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## Olmec Sculpture: The First Mesoamerican Art

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Mesoamerica's first true art was created by the archaeological culture now known as the Olmec. Although there were numerous artistic figurines and other objects that clearly preceded the development of Olmec art, some of them with patterns similar to decorations applied to Olmec clay vessels, I agree with those who consider true art to be the conjunction of forms and meanings, as first evident in the great number of Olmec objects spread throughout early Mesoamerica. The qualities of Olmec art have been observed since the 1920s and have been enriched by almost every scholar attracted by the Olmec. What is important here is the recognition that these Olmec traits can be found in objects in distant regions, especially dating to the Middle Formative. My purpose in this essay is to discuss Olmec art, its themes, and its stylistic variations or artistic schools.

### THE OLMEC ART STYLE

"Olmec Art" would seem to be a self-evident category, but both parts of the term have been the center of controversy. What is meant by "Olmec," and what is meant by "art?". As noted, I take "art" to be the conjunction of form and meaning. As to "Olmec," many hypotheses have been proposed as to the precise meaning of this term and its acceptable usage. Some see the Olmec phenomenon as indicative of a unity based upon religion, ethnicity, language, or art style. I remain faithful to the last idea because it corresponds to the original sense given by Saville (1) and later reinforced by Stirling (2), Covarrubias (3), and Coe (4), and more recently by several other scholars (5).

In the apprehension of similar traits and qualities in a wide range of objects, these scholars discovered a new style of forms and iconographic representations which they attributed to the Olmec. By the time that the name was established, the greatest concentration of monuments known with these qualities, came from southern Veracruz and eastern Tabasco, Mexico, an area considered the "climax" zone by American archaeologists (6) and "metropolitan" area by Mexican archaeologists (7). Nowadays, Olmec traits are known to occur in a much wider region than the Gulf coast and Mexican highlands; Olmec style objects appear in the Mexican states of Guerrero and Chiapas, Guatemala, and portions of lower Central America.

There has been much discussion about the unity of the Olmec style, and I must emphasize that such unity may be relative since different communities in diverse geographical areas interpreted plastic fundamental qualities in accordance with their own traditions. By established in the classical moment of Olmec art and extended and defined in the metropolitan area. The use of this sculptural convention began to diminish in late Olmec times as other conventions for formal presentation became more important. Changes in late Olmec art are also evident in the iconography and general themes of the sculpture and objects.

#### OLMEC ICONOGRAPHY

The main themes of Olmec art and iconography have been discussed by several scholars (9). All of these proposals, however, remain hypothetical as none has yet been demonstrated fully. Since written testimony for Olmec times is lacking, scholars must rely for their interpretations of the meaning and functions of Olmec art on universal religious experience as revealed in non-literate cultures, and in comparative assessments of these experiences.

Art is the fundamental expression of underlying concepts: religious, political, social, technological, or economic. However, it is difficult to establish universal patterns for human conduct because, in the course of history, differences in human activities have been hard to isolate. Based on the common experience of man, I think that we can appreciate

some matters that deal with cosmogony. They are present in the themes and meanings of monumental Olmec sculpture. Generally, it is the human figure that is rendered as primordial in Olmec art.

The first group of Olmec iconographic cosmogony is supported by the depiction of mythical themes. They all deal with myths of creation, possession of the Earth by fertilizing it (Fig. 5), or by humans emerging from the cave of Earth in a clear myth of origin of Olmec peoples, as seen in Mon. 5 of Laguna de los Cerros (Fig. 6). It is the ancestral, terrestrial matrix that gives birth to whole-figured men. Some variations of this theme are evident on La Venta Mon. 5 where sacrifice as a need to purification and sacredness is the essential theme depicted. Variations also exist in sculptures such as the Las Limas figure, where natural rocky shelters might have served as a substitute for otherwise depicted caves (Fig. 7).

Another cluster of thematically related monuments is constituted by figures that incorporate features of animals into their essential human aspect and others that are merely combinations of fantastic and visual characters. Elsewhere, I consider them as "supernatural" beings (10). They refer, of course, to what has been the pivotal explanation of the meaning of the totality of Olmec art: the Jaguar, the were jaguar, the humanized jaguar, and the baby jaguar. Certainly these images were related to mythical beings; they themselves were part or symbol of the myth.

