

A Formalistic Approach to Olmec Representation: The Fundamental Themes*

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The beginning of Olmec iconographic studies may be traced back to the late twenties or early thirties when M. Saville (1929) and G. Vaillant (1932) isolated and identified a unique pre-Columbian representational style and interpreted its principal image as a jaguar deity in humanized form. Relying only on a handful of stylistically related artifacts, this interpretation was based on the shared assumption that the cleft fangs visible in the mouth of the chubby figure carved on the Kunz and other axes, though displaying a non-feline type of occlusion, were those of a jaguar, and that representations depicting articulations of human and animal traits meant to show deities. However, they disagreed as to whether the depicted deity was the representation of the Mexica god Tezcatlipoca in its jaguar manifestation, or the jaguar-like Mixtec God of the Mountains. Over the years, similar impressionistic approaches have characterized even the interpretation of individual motifs. Serrated brows, for instance, common to many composite representations, have been called or described as “flaming” and identified as representing or symbolizing the feathery tufts of the harpy eagle. By extension, Olmec images depicting such brows have been consistently ascribed to deities pertaining to the heavenly realm, representing cosmogonic views that were not like those of the Maya and other Pre-Columbian cultures with sky-related deities. Other scholars have viewed these eyebrows as “serrated” and characteristic of reptilian or saurian supra-orbital ridges, symbols of creatures inhabiting earthly and unworldly realms, mythological images of primordial “supernaturals” or some undefined “earth monster” treated as a deity.

The important argument here is that these early interpretations, perhaps because they were proposed by distinguished scholars, were never seriously ques-

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tioned and eventually became the foundation for many subsequent Olmec iconographic studies. One current group of scholars working with Olmec representation proposes that Olmec art depicted early versions of ancestral deities later worshipped by the Mexica and their contemporaries. Another group relying primarily on recent advances in Maya epigraphy, have offered the notion that Olmec representation was primarily devoted to aspects of rulership, legitimation, and related rituals, including ancestor worship. And yet another group, using current ethnographic information from this continent and other parts of the world, has characterized a number of Olmec representations as depicting shamans, rather than rulers or deities, in acts of shamanistic transformation or flights. Common to these iconographic approaches are:

- 1) The belief that the jaguar and its surrounding mythology constitute the basic visual discourse in Olmec art;
- 2) A dependence on unproven or unprovable assumptions, mainly that similarity of form implies similarity of meaning;
- 3) A free manipulation of randomly selected traits for the purpose of analogical interpretation; and
- 4) An absence of explicit theoretical and methodological guidelines to support the chosen iconographic approach.

Citing Panofsky's "principle of disjunction," G. Kubler (1970: 143) rejected outright such analogical approaches to undocumented representation. B. de la Fuente (1977a: 324), although more subtly, did the same: "There are two ways to approach Olmec art: one is objective and focuses on that which is visibly recognizable; the other involves interpreting that which we see. The latter is indirect and inevitably subjective" (translation mine). In my view, the problem with the analogical approach which, in all instances is "from without," is not the use of analogy per se, but the obvious lack of controls over the variables used in the interpretative comparisons. Usually no more than two or three at the best, they are always selected for their similarity of form and, in nearly all instances, devoid of any accompanying information as to their respective systemic context or "roles." As suggested by current studies of visual and verbal communication, the actual

meaning carried by individual signs, be they pictorial or auditory, is almost never predicated on their outward or superficial morphology or sound, but on their structural placement.

Since Olmec art is over 3000 years old and characterized by a lack of information as to the meaning of the images and motifs that inform it—"text-free," in C. Hawke's (1954) terminology—it becomes essential that before any interpretations are undertaken, the selected motifs are evaluated as to their placement or "role" within the entire representational system. As shown by Bill Holm (1965), N. Munn (1966, 1973), and the contributors to D. Washburn's (1983) volume dedicated to the study of structure and cognition in art, the meaning of any given motif or pictorial unit, as noted above, is context-sensitive and contingent upon its placement and relationships to the other motifs that make up the themes in the system. It should not be assumed, therefore, that just because the flaming or serrated brow, for instance, appears in depictions of both the "fire-serpent" and "were-jaguar" images in Olmec art, its meaning is necessarily the same in both contexts. For this to be true, the presence of this motif in both contexts has to be explained and the pictorial relationship between these two distinct Olmec images has to be demonstrated.

