

TRACING OLMEC ARTISTIC INFLUENCE IN SOUTHERN  
MESOAMERICA THROUGH ICONOGRAPHY

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## **ABSTRACT**

“America’s first civilization,” the Olmec, influenced the art and culture in Southern Mesoamerica. As one of the earliest identifiable cultural groups, the Olmec were the first to have a distinguishing style to their artwork including numerous prominent symbols, such as the jaguar, maize, and sacrifice. Many of the symbols found in the works of the Olmec can also be seen in the art of subsequent cultures, such as the Maya. With their continuous use in the region, the symbols that were originally distinctive of the Olmec, became Pan-Mesoamerican symbols or themes, seen in the works beyond the Olmec civilization. Ultimately, these themes were seen in many different types of art, including ceramics, monumental sculpture, and jade work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Many scholars view the Olmec as “America’s First Civilization.” Despite no written history, the Olmec’s past has been pieced together thanks to archaeological investigations and oral history (Pool, 2016, p. 2). The Olmec thrived during the Early and Middle Formative Periods, from 1800 to 300 BC. The Olmec civilization is defined by four chronological stages: Pre-Olmec, Early Olmec, Late Olmec, and Epi-Olmec. The rise and fall of the Olmec heartland, San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes, can be seen beginning in the Early Olmec stage and into the Epi-Olmec stage. The center of this early civilization thrived in the southeastern Mexican Gulf lowlands (Diehl, 2004, pp. 8-10).

The claim of “civilization” in reference to the Olmec is controversial to some scholars. However, numerous archaeologists in the region argue that the Olmec meet French archaeologist Christine Niederberger’s definition for a civilization. Niederberger maintains ““cities share six characteristics: (1) elaborate political and religious power, (2) clear social ranking, (3) planned public architecture, (4) a group of highly specialized craftsmen, (5) control and active participation in interregional trade networks, and (6) complex intellectual achievements such as a sophisticated, codified iconography for the permanent recording of certain concepts or events”” (Diehl, 2004, pp. 12-13). Ultimately, archaeologist Richard Diehl believes that one of the earliest Olmec cities, San Lorenzo, demonstrated all six of Niederberger’s characteristics.

While scholars consider the Olmec to be a singular culture, it is more complex than it appears. As there is no surviving written record, we have no knowledge of what people in the region called themselves or if there was a term encompassing all of the peoples within the Olmec region. Despite many centers being a considerable distance from one another, the local cultures

were extremely similar. Therefore, despite the various regional differences, scholars have grouped them together as one culture, the Olmec.

The Olmec are best known for their monumental sculpture, such as the colossal heads found throughout different centers. As one of the earliest known civilizations in Middle America, they laid a foundation for cultural trends seen in later civilizations. Many scholars suggest that Olmec culture had a large influence on the art of subsequent cultures in the Mesoamerican region, specifically the Mayans. This influence can be seen through the examination of the iconography found in ceramics, monumental sculpture, and jade works.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The works of well-known Mesoamerican archaeologists were some of my most important sources as I worked on this project. These archaeologists, such as Christopher Pool, Susan Toby Evans, Richard Diehl, and Karl Taube provided not only in-depth detail regarding Olmec art and archaeology, but also a general background of the Formative and Classic Periods. Their works are extremely detailed, allowing for informed analysis.

In addition to these sources, I utilized literature from others undertaking research in the region. This allowed for a larger pool of ideas and opinions on subjects being addressed in the project. For example, numerous sources discuss the symbology of the jaguar in Mesoamerica, as it is a vital symbol in many works of art.

Equally important to my research was the use of online collections at several museums. The utilization of online collections at the Metropolitan Museum allowed for additional information and visual representation.

## **INTRODUCTION TO OLMEC ICONOGRAPHY**

The art produced by the Olmec was the first distinctive art style to appear in Mesoamerica. Sculpture was the typical form of expression for the culture. The themes expressed by the Olmec have distinctive features. According to anthropologist Susan Toby Evans (2008), “Olmec art reflects [the earliest distinctive Mesoamerican] themes in dramatic ways, and to divorce art from social meaning violates an essential unity, though it is important to establish the modern limits of understanding” (p. 134). With the emergence of Olmec art, Mesoamerica joined the other emerging civilizations where large works represented a fusion of both secular and sacred thought, which was common in a complex society. As the markers of complex society appeared within Olmec society in the form of monumental construction, the Olmec continued to produce smaller, portable works for ritual, dynastic, or other functions (Evans, 2008, p.134).

