

# Prehispanic Art of Mesoamerica

7<sup>th</sup> Grade Curriculum

**de Young \**  
**\ Legion of Honor**  
fine arts museums  
of san francisco

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Written by Sheila Pressley, Director of Education, and Emily K. Doman Jennings, Research Assistant, with support from the Education Department of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, © 2005. 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade curriculum development by Gail Siegel. Design by Robin Weiss Design. Edited by Ann Karlstrom and Kay Schreiber.

# Get Smart with Art @ the de Young

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## Get Smart with Art @ the de Young

*Get Smart with Art* is an interdisciplinary curriculum package that uses art objects as primary documents, sparking investigations into the diverse cultures represented by the collections at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Using works of art as the foundation of every lesson, each guide is designed to increase visual literacy, historical knowledge, and expository writing skills. In an effort to reduce the burden of teacher preparation time, historical texts are written at the reading level of the intended student audience.

The enclosed materials may be used in preparation for a museum visit or over the course of the school year. *Get Smart with Art* differs from previous curriculum series in that it is a “living” curriculum which the Education Department seeks to revise through teacher and student feedback. As part of the preliminary assessment of this project, we are conducting pre and post student interviews. If you would like to participate in this process or have any questions regarding the curriculum, please do not hesitate to contact the Education Department.

*Get Smart with Art* curricula is available in the following subject areas:

<b>1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>Learning to Look at Art</b>
<b>4<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>California History: Native American Culture and Westward Expansion</b>
<b>5<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>American History: Colonial – Revolution</b>
<b>6<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Ancient Western Civilizations</b>
<b>7<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>The Art of Africa and Mesoamerica</b>
<b>8<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>American History: Revolution – Reconstruction</b>
<b>9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Site in Sight</b>

To order these materials, please call 415. 750. 3522 or email [ejennings@famsf.org](mailto:ejennings@famsf.org)

# Prehispanic Art of Mesoamerica

## Introduction

Approximately one third of all Californians can trace their heritage to Mexico, Central America, or South America. Many of these Californians are direct heirs to the advanced cultures created in Mesoamerica before the invasion of the *conquistadores*. Mesoamerica was a cultural area that included modern day Mexico and northwestern Central America (Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua). This area was home to many great civilizations for over 3,000 years, from 1500 B.C. until the arrival of the Spanish in A.D. 1519. This guide will look at art from a few of these civilizations: Olmec, Teotihuacan, Maya, West Mexico, and Aztec. These civilizations were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse, but shared many similar beliefs and practices.

Special thanks to Dr. Mary Ellen Miller for generously reviewing and providing invaluable additions to these materials.

**GET SMART WITH ART  
7TH GRADE  
MESOAMERICA**

## **GETTING STARTED**

### **Part 1:**

#### **Building Background Knowledge and Developing Observational and Analytical Skills**

##### **Materials:**

- Maps of Central and South America and world maps (wall and text)
- Student resource packets developed from Oakland Unified School District website (see bibliography)
- Description of deYoung Mesoamerican Art Collection
- chart paper, overhead or chalkboard/erase board and writing utensils

**Time:** 30-45 minutes

##### **Class work:**

- Ask students to read background information on Mesoamerican art using DeYoung descriptions, texts, websites, reference and research materials. Review the geographical regions discussed in the curriculum guide. The teacher may also want to present some background information through a brief introductory lecture to the class.

- Brainstorm with class, using chart paper, overhead or writing board using these headings:

What we know so far about Mesoamerican art:

What questions we have/what we want to investigate:

### **Part 2**

#### **Sharpening observational/ visual skills and note taking-Preliminary viewing of The Mesoamerican Collection at the deYoung Museum**

##### **Materials:**

Writing utensils and Artifact Note taking worksheets (see Appendix A) for each

student

**Time:** 60 minutes

**Class work:**

If you have an LCD projector, use the DVD provided to introduce the objects to the class and review the meaning of each artifact.

If your classroom does not have computer availability, use the *Object Information Sheets*

and place them in different stations throughout the classroom. Hand out Artifact Note taking

Sheets to students and review these sheets with class. As students rotate through the stations, until all students have seen all artifacts and have taken notes about these objects.

\*This activity could be done in partners or teams of three.

**Part 3**

**Researching artifact and creating first draft of exhibit display**

**Materials:**

- research texts, website information, maps, art history books, history books
- notetaking materials
- scanner or photography materials for display
- art materials

**Time:** 90 minutes

**Class work:**

•Divide students into Museum Design Display teams, three students to a team. Assign one of the Mesoamerican exhibit artifacts to each team. Their task is to create an exhibit for that artifact. Using the Previewing the Artifact note taking sheet (see Appendix B), students jot down what they notice and what they wonder about the artifact. This process narrows the focus for their research and writing.

•Explain to your students that the deYoung is searching for an outstanding design display team. A competition will be held in your classroom and judges\*

(\*you and your class or invited guests from your school) will choose teams that are eligible for the competition based on the development of their exhibit and the tour they offer of the exhibit.

- Design displays for each team include written description of the artifact, photo or drawing of the artifact, and an oral presentation by the team about the artifact.
- Students then research information about their object and its importance to the collection.
- Students write a description of the artifact including its history, uses, materials, artist, cultural importance, factual information about the country of origin, relevance during historical time period, archeological facts, museum involvement (acquisition/preservation/donor). Teachers may want to use descriptions from DeYoung Museum catalogue as writing models for students. From the written description, the audience should understand the relevance of this artifact to the Mesoamerican Collection. Using the writing process, students read their descriptions aloud to each other, checking for coherence, clarity of ideas and information, and logical order of information presented. After drafts are completed, students edit for grammatical and spelling correctness.
- Students design their display using their writing, artwork, labels, etc.

## **Part 4**

### **Presentation Preparation and Rehearsal**

Materials: All materials necessary for mounting Design Display Exhibits in classroom, such as scissors, tape/glue, yarn, paper, stencils, tagboard, colored pencils, etc.

Time: 45 minutes

Class work:

- Students prepare and mount their museum exhibit for Design Display competition.
- Students prepare an outline for the oral presentation of their artifact exhibit. These presentations should take into consideration how to create interest about their artifact for the audience of judges. Students should then rehearse their presentations so that each team member knows what they will show and what

they will say. Review with students the pointers of a good oral presentation, including use of voice modulation, use of eye contact, enunciation, etc.

## **Part 5**

### **Presentations to judges**

Students present their Design Display Team Artifact Exhibit to the panel of judges. Presentations are judged on quality of written material, oral presentation, and design display. Rubric for judging can be created by the class.

