

Tag: Nayarit culture

Pre-Columbian Art of Mexico: Pre-Classic Era, Art of the Villages



Seated Chieftain made in ceramic and pigment, ca. 100 BC-250 AD from Nayarit (Lagunillas area, Mexico), (Art Institute of Chicago).

In the prehistory of Mexico there are almost no traces of an activity that could be called “artistic,” although there is evidence that ancient nomadic peoples -simple collectors or hunters of mammoth and other prehistoric species- inhabited Mexico more than ten thousand years ago. The earliest evidence of a sedentary lifestyle appeared around 5000 BC, and focused around the initial stages of the domestication of corn, a plant that was destined to totally modify the life of the Native American population at least in many regions of what would be later known as the “New World”.

At the dawn of the second millennium BC, the primitive species of maize (corn) were domesticated in Mexico which in turn were hybridized with other related plant species resulting in the staple food that would eventually contribute to facilitate the sedentary lifestyle of these Native peoples. Soon along with the cultivation of corn other plants like several species of pumpkins, beans, tomato, cacao, numerous fibers, and one species of cotton were also cultivated.

And while in this way agriculture was enriched the societies diversified from primitive agricultural villages to more advanced levels of civilization. However, concerning the arts and thought, these peoples

prior to Cortés’ arrival in Mexico were using relatively few technologies. In fact, they never used the

wheel to facilitate human tasks (perhaps because they did not use traction animals) and they weren't familiar with the metallurgy of soft metals such as gold, silver, and copper until around 1000 AD, that is, about five centuries before the Spanish conquest. But these technological gaps only make more admirable the progress reached by these peoples in other fields. Just take a look at the marvelous commentaries of some chroniclers (including the sincere admiration of an artist of the stature of Albrecht Dürer) when describing with astonishing admiration the jewels in jade, gold, and silver, the fine wood carvings, the delicate polychrome vessels or the mosaics of precious feathers, "... *things never before seen, not even dreamed*" as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the faithful chronicler of the Spanish conquest, once exclaimed.



Seated Joined Couple made in ceramic and pigment, ca. 200-300 AD from Nayarit (Mexico), (Art Institute of Chicago).

The first permanent agricultural villages appeared in ancient Mexico towards the beginning of the second millennium BC. In 1800 BC -at the dawn of the period known as "formative" or "preclassic"- there was clear evidence of the existence of some of these small villages in the valley of Mexico, then largely covered by a group of lakes. Everything seems to indicate that the social structure of these peoples was still very simple, of communal character, perhaps revolving around the family nucleus. There is no clear indication that textiles existed at the beginning of this period and the tools were rather rudimentary. Instead, ceramics for both utilitarian and ritual use began to be made and some statues were modeled in clay.

The religion was at the level of "shamanism": the presence of numerous burials, in which the corpse was usually accompanied by offerings, allows to conclude that, from this time, there was an important cult of the dead, which necessarily implies a belief in a better "after life".



A reconstruction of a Shaft Tomb from Western Mexico from around 300 BC-400 AD (Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico city).

It is precisely in these burials where archaeologists have found the sequence of the artistic evolution of these village peoples. On one hand, the pottery, usually tripod or with curved bottoms, was simple in shape and often decorated with a geometric decoration made by incisions. Second, clay figurines modeled by hand using the so-called “pastillage” technique initially showing some rather rough proportions used to represent mostly nude female figures **whose thick hips seem to indicate the existence of a fertility cult** (<https://arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/2013/02/03/prehistoric-art/>) focused on human and agricultural fecundity, a very plausible practice in a still primitive, agrarian-based society.

Tlatilco

Towards the beginning of the so-called Middle Preclassic period (1300-800 BC), some of these villages grew to become agglomerations with a more complex social structure, while at the same time other villages had appeared in this and other regions of ancient Mexico. One of these large towns, Tlatilco (northwest of present-day Mexico City), clearly reflected the level reached at that time and its naïve statuettes known as “pretty ladies” constitute the culmination of this fertility cult mentioned before.



Examples of the “Pretty Ladies” figurines from the Tlatilco culture, they represented magic symbols of the cult of fertility both human and agricultural. Left: Two Tlatilco figurines from ca. 1000 – 800 BC. (Snite Museum of Art, Indiana). Right: Pretty Lady figurine from the Tlatilco culture, Preclassic Period, ca. 1200-900 BC.

