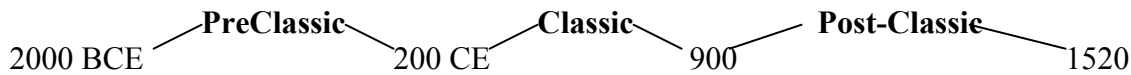


# Mesoamerican Art



OLMEC----- MAYA----- AZTEC--  
TEOTIHUACAN- TOLTEC-----

Four of the numerous great Mesoamerican cultures, and what they're best known as:

- **Olmec** the "Mother Culture"
- **Maya** overall high achievers
- **Toltec** builders and organizers who subdued and influenced the Maya
- **Aztecs** warriors

...and a cosmopolitan city: **Teotihuacan**

Two general comments:

- Mesoamerican art is almost exclusively religious or mortuary.
- Unlike African art, much of which reflects a mid-point between naturalism and abstraction, in Mesoamerican art, both extremes—very naturalistic pieces and very abstract pieces—are being done simultaneously, while other pieces reveal a combination of the two.



## Preclassic Period: The OLMEC

Considered the "Mother Culture" of Mesoamerica, the Olmecs' religion, political structure, architecture, and art profoundly influenced all the cultures that followed. They had developed both writing and an accurate calendar by about 600 BCE. Most of the population was made up of farmers, who lived in villages in the swampy jungles near the Gulf of Mexico, and their labors supported a hereditary caste of rulers and priests, who lived at the religious and civic centers of San Lorenzo and La Venta. The entire population gathered regularly at these cities for religious rituals.



**La Venta** was an "early form of the temple-pyramid, plaza-courtyard complex (G, 504) that will characterize Mesoamerican urban planning. The pyramid is 100' high, and rituals performed in a temple located at the top would have been visible to the throngs gathered in the plaza below. The entire complex is oriented with a north-south axis. Facing the plaza were four colossal Olmec heads.

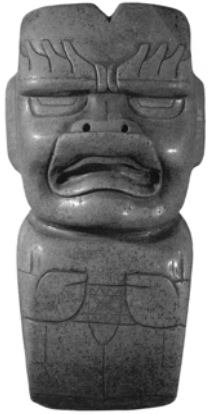
More **ABSTRACT** Olmec pieces:

**Colossal Olmec Heads**, made between 1200 BCE and 200 CE. Basalt, 8' high, 21' in circumference. The "hallmarks of Olmec art" (G 504), the **abstract** heads have just enough differences in facial features to make most scholars believe they were probably portraits of some of their rulers. A total of 16 Olmec heads have been found, weighing from 10,000 to



40,000 pounds, and the basalt they were made from had to be transported (without the wheel!) through 60 miles of swampland. The heads are **rigidly frontal and symmetrical, with hemispherical chin-strapped helmets, puffy cheeks, flat noses, slight frowns, thick lips, and down-turned mouths**. When La Venta was conquered, the heads were deliberately defaced and the city was burned.

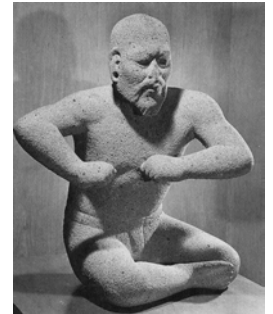
**Olmec Mask**, 800-400 BCE, shows the influence of the colossal heads, with the same abstraction, rigid symmetry and frontality, and facial features.



**Ceremonial Jaguar Axe**, 600 BCE, jade, 11 ½": This humanoid creature of an infant with a huge jaguar head and snout is called a **were-jaguar**, a combination human/jaguar form that is the most common image in Olmec carvings. Again, this shows the same abstraction, symmetry and frontality. The details of the body are incised. Reflects the worship of Balam, the jaguar god, who could assume human form, and shamans who could assume jaguar form to be go-betweens from the human to the spirit world. We see here a **common Mesoamerican motif, the animal-human deity**.

#### More NATURALISTIC pieces:

**Wrestler**, before 400 BCE, basalt: This, "the finest of all Olmec sculpture" (HF, 89), shows the artist's careful observation and depiction of the human form and body mechanics. It reveals "controlled inner energy...firmness of muscle... the slow, flexing movement of the spiraling pose...[and a] continuous flow of curved surfaces. (HF 89)



**Man in Form of Human Heart**, 1000 BCE, 7 ½", ceramic. The earliest known image of the human heart, this piece suggests that the Olmecs may have practiced human sacrifice, removing the hearts from living sacrificial victims.