The first scholar to propose a reasonable alternative to the analogical approach "from without," even though she was not seeking to interpret the images depicted in Olmec monumental carvings, was Beatriz de la Fuente (1977a). In a rigorously formalistic study "from within," she analyzed Olmec monumental carvings from various sites and concluded, on the strength of the visual information alone, that the jaguar and the mythological concepts that allegedly surrounded it, did not necessarily permeate all of Olmec art, as was previously alleged by M. Covarrubias (1946, 1957) and others. In fact, without resorting to interpretation, she was able to show that Olmec art was fundamentally anthropomorphic or, in her own expression, "homocentric."

By combining De la Fuente's solidly grounded formalism from the field of History of Art with Kubler's (1973) configurational approach, and incorporating certain guidelines described in ethnographic studies of representation together

with information provided from other fields of structured communication such as linguistics, it was possible to build a theoretical foundation and methodology for an iconographic approach to text-free archaeological art that is not only “from within,” but is particularly suited to the analysis of a pictorial system such as the Olmec. It is descriptive in that it considers that which is visible by focusing on aspects of line, color, material, size, volume, and form. But it differs from the formalistic methodology of the art historian in that it is holistic, stresses patterns and tendencies, objectifies structural aspects, while at the same time de-emphasizing a reliance on meaning which, for the historian of art is provided by available documentation. The present approach to text-free art focuses primarily on the pictorial behavior of the smallest visually meaningful components that constitute the entire representational system in all its media of expression. By focusing on these motifs or pictorial elements, it is possible to determine their contextual and morphological integrity, their placement within the themes they structure, their relationship to other motifs in the system, and their morphological variability which is time and space sensitive. Such a “relational” or structural approach to text-free representation is, in fact, an attempt to establish a grammar or syntax for a system of communication in which the component elements act like words in a language whose individual meaning is not known.

This descriptive or formalistic approach to visual representation is, as described by E. Benveniste (1996: 19) for verbal communication, “structural, paradigmatic and synchronic, rather than individualistic, syntagmatic and diachronic.” Under such an approach, changes in individual motifs, though reflective of time and space, are absorbed by the system and subsumed within the bounds of systemic constancy in such a way that their overall alignment remains undisturbed. Such a condition creates a stationary state which, in K.C. Chang’s (1967: 33) words, “generalizations as to behavior and style from most of its parts or its most significant parts can be applied to its entirety.” Similar observations with regards to the synchronic nature of structural studies have been expressed by S.F. Nadel (1957: 128-129) and V. Bricker (1981: 181). But although “grammar-seeking” formalistic approaches focus on the system’s structural aspects, they are

not, however, structuralistic in the Levi-Straussian mentalistic sense, as Coe (1989: 72) has characterized P. Joralemon's analogical studies. Rather, as already pointed out, the formalistic approach described here views structure as a form of "grammar," or a set of clear rules that coherently articulate the pictorial motifs into a visual language, in which certain images and not others could be encoded by the artisan and decoded by the viewer. In this approach, aspects of meaning are not sought outside, but primarily suggested, "from within," namely, by the explicit morphology of the component elements, the themes they articulate, and the parametric boundaries of the system itself (Pohorilenko 1990a).

The summary results presented in this paper reflect the application of this formalistic approach to the study of nearly seven hundred artifacts in the Olmec style, including pottery, clay figurines, mural paintings, relief carvings, and portable and monumental carvings, all selected according to the stylistic criteria articulated by Covarrubias (1946) and De la Fuente (1977a). Each artifact was evaluated, coded, and drawn according to its component elements or motifs, both primary and secondary. An attempt at establishing statistical measures of association between different variable components was eventually rejected due to the disparity in the numbers of components in some variables. The other alternative was the cumbersome method of cross-tabulating individual components, such as eyebrows, noses, mouths, head-shapes, eyes, cleft-depressions, objects held, things worn, and so on. The result of such a laborious comparative process, however, revealed that the Olmec representational system was made up of three major pictorial clusters, each characterized by a dominant image and a number of associated motifs that together formed large and somewhat overlapping iconic complexes (Pohorilenko 1990b). Designated by a neutral terminology, these central images or themes are: the composite zoomorph, the baby-face, and the composite anthropomorph. Whether expressed in full-bodied fashion, head form, as a *pars pro toto* element, or simply by a symbol from its iconic complex, these three thematic concepts were carved in-the-round on portable and monumental scales, painted inside and above cave entrances, carved in relief on slabs and rock outcroppings, molded out of clay into beautiful solid and hollow figurines, and