An important aspect of Olmec iconography is the evident stylistic differences displayed in their art in varying regional areas. According to Beatriz de la Fuente (2000), a notable pre-Hispanic art historian, in Olmec art, “one recognizes a major style and a plurality of regional, local, and perhaps personal styles entailed within it” (p. 256). Ultimately these stylistic variations can still be housed under the primary label of the Olmec style. These same variations, however, allow for archaeologists to trace the origins of a piece to a specific workshop. It also demonstrates how expansive the Olmec trading system was and how interconnected the various city-centers were with one another (De la Fuente, 2000, pp. 253, 256). De la Fuente believes that the sculptural school of San Lorenzo was one of the longest lasting centers of production (2000, p. 256).



One of the primary iconographic themes found in Olmec art is the appearance of zoomorphic figures, particularly the were-jaguar. The were-jaguar is typically expressed in the facial attributes of an otherwise human figure. However, the overall jaguar symbolism present in a work can vary from a full naturalistic representation of the jaguar to stylized feline features on a human body or face (Clewlow, 1974, p. 95). The were-jaguar is the combination of both jaguar features and human features, making the were-jaguar a half human and half jaguar. Many scholars debate the function of jaguar symbolism in Olmec art. Ultimately, Kimberly Ann Becker (1996) argues that four major themes or theories relating to the jaguar symbol have emerged from research in the region: “(1) The jaguar as a rain deity, (2) The jaguar as a primal ancestor or totemic emblem, (3) The jaguar as a shaman’s *nagual* [animal transformation] and (4) The jaguar as an ensignia [sic] of rulership” (p. 24). These four theories relating to the jaguar symbol are a conglomeration of the research of prominent archaeologists such as Miguel Covarrubias and Michael Coe (Becker, 1996, p. 24).

As one of the most prominent symbols in Olmec art, the were-jaguar is frequently seen in sculpture. The jaguar is often represented with a mix of feline and human baby features. The sculpture typically has a human nose and a “squalling” infantile expression and downturned mouth with fangs located in the corners. Additionally, the sculpture has a thick upper lip and a V-shaped cleft in the head. All of the features are distinctive of the Olmec artistic style (Weaver, 1973, pp. 55-56; Miller & Taube, 2018, pp. 102-104). According to Mary Miller and Karl Taube (2018), the were-jaguar was originally identified as the “Rain Baby,” a prominent Olmec deity (p. 126).

There are many prominent representations of the jaguar in Olmec art. One of the most well-known is the El Azuzul twins (shown in figure 1). The twins are a set of ceremonial

sculptures located at an Olmec site called El Azuzul (Evans, 2008, p. 140). El Azuzul is only a few kilometers from the vital Olmec site of San Lorenzo. The El Azuzul twins are kneeling and leaning forward. Their elaborate headdresses and the similarity of positions in relation to figures on altar-thrones indicates the twins represent figures of an elite status or ruling authority. Many scholars believe from the sculptures' posture that the statues represent subjects in the middle of a shamanistic transformation, from human to were-jaguar (Pool, 2016, p. 118). Becker hypothesized that were-jaguars were used as symbols of both rulership and shamanistic principles in Olmec art (Becker, 1996, p. 80). Many archaeologists, in addition to the connection to the elite, believe that the twins have religious allusions. They are referred to as "priests" or "mediators" (Pool, 2016, p 118). In fact, the twins may represent rulers as well as shamans, who during the Formative Period, would have had a large role in the governing of Olmec society. Additionally, the El Azuzul twins are a powerful image of duality, which is when two independent halves are connected to form a pair. Duality is an important concept seen in later Mesoamerican symbolism. The concept of twins is a common representation of this principle (Evans, 2008, pp. 140-141).

Some archaeologists studying the region, such as Carl William Clewlow, Jr., suggest that the presence and degree to which were-jaguars were depicted suggests the presence of a cult centering on the jaguar. Olmec cosmology is often depicted in sculpture with the jaguar, indicating the jaguar is a cult object rather than a normal animal. The largest amount of jaguar iconography can be found at the Olmec site La Venta, implying it was the center of the possible jaguar cult (Clewlow, 1974, p. 102-103). This likely indicates the Olmec were more interested in the mythical connection of the jaguar and humanity as a whole, rather than nature or the animal itself.

