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The Olmec Masks:  Mortals or Gods?

Among the great civilizations of Mesoamerica, a few such as the Aztecs and Maya, are commonly known by many people today.  But these cultural entities had their foundations much earlier in the coastal Mexican states of Tabasco and Veracruz.  Beginning more than three thousand years ago, a people began developing what would become the first of the large ancient American civilizations.  Today we call these people Olmec.  The word Olmec comes from the Aztec Nahuatl language word “Olmecatl “ that translates as “people of the rubber country.” which simply means that these coastal citizens extracted latex from the regional rubber trees, Castilla elastica, and used this product to make the coagulated and dried orbs that were used in the Mesoamerican ballgames.  That name, Olmec, was later applied, by modern historians, to the ancient people who occupied the east coast region thousands of years before the Aztecs.  But the ancient Olmec cultural group did much more than just make bouncing rubber spheres.  They were, among other things, great workers of stone into various sizes and shapes of ornamental art.  Some, in the likeness of huge basalt human heads, weigh over twenty tons each while others were in the form of smaller stylized and realistic figurines, ceremonial weapons and the famous jade facial images – the Olmec masks.

The Olmec people lived in the coastal lowlands of eastern Mexico from before1200 BC until around 400 BC.  There they built villages and large ceremonial hubs, raised crops including maize, squash and beans by using sophisticated irrigation systems and developed an extensive trade network to travel the regional waterways as far as central Mexico and Guatemala.  It is now the accepted belief that they were the first group to build large dirt and stone pyramids in their religious/ceremonial centers.  These ingenious people are thought by many to be the direct ancestors of the Maya and they are now credited with developing a hieroglyphic writing system, an accurate annual calendar and the mathematical concept of zero as well as participating in the more gruesome human bloodletting and maybe even human sacrifice for the purpose of pleasing their gods.  The Olmec apparently worshiped multiple types of deities including serpents, jaguars and at least one that appeared to be a human child. There is no definite answer as to why this society ceased to exist but theories are that the regional rivers changed courses because of agricultural siltation and/or tectonic plate activity or because, as is the most recent theory, of extreme volcanic activity.  Whatever the actual reason, we know that this major cultural entity ceased to exist a little over two thousand years ago. But they did leave behind many artifacts that can assist archaeologists today to analyze these people - artifacts such as their fabulous jade art.

All the great Mesoamerican cultures had a high regard for jade, even more so than gold and silver.  It is believed today that the preferred green color of the mineral was associated with the color of maize, with the growth cycle and with renewal and rejuvenation after death.  It is also thought that jade was associated with life in general and with the sun and wind.  Whatever the reasons these ancient peoples revered jade, we do know that they went to great lengths to possess the stone.  The Motagua River valley in the modern day country of Guatemala was the source of the very best jade.  For the very closest Olmec villages to this valley, the natives would have had to travel over 250 miles by canoe and by foot through hostile and almost impervious jungle.  Not an easy trip for some green rock.  The stone jade is composed worldwide of two distinct minerals – nephrite and jadeite. Nephrite is not found in Mesoamerica so all the jade artifacts produced by the Olmecs and their successors are made of jadeite.  Jadeite is a pyroxene rich mineral and it comes in many colors from white to tan to pink to lavender to brown to blue to green.  The name jadeite comes from the Spanish term “piedra de ijada” which means “stone of the side” since it was believed that by rubbing jadeite pebbles on the side of a person suffering from kidney stones, pain relief would be forthcoming. It is often confused with other minerals used by the ancient lapidarists of the region - greenstones, which scientifically include albitite, omphacite and chrysaprase.  Today only skilled and knowledgeable gemologists or geologists can differentiate between true jadeite and the greenstone minerals – so most of the ancient artifacts are usually lumped under the classification jade.

The Olmec people as well as all who came after them used jade for many artistic purposes.  Of course, this was probably not art for these ancients – at least not as we consider art.  These jade objects were simply an integral part of their daily economic/religious/ceremonial beliefs and rituals.  Since jade is a relatively hard stone, being on average about 6.5-7.0 on the MOHS hardness scale (with the diamond at a 10), these natives, using only their stone tools, would have been able to manipulate the mineral into intricate shapes only with extreme perseverance and probably brute force.  But they managed to make many small realistic and anthropomorphic creatures, including humans, from this hard jade.  They also made ceremonial axes and celts and decorative facial and ear ornaments as well as thousands and thousands of small jade beads. Some of the jade beads were laboriously ground into shape while others were merely river tumbled jade cobbles that were drilled to accept a cord.  But it is the Olmec jade face masks that are so amazingly intriguing.

These masks come in a variety of shapes and sizes but most are essentially human in appearance.  Many seem to have been shaped to exactly fit the face and if not in size, then in basic form.  Most have two eye holes, some of which are long and narrow and others circular.  Above the eyes are often lightly carved or incised eye lids with raised eye brows just above them.  The nose is usually somewhat large and many of the masks have pierced nostril holes. The mouths on these masks normally, but not always, have the lips parted and have an elongated slot for the mouth opening.  Some feature teeth representations while others appear to have a toothless mouth.  Many of these masks feature large and full lips reminiscent of African people which made some early explorers and archaeologists suggest that the Olmec people came from Africa.  Now it is known that many of the native Indians in the region also have full lips even into the present time.  Numerous examples of these masks feature large ears each of which has one pierced hole in the ear lobe. A sub-type of the Olmec masks is the style called the “were-jaguar” which features almond shaped eyes, a down turned grimacing mouth and a cleft head.  Early archaeologists believed this to be a motif that suggested the offspring of the mating between a human woman and a jaguar.  Today it is acknowledged that the were-jaguar masks represent the Olmec rain god that is called Were-Jaguar or Chac.  Some of the masks, in general, are about the size of a human face but many seem to be about one half the size of an adult visage.  Most have a small hole in each edge, just above the ears, the same as on a modern mask, for the supposed purpose of attaching a band so the device could have been worn on a human head as a facial disguise.  But the smaller masks would not have fit on the face of an adult.  Perhaps they were manufactured for children or made in the likeness of the human child god.  In fact many of these masks are reminiscent of the rounded faces of infants or small children. Even though jadeite comes in a variety of colors, most Olmec face masks are in various shades of green and usually very well made and polished.  Whatever the reason these adornments were made, the ancient ones obviously had a high regard for them.  We do not know if these masks were made as funerary ornaments, since to date, none have been found in any controlled archaeological study context.  Maybe they were placed in tombs with honored deceased or maybe they were worn as symbols of power in the hierarchical societies since perhaps they were made as realistic portraits of living kings and/or priests.  Or maybe they were made to honor the newly born of the socially elite. Maybe they are indeed conjectural representations of the Olmec gods.  Or maybe they were made as stylized adaptations of man in general.  Maybe someday these questions will be answered but not today.  Today we only have these great art objects to study and admire and about which to wonder - do the Olmec masks represent mortals or gods?

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