incised and excised (carved) on the walls of finely made pottery vessels. As such, they account for all of the subject matter represented by the entire Olmec representational system.

The Composite Zoomorph Thematic Complex

The first documented appearance of this thematic subject and its associated motifs occurs on clay pottery from Early Preclassic strata, in the Valley of Mexico. Covarrubias (1957: fig. 9) was the first to name this image “the jaguar dragon.” Since then many scholars have referred to its many versions as God I (Joralemon 1971), Olmec Dragon (Joralemon 1976), “earth monster” (D. Grove 1973), “fire-serpent” and “sky-dragon” (N. Pyne 1976), and simply “Sky”, a symbolic image of such heavenly natural forces as lightning (J. Marcus 1989). The designation composite zoomorph utilized here is strictly descriptive and avoids any connotative interpretations.

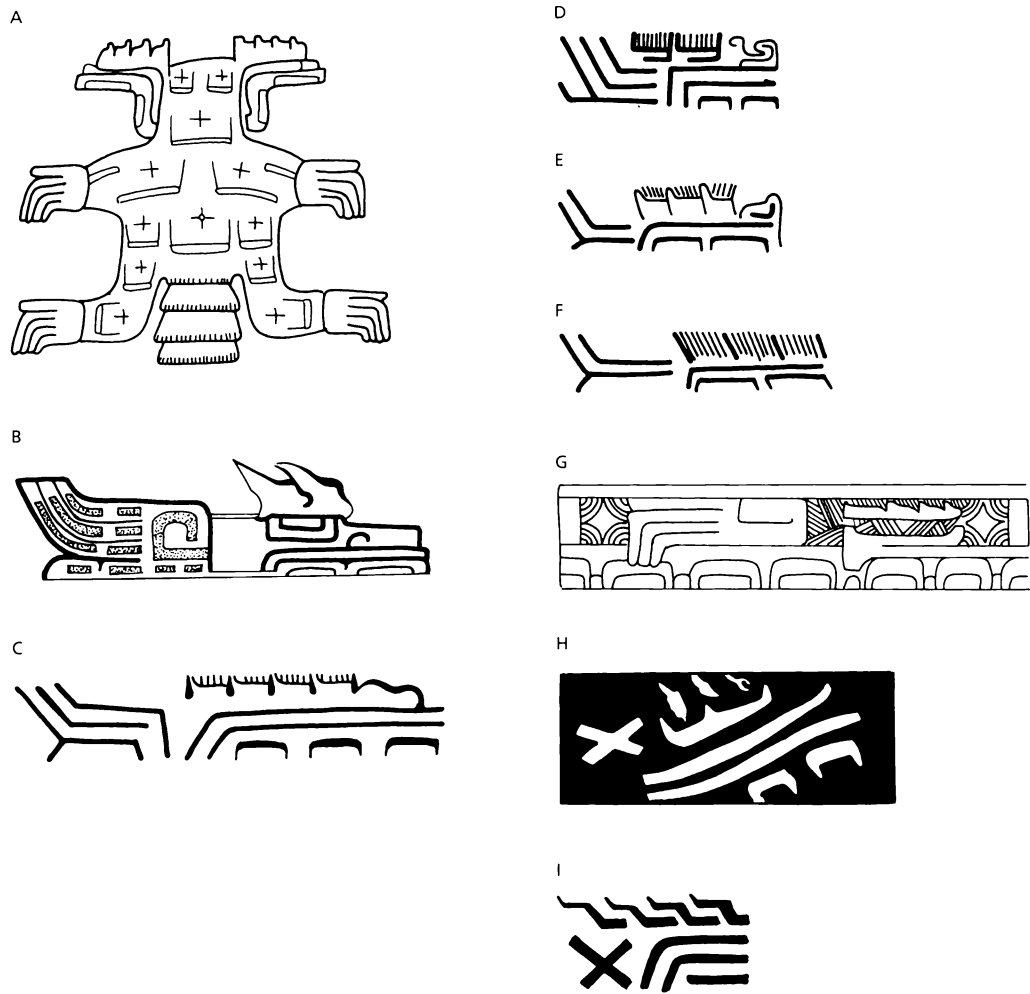
Full-length images of the composite zoomorph consistently show a composite creature with a lizard-like body, serrated brows over trough—or L-shaped eyes, a typically reptilian nose and mouth and, as is common to such egg-laying, scale covered creatures, an absence of chin. The mouth, particularly on head versions depicted on some dark gray to black pottery, seems to consistently show an everted upper lip that reveals a row of teeth in a standardized downturned “U” that has come to be known as gum brackets. In these versions the nose, when shown as part of the head, is usually depicted resting directly over the everted upper lip. The limbs, whenever present, are typically reptilian, except that their extremities are consistently rendered as splayed human hands. Full-bodied versions of this theme occur in relief on rock outcroppings, as hollow clay effigy vessels, as solid clay figurines, and as beautifully polished and carved jadeite artifacts. On a tridimensional monumental scale, however, this image only occurs in a symbolic or *pars pro toto* fashion, on either the headdresses of seated figurines or on the so-called “altars.” Mostly, whether as a head in profile or symbolically represented by secondary pictorial elements, the composite zoomorph and its

