

The Olmec

Pictures of Record, Inc., 1979.

The name Olmec means “dweller in the Land of Rubber” and refers to a group of people who, between about 1500 BC and 100 AD, lived on the Gulf Coast of Mexico in the southern part of Veracruz and the western part of Tabasco.

Characteristic Olmec traits include the building of clay pyramids and temple mounds, a sculptural style which features a weeping or snarling jaguar/human infant, or were-jaguar, colossal heads and other basalt monuments, and extremely fine jade carving.

Because artifacts having distinctive Olmec characteristics are found in early pre-Classic horizons throughout much of Mesoamerica, some archaeologists believe the Olmec civilization to be the source of all Mesoamerican civilization. More recent investigations, however, suggest parallel developments in much of Mesoamerica.

The central Olmec area lay on the Gulf Coast lowland between the Rio Blanco and the Rio Tonalá. The sites so far discovered are nearly always located on rivers, or on a river island in the case of La Venta. Based on slash and burn agriculture, the great Olmec sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and Cerro de Las Mesas seem to have been ceremonial centers rather than urban ones.

San Lorenzo, the oldest Olmec site, was occupied by 1500 BC. Pottery is found from the earliest period, but the monumental stone sculptures for which the Olmecs are known were not made until around 1250 BC. For a period of some 250 or more years, the massive heads and other monuments were carved from basalt which was floated on huge rafts and then dragged from the Tuxtla Mountains. Around 900 BC this activity ended and all of the great monoliths were intentionally mutilated and buried.

Contemporaneous with the later phases of San Lorenzo and surviving longer was La Venta, a planned ceremonial center on an island in the Rio Tonalá. Oriented on a north-south axis, the site includes mounds, plazas, tombs, enclosures made of basalt slabs, and a great cone-shaped clay pyramid whose shape may have imitated that of the Tuxtla volcanos. Perhaps the most striking aspect of La Venta is the sheer massiveness of the various buried stone offerings, which include large caches of jade and serpentine celts, colored clay floors, mosaics of stylized jaguar masks, and an extraordinary group of stone figurines.

In addition to creating monumental works, the Olmecs also carved and polished small jade objects with enormous skill. It is likely that the acquisition of jade, serpentine, pyrite, obsidian, and other raw materials was accomplished by establishing extensive trade routes. Olmec style is seen throughout Mesoamerica although whether that was due to trade, conquest, or a set of pan-Mesoamerican symbols that we know best from the Olmec area is still a matter of much debate.

Sometime around 600 BC major building and expansion of Olmec sites ended. However, the influences of the Olmecs is seen throughout the pre-Classic period (and in modified form until the Spanish conquest) in such geographically separate places as Monte Alban in Oaxaca, Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala, and the Valley of Mexico.

