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## Mesoamerican Art

**THE NEW WORLD** During the last Ice Age, which began about 2.5 million years ago, glaciers periodically trapped enough of the world's water to lower the level of the oceans and expose land between Asia and North America. At its greatest extent, this land bridge was a vast, rolling plain a thousand miles wide, where grasses, sagebrush, sedge, and groves of scrub willow provided food and shelter for animals and birds.



Mavan temple at Chichen Itza. Yucatan. Mexico. 9<sup>th</sup> c.

Although most areas of present-day Alaska and Canada were covered by glaciers during the Ice Age, a narrow, ice-free corridor provided access to the south. Sometime before about 12,000 years ago, perhaps as early as 20,000 to 30,000 years ago, Paleolithic hunter-gatherers emerged through this corridor and began to spread out into two vast, uninhabited continents. Between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago, bands of hunters whose tool kits included sophisticated fluted-stone spearheads traveled across most of North America. The earliest uncontested evidence puts humans at the southern end of South America by 11,000 years ago. Although contact between Siberia and Alaska continued after the ice had retreated and rising oceans had flooded the Bering Strait, the peoples of the Western Hemisphere were essentially cut off from the peoples of Africa and Eurasia until they were overrun by European conquerors beginning in the late fifteenth century CE.

In this isolation New World peoples experienced many of the same transformations that followed the end of the Paleolithic era elsewhere. In many regions they developed an agricultural way of life, based on the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash. Other plants first domesticated in the New World included potatoes, tobacco, cacao (chocolate), tomatoes, and avocados. New World peoples also domesticated many animals: turkeys, guinea pigs, llamas (and their cousins, the alpacas, guanacos, and vicunas), and, as did the peoples of the Old World, dogs.

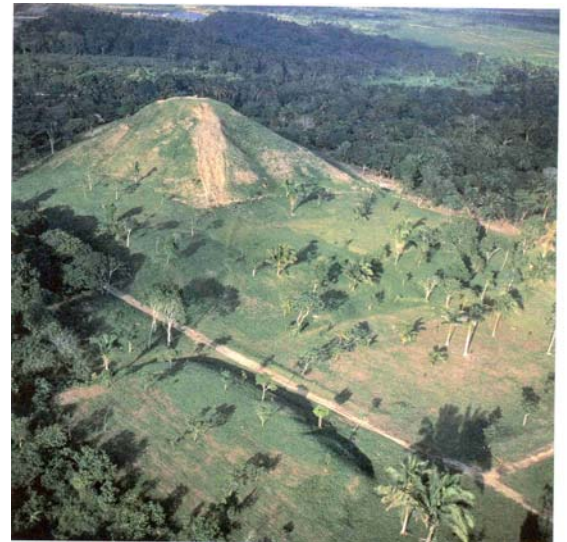
As elsewhere, the shift to agriculture in the Americas was accompanied by population growth and, in some places, the rise of hierarchical societies, the appearance of ceremonial centers and towns with monumental architecture, and the development of elaborate artistic traditions. New World cities such as Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico rivaled those of the Old World in size and splendor. New World civilizations produced sophisticated ceramic wares, although they did not develop the potter's wheel or the wheel in general, perhaps because they lacked beasts of burden like horses and oxen for exploiting its potential. The peoples of Mesoamerica—the region that extends from central Mexico to northern Central America—developed writing, a complex and accurate calendar, and a sophisticated system of mathematics. Central and South American peoples developed an advanced metallurgy and produced exquisite gold, silver, and copper jewelry. The smiths of the Andes began to produce metal weapons and agricultural implements in the first millennium CE, but Native Americans in general made tools and weapons from such other materials as bone, ivory, stone, wood, and, where it was available, obsidian, a volcanic glass capable of holding a cutting edge as fine as surgical steel. Native Americans were skilled in basketry, and in the Andes, beginning about 2000 BCE, they developed an enduring tradition of weaving that produced some of the world's finest textiles.

**MESOAMERICA** - Ancient Mesoamerica encompasses the area from north of the Valley of Mexico (the location of Mexico City) to modern Belize, Honduras, and western Nicaragua in Central America. The region is one of great contrasts, ranging from tropical rain forest to semiarid mountains. Reflecting this physical diversity, the civilizations that arose in Mesoamerica varied, but they were linked by trade and displayed an overall cultural unity. Among their common features are a complex calendrical system based on interlocking 260-day and 365-day cycles, a ritual ball game (see "The Cosmic Ball Game," page 445), and aspects of the construction of monumental ceremonial centers. Mesoamerican society was sharply divided into elite and commoner classes.

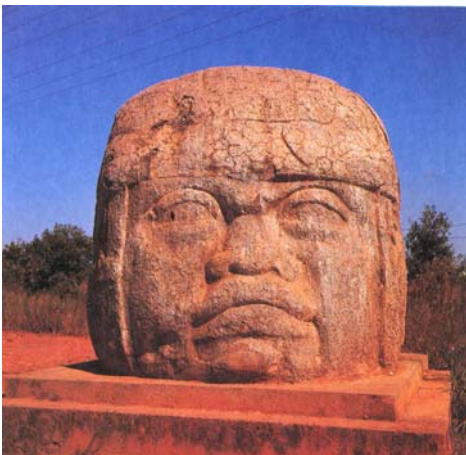
The transition to farming began in Mesoamerica between 7000 and 6000 BCE, and by 3000 to 2000 BCE settled villages were widespread. Archeologists traditionally have divided the region's subsequent history into three broad periods: Formative or Preclassic (1500 BCE-250 CE), Classic (250-900 CE), and Postclassic (900-1500 CE). This chronology derives primarily from the archeology of the Maya—the people of Guatemala and the Yucatan peninsula. The Classic period brackets the time during which the Maya erected dated stone monuments. The term reflects the view of early Mayanists that it was a kind of golden age, the equivalent of the Classical period in ancient Greece. Although this view is no longer current and the periods are only roughly applicable to other parts of Mesoamerica, the terminology has endured.

