



olmecs

Exhibition until September 15, 2024

and the
Civilizations
of the Gulf
of Mexico

OCÉAN PACIFIQUE
PACIFIC OCEAN

GOLFE DU MEXIQUE
GULF OF MEXICO



The rise of a founding Civilization

The Olmec civilization emerged in Mexico, specifically in the city of San Lorenzo, over 3,500 years ago, with the Olmecs settling and developing on the Gulf Coast of Mexico from 1,600 years before the common era (BCE) to the year 200 in the common era (CE). With their jungle-based communities, the Olmecs flourished in a region filled with Hevea, or rubber trees. In fact, derived from “Olmecatli” in the Aztec language Nahuatl, the word “Olmec” means “people of the rubber country.”

A founding people of Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmecs were skillful farmers, pioneers of writing, and creators of rituals and deities. They were also architects of the first Mesoamerican pyramids around which they tamed a generous but hostile natural environment that they venerated in their art with jaguar, water and maize motifs on their objects to represent supernatural forces.

The Olmecs also left a cultural heritage of monuments that was only discovered in the 19th century. A number of Mexican communities today derive their culture from that of the Olmecs. Even with a history of cultural interactions and traditions, much about the Olmecs remains shrouded in mystery.

For the first time in Canada, Pointe-à-Callière, Montréal’s Archaeology and History Complex, is presenting an exclusive exhibition dedicated to the **Olmecs** – the oldest known civilization in Mesoamerica – and to the rich heritage they left behind.

Some 300 objects on display in this exhibition are the result of a renewed partnership with the *Secretaría de Cultura – Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico*. They include masterpieces from a dozen Mexican institutions, with most of the objects on loan from the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* in Mexico City.

Iconic colossal heads

Olmec culture emerged in San Lorenzo, the first of this civilization's three capitals (the others being La Venta and Tres Zapotes), where women and men forged a city filled with stone monuments carved from single basalt boulders.

▼ Colossal Head 4

1200–400 BCE
San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán,
Veracruz
Basalt
*Museo de Antropología
de Xalapa*

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Emblematic of Olmec culture, these **colossal heads** like the one shown here (weighing 4.5 tonnes and measuring 183 cm x 123 cm x 112 cm) have been interpreted as representations of ancestors, shamans, warriors or ball players; however, the most accepted explanation is that they are portraits of rulers.

The colossal heads have the facial characteristics of the Olmecs: flat noses, prominent cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and fleshy, downturned lips. However, each face is unique and has an individual expression and individual features and attributes. The ear ornaments and helmets of these chiefs are identical to those worn by ball players and are decorated with motifs that symbolize their nobility and mark their lineage. The power of this civilization is therefore etched in these faces of timeless stone.

The first Olmec discovery

Antiquities collector and dealer José María Melgar y Serrano discovered the first colossal Olmec head at the Tres Zapotes site in 1858. This discovery proved the existence of an ancient civilization and went on to prompt archaeological digs beginning in 1938. A total of 17 colossal heads were unearthed, including 10 at the San Lorenzo site.



The jaguar: spirit animal

A central fixture of Olmec culture, the **jaguar is associated with the night, the underworld, water, and fertility**. It appears as an animal or as a hybrid half-man, half-jaguar with a cleft head, structured eyebrows, a flared upper lip, and a downturned open mouth. These figures are also depicted in a striking pose with imposing musculature. A true symbol of nobility, the jaguar embodies the power and lineage of the ruling families. Often positioned at the entrance to caves, these statues were perhaps meant to guard the underworld that linked the realm of humans with that of the gods.

The **were-jaguar**, which regularly appears as a motif in Olmec art, **has the appearance of a fantastical being**. This figure represents a human character with well-defined features. Excavated near an underground stone drain, this sculpture may be associated with water worship.



▲ Seated sculpture, Monument 52

1200–600 BCE
San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán,
Veracruz
Basalt
*Museo Nacional de
Antropología de México*

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Statues discovered in the acropolis of the El Azul site show that the Olmecs used monumental sculpture to recreate historical events or capture mythological tales. This sculpture features twins in richly adorned clothing facing east, one behind the other, in front of a jaguar with protruding fangs. These sculptures, which perhaps depict the were-jaguar metamorphosis allegory or set the scene of a legend, reveal Olmec ritualistic practices and the use of art as a medium to spread this culture's ideology.

◀ Sculpture of twin

1200–900 BCE
Loma del Zapote (El Azul),
Texistepec, Veracruz
Andesite
Museo de Antropología de Xalapa

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The apogee of the Olmecs: La Venta

Centuries after the rise of San Lorenzo, the Olmecs went on to develop impressive architecture and urban planning at **La Venta** (1000 BCE), their second capital that represented Olmec grandeur and complexity. During this period, they also created major art works that harboured the secrets of their lifestyle and beliefs. This rich and powerful culture used a vast communication and transportation network to expand its cultural, artistic and ideological influence well beyond the rain forests of the Gulf of Mexico.

