

NO HAIR OF THE DOG

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In the 18th century, the eminent French natural historian, the Comte de Buffon, searched for evidence to support his theory that New World species were inferior to European ones. Buffon would have been hard pressed to find an animal better suited to his purposes than the dog called *xoloescuinle*, known colloquially in Central and South America as *escuinle*. The name derives from the Nahuatl *xoloitzcuinle*, meaning "dog of *Xólotl*," a reference to Quetzalcóatl's twin brother, *Xólotl*, the Mesoamerican god of twins and the deformed. The breed's name can also be translated to mean strange or monstrous dog. This Mexican dog is strange indeed, generally hairless, barrel-chested, and with a mouth either featuring an incomplete set of teeth or utterly devoid of them. The puppies look as much dinosaur as mammal. But *escuinles* are much more than canine oddities. They also refute the widely-held belief that there were no dogs in the New World prior to the arrival of the first Europeans.¹ *Escuinles* lead us on a trail into Mexico's past.

Hairless dogs are not unique to Mexico. Similar breeds are indigenous to Peru, Manchuria, Paraguay, southern India, Turkey, and parts of Africa, especially Ethiopia and the Congo. Some have suggested that the similarities between the hairless dogs of the Pacific coasts of Mexico and South America are evidence of commerce conducted centuries before the Spanish Conquest.² The archeological evidence suggests that even before the Conquest the *escuinle* played multiple roles within the societies of the western states of Colima, Nayarit, Michoacán, and Jalisco. For the most part, this area of Mexico lacks the pyramids and other spectacular monumental structures associated with other pre-Columbian Mexican cultures. Until about 600 A.D., however, the inhabitants built elaborate underground tombs with one or more chambers, accessible only through narrow, vertical shafts that were sometimes as deep as 50 feet. Typically, the dead were supplied not only with goods such as axes, jewelry, blades, ceramics, crystals, and awls but also with clay dogs. Some of the burnished ceramic objects excavated (or, more often, looted) from the tombs represent the *escuinle* in a variety of poses: sitting attentively, sleeping curled in a ball, nursing puppies, scratching fleas, holding a bone or ear of corn in its mouth, and wrestling playfully with other *escuinle* while standing on hind legs. Such poses would not be unfamiliar to those who know the modern-day descendants of these pre-Columbian puppies. The diverse forms of these ancient ceramics make them greatly appealing: Some *escuinle* are grossly overweight; others are mere skin and bones; others are marked with patterns that seem to represent wrinkles. Even more intriguing are the less naturalistic depictions, such as an *escuinle* sprouting antlers or in mid-transformation between dog and human forms or (seemingly) between dog to snake, in Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum. These multiple examples of double-headed dogs reinforce their connection to twins, a reproductive category with great supernatural significance for pre-Columbian cultures.

These sculptural objects, as well as a number of ceramic dogs wearing humanoid masks (the only animal so represented in this region) and human bodies with heads of dogs, led many archeologists to consider the *escuinle* to be supernatural animals. Such evidence contradicted the conclusions of many archeologists who believed that the absence of monumental architecture in West Mexico was proof that these had been secular societies. Marxist nationalists had even suggested that these Mexican societies were more egalitarian than the imperial, theocratic, and rigidly hierarchical Aztec or Maya. The subsequent

work of archeologists, especially Peter T. Furst, has overturned these orthodoxies by suggesting the centrality of shamanism and the magical.³

The Spanish chroniclers of the Conquest noted the strange hairless dog of Mesoamerica. In the *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (1579), Fray Bernardino de Sahagún wrote that most of the dogs were born with hair but it had been removed with a substance made from pine resin. The exceptions to this rule, according to Sahagún, were the dogs of Teotlixco and Toztlán, where the dogs are born hairless. The modern day names or locations of these towns are difficult to identify with certainty, though they are probably on the Pacific Coast. In his *Historia de Tlaxcala* (1585), Diego Muñoz de Camargo describes the sacrifices of several hairless dogs to the rain god. Believers conducted canine sacrifices by piercing them with arrows, suffocating them, or throwing the bound animals on rocks before extracting their hearts, which were later cooked. West Mexican myths compiled after the Conquest also suggest an intimate relationship between *escuinle* and humans. In his *Relaciones de los indios Colimas de la Nueva España* (1581), Juan Suárez de Cepeda records that the gods had once punished humanity with a disastrous flood. Those who survived had to resort to fishing for the only available source of food. Unfortunately, the smoke produced while cooking the fish enraged the gods, who decapitated the humans and stuck their heads up their asses as punishment for the humans' pollution. The headless humans were transformed magically into hairless dogs.