The group of monuments of principal importance is constituted by images whose characteristics are exclusively human. In this group I include those with out physical individuality, such as the "prince" of Cruz del Milagro (Fig. 8), and, to those sculptures that show unique personality. I refer to the portraits of kings in the 17 colossal heads: ten from San Lorenzo, four from La Venta, and three from Tres Zapotes and its environs. (Fig 5)

### SCHOOLS OF OLMEC ART

As evident above, one recognizes a major style and a plurality of regional, local, and perhaps personal styles entailed within it. Style obtains its climax of cultural unity, but as a process it is always

mutable and modifies itself by internal laws of change or by inevitable external expressions. Style, either general or particular, has its proper and peculiar trace; it is always dynamic, develops cycles, and reaches moments where cultural homogeneity is expressed in greater similarities of works of art. Here I consider the local Olmec sculptural styles of the major centers in the metropolitan area. The main reason why it is now possible to distinguish styles at these sites is because we have large samples of monuments from each, and it is possible to make a general and analytical survey of sculptures.

The sculptural school of *San Lorenzo* was perhaps a long lasting workshop where novices were taught by the masters of stone carving and then transmitted their learning to subsequent generations. I include with San Lorenzo the smaller sites surrounding it, namely, Potrero Nuevo, Tenochtitlan, El Azuzul, and Los Idolos. The prominent characteristic of this school is the ideal approach to visual reality (see Pasztory, Chapt. X); the images that dominate in volume or in bas-relief are mostly human. <sup>(Fig. 6)</sup> Most sculptures convey the feeling of absolute concordance between form and meaning. The regional style of San Lorenzo has its own "grammar," internal order, and expressiveness.

The highlights of the San Lorenzo school include all those characteristics mentioned for the Olmec style in general (i.e., volume, monumentality, heaviness, and internal rhythm) as well as a preference for rounded forms that cover acute geometrism and maintain equilibrium based on perfect harmony, as is true of the animal figures such as the felines (Fig. <sup>7</sup>10). The arrest of momentum evident in San Lorenzo sculptures changes through time. In later times, the restful serenity we have seen before is substituted by soft dynamism, scenic resources, exaggeration in traits, and, in general, a more eclectic expression (Fig. <sup>8</sup>14).

The La Venta school seems to have been more versatile than that at San Lorenzo because of the diversity of themes portrayed on its monuments (see Gonzalez, Chapt. y). Noteworthy is the near equivalence in the number of human and composite figure representations (the "supernaturals" mentioned above that integrate human and animal characteristics in fantastic combinations). This may mean that a greater diversity of myths was present in La Venta culture. At its

beginning, the style was shown by solid figures of geometric forms. The volume sometimes seems to have been obscured by bas-reliefs on the sides of monuments, such as seen in the combinations between volume (one main figure) and scenes carved on the sides in relief, as on Thrones 4 and 5 (Fig. <sup>3</sup>12).

Over time, the La Venta style showed an increase of geometrism and synthetic forms, plastic movement produced by the release of volume into space, and a wider discourse of scenic narrative. It seems to me that the final expressions of the La Venta style, the narrative historical scenes depicted on enormous stone slabs such as Stelae 2 and 3 (Fig. <sup>10</sup>13), were a sort of a bridge between mythical and historical narratives such as seen in Maya times.

The site of *Laguna de los Cerros*, the locus of the third artistic school, has some of the most impressive sculptural masterpieces of any Olmec site (see Gillespie, this volume). The art from Laguna de los Cerros does not conform to the compact naturalistic style of San Lorenzo nor to the impersonal geometrism of La Venta climax art. Until a larger corpus of sculptures is available from this region, however, I dare only say that the Laguna style represented an eclectic school that fully mastered stone carving but showed different forms and levels in its iconography. At the same time, one appreciates the powerful quality of the priest or king depicted in Mon. 19 (Fig. <sup>14</sup>14), the classical, sensual forms of the semi-nude torsos (Fig. <sup>12</sup>15), the baroque, non-colossal heads (Mons. 1 and 2), <sup>(Fig. 13)</sup> and a surprising combination of synthetic corporal forms with an enormous head and abstract facial traits (Fig. <sup>14</sup>16).