In addition to the were-jaguar, the Olmec used other zoomorphic figures in their art, such as the serpent. Many of these animals also had cosmological influences. For example, the serpent was often depicted as the “fire-serpent”: as when angry it was illustrated with eyebrows made of flames. Further, Prudence Rice, a professor of anthropology, believes that there was zoomorphic variation depending on the geographic location. She discusses how the animal iconography in the tropical, forested lowland was often dominated by sharks and crocodiles while the highland was occupied by serpents and fish iconography. Furthermore, animals, such as jaguars, avians, and reptiles and amphibians, for instance turtles and toads, were found in both the highland and lowland habitat and iconography (Rice, 2020, pp. 12-13). One example of Olmec work outside of the jaguar is a stirrup-spouted pottery bowl originating from the Río Balsas area. The vessel displays the zoomorphic figure of the *Bufo marinus* or toad (shown in figure 2). The toad sits on its hind legs, with the bowl raised in the air. The vessel is described as, “[being] molded so that the upraised legs serve as hollow conduits between the shallow bowl and the hollow body of the toad, the vessel thus functioning as a chalice and the toad as a reservoir and a symbol of the substance contained within” (Reilly, 1989, p. 10). Furthermore, the vessel is decorated with Olmec style figures, including cleft-headed figures, which are commonly seen in Olmec iconography (shown in figure 3).

Another important aspect to Olmec iconography is the role of maize. Maize, or corn, was a vital crop and was a staple to the Mesoamerican diet. It was believed that maize was food consumed by humans; therefore, it was what humans were made of. According to Mesoamerican and Olmec belief, maize was a gift of the gods and there must have been a form of reciprocity. Consequently, blood and sacrifice were often paired with maize in many Mesoamerican cultures (Evans, 2008, pp. 53, 85). Images of the Maize God are often described with typical Olmec

features such as the cleft head. Similar to the depictions of the were-jaguar, who represents the Olmec rain god, the Maize God is described with an anthropomorphic nose and a similar scowling and toothless mouth. The Maize God is often associated with its own shamanistic transformations and cosmological connotations in addition to symbolizing the fertility of the earth (Miller & Taube, 2018, pp. 108-109).

The concepts of blood and sacrifice are heavily entwined with the Maize God in Mesoamerican iconography. Miller and Taube (2018) state that the maize in Mesoamerica was red, blue, and yellow. This correlates to the colors of blood inside and outside of the body. Human blood appears blue in the veins due to the yellow tones of the skin while blood outside the body is red (pp. 109, 144-145). The Olmec and later civilizations prized cinnabar, a bright red mineral, for its use in representing blood in art. The use of cinnabar symbolized living blood and *ch'ulel* or the holy soul force. In addition to representing the life force, blood symbolized the idea of kinship in Mesoamerica (Rich et. al, 2010, p. 117).

The symbols just discussed, the zoomorphic figures, the Maize God, bloodletting, and sacrifice, are some of the Pan-Mesoamerican symbols found throughout art and iconography in Mesoamerica. All of these themes are present in the Olmec culture and ideological sphere. Many of these symbols show up again in subsequent cultures, such as the Maya and the Aztec who likely had heavy influence from the Olmec (Pool, 2016, pp. 290, 298-299). Numerous archaeologists, including Hector Neff and Christopher Pool, discuss the “continuity hypothesis.” This hypothesis, was part of the argument for an Olmec legacy in subsequent Mesoamerican cultures, depends on showing continuous use of cultural symbols from the Formative Period. Pool states this “is better conceived as ‘descent with modification’” (p. 298). The rate of change can vary over time with the influence of different factors such as social practice and ideology.

Neff believes that symbolic representations found in later cultures have an Olmec heritage with the continuity of the maize symbology being especially clear (Neff, 2011, n.p.).

## ICONOGRAPHY FOUND IN CERAMICS

Many Mesoamerican ceramic vessels display the pan-Mesoamerican themes that first appear in Olmec iconography. Brian Stross examines maize and blood as they appear in two distinct terracotta vessels within the Olmec and Maya cultures. Interestingly, the cosmological association of both the Olmec vessel and Mayan vessel display the concepts of pan-Mesoamerican themes (Stross, 1992, p. 83).