**The Olmec** The first major Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmec, emerged during the Formative period along the Gulf of Mexico, in the swampy coastal jungles of the modern Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. In dense vegetation along slow, meandering rivers, the Olmec cleared farmland, drained fields, and raised earth mounds on which they constructed religious and political centers. These centers probably housed an elite group of ruler-priests supported by a larger population of farmers who lived in villages of pole-and-thatch houses. The presence at Olmec sites of goods like obsidian, iron ore, and jade that are not found in the Gulf region but come from throughout Mesoamerica indicates that the Olmec participated in extensive long-distance trade.

The earliest Olmec center, at San Lorenzo, flourished from about 1200 to 900 BCE and was abandoned by 400 BCE. The archeological findings here include a possible ball court, an architectural feature of other major Olmec sites. Another center, at La Venta, rose to prominence after San Lorenzo declined, thriving from about 900 to 400 BCE. La Venta was built on high ground between rivers. Its most prominent feature, an earth mound known as the Great pyramid, still rises to a height of about 100 feet (fig. 12-2). This scalloped mound may have been intended to resemble a volcanic mountain, but its present form may simply be the result of erosion after thousands of years of the region's heavy rains. The Great pyramid stands at the south end of a large, open court, possibly used as a playing field, arranged on a north-south axis and defined by long, low mounds. An elaborate drainage system of stone troughs may have been used as part of a ritual honoring a water deity. Many of the physical features of La Venta—including the symmetrical arrangement of earth mounds, platforms, and central open spaces along an axis that was probably determined by astronomical observations—are characteristic of later monumental and ceremonial architecture throughout Mesoamerica. Found buried within the site were carved jade, serpentine stone, and granite artifacts.



**12-2 Great Pyramid and ball court, La Venta, Mexico. Olmec culture, c. 900-600 BCE Pyramid height approx. 100'.**



**12-3. Colossal head (no.4), from La Venta, Mexico. Olmec culture, c. 900-500 BCE. Basalt, height 7'5" (2.26 m). La Venta Park, Villahermosa, Tabasco,**

Among Olmec carvings, the most pervasive images are jaguars and so-called were-jaguars, creatures that combine human and feline features. These images suggest that Olmec religion may have involved a belief in jaguar deities that could assume human form, as well as shaman figures who could assume animal (jaguar) form and mediate between humans and the spirit world here is also sculpture showing a woman and a jaguar in close association, suggesting an origin myth involving the union of a human with a feline deity.

In addition to the smaller works in jade and serpentine, the Olmec produced an abundance of monumental basalt sculpture, including colossal heads, altars, and seated figures. The huge basalt blocks for the large works of sculpture were quarried at distant sites and transported to San Lorenzo, La Venta, and other centers. The colossal heads, ranging in height from 5 to 12 feet and weighing from 5 to more than 20 tons, are probably the best-known Olmec sculpture today (fig. 12-3). The heads represent adult males wearing close-fitting caps with chin straps and large, round earplugs. The fleshy faces have almond-shaped eyes, flat broad noses, thick protruding lips, a slight frown, and down-turned mouths. Each face is different, suggesting that they may represent specific individuals. Most scholars now consider them to be portraits of rulers.

Nine heads were found at San Lorenzo; all had been mutilated and buried about 900 BCE, about the time the site went into decline. Seventy-seven basalt monuments were found at La Venta, including four heads, which faced each other across the ceremonial core of the site.

The colossal heads and the subjects depicted on other monumental sculpture suggest that the Olmec elite, like their counterparts in later Mesoamerican civilizations, particularly the Maya, were preoccupied with the commemoration of rulers and historic events. This preoccupation was probably an important factor in the development of writing and calendrical systems, which first appeared around 600 to 500 BCE in areas with strong Olmec influence. By 200 CE forests and swamps were reclaiming Olmec sites, but Olmec civilization had spread widely throughout Mesoamerica and was to have an enduring influence on its successors. As the Olmec centers of the Gulf Coast faded, the great Classic period centers at Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico, at Monte Alban in the Valley of Oaxaca, and in the Maya region were beginning their ascendancy.

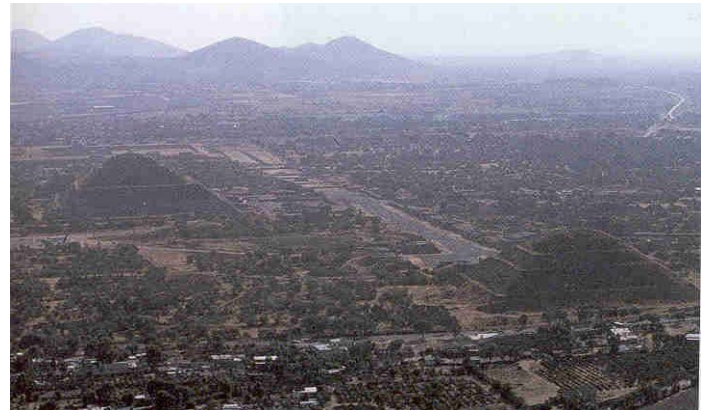
The naturalistic colossal heads found at La Venta and San Lorenzo are sculpture in the round that measure about 8 feet in diameter. They are carved from basalt boulders that were transported to the Gulf Coast from the Tuxtla Mountains, more than 60 miles inland.