iconic complex are found primarily on Early Preclassic pottery, 1200-900 B.C. Although itself not found in nature, the component attributes that structure the image of the composite zoomorph come from clearly identifiable natural beings.

A. Clay Pottery

Images of the composite zoomorph were first identified as Olmec on pottery unearthed at the site of Tlatilco and Tlapacoya, in the Valley of Mexico, at a time when such representations were not found in the southern Gulf Coast, a region known as the Olmec “Heartland” and famous for its monuments in the Olmec style (Covarrubias 1943; Porter 1953; Piña Chan 1958). Consisting primarily of abbreviated versions of full-length images of the zoomorph (figs. 1A-1I), these depictions on pottery showed primarily stylized variations of the zoomorph’s head in profile, often accompanied by the splayed hand motif, also known as “paw-wing,” or the St. Andrews cross, also known as the crossed bars motif. Despite the many known stylizations of the head, the serrated or flaming brows and the nose resting on an everted upper lip are consistently present, while the eyes and the gum bracket teeth may be omitted. But sometimes the outer wall of a gray or black vessel may symbolize the zoomorph by displaying only the serrated brows, or its everted lip, or a row of gum bracket motifs. Often the excised motifs on this pottery show traces or red pigment. Called Black Channeled ware (Coe 1965: 21), this type of pottery was later identified at the Gulf Coast site of San Lorenzo, as Calzadas Carved and Limon Carved-Incised (Coe 1970; Coe and Diehl 1980). In the Valley of Mexico, decorations relating to the composite zoomorph iconic complex occur on such wares as Tortuga Pulido, Volcan Pulido, and Atoyac Gris Fino (C. Niederberger 1976, 1987). Outside the Valley, at Chalcatzingo, Morelos, it is found on Carved Gray ware (A. Cyphers 1987). In Oaxaca, it appears on Leandro Gray, Delfina Fine Gray, and San Jose Black-and-White (K. Flannery and J. Marcus 1994). And in Chiapas and coastal Pacific Guatemala, motifs from the composite zoomorph iconic complex (fig. 2) were identified on dark gray to black wares at Mirador-Plumajillo (P. Agrenier 1989),

figure 1
Different presentations of the composite zoomorph
in Early Preclassic ceramics.



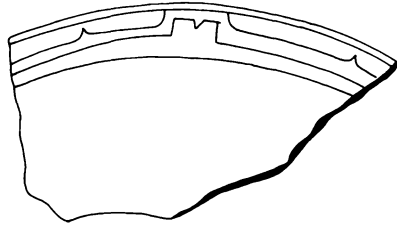
A
Full-bodied image of the zoomorph as seen
on the pelt of the Atlihuayan Baby.

