

Science and Art at the Xalapa Anthropology Museum

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All museums have something that makes them unique. The Xalapa Anthropology Museum is no exception: it is the only large archaeology museum in Mexico not managed by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the institution that possesses most of Mexico's archaeological riches; it is locat-

ed outside of Mexico City; and it is managed by a university, the Veracruz University. It is a university archaeological museum in the provinces with collections of inestimable value placed in an outstanding setting.

BRIEF HISTORY

Anthropological and archaeological studies on the Gulf of Mexico coast have gone through three stages. During the first, from the early eighteenth cen-

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Cihuateo. Figures like this represent women who died in childbirth.

The museum's collections were gathered over decades of archaeological research between 1951 and 1973.

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tury to the beginning of the twentieth, similarly to the study of archaeology nationwide, they concentrated on scientific inquiry mixed with a romantic vision of the past. In the second stage, from 1936 to 1970, once the profession of anthropologist had been consolidated in Mexico, regional work developed, like that in Oaxaca and Michoacan, followed by Xalapa, Guadalajara and San Luis Potosí. The third stage began when the federal government began decentralizing nationally in the early 1970s, including the decentralization of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

This policy came to Veracruz in 1979, but had contradictory effects because our cultural and archaeological patrimony had already been decentralized and administered by the Veracruz University for three decades. The establishment of the INAH's Regional Center actually centralized the patrimony again.

The story begins in the 1930s under the influence of the ideas current under President Lázaro Cárdenas, after the Mexican Revolution. These ideas included changing the vision of indigenous people from that of objects to be exhibited and seeking through archaeology a sincere—though ephemeral—valuing of the dignity of indigenous people as a first step toward the much-longed-for social justice which would lead to emphasizing the glories of the past. The founders of anthropology in Veracruz, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and José Luis Melgarejo Vivanco, worked under the influence of these ideas.

In 1942, the Veracruz government Office of Indigenous Affairs began to transfer its collection of archaeological pieces to the city of Xalapa, exhi-

biting them in the General Offices of Education headquarters starting in 1943. The following year the Veracruz University was founded. The dominant archaeological ideas of the time were concretized in a museum, inaugurated in the early 1940s, which the Veracruz government said had the aim of “strengthening the nationality,” and being “luminous like Veracruz and joyful like its people.”

In 1957, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, dean of Veracruz University, came to an agreement with the INAH to make it possible to “carry out archaeological exploration and create the museum’s archaeology section.”

In 1986, after operating almost three decades, the Veracruz University inaugurated its new site for the Anthropology Museum, built on six hectares of land with 16,000 square meters of construction for the exhibition of about 2,500 pieces of different sizes, some of which weigh more than 20 tons. The rest of the almost 30,000 objects in the collection are properly stored in three air-conditioned warehouses.

A SPACE WORTHY OF OUR CULTURAL PATRIMONY

The museum’s collections were gathered over decades of archaeological research between 1951 and 1973. They have been augmented by donations from individuals, among them several entire collections received in the first half of the 1980s. Iker Larrauri and Fernando Gamboa stand out among the many gifted museographers who participated in creating the museum. The works of pre-Hispanic art were distributed in a vestibule, six rooms,



Ritual palm, part of a symbolic group of objects linked to the ball game.

Fernando Gamboa stands out among
the many gifted museographers who participated in
creating the museum.

Perhaps one of the museum's most significant features is its collection of Olmec works.

18 galleries and three patios or pergolas that lead to four hectares of gardens, where visitors can admire everything from tropical plants to those that grow in milder climes.

In addition to warehouses, the area of restricted access includes 15 cubicles for researchers from Veracruz University and other Mexican and foreign institutions who are working on projects related to the museum's collection. Other activities are the preservation of the museum's patrimony and research to update and attractively present information for the public through the temporary and permanent exhibits.

For all this work, the museum has warehouses and a computer center, as well as rooms used for liaison with other museums and institutions. All these areas operate with volunteers from different institutions, mainly archaeologists, visual artists, restorers, historians and architects.

Perhaps one of the museum's most significant features is the collection of Olmec works that are the most representative examples of the artistic splendor of the southern part of Veracruz state during the Early Pre-Classical Period (1200-900 B.C.). From this same culture, the museum also exhibits



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The museum exhibits about 2,500 pieces of different size and weight.



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The pieces are displayed in an outstanding setting.

