

The Donald Cordry ARCHEOLOGICAL COLLECTION

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One of the most significant collections owned by the University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUCA) is undoubtedly the one U.S. ethnographer Donald Cordry donated in 1982. The collection boasts over 1,000 masks, puppets, jewelry, textiles and other items, including 289 archeological pieces from different Mexican pre-Hispanic sites, particularly from the so-called Western cultures.

Mexico's West includes the states of Sinaloa, Nayarit, Colima, Jalisco, Michoacán and part of the states of Guanajuato and Guerrero. Its ancient inhabitants were outstanding artisans who worked with great skill in shell, hard stone and, in the later period, metals. They distinguished themselves with their splendid artistic creations which, although small, naive and schematic, were nevertheless not without charm and beauty. Their contribu-

tions and influence on subsequent local cultures were very important.

These anonymous artists have been traced mainly to the pre-classical and early classical periods. Different archeological excavations and finds have made it possible, with certain reservations, to establish when their cultures flourished. The majority of these finds were pieces from tombs and burial grounds. Sites like El Opeño, Chupícuaro, Etzatlán and Los Ortices in western Mexico brought forth an abundance of figurines, vessels, flutes, *ocarinas* [a simple mouth organ], whistles, bones, striates, necklaces, bracelets, earrings and noisemakers, among other things.

The Chupícuaro culture, one of most influential among the ancient peoples of northern Mexico, had its greatest impact in the pre-classical period. According to German archeologist Otto Schöndube, "The Chupícuaro culture is not the only pre-classical culture which flourished in the West, but data pertaining to oth-

ers is very scarce and difficult to interpret. Many figurines differing slightly from the Chupícuaro style but with various similarities have been found in the highlands of Michoacán. This indicates that the overall archeological picture of the pre-classical period in the West is far from clear and that a series of cultures which may or may not have been related to Chupícuaro's were either its contemporaries or existed slightly later."¹

The classical horizon of the cultures of the West is situated in the states of Jalisco, Colima and Nayarit. Its art work follows, in a certain fashion, the thrust of the pre-classical period, although it is freer and more evolved. The many clay figures discovered reveal a great deal about the different social and ceremonial elements that surrounded these artisans, who lived in the first six centuries of our era. Human and animal

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¹ "Culturas del Occidente de México," in *Artes de México*, no. 119, year XVI, 1969.



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Photos by Arturo Píera

1. Zoomorphic figure in the shape of a bird.
2. This seated, whistling male figure has a deformed spine and cranium.
3. *Chinesca* pre-classical figurine with a flat, oval head.
4. Female pre-classical figurine with prominent breasts and genitals.

forms abound, representing their ideas, tastes and beliefs.

Despite the fact that these communities were contemporary and geographically close together, archeologists have been able to differentiate their artistic styles, specifying that Colima's style is more elegant and realistic. Its ceramics and figurines are monochromatic, predominantly in shades of red and brown; they are modeled and decorated with *pastillaje*² and inci-

² A technique used in pottery decoration. The potter creates a design by applying small daubs of clay to the piece.

sions. The pieces from Nayarit are notable for their rich use of multiple colors to decorate their main detail work; outstanding among them are the figures called *chinescas* and the Ixtlán variety. Finally, the Jalisco style is the least known and can only be distinguished on the basis of their slight similarity to some pieces found in the area of the Nevado de Colima mountain.

Finds of quite good pieces, both in quality and richness, have been made in Guerrero state also. Some specialists even consider this area the birthplace of Olmec sculpture. This style has been given the name *chontal* in honor of the people who lived there. A goodly number of very stylized, erect human figures and masks with geometric features have been found there.

The Cordry collection has pieces of great aesthetic and testimonial value which beautifully exemplify the craft heritage left by these ancient Mexican peoples: for example, the clay figurines of female forms of the Colima type, or the animal-shaped vessels. The oval windlasses and seals decorated with geometric designs are also noteworthy.

Particularly interesting are the representations of human beings with deformed crania and bodies. These figures usually have feminine bodies with short arms and legs, large bellies and prominent breasts and genitals. Archeologists have classified these figures as pathological. Otto Schön-dube writes, "They may have made these figures to magically keep illness away, or perhaps they thought sick people had been touched by the gods

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or the forces of nature and deserved special treatment.”³

Donor Donald Cordry was a roving ethnographer and artist. Born in Detroit in the 1930s, he wandered the eastern United States with a traveling puppet show that used puppets of his own manufacture. In that period he visited Mexico for the first time, staying in Taxco to paint. He made long trips through the state of Guerrero to study the folk culture of indigenous dances, and it was there that he began to acquire masks. After a brief stay, he returned home to become a researcher at the New York American Indian Museum. In 1937, under the auspices of the Heye Foundation and Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology, he made six expeditions in search of objects from the Cora and Huichol communities.

In the 1940s, Cordry was in permanent contact with Mexican culture. He began to collect textiles, looms, spindles and other objects. In 1942 he took up residence with his wife in the city of Oaxaca and opened a crafts design workshop. Toward the

³ Ibid.



Seated male figure with deformed cranium from Nayarit or Jalisco.

end of the decade, he moved to Mexico City seeking to contact other specialists in archeology and ethnography. Between 1950 and 1970, he made many trips throughout Mexico to do research; a product of this period was his *Mexican Indian Costumes*, published in Austin in 1967. Three years later he began his fascinating study of the use and origin of pre-Hispanic masks, which he finished in

1977. After suffering several strokes and heart attacks, he died in his Cuernavaca home in 1978.

The Office for the Administration of UNAM Patrimony is delighted to be able to use this forum to inform the public about this important archeological collection, an example of the impact of the pre-Hispanic art from Mexico’s West, and an important part of the university’s cultural heritage. ❧