There are many other sites with few works of monumental sculptures; stylistically, they can either be forced into one of the sub-styles just described or left apart until more evidence is available. It is difficult at the moment to propose evidence for a sculptural chronology. I leave this matter to archaeologists and specialists in the field. My main purpose here is to draw attention to the outstanding forms and meanings of Mesoamerican's first art style, as it is evident in various sculptures from sites the Gulf Coast Lowlands of Mexico.

## THE QUESTION OF TWINS

In the course writing this paper several unusual monuments piqued my interest. These monuments portray mythical images and supernatural beings and are part of the primordial cosmogony of Mesoamerica dealing with twins. These are evident in the duality present in monumental Olmec sculpture and in ceramic figurines of Middle Formative period. I want to emphasize this cosmogonical myth here because it seems, thus far, that Olmec deities and myths are supposed by <sup>some</sup> scholars to have been induced by psychoactive drugs introduced into the body or by auto-sacrifice.

I like to think that pre-Columbian man had similar experiences as men from other parts of the world and shared conceptions of nature, the universe, earth, and human being. Of course, this experience would have included the stage of animal power (in the Olmec case, that of the jaguar, the monkey, the toad, the eagle, the crocodile, and so on) and the consolidation of the seeded earth. Experiences in this early process of human development related to the adaptation to and dominion of nature. Consequently, man created myths to explain defend against it.

There was a myth precisely depicted in Olmec times, and until now not wholly recognized, of the origin of a radical Mesoamerican myth that is also a common theme in global mythology. I refer to the twins depicted in the sculptures from El Azuzul (Fig. <sup>15</sup> ~~17~~), the ones in Mon. 2 of Potrero Nuevo (Fig. <sup>16</sup> ~~18~~), and most probably in San Martin Pajapan and Mon. 44 of La Venta. Let us first remember the universality of myths of hero twins and later refer to some of the sculptures depicting this myth in its Mesoamerica setting. The myth of founding twins represents a continuity of belief from Olmec to Mexica times.

All cultures and all mythologies reveal particular interest in twins. Even though birth of twins a common natural phenomena, it always arouses surprise and admiration. In mythology, twins can be portrayed as equals or opposites. One of them may be luminous while the other is obscure; one may represent heaven and the other the earth; they may represent other paired dualities of day and night, black and white, hot and cold, or red and blue. They express duality, the basic principle of Mesoamerican ideology. Dualism, in both spiritual and material senses,

approaches the profound meaning of life and cosmos.

Some twins are absolutely alike, doubles, or copies of one another, as is the case of El Azuzul twins (~~Fig. 19~~), the maya hero twins of the Popol Vuh, or the mexica eagle warriors of the Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan. They express the unity of a balanced duality. This dualism is like a mirror image, the purpose of a unique expression. Moreover, these twins symbolized the ambivalence of the mythical universe. In all world traditions, twins (as gods or heroes) dispute, struggle, or even charm, giving them an ambivalent character.

André Virel (11) argues that twin images are the internal tension of a permanent situation, the reduction of a multiple to a unity. In conclusion, twin images symbolize contrary interior and exterior forces; they are at the same time opposite and complementary, relative or absolute principles to be resolved in an eternal creative tension.

A general survey of early world mythologies shows evidence of the twins' symbolic myth. Such as the vedic Ashwins; Mitra-Varuna; Romulo-Remo; Isis-Osiris: Apollo-Artemisa: Castor-Polux. In some myths there is a third brother, as with Castor and Helena or Osiris and Set. Could these be something equivalent to the third image, the standing jaguar, at El Azuzul? In all cases, either twins or triad they are mythical beings with natural appearance, or mixed with animals descendent from inmortal father and mortal mother. They are hierogamic because of the integration of soul (immateriality) and flesh (corporeality).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay I have considered the general qualities, form, and meaning of Olmec art, as expressed by its sculpture, as well as the defining attributes of the San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Laguna de los Cerros regional sub-styles. Also, I stressed the importance of a cosmogonical myth, that of hero twins depicted in several colossal human figurines. It is important to note that this myth of hero twins goes together with dualism in Ancient Mexico.