## Teotihuacan

Teotihuacan is located some 30 miles northeast of present-day Mexico City. Early in the first millennium CE it began a period of rapid growth, and by 200 it had emerged as a significant center of commerce and manufacturing, the first large city-state in the Americas. One reason for its wealth was its control of a source of high-quality obsidian. Goods made at Teotihuacan, including obsidian tools and pottery, were distributed widely throughout Mesoamerica in exchange for luxury items such as the brilliant green feathers of the quetzal bird, used for priestly headdresses, and the spotted fur of the jaguar, used for ceremonial garments. The city's farmers terraced hillsides and drained swamps, and on fertile, reclaimed land they grew the common Mesoamerican staple foods, including corn, squash, and beans. From the fruit of the spiky-leaved maguey plant they fermented pulque, a mildly alcoholic brew still consumed today.

At its height, between 350 and 650 CE, Teotihuacan covered nearly 9 square miles and had a population of some 200,000, making it the largest city in the Americas and one of the largest in the world at that time (figs. 12-4, 12-5). Whether through conquest or trade—archeologists are not certain which—It exerted far-reaching influence. The site of Kaminaljuyu in the highlands of Guatemala, for example, shows evidence of close contact with Teotihuacan. The people of Teotihuacan worshiped many gods that were recognizably antecedent to gods worshiped by later Mesoamerican people, including the Aztec, who dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest. Among these are the Rain God (possibly also the god of war and sacrifice), known to the Aztec as Tlaloc, and the Feathered Serpent, known to the Maya as Kukulcan and to the Aztec as Quetzalcoatl.

Sometime in the middle of the eighth century disaster struck Teotihuacan: the ceremonial center burned, and the city went into a permanent decline. Nevertheless, its influence continued as other centers throughout northern Mesoamerica borrowed and transformed its art and imagery over the next several centuries. The site was never entirely abandoned, however, because it remained a legendary pilgrimage center until the time of the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. The Aztec revered the site, believing it to be the place where the gods created the sun and the moon. Its name, Teotihuacan, is an Aztec word meaning "The City (gathering place) of the Gods." Its principal monuments include the pyramid of the Sun and the pyramid of the Moon.



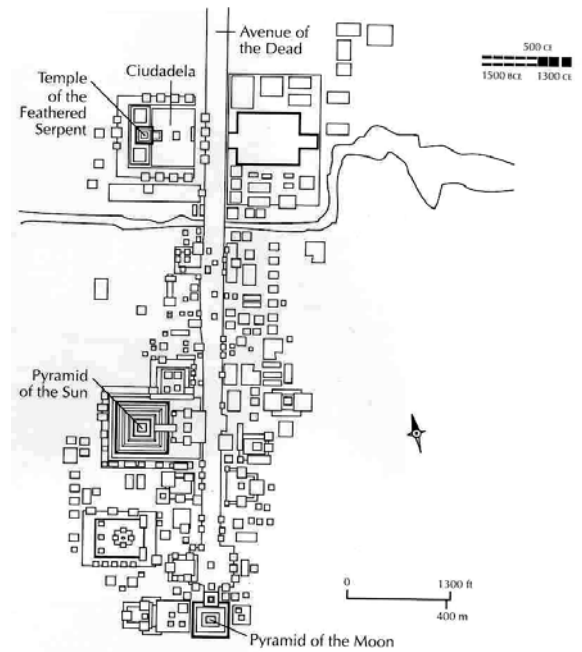
**12-4. Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico. Teotihuacan culture, 350-650 CE. The pyramid of the Moon is at the lower right, the Pyramid of the Sun at the middle left, and the Ciudadela and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at the upper left.**

The so-called Avenue of the Dead, the heart of the city, is a broad thoroughfare laid out on a north-south axis and extending for more than 3 miles. Another major thoroughfare intersects it at right angles, establishing a grid to which the rest of the city strictly conforms. Much of the ceremonial center, in a pattern typical of Mesoamerica, is characterized by the symmetrical arrangement of structures around open courts or plazas. The pyramid of the Sun flanks the Avenue of the Dead to the east. It is built over a four-chambered cave with a spring that may have been the original focus of worship at the site and the source of its prestige. The largest of Teotihuacan's architectural monuments, the pyramid of the Sun is more than 210 feet high and measures about 720 feet on each side at its base. It rises in a series of sloping steps to a flat platform, where a two-room temple once stood. A monumental stone stairway led from level to level up the side of the pyramid to the temple platform. The exterior was faced with stone and stucco and painted. The pyramid of the Moon, not quite as large as the pyramid of the Sun, stands at the north end of the Avenue of the Dead, facing a large plaza flanked by smaller, symmetrically placed platforms.

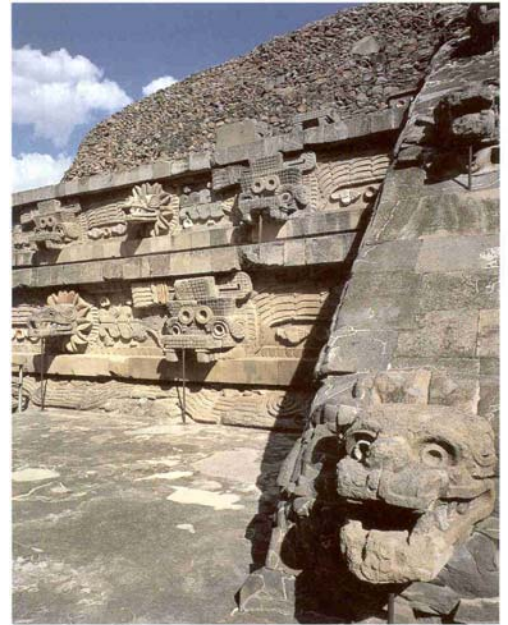
In the heart of the city, at the intersection of the Avenue of the Dead and the main east-west thoroughfare, is the Ciudadela, a vast sunken plaza surrounded by temple platforms. One of the city's principal religious and political centers, the Ciudadela could accommodate an assembly of more than 60,000 people. Its focal point was the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, or Quetzalcoatl. This structure exhibits the *talud-tablero* construction that is a hallmark of the Teotihuacan architectural style. The sloping base, or *talud*, of each platform supports a vertical *tablero*, or **entablature**, which is surrounded by a frame and often filled with sculptural decoration. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent was enlarged several times, and typical of Mesoamerican practice, each enlargement completely enclosed the previous structure, like the concentric layers of an onion.