B-G
Abbreviated version of the zoomorph consisting
of a profile head and splayed hand motif.
G also shows lozange and mat motifs with a row of gum
bracket teeth at the bottom.

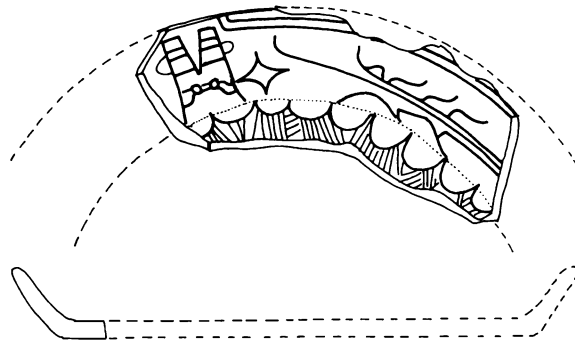
H
Profile head of the zoomorph with the
St. Andrew's cross motif.

I
Same as previous.

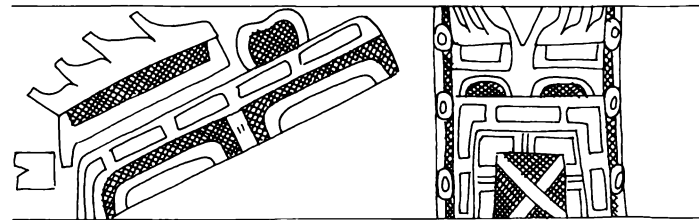
J



K



L



J

Abstracted version of the zoomorph and anthropomorph on the same vessel, as stylized double-line-break or gum bracket motif and the frontal cleft rectangle "mask," respectively. A whiteware potsherd from San José Mogote, Oaxaca.

