

The Huastec Culture Museum

Alejandra Sosa Florescano*



Reproduction of a Huastec priest.
The original is currently at the Louvre.
Photo: Elsie Montiel.

For historical and geographical reasons, Mexico's Northeast, and particularly Tamaulipas, have developed differently from the rest of the country. The lack of dominant cultures with monumental remains had limited both archaeological research and the dissemination of this state's cultural history. Nevertheless, recent archaeological discoveries have sparked the interest of a society that for years has demanded cultural outlets, with the

*Archaeologist, contributor to the Tamaulipas Institute for Culture and the Arts and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

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resulting recent creation of museums, theaters and galleries all over the state. Outstanding among them is the Museo de la Cultura Huasteca (Huastec Culture Museum), housed in the modern Metropolitan Space Cultural Complex on the shores of the Carpintero Lagoon, a piece of tropical jungle in the very heart of the cosmopolitan port of Tampico.

Tampico (meaning "place of otters") was one of the old seats of the Huastec culture. In and around the city there are still many remnants of the ancient towns built on the shores of the lagoons and rivers like the Pánuco and the Tame-sí. In the Chairel Lagoon, and in the rest of what is now the state of Tamaulipas, the battle that gave the Spaniards control over the Huasteca region took place.



The modern Metropolitan Space Cultural Complex on the shores of the Carpintero Lagoon houses the museum.

Elsie Montiel

Centuries later, at the time of the oil boom in the mid-1900s, Tampico became the center of attraction for the entire region, including the states of Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, Puebla, Querétaro and Tamaulipas. With its avant-garde spirit, this important port attempted to offer a space that would make possible the appreciation of the millennia-old Huastec culture, showing through its creations, traditions and customs that the original foundations continues to be alive and well. Also, despite oppression and the changes it has suffered historically, cultural continuity has been maintained generation after generation, even though it is today threatened by poverty, marginalization and the migration of indigenous peoples seeking a better way of life.



Elsie Montiel

The art room displays creative and finely honed works including stone sculptures, domestic ceramics, toys and musical instruments.

A TOUR OF THE MUSEUM

In 1,200 square meters, the Huastec Culture Museum presents visitors with a representative range of archaeological and ethnographic pieces from Huastec territory, dating from 500 B.C. until the Spanish conquest and then from 1522 until today.

It offers the visitor a complete panorama of the entire region's cultural development, showing the area's natural diversity on a relief map, graphs and videos. Also outstanding is the variety of ethnic groups that share the Huastec cultural tradition, among them the Teenek or Huastecs, the Pames, Otomís, Totonaques, Tepehuas and Nahuas. The museum's different rooms combine archaeology and ethnography to underline the continuity of their traditions. The room of the cult of life and fertility stresses their religious activities. The sculptures of Teem, the mother goddess, and Mam,

the old sun god, represent the cult of fertility. A pitcher with flowers represents Paya, the moon goddess; other objects are part of phallic worship practiced in Hidalgo state's Huastec region until the early twentieth century. Gigantic *mojigangas*, enormous cardboard dolls, paraded in the Huastec carnivals represent the mixture of indigenous, Christian and pagan religion celebrating the cult of fertility in another way.