### **DeYoung Visit**

Students are ready to enjoy a real-life tour of the Mesoamerican Exhibit at the deYoung Museum. Arrange a time to take students to the deYoung Museum. After the tour at the deYoung Museum, ask students to individually write up a summary of their tour and a comparison between their classroom exhibit and the deYoung exhibit. They can discuss their ideas with their groups first. What were the differences? What were the similarities? How would they change their own exhibit after seeing the deYoung exhibit?

### **Extension:**

Art activities related to the Mesoamerican collection at the deYoung Museum can be found at [www.thinker.org](http://www.thinker.org). If collaboration between social studies, language arts, and art instructors is a possibility, the classroom exhibit could feature the visual and written work of the students rather than the art objects from the deYoung Museum.

- Students could create a museum catalogue of their exhibits, including their written and pictorial work for the competition.
- Students could create a virtual tour of their exhibits from the competition using a variety of technology programs such as a slide show.
- Students could invite other classes, parents, or administrators for a docent tour of their exhibits.

# Artifact Note Taking Chart

<b>Object Name:</b>	<b>Main Ideas:</b> Take notes on the significant details of the person, role, when, where and function of this piece.	<b>In your own words:</b> Put these notes in your own words.
<b>Who/What</b>		
<b>Role</b>		
<b>When/ Where</b>		

<b>Function</b>		
<b>Other information: <i>Materials and Details on Piece</i></b>		

**Appendix A**

## Previewing the Artifact

<b>I Notice</b> <i>Write down things you see in your artifact</i>	<b>I Wonder</b> <i>Write down questions you have about your artifact</i>

# Additional Reading

## 7<sup>th</sup> Grade

### Get Smart with Art @ the de Young

#### Fiction

1. Eboch, Chris. *The Well of Sacrifice*. Clarion, 1999. Mayan life comes alive as Eveningstar Macaw plots to avenge the death of her brother, Smoke Shell.
2. Kirwan, Anna. *Lady of Palenque: Flower of Bacal*. Scholastic, 2004. Maya princess Green Jay writes of her journey to meet King Fire Keeper, her future husband.

#### Non-fiction

3. Ackroyd, Peter. *Cities of Blood*. Dorling Kindersley, 2004. The gory and less lurid details of four ancient Mesoamerican civilizations are covered in this colorful volume.
4. Arnold, Caroline. *City of the Gods: Mexico's Ancient City of Teotihuacán*. The story of a complex community that was abandoned in A.D. 700.
5. Bierhorst, John. *The Monkey's Haircut: and Other Stories Told by the Maya*. W. Morrow, 1986. A small gathering of tales, myths and legends told by ancient and modern Maya.
6. Cory, Steve. *Daily Life in Ancient and Modern Mexico City*. Lerner, 1999. The city during the time of the Aztecs and present day is discussed.
7. Gifford, Douglas. *Warriors, Gods and Spirits from Central and South American Mythology*. An illustrated introduction to the mythology of the various Mesoamerican societies.
8. Glubok, Shirley. *The Art of Ancient Mexico*. Harper & Row, 1968. An introduction to the art of the Aztec, Mixtec, Toltec, Olmec, and Zapotec civilizations.
9. Mann, Elizabeth. *Tikal*. Mikaya, 2002. The story of one of the great Mayan cities, from its humble beginnings to its golden age.
10. Marrin, Albert. *Aztecs and Spaniards: Cortés and the conquest of Mexico*. Atheneum, 1986. A historical perspective of the Aztecs and their origins, followed by the arrival of the "conquistadores" in their world and the devastation that ensued.
11. Meyer, Caroline. *The Mystery of the Ancient Maya*. Simon and Schuster, 1995. A look into the civilization that faded into a veil of mystery.
12. Sharer, Robert J. *Daily Life in Maya Civilization*. Greenwood, 1996. This in-depth book covers several thousand years of Mayan civilization.
13. Steedman, Scott. *The Aztec News*. Candlewick, 2001. Wit and humor abound in this mock newspaper about Aztec life.
14. Wyborny, Sheila. *The Aztec Empire*. Blackbirch, 2003. Learn about the Aztec society, including their interesting medical advances.

I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Green Stone Mask

OLMEC CULTURE, MEXICO

Age:

Around 3,000 years old

Size:

About 6 inches tall

Who am I?

"I am a proud Olmec."



## Most of what we know

about ancient Mesoamerica has been discovered by **archaeologists**. Working deep in the jungle, they find objects and treasures that have been buried for thousands of years. Imagine the thrill of discovering an object such as this mask! After weeks of working in the hot and humid jungle, you spot something green and shiny. With great care you brush away the dirt from the object, photograph its placement in the ground, and ever so carefully lift it into the light. You look into the hard green face. Is this a portrait of an inhabitant of Mesoamerica's first great **civilization**? Could this be a representation of an **Olmec** nobleman staring back at you after 3,000 years in the ground?

**archaeologist:** a person who finds and studies physical objects from past human life and culture. Objects from the past tell us what life was like at a different time in history.

**civilization:** a complex society that has a stable food supply, specialization of labor, a system of government, different social levels (including the elite), and a highly developed culture that includes art, architecture, religion, music, and laws. Frequently, civilizations also have a system of writing.

**Olmec:** a civilization in ancient Mesoamerica



Although we do not know if this mask **represented** an actual Olmec person, we do know that it was made by an Olmec artist. Most

Olmec depictions of the human face share features similar to this mask: almond-shaped eyes, a down-turned mouth, and a wide nose.

Olmec culture dates from about 1200 to 400 B.C. and was centered in the fertile lands along the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to hunting and fishing, the Olmecs learned to clear land and farm the dense jungle. Farming led to a stable supply of food. People could stay in one place and eat well. As a result, populations grew and needed more organization and leadership. The Olmecs built the first pyramids in Mesoamerica, carved huge stone portraits of their rulers, and traded with other regions of Mesoamerica. They also created precious objects of jade and green stone like this mask.

The purpose of this mask is still a mystery. It may have been worn on a headdress or as a chest ornament.

All types of green stone were highly valued by the Olmecs. They believed that the color green represented healthy crops and water, the most important elements to a farming society. The Olmecs traded for serpentine, jade, and other green stones with people living in what is now Guatemala. There were no metal cutting tools used in ancient Mesoamerica. All of the carving and polishing of precious stone was done with ropes and sand or powdered rock. These materials were rubbed against the stone to create a smooth surface. This process took great skill, patience, and months of hard labor. The beautiful carving on this mask is the result of this difficult process.

Between 900 and 100 B.C., Olmec cities were destroyed and deserted. The great Olmec culture—the first high civilization in the Americas—grew weak and fell apart. No one can truly understand or explain the reasons for the end of the Olmec culture.