In addition to its supernatural significance, the *escuinle* fulfilled some of the more pragmatic needs of the ancient Mexicans. Though in general domesticated animals played a much less important role in the pre-Columbian diet than in that of Europeans, ancient Mexicans raised *escuinles* to be cooked and eaten, often prepared in green sauce and served with pigweeds. Comala-style earthenware vessels with decorative representations of foodstuffs along their rims occasionally incorporate the figure of an *escuinle*; one unusual ceramic piece depicts a life-sized roasted dog ready for carving. Diego Durán writes that at the time of the Conquest, hundreds of dogs were for sale at the Market of Acolman near the pyramids of Teotihuacan in Central Mexico. Diego de Landa and Clavijero reported that the meat was delicious. Perhaps it was the growing taste for *escuinle* meat that brought the dogs beyond their original turf into more temperate climates, where inevitably they needed special care; De Sahagún reports that in the Central Valley they were wrapped in blankets during the winter.⁴

After the Conquest, the popularity and reverence for the *escuinle* was largely replaced with the arrival of European dogs, and the animal survived only in Western Mexico, the area of its origin. Fortunately, the *escuinle* did not suffer the same fate as the dogs indigenous to the island of Hispaniola, which were hunted to extinction by Columbus's famished crew. Instead, throughout the colonial era and well into the 19th century, numerous laws enacted to control the problem of stray dogs effectively reduced the *escuinle* population.⁵ On occasion manufacturers used the dogs' skins for gloves made for export. It is also rumored that, during WWI, military scientists experimented on the dogs with poisonous gases because of the similarities between the animals' skin and that of humans, which hastened the dwindling population even further. It was not until the mid-20th century that the *escuinle* had a reversal of fortunes. With the fevered nationalism of the post-revolutionary era, the dogs began to attract the attention of Mexican artists. For Diego Rivera, this most Mexican of animals functioned as a symbol of national pride; *escuinles* frolicked in the

opposite: *Escuinle* wearing a mask with a human face. Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art

gardens and patios of Rivera and Frida Kahlo's "Blue House" in Coyoacán, as documented in numerous photographs of Lola Alvarez Bravo and others. In the corner of Rivera's 1941 mural *Colonization (or The Disembarkation of the Spanish at Veracruz)*, painted in Mexico City's National Palace, an *escuincle* filled with the spirit of indigenous resistance can be seen snarling at the European mutt imported by a green-faced, microcephalic Hernán Cortés. Rivera's private collection of ancient art, now housed in the Anahuacali Museum, includes several of his pre-Columbian ceramic *escuincles*. *Escuincles* also populate the artwork of Frida Kahlo, Maria Izquierdo, and others of the post-revolutionary generation.⁶

Even more so than Rivera and his circle, however, it was British Colonel Norman P. Wright who prompted the reevaluation of the hairless dog. In 1955 and 1956, Wright made three trips to isolated villages in West Mexico along the shores of the Rio Balsas (in the state of Guerrero), where *escuincles* were found both as domestic animals and as strays. Since the peasants were by nature suspicious of outsiders who coveted their dogs, the colonel dressed in a straw hat, *huaraches*, and the white cotton shirt and pants typical of the rural farmers there, hoping the disguise would help him win their trust. He returned to Mexico City with several *escuincles*, which he bred successfully. In 1957, after the U.S.S.R. launched the satellite Sputnik with the Siberian Husky Laika onboard, Guerrerense locals erroneously associated the two events. Even years later, they maintained that a stray *escuincle* had been sent into outer space through the intervention of the eccentric English colonel in the disguise of a Mexican peasant.⁷

The *escuincle* found a champion in Norman P. Wright. He participated in a subcommittee of the Asociación Canófila Mexicana (Mexican Dog-Lovers' Association) that established norms for the breed, which served to boost the *escuincle* population. Wright followed the model established by fanciers of the German Weimaraner, another breed once in danger of disappearing. *Escuincle* puppies with desired traits were given to breeders on the condition that they cooperate with the association. The exportation of female *escuincles* from the country was prohibited. The successful efforts of the Association were publicized in both general interest periodicals such as *Life*, *Time*, and *The Illustrated London News* as well as in specialty publications including *La vie canine*, *The Kennel Review*, and *Tail-Wagger*. Today, Mexican dog breeders and pet owners have fostered a more widespread appreciation for their native pooch. Since 1974, the Federación Canófila Mexicana (Mexican Dog-Lovers' Federation) has organized dog shows; as a result, *escuincles* can now command astronomical prices. New interest in the dog has also encouraged its scientific study, which has helped to clarify many misconceptions that have surrounded the breed. The *escuincle*'s hairless condition, for example, is apparently the result of a dominant gene that also may be related to the dog's irregular dentition. That gene, in fact, can be fatal. If two hairless *escuincles* mate, and the dogs' offspring inherit the hairless gene from both parents, it will be still-born. Puppies that receive the recessive gene from both parents live to maturity and grow hair.