**"Baby" Figure**, Olmec, 12th – 9th c. BCE "This carved and polished figurine is of a type known as an 'Olmec baby' because of its proportions and puffy facial features, including fleshy lips and slit eyes. The elongated head suggests an Olmec custom of infant cranial shaping, which was considered beautiful and a sign of high rank."

([http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA\\_Amerindian/pages/Amerind\\_2.shtml](http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_Amerindian/pages/Amerind_2.shtml))



#### A combination of abstraction and naturalism:

##### **Jaguar Shaman**, Olmec, 1150-800 BCE

This combines the naturalistic human body we see in The Wrestler and the "Baby" Figure with the stylized jaguar mask to create another **were-jaguar**.

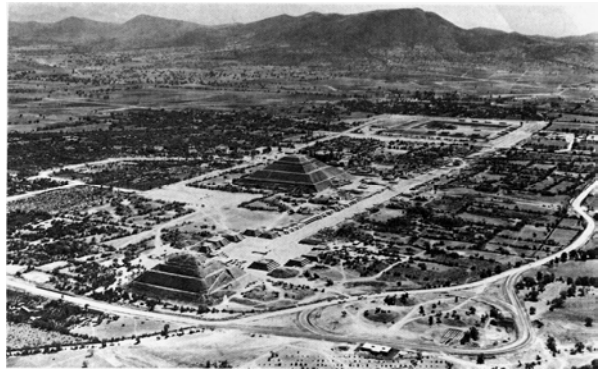
Although the Olmec cities declined and were ultimately abandoned by about the third century C.E., their influence spread both east and west. San Lorenzo and La Venta disappeared under the rain forest as the next great period in Mesoamerica was emerging. In the west, the city of Teotihuacán became a force to reckon with, while the Maya ascended in the south and east.



## The Classic Period

### TEOTIHUACÁN (ca. 200 – 750)

While we don't know what the residents of this vast city called themselves, the Aztecs were so impressed by the ruins they discovered in the city that they gave it their word meaning, "Where one becomes a god." Aztec kings would make regular visits to the city in the Valley of Mexico only 30 miles outside of present day Mexico City. With an area of nine square miles and a population of perhaps 200,000, Teotihuacán was one of the largest cities in the world at its height from the fourth through the seventh centuries. Both Zápotec and Maya lived in this cosmopolitan religious center, whose broad avenues were laid out in a grid pattern according to precise astronomical orientation



**Pyramid of the Sun:** Built two thousand years after the Egyptian pyramids and Sumerian ziggurats it resembles, the Pyramid of the Sun is a vastly enlarged version of the Olmec temple-pyramid. A steep stairway leads from its entrance on the Avenue of the Dead up the 200-foot structure at whose top was the temple. Like many Mayan pyramids being built at about the same

time, there are nine progressively smaller, square platforms stacked on top of one another. Though a bit less than half as high as the Pyramid of Khufu, the largest of the Egyptian pyramids, the 720-foot width of each side is only slightly narrower than Khufu's width of 775 feet.

**Relief Sculpture:** The much smaller **Temple of Quetzalcoátl**, found at the south end of the Avenue of the Dead, is decorated with colorful bands of relief sculpture on each of its six terraces. Heads of Quetzalcoátl, the feathered serpent, alternate with geometrically abstract heads of the goggle-eyed Tlaloc, god of rain. Low reliefs of the serpent body of Quetzalcoátl and water symbols such as seashells run along the panels between the heads. We see here the combination of monumental sculpture and architecture, just as we do in buildings erected by the Egyptians, Sumerians, Greeks, and medieval Europeans.



Though never completely abandoned, Teotihuacán's population plummeted after a fire in the ceremonial district in the eighth century. As with the ancient Sumerian city-states, the decline was likely exacerbated by a population too large for the surrounding land to support. Deforestation and soil overuse transformed the area into one with semi-desert conditions that could no longer provide for the city's residents. As with the Olmec, however, the city's art and architecture would continue to exercise influence for centuries to come.

## THE MAYA (ca. 200 – 900)

Mayan culture, called by Gardner's "the most advanced, sophisticated, and subtle civilization of the New World" (9<sup>th</sup> ed., 507), reached astonishing heights of development in the Classic Period stretching from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula down into Guatemala and Honduras in Central America. The Maya developed their intricate writing system, now largely deciphered, along with their accurate calendar, probably as a result of their desire to keep records of the events in the lives of their kings. They had an advanced understanding of mathematics and astronomy, again reflected in the astronomical orientation of their temple-pyramids. The ruling class of priests and administrators inhabited the cities, supported by the farmers in the surrounding countryside. All the citizens would come into the city and gather in the vast plazas for religious observations and rituals held at the top of the temple-pyramids. The cities also contained ceremonial ball courts and the palaces of the ruling elite.



