14: Native-American Art Before 1300 CE
14.1: The New World

14.1.1: The New World

Indigenous visual arts traditions in the Americas span thousands of years, representing cultures from Mesoamerica to the Arctic.

Learning Objective

Gain an appreciation for the breadth and diversity of indigenous peoples and cultures of the Americas

Key Points

- The New World refers to the western hemisphere, especially the Americas, after the European "age of discovery" beginning in the early 16th century. The indigenous peoples of the Americas are the pre-Columbian (before European contact) inhabitants of North America, Mesoamerica, and South America as well as Greenland.
- Scientists believe that the most recent migration of humans from Eurasia to the Americas took place around 12,000 years ago via a land bridge that connected the two continents.
- Indigenous populations across the Americas created monumental architecture, large-scale cities, chiefdoms, states, and empires.
- Indigenous Americans also created pottery, paintings, jewelry, weaving and textiles, sculptures, basketry, carvings, beadwork, and other objects that comprise a major category in world art history.

Key Terms

Mesoamerica

A region and cultural area in the Americas, extending approximately from central Mexico to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica, where pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish colonization of the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries.

indigenous peoples

People defined in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular territory, and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations that are often politically dominant.

New World

The term used by Europeans to describe the western hemisphere, specifically the Americas, during the "age of discovery" beginning in the early 16th century.

Paleo-Indians

The first people to inhabit the Americas from Eurasia more than 11,000 years ago.
The inhabitants, societies, and culture of the Americas prior to European contact, colonization, and influence; literally "pre-(Christopher)Columbus."

The New World refers to the western hemisphere, especially the Americas, which was almost entirely unknown to Europeans before the "age of discovery" beginning in the early 16th century. The Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was one of the earliest and most well-known of these European explorers; the first of his four famous voyages from Spain to the Americas began in 1492.

Sebastian Munster's Map of the New World, first published in 1540

A colorful map of what the German cartographer, Munster, and his contemporaries believed the Americas looked like during the European "age of discovery."

The indigenous peoples of the Americas are the pre-Columbian inhabitants of North America, Mesoamerica, and South America as well as Greenland. There are almost as many terms for indigenous people in the Americas as there are geographic regions. For example, "pueblos indígenas" is a common term in Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. "Aborigen" is used in Argentina; "Amerindian" is used in Guyana. Indigenous peoples are commonly known in Canada as Aboriginal peoples, which includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Indigenous peoples of the United States are commonly known as Native Americans or American Indians, and Alaskan Natives.

Scientists believe that migrations of humans from Eurasia (the combined continental landmass of Europe and Asia) to the Americas first took place via Beringia, a land bridge which formerly connected the two continents across what is now the Bering Strait. The most recent migration probably took place around 12,000 years ago, but the earliest period remains somewhat of a mystery. These early Paleo-Indians soon spread throughout the continent, diversifying into many hundreds of culturally distinct nations and tribes. According to the oral histories of many indigenous peoples of the Americas, they have been living there since their genesis, represented in a wide range of traditional creation stories.
Indigenous Cultures

While some indigenous peoples of the Americas were traditionally hunter-gatherers — and many, especially in Amazonia, still are — many groups practiced aquaculture and agriculture. The impact of their agricultural endowment to the world is a testament to their time and work in reshaping and cultivating the flora indigenous to the Americas. While some societies depended heavily on agriculture, others practiced a mix of farming, hunting, and gathering. In some regions, the indigenous peoples created monumental architecture, large-scale cities, chiefdoms (with hierarchies based on kinship), states, and empires. Many parts of the Americas are still populated by indigenous Americans, and some countries have sizable populations, including Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Greenland, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru.

At least a thousand different indigenous languages are spoken in the Americas. Some, such as Quechua languages, Aymara, Guaraní, Mayan languages, and Nahuatl, count their speakers in millions. Many indigenous people also maintain aspects of their traditional cultural practices, including religion, social organization, and subsistence economies. Some indigenous peoples still live in relative isolation from Western society.

Cultural practices in the Americas seem to have been shared mostly within geographical zones where unrelated peoples adopted similar technologies and social organizations. An example of such a cultural area is Mesoamerica, where millennia of coexistence and shared development among the peoples of the region produced a fairly homogeneous culture with complex agricultural and social patterns. Another well-known example is the North American plains where until the 19th century, Native American groups such as Blackfoot, Crow, and Sioux existed as nomadic hunter-gatherers (primarily buffalo hunting).

Indigenous visual arts traditions in the Americas span thousands of years, representing cultures from Mesoamerica to the Arctic. Visual arts by indigenous peoples of the Americas comprise a major category in world art history. Their contributions include pottery, paintings, jewelry, weavings and textiles, sculptures, basketry, carvings, and beadwork. Much of this artwork provides insight into the values, beliefs, and ceremonial rituals of early cultures of the Americas. In the following chapter, we will examine in detail the artworks of indigenous groups throughout North and South America prior to 1300.

Mayan Funerary Urn
Ceramics such as this urn provide insight into the values, beliefs, and ceremonial rituals of early cultures of the Americas.

Attributions

- The New World
14.2: Mesoamerica

14.2.1: Cultures of Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica was dominated by three cultures in the Pre-Classical (up to 200 CE) to Post-Classical periods (circa 1580 CE): the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec.

**Learning Objective**

Identify distinctive trends and materials in each of these civilization's art production

**Key Points**

- The Olmec people are known for extraordinarily detailed jade figurines and colossal heads of rulers made of basalt.
- Mayan culture achieved an advanced system of hieroglyphic writing, a sophisticated calendar, and a productive system of art patronage.
- The Mayan civilization rose very quickly. Although much of its art was lost to the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century, many stone and wood sculptures that attest to the Mayan's distinctive religious beliefs still survive.

**Key Terms**

Mesoamerica

A pre-Columbian cultural region extending from the southern part of Mexico to an area that comprises some parts of the countries of Central America.

jade

An ornamental rock with green and blue properties.

stelae

Upright stone slabs or columns typically bearing a commemorative inscription or relief design, often serving as gravestones. (singular: stela)

hieroglyphic

A type of writing consisting of hieroglyphs, a largely pictorial character of the Ancient Egyptian writing system.

Mesoamerica is a region in the Americas that extends from central Mexico to northern Costa Rica. Three cultures dominated the pre-Columbian history of Mesoamerica: the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations.
Olmec Culture

The Olmec civilization, which flourished from 1200–400 BCE, defines the Pre-Classical period; the Olmecs are generally considered the forerunner of all Mesoamerica cultures including the Maya and Aztecs. Primarily centered in the modern states of Tabasco and Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico, the Olmec people are known for creating an abundance of small and extraordinarily detailed jade figurines. The figurines typically exhibit complex shapes such as human figures, human-animal composites of deities and gods, and animals like cats and birds. Although we don't know the specific purpose of these jade objects, their presence in some Olmec graves suggests they served a religious purpose in addition to being signs of wealth and goods for trade.

Olmec jade figurine

Small holes were drilled around the edges so that this figurine could be worn on the body with twine.

The Olmec are also known for building massive stone sculptures, many of which were discovered at La Venta in the modern Mexican state of Tabasco. Made from basalt rock from the Tuxtla mountains to the north, the Olmec used this rock to create altars, stelae, and colossal heads. Each head is rendered as a distinct individual and is thought to resemble an Olmec ruler. Each ruler's personality is represented in the distinct headdresses that adorn the sculptures' heads.
Olmec Colossal Head

Heads made from basalt boulders weighed anywhere between 6 and 50 tons.

Mayan Culture

Mayan culture peaked during the Classical period (ca. 200–900 CE) and featured complex organization of large agricultural communities ruled by monarchs. They built imposing pyramids, temples, palaces, and administrative structures in densely populated cities in southern Mesoamerica. The Maya had the most advanced hieroglyphic writing in Mesoamerica and the most sophisticated calendrical system. In Mayan culture, we also see one of the earliest systems of art patronage. Kings and queens employed full-time artists in their courts, many of whom signed their work. It's thus unsurprising that the most common motifs in Mayan art are mortal rulers and supernatural beings.
Mayan relief sculpture from Palenque, Mexico

The Mayans were among the most advanced cultures of Mesoamerica. Most of their art represents mortal rulers or mythic deities.

In Palenque, Mexico (a prominent Mayan city in the Classical period), the ruler Lord Pakal commissioned a grouping of large structures that stand on high ground in the middle of the town. One of those buildings, the Temple of the Inscriptions, is a nine-level pyramid that is 75 feet high. The layers of the structure probably reflect the Mayan belief that the underworld had nine levels. Inscriptions line the back wall of the temple, giving the building its name.
Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Mexico

The Temple is one of four structures commissioned by the Maya ruler Lord Pakal.

