

Mesoamerica

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

The art and architecture of the ancient Americas is unique. Specific to this region is art of the Olmec and architecture and structures within the city of Teotihuacán. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: The Ancient Americas
2. Colossal Head From La Venta
3. Ceremonial Axe
4. Teotihuacán
5. Mural From Teotihuacán

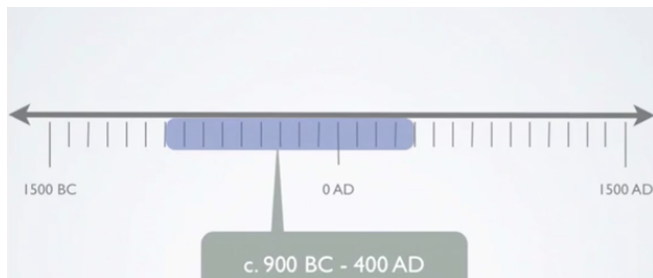
★ BIG IDEA

Mesoamerica is a region that anthropologists have designated as extending from present-day Mexico City in the north to Costa Rica in the south. This region has shared cultural characteristics that archeologists and other scholars have observed that extend over long periods of time and across different cultures. These include the cultivation of corn, squash, and beans as main food sources, a similar pantheon of deities, including the rain god and the feathered serpent, the ball game, and the 260-day calendar.

Between 8000 and 2000 BCE, the peoples of the Americas domesticated corn from a wild grass called teosinte. Through selective breeding, the seeds of teosinte eventually became corn kernels. There is a shared myth among the people of different Mesoamerican groups that they are made from corn. Other groups of people were made from wood, stone, or other substances but did not know how to thank the gods properly. The corn people thanked the gods with the substance that was the most precious to them: blood. Some people performed bloodletting sacrifices on themselves, while others sacrificed people as offerings to the gods.

1. Time Period and Location: The Ancient Americas

This lesson covers 900 BCE through 400 CE, a span of nearly 1,300 years, highlighted in the timeline below. Geographically, this lesson explores the Americas, which include all the major land masses of the Western hemisphere, most notably North, Central, and South America.



Early indigenous Americans crossed the Bering Strait sometime during Earth's last major glaciation period, when lower levels of the Bering Sea revealed a land bridge between the continents of Asia and North America. Most believe that some humans continued south, settling in the areas of modern-day Mexico, Central America, and South America. This lesson looks in particular at the locations of La Venta and Teotihuacán.

We often refer to **Mesoamerican** cultures as "**Pre-Columbian**" since they existed before European contact. When Europeans arrived in the New World, they set out to destroy Indigenous culture. Frey Diego de Landa, who was the archbishop of Yucatán, wrote about burning Maya codices, or bark paper books, and destroying their religious sculptures. He was directly responsible for the destruction of important evidence and objects regarding Maya culture and did not seem to realize it until well after the fact. Indigenous culture died out so rapidly after Spanish contact that another Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún, translated Spanish texts into Nahuatl and created the Florentine Codex as a way to preserve Indigenous knowledge before it was lost forever. For these reasons, scholars distinguish Indigenous culture before and after contact. At the same time, we have begun to recognize that the term "Pre-Columbian" is problematic in the way that it defines Indigenous people solely in relation to Europe.

📖 TERMS TO KNOW

Mesoamerica

A region that extends from central Mexico through Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

Pre-Columbian

An adjective referring to cultures that existed before the arrival of Columbus to the Americas in 1492.

2. Colossal Head From La Venta

The Olmec were the earliest identifiable culture in Mesoamerica and are often referred to as a sort of “mother culture” of Mesoamerica. They thrived in the area around the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco (Gulf Coast and further inland). They had very sophisticated trade networks, reaching all the way to Guatemala, through which they obtained much of the stone for their sculptures.

We do not know what language the **Olmec** spoke because they left behind no written records. We do not even know how they referred to themselves. The name “Olmec” means something like “rubber people” and actually comes from the Nahuatl language, spoken by the Mexica, or Aztec, who lived in Tenochtitlán, better known today as Mexico City.

A number of colossal stone heads have been found at La Venta and at other Olmec sites. The fact that they resulted from a great deal of effort suggests that they were portraits of actual rulers. Each colossal head is different, with differently shaped features and helmets that seem to have indicated social status. No one is sure how the Olmec moved the giant boulders to the site, since the stone comes from a quarry that is some distance away (60–100 miles). There was no use of the wheel in Mesoamerica prior to the European conquest, and it probably would not have been very useful anyway, since much of the terrain in this area consists of mountains, jungle, or areas with thick, thorny vegetation.