**represent:** to serve as a sign or symbol. For example, a red light is a common symbol that means “stop.”



This stone portrait of an Olmec ruler is five and a half feet tall. It is actually one of the smaller Colossal Heads! It is shown with a member of the archaeological crew who uncovered it after centuries in the ground. The ancient Olmec transported huge stones to their cities from quarries more than fifty miles away without the aid of draft animals or wheeled vehicles. (Monument 17, 1500–900 B.C., San Lorenzo, Veracruz, Mexico)



**Mask**

Olmec, Veracruz or Guerrero, Mexico  
 1200–800 B.C.  
 Serpentine  
 6 x 4½ x 2 in. (15.20 x 11.43 x 5.08 cm)  
 Museum purchase, Salinger Bequest Fund  
 72.43



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Wall Painting of an Elite Person

TEOTIHUACAN CULTURE,  
MEXICO

Age:

Around 1,400 years old

Size:

Almost 3 feet high and  
5 feet long

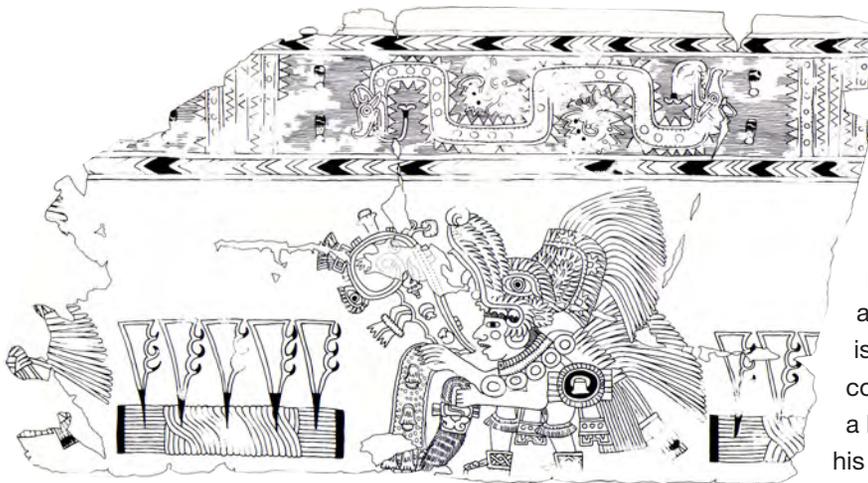
Who Am I?

“Together with my councilmen,  
I keep order over the vast  
population of this great city.”

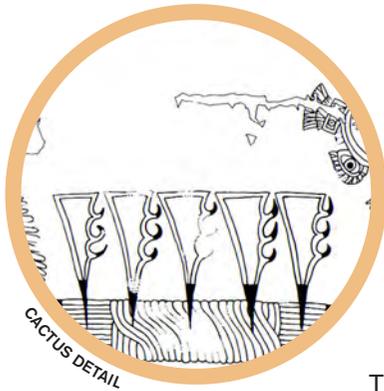


**Just as it is taking your eyes** a few moments to get used to looking at this painting, it took scholars

a long time to figure out what was shown here. Look closely at the painting and its associated line drawing. Notice the richly dressed male figure in profile. He wears a headdress with a large feathered animal nose and a piercing eye that grabs your attention. A large scroll, which is probably a prayer or a chant, comes out of his mouth. He holds a bag of incense in one hand. From his other hand a stream of liquid with red dots and flowers flows onto the earth. Could those red dots



This mural was broken into pieces and damaged when it was removed from its original location. Also, it was originally painted in pinks and reds, colors close to each other in value and not of high contrast. As a result, a line drawing is necessary for careful study of the image.



**represent** blood? On either side of the figure, sharp cactus leaves with thorns are set into bundles. The thorns may be connected to **ceremonies** in which people pierced their own flesh to offer blood for healthy crops. Above the figure is a double-headed snake.

This snake may be an earth monster that required human blood in order to produce successful crops. The male figure wears a headdress bordered with the highly-prized long green tail feathers of the **quetzal** bird and a necklace of conch shell. These materials come from other locations and show proof of long-distance trade.

This painting is from the great trading city of **Teotihuacan**. It is located in Central Mexico and dates from A.D. 1 to A.D. 650. In ancient times, Teotihuacan was the largest and most important city in all of Mesoamerica. It had an impressive ceremonial center with many temples and huge pyramids. At the height of its power and success, the population of Teotihuacan was 150,000 people.

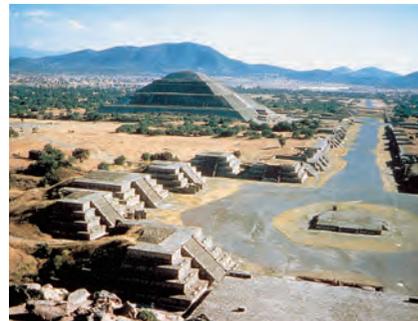
Unlike many Mesoamerican cities, Teotihuacan was probably ruled by a group of people—not by one all-powerful individual. Another unique fact about Teotihuacan is that most of the people lived in **adobe** apartments that were built by the government. It was the first city in the Americas to build permanent housing for its people. One-story rooms looked out onto central courtyards that provided fresh air and natural light. The walls of the courtyards were covered with beautiful **murals** such as this.

**represent:** to serve as a sign or symbol. For example, a red light is a common symbol that means “stop.”

**ceremony:** a formal act or series of acts that must be done a certain way. In ancient Mesoamerica, ceremonies were often related to religion.

**quetzal bird:** a rare bird found only in the tropical mountains of Guatemala

**Teotihuacan:** a city in ancient Mesoamerica



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The ceremonial center of Teotihuacan is dominated by the Pyramid of the Sun, seen in the distance of this photograph. It is as tall as a twenty-story building and was the tallest and largest structure in North America until the twentieth century.

**adobe:** sun-dried bricks made of mud and straw



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This photograph of the remains of an adobe apartment at Teotihuacan shows how the walls collapsed over time. Over 2,000 apartment compounds have been discovered. Each compound was occupied by family units of fifty to one hundred people. Both the wealthy and the poor lived in apartments with murals decorating their walls.

**mural:** a painting on a wall



**Mural with Maguey Ritual Figure**

Teotihuacan, Tlacuapaxco, Mexico

A.D. 600–750

Volcanic ash and mud backing, lime coating and red pigment  
 34½ x 60½ x 3 in. (87.6 x 153.7 x 7.6 cm)

Bequest of Harald J. Wagner

1985.104.4



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Wall Painting of a Feathered Serpent and Flowering Trees

TEOTIHUACAN CULTURE,  
MEXICO

Age:

Around 1,400 years old

Size:

Almost 2 feet high

Who am I?