Aztec Culture

Mayan civilization was in decline by the time of the Spanish Conquest in the early 16th century, and by then the Aztecs controlled much of Mexico. The rise of the Aztec was quick. Once a migratory people, they arrived in the Basin of Mexico in the 13th century where they eventually settled on an island in Lake Texcoco; they called their new home Tenochtitlan. In only a few centuries, the Aztecs aggressively expanded their territory and transformed Tenochtitlan into a capital so grand that the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes remarked on its beauty en route to invade the city in November 1519.

Metalwork was a particular skill of the Aztecs. Unfortunately, very few examples of their characteristic small gold and silver objects survive. When the Spanish arrived, most were melted down for currency. Stone sculpture and wood figurines fared much better during the Conquest. Aztec sculpture, most of which took the form of human figures carved from stone and wood, were not religious idols as one might suspect. Instead of containing the spirit of a deity, monumental sculptures were made to “feed” the deities with blood and precious objects in order to keep the gods, who resided elsewhere in the temples, happy. These sculptures are the source of stories told by Spanish conquistadors of huge statues splattered with blood and encrusted with jewels and gold.
15th century CE vase representing Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain, storms and agriculture

The vase is from the glittering Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.

14.2.2: Colossal Heads of the Olmec

The Olmec culture of the Gulf Coast of Mexico produced the first major Mesoamerican art and is particularly known for the creation of colossal stone heads.

Learning Objective

Describe the colossal stone heads made by the Olmecs

Key Points

- The Olmec built large cities with ceremonial centers. They also made small sculptures and figurines from many types of material. Using huge basalt boulders transported from mountains in another region, the Olmec produced at least 17 sculptures of human heads.
• The monuments are thought to represent Olmec rulers because of their distinct facial features and adornments.
• The heads date from between 1500 and 400 BCE.
• The only example of a colossal head found in a region outside the Olmec's domain is at Takalik Abaj in Guatemala.

**Key Terms**

Preclassic period

Also known as the Formative period, dating roughly from as early as 1500 BCE to about 400 BCE.

earspools

Cylindrical earrings that pierce the earlobe.

Olmec

Ancient pre-Columbian people living in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico, in roughly the modern-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco.

**The First Major Mesoamerican Art**

The art of the Olmec, which emerged during the preclassic period along the Gulf of Mexico, was the first major Mesoamerican art. Across the swampy coastal areas of the modern Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco, the Olmec constructed ceremonial centers on raised earth mounds. These centers were filled with objects made from materials including jade, clay, basalt, and greenstone. Most of these objects were figurines or sculptures that resembled both human and animal subjects.
Fish Vessel, 12th–9th century BCE

Olmec art frequently featured animal as well as human subjects.

While Olmec figurines are found abundantly in sites throughout the Formative period, monumental works of basalt sculpture, including colossal heads, altars, and seated figures are the most recognizable feature of this culture. The huge basalt rocks for the large sculptures were quarried at distant sites and transported to Olmec centers such as San Lorenzo and La Venta. The colossal heads range in height from 5 to 12 feet and portray adult males wearing close-fitting caps with chin straps and large, round ear spools. The fleshy faces have almond-shaped eyes, flat, broad noses, thick, protruding lips, and downturned mouths. Each face has a distinct personality, suggesting that they represent specific individuals.
Olmec Head No. 3 from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan
1200-900 BCE.

Olmec colossal heads are believed to be depictions of powerful rulers.

These massive basalt boulders were transported from the Sierra de los Tuxtlas Mountains of Veracruz. When originally displayed in Olmec centers, the heads were arranged in lines or groups; however, the method used to transport the stone to these sites remains unclear. Given the enormous weight of the stones and the manpower required to transport them over large distances, it is probable that the colossal portraits represent powerful Olmec rulers.

The discovery of a colossal head at Tres Zapotes in the nineteenth century spurred the first archaeological investigations of Olmec culture by Matthew Stirling in 1938. Seventeen confirmed examples are traced to four sites within the Olmec heartland on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Most colossal heads were sculpted from spherical boulders, but two from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán were recarved from massive stone thrones. An additional monument at Takalik Abaj in Guatemala is a throne that may have been carved from a colossal head. This is the only known example from outside the Olmec heartland.

Dating the monuments remains difficult because of the movement of many from their original contexts prior to archaeological investigation. Most have been dated to the Early Preclassic (or Formative) period (1500–1000 BCE) with some to the Middle Preclassic (1000–400 BCE) period. The smallest weighs six tons, while the largest is estimated to weigh 40 to 50 tons, although it was abandoned and left unfinished close to the source of its stone.

14.2.3: Teotihuacan

At its height, Teotihuacan was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of 200,000. It was a primary center of commerce and manufacturing.

Learning Objective

Understand the importance of Teotihuacan as a religious, commercial, and art historical center
Key Point

- The name Teotihuacan means Gathering Place of the Gods.

Key Term
taludtablero

A design characteristic of Mayan architecture at Teotihuacan in which a sloping *talud* at the base of a building supports a wall-like *tablero*, where ornamental painting and sculpture are usually placed.

Located some 30 miles northeast of present-day Mexico City, Teotihuacan experienced a period of rapid growth early in the first millennium CE. By 200 CE, it emerged as a significant center of commerce and manufacturing, the first large city-state in the Americas. At its height between 350 and 650 CE, Teotihuacan covered nearly nine miles and had a population of about 200,000, making it one of the largest cities in the world. One reason for its dominance was its control of the market for high-quality obsidian. This volcanic stone, made into tools and vessels, was traded for luxury items such as the green feathers of the quetzal bird, used for priestly headdresses, and the spotted fur of the jaguar, used for ceremonial garments.

Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico, Teotihuacan culture, c. 350-650 CE.

View from the Pyramid of the Moon down the Avenue of the Dead to the Ciudadela and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. The Pyramid of the Sun is at the middle left. The avenue is over a mile long.

The people of Teotihuacan worshipped deities that were recognizably similar to those worshipped by later Mesoamerican people, including the Aztecs, who dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest. Among these are the Rain or Storm God (god of fertility, war, and sacrifice), known to the Aztecs as Tlaloc, and the Feathered Serpent, known to the Maya as Kukulcan and to the Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl.

Teotihuacan's principal monuments include the Pyramid of the Sun, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the Ciudadela (Spanish for fortified city center), a vast sunken plaza surrounded by temple platforms. The city's principal religious and political center, the Ciudadela could accommodate an assembly of more than 60,000 people. Its focal point was the pyramidal Temple of the Feathered Serpent. This seven-tiered structure exhibits the taludtablero construction that is a hallmark of the Teotihuacan architectural style. The sloping
base, or *talud*, of each platform supports a vertical *tablero*, or entablature, which is surrounded by frame and filled with sculptural decoration. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent was enlarged several times, and as was characteristic of Mesoamerican pyramids, each enlargement completely enclosed the previous structure like the layers of an onion. Archaeological excavation of this temple's earlier-phase tableros and a stairway balustrade have revealed painted heads of the Feathered Serpent, the goggle-eyed Rain or Storm God, and reliefs of aquatic shells and snails. The flat, angular, abstract style, typical of Teotihuacan art, is in marked contrast to the curvilinear style of Olmec art.

The Decline

Sometime in the middle of the seventh century disaster struck Teotihuacan. The ceremonial center burned and the city went into a permanent decline. Nevertheless, its influence continued as other centers throughout Mesoamerica and as far south as the highlands of Guatemala borrowed and transformed its imagery over the next several centuries. The site was never entirely abandoned as it remained a legendary pilgrimage center. The much later Aztec people (c. 1300-1525 CE) revered the site as the place where they believed the gods created the sun and the moon. In fact, the name "Teotihuacan" is actually an Aztec word meaning "Gathering Place of the Gods."

14.2.4: Art of the Maya

Mayan art includes a wide variety of objects, commissioned by rulers, that depict scenes of both elite and everyday society.

**Learning Objective**

Identify the key features of Mayan art from the Classic Period
Key Points

- Maya blue was a distinctive color preserved for centuries due to its unique chemical composition; unfortunately, the technique involved in producing it has been lost.
- The Maya carved stone portraits of their rulers as memorials.
- There is an especially strong tradition of painting and sculpture in Mayan culture. Often sculpture was painted with distinctive dyes and techniques characteristic of the Maya.
- Much Mayan art was commissioned by rulers to accompany them to the Underworld.

Key Terms

Stele

As stone slab placed vertically and decorated with inscriptions or reliefs. Used as a grave marker or memorial.

Maya blue

A unique bright azure pigment manufactured by cultures of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, such as the Maya and Aztec. Made from a combination of a particular kind of clay, indigo, and vegetable dye.