Volcanic activity is frequent in this area, providing a healthy supply of basalt, which is the stone used to make the colossal heads, from the Tuxtla Mountains. It is a type of volcanic stone created from magma that cooled quickly and produced tiny crystals, as opposed to the larger crystal formations of slower-cooling granite. Another striking aspect of these portraits is that they have many small holes in their surfaces that appear to have been drilled into them intentionally. We do not know for sure why this was done. It might have been a form of defacement, or it might have involved some sort of ritual to “release” the spirit of the person whose likeness is depicted in the sculpture.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is a colossal head from La Venta:



Colossal head from the Olmec culture

La Venta, Mexico

900–400 BCE

Basalt

This huge sculpture of an Olmec ruler is carved in basalt. At almost 8 feet tall and weighing several tons, it is believed that the features are rather individualized and depict an actual person rather than a deity. The sheer size of the statue reflects the power and importance of this individual.

Also at La Venta was an enormous pyramid 110 feet tall and made of earth. The Olmec at La Venta did not have good stone to work with, so this pyramid is made of around 100,000 cubic meters of earth fill. At one time, it had squared-off sides, but these have been worn down with time so that it now appears conical in shape. It has never been excavated, so we do not know what might be inside. Although it is less visually spectacular than the Egyptian pyramids, it is an achievement that required vast amounts of labor to complete.



The pyramid at La Venta, as seen from the south



TERM TO KNOW

Olmec

The first civilization in Mexico.

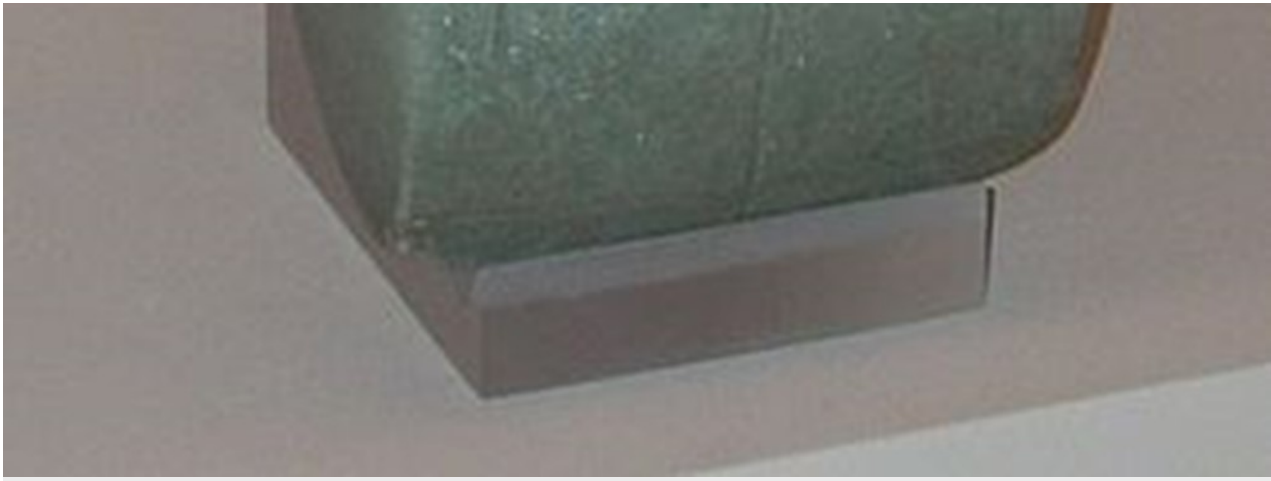
3. Ceremonial Axe

Shamanic transformation was another important aspect of Mesoamerican spirituality. The shaman is a figure with origins in Central Asia. Shamanic transformation involves the idea that there are many different levels to the universe and that the shaman is able to access other levels through a variety of methods that might involve activities such as bloodletting, ingesting psychedelic substances, starvation, sweat baths, prolonged twirling, or any activity that might induce a vision.

Shamanic transformation was a very common theme of Olmec sculpture, which often depicted people in various stages of becoming a jaguar, which was one of the most important animals and deities in Mesoamerican cosmology.

Figures that appear to be engaged in shamanic transformation have snarling, jaguar-like faces and a cleft in the top of their head, as seen in this jade ceremonial axe from La Venta. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is no conclusive interpretation for what these sculptures depict. Some scholars have also argued that there is no evidence for shamanic transformation in these images and that this interpretation amounts to grasping at straws. Without a written record, we will never know for sure.





Ceremonial axe
La Venta, Mexico
900–400 BCE
Jade

This ceremonial axe is made of jade, which is a very hard stone. Jade was one of the most valued substances in Mesoamerica because its green color made connections with life and fertility.