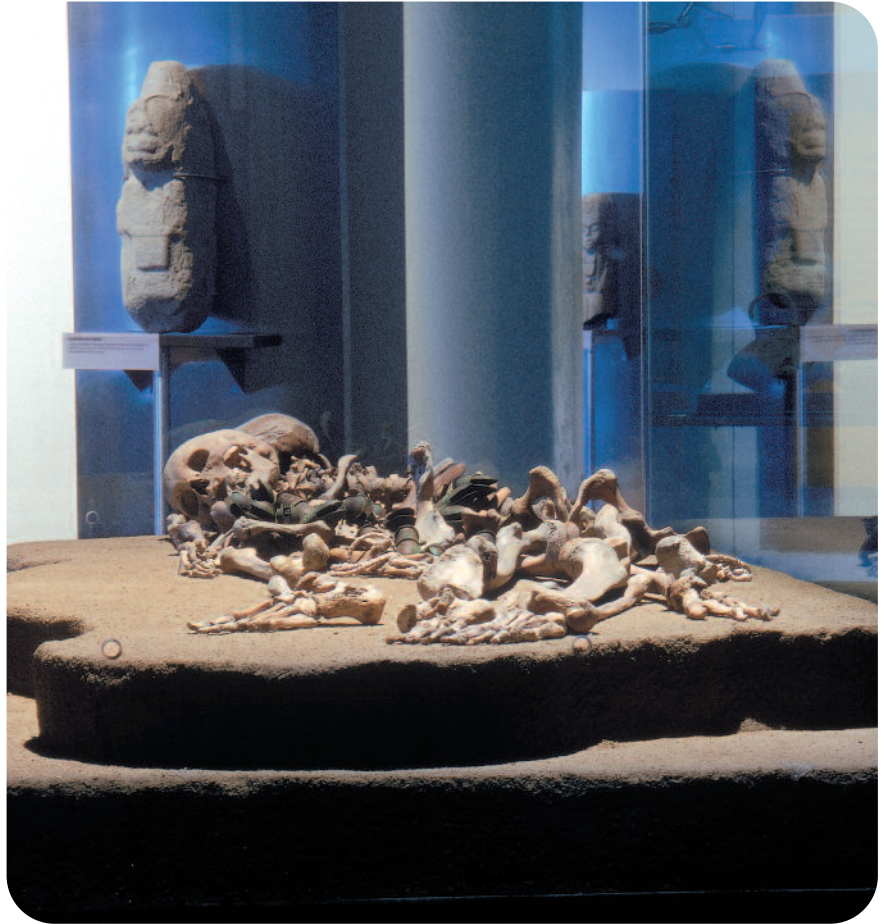
The art room displays creative and finely honed works including stone sculptures representing gods and ritual and domestic ceramics, toys and musical instruments. Two unique pieces stand out among all the rest: a jointed, bone doll representing a nude woman with a cone-shaped hat, and the exact reproduction of a Huastec sculpture of a priest, the original of which is currently on display in the Louvre after a French merchant living in Tampico took it to France in the late 1800s. Until only a few years



Tancol anthropomorphic vessel.
Photo: Gustavo Ramírez.



Jointed bone doll.
Photo: Gustavo Ramírez.



Elsie Montiel

The central piece in the room of death is the recreation of the high-ground double interment, discovered in 1999.



Black on white anthropomorphic vessel.
Photo: Gustavo Ramírez.

ago, this piece was unknown to specialists.

The room of death is dedicated to the belief current in the pre-Hispanic period that the dead make a journey to the underworld where they finally take up residence after undergoing several different tests. Graphs and a model show how the dead were buried at that time and today: rolling them up in a straw mat with their personal belongings, apparel and tools. The central piece in this room is the recreation of the high-ground

double interment, discovered in 1999 on the outskirts of the city. This burial is considered the most important example of its kind from the Huasteca region both because of its rarity and the richness of its offering. It is the burial of a woman of exalted lineage accompanied by her female slave or servant. The offering for the woman includes valuable objects like shell bracelets, a string of 56 copper bells and a necklace of gold and jade bells. The altar of the dead, a must in this museum, is the means of communication between

the world of the living and the world of the dead; the dead come and share with their relatives and friends for the brief period of Xantolo, or the day of the faithful dead, before returning to their dwelling place. The room of daily life exhibits the customs in food, clothing, personal ornament and day-to-day activities. This section includes an original Huastec house brought from San Antonio Nogalar, 100 kilometers north of Tampico, the last of its kind in the state. It also displays a variety of pre-Hispanic utensils: bowls, pots, plates and some surprising large clay spoons. The following room deals with labor, emphasizing productive activities like fishing, farming and commerce as the basis for the local economy. Different pre-Hispanic and modern tools for making textiles and ceramics, the techniques for making arrows and knives, clay weights for a fishing net, the remains of 5000-year-old basket-weaving and a nineteenth-century display case brought from a Potosí indigenous community, as well as a variety of modern crafts are all on display.

The room of the sacred space explains how the Huastecs transferred the cosmic planes to the earthly world, reproducing the cosmic order through the distribution of their buildings. Outstanding here is the life-sized reproduction of the great altar of Tamuín, from San Luis Potosí, decorated with stupendous murals depicting a procession of priests, gods and prisoners.

The center of the museum is dominated by a pole that represents the fundamental axis of the indigenous cosmos, surrounded by four walls representing the four directions of the universe. This room, which invites the visitor to rest and reflection, uses advanced technology to reproduce the dance of the flier,



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The room of the cult of life and fertility.

represented by the “Tamaletón fliers” from San Luis Potosí, the only place in the Huasteca where it is still practiced as a ceremony that summarizes the indigenous world view, the universal order and the fertilization of Mother Earth, to ensure the permanence of Man on Earth. **MM**



Ehecacózcatl.
Photo: Gustavo Ramírez.

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Gold necklace.
Photo: Gustavo Ramírez.