Archeological excavations of earlier-phase *tableros* and a stairway balustrade have revealed painted reliefs of the Feathered Serpent, the goggle-eyed Rain God (or Fire God, according to some), and aquatic shells and snails (fig. 12-6). Their flat, angular, abstract style is typical of Teotihuacan art and is a marked contrast to the three-dimensional, curvilinear style of Olmec art. The Rain God has a squarish, stylized head with protruding lips, huge round eyes originally inlaid with obsidian and surrounded by colored circles, and large, circular earspools. The fanged serpent heads, perhaps composites of snakes and other creatures, emerge from an aureole of stylized feathers. It is tempting to read cosmic imagery into the sculpture. The Rain God and the Feathered Serpent may represent alternating wet and dry seasons, may be symbols of regeneration and cyclical renewal, or may have some other meaning that has been lost.

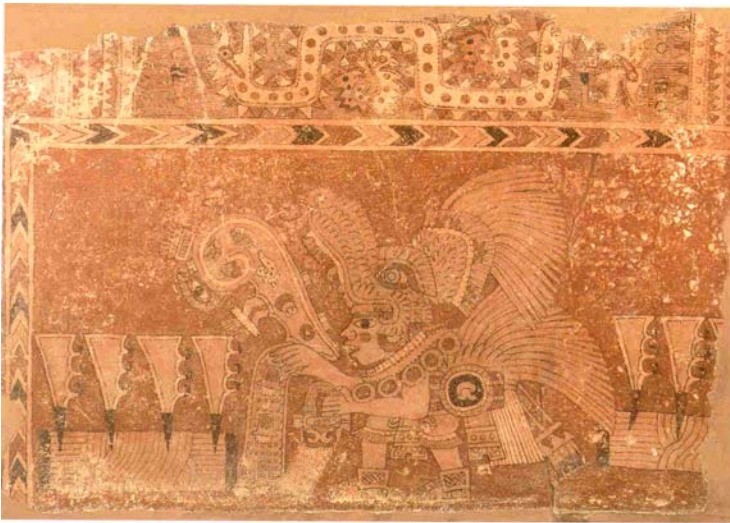
The residential sections of Teotihuacan adhered to the grid established in the city's center. The large palaces of the elite, with as many as forty-five rooms and seven patios, stood nearest the ceremonial center. Artisans, foreign traders, and peasants lived farther away, in less luxurious compounds. The palaces and more humble homes alike were rectangular, one-story structures with high walls, thatched roofs, and suites of rooms arranged symmetrically around open courts. Walls were plastered and, in the homes of the elite, covered with paintings.



12-5. Plan of the ceremonial center of Teotihuacan



12.6 Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the Ciudadela, Teotihuacan, Mexico. Teotihuacan culture. c 350 CE.



**12-7. Maguey Bloodletting Ritual, fragment of a fresco from Teotihuacan, Mexico.** Teotihuacan culture, 600-750 CE. Pigment on lime plaster, 32 ¼ x 45 ¼ " (82 x 116.1 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art. The maguey plant supplied the people of Teotihuacan with food; fiber for making clothing, rope, and paper; and the sacramental drink pulque. As this painting indicates, priestly officials used it in rituals of self-sacrifice to draw their own blood.

Teotihuacan's artists worked in a true fresco technique, applying pigments directly on damp lime plaster. Their flat, abstract-style drawing is assured, and their use of color is subtle—one work may include five shades of red with touches of ochre, green, and blue. A detached fragment of a wall painting, now in The Cleveland Museum of Art, depicts a bloodletting ritual in which an elaborately dressed man enriches and revitalizes the earth with his own blood (fig. 12-7). The man's Feathered Serpent headdress, decorated with precious quetzal feathers, indicates his high rank. He stands between rectangular plots of earth planted with bloody maguey spines and scatters seeds or drops of blood from his right hand, as indicated by the panel with conventionalized symbols for blood, seeds, and flowers. The speech scroll emerging from his open mouth symbolizes his ritual chant. The visual weight accorded the headdress and speech scroll suggests that the man's priestly office and chanted words are essential elements of the ceremony. Above the figure is a two-headed, spotted serpent holding two birds in its angular coils. Such bloodletting rituals were not limited to Teotihuacan but were widespread in Mesoamerica.

## The Maya

The Maya homeland in southern Mesoamerica includes Guatemala, the Yucatan peninsula, Belize, and the eastern part of Honduras and El Salvador. The remarkable civilization created there endured to the time of the Spanish conquest and is still reflected in the culture of the Maya's present-day descendants. The ancient Maya are noted for a number of achievements. They developed ways to produce high agricultural yields in the seemingly inhospitable tropical rain forest of the Yucatan. In densely populated cities they built imposing pyramids, temples, palaces, and administrative structures. They developed the most advanced hieroglyphic writing in Mesoamerica and the most sophisticated version of the Mesoamerican calendrical system (see "Maya Record Keeping," page 452). With these tools they documented the accomplishments of their rulers in monumental commemorative stelae, in books, on ceramic vessels, and on wall paintings. (Scholars have determined the relationship between the Maya calendar and the European calendar, making it possible to date Maya artifacts with a precision unknown elsewhere in the Americas.) They studied astronomy and the natural cycles of plants and animals and developed the mathematical concepts of zero and place value before they were known in Europe.