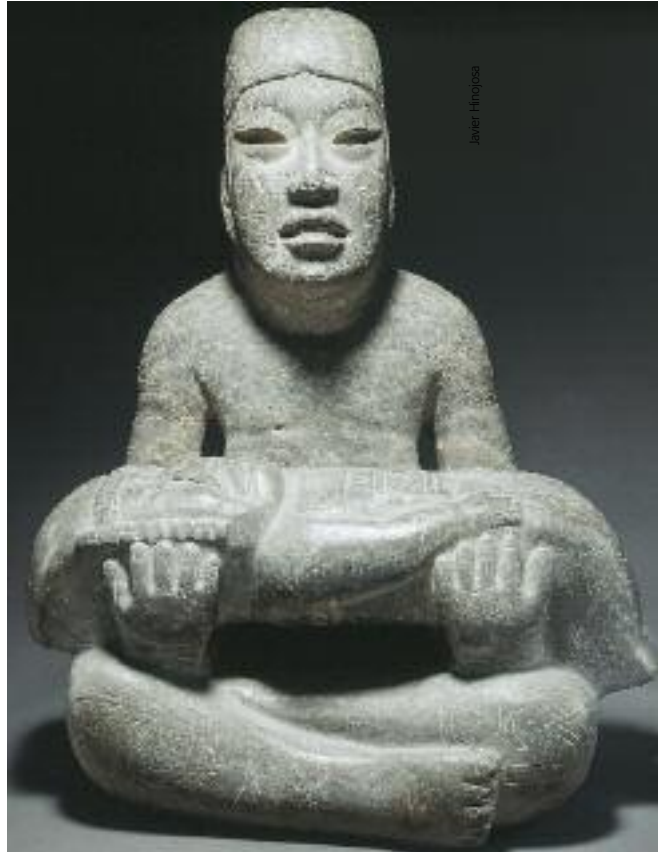
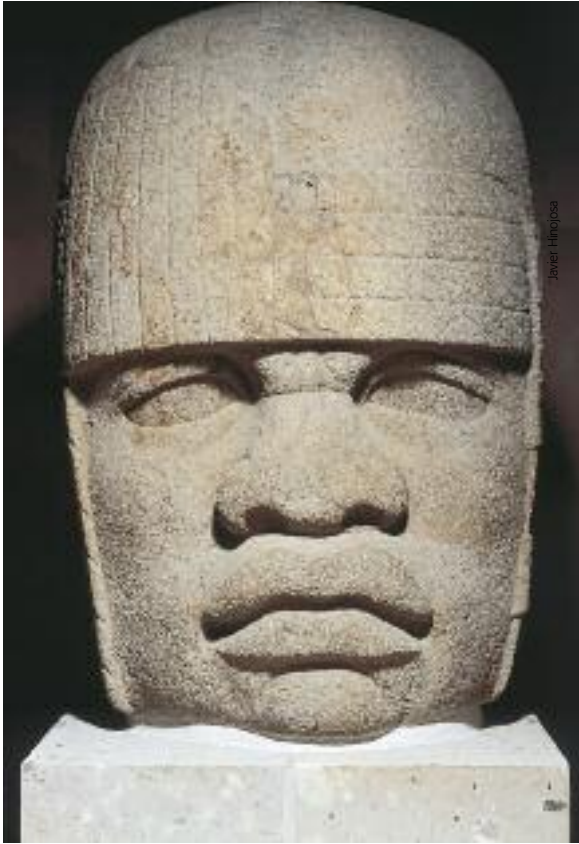
masks and figurines encrusted with semi-precious stones. This is perhaps the world's most important collection of Olmec monumental art. Suffice it to mention the famous *Lord of the Lime Trees*, or the seven oldest and most aesthetically perfect colossal heads. Recently, the collection has been supplemented with the sculpture *The Twins of Azuzul*.

The cultures of central Veracruz flourished during the early and middle Classical Period (A.D. 300-650); the museum has a rich stock of murals from the Las Higueras area, excellently fashioned clay figures, as well as

the best collection of the so-called "smiling figures." Also of note are the life-sized terra-cotta sculptures from El Zapotal representing women who died in childbirth, or *cihuateos*. Lastly, in this part of the museum, we can see beautiful stone sculptures, both reliefs from El Tajín and full-bodied pieces that are part of a symbolic group of objects linked to the ritual ball game: yokes, palms, votive axes, protective mitts and padlocks.

From the Post-Classical (A.D. 950-1521), the museum has an abundant collection of sculptures from the Huasteca region in the far northern part

The museum's nearly 30,000-piece collection is stored in three air-conditioned warehouses.



The Olmecs' monumental art is well represented. Left: one of the seven oldest colossal heads; right: the Lord of the Lime Trees.

The museum exhibits some of the most beautiful, representative works from the southeast region of Mexico.

of the state, among them the *Corn Stone*, the *Tlazolteotl* and the *Lord of Ozuluama*, the representation of one of the dead crossing into the underworld. The Huastecs were incomparable potters and expertly worked shell and metals like copper and gold. The museum exhibits some of the most beautiful, representative works from the Huasteca this region of Mexico.

Other sections of the museum exhibit objects from the Post-Classical period from sites in central Veracruz like Cempoala, Quiahuixtlan and Quauh-tochco. And, lastly, we must not forget to go through the thematic sections of the museum organized to show stones, jewelry, instruments, items related to the ball game, bones and codices.

In the last four years, the museum has curated and organized almost 20 local exhibitions and participated in others presented in Finland, Canada, France, Spain, Portugal, Mexico City, Monterrey, Macao, the United States and the People's Republic of China.

The gardens, the building, the collection and the harmonious whole in the temperate climate of the city of Xalapa make of the museum a place worthy of a visit both by local tourists and those from far away. None of them will regret it. **MM**

INFORMATION

Av. Jalapa y Acueducto s/n
Xalapa, Ver.

Open Tuesday to Sunday
From 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.