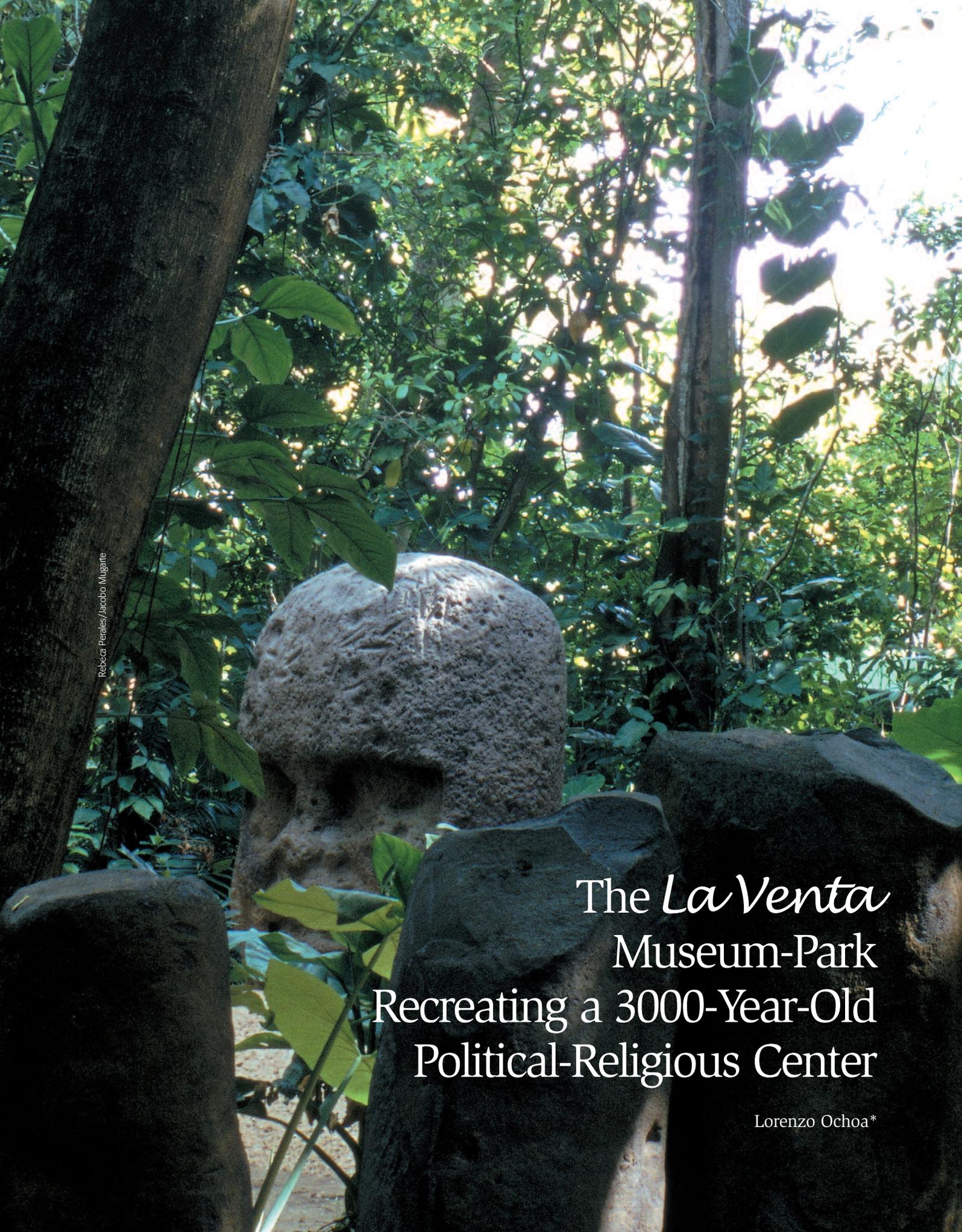


Rebeca Perales/Jacobo Mugarte



The *La Venta*  
Museum-Park  
Recreating a 3000-Year-Old  
Political-Religious Center

Lorenzo Ochoa\*



Monument 4, La Venta.



Monument 68. Unfinished head.



Monument 1, La Venta.

Just by going through the heavy iron railing that leads into the La Venta Museum-Park in Villahermosa, time seems to come to a standstill. Behind us we leave the oppressive deafening noise of modernity. In its place is only the silence of the jungle interrupted by the sharp buzz of thousands of insects, the howl of the spider monkeys, the jaguar's long yawn, the badgers' scampering and the steps of the *tepezcuintles* (agouti paca) over the withered leaves, accompanied by the song of the birds and the swaying branches of the centuries-old silk-cotton trees, the cedars or the palms. Murmurs with prolonged silences that we are no longer used to, murmurs that guide us through the quiet flow of more than 3,000 years accumulated in the dozens of Olmec sculptures that loom out of the weeds here and there.