A casual survey of the current conditions of the *escuincle* reveals that the situation has improved radically from the times of Wright. Now the breed can be found in many parts of the world. In Mexico, the dogs are found not only in the homes of the cultural and social elites, like museum director and *escuincle* fancier Dolores Olmedo Patiño, but also in households of much more modest means throughout the republic. In addition to the dogs' roles as household pets, Valadez Azúa and Mestre Arrijoa report the persistence of belief in their medical functions and at least one case of an *escuincle* used for rescuing humans.

where a nation's dog fanciers have recognized (however belatedly) the value of their cultural heritage after centuries of colonization—is more ambivalent and nuanced. Mexican dogs, like their human counterparts, still live in a highly stratified world defined by race and class. In the heady nationalism of the post-revolutionary era, *escuincles* have attracted artists such as contemporary video makers Miguel Calderon and Yoshua Okon. Okon's short video *Chocorol* (1998), for example, records an *escuincle* mounting a French poodle, dogs more amorous than the ones depicted in Rivera's mural. Okon relates that the poodle owner was irate upon learning that the animal had been fornicating with a Mexican hairless. Okon's work reveals the mutual fascination that Mexico and France seem to hold for each other, from Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, Napoleon III, and other French lovers of all things Mexican, to the elites of Porfirio Díaz's Mexico and other Francophiles that populate the Mexican middle class today. Okon's work also documents the canine equivalent of the *pintura de castas*, those taxonomical oil paintings of the colonial era that obsessively categorized the racial mixtures of the New World. The violent response to the mating on the part of the poodle's owner suggests that the legacy of eugenics lies beneath the dog breeder's preoccupation with purebreds.⁸ Today, the ideal *escuincle*, as codified by the standards of the Comité Izcuente de la Asociación Canófila Mexicana, A.C. and maintained by selective breeding, is inaccessible to the indigenous population that first reared these animals. In fact, some of the terminology employed (e.g. "*saltoatras*" is used in both contemporary dog breeding and colonial racial taxonomies) is identical to that of the colonial administrators preoccupied with categorizing every possible kind of miscegenation. As it happens so often, humans have projected their destructive neuroses onto the animal world, imposing their worst impulses on their species' best friend.

Norman P. Wright's "Standard for the Large Mexican Hairless Dog (Standard Xoloitzcuintle)" as adopted by the Mexican Dog-Lovers' Association on 1 May 1956 is available for all *escuincle* lovers under "issue 6" at <www.immaterial.net/cabinet>. A recipe for cooking the *escuincle* will be found on the same page.

1 For example, Antonio de Herrera makes this assertion in *Historia General de los Hechos de los Castellanos en America* (1601–1604).

2 Alana Cordy-Collins, "An Unshaggy Dog Story," *Natural History* (February 1994), pp. 34–40.

3 Peter T. Furst, "West Mexican Art: Secular or Sacred?" in Dudley T. Easby, Jr., ed., *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), pp. 98–133.

4 Much more could be said about the medical, culinary, funerary, and religious uses of the *xoloescuincle* in ancient Mexico. A useful summary of this subject is provided in the catalogue of ceramic dogs from the Colima region in the holdings of Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum. See Carolyn Baus Czitrom, *Los perros de la Antigua provincia de Colima* (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 1998).

5 A compendium of such laws is provided by Raúl Valadez Azúa and Gabriel Mestre Arrijoa's valuable *Historia del Xoloitzcuintle en México* (México, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), pp. 104–109.

6 A survey of *escuincles* in Mexican visual arts, both modern and ancient, is provided by the exhibition catalogue *El xoloitzcuintle en la historia de México* (México, D.F.: Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, 1997).

7 Wright gives a brief account of these trips in *El enigma del xoloitzcuintli* (México D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 1960), pp. 67–68. The association of Wright's visit with the Sputnik launch was documented during the retracing of the Englishman's journeys, as told in Valadez Azúa and Mestre Arrijoa, op. cit., p. 62.

8 Okon's account of this incident is published in *Luna Cornea* no. 20 (2000), pp. 164–165.