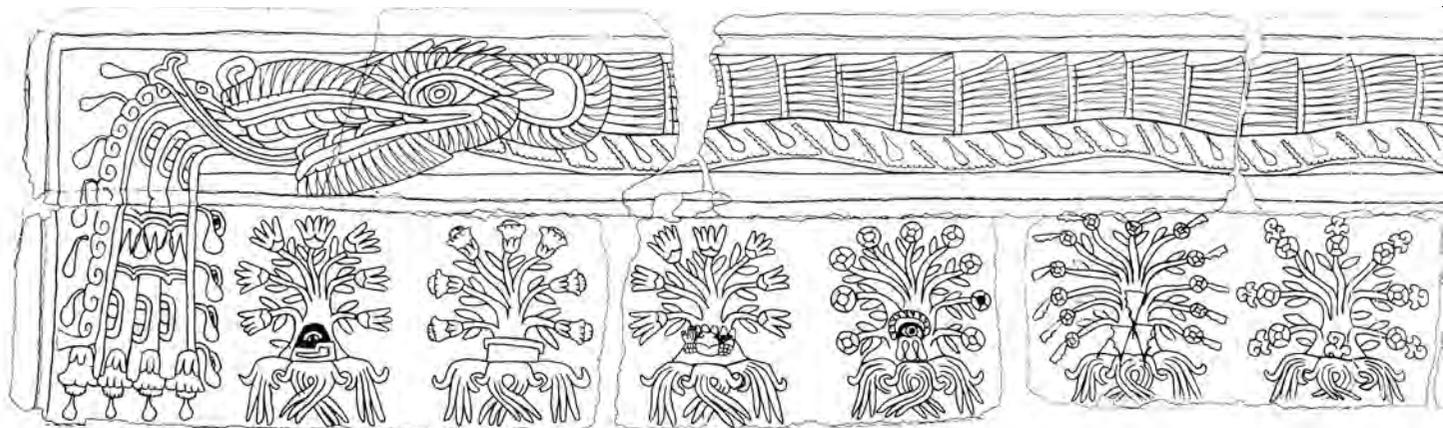
“I bring the rain to the dry lands of Teotihuacan.”



Museum staff had to work hard to reconstruct the Teotihuacan mural fragments in the early 1980s. There are many different types of museum careers that include caring for, teaching about, and displaying objects.

## Do you like puzzles?

Learning about ancient cultures can be similar to playing with puzzles. First we fit together what we know; then we try to form a clear picture. In some cases a piece of art is broken into many pieces. When the experts at the museum first saw this mural, it was in over thirty pieces! Putting it back together again was like working on a giant jigsaw puzzle.



This **Teotihuacan** mural shows a supernatural being, a water-giving snake with green feathers. Notice the stream of blue water that flows from the serpent's mouth to nourish the trees. Serpents—with their ability to shed their skin and transform themselves from old creatures into new ones—represented rebirth and renewal.

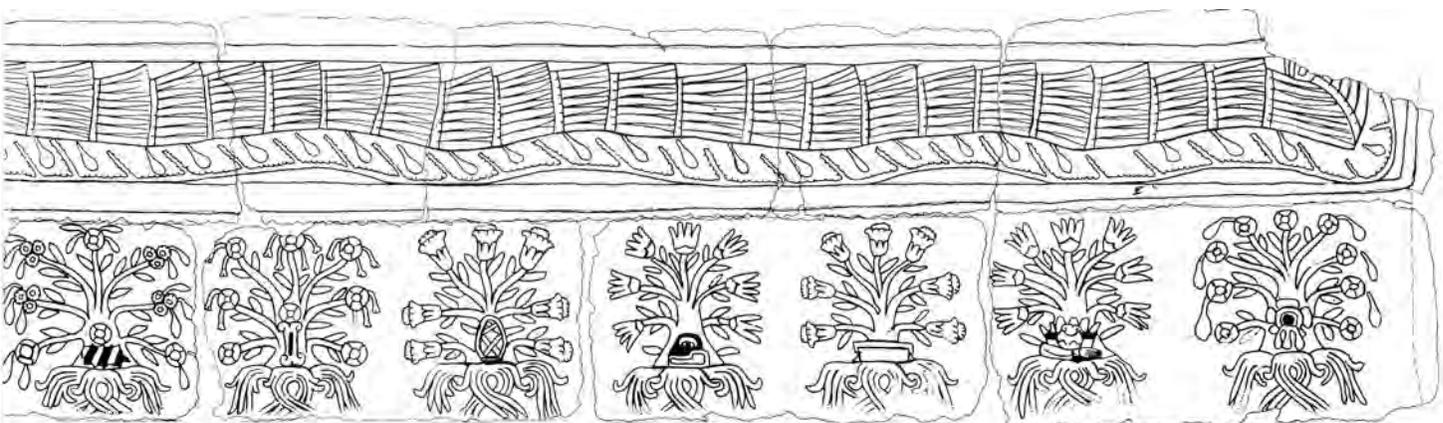


**Teotihuacan:**  
a city in ancient  
Mesoamerica

At the bottom of each tree, above the roots, are different **glyphs**. These glyphs are a form of picture writing. What they say, however, is still a mystery. So far only a small number of glyphs have been found at Teotihuacan. Because the people of Teotihuacan created a culture with so many great accomplishments, we think they must have had a complex writing system. Most of the writing was probably done on materials such as paper, wood, and cloth. These materials do not survive over time. As new discoveries are made at Teotihuacan, it is hoped that more examples of writing will be found. Perhaps some day scholars will fully understand the glyphs of Teotihuacan.

**glyph / hieroglyph:** a character in a system of writing

The full serpent mural is over thirteen feet long.





**Feathered Serpent and Flowering Trees Mural**

Teotihuacan, Techinantitla, Mexico

A.D. 600–750

Volcanic ash and mud backing, lime coating, and red, green, yellow, and blue pigments

23¼ x 159½ x 2¼ in. (59.1 x 405.1 x 5.7 cm)

Bequest of Harald J. Wagner

1985.104.1a–b



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Ceramic Incense Burner

TEOTIHUACAN CULTURE,  
MEXICO OR GUATEMALA

Age:

Around 1,500 years old

Size:

About 1½ feet tall

Who am I?

“I am the great goddess; I  
help to spread the religion of  
Teotihuacan across the lands”



**incense:** a material used to make a fragrant odor when burned. Copal (tree resin) was the most common incense used in Mesoamerica.

**Do you like the smell** of burning **incense**? This is a lid to an ancient incense burner. The burning of incense was, and still is, a part of religious rites in many cultures. Have you ever been to a ceremony where incense was burned? Can you figure out what is represented on this lid? Find the face with the round earrings and butterfly-shaped lip ornament. It is not actually a face, but a mask. The Teotihuacan great goddess was usually shown wearing



FACE DETAIL



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This mural shows the face of the great goddess. She is wearing a green mask; you can actually see only small dots of her yellow skin beneath the mask. Notice the large jade earrings, necklace, and lip ornament. (Tetitla Apartment Compound)

a face mask. Imagine this mask surrounded by clouds of smoke that smell strong and sweet.