The Chalcatzingo Vase (seen in figure 4) is an Olmec vase or urn that was excavated in the early 1900s in Chalcatzingo, Mexico. It was manufactured in the late Middle Formative Period. Its central figure is a disembodied or decapitated head. The iconography seen within the vase is described as, “‘a crossed bands’ motif [on top] is surmounted by a ‘maize crown’ complex; on the bottom is an earth pedestal” (Stross, 1992, p. 84). The Mayan Princeton Plate (seen in figure 5) is dated to the Early Classic Period and is associated with the Tikal region. The Maize God is depicted as the central figure in the form of a disembodied head. In front of the Maize God’s face are “the three primary bloodletting lancets- an obsidian blade, a stingray spine, and a flint knife” (Stross, 1992, p. 84). Furthermore, glyphic symbols in the background of the main image show the water to be blood; therefore, the image is floating on a pool of blood.

The Chalcatzingo Vase and Princeton Plate have many shared iconographic elements. For example, in the top elements of both objects, sky and maize imagery are represented. Beyond the corresponding imagery in the peripheral images, additional similarities can be found in the central image. Stross states that the disembodied head represents “a supernatural being in its anthropomorphic manifestation” (Stross, 1992, pp. 83-84). In both the Chalcatzingo Vase and Princeton Plate, the Maize God is the most likely central figure. The main figure in the Chalcatzingo Vase is described as “sprouting maize features” while the Princeton Plate shows a

decapitated head with a maize kernel and ear at the top of the figure. In addition, the Mayan glyph *lx* is present. This glyph represents the day *lx* or day of the jaguar. It also refers to a folkloric animal known as *balam*. In the Yucatan, the *balam* is a “guardian of the milpa” or “a protecting spirit of the cornfield” (Stoss, 1992, p. 85).

Another major pan-Mesoamerican symbol found on both the Chalcatzingo Vase and Princeton Plate is the concept of sacrifice and cosmology. In both, the central figure, likely the Maize God, has been decapitated (Stoss, 1992, p. 85). This emphasizes the symbology of blood and sacrifice within the vessel. Additionally, the Chalcatzingo Vase has four free-floating Y-shaped elements that are not found on the Princeton Plate. However, due to their placement and complexity, scholars believe they correspond to Apho glyph collections on the Princeton Plate. The Apho glyphs are located at the top and bottom of the plate and have many seedlike *po* characteristics. Evidence from other Olmec artwork supports the hypothesis that the Y elements on the vase represent seeds. On the Chalcatzingo Vase, the four glyphs are surrounding a “houselike structure” that contains the decapitated head. Similarly, some scholars suggest the four seedlike Apho glyphs on the Princeton Plate secondarily represent the four house poles located in a Mayan house. These are used as metaphor in some Mayan languages as they are “pillars of the cosmos” sown like seeds (Stoss, 1992, p. 85).

On the Princeton Plate, circlet symbols represent water elements and when combined with other symbols present in the plate these symbols indicate blood; this means the entire image is “[floating] in blood” (Stoss, 1992, p. 84). It is likely that the Chalcatzingo Vase’s similarly free-floating symbols, Y’s, and circlets symbolize seeds and blood. Therefore, there is an indication of a transformative relationship, commonly seen in Mesoamerican art. Blood can be transformed into seeds and seeds into blood according to cosmological tradition (Stoss, 1992, p.

85). The Princeton Plate goes even further with the blood imagery by also depicting the presence of traditional Mayan bloodletting objects: a stingray spine, an obsidian blade, and a flint knife.

Therefore, although the Olmec and Mayan traditions were separate through space and time, their relationship can be viewed through their iconographic features in symbols such as maize and bloodletting. Through duplication of Pan-Mesoamerican symbols and themes, scholars have been able to begin to ascertain the connections between the Olmec and subsequent cultures' thoughts and beliefs.