During this same phase of the Preclassic period, a new and vigorous culture emerged in the Gulf of Mexico, **the Olmec civilization** (<https://arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/2017/02/19/pre-columbian-art-of-mexico-the-olmec-art-and-its-diffusion/>), whose influence spread in many directions of ancient Mexico in the first millennium BC exerting a profound influence on the culture of some regions and laying the foundations of many of the later theocracies of the so-called “Classical” period.

The West of Mexico

While the influence was significant in areas such as the Gulf of Mexico; the central Mexican plateau, Oaxaca, the vast Maya zone, and other regions of ancient Mexico remained as simple agricultural villages that preserved with little modification a cultural stratum similar to the Tlatilco towns almost until the end of the first millennium AD. This appears to be the case of the area west of the central highlands known as “western Mexico” which covers the present states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Jalisco, Nayarit, Colima, and Guerrero.



A Colima seated figure, from 100 BC-300 AD, earthenware, burnished slip in red and light brown (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland).

Except for some **Olmec** (<https://arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/2017/02/19/pre-columbian-art-of-mexico-the-olmec-art-and-its-diffusion/>) and later **Teotihuacan** (<https://arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/2017/02/22/pre-columbian-art-of-mexico-the-central-mexican-plateau-teotihuacan/>) penetrations in some western areas, it seems that the villages of this region remained largely out of the strong cultural impulse that shook ancient Mexico and that led the other regions of the country to unsuspected progress in arts and thought. Thus, while the great architecture in stone, monumental sculpture, mural painting, and other major arts developed among the Teotihuacan, Totonac, Zapotec, and Maya peoples, the western peoples continued to use pottery as a nearly exclusive means of artistic and religious expression. But in the art of pottery they achieved surprising results placing them at an enviable level within the panorama of universal ceramics.



Left: A Chupícuaro statuette in Terracotta from the VII-II century BC (Louvre). Right: Nude pregnant woman (D. Olmedo Phillips Collection, Mexico), a magnificent example of the art of the Nayarit culture.

This peculiar vocation of potters shown by the peoples of western Mexico can be observed from the ritual ceramics produced in Chupícuaro -with its rich and well contrasted polychrome decoration- that goes back to the first millennium AD. On the other hand both, individual statues and group scenes from Jalisco, Nayarit, and Colima constitute not only a true documentary of the simple life of those villages, but a human message full of life and good humor. And within this incredible range of forms, the hollow and finely polychromed vessels and statues of Colima certainly represent a culminating point.



Ceramics from the Colima culture. Left: Group of dancers (male and female) from the Colima culture (Anahuacalli Museum of Diego Rivera, Mexico City), this statuette represents the spirit that from prehistoric times has impelled people from diverse cultures to unite in a circular dance. Right: Colima male figurines from the recent Preclassic period, ca. 300-200 BC, in terracotta (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Bruxelles).

Whether inspired by natural forms (plant, animal or human) or by an advanced degree of abstraction, the works of the Colima culture surprise by the fullness and diversity of its forms, the result of a highly evolved plastic sensibility. In this rich artistic production, the visual reality was modified by the artist's hand until it was often transformed into an abstract design. But whatever the artist's subject be -a crab, a dog, a pumpkin held by three parrots, a warrior, a water-bearer, or a ball-player- these formal subjects were solved in a way that didn't interfere with the functional aspect of the container they were represented on.



Ceramic vases decorated one with rhombuses (left) and another with longitudinal segments (right) according to the style named “white on red” typical of the Nayarit culture.



Colima ceramics. Left: Colima redware effigy vessel representing a dog carrying a bowl, ca. 300 BC-300 AD. Right: Colima dog in ceramic found in a shaft tomb (Tamayo Museum, Oaxaca, Mexico).



Map of Pre-Columbian archaeological sites in Mexico.

Posted on February 15, 2017 December 26, 2022 by carolinarh Posted in Pre-Columbian Art Tagged Chupícuaro culture, Colima culture, Colima culture ceramics, Mexican art of the villages, Mexican Pre-Columbian art, Nayarit culture, Olmec civilization, Pre-Columbian Art, Pre-Columbian Western Mexico, Pretty Ladies of Tlatilco, Tlatilco culture, Western Mexican Pre-Columbian ceramics, Western Mexican Pre-Columbian shaft tombs. 2 Comments

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