Another theme in Olmec sculpture associated with shamanic transformation involves figures that scholars have come to refer to as “were babies.” They are made of ceramic and are hollow inside. They have the shortened, chubby limbs of babies and often elongated heads. Their facial features include half-closed, slanted eyes and snarling mouths often associated with shamanic transformation into a jaguar or some sort of deity. Do these figures represent babies in some state of shamanic transformation? Are they portraits of Olmec rulers as infants? Another mystery associated with these figures is the fact that although they have the same visual style as other examples of Olmec art, they have been found in other parts of Mexico, outside of Olmec territory. Scholars have begun to question whether they should even be categorized as Olmec.



Olmec baby face figure

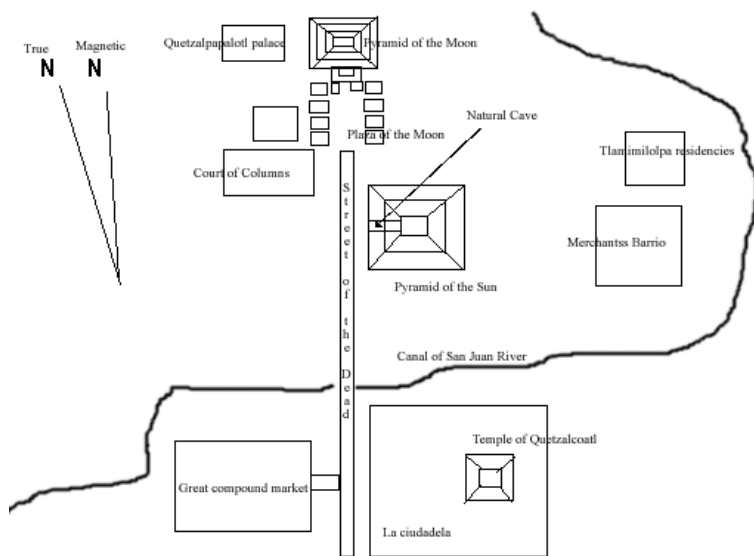
1000–300 BCE

Ceramic

4. Teotihuacán

The city of **Teotihuacán** was the largest city in Mesoamerica and sixth largest city in the world at the time, with a population between 150,000 and 200,000. It lies just northeast of modern-day Mexico City. The name “Teotihuacán” comes from Nahuatl and means “the place where the gods are born.” The people of Teotihuacán no longer inhabited their city when the Aztec built Tenochtitlán, but they saw the nearby ruins and found them fascinating. We do not know much about who the people of Teotihuacán were, what language they spoke, or what their ethnic origin was. This city thrived from about 1st century CE to 7th century, then it mysteriously collapsed.

Teotihuacán was laid out on an **axial plan**, divided into quarters by two primary axes that run north/south and east/west for about four miles. There are two massive pyramids within the city. Their modern names are the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon.



Plan of Teotihuacán

Unlike Maya, or even Olmec, settlements, there are no suggestions of what the government would have been at Teotihuacán. There are no ruler portraits, no stelae, no sense of individuality, but also no indication of an upper class that exploited agricultural workers. Was there some form of government other than an aristocracy? The inhabitants seemed to dwell almost exclusively in stone-walled apartment structures that in other parts of Mesoamerica would have been reserved exclusively for the elite.

Here is an image of what Teotihuacán looks like today. It looks like it was taken from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon. The Avenue of the Dead extends in front of it, and the Pyramid of the Sun can be seen to the left. In front of the Pyramid of the Moon is a plaza that is framed by smaller pyramids, seen in the image below. There was also a platform built in front of the Pyramid of the Moon that we think was used for rituals.



Teotihuacán, as seen from the Pyramid of the Moon

Teotihuacán, Mexico

1st century BCE to 3rd century CE

The names that we use for structures at Teotihuacán, such as the Pyramid of the Sun, Pyramid of the Moon, and Avenue of the Dead, are all translations from Nahuatl. Scholars have identified a total of eight main deities associated with the site, including a storm god, a great goddess, and the feathered serpent.

The deity thought to be the most important at Teotihuacán is the Great Goddess. The Pyramid of the Moon, which is thought to be dedicated to this goddess, is the second largest pyramid in the world, the first being the pyramid at Cholula. In the image below, you can see the pyramid itself, the platform in front of it, and the smaller pyramids surrounding it. Archaeologists think that there may have been a small temple at the top of this pyramid that was made of materials that have been destroyed. They also think that the shape of the pyramids was meant to echo the shape of the mountains behind them, making the city into a model of creation.

Sacrifices have been found inside the Pyramid of the Moon. It has been renovated and made larger at least six times. With every stage of construction, offerings were made that included carved objects as well as the bodies of people and animals.

There is a theory that the Avenue of the Dead functions as a horizontal axis mundi that connects the mountains and the pyramid to the underworld. In Maya and other cosmologies, the underworld is thought to be a watery place.



