

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

# COLOSSAL HEADS

Olmec Masterworks

Ann Cyphers \*



*Colossal Head 8, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Xalapa Anthropology Museum.*



*Colossal Head 5, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Xalapa Anthropology Museum.*

Of the many interpretations of the meaning of the colossal heads, one stands out: that they were portraits of important personages like rulers and priests.

Mexico's colossal heads are recognized worldwide for their huge size and extraordinary beauty. They are the most celebrated symbols of the Olmec civilization, which reached its peak between 1400BCE and 400BCE on the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Two questions are often asked about them: What do they represent and how were they transported? Despite their simplicity, these questions encompass an extremely complex issue involving the structure and functioning of Olmec society.

Of the many interpretations of the meaning of the colossal heads, one stands out: that they were portraits of important personages like rulers and priests. Despite the formal similarity among them, all the faces are different. In addition, each exudes the power and dynamism of great rulers since these stone sculptures act as political symbols with the connotations of a social hierarchy.

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*Colossal Head 6, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, National Anthropology Museum.*

*The inherent symbolism of recycling the throne of a dead ruler to create his colossal portrait sheds new light on the Olmec cult of their ancestors.*

San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, the first Olmec capital,<sup>1</sup> is the place with the greatest number of colossal heads: ten in all. Although scholars have assumed that the monumental sculptures were carved out of natural rocks, some of them have been recycled; that is, previously existing pieces were re-carved to change their form and meaning. This is the case of most of the colossal heads from San Lorenzo. It is worthy of note that some of these pieces were carved out of large thrones, as is noticeable in the ones that still preserve remnants of the frontal niche of a throne. The flattened features and compressed form of nine of San Lorenzo's ten heads, as well as the flat sides,

must be the result of this recycling process and not indicators of African origins, as has sometimes been said.

The inherent symbolism of recycling the throne of a dead ruler to create his colossal portrait sheds new light on the Olmec cult of their ancestors and also provides evidence that the recycled heads were not transported from the distant fields of volcanic rock in the Tuxtla Mountains since the rock was re-utilized in the very capital of San Lorenzo a short time before its decline around 900BCE. This is also related to the waning power of the capital's last rulers and their inability to import the rock from far-away deposits. After 1000BCE the problems that were to

disastrously affect San Lorenzo society began. One of the ways in which they manifested was precisely the increasing recycling of sculptures, which suggests difficulties in obtaining the raw materials and the labor needed to move the monuments.

This recycling carried out to create the enormous portraits is a complex phenomenon with implications on various, not mutually-exclusive levels: the personal or individual, the social, the official, the historical, and the mythical. The large thrones are probably the only potentially recyclable monuments for making colossal forms. If most of the colossal heads were created out of recycled seats of power, then many symbols of Olmec authority have been lost, and therefore, key traces of this civilization's

socio-political and ideological development. The loss of thrones must not be ignored since the socio-political basis that motivated the recycling systematically and intentionally eliminated important elements that registered the identity of past rulers, previous hierarchical structures, and predecessors to the ruling positions; this must have had both advantages and disadvantages for different social groups.

It can be seen that the carving of three of the ten pieces was not finished, which is why they were not placed in their final destination: two long lines of ancestral portraits that were being mounted in the site center. The aim of creating this great scene of heads is not completely clear, though it would seem to be an attempt to reaffirm



*Colossal Head 7, Villahermosa, Tabasco, La Venta Park Museum.*

the legitimacy and right to govern of one or several of the site's last rulers, who were facing the imminent disintegration of their reign and had to transform the pre-existing sculptures. This scene was never finished given the socio-political problems that caused it to be abandoned. The existence of two lines of heads was confirmed with the discovery of the tenth head in 1994. The carving of three of the heads remained unfinished, which is why they were not shifted to the commemorative lines. The custom of forming linear scenes of colossal heads endured through time, since in the La Venta archaeological site in Tabasco, we can also see the alignment of three heads north of the ceremonial area.

The specificity of each face and the characteristics of each headdress allowed the Olmec people to recognize the figures, even though today we cannot identify them by name.



*Colossal Head 10, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, San Lorenzo Community Museum.*



*Colossal Head 4, Villahermosa, Tabasco, La Venta Park Museum.*

The Olmec sculptures may have been moved time after time for different reasons. Each time a sculpture was moved from one place to another or when a scene was formed with various sculptures, a considerable amount of labor was required, reinforcing, promoting, and proclaiming the nobility of the elite. Thus, the monuments were used periodically to re-create scenes imbued with mythological and historical significance. Several examples of this practice exist, outstanding among which are the sculptural scene in the Azul acropolis at the Loma del Zapote site, made up of the twins and two felines, and the macro-scene of the colossal heads.

These scenes are unmistakable material manifestations of the dramatization of power that aided the ruling group to design and control the social experience to take and remain in power. Clearly, the creation of each scene had a cost in labor, carried out by the common people, at the same time that it reinforced these sacred ideas. This kind of dramatization of mythical and historical events was essential



*Colossal Head 1, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Xalapa Anthropology Museum.*

in the symbolic construction of authority; the creation of the scenes constituted a dazzling mixture of emotions, cosmology, and the power that legitimized it.

The colossal portraits of the Olmec rulers are a valuable historical registry of the Olmec governments as pointed out by the great scenes of the heads in both capitals. The specificity of each face and the characteristics of each headdress allowed the Olmec people to recognize the figures, even though

today we cannot identify them by name. These stone testimonials are a demonstration of the greatness of the central authority of Mesoamerica's first civilization, but also the registry of its decline. **VM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> San Lorenzo's oldest settlement dates back to 1800BCE-1400BCE.