

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY REVEALS THE EXTRAORDINARY WONDERS
OF MEXICO'S EARLIEST CIVILIZATION
IN FIRST COMPREHENSIVE SHOW OF OLMEC ART
JUNE 30 - OCTOBER 20, 1996

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The first comprehensive exhibition of Olmec art will provide a panoramic view of the artistic achievements of Mexico's earliest and least-known civilization, at the National Gallery of Art, June 30 through October 20, 1996. The 122 objects in the show were created in Mexico and Central America three thousand years ago, long before the great civilizations of the Maya, Teotihuacan, and Aztec. Among the works of art will be a thirteen-ton colossal head from San Lorenzo, which will leave Mexico for the first time. Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico also represents a groundbreaking collaboration between Mexican and U.S. scholars to bring a major exhibition of Pre-Columbian art to the United States.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art in collaboration with the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, through its Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. The exhibition is made possible by The Fund for the International

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Exchange of Art and generous support from Goldman, Sachs & Co., as well as other corporations. It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

"The government of Mexico's unprecedented commitment to lend many of its finest Olmec objects guarantees that this exhibition will be one of the most exciting Pre-Columbian shows ever presented," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "Few visitors will come away unmoved by the magic of Olmec art, which speaks to us across centuries, distance, and cultures. This will be a rare opportunity for scholars to study the widest range of Olmec objects ever brought together in one place."

"The masterworks gathered for Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico are among the most revealing of Mexico's artistic splendors and highlight the essence of modern Mexico's identity and heritage," said Rafael Tovar, president, National Council for the Culture and the Arts of Mexico.

Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico will be installed on the concourse level of the East Building, the only place in the Gallery able to support the heaviest of the seventeen monumental sculptures, fifteen of which will arrive from Mexico's museums.

Pre-Columbian civilizations such as the Aztec had been studied long before the Olmec civilization drew the attention of serious archaeologists in the 1930s and 1940s, although Olmec objects, particularly jades, had been collected as exotic

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curiosities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Olmec civilization evolved from hunting and gathering societies, whose members migrated to Mesoamerica from Asia at least ten thousand years earlier. Olmec cities and agricultural villages flourished throughout southern Mexico and northern Central America in the first and second millennia before the birth of Christ (1200 to 300 B.C.). The society was hierarchical: most people were farmers, governed by an elite class of rulers and priests. Many archaeologists believe the Olmec civilization set the cultural pattern for later Pre-Columbian civilizations, such as the Aztec, Maya, and Teotihuacan.

Olmec artists used primitive stone tools to fashion masterpieces. Although there are many regional variations, the symbols and style of Olmec art were recognizable throughout Mesoamerica. Much of the work is focused on the human figure and the supernatural beings that ruled the cosmos.

Visitors will begin their exploration of the Olmec world with Colossal Head 8 from San Lorenzo near Mexico's Gulf Coast. Weighing approximately thirteen tons, the beautifully carved portrait in stone depicts a ruler wearing a distinctive helmet and earspools. Next, visitors will see art from the remarkable site of La Venta, also located in the coastal lowlands. Among the objects will be an impressive cache of jade and serpentine figurines found in 1955 under a layer of white sand. Preserved

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intact, La Venta Offering 4 depicts a group of sixteen figures standing in front of six celts (a prehistoric stone shaped like a blade) in what appears to be a ritual ceremony.

The section called "Beyond the Gulf Coast" features objects from other parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica. Included are carved pottery vessels, ceramic human figures, and stone sculpture. The Acrobat Effigy Vessel, recovered from the 1967 excavations at Tlatilco, in the Valley of Mexico, is one of the most fascinating works in the show. The body of a male figure, possibly a shaman (similar to a sorcerer), is contorted into an acrobatic position, perhaps in an attempt to enter a trancelike state. He has typical Olmec features, such as cranial deformation.

The exhibition continues with a section on the human figure, containing enigmatic sculpture made of ceramic clay and exotic stone, ranging from babies to muscular rulers, such as Cruz del Milagro Monument 1. This well-preserved basalt figure, seated cross-legged and weighing 1.3 tons, was found in 1961 by residents of Cruz del Milagro in Veracruz. A room of jade funerary masks and head fragments includes some of the most haunting portraits carved in ancient America.

The centerpiece of "Rulership" is Monument 4 from San Lorenzo, a six-ton colossal head. There are also jade ornaments, ceremonial objects, and figures holding implements, such as the intriguing Tall Standing Figure Carrying a Scepter and

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Sacrificial Knife. Known as "The Young Lord," this serpentine figure displays symbols of rulership and is incised with complex iconographic designs.

"The Olmec Cosmos" explores the supernatural world and its mythological inhabitants, with a series of figures that reveal stages in a shaman's transformation from human to jaguar. Also on view is the Relief Carving of an Earth Monster Face with Open Mouth, from Chalcatzingo, probably used as a portal.

The exhibition ends with a selection of "heirlooms," Olmec objects reworked by later peoples or included in burials and offerings dating to the centuries after the collapse of Olmec civilization. Included is an exquisite jade mask excavated in the fifteenth-century Aztec ruins of the Templo Mayor, in downtown Mexico City. The final piece in the show is Seated Figure with Mustache and Beard, one of the most familiar Mesoamerican sculptures, treasured for its exceptional aesthetic qualities. Popularly known as "The Wrestler," it may represent a warrior, a ball player, or a shaman.

A distinguished team of scholars from the United States and Mexico, representing the diverse perspectives of Olmec archaeologists and art historians, has organized the exhibition. The members of the Olmec Exhibition Organizing Committee are Elizabeth P. Benson, research associate, Institute of Andean Studies, Berkeley, California; Marcia Castro-Leal, curator, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City; Dr. Richard Diehl,

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professor of anthropology, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Dra. Beatriz de la Fuente, professor, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City; Dra. Rebecca B. González Lauck, archaeologist, Instituto Nacional de Antropología (INAH), Tabasco; Dr. David Grove, professor of anthropology, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; Peter David Joralemon, Pre-Columbian Art Research Associates, New York; Christine Niederberger, archaeologist, Instituto Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City; Dra. Mari Carmen Serra Puche, director, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.

A fully illustrated catalogue, published by the National Gallery of Art and distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, will include color reproductions and entries of objects in the show, fourteen essays by members of the Olmec Exhibition Organizing Committee and other experts in the field, and a bibliography. The hardcover catalogue is priced at \$85 and the softcover version is \$39.95. They can be ordered through the National Gallery Shops by calling (301) 322-5900.

A twenty-minute videotape, produced by the National Gallery of Art, will be shown continuously in the small auditorium adjacent to the exhibition. Shot on location, it presents the story of the twentieth-century explorations of the Olmec sites of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Chalcatzingo.

The National Gallery of Art was one of the first U.S. art

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museums to show Pre-Columbian artifacts, beginning in 1947 with the loan of objects from the Robert Woods Bliss Collection (Indigenous Art of the Americas). This was followed by Masterpieces of Pre-Columbian Gold (1954), Between Continents/Between Seas: Pre-Columbian Art of Costa Rica (1981), Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan (1983), and a selection of Aztec and Inca art, as well as Central American and Colombian gold in the 1991 exhibition Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration.

The National Gallery of Art, located on Constitution Avenue between Third and Seventh Streets, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For general information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., at (202) 842-6176.

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