

THE GREAT EXHIBIT

Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico Mesoamerica's Oldest Civilization

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A magnificent exhibit of Olmec objects was recently inaugurated at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery. In my opinion, the showing demonstrates something fundamental: that Olmec objects are in themselves works of art, just as are those from other civilizations at their zenith. The National Gallery then, is hosting an art exhibit, in which for the first time Olmec pieces are being presented as *objets d'art*. The exhibition confirms once again

the receptivity of Western peoples to diverse expressions of art.

This is the second time the National Gallery has hosted an exhibit of pre-Columbian art. In 1983 it housed the "Art of Aztec Mexico. Treasures of Tenochtitlan" exhibit, a first class presentation of Mexica art. "Art of Aztec Mexico" was characterized by the exceptional sculptures done by Mexica artisans and the carved stone by masters from the provinces ruled by the great Aztec Empire.

The new showing, in a unique homage to the arts of ancient Mexico, presents Olmec sculpture, the oldest style in Mesoamerica.

The collection is of such high quality that some of the monumental pieces (transported from museums in Villahermosa, Tabasco, and Xalapa, Veracruz, as well as from the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City) grace the enormous, geometric spaces of the East Wing of the U.S. National Gallery.

It is a recognition of the first artists of Mesoamerica, an artistic validation of the objects created by the ancient Mexicans who mainly inhabited the southern part of the Gulf Coast, what is now eastern Tabasco state and southern Veracruz state. Monumental sculptures were carved in this region, called by Mexican scholars the "metropolitan area" and by U.S. researchers the "climax area" or "central area."

The "*Olmec*" concept, as defined by Beyer, arose out of Marshall Saville's comparisons (1927) of several small figures and one with colossal-sized features: the idol of San Martín Pajapan.¹ From this analysis, he deduced that they shared a series of common features: "a human body with a feline head...slanted eyes...long canine teeth...a jutting upper lip." This described a newly identified style that, for reasons of fate and history, was called Olmec.

In the late 1920s, on the basis of these stylistic considerations, the find was categorized as a separate culture,



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¹ Beyer, H. "Nota Bibliográfica sobre Tribes and Temples de F. Blom y O. La Farge," *El México Antiguo*, Vol. 2, México, 1927, pp. 305-313.



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older than the other Mesoamerican cultures known at the time: including the Teotihuacan culture, the Mayas, the Huastecs, the Totonacs, the Zapotecs, the Mixtecs, the Toltecs and the Mexicas.

The first archeological expeditions in the Olmec area of the Gulf Coast were carried out in the 1930s. Their findings spurred the establishment of the "Olmec" concept after a round table discussion of experts in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, in 1942.

However, for 20 years, the Olmec world was the object of only isolated studies. It was not until 1965, with the work of U.S. archeologist Michael D. Coe in San Lorenzo, Veracruz, and his studies of the figurative ceramics

of Mexico's high plateau, that the topic came once again into the limelight.

With that impetus, a conference on the Olmecs was held in 1968 in Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, with the participation of distinguished archeologists, among them the Mexican researcher Ignacio Bernal.

More than 20 years have passed, and publications about the Olmecs have been few. Recently, archeologists Ann Cyphers (of the UNAM's Institute for Anthropological Studies) and Rebeca González (of the National Institute of Anthropology and History) reported new finds. Cyphers' discoveries in San Lorenzo, Veracruz, include several monumental sculptures, among them the tenth colossal head. González offers

us a first: a map of old La Venta, Tabasco,² a correct interpretation of the Olmec "city" *par excellence* and important colossal sculptures. Both scholars' studies change our previous perception of Olmec buildings and monumental sculpture.

Other important discoveries include the wood carvings from El Manatí, found by Mexicans Ponciano Ortiz and María del Carmen Rodríguez. Also noteworthy are the finds of archeologist Guadalupe Martínez Donjuan at the surprising site in Teopantecuanitlán, Guerrero.

² La Venta, Tabasco, is one of the best preserved and most representative Olmec cities. [Editor's Note.]



Altar-shaped thrones were the symbols of power of the rulers.

Los Olmecas de Mesoamérica (The Olmecs of Mesoamerica) is a series of essays about “the Olmec problem,” published by City Bank de México in 1994. This book provides not only a general overview of Olmec questions in their “metropolitan” area, but also follows the tracks of their style through Chiapas, Oaxaca, the Mexican high plateau and the highlands of Guatemala.

Due to the difficulty and risk involved in transporting these impressive pieces, only 17 of the nearly 300 known to exist were moved. On previous occasions, the colossal heads of San Lorenzo, Veracruz, have traveled to other exhibitions in Houston, Paris, New York and Venice. The National Gallery showing has two colossal heads and 15 monumental sculptures. Of the latter, 13 are normally housed in the museum in Xalapa, Veracruz; in Ta-

basco state’s La Venta Museum Park and Pellicer Museum; and in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

The showing in the National Gallery boasts a total of 122 pieces, both large and small, fashioned 3,000 years ago by the people whom we today call the Olmecs.

Olmec sculpture, both monumental and small, is extraordinarily vigorous. Of the small pieces, the sublime jade carvings are outstanding. The magnificent terra-cotta figures are included among the sculptures, since they use volume contained in space. In this small universe, human actions are transmitted with greater vivacity.

I have said elsewhere that Olmec sculpture, in its different materials, is basically homo-centrist: the human figure is the main object. But man can be represented as different animal

forms (jaguar, eagle, monkey, serpent), becoming a supernatural being. The human figure is the one of earthbound actions, perhaps those of the rulers, depicted in the colossal heads. The animal forms are deities: the gods of Olmec origins, of the earth, the rain, lightning and many other forces that to this people were supernatural and incomprehensible.

The Olmec universe comes down to us—within limitations—through the work they left us. This people flourished between 1200 B.C. and 300 B.C., dominated by an elite, priestly and governing caste. They left their portraits in the colossal heads and the rituals of their beliefs in many other sculptures. The Olmecs, as seen through their extraordinary works of art, laid the foundations for art throughout Mesoamerica, establishing the cultural roots of the ancient Mexican world. ❧