Inspired by the original idea that Carlos Pellicer conceived poetically in three dimensions in the 1950s, today's La Venta Museum-Park attempts to recreate the scenery of the jungle and water that this Tabascan poet thought existed at the original site where the sculptures on display came from, an environment missing only the swamps and mangroves.

In this way, using the natural environment of the Lagoon of Illusions, as Pellicer did in the early 1950s, different animals from the region and a broad variety of vegetation were introduced into the new museum and, with the freedom allowed a poet, mixed with others brought from far-off regions and latitudes.

Especially outstanding in this landscape, uncommon for a museum, are species that were and continue to be very important to the inhabitants of rural Tabasco and Mexico's Southeast: some used as construc-

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Photos by Elsie Montiel.



The La Venta Museum-Park attempts to recreate the scenery that its creator, Carlos Pellicer, thought existed at the original site.

tion materials, others as medicine, in addition to simple ornamental plants, fruit trees, or sacred plants. Trees destined for building houses and *cayucos* or dug-outs: cedar, *zapotillo*, pepper, *chicozapote*, elephant's ear tree, *maculí*, *guano*, *ramón*; those with medicinal uses like the trumpet tree, the *guácimo*, the gumbolimbo and avocado trees, the *cocoíte* and the *zapote de agua*. Ornamental species like the *guayacán*, *bromelias*, orchids, "elegant leaf" and the bird of paradise; fruit trees like the star apple, the *chicozapote*, the *nance* or the *jobo*; others that please the palate like cacao or those whose sap is in great demand for industry like rubber trees. Over all of these rules the centuries-old *ceiba*, or silk-cotton tree, a sacred tree *par excellence* among the ancient Mesoamerican peoples.

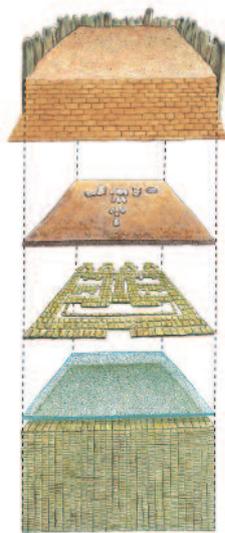
Although today the scenery in the thousand-year-old place where the political-religious center of La Venta was erected is totally different, our imaginations let us in to the tropical jungle. We should point out, however, that what we know today makes it obvious that the environment recreated in the museum park is not what originally existed on the site where these monuments are from. There, although most were out in

the open, they most certainly were not erected amidst the vegetation. However, the museum's discourse, which amalgamates archaeological ambiance and natural scenery, serves as an underpinning for the relationship of this ancient culture and the spectator.

In this way, after advancing only a few meters, we find a room where old, faded photographs introduce us, not to Olmec history, but to some of the first explorations done at the site by researchers from the National Geographic Society.

These faded photographs also allow us to imagine the way the monuments were recovered and later taken to the place picked by Carlos Pellicer: a large tract of land located on the banks of the Lagoon of Illusions. In 1957,

Carlos Pellicer wrote a letter to the director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Eusebio Dávalos Hurtado, saying, "To the extent that the limited space (seven hectares) allows me, [I have managed to] reproduce as far as possible the order in which the little figures were originally found." And although it could not preserve the same arrangement that they



The jaguar mosaics were originally part of underground offerings.



Jaguar mosaic.

had had in La Venta, once it had achieved its goal, finally, on March 4, 1958, the museum-park opened its doors to the public.

But, I return to the center of the introductory room, where there is a model of La Venta, which reproduces to scale the A, B, C, G and Stirling Acropolis architectural complexes and the approximate location of the different monuments. But the builders of this political-religious center were not

only thinking of the earthly world; they also explained the cosmos to themselves. Under the surface is the underworld, seen in the tombs and their offerings, which can be observed through a series of windows on the lower sides of the model, showing the approximate location. The tomb made of basalt columns, Monument 7, can be seen through one of these windows, and we will be able to see it in all its glory later during the visit through the museum-park. Thanks to this model, the visitor can see that the massive offerings and the mosaics with the stylized jaguar faces were not located in open spaces like they are in the museum-park, but rather were imagined hidden, as an offering to the earth.

Distributed here and there, replicas of different sculptures from the same political-religious center—the originals are in assorted museums—illustrate the magnificence of the Olmec visual arts. Also there, the original remains of an aqueduct and an enormous basalt receptacle narrate wordlessly how they fulfilled a more sacred than utilitarian function. Samples of hatchets carved in sandstone and green stone, clay objects, ceramics for daily use and for special occasions, together with tools made of different kinds of stone and a few drawings of maps and photographs of the landscape introduce us to the fascinating world of Olmec archaeology, at the same time that they prepare us for admiring each of the monumental sculptures.