An increasingly detailed picture of the Maya has been emerging from recent archeological research and advances in deciphering their writing. That picture shows a society divided into competing centers, each with a hereditary ruler and an elite class of nobles and priests supported by a far larger class of farmer-commoners. Rulers established their legitimacy, maintained links with their divine ancestors, and sustained the gods through elaborate rituals, including ball games, bloodletting ceremonies, and human sacrifice. These rituals occurred in the pyramids, temples, and plazas that dominated Maya cities. Rulers commemorated such events and their military exploits on carved stelae. A complex pantheon of deities, many with several manifestations, presided over the Maya universe.

Olmec influence was widespread in the Maya area during the middle Preclassic period (1000-300 BCE). The earliest distinctively Maya centers emerged during the late Preclassic period (300 BCE-250 CE), and Maya civilization reached its peak in the southern lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula during the Classic period (250-900 CE). Probably due to increased warfare and growing pressure on agricultural resources, the sites in the southern lowlands were abandoned at the end of the Classic period. The focus of Maya civilization then shifted to the northern Yucatan during the Postclassic period (900-1500 CE).

### Classic Period Architecture at Tikal and Palenque.

The monumental buildings of Maya cities were masterful examples of the use of architecture for public display and propaganda. Seen from outside and afar, they would have impressed the common people with the power and authority of the elite and the gods they served.

Tikal, in what is now northern Guatemala, was the largest Classic period Maya city, with a population of as many as 70,000 at its height. Like other Maya cities—and unlike Teotihuacan, with its rigid grid—Tikal conformed to the uneven terrain of the rain forest. Plazas, pyramid-temples, ball courts, and other structures stood on high ground connected by elevated roads, or causeways. One major causeway, 80 feet wide, led from the center of the city to outlying residential areas.

Figure 12-8 shows part of the ceremonial core of Tikal. The structure on the right, known as the North Acropolis, follows a north-south axis and dates to the early Classic period. It contained many royal tombs and covers earlier structures that date to the origin of the city, about 500 BCE. The tall pyramid in the center is known as Temple I or the Temple of the Giant Jaguar. It covers the tomb of Au Cacau (Lord Chocolate, 682-c. 727), who began an ambitious expansion of Tikal after a period in the sixth and early seventh century CE when there was little new construction at this or other major Maya sites. Under Au Cacau and his successors, Tikal's influence grew, with evidence of contacts that extended from highland Mexico to Costa Rica.

Temple I faces a companion pyramid, Temple II, across a large plaza. These two structures changed the orientation of the ceremonial center from north-south to east-west. The new plaza provided a monumental entrance to the North Acropolis, and the two new pyramids framed the ancestral core of the city, visually linking old and new.

From Au Cacau's tomb in the limestone bedrock, Temple I rises above the forest canopy to a height of more than 40 feet. It has nine layers, probably reflecting the belief, current among the Aztec and the Maya at the time of the Spanish conquest, that the underworld had nine levels. Priests climbed the steep stone staircase on the exterior to the temple on top, which consists of two long, parallel rooms covered with a steep roof supported by **corbeled vaults**. It is typical of Maya enclosed stone structures, which resemble the kind of pole-and-thatch houses the Maya still build in parts of the Yucatan today. The only entrance to the temple was on the long side, facing the plaza and the commemorative stelae erected there. The crest that rises over the roof of the temple, known as a **roof comb**, was originally covered with brightly painted sculpture.



**12-8. North Acropolis (right) and Temple 1, called the Temple of the Giant Jaguar (tomb of Au Cacau), Tikal, Guatemala. Maya culture. North Acropolis, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE; Temple 1, c. 700 CE** Tikal has been the focus of an extended program of research directed by archeologists from the University of Pennsylvania in cooperation with the Guatemalan government. This research is part of an explosive growth in Maya studies that has enormously enriched our understanding of Maya culture and history.



Palenque, located in the Mexican state of Chiapas, rose to prominence in the late Classic period. Hieroglyphic inscriptions record the beginning of its royal dynasty in 431 CE, but the city had only limited regional importance until the ascension of a powerful ruler, Lord Pacal (Maya for "shield"), who ruled from 615 to 683 CE. He and the son who succeeded him commissioned most of the structures visible at Palenque today. As at Tikal, major buildings are grouped on high ground. A northern complex has five temples, two nearby adjacent temples, and a ball court. A central group includes the so-called Palace, the Temple of the Inscriptions, and two other temples (fig. 12-9). A third group of temples lies to the southeast.

**12-9 Palace (foreground) and Temple of the Inscriptions (tomb-pyramid of Lard Pacal), Palenque, Mexico. Maya culture, 7<sup>th</sup> c CE**

The palace in the central group—a series of buildings on two levels around three open courts, all on a raised terrace—may have been an administrative rather than a residential complex. The Temple of the Inscriptions next to it is a pyramid that rises to a height of about 75 feet. Like Temple I at Tikal, it has nine levels. The shrine on the summit consisted of a portico with five entrances and a three-part, vaulted inner chamber surmounted by a tall roof comb. Its facade still retains much of its stucco sculpture. The inscriptions that give the building its name were carved on the back wall of the portico and the central inner chamber.

In 1952 an archeologist studying the structure of the Temple of the Inscriptions discovered a corbel-vaulted stairway beneath the summit shrine. This stairway descended almost 80 feet to a small subterranean chamber that contained the undisturbed tomb of Lord Pacal himself, and in it were some remarkable examples of Classic sculpture.

