



Post-Classical section of the room exhibiting Huastec pieces.

## Huastec Culture at the National Anthropology Museum

Marcia Castro-Leal Espino\*

The Mesoamerican archaeological area called the Gulf Coast included several different cultures. The ones occupying the largest geographical area and whose history is the longest were the Olmec culture (1800-100 B.C.); that of Central Veracruz (1800 B.C. to A.D. 1519); and the Huastec culture (1800 B.C. to

A.D. 1519). They all shared common religious, social, political and economic traits. However, there were differences in regional forms of architecture, sculpture, painting and ceramics, metal working and objects made of spiral and conch shells. The Gulf Coast irradiated cultural innovations that changed life in Mesoamerica. The Olmec culture, the first civilization, was born there, coining very complex religious ideas that inspired ceremonies and rites such as the ball game, decapitation and the creation of gods representing the earth, water and fertility, which subsisted as cultural elements of the first mag-

---

\*Researcher and curator of the archaeological collections of the Gulf cultures at the National Anthropology Museum.

Photos by Daniel Munguia. Reproduced by permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Conaculta-INAH-Mex.



Relief of an old man with an erect phallus.



Monkeys were often represented in the Huastec culture.

nitude until the sixteenth century. Later, regional cultures with a wealth of artistry unlike anything else in ancient Mexico emerged. The Gulf Coast became essential for the history of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

Despite its name, the region was not limited only to the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, but rather covered a large territory including what are now the state of Veracruz and parts of the states of Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, Hidalgo, Querétaro and Tabasco. The Huastec culture spread through the states of Veracruz, Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo and Puebla. The different groups living there developed their own languages: Totonac, Huastec, Otomí, Pame, Nahuatl, Tepehua, Popoloc, Zoque-Mixtec and Mixtec.

Because of their importance to knowledge about the Mesoamerican world, since April 2004, the Gulf Coast cultures have occupied a new room in Mexico City's National Anthropology Museum. The room combines current data discovered in recent archaeological digs in the region and the analysis of all the archaeological materials in the museum's collection, dating from the nineteenth century when it was the National Museum.

One of the objectives of studying the collection, with all its archaeological objects, was to select the best works, the most representative of each of the cultures and to decide how to exhibit the important pieces that had never been displayed before. In the end, pieces with the following characteristics were

selected: 1) those that had been found in excavations, since they offer the greatest amount of data and their chronological dating and associations with a whole series of other objects can be certain; 2) when the items were not found in an excavation, the best quality ones were chosen, whose place of origin was certain, since having that piece of information makes it possible to establish what influences and relationships they had with other cultural groups; 3) the pieces that were turned in by archaeologists who had recently excavated in until now unknown or little-known sites; 4) pieces that, because of their archaeological importance or aesthetic value, even though their exact place of origin was unknown, could undoubtedly be traced to the regions of the Gulf Coast, and that have been part of the museum's exhibits for more than 50 years.



Showcase containing symbols of the sea: rings, earplugs and necklaces made with sea shells.



Fragment of the Borbon Codex surrounded by Huastec figures holding up large phalluses.

### THE HUAXTEC ROOM STORYBOARD

The first part of the Huastec room introduces us to the region by describing the wealth of the environment, the geographical and climatic conditions and the abundance of water, thanks to which very diverse animal and plant life flourished. Four showcases contain representations of the most important animals, covering all the periods and the different Gulf Coast cultures.

The second part of the room deals with the pre-classical or formative period. The first showcase belongs to the Huastec culture, displaying ceramic objects representing different nude female figures with interesting headgear. They show the typical forms, traits and ornaments of the Huastec culture.

The Huastec culture developed for a long time and was part of the very important cultural movements of the end of the classical period and particularly the Mesoamerican post-classical. The Huastecs built large ceremonial centers and produced valuable art in the form of sculptures, paintings, ceramics, metal objects and many decorative pieces made with spiral and conch shells.

### FEMALE STONE FIGURES

At the center of the room are three large representations of goddesses, fundamental symbols of the Huastec and Central Veracruz religion. The goddesses symbolize the capacity to give life and evoke images of the earth and the gifts it gives. The great majority of the goddesses are standing with their hands on their bellies, the place in the body where life develops. The naked torso represents how they care for the newborn. Some have their eyes closed, thus representing the underworld or world of the dead, which is part of the Earth, a very complex space since the dead inhabit it. However, on another level of the Earth itself, life develops, reflected in the birth of plants. That is, the Earth has the dual potential: the world of the dead belongs to it, and it is also the origin of life both of plants and of the men who eat them.