## **ICONOGRAPHY FOUND IN MONUMENTAL SCULPTURE**

Bioarcheologist Vera Tiesler examined the resemblance of Maya cranial vault modification to Olmec portraiture. According to the archaeological record, infant cranial modification in the Maya region occurred beginning in 1000 BC. By the Classic Period, it was common practice for such modification to occur through the use of cradle boards, wrappings, and other implements. Such cranial modification typically had social motivations. Evidence links the skull shapes of the Preclassic Period in eastern Mesoamerica to the Olmec head iconography from the Gulf Coast, originating with archaeologist Arturo Romano's study on a skull from Pampa de Pajón (seen in figure 7) (Tiesler, 2010, pp. 291-293). Ultimately, the "joint application of horizontal headwraps and rigid tablets caused 'pseudo-circular' oblique tabular modifications, which led to elongated, tabular vaults with slanted foreheads" (Tiesler, 2010, p. 293). The skull Romano's study focuses on resembles the pear-shaped anthropomorphic carvings found in the Olmec heartland.

Since Romano's study, Tiesler has documented nine more Mayan skulls with an artificially produced Olmecoid head shape dating to the Preclassic period. The nine skulls are from five sites in Guatemala, Chiapas, and the Yucatan. The nine skulls documented are also pear-shaped, similar to the pear-shaped heads depicted in Olmec iconography. Tiesler and other archaeologists hypothesize that the Maya were altering the skull shape of their infants to emulate deities in their pantheon. For example, in the Classic period, the elongated head shape that was favored was likely to imitate the Maize God. Others, however, suggest that it embodies the jaguar (Tiesler, 2010, pp. 302-303). The Olmec's relationship with the supernatural world was often expressed in their art through their transformative scenes. Therefore, Tiesler believed the pear-shaped cranium is likely an early attempt by the Mayans to emulating deities such as the

Maize God. Although no known skeletal remains have survived in order to assist in the examination of Olmec morphology, realistic portraiture work in the form of figurines and carvings provide an idea of their cranial morphology (Tiesler, 2010, p. 305).

The supernatural relationship observed by the Olmec can also be seen in subsequent cultures' artistic views, such as the Mayans. Palenque was a major Mayan site in the Classic Period. One of its most famous rulers was King K'inich Janaab' Pakal I, or simply Pakal. He is well known for his mortuary monument, the Temple of Inscriptions. Deep within the temple is Pakal's sarcophagus (seen in figure 8) (Evans, 2008, pp. 329-331). On the lid is a scene depicting Pakal's death and subsequent rebirth as the Maize God. There are also hieroglyphics representing the Mayan underworld (Miller & Samayoa, 1998, pp. 58-60). Archaeologist Mary Ellen Miller describes the lid as depicting Pakal and containing several supernatural images (Miller, 2006, p. 155).

Pan-Mesoamerican themes are shown throughout the sarcophagus's lid, such as the transformation into the Maize God. Tiesler believes that the Mayan Maize God evolved out of the Olmec's Maize God. She argues that "many Mesoamerican maize deities go back to the Maize God prototypes" (Tiesler, 2010, p. 305). The classic slanted, tubular shape that characterized Mayan representations of the Maize God do not appear in the archaeological record until the Classic Period. Prior to that point, the Maize God was typically portrayed with an erect head shape and steep forehead, both of which more closely resemble the Olmec depiction of the Maize God (Tiesler, 2010, p. 303). In addition to facial features indicating the Maize God on the lid, Pakal is wearing the god's beaded skirt, which is typical of his depictions in Mayan art (Miller, 2006, p. 156).

Other Pan-Mesoamerican symbols are present in the sarcophagus lid. This includes the figure of the serpent, which, like in Olmec art, was common in Mayan works. In *The Art of Mesoamerica* Miller states that in addition to the transformation into the Maize God, this image shows Pakal with the appearance of the God of Royal Lineages, K'awiil. While the Maize God, as is typical in Mesoamerican cultures, represents death and the renewal of life, K'awiil is the God of Royal Lineages (Miller, 2006, p. 156). According to Miller (2006), "K'awiil is also characterized by a serpent foot, and Pakal twists his right foot to show the sole, perhaps to mimic the serpent" (p. 156).

The most impressive and well-known Olmec art pieces are their colossal stone heads (seen in figure 9). There are seventeen known colossal heads; ten are from San Lorenzo, four are from La Venta, two located at Tres Zapotes, and one unfinished carved head was found at La Cobata. While each of the seventeen heads have their own unique features, they all represent male figures. Their physical features consist of flat noses and slightly crossed eyes. The backs of the heads are flattened, and the bottom curved as if the sculpture was meant to sit facing the heavens. Each head is wearing a headdress. Today scholars have reached a tentative consensus that these sculptures represent individual rulers, but at one point they believed they were portraits of ballplayers (Diehl, 2004, p. 111-112).