**Classic Period Sculpture.** Lord Pacal lay in a monolithic sarcophagus with a lid carved in low relief that showed him balanced between the spirit world and the earth (fig. 12-10). With knees bent, feet twisted, and face, hands, and torso upraised, he lies on the head of a creature that represents the setting sun. Together they are falling into the jaws of the underworld. The image above him, which ends in the profile head of a god and a fantastic bird, represents the sacred tree of the Maya. Its roots are in the earth, its trunk is in the world, and its branches support the celestial bird in the heavens. The message is one of death and rebirth. Lord Pacal, like the setting sun, will rise again to join the gods after falling into the underworld. Lord Pacal's ancestors, carved on the side of his sarcophagus, witness his death and apotheosis. They wear elaborate headdresses and are shown only from the waist up, as though emerging from the earth. Among them are Lord Pacal's parents, Lady White Quetzal and Lord Yellow Jaguar-Parrot, supporting the contention of some scholars that both maternal and paternal lines transmitted royal power among the Maya.



**12-10. Sarcophagus lid, in the tomb of Lord Pacal, Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Mexico. Maya culture. c. 683 CE. Limestone, approx. 12'6" x 7'**



**12-11. Portrait of Lord Pacal, from his tomb, Temple of the Inscriptions. Mid- 7th century CE. Stucco, height 16 7/8" (43 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City. This portrait of the youthful Lord Pacal may have been placed in his tomb as an offering. Possibly it formed part of the original exterior decoration of the Temple of the Inscriptions.**

Elite men and women, rather than gods, were the usual subjects of Maya sculpture, and most show rulers dressed as warriors performing religious rituals in elaborate costumes and headdresses. The Maya favored low-relief carving with sharp outlines on flat stone surfaces, but they also excelled at three-dimensional clay and stucco sculpture. A stucco portrait of Lord Pacal found with his sarcophagus shows him as a young man wearing a diadem of jade and flowers {fig. 12-11}. His features—sloping forehead and elongated skull (babies had their heads bound to produce this shape), large curved nose (enhanced by an ornamental bridge, perhaps of latex), full lips, and open mouth—are characteristic of the Maya ideal of beauty. Traces of pigment indicate that this portrait, like much Maya sculpture, was colorfully painted.

**Classic Period Painting.** Maya painting survives on ceramics and a few large murals. Most illustrated books have perished except for a few postconquest examples with astronomical and divinatory information. Scribes and vase painters were often members of the ruling elite and perhaps included members of the royal family not in the direct line of succession. Vases painted in the so-called **codex style**, referring to books of folded paper made from the maguey plant, often show a fluid line and elegance similar to that of the manuscripts. A late Classic cylindrical vase in the codex style (fig. 12-12) may illustrate an episode from a legend recounted in the Book of Popol Vuh, a compendium of Maya myths written in Spanish in the sixteenth century by a Maya noble. The protagonists of this legend, the mythical Hero twins, defeat the Lords of Xibalba, the Maya

underworld, and overcome death. The vessel shows one of the Lords of Xibalba, an aged-looking being known to archeologists as God L, sitting inside a temple on a raised platform. Five female deities attend him. The god ties a wrist cuff on the attendant kneeling to his left. Another attendant, seated outside the temple, looks over her shoulder at a scene in which two men sacrifice a bound victim. A rabbit in the foreground writes in a manuscript, reminding us of the Maya obsession with historical records, as well as of the many books now lost. The two men may be the Hero twins and the bound victim a bystander they sacrificed and then brought back to life in order to gain the confidence of the Xibalban lords. The inscriptions on the vessel have not been entirely translated. They include a calendar reference to the Death God and to Venus, the evening star, which the Maya associated with war and sacrifice.

**Postclassic Art.** A northern Maya group called the Itza rose to prominence when the focus of Maya civilization shifted northward in the Postclassic period. Their principal center, Chichen Itza, which means "at the mouth of the well of the Itza," grew from a village located near a sacred well. The city flourished from the ninth to the thirteenth century CE, eventually covering about 6 square miles. It shares many features with the site of Tula in central Mexico, but archeologists are uncertain what relationship the two centers had to each other.



**12-13. Castillo, with Chacmool in foreground, Chichen Itza. Yucatan. Mexico. Mava culture. 9th-13th century**

One of Chichén Itzá's most conspicuous structures is a massive pyramid in the center of a large plaza (fig. 12-13). Embellished with figures of the Feathered Serpent, this structure is known today as the Castillo (Spanish for "castle"). A stairway on each side leads to a square, blocky temple on its summit. At the spring and fall equinoxes, the rising sun casts an undulating, serpentlike shadow on the stairway balustrades. Like earlier Maya pyramids, the Castillo has nine levels, but many other features of Chichén Itzá are markedly different from earlier sites. The Castillo, for example, is lower and broader than the stepped pyramids of Tikal and Palenque, and Chichen Itza's buildings have wider rooms. Another prominent feature not found at earlier sites is the use of pillars and columns. Chichén Itzá has broad, open galleries surrounding courtyards and inventive columns in the form of inverted, descending serpents. Brilliantly colored relief sculpture covered the buildings of Chichen Itza, and paintings of feathered serpents, jaguars, coyotes, eagles, and composite mythological creatures adorned its interior rooms. The surviving works show narrative scenes that emphasize the prowess of warriors and the skill of ritual ball players.