This lid looks just like earthenware produced at **Teotihuacan**, yet it was actually made hundreds of miles away in Esquintla, Guatemala. Teotihuacan was a powerful trading center with outpost settlements located close to the materials it wanted. Esquintla, Guatemala, was one of these outposts. It was conveniently located near sources for jade, feathers, and cacao (chocolate). Teotihuacan traders brought their beliefs and art styles with them when they settled at Esquintla. From this and other trading outposts, Teotihuacan maintained business and political connections with people all over Mesoamerica.

Teotihuacan's power and influence came to an end around A.D. 650. Archaeologists have determined that around this time the city began to experience problems with trade, as well as an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Although we don't know exactly what happened, one theory is that the poor grew to resent the elite and attacked the center of the city. We do know that in a sudden explosion of violence the palaces and the temples were destroyed. Even though many apartment compounds remained, all of the people left the city within fifty years.

**Teotihuacan: a great trading city located in Central Mexico that dates from A.D. 1 to A.D. 650**



**Incense Burner Lid**

Teotihuacan-style found in Mexico and Guatemala  
 A.D. 300–700  
 Earthenware, yellow and white pigment  
 18 x 19 in. (45.7 x 48.3 cm)  
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Larry Ottis  
 1981.51.7



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Stone Monument of a Queen

MAYA CULTURE,  
MEXICO OR GUATEMALA

Age:  
Over 1,200 years old

Size:  
About 7½ feet tall

Who am I?  
“I am Queen Ix Mutal. I call  
upon the god of lightning to  
reveal maize for my people’s  
nourishment.”

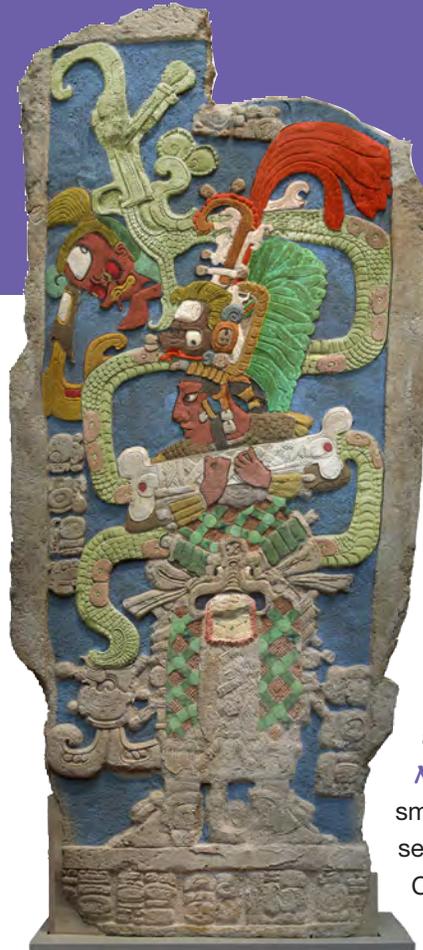
Analysis of this stela shows microscopic evidence of ancient paint. Although we do not know how it was originally painted, this colorized version can assist modern day viewers in understanding this complex scene.

**sacred:** relating to religion

**Maya:** a group of ancient and modern-day Mesoamerican people

**glyph / hieroglyph:** a character in a system of writing. The ancient Maya had the most advanced writing system of all Native American groups.

**maize:** different from the sweeter corn that we know. Soaked in ash or with lime (to release important nutrients), maize was the most important food source in Mesoamerica.



## This huge stone carving

shows a powerful woman who performs an important ritual to contact the gods. She wears a dress with jade beads and a feathered headdress. To begin the ritual, she created **sacred** smoke by burning precious liquids such as her own blood or tree sap. The **Maya** people believed that as the smoke rose toward the sky, a vision serpent (or snake) would appear.

Can you trace the movement of the serpent on the monument? Notice the face coming out of the serpent’s mouth. This is the

Maya god of lightning. He played an important role in agriculture. It was believed that he revealed **maize** (or corn) for the people when his first bolt of lightning struck the ground.

This carving contains **hieroglyphic** texts. The hieroglyphs tell us that this monument was made in the year A.D. 761. The Maya had a remarkable understanding of numbers. They used this knowledge to record dates and history in great detail. They used a system of dots and lines to write numbers. Each dot represented a one, and a horizontal line represented five. A number was read by adding the dots and lines

together. The second glyph from the left along the bottom contains the number 13. The 2 bars (2x5) and 3 dots (3x1) represent 13. Try to write your age using the Maya numbering system.

The last glyph in the column on the left names the person shown as “Lady of Mutal.” Mutal was a name used by two different Maya cities. This woman was probably a royal bride from the city of Mutal. The “lady” glyph shows a human face. Can you find this glyph? It was one of the first glyphs to be understood by modern day scholars. Using about 500 such glyphs, the Maya could have written anything from poetry to instructions for war. We know more about the ancient Maya than about any other Mesoamerican cultures because they had both advanced writing and calendrical systems that scholars can study today.

As you can see, Maya artists were great carvers. From the **limestone** found in their areas, they created impressive palaces, temples, ballcourts, and monuments such as this **stela**. Stelas are pieces of stone that stand upright; on the surface are carved glyphs and pictures that record Maya history. Stelas were placed outdoors in grand temple plazas. They often have a portrait of a ruler or a member of the ruler’s close family. Maya culture was made up of a small elite group and a large group of workers and common people who supported the elite.



13 GLYPH DETAIL

**limestone:** a rock common in much of the Maya area. It was cut into blocks to make sculptures and buildings

**stela:** a stone column that stands upright and has information about important dates and people



LADY OF MUTAL GLYPH DETAIL



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Although we do not know at which Maya city this queen lived, we can imagine that it may have looked something like Tikal, seen in this photograph. Notice the steep pyramid constructed from limestone and the great plaza with standing stelas. (Temple I, Tikal, Guatemala)



**Stela with Queen Ix Mutal Ahaw**  
 Maya, Southern Lowlands, Mexico or Guatemala  
 A.D. 761  
 Limestone  
 92 x 42 x 3 in. (233.7 x 106.7 x 7.6 cm)  
 Museum purchase, gift of Mrs. Paul Wattis  
 1999.42a-k



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● I notice. . .



● I wonder. . .

# Ceramic Figure of a Woman

MAYA CULTURE, MEXICO

Age:  
Over 1,100 years old

Size:  
1 foot tall

Who am I?  
“I am the height of  
fashion and beauty.”