Palenque

The Maya, who believed their kings were descended from Balam, the jaguar god, lived in independent theocratic city-states. They believed that their hereditary rulers and their gods were interdependent, the rulers needing the gods to give them life, food, and military success, the gods needing rulers to provide them with nourishment secured through blood sacrifice. They believed that the gods created the forms of human beings with maize and water then gave their own blood to bring humans to life (Gardner's *Art through the Ages* 9<sup>th</sup> ed., 509). The responsibility of kings, consequently, is to replace the blood of the gods with human blood. The failure to do so would result in the death of the gods, the cessation of the movement of the planets, and the end of all life. Blood was procured for the gods in religious rituals involving **bloodletting** and **human sacrifice**.

### Bloodletting:



**A Bloodletting Rite:** limestone lintel from Yaxchilán, Mexico, ca. 725. This is one in a series of carvings by the sculptor who has been dubbed "the Cookie Cutter Master," because after the outlines of the design were drawn on the stone, the background was cut away and the details were incised, leaving an essentially flat projection. As in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian art, we have the combination of text and image – a common feature in Mayan art – and the text records the date as the equivalent of October 28, 709. The highly formalized images show "King Shield Jaguar, with the shrunken head of a sacrificial victim in his feathered crown, holding a flaming torch over his principal wife, Lady Xoc, who kneels, pulls a cord knotted with thorns through her perforated tongue to draw blood which drips on to strips of paper that will be burnt and thus transmitted to the gods" (Honour and Fleming, *The Visual Arts, A History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 479). Note the wealth of detail shown in the woman's patterned robe, her intricate jade jewelry, and her elaborate headdress. The importance of the ritual is communicated to us through the rigid profile stance of the king as well as the composite view of Lady Xoc. The facial profiles allow us to see the typical facial features found in Mayan art: a slanting forehead, a receding chin, and a prominent nose.





**Human Sacrifice:** (see also *Bird Jaguar Taking a Prisoner, Yaxchilán, ca 775*)

Obtaining sacrificial victims was the primary cause for warfare among the Mayan city-states during the first few centuries of the Classic Period. As environmental degradation and deforestation reduced the ability of the farmers to support the ruling class, wars also began to be fought over land. This on-going warfare would ultimately lead to the decline of the Maya as it increased their vulnerability to conquest by outsiders.

**Bonampak mural fresco, ca 800.**

"Bonampak," the name of the city most famous for its murals, is the Mayan word meaning "painted walls." Like Mayan sculpture and Egyptian tomb painting, the murals are a combination of text and image. The events shown in the series of murals took place in 790-791, illustrating the ceremonies through which the new king ascends the throne. This mural shows the requisite sacrifice of prisoners. As is common in art expressing social hierarchies, the higher the rank of the person depicted, the more formal the portrayal. The new king is clearly the focal point of the composition, occupying the greatest amount of space, with his royal staff and his magnificent headdress of quetzal feathers, in the center of the top row. He is the only figure shown in the ultra-formal composite stance. The highest-ranking nobles, all facing him, are arranged symmetrically around him on the same level. Their profile stances and their gazes directed toward the king underscore his importance. At the bottom level are lower-ranking nobles. Their position beneath the other nobles, as well as farther from the king, along with their less elaborate costumes, communicate their lesser status. At first glance, their stances also appear to be profile, like those above, but on closer inspection, we see several in more natural, less formal positions, talking to one another, looking around, or assuming a combatant pose. The sacrificial victims, clearly the lowest ranking individuals in the scene, are shown in the least formal poses, asymmetrically arranged on the two steps beneath the king. One, as if begging for mercy, kneels beneath the king, who completely ignores him. Another appears to have passed out, while the victim on the far left is in the process of having his fingernails removed. Others, to whom that has already been done, look numbly at the blood dripping from their fingers. Their human gestures and realistic responses to their predicament are in stark contrast to the implacable formality of the king and nobles above them.



Warfare among the Mayan city-states left them vulnerable to conquest by the Toltecs, under whose influence and control the Maya would build post-Classic structures such as Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula. The Maya were the first people Cortez and his men met when they landed near Tulum in 1519, and there are two million Maya still living in the Yucatán and Central America today, centuries after most of their monuments disappeared beneath the jungle.