### CULT OF THE PHALLUS

Linked to the cult of fertility and the renewal of life, we find stone and clay

sculptures of nude males. The explicit representation of their sex is common to almost all the figures of adult males. Among the group of hunchbacked old men holding planting staffs in their hands, one represents an old hunchbacked man digging a hole in the earth with his staff to deposit in it the seeds that will give life to the plants that will feed men. The old man has an erect phallus, which also suggests the act of procreation. This sculpture is placed across from the showcase of the Cult of the Phallus, which contains representations of phalluses sculpted in the Gulf Coast from different parts of Central Veracruz, dating from the classical period. Several male members, separate from the rest of the body, carved in stone were found in Tamtok, San Luis Potosí. The one from Yahualica, Hidalgo is the most important found until now both because of its size (1.56 meters high) and its artistic quality. They are all related to the principle of new life, both that produced in the earth with the planting staff and that procreated by male phalluses.

Next to this showcase is a copy of several pages of the Borbon Codex,



Huastec goddess.



Huastec pieces from the lower pre-Classical period (1800-1200 B.C.).

showing the relationship and close contact between the Huastec and Mexica cultures. The codex represents a ceremony honoring the goddess "Our Mother" Tlazolteotl or Toci, who appears accompanied by four priestesses and surrounded by 13 figures, eight of whom, identifiable as Huastecs by their clothing, are holding up a large reproduction of a phallus in one hand.

#### GOD WITH A CUT SPIRAL SHELL PECTORAL ORNAMENT

One of the largest Huastec sculptures is of Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl, whose main distinguishing features are the pectoral ornament of cut spiral shells, the necklace of small spiral shells, the specially shaped ear plugs made of spiral shells and a headdress typical of the Huastecs.

Next to this figure is the tablet of Huilocintla, representing a priest richly clothed for a ceremony in which he offers up the drops of blood dripping

from his tongue to Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl. We know this because he is wearing the god's characteristic feature, the pectoral ornament of cut spiral shells.

#### HUASTECS PAINTINGS

One of the pictures is a copy of a painting from El Tamuín, San Luis Potosí, on the round altar, with a line of 12 figures. It undoubtedly portrays a religious ritual in which each of the priests is dressed in an outfit alluding to the god he represents. In a showcase further on are small fragments of original paintings from buildings in Tamtok, San Luis Potosí.

#### FROM EL TAMUÍN

This sculpture from San Luis Potosí is very valuable, not only because of its style but also because of its meaning since it is the representation of the most



Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl, from Veracruz.

important plant in pre-Hispanic Mexico: corn. Part of it shows the elements associated with what corn meant for Huastec religious thought.

Wood was also used for sculpture in the area, but very few of these pieces survive. The one in this room deals with a similar theme to the stone sculpture from El Caracol, San Luis Potosí.

Several showcases in the third part of the room exhibit Huastec ceramic female figurines, most representing ceremonies and rituals from the classical and post-classical periods.



The sea and its symbols, example of pectoral worn by priests.

#### SYMBOLS OF THE SEA

The Huastecs were specialists in working with spiral and conch shells, turning them into ornaments for priests and leaders. Three showcases show a wealth of objects: pectorals, rings, bracelets, ear plugs and small animals. Some of the cut spiral shell pectorals contain ceremonial scenes. All the objects symbolize the sea and are recurring figures in the Huastec culture, remitting us to the essence of life, so much so that one of the main gods, Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl, is wearing them.

The work in ceramics from the classical and post-classical periods displayed in several of the room's showcases are from El Platanito, San Luis



The Huastecs were specialists in working with spiral and conch shells.



Paintings of religious ceremonies, from Tamuín, San Luis Potosí.

Potosí; Vista Hermosa, Tamaulipas; and the Pánuco region of Veracruz. Several metal objects used as personal ornaments were discovered in Pánuco. In the last part of the room we encounter several Huastec stone sculptures por-

traying priests dressed in a way that makes them religious effigies. Huastec writing is also represented here on a stone cube with a date on each side.

One last sculpture bids us goodbye at the exit: the deification of Venus. **MM**