The earliest depiction of twins I have found in America comes not from



Mexico but from Ecuador and dates to around 2000 BC (Early Valdivia phase). It shows two anthropocentric female branches that emerge from the same pedestal. Later, from 2000 to 600 b. C., we see the concept in Mesoamerica in ceramic figurines and stone sculpture. Figurines are frequent at Tlatilco, located in the Basin of Mexico, and depict bicephalism or two faces integrated in one head (Fig. <sup>17</sup>20); the concept of life and death is clearly exhibited in a well-known mask from the same site (~~Fig. 21~~). The magnificent twins from El Azuzul are the earliest known depiction of these twins in monumental sculpture (~~Fig. 22~~). (Fig 18).!

Another important example is that of the double twin heroes of the Popol Vuh, the primary document of Maya spirituality. Some of the scenes on Classic Maya vessels and bone objects have been interpreted as depiction of the Popol Vuh myth. Here scholars recognize the resurrection of the maize god Hun Hunahpu and his two sons Hunahpu and Xbalanque. The monkey scribe appears with them in a late Maya vase. Also important is the Postclassic twin myth of Quetzalcoatl, as Venus or Xolotl, as described in the sixteenth century sources. This is also the period of the twin double pyramids in ancient Tenochtitlan. Other examples from late figurative art include the Mexica standard bearers (Fig. 19),! and the twin eagle warriors found in the chamber of that name at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City. (~~Fig. 23~~).

Olmec art was the earliest in Mesoamerica and it established an artistic unity, both formal and conceptual, at the foundation of Mesoamerica. Civilization was whole and continuous, but styles changed at different times and in different places. As with all true art, the most outstanding expressions of Mesoamerican art, such as Olmec Art, have taken their place among the world's masterpieces.

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Captions for "Olmec Sculpture: First Mesoamerican Monumental Art" to be published in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica*, *Developments in Formative Period Social Complexity*

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Fig. 1. Tenochtitlan, Monument # 1, ca. 1200-1000 B.C. basalt, Museo Nacional de Antropología, México.

Fig. 2. Laguna de los Cerros, Monument # 5, ca. 1200-800 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 3. Las Limas, Monument # 1, ca. 1200-800 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 4. "El Príncipe" from Cruz del Milagro, ca. 1200-800 B.C., basalt. Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 5. San Lorenzo, Colossal Head # 8, ca. 1200-1000 B.C., basalt. Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 6. San Lorenzo, Monument # 11, ca. 1200-1000 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 7. El Azuzul, Feline sculpture, ca. 1200-800 B.C. *In situ*

Fig. 8. San Lorenzo, Feline and man, ca. 1200-800 B.C. basalt, Museo Comunitario de San Lorenzo.

Fig. 9. La Venta, Throne (or altar) # 4, ca. 1000- 600 B.C., basalt, Parque Museo La Venta.

Fig. 10. La Venta, Stelae # 2, ca. 1000-600 B.C., basalt. Parque Museo La Venta.

Fig. 11. Laguna de los Cerros, Monument # 19, ca. 1000-600 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

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Fig. 12. Laguna de los Cerros, Monument # 6, ca. 1000-600 B. C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 13. Laguna de los Cerros, Monument # 1, ca. 1000-600 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 14. Laguna de los Cerros, Monument # 8, ca. 1000-600 B.C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 15. El Azuzul, Twins, ca. 1200-800 B.C., *In situ*.

Fig. 16. Potrero Nuevo, Monument # 2, ca. 1000-800 B. C., basalt, Museo de Antropología de la Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa.

Fig. 17. Tlatlaco, bicephalous figure, clay, (middle preclassic) 800-600 B. C., Museo Nacional de Antropología, México.

Fig. 18. El Azuzul, Twins, ca. 1200-800 B.C., *In situ*.

Fig. 19. Mexica *Ehécatl* standarbearers, ca. 1350-1500 A.C. Museo Nacional de Antropología, México.

Endnotes for "Olmec Sculpture: First Mesoamerican Monumental Art" to be published in *Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica: Developments in Formative Period Social Complexity*.

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