Mayan Portraiture

Strong cultural influences stemming from the Olmec tradition and Teotihuacan contributed to the development of the Mayan city center and the culture's Classic artistic tradition. The most sacred and majestic buildings of Mayan cities were built in enclosed, centrally located precincts. The Maya held dramatic rituals within these highly sculptured and painted environments. For example, the grand pyramids of Copan and Tikal are among the most imposing buildings the Maya erected; each contains sculpted portraits that glorified the city's rulers.

Stele H in the Great Plaza at Copan represents one of the city's foremost leaders, 18-Rabbit, who reigned from 695-738 CE. During the ruler's long reign, Copan reached its greatest physical extent and breadth of political influence. On Stele H, 18-Rabbit wears an elaborate headdress and ornamented kilt and sandals. He holds across his chest a double-headed serpent bar, symbol of the sky and of his absolute power. His features, although idealized, have the quality of a portrait likeness. The Mayan elite, like the Egyptian pharaohs, tended to have themselves portrayed as eternally youthful. The dense, deeply carved ornamental details that frame the face and figure stand almost clear of the main stone block and wrap around the sides of the stele. The stele was originally painted, with remnants of red paint visible on many stelae and buildings in Copan.
Stele H portraying the ruler 18-Rabbit. Great Plaza at Copan, Honduras. Made of stone, 11' 9" high.

Although a powerful ruler, 18-Rabbit eventually was captured and beheaded by a rival king.

**Clay Sculpture**

Many small clay figures from the Classic Mayan period remain in existence. These free-standing objects illustrate aspects of everyday Mayan life. As a group, they are remarkably life-like, carefully descriptive, and even comic at times. They represent a wider range of human types and activities than commonly depicted on Mayan stelae. Ball players, women weaving, older men, dwarves, supernatural beings, and amorous couples, as well as elaborately attired rulers and warriors, comprise one of the largest groups of surviving Mayan art. Many of the hollow figurines are also whistles. They were made in ceramic workshops and painted with *Maya Blue*, a dye unique to Mayan and Aztec artists. Small clay figures found in burial sites were made to accompany the Mayan dead on their inevitable voyage to the Underworld.
Ballplayer, Maya, from Jaina Island, Mexico, 700-900CE. Painted clay, 6.25" high

Maya Blue is a pigment that has proven virtually indestructible, unlike other dyes and paints that have largely disappeared over time.

Painted Vases

The Maya painted vivid narrative scenes on the surfaces of cylindrical vases. A typical vase design depicts a palace scene where an enthroned Mayan ruler sits surrounded by courtiers and attendants. The figures wear simple loincloths, turbans of wrapped cloth and feathers, and black body paint. These painted vases may have been used as drinking and food vessels for noble Maya, but their final destination was the tomb, where they accompanied the deceased to the Underworld. They likely were commissioned by the deceased before his death or by his survivors, and were occasionally sent from distant sites as funerary offerings.

Detail of Enthroned Maya lord and courtiers, cylinder
vase, from Motul de San Jose region, Guatemala, c. 672-830 CE

Ceramic with red, rose, orange, white, and black on cream, 8” high.

14.2.5: Architecture of the Maya

The Maya had complex architectural programs. They built imposing pyramids, temples, palaces, and administrative structures in densely populated cities.

Learning Objective

Describe the characteristic style and functional elements of Maya architecture in the Classic and Postclassic periods

Key Points

- The Maya grouped large architectural structures at the centers of major cities.
- Pyramids and temples were used for religious purposes and built by rulers as memorials to themselves.
- Administrative structures such as the Palace demonstrate the sophistication of Maya architecture and technology.
- Maya architecture is ornate and elaborate, incorporating bas-relief, sculpture, and painted murals on the interiors and exteriors of structures.
- The Mesoamerican ball game was a central part of ancient Mesoamerican cultural, religious, and political life.
- The cities of Palenque and Chichen Itza, both in Mexico, contain iconic examples of Mayan architecture from the Classical and Postclassical periods.

Key Terms

bas-relief

A kind of sculpture in which shapes are carved so that they are only slightly higher than the flat background.

aqueduct

An artificial channel for conveying water, typically in the form of a bridge supported by tall columns across a valley.

mansard roof

A roof with four sloping sides that become steeper halfway down.

roof comb
In a Mayan building, a masonry wall along the apex of a roof built above the level of the roof proper. Roof combs support the highly decorated false facades that rise above the height of the building at the front.

Balustrades

A kind of low wall placed at the sides of staircases, bridges, etc., made of a row of short posts topped by a long rail.

The Mayan civilization emerged during the late Preclassic period (250 BCE-250 CE), reached its peak in the southern lowlands of Guatemala during the Classic period (250-900 CE), and shifted to northern Yucatan during the Postclassic period (900-1521 CE).

Architecture in Palenque

In Palenque, Mexico, a prominent city of the Classic period, the major buildings are grouped on high ground. The central group of structures includes the Palace (possibly an administrative and ceremonial center as well as a residential structure), the Temple of the Inscriptions, and two other temples. Most of the structures in the complex were commissioned by a powerful ruler, Lord Pakal, who reigned from 615 to 638 CE, and his two sons, who succeeded him.

Palace (right) and Temple of the Inscriptions, tomb-pyramid of Lord Pakal (left)

Palenque, Mexico. Mayan culture, late 7th century.

Temple of the Inscriptions

The Temple of the Inscriptions is a nine-level pyramid that rises to a height of about 75 feet. The consecutive layers probably reflect the belief, current among the Aztec and Maya at the time of the Spanish
conquest, that the underworld had nine levels. Priests would climb the steep stone staircase on the exterior to reach the temple on top, which recalls the kind of pole-and-thatch houses the Maya still build in parts of the Yucatan today. The roof of the temple was topped with a crest known as a roof comb, and its facade still retains much of its stucco sculpture. Inscriptions line the back wall of the outer chamber, giving the temple its name.

Temple of the Inscriptions (tomb pyramid of Lord Pakal)

Palenque, Mexico, 7th century

The Palace

Across from the Temple of Inscriptions is the Palace, a complex of several adjacent buildings and courtyards built on a wide artificial terrace. The Palace was used by the Mayan aristocracy for bureaucratic functions, entertainment, and ritual ceremonies.

 Numerous sculptures and bas-relief carvings within the Palace have been conserved. The Palace’s most unusual and recognizable feature is the four-story tower known as the Observation Tower. Like many other buildings at the site, the Observation Tower exhibits a mansard roof. The Palace was equipped with numerous large baths and saunas which were supplied with fresh water by an intricate water system. An aqueduct constructed of great stone blocks with a six-foot-high vault diverts the Otulum River to flow underneath the main plaza.
The Palace's Observation Tower with mansard roof

Palenque, Mexico, late Classic period

Architecture in Chichen Itza

As the focus of Maya civilization shifted northward in the Postclassic period, a northern Maya group called the Itza rose to prominence. Their principal center, Chichen Itza, (Yucatan State) Mexico, which means "at the mouth of the well of the Itza," flourished from the 9th to 13th centuries CE, eventually covering about six square miles.

El Castillo

One of Chichen Itza's most conspicuous structures is El Castillo (Spanish for the castle), a massive nine-level pyramid in the center of a large plaza with a stairway on each side leading to a square temple on the pyramid's summit. At the spring and fall equinoxes, the setting sun casts an undulating, serpent-like shadow.
on the stairways, forming bodies for the serpent heads carved at the base of the balustrades.

El Castillo (the Castle)

Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico. 9th-13th century.

The Great Ball Court

The Great Ball Court northwest of the Castillo is the largest and best preserved court for playing the Mesoamerican ball game, an important sport with ritual associations played by Mesoamericans since 1400 BCE. The parallel platforms flanking the main playing area are each 312 feet long. The walls of these platforms stand 26 feet high. Rings carved with intertwined feathered serpents are set high at the top of each wall at the center. At the base of the interior walls are slanted benches with sculpted panels of teams of ball players. In one panel, one of the players has been decapitated; the wound spews streams of blood in the form of wriggling snakes.

At one end of the Great Ball Court is the North Temple, also known as the Temple of the Bearded Man (Templo del Hombre Barbado). This small masonry building has detailed bas-relief carving on the inner walls, including a center figure with decorative carvings that resemble facial hair. Built into the east wall are the Temples of the Jaguar. The Upper Temple of the Jaguar overlooks the ball court and has an entrance guarded by two large columns carved in the familiar feathered serpent motif. At the entrance to the Lower Temple of the Jaguar is another Jaguar throne similar to the one in the inner temple of El Castillo.

The Great Ball Court, Chichen Itza, Mexico Late Classic period, 551' x 230'
The modern version of the Mesoamerican ball game is called Ulama and is similar to racquetball.