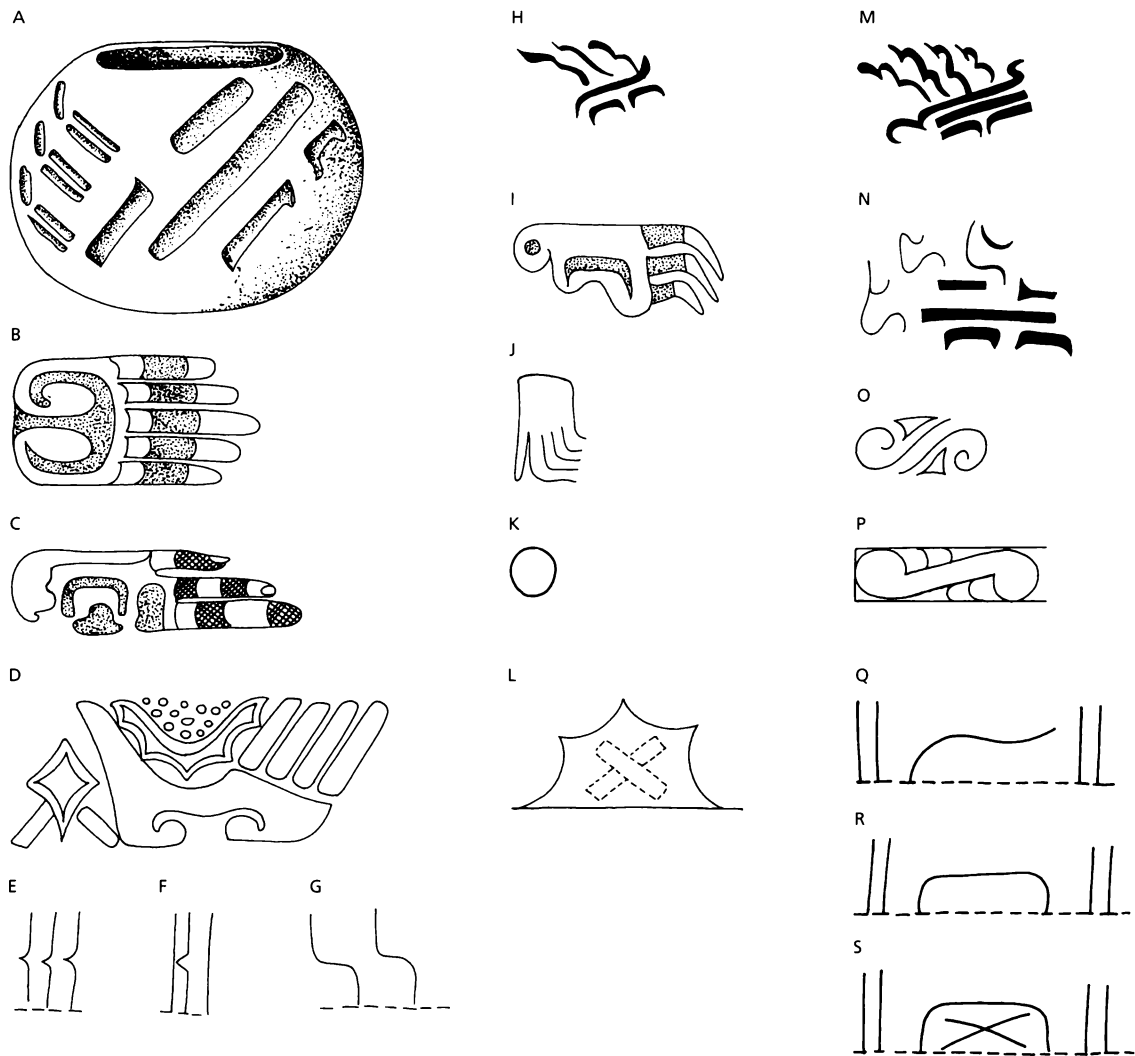
K

Same as J on a whiteware potsherd from Zohapilco, Valley of Mexico.

L

Same as the two previous, except explicitly rendered on a bowl from Tlapacoya, Valley of Mexico.

figure 2
Some pictorial motifs of the composite
zoomorph thematic complex.



A
Tecomate with the profile head
of the zoomorph. Zohapilco.

B
Hand motif with pictorial element.
Tlatilco.

C
Partial hand motif with pictorial
element. Tlatilco.

D
Hand motif containing seeds and
accompanied by a lozenge, a symbol
for the zoomorph. Tlatilco.

E-G
Dividing elements on
Calzadas Carved pottery. San Lorenzo.

H
Profile head of the zoomorph. Tlatilco.

I
Claw motif with a gum bracket in
the form of a larva. Tlatilco.

J
Splayed hand motif.

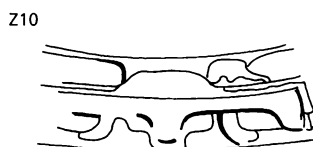
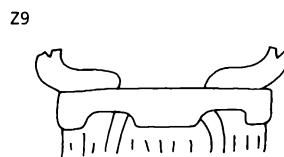
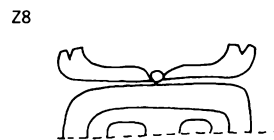
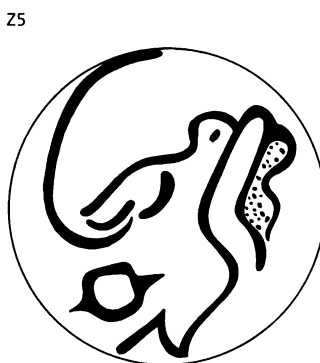
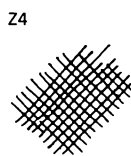
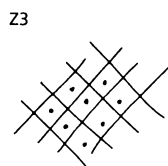
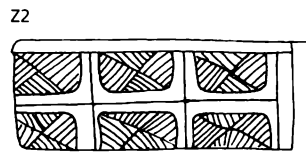
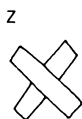
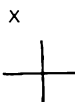
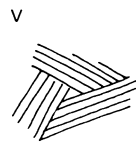
K
Circle motif.

L
Sunburst motif.

M-N
Profile head of the zoomorph.
San José Mogote.

O-P
Opposed volutes motif. San Lorenzo.

Q-S
Gentle slope and bracket motifs
(one containing the crossed
bands motif) separated by double bars.
Calzadas Carved pottery.
San Lorenzo.