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Olmec Slides

1. Map of Mesoamerica
2. Map of Olmec area.
3. Colossal head No. 1. This was found directly south of the Great Pyramid at La Venta.
4. Side view of colossal head No. 1. The helmet has been described as that of a ballplayer.
5. Colossal head No. 4 from La Venta. Note teeth. Colossal heads 2, 3, and 4 were found north of the mound containing Tomb A. All the heads are carved of basalt from the Tuxtla Mountains, about 70 miles from La Venta, and floated on giant rafts or graded that distance.
6. Side view of colossal head No. 4.
7. Colossal head No. 2 from La Venta. Shows teeth and a combination of weathering and intentional mutilation.
8. Side view, probably intentionally showing skull deformation.
9. Colossal head from Tres Zapotes. Pitting is a result of intentional mutilation.
10. Colossal head. Monument 5 from San Lorenzo. Note pitting on helmet. It is believed that all of the colossal heads are portraits of actual rulers or priests.
11. Detail of Monument 5. Note modeling of bridge of nose and eye as well as details of helmet.
12. Sculptured head. This is on a smaller scale than that of the colossal heads but of the same genre.
13. Detail of sculpted head. Note skull deformation, the result of strapping an infant to a cradleboard.
14. Tomb A from La Venta, reconstructed at the Museo Parque de La Venta in Villahermosa. The tomb, made of basalt columns imitating logs, was found buried inside a pyramid. Two burials, probably of infants, were found covered with red pigment and accompanied by grave goods.
15. Detail of Tomb A.
16. Interior of Tomb A. It had a limestone slab floor.
17. Detail of enclosure of prismatic basalt columns surrounding the Ceremonial Court at La Venta, reconstructed at Museo Parque de la Venta, Villahermosa. This structure was built during the fourth and last building stage of the center, between 800 and 400 BC.
18. One of three mosaic floors from La Venta, reconstructed at Museo Parque de la Venta, Villahermosa. Representing a jaguar mask, these floors were made of imported slabs of serpentine and then covered with several floors of colored clays. Their function is unknown, but they were probably a form of offering.
19. Sculpture of figure, possibly that of a monkey, looking toward the sky. La Venta. Note realistic modeling of face.
20. Sculpture of priest/ruler from La Venta. Note typical Olmec-style face, which combines features of a baby and a jaguar.
21. Detail of sculpture, showing pendant and belt with 'x' motif, probably representing a jaguar. The 'x' motif recurs repeatedly throughout Mesoamerica.
22. Rear view of sculpture, showing details of headdress, cape, probably of jaguar skin, and what may be a symbol for a skull on the cape. The cleft in the headdress is a common Olmec trait, which may represent the depression in a jaguar skull.
23. Monument 5 from La Venta. A small kneeling creature, possibly a dwarf, with an offering. Note depression in box, possibly made to hold a precious stone.
24. Detail of Monument 5. Note child-jaguar face.
25. Stela 1 from La Venta. Sculpture of a standing young female, possibly a dwarf, in a niche.
26. Altar 5 from La Venta.

27. Detail of Altar 5. A male figure, possibly a priest or ruler, is seated in a niche and holds a were-jaguar infant, perhaps as an offering.
28. Side of Altar 5. Two adults hold struggling were-jaguar children.
29. Detail of Altar 5.
30. Detail of Altar 5.
31. Altar from La Venta. This badly weathered monument shows a figure sitting in a niche. To his left in bas-relief is a standing male figure, perhaps extending an offering or tribute.
32. Detail of altar. The standing figure wears a sarong-like skirt.
33. Side of altar. Two figures of bearded men gesticulate. Note that they appear to be of 2 distinctive physical types, the one on the left slender with an aquiline nose, the one on the right more typically 'Olmec.' These are probably portraits of real people.
34. Detail of altar. The beard may be false.
35. Altar from La Venta in form of stylized jaguar face.
36. A 'throne' or altar from La Venta, perhaps in the form of a jaguar face. Note pecked drain in center.
37. Stela from La Venta, representing a bearded individual embracing a serpent.
38. Detail of stela. The bearded man, realistically modeled in profile, wears an elaborate turban headdress.
39. Stela No. 3 from La Venta. Two individuals, surrounded by six smaller figures, face one another.
40. Detail of Stela No. 3. An obese individual, possibly female.
41. Detail of Stela No. 3. The beard may be false.
42. Detail of Stela No. 3. A floating figure, one of six surrounding the two central figures. With his right arm, he points to the obese figure.
43. Monument 13 from La Venta. 'The Ambassador.' A man wearing a turban-like headdress, necklace, loincloth, and sandals. He is surrounded by four glyphs. On the left is a glyph representing a foot, possibly indicating that he is traveling.
44. Detail of Monument 13.
45. Detail of Monument 13. The glyphs may identify the individual.
46. Altar from La Venta in the form of a jaguar, with were-jaguar face.
47. Side view of altar.
48. Stela 2 from La Venta. This is probably a portrait of an actual ruler. He is surrounded by six running figures.
49. Detail of Stela 2. He carries a staff of office, possibly a small winged serpent.
50. Detail of Stela 2. It is likely that this stela, along with the other stone monuments of La Venta, was painted.
51. Detail of Stela 2. One of running figures. He carries a weapon.
52. Altar 4 from La Venta. In classic Olmec style a priest or ruler sits in a niche representing a jaguar's mouth. In this case he holds a rope which binds captives on either side of the altar.
53. Detail of Altar 4. Note stylized jaguar mask with fangs and 'x' motif.
54. Detail of Altar 4. The man wears an elaborate jaguar headdress, a pectoral, and a bracelet on his left arm.
55. Detail of Altar 4. The depression in the pectoral probably held either a piece of jade or more likely a convex pyrite mirror.
56. Detail of Altar 4. The figure grasps a thick rope which holds the prisoners. He also holds a stone knife.
57. Side of Altar 4. The captive, physically distinctive from the Olmec, may represent a conquered group or ruler, possibly Mayan. Note the 'Mayan' nose and deformed skull.