**Maya:** a group of ancient and modern-day Mesoamerican people

**elite:** a small privileged group at the top of a society. They are richer and more powerful than those below them.

**scarification:** a process for beautification in which skin is cut to make raised scars

**Pictured here** is a clay statue that shows the **Maya** ideal of female beauty. Could those marks around this woman’s mouth have been the height of beauty and style? Indeed they were! This woman was a member of the Maya **elite**. To be more attractive, important Maya women often adorned themselves with **scarification**, tattooing, or body paint. The Maya elite also wore jade and feathers. This woman



MOUTH DETAIL



wears large jade earrings, a bracelet, and what is left of a necklace. Her long nose, sloped forehead, and **elongated** hairstyle are also signs of

beauty. These qualities were associated with

the shape of an ear of corn. Corn was a symbol of the all-important Maize God. In what ways do we change our appearances today to be more beautiful?

Maya women were responsible for caring for the children, cooking, and weaving cloth. This woman wears the basic item of female clothing called a **huipil**. You can still see blue on her **huipil**. Cloth was very valuable because of the many hours of labor that went into creating it. Cloth with fancy borders, like this example, took an extra amount of work and time.

This ceramic figure is from Jaina, a small island in the Gulf of Mexico. From A.D. 600 to 900, Jaina was used as a burial ground for Maya elite. The many burial tombs of Jaina contain ceramic figures that may be **portraits** of the actual people in the tombs or their relatives.

**elongated:**  
stretched out



**huipil:** a blouse-length or full-length garment usually made of cotton and worn by Maya woman

**portrait:** a depiction of a person

Maya women still weave cloth today using a traditional back-strap loom similar to those of ancient times.

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**Female Dignitary-Whistle**

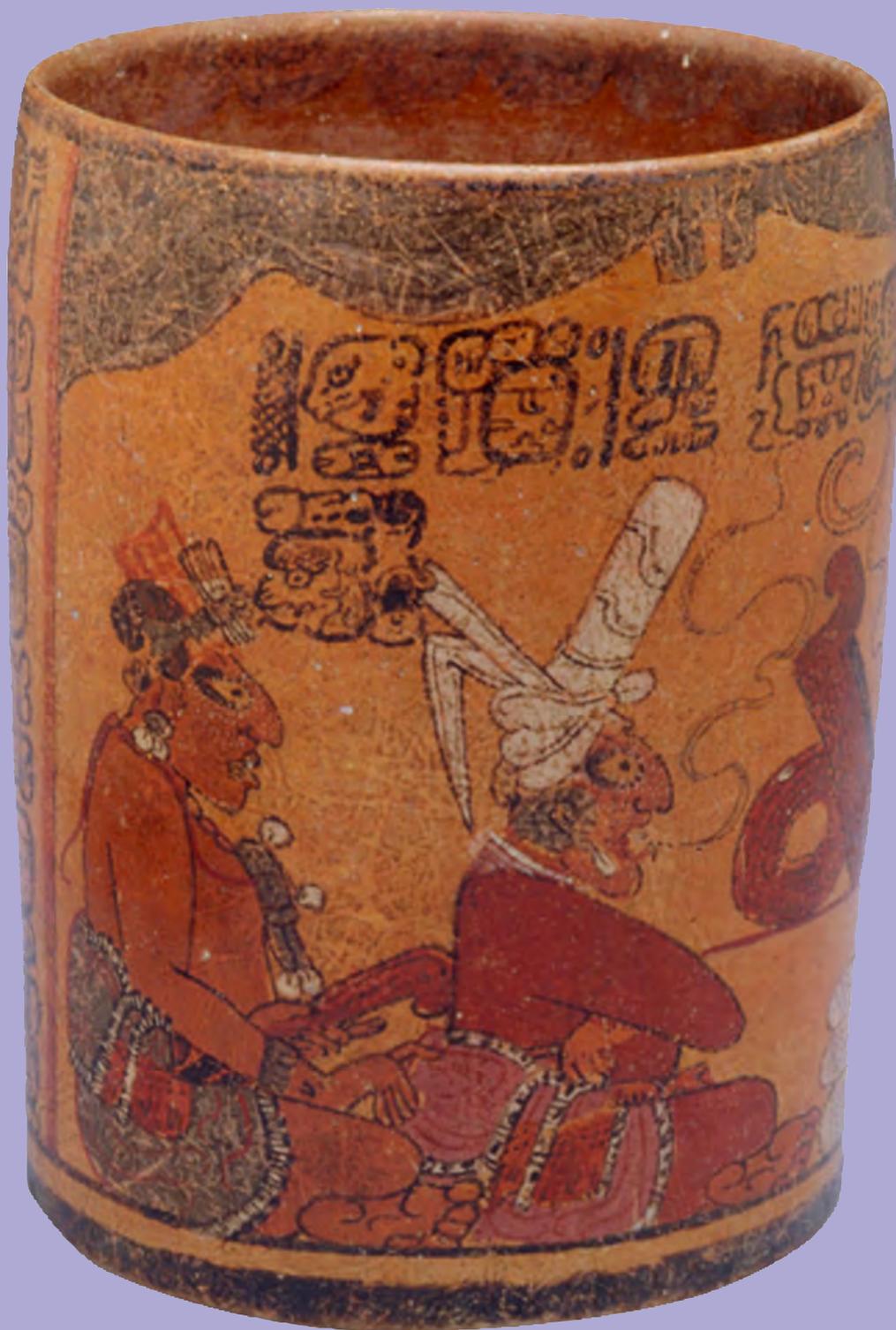
Maya, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico  
 A.D. 600–900  
 Earthenware  
 12¼ x 6 x 3¾ in. (31.1 x 15.2 x 9.5 cm)  
 Museum purchase, Salinger Bequest Fund  
 and proceeds from Museum Society Auction  
 78.39



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Painted Cup

MAYA CULTURE,  
MEXICO OR GUATEMALA

Age:

Around 1,400 years old

Size:

7 inches tall

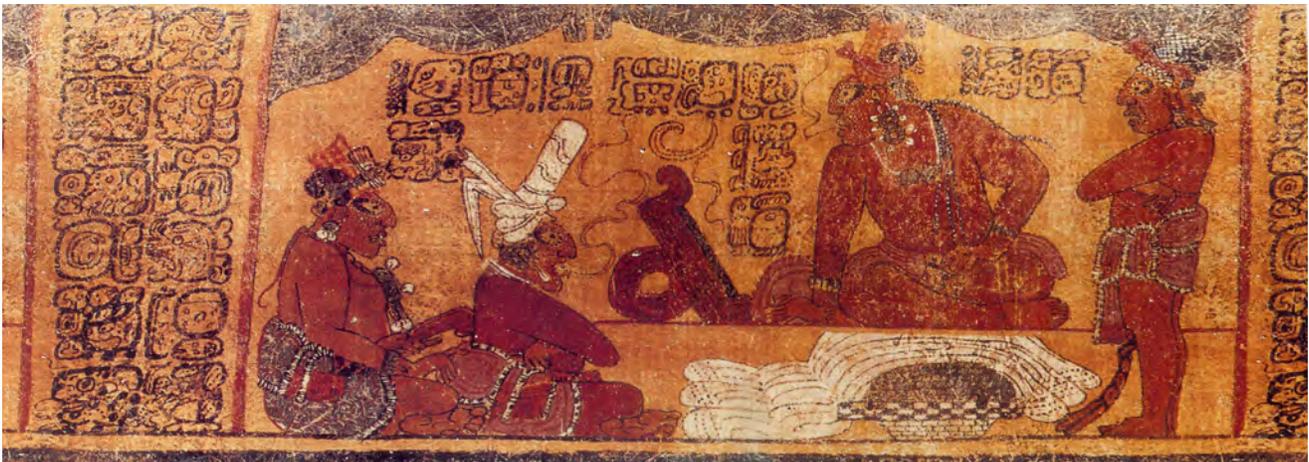
Who are we?