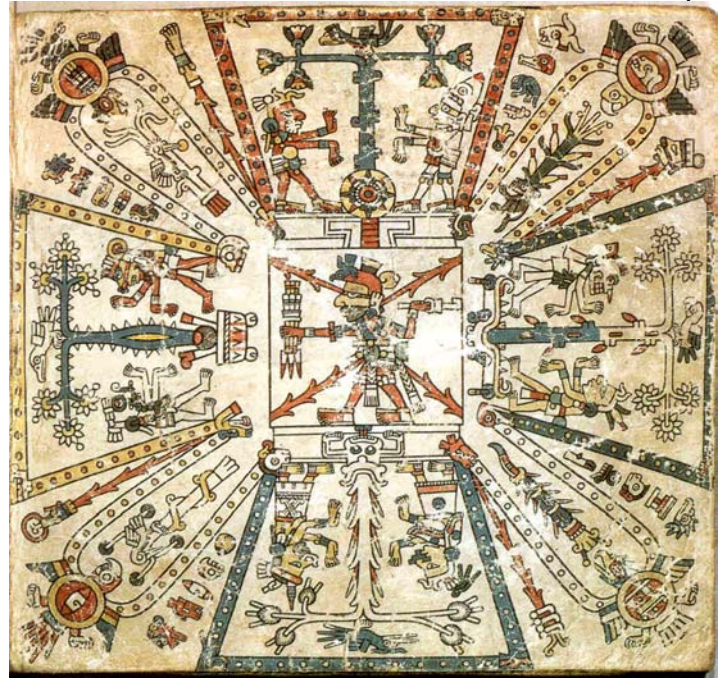
Sculpture at Chichén Itzá, including the serpent columns and the half-reclining figures known as Chacmools (see fig. 12-13), has the sturdy forms, proportions, and angularity of architecture. It lacks the curving forms and subtlety of Classic Maya sculpture. The Chacmools probably represent fallen warriors and were used to receive sacrificial offerings. They once typified pre-Columbian sculpture for many Westerners. After Chichén Itzá's decline, Mayapán, on the north coast of the Yucatan, became the principal Maya center. But by the time the Spanish arrived, Mayapán, too, had declined. The Maya people and much of their culture would survive the conquest despite the imposition of Hispanic customs and beliefs. They continue to speak their own languages, to venerate traditional sacred places, and to follow traditional ways.

## The Aztecs

Early in November 1519, the army of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés beheld for the first time the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. The shimmering city, which seemed to be floating on the water, was built on islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico, linked by broad causeways to the mainland. One of Cortés's companions later recalled the wonder the Spanish felt at that moment: "When we saw so many cities and villages built on the water and other great towns and that straight and level causeway going towards [Tenochtitlan], we were amazed...on account of the great towers and [temples] and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream" (cited in Berdan, page 1).



The startling mirage that Cortés's soldiers saw was indeed real, a city of stone built on islands— city that held many treasures and many mysteries. Much of the period before the conquistadores' arrival still remains enigmatic, but a rare manuscript that survived the Spanish Conquest depicts the preconquest worldview of peoples of Mexico at that time, though it is uncertain whether the manuscript originated with the Aztec or their rivals the Mixtec. At the center of the image here is the ancient fire god Xiuhtecutli (fig. 23-1). Radiating from him are the four directions—each associated with a specific color—as well as a deity and a tree with a bird in its branches. In each corner, to the right of a U-shaped band, is an attribute of the god Tezcatlipoca, an omnipotent, primal deity, the "smoking mirror" who could see everything—in the upper right a head, in the upper left an arm, in the lower left a foot, and in the lower right bones. Streams of blood flow from these attributes to the fire god in the center. Such images are filled with important, symbolically coded information—even the dots refer to the number of days in one aspect of the Mesoamerican calendar—and they were integral parts of the culture of the Americas.



**23-1 A view of the world, detail from Codex Rejervary-Mayer. Aztec or Mixtec, C. 1400-1521. Paint on animal hide, each page 7" x 7", total length 13'3". The National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool, England**

**INDIGENOUS AMERICAN ART** When the first European explorers and conquerors arrived, the Western Hemisphere was already inhabited from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego by peoples with long and complex histories and rich and varied cultural traditions (see "Foundations of Civilization in the Americas: below). This chapter focuses on the arts of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, Andean South America, and North America just prior to and in the wake of their encounter with an expansionist Europe.

Although art was central to their lives, the peoples of the Americas set aside no special objects as "works of art." For them, everything had a function. Some objects were essentially utilitarian and others had ritual uses and symbolic associations, but people drew no distinctions between art and other aspects of material culture or between the fine arts and the decorative arts. Understanding Native American art thus requires an understanding of the cultural context in which it was made, a context that in many cases has been lost to time or to the disruptions of the European conquest. Fortunately, art history and archeology have recently contributed to the recovery of at least some of that lost context.

**MEXICO AND SOUTH AMERICA** Two great empires—the Aztec in Mexico and the Inka in South America—rose to prominence in the fifteenth century at about the same time that European adventurers began to explore the oceans in search of new trade routes to Asia. In the encounter that followed, the Aztec and Inka Empires were destroyed.

### The Aztec Empire

The people who lived in the remarkable city that Cortés found were then rulers of much of Mexico. Their rise to such power had been recent and swift. Only 400 years earlier, according to their own legends, they had been a nomadic people living on the shores of the mythological Lake Aztlan somewhere to the northwest of the Valley of Mexico, where present-day Mexico City is located. They called themselves the Mexica, hence the name Mexico. The term Aztec derives from Aztlan.

At the urging of their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec began a long migration away from Lake Aztlan, arriving in the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century. Driven from place to place, they eventually ended up in the marshes on the edge of Lake Texcoco. There they settled on an island where they had seen an eagle perching on a prickly pear cactus (tenochtli), a sign that Huitzilopochtli told them would mark the end of their wandering. They called the place Tenochtitlan. The city, like Venice, grew on a collection of islands linked by canals.

Through a series of alliances and royal marriages, the Aztec gradually rose to prominence, emerging less than a century before the arrival of Cortés as the head of a powerful alliance and the dominant power in the valley. Only then did they begin the aggressive expansion that brought them tribute from all over Central Mexico and transformed Tenochtitlan into the glittering capital 1400 that so impressed the invading Spanish.

Aztec society was divided into roughly three classes: an elite of rulers and nobles, a middle class of professional merchants and luxury artisans, and a lower class of farmers and laborers. The luxury artisans were known as *Toltecca*, reflecting Aztec admiration for 'the earlier Toltec civilization, which had fallen in the thirteenth century. Commoners and elite alike received rigorous military training.