The colossal heads are unique because they do not contain any of the jaguar features typically found in Olmec art, such as the "snarling mouth." Instead, they appear to be realistic depictions of people. According to archaeologist Charles Wicke, "If the Colossal Heads are indeed portraits, they can be thought of as reflections of late developments within Olmec society... Like landscape, realistic portraiture is unknown in the art of primitive societies. Only

with the beginnings of civilization and its concomitant social stratification do certain individuals literally ‘stand out’” (Wicke, 1971, p. 69).

As many archaeologists hypothesize, the Olmec colossal heads are lifelike portraits of Olmec rulers; Tiesler’s evidence regarding the Maize God can potentially be linked. Examining the Mayan pear-shaped skull found by Romano, there is a general resemblance to the Olmec colossal head. This further supports Tiesler’s theory regarding the transmission of beliefs and culture from the Olmec to the Maya.

## **ICONOGRAPHY FOUND IN JADE WORKS**

In Mesoamerica, jadeite or serpentine was widely used in art as an artistic medium. The practice began with the Olmec and was particularly frequent at the site of La Venta. Jadeite was used to produce a variety of items, including headdress plaques, earspools, beads, belt celts, pectorals, and figurines, with the celt being the most prominent. Jadeite works not only had a major economic importance, but also a large cosmological significance (Evans, 2008, p. 131).

According to archaeologist Karl Taube, “In ancient Mesoamerica, one of the most basic and widespread cosmological models is the four-sided world, with the intercardinal corners framing the central and pivotal axis mundi” (Taube, 2005, n.p). The model dates to when maize agriculture became a central part of life in Mesoamerica during the Formative Period. Olmec iconography often portrays this worldview via the bar-and-four-dots motif (see figure 10). Many Olmec jadeite celts also portray the Maize God as a central figure in several depictions of the four-sided world (see figure 10). It is of note that jadeite is often used in Mesoamerica to signify maize and agricultural wealth, a theme that likely originated in the Formative Period with the Olmec (Taube, 2005, n.p).

Many of the themes seen in Olmec art: wealth, maize, and cosmology are also seen in Mayan jadeite. In addition, jade is often related to rulership and authority, water, and centrality in Mayan culture. At La Venta, a grouping of Olmec jade works depicts the Maize God as a celtiform world tree. Similarly, Classic Mayan stelae are frequently celtiform, originating from the Olmec. Many of these Mayan stelae are regarded as “sky celts” due to their vertical nature. These sky celts indicate the heavens, while a horizontal celt represents the earth. Mayan celts often appeared on belts of rulers as decorative ornaments (see image 11). Belt celts may contain incised images of rulers like miniature monuments (Taube, 2005, n.p).

As previously mentioned, the cardinal directions are closely connected to jade works. In addition to symbols within the works themselves representing the axis mundi, there is evidence of caches from the Middle Formative with jadeite celts positioned at the cardinal directions. Similarly positioned offerings were made at the Mayan site of Copan. At Copan, jadeite earspools were located at the four cardinal directions plus zenith and nadir, the two poles of the horizon. The offering also contained a small jadeite statue portraying a contortionist Maize God at the center of the four directions (Taube, 2005, n.p).

At Palenque, Pakal's burial is similarly oriented toward the four quarters and world center. Additionally, Pakal had one of the richest known offerings of jadeite in the Maya region. Four large jadeite beads were placed at the hands and feet, framing Pakal as the world axis, and a fifth was placed at his groin. These five beads make a similar pattern to the Olmec bar-and-four-dot motif (Taube, 2005, n.p). Evans believes that due to the color of jadeite, which it shares with water and vegetation, jadeite became closely associated with the life force. Therefore, jadeite beads were often put in the mouths of the dead in Mayan burials (Evans, 2008, p. 131).

Because jadeite was a rare and beautiful material, jadeite objects were often considered a luxury good. Additionally, the artisans who worked on the pieces added to the value of the pieces. During the Olmec culture, celts were the basic form of jadeite exchange. When given to the dead, a jade celt was more than a symbol of life, it was also the dead's form of currency in their next world (Miller & Taube, 2018, pp. 101-102).