14.2.6: Ceramics of the Veracruz

Ceramic figurines are a hallmark of Classic Veracruz art. The Veracruz people produced a variety of small clay figures in multiple areas around the modern state of Veracruz, Mexico.

Learning Objective

Describe characteristics of ceramic figurines from two parts of Veracruz known for ceramic production in the Classic and Late Classic periods

Key Points

- The Classic Veracruz culture produced ceramic figurines in multiple distinctive styles and depicting many types of people.
- There are strong stylistic differences between ceramic figures from the cities of Remojadas and Nopiloa.
- The highly ritualized Mesoamerican ball game was of crucial importance to the Veracruz culture and was represented in their art.
- Smiling figures from Remojadas called Sonrientes are the most recognizable ceramic figures produced by the Veracruz people.

Key Terms

Mesoamerican ballgame

A sport with ritual associations played since 1,400 BC by the pre-Columbian peoples of Ancient Mesoamerica. The sport had different versions in different places during the millennia, and a more modern version of the game, *ulama*, is still played in a few places by the indigenous population.

Sonrientes

A type of ceramic figurine produced by the Veracruz culture. Literally translates to "smiling" in Spanish.

appliqués

In the context of ceramics, adding low-relief clay forms to hard surfaces for embellishment.

The modern state of Veracruz lies along the Mexican Gulf Coast, north of the Maya lowlands and east of the highlands of central Mexico. Culturally diverse and environmentally rich, the people of Veracruz took part in dynamic interchanges between three regions that over the centuries included trade, warfare, and migration. During the middle centuries of the first millennium, the artistically gifted Veracruzanos created inventive ceramic sculpture in diverse yet related styles.

Until the early 1950s, Classic Veracruz ceramics were few, little understood, and generally without provenance (known history). Since then, the recovery of thousands of figurines and pottery pieces from sites such as Remojadas and Nopiloa (some initially found by looters), has expanded our understanding and
filled many museum shelves. Artist and art historian Miguel Covarrubias described Classic Veracruz ceramics as "powerful and expressive, endowed with a charm and sensibility unprecedented in other, more formal cultures."

**Figurines from Remojadas and Nopiloa**

Remojadas-style figurines, perhaps the most easily recognizable from this culture, are usually hand-modeled and often adorned with appliqués. Of particular note are the *Sonrientes* (Smiling) Figurines, with triangular-shaped heads and outstretched arms. Figurines from Nopiloa are often molded and usually less ornate, without appliqués. The Sonrientes figure from Remojadas (below) provides scholars with an example of the clothing worn in ancient times, such as the loincloth and headdress. The flattened forehead on this smiling figure may represent the practice of intentional cranial deformation or may simply reflect an artistic convention. Many American cultures considered a flattened forehead desirable and used a variety of techniques to flatten the skulls of infants while they were still pliable.

![Smiling Figure, Late Classic Period, 7th-8th century, Remojadas, Veracruz, Mexico, 45.5cm high](image)

Smiling Figure, Late Classic Period, 7th-8th century, Remojadas, Veracruz, Mexico, 45.5cm high

Made of brown clay with white pigment. The figure contains both hand-modeled and mold-made elements.

Another smiling figure from the Remojadas region is a hollow ceramic sculpture representing an individual celebrating with music and dance. This bare-chested figure with open mouth and filed teeth stands energetically with legs spread and arms lifted as if caught in mid-motion. He wears a woven cap with geometric patterns, an elaborate skirt, circular earrings, a beaded necklace, and a bracelet. His face and body contain patterns evocative of body paint, including slight lines emanating from his lower eyelids and onto his cheeks. This sculpture evokes a festive dance or ritual accompanied by the rhythmic reverberation of the hand-held rattle and celebratory sound escaping from the figure's open mouth.
Smiling Figure, Late Classic Period, 7th–8th century

Remojadas, Veracruz, Mexico, 45 cm high

In contrast to Smiling Figures from Remojadas, the mold-made ceramic figure from Nopiloa below depicts a bearded, mustachioed male wearing a ballgame yoke around his waist to protect him from the hard, solid rubber ball used in play. There are cylindrical ear ornaments in his ears and beneath his arm, a baton-like object perhaps related to the local incarnation of the game. The rules and manner in which the Mesoamerican ballgame was played varied among contemporary sites and evolved through time. Surviving evidence suggests human sacrifice was a frequent outcome, but the game may also have been played for other purposes such as sport. The people of ancient Veracruz interacted with people from other Mesoamerican cultures, and this Nopiloa figure displays motifs commonly found in Mayan art. Knotted ties like those around this player's wrist and neck connote captured prisoners in Mayan pictorial language. A motif similar to the Maya mat, a symbol of rulership, appears on the flanged headdress of the ballplayer. Like Mayan figurines of this type, the body of this figure is a whistle, a musical instrument used in ritual and ceremony.
Ball Player Figurine, 7th–10th century, Nopiloa, Veracruz, Mexico, 27 cm. high.

Nopiloa, Veracruz, Mexico. 27 centimeters high.

14.2.7: Codices of the Mixtec

Mixtec culture had a unique and complex writing system that used characters and pictures to represent complete words and ideas instead of syllables or sounds. They made codices to document important historical events in their society.

Learning Objective

Understand the uses and structure of Mixtec codices

Key Points

- Mixtec codices were made of deerskin and folded in an accordion pattern. Only eight Mixtec codices survive.
- Mixtec codices allow us to trace Mixtec history from 1550 CE back to 940 CE, deeper in time than any other Mesoamerican culture except the Maya.
• Codices represented historical events on both a micro and macro scale for Mixtec nobility.

**Key Terms**

**Mixtec**

A Mesoamerican people who lived in southern Mexico before the rise of the Aztecs.

**codices**

Books constructed of sheets of paper, vellum, papyrus, or similar materials, with hand-written contents. Codex: singular

**logographic**

Type of written language in which the characters/pictures used represent complete words and ideas instead of syllables or sounds.

**About the Mixtec**

The Mixtecs were one of the most influential ethnic groups to emerge in Mesoamerica during the Post-Classic period. Never a united nation, the Mixtecs waged war and forged alliances among themselves as well as with other peoples in their vicinity. They also produced beautiful manuscripts and metal work and influenced the international artistic style used from Central Mexico to Yucatan.

During the Classic period, the Mixtecs lived in hilltop settlements of northwestern Oaxaca, a fact reflected in their name in their own language, Ñuudzahui, meaning "People of the Rain." During the Post-Classic period, the Mixtecs slowly moved into adjacent valleys and then into the great Valley of Oaxaca. This time of expansion is recorded in a large number of deerskin manuscripts called codices, only eight of which have survived. Nevertheless, these manuscripts allow us to trace Mixtec history from 1550 CE back to 940 CE, deeper in time than any other Mesoamerican culture except the Maya.

**Mixtec Codices**

**Mixtec Codex Zouche-Nuttall**

Mixtec codices were made of deerskin and folded like an accordion.
Mixtec codices represent a type of writing classified as logographic, meaning the characters and pictures used represent complete words and ideas instead of syllables or sounds. In Mixtec, the relationships among pictorial elements denote the meaning of the text, whereas in other Mesoamerican writing the pictorial representations are not incorporated into the text. Common topics found in the codices are biographies of rulers and other influential figures, records of elite family trees, mythologies, and accounts of ceremonies.

A Warrior Scene from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall

The above detail from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall depicts a group of warriors conquering a town (an event noted by the warriors' drawn weapons and the arrow piercing the hill). Above each participant's head is a glyph, or pictograph, with a dot. The glyphs below the warriors are calendrical day signs. They are also, however, the names of Mixtec nobles; among this group, a person's name was often his or her birthday.

Pre-Columbian Mixtec are mainly concerned with histories. They record events such as royal births, wars and battles, royal marriages, forging of alliances, pilgrimages, and death of rulers. In addition to the calendrical signs used for dating events and naming individuals, the Mixtecs used a combination of conventionalized pictures and glyphs to illustrate the type and nature of the event. One example is the wedding scene, usually shown as two individuals of opposite sex facing each other and sitting on jaguar-pelt chairs, as illustrated by a scene from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall which records the marriage of the legendary Mixtec King 8 Deer "Tiger Claw" of Tilantongo to Lady 12 Snake in 1051 CE.
A Marriage Scene from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall

This arrangement of the bride and groom is a purely pictorial convention, with no connection to the language. This means that no idiom or phrase in the Mixtec language that describing two people sitting face-to-face is a metaphor for marriage. However, the cup of chocolate held by Lady 12 Snake may represent the expression ynodzehua, which means "dowry" in Mixtec, where the root dzehua means "chocolate." Chocolate or cacao was one of the most expensive and luxurious products in Mesoamerica, and cacao beans were used as currency. It is no surprise the word for dowry would be based on chocolate.