“We are noblemen who bring  
tribute to our great ruler.”

**To see the painted images** all the way around this cup, it is helpful to look at a photograph like the one below called a roll-out. Here we see three noblemen and a seated king. Do these men look plump and well fed? The ancient **Maya** diet was very low in fat. In fact, the only fat came from avocados and chocolate. These were considered luxury foods and they were reserved for the **elite**. It seems that these men are eating more than their fair share of avocados and chocolate!

**Maya:** a group of ancient and modern-day Mesoamerican people

**elite:** a small privileged group at the top of a society. They are richer and more powerful than those below them.





Chocolate, made from **cacao** beans grown in the Maya rain forest, was a favorite drink of Maya kings and lords. They drank it mixed with water, spices, and honey. A cup like this was used to mix and serve the chocolate drink.

This ruler not only had the best food, he also received payment in the form of valuable cloth. Notice the white cloth presented to him by the seated noblemen. Although the ancient Maya did grow tobacco, the lines

coming out of the mouth of the ruler and the nobleman wearing the white headdress are not smoke. These lines represent speech. Look closely at the object in front of the ruler. This is a mirror (supported by a frame of basketry) that also “speaks!” Mirrors were believed to connect the living world with the world of the ancestors; they provided wisdom and advice to Maya rulers.

**Hieroglyphs** are painted on this cup with strong black lines. They give the name of the king and tell us that this vessel was made to hold his beloved chocolate drink. Beautifully painted pottery, like this cup, was a common offering in the graves of the Maya elite.

**cacao**: the seed of the chocolate plant. In ancient Mesoamerica, cacao was so valuable that it was sometimes used for money.



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The ancient Maya had the most advanced writing system in the Americas. In addition to painting glyphs, the Maya carved glyphs on many of their stone monuments. Glyphs such as these recorded the history of Maya rulers.

**glyph / hieroglyph**: a character in a system of writing





**Cylindrical vessel depicting ruler with mirror**  
 Maya, Central Lowlands, Mexico or Guatemala  
 A.D. 600  
 Earthenware and orange, white, black, red, and blue slip  
 7 x 5 in. (17.8 x 12.7 cm)  
 Museum purchase, Salinger Bequest Fund  
 78.41



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Rubbing from the Wall of a Ballcourt

MAYA CULTURE, MEXICO

Age:

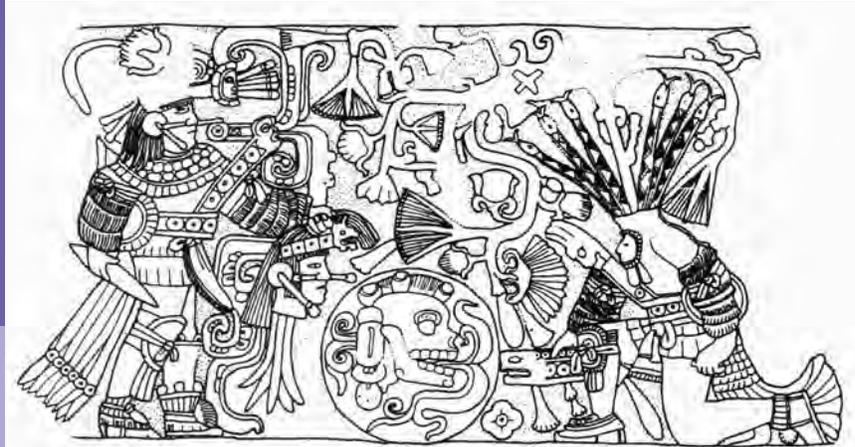
Original carving over 1,000 years old

Size:

Over 6 feet tall

Who are we?

“We are ballplayers who reenact, through decapitation, the harvest of corn and its ability to sprout new life.”



Although this image represents a stone carving, it is actually ink on paper. It was made by a process called rubbing. To make a rubbing, place a sheet of paper over a carving. Gently press the paper into every gap (or carved area). Apply ink to the paper. The ink will not appear on the parts of the paper that are pressed into the gaps. In this way you can get an accurate copy of the carving on paper.

**Because this is such a complicated** image

it is helpful to look at a line drawing. Notice the two men; they are both ballplayers. On the right side is a kneeling ballplayer. What has happened to his head? The other ballplayer, standing to his left, holds the severed head and a knife. Blood is shown as six serpents and one plant stem that come from the neck of the victim on the right. The ball in the center is decorated with a skull. To the ancient Mesoamericans life and death were closely connected and related to the harvest. At the end of each growing season the maize is cut (or decapitated).

Lifeless corn kernels (like skulls) are scattered to eventually sprout new life.

The ballgame was played with a large, heavy rubber ball that could cause injury to the players. Here both ballplayers wear protective clothing like wide belts around their waists. Can you imagine trying to hit a heavy rubber ball wearing padding, feathers, and





ear ornaments? The **Maya** ballgame could **symbolize** other things in addition to growing corn: the struggle for life over death, the hunt, and war.

This image is on the wall of a ballcourt at Chichen Itza. Chichen Itza was a large Maya city that prospered in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico after A.D. 800. Although there were many different groups of people in ancient Mesoamerica, one interest they shared was the playing of a ballgame. Today, we don't know the rules of this ancient game. We do know that players struck the heavy ball with their upper arms and legs. And just as in soccer today, players did not use their hands. Stone ballcourts are usually found in the center of Mesoamerican sites. This location points to the important role they played in the **ceremonial** life of the **elite**.

For reasons scholars don't completely understand, by A.D. 1450 most Maya cities were abandoned. Most elite activities, such as carving stone monuments and making jade jewelry, stopped. When the Spanish invaded Mesoamerica, many Maya lived in small towns where they continued to read and write in hieroglyphs. The Spanish tried to get rid of Maya religion, reading, and writing. Books were burned, and great numbers of Maya died of European diseases. Today some six million Maya live in Mesoamerica; they are one of the largest surviving Native American cultures. The California Bay Area is also home to many Maya who have chosen to leave the current hardships of life in Mexico and Guatemala.

