taper to points or rounded ends on either side. The blades are designed to be inserted into handles made of wood, bone, or various other materials, which sometimes survive. Traditionally these blades are associated with human sacrifice, but they were also part of the armaments of the elite jaguar warriors and were used in short-range combat.

There are numerous mythical and religious associations with these blades in Aztec culture, owing both to the manufacture and use of the *tecpatl* and medium of obsidian. The *tecpatl* is one of the most important and ubiquitous symbols of Aztec mythology, associated with a number of important deities, and has multiple uses in the symbology of the Aztec calendar.

The present *tecpatl* is made of black obsidian, a prized stone for the Aztecs, though blades were also made from flint as well as red and green obsidian. Archaeological records indicate that the mining of obsidian was itself a ritualized activity, as indicated by the presence of stone icons of divinities as well as pre-form blades discovered at mining sites, such as ones on the Sierra de las Navajas, in the present-day Hidalgo province of Mexico.

The present example, of exceptionally large scale and quality, preserves a layer of white and golden mineral accretions on the surface of the stone, adding to its attractiveness.

References:

For the religious and cultural associations with obsidian for the Aztecs, see Marc N. Levine and David M. Carballo (Ed.), *Obsidian Reflections: Symbolic Dimensions of Obsidian in Mesoamerica*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press 2014, esp. pp. 75-110.

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Comparanda:



New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
00.5.1046.



New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art,
00.5.1044.