Attributions

- Cultures of Mesoamerica
  - "Pre-Columbian art." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-Columbian_art%23Mesoamerica_and_Central_America](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-Columbian_art%23Mesoamerica_and_Central_America). Wikipedia [CC BY-SA 3.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-Columbian_art%23Mesoamerica_and_Central_America).
  - "Aztec Art." [http://www.ancient.eu/Aztec_Art/](http://www.ancient.eu/Aztec_Art/). Ancient [CC BY-SA 3.0](http://www.ancient.eu/Aztec_Art/).
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- Colossal Heads of the Olmec

- Teotihuacan

- Art of the Maya
Calendar Portal CC BY-SA 3.0.

Architecture of the Maya

Ceramics of the Veracruz

Codices of the Mixtec
14.3: South America

14.3.1: Ceramics in Early South America

The ceramic objects of the Paracas, Nazca, and Moche communities of Peru vary in artistic forms and were important cultural artifacts. Like the Tiwanaku and Waki people of Bolivia and their contemporaries, the Wari people of Peru produced pottery that was multifaceted in both aesthetics and utility.

Learning Objective

Compare the aesthetic style, technique, and function of ceramics made by the Paracas, Nazca, Moche, Tiwanaku, Waki, and Wari cultures

Key Points

- The Paracas culture (from 800 to 100 BCE) immediately preceded and heavily influenced the Nazca culture.
- The art of the Paracas culture has mainly been preserved in tombs and on mummies.
- The Nazca, like all Pre-Columbian societies in South America including the Inca, had no writing system, in contrast to the contemporary Maya of Mesoamerica. The iconography or symbols on their ceramics served as a means of communication.
- As in other cultures, Moche ceramics were probably used for educational purposes and communication.
- The Moche culture used mold technology to replicate ceramic forms.
- Irrigation and the passage of fluids in the human body are important themes in Moche culture and artwork.
- The realistic detail in Moche ceramics may have helped them serve as didactic models.
- The Tiwanaku state was an important precursor to the Inca Empire.
- Small decorative objects that held ritual religious meaning were used to spread the influence of the capital city of Tiwanaku to surrounding communities.
- The Tiwanaku and Wari cultures must have interacted, given the similarities in the artifacts of each culture, but whether their relationship was amicable or antagonistic is unknown.

Key Terms

Moche

A civilization that flourished in northern Peru from about 100 to 800 AD, particularly noted for their elaborately painted ceramics, gold work, monumental constructions (huacas), and irrigation systems.

phytomorphic

Having the attributes of a plant.

kero
A type of wooden drinking vessel produced by the Incas and earlier Andean cultures.

Wari

A Middle Horizon civilization that flourished in the south-central Andes and coastal area of modern-day Peru, from about 500 to 1000 CE.

Resin painting

A type of pottery decoration in which ceramics are painted after they are fired in a kiln with a sticky organic substance exuded by trees and other plants.

Middle Horizon

Cultural period of Peru and the Andean region lasting from 600 to 1000 CE.

Huacas

In Quechua, a Native American language of South America, a huaca or waqa is an object that represents something revered, typically a monument of some kind. The term huaca can refer to natural locations, such as immense rocks.

Slip painting

A type of pottery decoration in which a liquid mixture of clay and/or other materials suspended in water is applied to wet clay before it is fired in a kiln.

Andean

Of or pertaining to the Andes mountains in South America.

**Paracas and Nazca Cultures**

The Paracas culture was an important Andean society between approximately 800 and 100 BCE, with an extensive knowledge of irrigation and water management. It developed in the Paracas Peninsula in the Ica Region of Peru.

The Nazca culture flourished from 100 to 800 CE beside the dry southern coast of Peru in the river valleys of the Rio Grande de Nazca drainage and the Ica Valley. Heavily influenced by the preceding Paracas culture, the Nazca produced an array of beautiful crafts and technologies such as ceramics, textiles, and geoglyphs (most commonly known as the Nazca lines).

**Paracas Ceramics**

Many ceramics of the Paracas have been found in tombs, particularly in the Paracas Cavernas. These are shaft tombs set into the top of Cerro Colorado, each containing multiple burial sites. The associated ceramics include incised polychrome (the surface has been incised with a sharp tool and painted multiple colors), “negative” resist decoration (pottery is covered in material, then painted and uncovered to reveal a pattern of negative and positive space), and other techniques of the Paracas tradition.
Nazca Ceramics

The Nazca culture is characterized by its beautiful polychrome pottery, painted with at least 15 distinct colors. The shift from post-fire resin painting to pre-fire slip painting marked the end of Paracas-style pottery and the beginning of Nazca-style pottery. Archaeologists have excavated highly valued polychrome pottery among all classes of Nazca society, illustrating that it was not just the elite that had access to these pieces.

The Nazca pottery sequence has been divided into nine phases, progressing from realistic subject matter such as fruits, plants, people, and animals to motifs that included abstract elements as part of the design and geometric iconography. The Nazca, like all Pre-Columbian societies in South America including the Inca, had no writing system, in contrast to the contemporary Maya of Mesoamerica. The iconography or symbols on their ceramics served as a means of communication.

Moche Ceramics

From 100 to 800 CE, Moche civilization flourished in northern Peru with its capital, Huacas del Sol y de la Luna, located near present-day Trujillo.

Huaca del Sol

Huaca del Sol, "Temple of the Sun," was the Mochica political capital.

Huaca del Sol, "Temple of the Sun"

Traditional North Coast Peruvian ceramic art uses a limited palette, relying primarily on red and white, fine line painting, fully modeled clay, naturalistic figures, and stirrup spouts (in which the stirrup handle forms part of the spout, which emanates from the top of the stirrup). Moche ceramics created between 150 and 800 AD epitomize this style. These realistic pots have been found not only in major North Coast archaeological sites, such as Huaca de la luna, Huaca del Sol, and Sipan, but at small villages and unrecorded burial sites as well.

The realistic detail in Moche ceramics may have helped them serve as didactic models. Older generations could pass down general knowledge about reciprocity and embodiment to younger generations through such portrayals. Important social activities are documented in Moche pottery, including war, sex, metalwork, and weaving. Moche ceramics vary widely in shape and theme and are not generally uniform, although the use of mold technology did enable for mass production.
Erotic Moche Pot

This piece is an example of the didactic role of ceramics in Moche culture.

Erotic Moche Pot

Because irrigation was the source of wealth and foundation of the empire, Moche culture emphasized the importance of circulation and flow. Expanding upon this, the Moche focused on the passage of fluids in their artwork, particularly life fluids through vulnerable human orifices.

The coloration of Moche pottery is often simple and follows the Peruvian tradition with yellowish cream and rich red used almost exclusively on elite pieces and with white and black used rarely. Their adobe buildings have been mostly destroyed by looters and natural forces over the last 1300 years, but the huacas that remain show that their murals featured vibrant colors.

Tiwanaku and Waki Cultures

Tiwanaku is an important Pre-Columbian archaeological site in western Bolivia, South America. Tiwanaku is recognized by Andean scholars as one of the most important precursors to the Inca Empire, flourishing as the ritual and administrative capital of a major state power for approximately 500 years.
The "Gate of the Sun"

This site was the spiritual and political center of the Tiwanaku culture.

The "Gate of the Sun"

The city and its inhabitants left no written history, and the modern locals know little about the ancient city and its activities. An archaeologically based theory asserts that around 400 CE, Tiwanaku went from a locally dominant force to a predatory state. Tiwanaku expanded its reaches into the Yungas and brought its culture and way of life to many other cultures in Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. However, Tiwanaku was not exclusively a violent culture. To expand its reach, Tiwanaku used politics to create colonies, negotiate trade agreements (which made the other cultures rather dependent), and establish state cults. Many others were drawn into the Tiwanaku empire due to religious beliefs.

Ceramics & Textiles

Tiwanaku ceramics and textiles were composed of bright colors and stepped patterns. An important ceramic artifact is the kero, a drinking cup that was ritually smashed after ceremonies and placed in burials. Tapestries and tunics provide examples of textiles found at Tiwanaku.

These decorative objects typically depicted herders, effigies, trophy heads, sacrificial victims, and felines. Religion and influence from the main site to the satellite centers were spread through small portable objects that held ritual religious meaning. They were created in wood, engraved bone, and cloth and depicted puma and jaguar effigies, incense burners, carved wooden hallucinogenic snuff tablets, and human portrait vessels.

The Wari

Throughout their imperial reign, the Tiwanaku shared domination of the Middle Horizon with the Wari, whose culture rose and fell around the same time and was centered 500 miles north in the southern highlands of Peru. It is unknown whether the relationship between the two empires was cooperative or antagonistic. Definite interaction between the two is proved by their shared iconography in art. Significant elements of both styles (the split eye, trophy heads, and staff-bearing profile figures, for example) seem to
have been derived from the earlier Pukara culture in the northern Titicaca Basin.