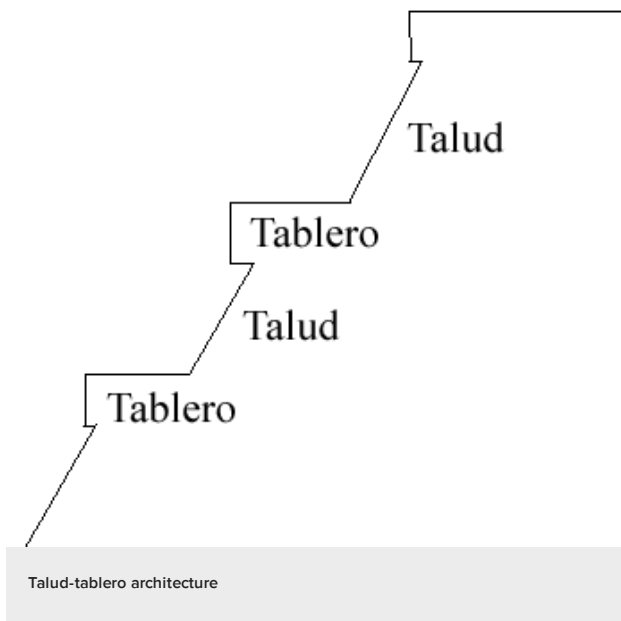
Pyramid of the Moon
Teotihuacán, Mexico

South of the Pyramid of the Sun is an enormous plaza known as the Ciudadela. It is large enough to contain around 100,000 people, or almost the entire population of Teotihuacán. Inside this plaza is a structure known as the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, named after the stucco masks that decorate its exterior. Some of the masks represent the feathered serpent, known as **Quetzalcoatl** in Nahuatl, and the masks with goggle eyes might represent Tlaloc, the rain god, although there is some debate. There are places in the eyes that at one time were set with obsidian, making them sparkle in the sunlight. The exterior of the temple was also painted and covered in seashells.



Temple of the Feathered Serpent
Teotihuacán, Mexico
1st century BCE to 3rd century CE

One of the notable design features of this temple building is the use of what is called **talud-tablero** architecture. Talud-tablero architecture involves a slanted element (talud) alternating with a flat element (tablero). The tableros, Spanish for “boards,” were often decorated with sculptural reliefs. This is the main building style of Teotihuacán, and dozens of variations on it are also present at sites throughout Mesoamerica.



TERMS TO KNOW

Teotihuacán

An expansive archaeological site in the Basin of Mexico containing the largest pyramids built during the pre-Columbian period of the Americas.

Axial Plan

The horizontal arrangement of the elements of a building or town along a central axis.

Talud-Tablero

A style of architecture characterized by a platform structure on top of a sloping surface, also referenced as the slope-and-panel style; often seen in pyramids built during the pre-Columbian period in Mesoamerica.

Quetzalcoatl

Mesoamerican deity whose name means “feathered serpent.”

5. Mural From Teotihuacán

The buildings of the city would have been covered with brightly painted murals. Take a look at this example from within an elaborate apartment complex:



Mural painting
Teotihuacán, Mexico
1st century BCE–3rd century CE

This mural depicts what appears to be a masked goddess. She is wearing a jade nose bar and ear spools, both decorations that indicate high status, as well as an elaborate headdress made of quetzal feathers. On either side of her headdress are two human hearts. These human hearts indicate the importance of human sacrifice to this community and its role in ensuring the blessings from what may be the city's patron deity. Water flows from her outstretched hands.

In fact, we cannot say for certain who this figure was, or even if this person is definitively male or female. There are many ideas, including that this represents a goddess of war, of fertility, water, or other qualities.

This mural raises other questions related to the issue of whether the people of Teotihuacán had writing. Initially, scholarly consensus was that this society did not have writing. However, after reviewing certain imagery in murals and on objects, there is a growing sense that there was a form of writing present at Teotihuacán in the form of small images that now appear to be glyphs, or picture-based forms of writing. This has not been confirmed, and none of what appears to be writing has been deciphered. So, for now, what we are able to know about Teotihuacán is limited.

SUMMARY

The art and architecture of the ancient Americas, such as the art of the Olmec and architecture and structures within the city of Teotihuacán, is unique. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of the ancient Americas**.

In doing so, you looked at several examples, including the **colossal head from La Venta**. This huge sculpture is of an Olmec ruler, carved in basalt. The sheer size of the statue reflects the power and importance of this individual. You also looked at a **ceremonial axe**, which was an example of a human-animal hybrid thought to be used as a votive statue for religious offerings to the gods.

Finally, you explored the city of **Teotihuacán**. One example of art and architecture from this city that you learned about was a **mural from Teotihuacán**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Axial Plan

The horizontal arrangement of the elements of a building or town along a central axis.

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Olmec

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