This **miniature life scene** was found in 1943 at the ceremonial complex in La Venta, the site of the most imposing acropolis in Mesoamerica and the first known pyramid. In the opening of this sand-and-clay vessel, a scene sculpted from jadeite and serpentinite shows fifteen individuals with the physical characteristics of the elite. They are listening to a sixteenth figure leaning against steles. In the crowd, four figures seem to be walking in a procession under the sage's gaze. Evoking a ceremony or political council, this work is a moving depiction of a memory that has been preserved for centuries.

Offering 4 ▼

(16 figurines with human features and six stelae)
800–700 BCE
La Venta, Tabasco
Jade, serpentine and granite
Museo Nacional de Antropología de México

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The origins of writing and the calendar

The Olmecs were one of the first civilizations to develop a writing and calendar system. No written language existed during the first millennium BCE, and ideas, concepts and myths were conveyed through sculptural compositions in scripts that have yet to be deciphered.

The Olmecs used a form of communication that they, along with outsiders who shared a certain cultural heritage, could understand. Writing did not appear until the first centuries CE. Some Olmec pieces and sculptures feature motifs or symbols similar to a type of ideographic writing, such as the Isthmian script. Later, other forms of writing developed through contact with the cultures of the Gulf, such as the Mayan culture.

The origins of the calendar are found on this stone stele which is attributed to the Olmecs. Its inscription relates an event expressed through three striated circles representing a place. The reptile eye glyph corresponding to the number seven indicates the year, while fire symbols associated with renewal are at the top. While the exact meaning behind these motifs evoking the agricultural fertility cycle (or the end of a cycle) remains unclear, this stele shows how these calendar and scriptural systems developed.

Carved stone stele ►

Carved stone stele
200–900 CE
Piedra Labrada, Tatahuicapan
de Juárez, Veracruz
Basalt
*Museo de Antropología
de Xalapa*

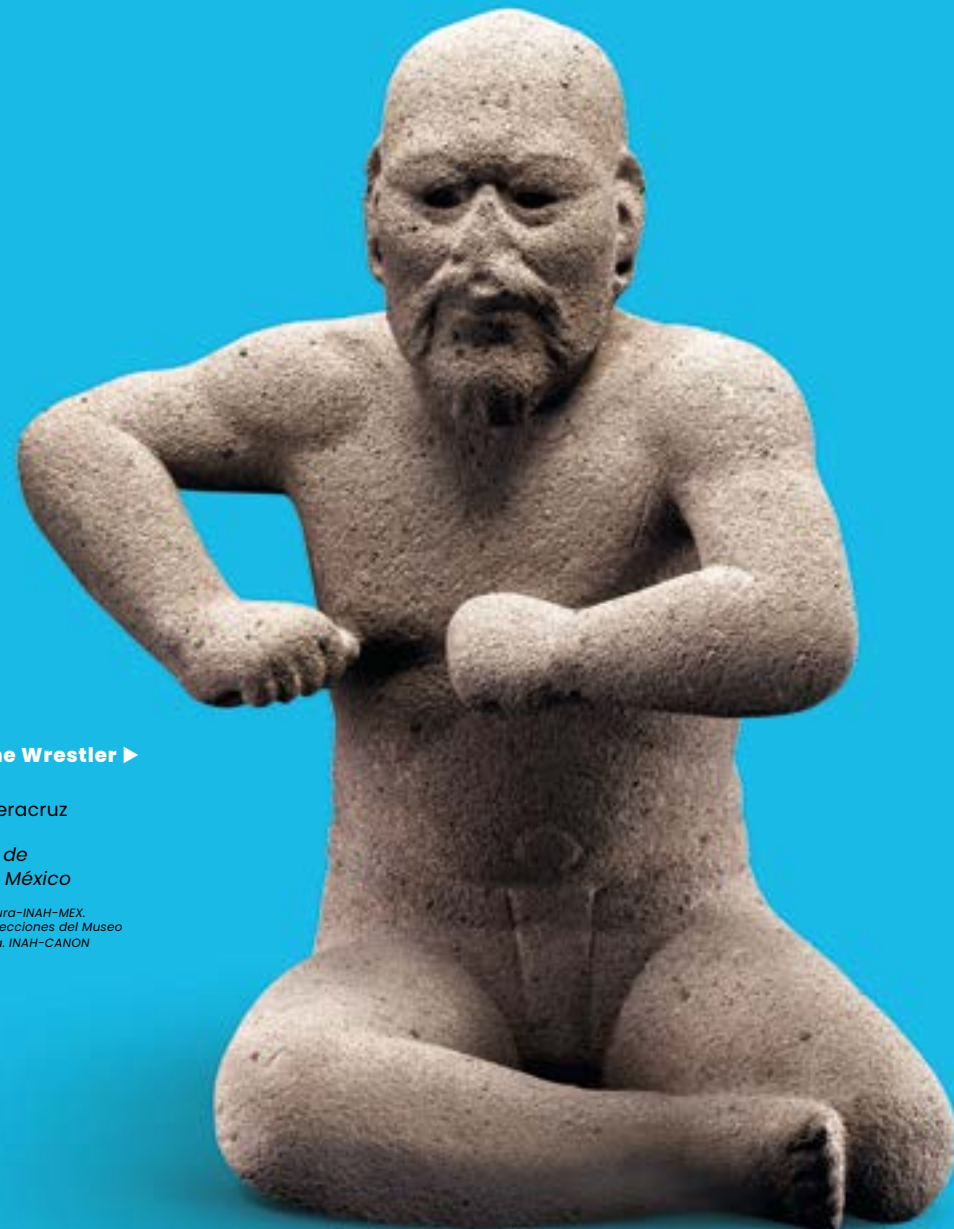
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The ball game: a ceremonial act