Wari earthenware pot with painted design, 650-800 CE (Middle Horizon)

The Wari shared much in common aesthetically with the Tiwanaku.

Wari earthenware pot with painted design, 650-800 CE (Middle Horizon).

14.3.2: Textiles in Early South America

The intricate, complex textiles of the Paracas and Nazca cultures were often associated with a burial ritual.

Learning Objective

Discuss the distinguishing characteristics of textiles in pre-Colombian Andean society

Key Points

- Both the Nazca and preceding Paracas culture created intricate textiles, most likely produced by women using a backstrap loom.
- Like the two cultures’ ceramics, many of their textiles were associated with burial rituals.
- Because of the dry climate in southern Peru, many Nazca and Paracas textiles have been well-
preserved.
• The so-called "Paracas Textile" tells modern scholars a great deal about the inhabitants of ancient Peru. For instance, they traded extensively with people who lived well outside their territory.

**Key Terms**

**backstrap loom**

A simple loom with roots in ancient civilizations, consisting of two sticks or bars between which the warps are stretched. One bar is attached to a fixed object, and the other to the weaver through a strap around the back.

**Andean**

Of or pertaining to the Andes mountains in South America.

**Textiles of Andean Cultures**

The Paracas culture was an important Andean society between approximately 800 and 100 BCE, with an extensive knowledge of irrigation and water management. It developed in the Paracas Peninsula in the Ica Region of Peru.

Many ceramics and textiles of the Paracas have been found in tombs, particularly in the Paracas Cavernas. These shaft tombs, set into the top of Cerro Colorado, each contain multiple burial sites. The associated ceramics include incised polychrome, "negative" resist decoration, and other wares of the Paracas tradition. The associated textiles include many complex weave structures and elaborate plaiting and knotting techniques.

The later Nazca people also produced technically complex textiles. The Nazca flourished from 100 to 800 CE beside the dry southern coast of Peru in the river valleys of the Rio Grande de Nazca and the Ica Valley. Heavily influenced by the preceding Paracas culture, the Nazca produced an array of beautiful crafts and technologies such as ceramics, textiles, and geoglyphs (most commonly known as the Nazca lines).
Woman weaving a textile using a backstrap loom.

Nazca textiles were most likely woven from spun cotton and wool by women at habitation sites. The textiles would have been made using a backstrap loom, similar to the way textiles are made in the region today. Textiles were woven with the common motifs before these appeared on painted pottery. The dry desert has preserved the textiles of both the Nazca and Paracas cultures, which comprise most of what is known about early textiles in the region. Shawls, dresses, tunics, belts, and bags have been found through excavations at Cahuachi and elsewhere. Many textiles associated with the Nazca culture are garments that were included with grave goods found at burial sites.

Mummy Bundles on the Paracas Peninsula

One of the most extraordinary masterpieces of Andean textiles is a nearly 2,000-year-old cloth from the South Coast of Peru. Despite its small size (about two by five feet), it contains a vast amount of information about the people who lived in ancient Peru, and despite its great age and delicacy, its colors are brilliant and tiny details amazingly intact. The arid environment of southern Peru along the Pacific shore allows organic material buried in the sand to remain well-preserved for hundreds or even thousands of years.
Nasca, *Mantle ("The Paracas Textile")*

100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Many figures are embroidered around the border of the textile, and inside the border are colorful geometric designs.

In the ancient cemeteries on the Paracas Peninsula, the dead were wrapped into "mummy bundles" with layers of cloth and clothing. The largest and richest mummy bundles contained hundreds of brightly embroidered textiles, feathered costumes, and fine jewelry, interspersed with food offerings such as beans. Early reports claimed that this cloth came from the Paracas peninsula, so it was called "THE Paracas textile," to mark its excellence and uniqueness. Currently, scholars have revised this provenance and now attribute the cloth to the Nasca culture.

**Detail of border figure on The Paracas Textile**

A close-up of a detailed and colorful figure on the border of the textile. He is wearing a headdress and is holding an object in each hand.

Like other very fine cloths, the Paracas Textile is finished so carefully on both sides that it is almost impossible to distinguish which is the correct side. Although the central cloth and its framing border are created by different techniques, both display perfect reversibility—except for three border figures. These
three appear in back view on one side of the cloth, thereby designating a “front” and “back” to the textile.

14.3.3: Architecture in Early South America

Chavín de Huántar and Tiwanaku were important ceremonial centers in pre-Inca South America.

Learning Objective

Discuss the multiple functions of architecture in early South America

Key Points

- During its heyday, Chavín de Huántar was used as a religious center for ceremonies and events or consultation with an oracle.
- The temple at Chavín de Huántar is a massive flat-topped pyramid surrounded by lower platforms, along with a U-shaped plaza with a sunken circular court in the center.
- Tiwanaku is recognized as one of the most important precursors to the Inca Empire.
- Archaeologists still struggle to understand how the megaliths used to construct Tiwanaku were transported to the site.

Key Terms

Chavin

A civilization that developed in the northern Andean highlands of Peru from 900 to 200 BCE. Their influence extended to other civilizations along the coast.

trilithon

A megalithic post-and-lintel structure.

megalith

A gigantic stone, often weighing several tons.

Chavín de Huántar and Tiwanaku were important ceremonial centers in pre-Inca South America.

Chavín de Huántar

Chavín de Huántar is an archaeological site containing ruins and artifacts, constructed circa 1200 BCE and occupied until around 400-500 BCE by the Chavin, a major pre-Inca culture. The site is located 160 miles north of Lima, Peru at an elevation of 10,000 feet, on the edge of the Conchucos Valley.
The site of Chavín de Huántar

Chavín de Huántar was of both geographical and religious significance to the Chavín.

A view of the ruins of Chavin de Huantar with mountains in the background.

Occupation at Chavín de Huántar has been carbon dated to at least 3000 BCE, with ceremonial activity occurring primarily toward the end of the second millennium and through the middle of the first millennium BCE. While the fairly large population was based on an agricultural economy, the city's location at the headwaters of the Marañn River, between the coast and the jungle, made it ideal for the dissemination and collection of both ideas and material goods. This archaeological site has revealed a great deal about the Chavín culture. The transformation of the center into a valley-dominating monument had a complex effect. Chavín de Huántar became a pan-regional place of importance. People used it to gather, attend and participate in rituals, and consult with oracles.

Findings at Chavín de Huántar indicate that social instability and upheaval began between 500 and 300 BCE, at the same time the larger Chavin civilization began to decline. Large ceremonial sites were abandoned, some unfinished, and were replaced by villages and agricultural land.

The temple at Chavín de Huántar was the religious center of the Chavín people and the capital of the Chavin culture. This massive flat-topped pyramid is surrounded by lower platforms and located in a U-shaped plaza with a sunken circular court in the center. The inside of the temple walls are decorated with sculptures and carvings. Chavín de Huántar was constructed over many stages, starting prior to 1200 BCE, with most major construction over by 750 BCE. The site continued as a ceremonial center until around 500 BCE.
The Circular Plaza at Chavín de Huantar

The Circular Plaza Terrace was built up around the Circular Plaza in order to make the 21-meter diameter plaza artificially sunken.

Tiwanaku

Tiwanaku is an important Pre-Columbian archaeological site in western Bolivia. It is recognized by Andean scholars as one of the most important precursors to the Inca Empire, flourishing as the ritual and administrative capital of a major state power for approximately 500 years.

The city and its inhabitants left no written history, and the modern locals know little about the ancient city and its activities. However, the site might have been inhabited as early as 1500 BCE. An archaeological theory asserts that around 400 CE, Tiwanaku went from a locally dominant force to a predatory state. It expanded its reaches into the Yungas and brought its culture and way of life to many cultures in Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. However, Tiwanaku was not exclusively a violent culture. To expand its reach, Tiwanaku used politics to create colonies, negotiate trade agreements (which made the other cultures rather dependent), and establish state cults. Many were drawn into the Tiwanaku empire by their religious beliefs.

Architecture

Tiwanaku monumental architecture is characterized by megaliths of exceptional workmanship. The main architectural appeal of the site comes from the carved images and designs on carved doorways and megalithic constructions such as the Gate of the Sun. Tiwanaku's architecture and skill in stone-cutting reveals a knowledge of descriptive geometry.

The Gate of the Sun is a trilithon that stands nearly 10 feet tall and 13 feet wide. Its weight is estimated at approximately 10 tons. Although there have been various modern interpretations of its mysterious inscriptions, the carvings that decorate the gate are believed to possess astronomical significance and may have served a calendrical purpose.
The Gate of the Sun

This site was the spiritual and political center of the Tiwanaku culture.