T
Upturned bracket motif.
U
Downturned bracket motif
containing a lozenge motif.
V
The mat motif.
W
The cleft rectangle motif.
X
The cross motif.

Y
The dotted star motif.
Z
The crossed bands motif
or St. Andrew's cross motif.
Z1
The lozenge motif.
Z2
Upturned and downturned
brackets containing the
mat motif. San José Mogote.

Z3
Dotted squares motif.
Z4
Cross hatching motif.
Z5
Profile head of the fish
monster. Zohapilco.
Z6
Cleft brow motif, also
a symbol for the zoomorph.

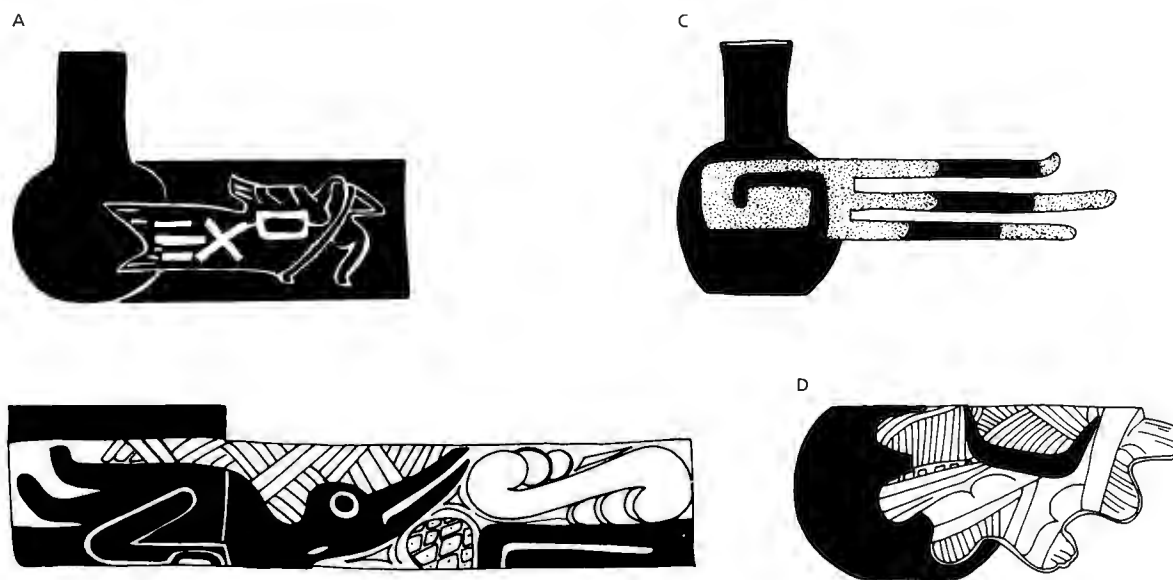
Z7
Cleft brow motif possibly
indicating that the square is
an altar.
Z8-Z10
Frontal "masks" of the
zoomorph.
Z11
Double Spiral motif, also a
symbol for the zoomorph.

at Altamira (D. Green and G. Lowe 1967), as well as other sites in the region. According to Niederberger (1976: 116), the double-line-break motif, so common on Middle Preclassic pottery, may be a variation of the zoomorph's gum bracket motif commonly seen excised on some everted rims of Tortuga Pulido and Volcan Pulido vessels found at Zohapilco, in the Valley of Mexico. The same motif also appears on the edge of the tabletop of monument 2 from Potrero Nuevo, an altar (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 496). Also known as monument 2 from Loma del Zapote, this altar and another virtually identical altar tabletop from San Isidro (Cyphers 1997: figs. 9.6 and 9.7), come from the vicinity of San Lorenzo, in the Gulf Coast. On some whitewares, such as Cesto Blanco and Pilli Blanco from Zohapilco-Tlapacoya, and Oaxaca's Atoyac Yellow-White, the vessels sometimes may carry stylized heads of both the composite zoomorph in profile together with a frontal view of the composite anthropomorph, another related fundamental theme (figs. 1J-1L).