The ball game was a ritual sport practised by many Mesoamerican civilizations, such as the Mayas and Aztecs as well as the Olmecs. This ritual continued until the end of the Aztec empire (in the 16th century CE). The lands and frescoes at the El Tajín site in the state of Veracruz attest to the importance of this game and lay out its rules. Two teams of eight players from the elite classes wore protective gear and hit a rubber ball with their hips, elbows or knees. This ball game was also a **ceremonial act** that often ended in human sacrifice. This game could be seen as a ritual in which humans pit their skills against those of the dead or their ancestors to win the favour of the gods.

The ball game is one of the **lasting legacies of the Olmec civilization**. The Olmec sculpture here, known as *El Luchador* (the wrestler), has been interpreted as a possible ball player given the position and movement of his body.



Sculpture, "The Wrestler" ▶

1000–600 BCE
Antonio Plaza, Veracruz
Basalt
Museo Nacional de
Antropología de México

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A new era inspired by Olmec heritage

Around 500 BCE, the decline of the Olmecs led to a fragmentation and abatement in their cultural activities. New cities sprang up in the Mexican lowlands and plateau that, while they retained Olmec characteristics, were also influenced by other cultures. These societies maintained a hierarchical structure, with working classes ruled by political and religious elites whose power was symbolized by the jaguar. These peoples continued to grow maize. Olmec deities, cults and ritual practices also endured. The Totonacs, Zapotecs, Huastecs and Toltecs evolved and developed their own artistic and cultural identities.

This censer depicting **Tlaloc, the god of rain and storms**, attests to cultural exchanges with the Teotihuacán region between 200 and 600 CE. It comes from Maticapan, a ceramics production centre, and is made in the Toltec style. The modelled features of the divinity's face, which evoke clouds and rain, are in keeping with the conventions and divine functions adopted from Mexico to Central America.

▼ Effigy censer

300–900 CE
Maticapan, Veracruz
Ceramic
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Men and women of the Huastec civilization

◀ Sculpture of kneeling woman

900–1200 EC
Tuxpan, Veracruz
Sandstone
Museo Nacional de Antropología

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The Huastecs were one of the ancestral civilizations that developed in the Gulf of Mexico mainly during the Postclassic era from 900 to 1500 CE.

What makes Huastec art distinctive is the use of shell artifacts depicting mythological scenes and sandstone sculptures representing divinities or nude male figures. Female representations reflect the social role of women. As worshippers of the body, the Huastecs practised cranial deformation, dental modifications, scarification and body painting.

The above sculpture of a female figure has an elegant headdress trimmed with folded paper and ears of maize on top. She is associated with the maize god. Dressed in a quechquemitl (a kind of shawl), she is also wearing a multi-stranded necklace of green-stoned beads.

Found at the Tamtoc archaeological site in 2005, this sculpture of a female body (on the right-hand page) with scarification marks on the thighs and shoulders was part of an offering to a water spring from which aqueducts were directed to other parts of the city. This deliberately fragmented and incomplete sculpture was found at the bottom of a crate with ceramic figurines, calcite beads, shells, and human bones. The offering is associated with fertility, vegetation, and rain and highlights the fertile qualities of the water spring.

Finally, this magnificent young man can be considered a divinity, as his nudity is characteristic of how Huastec gods were depicted. His right hand closed over his chest forms a hole as if he were holding something, suggesting that he might be a standard-bearer. The most surprising part of this sculpture is the small figure, perhaps an infant, carried on his back. Some researchers see the entire figure as Quetzalcoatl carrying the Sun on his back, while others interpret it as Cipak, the young maize god carrying his father to introduce him to sedentary civilization. The motifs engraved on the body could represent tattoos or body paint with symbolic meanings: ears of maize, green stone beads, a water snake, and signs linked to the worship of wind god Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl.

▼ Female sculpture, "The Scarified Woman"

150 CE
Tamtoc, San Luis Potosí
Sandstone
Zona Arqueológica de Tamtoc

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▲ Male sculpture, "Huastec adolescent"

900–1521 CE
Tamohi, San Luis Potosí
Sandstone
Museo Nacional de Antropología de México

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