



Cihuateotl

SURFACE TREATMENT

With COVID-19 rebounding and slowing gallery openings, we will keep your art experiences alive by looking back at some more memorable shows/reviews. Today we revisit the Anthropology Museum in Xalapa Mexico where I spent five wonderful hours absorbing ancient culture in 2014.

Ancient Ceramics at the Museo de Antropología, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico

Travel to Veracruz offered me the good fortune of visiting the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa, a beautiful museum situated in the southern Sierra Madre. Considered the second-best anthropology museum in Mexico, after its counterpart in Mexico City, this one is rich in sculpture and ceramics from the pre-Hispanic Veracruz cultures focusing on the Olmecs, Totonacs, and Huastecs. Of particular interest to me were figurative clay sculptures dating from 1700 BCE all the way up to the 16th century.

I had hoped for a visual feast of Olmec ceramics, but the Olmec emphasis lay in stone sculptures, leaving me with dampened expectations. A few clay fragments,

bowls, and figures were here, still speaking the beliefs of the Olmec. One complete figure of the "Baby Face" sculptural style is on display depicting a type of cranial modification. The skillfully modeled figure of pale clay is an iconic image from this early culture, and the infant's body with the slanted eyes of the jaguar superimposed on its face represents an ideal. The jaguar symbolized ultimate power and was the nagaul, the animal spirit of the Olmec. Sitting in an infantile position, the image combines the baby's innocence with power. Untarnished by the evils of life, power can be used for an honorable purpose.

Cranial modification was a common practice and has a known history spanning 10,000 years; several small sculptures illustrate the re-shaping of children's heads. It was believed that the elongated shape could contain more information than the normal head shape, and thus be more suited to positions of power. This piece shows a child strapped onto a bed with a shaping device clamped around its head. A necklace denotes high status.

The complex ideology of the Olmec clay sculptures contrast with the more direct Huastec figures. When the Mexica (Aztecs) first made contact with the naked Huastecan population, they considered them primitive. And, indeed, the female figures on display are nude except for a thin bikini bottom. Intriguingly, one piece depicts a female fertility ball player - an activity generally considered masculine.

For me, the real stars of this museum are the Totonac clay pieces from central and southern Veracruz. Complex pieces packed with information about their society, they date from between 600-900AD, later than the Olmecs, and simultaneous with the Huastecs. Engaging figures combining visual charm and bold clay technique, they depict scenes from the Popol Vuh (the book of creation), depictions of deities, personal commemorations, pottery, and even children's toys. One gallery, filled with life-sized hollow clay figures, addresses death. A beautiful clay sculpture symbolizes the place in the afterlife for young women who died in childbirth and became guardians of the setting sun. It was their responsibility to the living community to keep the sun safe when it sinks into the earth at night to sleep. The sculpture, "Cihuateotl", represents such a woman. A highly decorated head piece denotes her power, and shells around her waist and wrists identify her pregnant status. Her open mouth and palms signify death. An example of pit-fired earthenware with walls about half an inch thick, her construction is awesome.

On a lighter note, I love the children's toys. There are two toy jaguars on wheels - never too soon to teach about the jaguar. Another shows a seated figure on a

swing. This piece is unique in that it is a whistle; when it swings it emits a sonorous sound. A significant articulated doll is shown with its mold. Apparently, these were popular and mass produced. Made around 700AD, could this be an example of the first mass-produced consumer product?

The cultural city of Xalapa is a good destination for Mexican travel; the museum is a magical place to visit and provided me an English-speaking guide.

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