Mesoamerican cultures also crafted jadeite figurines portraying humans and animals. The Olmec made figurines with human and were-jaguar features. Many of the figurines had the typical Olmec facial features, such as the "scowl" and almond shaped eyes. Pear-shaped heads were also commonly represented. Once again, many of the figures appear to be in transformation

(Diehl, 2004, pp. 120-121). The Mayans also created zoomorphic figurines out of jadeite. For example, they produced a supernatural figurine embodying an avian (see image 12). These figurines likely had religious importance; they likely acted similarly to the Olmec carvings, which are believed to have functioned as household gods and familiars or spirit helpers (Diehl, 2004, p. 121).

Blood was an important Pan-Mesoamerican symbol to both the Olmec and the Maya. Therefore, minerals such as cinnabar were highly prized. In the caches of burials, not only were figurines painted with the mineral, but also the bodies of the deceased were painted. The cinnabar represented the resurrection of rulers and the vital Maize God (Rich et. al, 2010, p. 117).

## **CONCLUSION**

The iconography present in Mesoamerican art can be traced back to the Olmec culture. Symbols, such as zoomorphic figures, the Maize God, blood, sacrifice, and cosmology, established themselves as a vital part of artistic themes in Southern Mesoamerica beginning with the Olmec. These symbols, however, did not end with the fall of the Olmec; they continue to be present in the art of the Maya, ultimately acting as Pan-Mesoamerican symbols.

Comparisons of artistic works, such as the Chalcatzingo Vase and the Princeton Plate, allow for archaeologists to demonstrate the similarities that are present in the region. By continuing to examine art, especially ceramic vessels, monumental sculpture, and jade works, archaeologists can trace the influence the Olmec have had on the Maya and others.

There is more research to be done on both the topic and region. One of the areas that could use more investigation is transportation and merchant routes. How did the export of goods impact the legacy of Olmec art in the region? Did the symbols present in Olmec art diffuse into other regions, and subsequently other cultures, through these trade routes? Additionally, there is more investigation to be done within Olmec art itself on the variations present across the region. Explorations into the various meanings of the jaguar in diverse contexts and mediums would be beneficial to analyze, as it would allow for archaeologists to determine its importance with greater certainty.

The Olmec, as an early civilization in Mesoamerica, influenced subsequent cultures' artistic works.



**APPENDIX A: SUPPORTING IMAGES**



Figure 1 (left)  
El Azul Twins  
(De la Fuente, 2000, p. 260)  
Refer to Chapter 1 – Olmec  
Iconography



Figure 2 (left)  
Olmec Bufo Marinus  
stirrup spouted pottery  
(Reilly, 1989, p. 10)  
Refer to Chapter 1 –  
Olmec Iconography

Figure 3 (below)  
Olmec iconography strip on bowl of Bufo  
Marinus vessel  
(Reilly, 1989, p. 11)  
Refer to Chapter 1 – Olmec Iconography



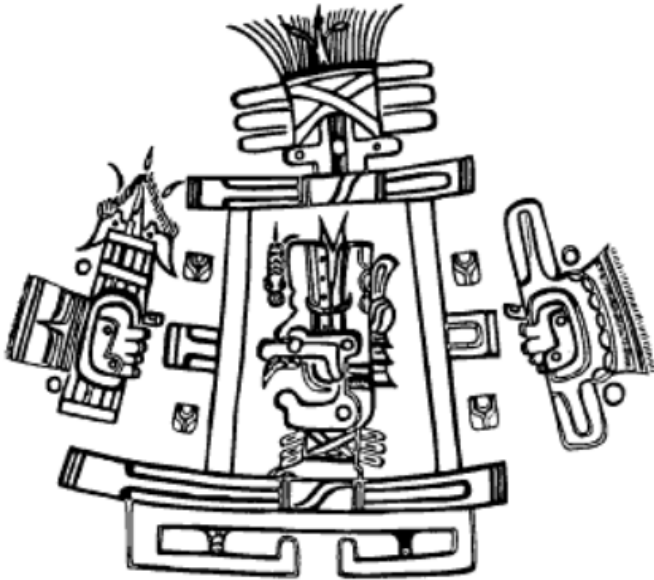


Figure 4 (left)  
 Olmec Chalcatzingo Vase  
 (Stross, 1992, p. 83)  
 Refer to Chapter 2 - Ceramics



