

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

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COLOSSAL HEAD FROM SAN LORENZO

LEAVES MEXICO FOR FIRST TIME;

IS HEAVIEST WORK OF ART EVER INSTALLED

IN NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, JUNE 30 - OCTOBER 20, 1996

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The colossal head from San Lorenzo, known as Monument 8, will be on view outside of Mexico for the first time ever in the exhibition Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico, at the National Gallery of Art, June 30 through October 20, 1996. The head will be the heaviest object ever installed in the National Gallery and it will be the first object visitors will see when upon entering the exhibition.

The exhibition of 122 objects will temporarily displace the Gallery's collection of post-World War II art on the concourse level of the East Building, the only area able to bear the weight of some seventeen monumental sculptures, fifteen from Mexico's museums.

The Gallery's design department will oversee the construction of steel shoring under the floor to support the heads. The heads will rest on steel beams, which will disperse their weight. From its supine position in a special crate, the

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colossal head . . . page 2

colossal head will be tilted upright into place. A structure will be built to hold the head while a concrete collar is poured to secure it.

According to Mark Leithauser, chief of design, National Gallery of Art, "In 1993, we installed the two-ton, 24-foot long, baroque coach from Portugal; in 1992, the three magnificent Dance Murals by Matisse, each measuring 40 feet or more in length; and, in 1981, Rodin's bronze Gates of Hell, weighing eight tons, but the colossal heads from San Lorenzo are without a doubt our most challenging installation to date."

Some 3,000 years ago Olmec engineers may have had a tougher assignment. They moved the multiton block of volcanic stone 60 to 80 miles from its quarry site without wheels or modern technology and installed it on a plateau 150 feet high above surrounding countryside.

The head was discovered in 1970 by archaeologists and remained buried at San Lorenzo until 1986, when it was moved to the new Museum of Anthropology at Veracruz University in Xalapa. Another colossal head from San Lorenzo, known as Monument 4, and weighing six tons, will also be on view. The two heads are among seventeen known colossal heads made by Olmec craftsmen. The colossal heads are portraits of Olmec rulers, who appear young but mature, and reveal a powerful individuality in their features and facial expressions. They display faultless carving as well as a harmony of almost perfect proportions.

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