

ANCIENT ART OF
MIDDLE AMERICA



BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

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THE area known as Middle America, that is, Mexico and its southern neighbors, is one of the two regions where extensive remains of pre-Columbian art have been found, and in some respects, the art of Middle America is superior to that of Peru, most notably in the amount, variety, and skill of its stone sculpture.

Although there were inhabitants of Middle America at an early date, there are only scattered traces to be found of art which would compare with that of the Pleistocene period in the Old World. The first notable and significant developments occurred in the first millennium B.C. coincident with the development of large ceremonial centers supported by a widespread system of dependent cultivators. Not only did settled life with the development of leisure provide the time for culture and the arts to develop; it was also a period marked by the elaboration of religious practices. This had a marked effect on artistic development, for with a very few exceptions, such as the Maya wall paintings at Bonampak and the greenstone masks of Teotihuacán, the art of ancient Mexico was almost exclusively in the service of religion and abounds in a religious symbolism that is difficult for the outsider to approach.

In a very loose sense, the cultural history of Middle America can be divided into two stages: 2500 years of sedentary agricultural life centered on the village, and 1500 years of urban civilization. A general classification of artistic styles would indicate an initial formative and transitional phase (Pre-Classic), a period of florescence of some eight centuries in the first millennium A.D. (Classic), a period of renaissance, and a final phase of Post-Classic in the three centuries preceding the Spanish Conquest. Two points should be noted about this classification. The Post-Classic period was not in all

areas a period of decadence, but in fact displays in certain regions characteristics of a young and vigorous culture. Moreover, the general scheme, while convenient, does not fit all areas of Middle America equally well. It describes the situation for the Maya of Southeast Mexico well, for the climax of this civilization was reached in the period A.D. 300-900, but in lowland Tabasco on the Gulf Coast, characteristics which can only be called Classic developed nearly a millennium earlier, and in some parts of Western Mexico, the archaic style persisted up to the Spanish Conquest.

It is true that every culture of Ancient Mexico had its own characteristic style. A Maya bas-relief, an Aztec sculpture, a Colima figurine all reveal pronounced individualities which the observer can distinguish. But despite this, there was clearly a Mexican stylistic area, homogeneous in many ways despite internal diversity. Separated from North America by desert, from South America by jungle, the Mexican area essentially evolved in isolation. Of the artists themselves, practically nothing is known, though it is reasonable to expect that every important city had its own body of sculptors and painters. There is considerable evidence that the plastic arts were held in high esteem among the Mexicans, and though much was destroyed at the time of the Conquest, the most discerning of the Renaissance men saw in the artistry of Middle America a great value. Dürer noted in his diary after viewing a collection of art objects sent by Cortés to the Emperor Charles V, "Never in my life have I seen anything which made my heart leap in me as these wonderful and artistic objects, and I am surprised at the exquisite skill displayed by these people of a foreign land."

ROGER HOWELL, JR.

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Dedicated to the memory of Professor William C. Root

ALL the objects in the exhibition, with the exception of those noted in the catalogue, were generously lent by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. We are indebted to Dr. Lee A. Parsons, Curator, and Mrs. Philippa D. Shaplin, Registrar, for their kind help and advice. RICHARD V. WEST, *Director*

CATALOGUE

(All measurements in centimeters, H = Height W = Width D = Depth)

VALLEY OF MEXICO

1
Solid Female Figurine (Type D-1)
Terracotta, traces of red and yellow paint
H. 9
Tlatilco, Middle Pre-Classic Period

2
Hollow Female Figurine
Terracotta
H. ca. 20
Olmecoid, Middle Pre-Classic Period
(From San Pablo, Moreles)
Lent by Mrs. Philippa D. Shaplin

3
Tripod Vessel
Earthenware, polychromed stucco decoration
H. 16 D. 18.5
Teotihuacan III, Classic Period

4
Large Funerary Mask
Greenstone
H. 26.5 W. 27
Style of Teotihuacan, Classic Period

5
Funerary Mask
Onyx (tecali), from Oaxaca
H. 12.7 W. 16.2
Style of Teotihuacan, Classic Period

6
Mask of the Goddess Coyalxauhqui
Jadeite
H. 10.7 W. 14
Aztec style

7
Seated Male Figure
Volcanic stone

H. 38.5 W. 23.5
Aztec style

GULF COAST AREA

8
Yoke (in the shape of a frog)
Polished stone
H. 12.5 W. 37 L. 43
Classic Vera Cruz Style
(From Vera Cruz)

9
Hacha with Tenon
Stone
H. 20 W. 18
Classic Vera Cruz Style
(From Oaxaca)

10
Ring (in the shape of a monkey)
Stone
H. 10.7
Classic Vera Cruz Style
(Probably from Vera Cruz)

11
*Vessel with Animal Face, Vertical Spout
and Strap Handle*
Earthenware, polychromed
H. 19.3 W. 16
Huastec, Post-Classic Period
(From a grave mound, Savinito, Vera Cruz)

OAXACA

12
Urn of the Bat God
Earthenware
H. 24 W. 12 D. 14
Monte Alban III B, Classic Period
(From the Zimitlan district)

13

Standing God Urn

(Medallion of Headdress, the Glyph C)

Earthenware

H. 23

Monte Alban III B-IV, Late Classic Period

14

Open-sided Vessel (Doughnut shape)

Onyx (tecali)

H. 21.3 W. 15.5 D. 9.2

Early Post-Classic Period

(From Mitla)

WESTERN MEXICO

15

Hollow Female Figurine

Terracotta

H. 38.8

Colima, Classic Period

16

Seated Man in Armor

Terracotta

H. 37.5

Ixtlan de Nayarit, Classic Period

17

Hollow Seated Female Figurine

Terracotta

H. 30

Nayarit, Classic Period

18

Mask

Onyx (tecali)

H. 18.5 W. 15.2

Guerrero, Mezcala Style, Classic Period

19

Seated Figurine

Terracotta

H. 14.3

Guerrero, probably Late Classic Period

(From Zumpango del Rio)

20

Plaque with Incised Figure

Greenstone, traces of red paint

H. 14.3

Guerrero, Post-Classic Period(?)

(From Acapulco)

Illustration on page one is Catalogue item 9, *Hacha with Tenon*. Courtesy Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

MAYA AREA

21

Effigy Stirrup Vase

Earthenware

H. 11 L. 15

Middle Pre-Classic Period

(From Ulua Valley, Honduras)

22

Dish with Jaguar Head Cover

Incised black ware

H. 25 Diam. 34.5

Holmul III, Early Classic Period

(From Holmul, Guatemala)

23

Straight-walled Tripod Vase

Yojoa polychrome ware

H. 11.7 Diam. 13

Late Classic Period

(From Ulua Valley, Honduras)

24

Bowl

Yojoa polychrome ware

H. 8.8 Diam. 12.3

Late Classic Period

(From Ulua Valley, Honduras)

25

Straight-walled Vase

Yojoa polychrome ware

H. 15 Diam. 12.3

Late Classic Period

(From Ulua Valley, Honduras)

26

Tenoned Head

Stone

H. 23 W. 14.5

Late Classic Period

(From Quirigua, Guatemala)

27

Vase with Head of a Bird

Plumbate ware

H. 16.7

Toltec, Post-Classic Period

(From Honduras)

28

Effigy Incense Burner

Earthenware

H. 47

Mayapan style, Post-Classic Period

(From Eastern Yucatan)

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