## The Post-Classic Period (900 – 1520)

### The Aztecs

The Toltecs were dominant in the Valley of Mexico and the Yucatán from about 900 – 1200, but as their power declined, the Aztecs gradually assumed their role of dominance in central Mexico. They had been nomads in the north, wandering in search of the home promised to them by their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and hummingbird god of war. He had revealed to them that they should not settle until they had spotted his sign for them, an eagle perched on a prickly pear. By 1370, they had spotted that sight on an island in Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico. They immediately set up



permanent residence, constructing the remarkable city of Tenochtitlán in the middle of Lake Texcoco, a city traversed by canals and connected to the mainland by causeways. Because the Aztecs believed that their mission was to spread the cult of Huitzilopochtli, they gradually came to dominate not only the immediate and surrounding areas but a vast empire stretching hundreds of miles to the Maya-inhabited Yucatán. In the process, they so alienated the peoples they conquered by demanding huge numbers of sacrificial victims that when Cortez landed, he found these conquered peoples ready allies against the Aztecs.

Two of the key monuments created by the Aztecs for the Temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City) refer to the story of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. The mother goddess, Coatlicue (kwat LEE kway), a manifestation of the earth, who had already given birth to her daughter the moon, Coyolxauhqui, and her many sons, the stars, was sweeping one day on the Mountain of the Serpent. As she swept, a feather came to rest in her bosom. At that moment she became pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. On learning that her mother was pregnant, the moon, Coyolxauhqui, approached her brothers, the stars, and tells them that since their mother had shamed them, they should kill her. They agree, but as they march toward her, one of the brothers runs ahead to warn his unborn baby brother. When the army arrives, Coyolxauhqui cuts her mother's head off, killing her. At that moment, Huitzilopochtli springs from her neck, fully grown and fully armed. He severs Coyolxauhqui's head and throws her down the mountainside. As she tumbles down, her arms and legs fall off as well. He then attacks his brothers the stars, scattering and destroying them. The story is interpreted as a teleological account of the phases of the moon and the victory of the brighter light, the sun, over the lesser lights, the moon and stars. Since Huitzilopochtli is the patron god of the Aztecs, it anticipates their victory over their conquered peoples, as well. The story also illustrates the theme that runs throughout Mesoamerican religion and art, that in order to have life, there must also be death.





**Coatlicue (Lady of the Skirt of Serpents)**, 15<sup>th</sup> century, 8'6". Probably the best-known Aztec sculpture, this shows the mother goddess just after her head has been severed and her son Huitzilopochtli has sprung from her neck. Serpents, the Mesoamerican symbol for flowing blood, appear all over this work. The heads of two serpents, seen in profile, face each other where her head would have been, creating a fearsome tusked mask. Her pendulous breasts, symbolizing the nurturing powers of the earth, are covered with a necklace of severed hands and excised hearts, alluding to ritual sacrifice. Her skirt is alive with writhing snakes, referring not only to the blood that accompanies birth but to menstrual blood as well. Everything symbolizes sacrifice; everything makes the point that death is a necessary precursor to life. Spanish accounts from the time of Cortés describe this sculpture in the Huitzilopochtli's temple, encrusted with blood and jewels. Since the temple was at the top of a pyramid, this signifies the top of the Mountain of the Serpent on which Coatlicue's sacrifice and death accompanied Huitzilopochtli's birth. This sculpture would have been one of the last things seen by victims after ascending the pyramid stairs before they were laid on the sacrificial altar. After the Spaniards

conquered the Aztecs, they destroyed the temples, using the stones to construct the downtown cathedral that stands next to the archeological site of Tenochtitlán today. When additional work was being done on the cathedral in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this sculpture was discovered. It so frightened the workers that they buried it again. It remained covered until just the past few decades, when Tenochtitlán was excavated.

**Coyolxauhqui**, 15<sup>th</sup> century, 11' diameter.

While the sculpture of Coatlicue was at the top of the stairway in the Temple of Huitzilopochtli, this massive stone disk representing the corpse of his sister was placed at the bottom of the stairs. The parade of victims up the stairs would have paused by this terrifying image. Coyolxauhqui is depicted as lying crumpled at the base of the Mountain of the Serpent, her severed head and limbs clearly indicated as separate from her torso. Serpents knotted around her arms and legs again symbolize her flowing blood, and the slow, turning rhythm suggests her tumbling down the mountainside. This recalls the work of the Mayan Cookie Cutter Master, with its flat



projection, background carved out, and incised details. During the construction of the subway system in downtown Mexico City in 1978, electrical workers digging in the cellar beneath a bookstore near the Cathedral uncovered this sculpture. Its discovery confirmed the exact location of Tenochtitlán and resulted in the excavation of the Aztec city for the first time.