A stone archway with a central figure carved into the center with smaller carvings on either side of it.

The Gate of the Sun shares its location with the Kalasasaya, a temple in a megalithic courtyard more than 300 feet long. Since the late 20th century, researchers have theorized that this was not the gateway's original location. The walls are covered with tenon heads of many styles, suggesting that the structure was reused for different purposes over time. What stands today is not the original configuration of the megaliths that comprise the Kalasasaya. Scholars believe it was originally constructed in a similar fashion as Stonehenge, with its stones spaced evenly apart and standing vertically.

Walls around the temple Kalasasaya at Tiwanaku

The Kalasasaya temple at Tiwanaku was used as a ceremonial center.

The quarries from which the stone blocks used in the construction of structures at Tiwanaku came lie at significant distances from this site, which has led scholars to speculate on how they could have been moved.
One theory is that giant andesite stones weighing more than 40 tons were transported some 90 kilometers across Lake Titicaca on reed boats and then laboriously dragged another 10 kilometers to the city.

**Attributions**

- **Ceramics in Early South America**

- **Textiles in Early South America**

- **Architecture in Early South America**
14.4: North America

14.4.1: The Southwest

Southwestern indigenous cultures have produced a variety of architectural, artisanal, and ritual art forms for centuries.

Learning Objective

Describe the Anasazi, Hopi, Navajo, and Hohokam cultures of the American Southwest

Key Points

- The Anasazi, the ancestors of Pueblo Native American tribes, produced decorative pottery for storage purposes.
- Chaco Canyon in New Mexico (c. 10th century) is one of the most impressive early examples of Southwestern Native American architecture.
- The Navajo emigrated from Northern Canada to the Southwest sometime after 1000 CE. The sand paintings and weavings for which this culture is renowned are gender-specific. Men created sand paintings while women created weavings.
- Mastery of acid etching allowed the Hohokam culture to create lasting designs in bone, shell, and stone.

Key Terms

Pueblo

Modern and ancient communities of Native Americans in the Southwestern United States of America.

Anasazi

A Native American people who once lived in cliff dwellings in Utah and Colorado.

Navajo

Currently the largest Native American tribe in North America.

xeriscaping

Landscaping and gardening that reduces or eliminates the need for supplemental water from irrigation.

The Anasazi (1000 BCE–700 CE) are the ancestors of today's Pueblo tribes. Their culture formed in the American southwest after the cultivation of corn was introduced from Mexico around 1200 BCE. Additionally, the Navajo and Apache emigrated from Northern Canada to the Southwest sometime after
1000 CE. People of this region developed an agrarian lifestyle, cultivating food, storage gourds, and cotton with irrigation or xeriscaping techniques. They lived in sedentary towns, so pottery used to store water and grain was ubiquitous. For hundreds of years, the Anasazi created utilitarian grayware and black-on-white pottery as well as orange and red ceramics. Turquoise, jet, and spiny oyster shell were traditionally used by Ancestral Pueblo for jewelry and sophisticated inlay.

**Anasazi Architecture**

Southwest architecture includes cliff dwellings (multi-story settlements carved from living rock), pit houses, and adobe and sandstone pueblos. One of the most elaborate and largest ancient settlements is Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, which includes 15 major complexes of sandstone and timber connected by a network of roads. The largest of these settlements, Pueblo Bonito, contains over 800 rooms.

![Pueblo Bonito](image)

**Pueblo Bonito**

The impressive Pueblo Bonito was built by the Ancestral Puebloans as one of several settlements at Chaco Canyon.

**Hopi Culture**

The Hopi culture emerged in the Southwest in the fourteenth century. Hopi communities created ceramic jars, dough bowls, and food bowls of different sizes for daily use, as well as more elaborate ceremonial mugs, jugs, ladles, seed jars and vessels for ritual use. These were usually finished with polished surfaces and decorated with black painted designs.

Among Hopi ritual art is the kachina figure. This instructs young girls and new brides about katsinas or katsinam, the immortal beings that bring rain, control aspects of the natural world and society, and act as messengers between humans and the spirit world.
Hopi Kachina Figure

The Kachina figure originated in the 18th century as a flat object with an almost indistinguishable shape that suggested a head and contained minimal body paint. By the late 19th century, it assumed a more realistic appearance.

Navajo Culture

Art in the Navajo culture is traditionally gender-based. Men, seen as static in nature, create sand paintings for healing rituals. Because the pattern must be precise if the infirm person is to be cured, men were believed to be better suited for this work. Because sand paintings must be destroyed at the end of the ritual, tradition dictates that the designs not be photographed or otherwise documented. Women, on the other hand, were seen as more dynamic in nature and thus better suited for the creation of woven fabrics, such as blankets and rugs, whose patterns do not have to be exact. Unlike sand paintings, blankets and rugs are made to be long-lasting and therefore may be photographed.
Probably Bayeta-style Blanket with Terrace and Stepped Design

Navajo, 1870-80.

Hohokam Culture

Around 200 CE, the Hohokam culture developed in Arizona as the ancestors of the Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'odham or Pima tribes. The Hohokam are credited as the first culture to master acid etching. Artisans produced jewelry from shell, stone, bone, and carved stone figures. Pottery and textile production also flourished.

Hohokam Etched Shell

This shell was produced by the Hohokam culture of the Southwest.

14.4.2: Inuit Art
Inuit art is produced by the people of the Arctic, or Inuit people, who were previously known as Eskimos.

**Learning Objective**

Differentiate between the Pre-Dorset, Dorset, Ipiutak, and Thule cultures of North America

**Key Points**

- Around 4000 BCE, nomads known as the Pre-Dorset or the Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt) crossed over the Bering Strait from Siberia into Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, and Newfoundland. The Dorset culture became culturally distinct around 600 BCE.
- Walrus and narwhal ivory was historically the preferred material for carving sculptures, utensils, tools, and weapons among Pre-Dorset and Dorset artisans.
- The Dorset and Ipiutak communities that inhabited Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, and Newfoundland were displaced by the Thule population around 1000 CE.
- The Thule carved small, delicate versions of non-utilitarian crafts and ceremonial objects that were easily transportable. They also constructed homes from bones harvested from bowhead whales and other materials.

**Key Terms**

Nomad

A member of a group of people who have no fixed home and move seasonally in search of food, water, and grazing.

Thule

The ancestors of the Canadian Inuit.

shaman

A holy person believed to mediate between the physical world and the spirit world.

Inuit

Any of several Aboriginal peoples of coastal Arctic Canada, Alaska, and Greenland.

Inuit art refers to artwork produced by the people of the Arctic, or Inuit people, previously known as Eskimos. Inuit culture begins with the Pre-Dorset cultures as far back as 4000 BCE and spans through the present day.

**Pre-Dorset and Dorset Cultures**

Around 4000 BCE, nomads known as the Pre-Dorset or the Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt) crossed over the Bering Strait from Siberia into Alaska, the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, and Newfoundland. Very little remains of this culture, and only a few preserved artifacts carved in ivory could be considered works of art.

The Dorset culture, which became culturally distinct around 600 BCE, produced a significant amount of
figurative art using walrus ivory, bone, caribou antler, and on rare occasions, stone. Ivory from walruses and narwhals was the preferred material for carving utensils, tools, and weapons among Pre-Dorset and Dorset artisans. Subjects included birds, bears, walruses, seals, and human figures, as well as remarkably small masks. These items had a magical or religious significance, and were either worn as amulets to ward off evil spirits or used in shamanic rituals.

**Carving of a polar bear**

Dorset culture. Ivory. Alamek site, Iglulik, Canada.

Archaeology has been critical to knowledge of the Dorset people, who were essentially extinct by 1500 due to difficulty adapting to the Medieval Warming Period.

**Ipiutak Culture**

The Ipiutak culture represents a classical period of Inuit development. The culture arose between 100 and 200 BCE and collapsed around 800 CE. The artwork is extremely elaborate, incorporating geometric, animal, and anthropomorphic designs.

**Ipiutak archaeological site at Point Hope in northwest Alaska**
The Ipiutak culture arose c. 100–200 BCE and collapsed around 800 CE.

An Ipiutak archaeological site at Point Hope, Alaska, is renowned for its mortuary offerings, notably mask-like creations. One Point Hope Ipiutak mask represents a human face with a gaping mouth and blowfly larvae issuing from its nostrils, a symbol rife with shamanistic implications. The mask, which belonged to a child, contains a stylized mouth and eyebrows and a naturalistic nose, as if it had been modeled upon an actual face. Two pointed objects likely covered the eyes.

![Child's Funerary Mask](image)

**Child's Funerary Mask**

Ipiutak. Point Hope, Alaska.