**Maya:** A group of ancient and modern-day Mesoamerican people

**symbolize:** to stand for or represent

**ceremony:** a formal act or series of acts that must be done a certain way. In ancient Mesoamerica, ceremonies were often related to religion.

**elite:** a small privileged group at the top of a society. They are richer and more powerful than those below them.



This ballcourt at the ancient city of Copan, in Honduras, is located close to the ceremonial center of the city. The elite Maya played on ballcourt alleys formed by two parallel limestone structures. The end zones gave the ballcourt the shape of the capital letter I.

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**Rubbing from the Ballcourt at Chichen Itza**

by Merle Greene Robertson  
 Maya, Yucatan, Chichen Itza, Mexico  
 Mid-20th century  
 Rice paper with ink  
 75 x 38 in. (190.5 x 96.5 cm)  
 Gift of Merle Greene Robertson  
 1992.152.1-3



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Ceramic Dog

COLIMA, WEST MEXICO

Age:  
Over 1,500 years old

Size:  
8 inches tall

Who am I?  
“I am a companion  
to my master in  
both life and death.”



**This realistic ceramic dog** is shown scratching an itchy ear. Why would an artist pay attention to a common dog? Dogs were loved in ancient Mesoamerica and served many roles. They were pets, companions, and sometimes were even bred for meat. This dog was made in West Mexico over 1,500 years ago. From around 200 B.C. to A.D. 800 the people of West Mexico created an abundance of objects made from clay. Many of these ceramics have a playful quality like the dog seen here. Others show scenes of everyday life. They include people, houses, animals, foodstuff, and vessels.



This male and female from West Mexico are both adorned with body paint, jewelry, and patterned clothing. This indicates that they are members of the elite. The woman holds a bowl atop her head, while the man holds a staff and a shovel-shaped object. (Standing figures, Nayarit, West Mexico, 2nd century B.C.–5th century A.D., earthenware, h. 24½ in. and 30 in. Gift of the Land Collection, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1989.74.3 and 4)

We do not know the name of the ancient people who created these ceramics. We do know that they lived in the modern-day Mexican states of Colima, Nayarit, and Jalisco. The clay objects they created all come from shaft tombs that were dug deep into the earth. Families returned to these tombs time and again to place their dead. Dogs were believed to be loyal companions in death as they were in life. Objects such as this dog may have been meant to care for their masters in the afterlife.



These two figures from West Mexico appear to be elaborately dressed dancers. We can learn about ancient West Mexican clothing from earthenware figures. Clothing disintegrates over time, but fired clay does not. These figures may be performing some sort of shamanic ceremony. (Standing dancing figures, Colima, West Mexico, 2nd century B.C.–5th century A.D., earthenware, h. 11½ in. Promised gift of the Land Collection, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, T#92.166.4.2a-b)



**Dog Scratching Head**  
 Colima, West Mexico  
 2nd century B.C. – 5th century A.D.  
 Earthenware and red slip  
 8 x 6½ in. (20.3 x 16.5 cm)  
 Promised gift of the Land Collection  
 T#92.166.8



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I notice. . .



I wonder. . .

# Stone Mask

AZTEC CULTURE, MEXICO

Age:  
Around 600 years old

Size:  
7 inches tall

Who am I?  
“I witnessed the splendid  
Aztec ceremonies”



EAR DETAIL

**Aztec:** an ancient  
Mesoamerican  
civilization

**This stone mask** was probably never worn because it was heavy and had no eye openings. Large jade earrings were once placed in the ear holes. Where else do you think stones were added to decorate this mask? Notice the different circles that mark the surface. Pieces of precious materials once filled those areas. Masks such as this may have served as the faces of statues, or they

may have been used as temple offerings.

People of the **Aztec** civilization created this mask. The Aztecs were the last great Mesoamerican civilization before the arrival of the

The swirling pattern on the stone is the result of water running over it while it was buried for hundreds of years.



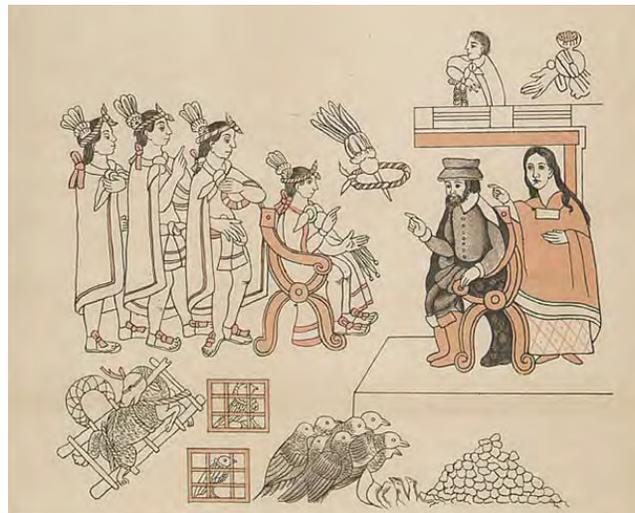
WATER PATTERN DETAIL

**conquistadores** in A.D. 1521. The Aztecs rose to power in central Mexico 500 years after the decline of Teotihuacan. In the year A.D. 1345, the Aztecs founded their capital city, a place called Tenochtitlan. Within a short time, they were the most powerful group of people in Mesoamerica. Their huge empire stretched from the Pacific coast in the west to the Gulf of Mexico in the east, and as far south as Guatemala. This empire was built on military power and riches taken from **conquered** lands.

The Spanish troops led by Hernán Cortés came to Mesoamerica in search of slaves and gold. They landed in the Yucatan peninsula and arrived in Tenochtitlan in A.D. 1519. Within two years they had taken over and destroyed the Aztec city. Over the ruins of Tenochtitlan, they built what is today Mexico City. Across Mesoamerica, the native peoples were defeated through war, slavery, and sickness. This land of great cultures was changed forever during the time Spain was in power. However, many elements of native culture survived and live on in Mesoamerica today.

**conquistadores:** the Spanish term for conqueror used in reference to Spaniards who came to the Americas in the 1500s in search of wealth

**conquered:** defeated by force or placed under enemy control



This drawing from the 1560s shows the meeting of Cortés and Motecuhzoma with Doña Marina. Doña Marina was an Aztec slave girl who helped translate the Aztec language for Cortés. The Spaniards owed their success, in part, to their Indian allies. In nearly all their battles, the Spaniards fought together with native armies like the Tlaxcalan Indians who were bitter enemies of the Aztec empire. The Tlaxcalans later recorded their participation in the conquest with a manuscript that included this drawing.



**Mask**  
 Aztec, Central Mexico, Mexico  
 Ca. A.D. 1400  
 Aragonite  
 7 x 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (17.8 x 21.3 x 9.5 cm)  
 Museum purchase, AOA Art Trust Fund  
 1990.31



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