As we leave the room, everything seems to change. From out of the weeds, a wanderer or ambassador seems to emerge, carved in bas-relief, inviting the visitor to look at parts of a codex created from 700-600 B.C. to 400 B.C. A dynamically moving figure, preceded by a foot-shaped hieroglyph, he is carrying a flag in his left hand. In front of him, a circle, a bird's head and a three-leaf clover seem to announce "proto-writing." In this monument, the intellectual complexi-

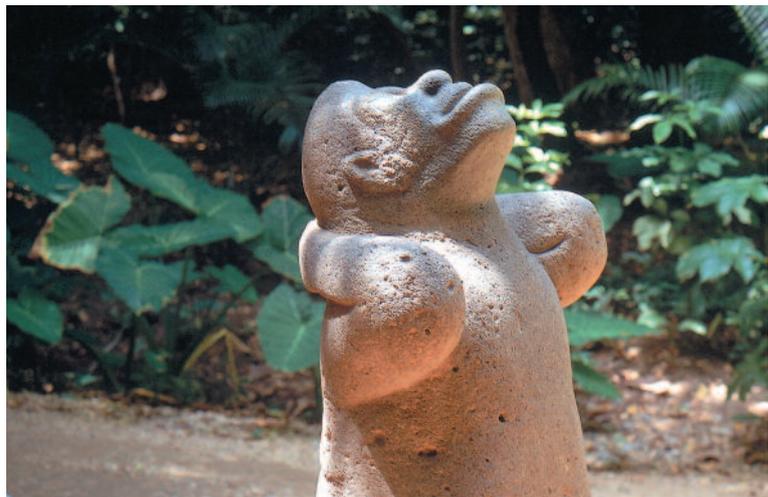
ty achieved by the Olmecs in their last phases in La Venta is evident. There, underneath the immensity of a silk-cotton tree, the sculpture known as The Grandmother, carved between 700-600 B.C. and 400 B.C., seems to flash a playful glance at the visitor. From there on, the archaeological monuments protected by the museum-park's ever-green jungle crisscross the weeds, rattan and vines.

During the visit, a symphony of textures, colors and stelas, altars, colossal heads, thrones and freestanding sculptures, some unfinished, is unleashed. Understanding the role the mosaics made of pale green serpentine played in the sculptors' thinking is beyond our imagination. The row of monolithic basalt columns which in the original La Venta site formed the perimeter of a sacred space, made of the same material with which they built a tomb that, like the other monuments, lies in the visitor's path, makes us ask about the profound significance they all embody. The stelas, for example, are a late innovation in Olmec art. They mark a stylistic change, both technical and in iconographic language. They hold a political-religious message rendered in bas-relief scenes. One of them, erroneously classified as Monument 63, includes a symbol: the shark, related to the highest level of the political-ideological sphere. Eroded by the sand that covered it for 3,000 years, just like Stela 2, this is from the last Olmec stage of the political-religious center, dating from between 700-600 B.C. to 400 B.C.

What we now call altars were really not used as the name implies in Western thinking. And though the representations found on these monuments may be quite different, the content of the central cosmic discourse is reflected in almost all of them: figures that emerge to communicate the interior world with the exterior world through a cave. These monuments were considered so important that the oldest were carved in the first cen-

turies that La Venta was inhabited, around the years 1200 to 1000 B.C. and they continued to be made up until the very last, in 400 B.C.

Considered chronologically, the giant heads demonstrate the Olmecs' genius as sculptors, both because of their mastery of carving techniques in the hard stone and their high artistic quality, and also because of their ideological content. But they did not always achieve their goal: in some cases, such as with Monument 68, when they were just beginning to delineate some of the features, the stone was severely cracked and the work had to be abandoned. The colossal



Freestanding sculptures have profound religious meaning.



The introductory room with the model of the La Venta site.



Altars reflect a cosmic discourse.

heads, with their almond-shaped eyes, thick lips and wide, flat noses, are a challenge to interpret. But, is it feasible to think, because of the way they were arranged in the political-religious center's holy ground, that perhaps they represent the protecting ancestors, dead rulers?

One trait that until now distinguishes La Venta's inhabitants is the custom of making massive serpentine offerings. They are deposits of several layers of colored clay on top of which they made a clay mosaic of the face of a jaguar or another fantastic being, which they

covered with another layer of colored clay. These offerings, which can still be seen, were placed in such a way that only those who made them knew about their location; the rest of the Olmec people ignored their existence.

We can interpret the political-religious content of many other monuments. The basalt tomb, the thrones, the freestanding sculptures have profound religious meaning. We cannot look at all of them here. They remain in our imagination, protected by the perennially green jungle, mingling with the La Venta Museum-Park's weeds, rattan and



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