**Thule Culture**

Around 1000 CE, the people of the Thule culture, ancestors of today's Inuit, migrated from northern Alaska and either displaced or slaughtered the earlier Dorset inhabitants. By the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the Thule occupied an area currently inhabited by the Central Inuit, and by the fifteenth century, the Thule had fully replaced the Dorset culture. Contact with Europeans began in the 16th century and intensified in the 18th century. Compounded by the already disruptive effects of the "Little Ice Age" (1650–1850), the Thule communities broke apart, and the people became known as the Eskimos, and later as the Inuit.

Thule art had a definite Alaskan influence and included utilitarian objects such as combs, buttons, needle cases, cooking pots, ornate spears, and harpoons. The graphic decorations were purely ornamental, bearing no religious significance.

All Thule objects were made by hand from natural materials, including stone, bone, ivory, antler, and animal hides. Nomadic people carried tools necessary for daily living and could take very little else with them. Non-utilitarian objects were also carved in miniature so that they could be carried or worn, such as dance masks, amulets, fetish figures, and intricate combs and figures used to objectify their mythology and oral history.

The Classic Thule tradition (1100-1400) relied on the bowhead whale for survival since this species swims slowly and sleeps near the surface of the water. Bowhead whales served many purposes for the Thule
people, including meat for food, blubber for oil (used in cooking, heating, and providing light), and bones for building structures and making tools. A Thule site in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, contains an example of a home with a whalebone frame.

An Ancient Thule Home Framed with Whalebone
Resolute Bay, Nunavut, Canada.

14.4.3: Woodlands in the East

Eastern Woodland cultures are known for their production of a variety of art forms, from pottery to substantial earthen mounds for burial.

Learning Objective

Distinguish between the early, middle, and late Woodland periods of North America.

Key Points

- The Woodland Period is divided into early, middle, and late periods, and consisted of cultures that relied mostly on hunting and gathering for subsistence.
- Pottery, stone carving and engraved shells are examples of the artwork of the shellfish-subsisting communities of the Early Woodland Period.
- The Middle Woodland Period from 200 to 500 CE is known for its jewelry and sculpture.
- The Late Woodland Period is traditionally framed as the decline for these hunter-gatherer communities, though many indigenous communities maintained similar lifestyles for several centuries.
- The agrarian Mississippian Culture emerged in the Southeast following the Late Woodland Period and is known for creating elaborate mounds, as well as ceramic innovation and work with shells and copper.
- Cahokia, a Mississippian site that extended from eastern Missouri to southern Illinois, is best known for its complex mound structure and the only copper workshop of the Woodland cultures.
Key Terms

anneal

A technique that involves heating material until it glows, then slowly allowing to cool to room temperature in still air.

Southeastern Ceremonial Complex

The name given to the regional stylistic similarity of artifacts, iconography, ceremonies, and mythology of the Mississippian culture that coincided with their adoption of maize agriculture and chiefdom-level complex social organization from 1200 to 1650 CE.

long-nosed god maskette

Small shield-shaped face with a squared-off forehead, circular eyes, and large nose.

mound builder

Any of several Native American people who constructed large mounds for ceremonial or burial purposes.

Mississippian

A mound-building, agrarian Native American culture that flourished in what is now the Midwestern, Eastern, and Southeastern United States from approximately 800 to 1500 CE.

The Eastern Woodlands cultures inhabited the regions of North America east of the Mississippi River since at least 2500 BCE.

Contact and trade were common among the many regionally distinct Woodlands cultures. They shared the practice of burying their dead in earthen mounds, which preserved many cultural artifacts. Burial mounds in North America are part of an archetypal tradition that includes the pyramids of ancient Egypt. These structures begin on the ground and extend upward toward the sky, acting as a connection between the earthly plane and the spiritual plane. Because of this trait, the cultures are collectively known as the Mound Builders.

Grave Creek Mound

This mound located in modern Moundsville, West Virginia was built by the Adena culture.
Early Woodland Period

Clay for pottery was typically mixed with non-clay additives such as crushed rock or limestone. Traditional jars were conical, with rounded shoulders, slightly constricted necks, and flaring rims. Pottery was most often decorated with a variety of linear or paddle stamps that created dentate (tooth-like) impressions, wavy line impressions, checked surfaces, or fabric-impressed surfaces. Some pots were incised with geometric patterns or more rarely, pictorial imagery such as faces. Pots were coiled and paddled entirely by hand without the use of fast rotation such as a pottery wheel. Some were slipped or brushed with red ochre.

Harrington vessel

Ceramic vessel uncovered on Bussell Island, at the mouth of the Little Tennessee River in Loudon County, Tennessee. This pot belonged to the "Round Grave" culture, which corresponds roughly to the Late Archaic (c. 3000-1000 BCE) and Woodland periods. The pot's diameter is approximately six inches.

Ceramics made by the Deptford culture (800 BCE-700 CE), inhabitants of the southern East Coast and Gulf Coast, are the earliest evidence of an artistic tradition in this region. The Adena culture is another well-known example. They carved stone tablets with zoomorphic designs, created pottery, and fashioned costumes from animal hides and antlers for ceremonial rituals. Shellfish was a mainstay of their diet, and engraved shells have been found in their burial mounds.

Middle Woodland Period

The Middle Woodland Period was dominated by cultures of the Hopewell tradition (200 to 500 BCE). Their artwork encompassed a wide variety of jewelry and sculpture in stone, wood, and even human bone. Mound City, located on Ohio Highway 104, is a group of 23 earthen mounds constructed by the Hopewell culture. Each mound within the group covered the remains of a charnel house. After the Hopewell people cremated the dead, they burned the charnel house and constructed a mound over the remains. They also placed artifacts such as copper figures, mica, projectile points, shells, and pipes in the mounds.
Hopewell Art

This unique Hopewell sculpture was carved from Mica between 200 BCE and 500 CE.

Late Woodland Period

The Late Woodland Period (500 to 1000 CE) saw a decline in trade and in the size of settlements, and the creation of art likewise declined. During this period, the nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle gradually gave way to an agrarian way of life.

The Mississippian culture flourished in what is now the Midwestern, Eastern, and Southeastern United States from approximately 800 to 1500 CE (following the Late Woodland Period). After adopting maize agriculture, the Mississippian culture became fully agrarian, as opposed to hunting and gathering supplemented by part-time agriculture practiced by preceding woodland cultures. They built larger and more complex platform mounds than those of their predecessors, and finished and developed more advanced ceramic techniques, commonly using ground mussel shell as a tempering agent. Many were involved with the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC), a pan-regional and pan-linguistic religious and trade network. Most known information about the SECC is derived from examination of the elaborate artworks left behind by its participants, including pottery, shell gorgets and cups, stone statuary, copper plates such as the Wulfing cache, and long-nosed god maskettes.
Ceramic of Underwater Panther

This Mississippian culture ceramic effigy jug was found at Rose Mound in Cross County, Arkansas, and dates from 1400-1600.

Perhaps the most famous mound-building site from this period is Cahokia, which straddles the Mississippi River between the St. Louis, Missouri area and East St. Louis, Illinois. Cahokia was the largest and most influential urban settlement of the Mississippian culture and developed advanced societies across much of what is now the central and southeastern United States, beginning more than 1000 years before European contact. Cahokia's population at its peak in the thirteenth century was approximately 40,000.

Monks Mound is the largest structure and central focus of the city: a massive platform mound with four terraces, 10 stories tall, and the largest human-made earthen mound north of Mexico. The mound was built higher and wider over the course of several centuries through as many as ten separate construction episodes, and the terraces and apron were added.
The concrete staircase is modern, but it is built along the approximate course of the original wooden stairs. Collinsville, IL.

While many Woodland cultures produced copper sculptures, Cahokia was the only Mississippian location to contain a copper workshop. The area contains the remains of three tree stumps thought to have been used to hold anvil stones. Analysis of copper found during excavations showed that it had been annealed. Artisans produced religious items, such as long-nosed god maskettes, ceremonial earrings with a symbolic shape thought to have been used in fictive kinship rituals.

Mississippian Culture repoussé copper plates.

Three examples of Mississippian culture avian themed repoussé copper plates. The right-hand figure is one of the Spiro plates from Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma. The left-hand figure is Wulfing plate A, one of Wulfing cache from Malden, Missouri. The middle plate is Rogan plate 1, from Etowah Mounds in Georgia. Examples of this type of artwork have been found as artifacts in many states throughout the Midwest and Southeast.

By the time of European contact, the Mississippian societies were already experiencing severe social stress. With the social upsets and diseases introduced by Europeans, many of the societies collapsed and ceased to practice a Mississippian lifestyle, with the exception the Natchez people. Other tribes descended from Mississippian cultures include the Caddo, Choctaw, Muskogee Creek, Wichita, and many others.

Attributions

- The Southwest
Inuit Art


Woodlands in the East