58. Monument F from Tres Zapotes. Although the face is modeled realistically, the rest of the figure is a basalt column. It may have served as a balustrade.
59. Detail of Monument F. Note the facial characteristics which differ considerably from the typical Olmec.
60. Sculpture from Las Limas. A young male holds an infant were-jaguar on a cradleboard. It has been suggested that the were-jaguar with an 'x' motif may represent a god of water. Michael Coe suggests that glyphs on the male's shoulders and knees represent the major deities of the Olmecs: Xipe, god of spring; the Fire Serpent; Quetzalcoatl; and the Death God.
61. Altar from Potrero Nuevo. These are dwarfs or possibly were-jaguars which functioned as atlantes, or supports for the altar. Atlantes were used many centuries later at Tula and Chichen Itza.
62. Detail of altar. Note dental mutilation or jaguar fangs.
63. Monument 52 from San Lorenzo. An Olmec jaguar deity, probably Tlaloc, god of water. Note 'x' motif on pectoral and cleft in head.
64. 'The Wrestler' from Santa Maria Uxpanapa. Note realistic modeling of musculature.
65. Monument 34 from San Lorenzo. This basalt monument had articulated wooden arms which have disappeared. The sculpture was beheaded and buried for unknown reasons by the Olmec people.
66. Monument 19 from La Venta. Priest or ruler wearing a jaguar headdress and seated on a feathered serpent. He carries a bag, probably used to hold copal, an incense.
67. Monument 5 from Cerro de las Mesas. Seated figure wearing a duck-bill mask reminiscent of the much smaller Tuxtla Statuette, which bears the Maya Long Count date of 162 AD.
68. Stela C from Tres Zapotes. A date inscription in Maya Long Count notation of 31 BC. On the back of this stela is a carved Olmec jaguar mask. This is the earliest calendric date found so far in the New World.
69. Kunz ax. A ceremonial celt carved from jade in the form of the jaguar god. He clasps an obsidian knife to his chest.
70. Jadeite necklace. Some of the elements of the necklace are in the form of jaguar teeth. Since jade occurs nowhere near the Olmec area, the Olmecs must have established very extensive trade routes to procure it.
71. Burial offerings from Tomb A, La Venta. Two of these figures are male, two are female. Also found in the tomb was a pair of small carved jade hands, jade awls in the form of a sting-ray spine, used for ceremonial blood-letting, and a tooth from an extinct giant shark.
72. Offering from Tomb A. Note the suggestion of legs and the pyrite mirror on her chest.
73. Small stone portrait head of child with an ornament on the forehead.
74. Offering No. 4 from La Venta. This group of jadeite, serpentine, and granite figurines was found as it is displayed, buried under several layers of colored clay in the Ceremonial Court. Sometime after it was first buried, someone dug into the exact spot where it was located, inspected the offering, and then covered it up again.
75. Detail of Offering No. 5. The granite figure seems to be the focal point. The jade and serpentine slabs may represent the basalt columns enclosing the plaza at La Venta; this is probably the realistic depiction of an actual ritual. Note the deformed heads.