

THE MESOAMERICAN GALLERY

Background Information for Teachers

The Mesoamerican cultures represented in this gallery cover more than three thousand years of prehistory.

In the Gulf Coast wall case are objects from the Olmec culture, a group whose ceremonial centers were located in present-day Veracruz and Tabasco states, in Mexico. The earliest Olmec remains date to 1200 BCE¹, and range from giant stone heads weighing several tons, to small highly polished jade figures, such as those displayed on the gold background in the wall case.

In the same case are objects made by later groups in the area, groups who created ceremonial centers, ball courts, and monumental art. Some of the ball game paraphernalia includes a stone yoke worn by ball players during ceremonies preceding the game, a palmate stone believed to have been worn in conjunction with a padded belt and used as a striking surface. The pottery figure near the stone yoke would have been placed around the hips in the same fashion. The ball game was played in a rectangular court, with a solid rubber ball weighing up to five pounds.

The Maya sites excavated by the Penn Museum include Piedras Negras in Guatemala and Caracol in Belize. The large stelas dominating the gallery are from those two sites. The stelas are historical, presenting information relating to a particular period of time. The Maya had developed a writing system used extensively during the Classic period (300-900 CE) on their stelas and temple pyramids; the more than nine hundred

¹ We are using the acronyms BCE and CE, meaning Before Common Era and Common Era respectively, in place of the earlier designation for dating of BC and AD.

glyphs are, as yet, only partially understood. Stela 14 celebrates the assumption of the throne of Piedras Negras by a 12 ½ year-old boy. His footprints can be seen ascending a partially obscured ladder to the royal mat; his mother, in profile, looks up at him. His elaborate earplugs and necklace may have been jade, a most important status symbol among the Maya. In the freestanding floor case to your right as you face Stela 14 are jade, obsidian, shell, and bone objects from Maya burials at Piedras Negras. Jade was, on occasion, inlaid as you can see from the teeth of a ruling-class Maya. In the wall cases adjoining this freestanding case are polychrome vessels found in burials.

As you turn your back to Stela 14, the wall cases facing you contain materials from Central Mexico. The case on the left has small pottery figures dating back to 1500 BCE. The articulated figure may have had ceremonial function. The middle case has an engraving, which shows Tenochtitlan, the city of the Aztecs, as it appeared at the time of the conquest by Spaniards in 1519 CE. The city was completely destroyed during the fighting, and the objects and the remains of monumental sculpture still rest under modern Mexico City. The pottery head at the lower left is a rattle; feathers once adorned it, anchored in the holes in the top of the head. The pottery flute on the right of the wall would have been used, with drums, to accompany ritual dances and processions. The old god forms the pipe used in Central Mexico to smoke tobacco.

Western Mexico is little known archaeologically. The figures in this case come from deep shaft graves, and reflect a culture simpler than those of the rest of Mesoamerica.