Aztec religion was based on a complex pantheon that combined the Aztec deities with more ancient ones that had long been worshiped in Central Mexico. According to Aztec belief, the gods had created the current universe at the ancient city of Teotihuacan. Its continued existence depended on human actions, including rituals of bloodletting and human sacrifice. The end of each round of fifty-two years in the Mesoamerican calendar was a particularly dangerous time, requiring a special fire-lighting ritual. Sacrificial victims sustained the sun god in his daily course through the sky. Huitzilopochtli, son of the earth mother Coatlicue and the Aztec patron deity associated with the sun and warfare, also required sacrificial victims so that he could, in a regular repetition of the events surrounding his birth, drive the stars and the moon from the sky at the beginning of each day. The stars were his half brothers, and the moon, Coyolxauhqui, was his half sister. When Coatlicue conceived Huitzilopochtli by inserting a ball of feathers into her chest as she was sweeping, his jealous siblings conspired to kill her. When they attacked, Huitzilopochtli emerged from her body fully grown and armed, drove off his brothers, and destroyed his half sister, Coyolxauhqui.

Most Aztec books were destroyed in the wake of the Spanish Conquest, but the work of Aztec scribes appears in several documents created for Spanish administrators after the conquest. The first page of the *Codex Mendoza*, prepared for the Spanish viceroy in the sixteenth century, can be interpreted as an idealized representation of both the city of Tenochtitlan and its sacred ceremonial precinct (fig. 23-2). An eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus—the symbol of the city—fills the center of the page. Waterways divide the city into four quarters, which are further subdivided into wards, as represented by the seated figures. The victorious warriors at the bottom of the page represent Aztec conquests.

The focal point of the sacred precinct—probably symbolized in figure 23-2 by the temple or house at the top of the page—was the Great Pyramid, a 130-foot -high stepped double pyramid with dual temples on top, one of which was dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and the other to Tlaloc, the god of rain and fertility. Two steep staircases led up the west face of this structure from the plaza in front of it. Sacrificial victims climbed these stairs to the Temple of Huitzilopochtli at the summit, where several priests threw them over a stone and another quickly cut open



**23-2. The Founding of Tenochtitlan, page from *Codex Mendoza*. Aztec, 16th century. Ink and color on paper, 8 7/16 x 12 6/16" The Bodleian**



**23-3 Rock-cut sanctuary, Malinalco, Mexico. Aztec, 15<sup>th</sup> c., modern thatched roof.**

their chests and pulled out their still-throbbing hearts. Their bodies were then rolled down the stairs and dismembered. Thousands of severed heads were said to have been kept on a skull rack in the plaza, represented in figure 23-2 by the rack with a single skull to the right of the eagle. During the winter rainy season the sun rose behind the Temple of Tlaloc, and during the dry season it rose behind the Temple of Huitzilopochtli. The double temple thus united two natural forces, sun and rain, or fire and water. During the spring and autumn equinoxes, the sun rose between the two temples, illuminating the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, an ancient creator god associated with the calendar, civilization, and the arts.

Like other Mesoamerican peoples, the Aztec intended their temples to resemble mountains. They also carved shrines and temples directly into the mountains surrounding the Valley of Mexico. A steep flight of stairs leads up to one such temple carved into the side of a mountain at Malinalco (fig. 23-3). The formidable entrance, which resembles the open mouth of the earth monster, leads into a circular room (the thatched roof is modern). If the temple itself is a mountain, surely this space is a symbolic cave, the womb of the earth. A pit for blood sacrifices opens into the heart of the mountain. Stylized eagle and jaguar skins carved into a semicircular bench around the interior are symbols of two Aztec military orders, suggesting that members of those orders performed rites here.

Sculpture of serpents and serpent heads on the Great Pyramid in Tenochtitlan associated it with the "Hill of the Serpent," where Huitzilopochtli slew the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. A huge circular relief of the dismembered goddess once lay at the foot of the temple stairs, as if the enraged and triumphant Huitzilopochtli had cast her there like a sacrificial victim (fig. 23-4). Her torso is in the center, surrounded by her head and limbs. A rope around her waist is attached to a skull. She has



bells on her cheeks and balls of down in her hair. She wears a magnificent headdress and has distinctive ear ornaments composed of disks, rectangles, and triangles. The sculpture is two-dimensional in concept with a deeply cut background.

The Spanish built their own capital, Mexico City, over the ruins of Tenochtitlan and built a cathedral on the site of Tenochtitlan's sacred precinct. An imposing statue of Coatlicue, mother of Huitzilopochtli, was found near the cathedral during excavations there in the late eighteenth century (fig. 43-5). One of the conquistadores described seeing such a statue covered with blood inside the Temple of Huitzilopochtli, where it would have stood high above the vanquished Coyolxauhqui. Coatlicue means "she of the serpent skirt," and this broad-shouldered figure with clawed hands and feet has a skirt of twisted snakes. A pair of serpents, symbols of gushing blood, rise from her neck to form her head. Their eyes are her eyes; their fangs, her tusks. The writhing serpents of her skirt also form her body. Around her stump of a neck hangs a necklace of sacrificial offerings—hands, hearts, and a dangling skull. Despite the surface intricacy, the sculpture's simple, bold, and blocky forms create a single visual whole. The colors with which it was originally painted would have heightened its dramatic impact.

**23-5 The Mother Goddess, Coatlicue. Aztec, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Stone, height 8'6". Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.**



**23-4 The Moon Goddess, Coyolxauhqui. Aztec, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Stone, diameter 11'6". This disk was discovered accidentally in 1978 by workers from a utility company who were excavating at a street corner in central**