Figure 5 (left)  
 Mayan Princeton Plate  
 (Stross, 1992, p. 84)  
 Refer to Chapter 2 - Ceramics

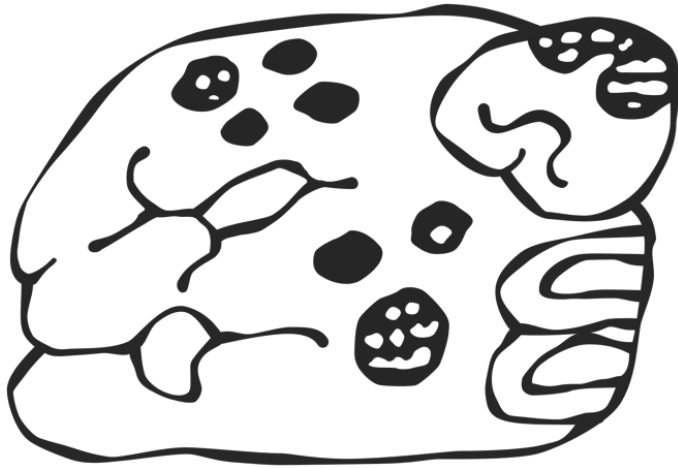


Figure 6 (left)  
Image of *Balam* icon  
Refer to Chapter 2 -  
Ceramics



Figure 7 (Above)  
Pear Shaped skull from  
Pampa de Pajón  
(Tiesler, 2010, p. 294)  
Refer to Chapter 3 - Sculpture





Figure 8 (left)  
Lord Pakal's  
Sarcophagus Lid  
(Miller & Samayoa,  
1998, p. 59)  
Refer to Chapter 3 -

Figure 9 (below)  
Olmec Colossal Head No 1  
San Lorenzo  
Refer to Chapter 3 - Sculpture



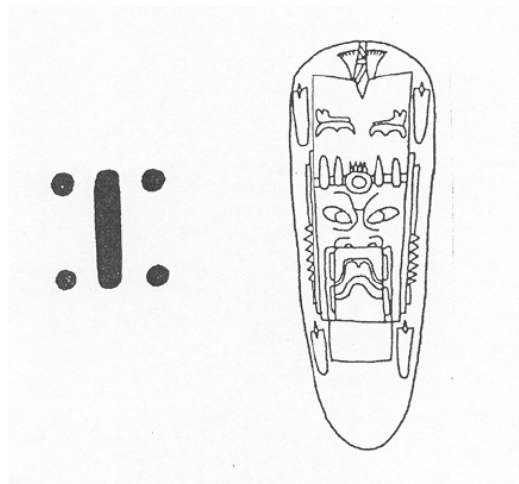


Figure 10

Left: The bar-and-four-dots motif

Right: Incised jade celt with head of Olmec Maize God as the central bar of the bar-and-four-dots motif

(Taube, 2005, n.p)  
Refer to Chapter 4 - Jade



Figure 11 (left)

Maya Jadeite Belt Celts  
(The MET, 2023, n.p)  
Refer to Chapter 4 -  
Jade

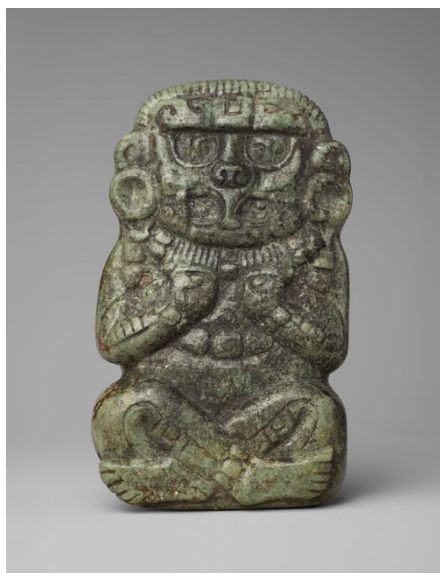


Figure 12 (left)

Maya Avian Figurine  
made of Jadeite  
(The MET, 2023, n.p)  
Refer to Chapter 4 -  
Jade



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