However, not all composites depicted on pottery are reptilian. There are blackwares depicting images in the Olmec style showing fish composites with stylized serrated brows, crescent-shaped eyes, human noses, and something like an egg tooth followed by a row of shark's teeth (fig. 3A). A similar composite is depicted in relief on a carving known as monument 58 from San Lorenzo (Cyphers 1997: fig. 8.6). There are also dark gray to black vessels that do not depict animal composites. Some vessels also depict animals after nature accompanied by one or more motifs from the composite zoomorph iconic complex (fig. 3B).

Pottery bearing images and motifs related to the composite zoomorph thematic complex first appeared in various areas of Mesoamerica, virtually simultaneously, at about 1200 B.C., together with solid and hollow clay baby-face figurines. However, it appears that the introduction of this new representational style was not necessarily accompanied by new pottery forms and decorative techniques. Vessel shapes that characteristically carry Olmec motifs and the techniques used to execute them were already known in different areas of Mesoamerica before the appearance of the Olmec style (Pohorilenko 2001).

figure 3
Images related to the composite zoomorph
thematic complex.



A
Ceramic bottle with the fish monster and the crossed
bands motif.

B
Crouched marsh bird with zoomorph-related motifs
in the background.

C
Bottle with an amputated hand motif.

D
Upturned bracket motif contained in a sunburst motif
with other zoomorph-related motifs excised/incised
on a tecomate.

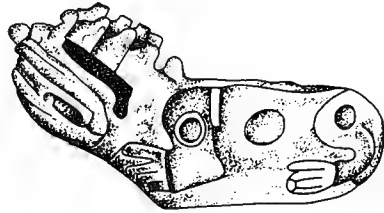
B. Clay Effigy Vessels

One of the finest known full-length images of the reptilian composite zoomorph is a hollow, clay, effigy vessel from Tlapacoya, Valley of Mexico (fig. 4A). Measuring 26.2 centimeters in length, it has serrated brows, L-shaped eyes, and an everted upper lip held in place by a device emerging from the nostrils that reveals or exposes a row of downturned gum bracket teeth. As in other depictions of the zoomorph, its extremities consist of splayed hands. But unlike other such representations, the Tlapacoya zoomorph has a number of circle motifs covering its body. Birds and other animals were also modeled as composites (fig. 4B).

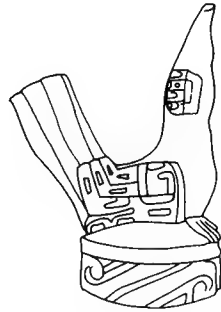
There are many delicately modeled effigy clay figurines of animals, some depicting birds, fish, ducks, monkeys, jaguars and other living beings. These

figure 4

A



B



A

Clay effigy vessel depicting the full-length image of the composite zoomorph with circle motifs. Tlapacoya.

B

An avian composite with the splayed hand motif over a base depicting the opposed volutes motif.

C



D



C

A realistic duck on a base with the opposed volutes motif.

D

Realistic fish with the opposed volutes motif incised into its body.

realistically rendered figures may be black and white slipped and often are highly polished. Some of them exhibit motifs from the composite zoomorph iconic complex, usually the opposed volutes motif, on their bodies or bases (figs. 4C and 4D). Nearly all known intact clay effigy vessels are reported to have come from the much-looted site of Las Bocas, Puebla. A few have also been reported to have come from the Valley of Mexico. Potsherds from such vessels, however, have also shown up in controlled excavations in the Central Highlands.

C. Portable Carvings

Only a few carved images in jadeite or other green stone depicting the composite zoomorph are known to exist. The best known example is a splendidly carved and highly polished figurine, no bigger than four centimeters in height and 12 centimeters in length, in the R. Martin Collection of the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 5A). It has serrated brows, finely incised L-shaped eyes, and an everted upper lip. Its paws have the shape of splayed human hands, with lightly but clearly incised digits. Its lizard-like tail is truncated and shows a “V” cleft or indentation cut into its extremity. The other known portable images of the zoomorph carved in stone are not as sensitively rendered (Art Museum of Princeton University 1995: 208, fig. 1 and Cat. nos. 64 and 106).

In addition to the reptilian or saurian zoomorph, there are other animal composites that were carved on a portable scale and, often, out of translucent jadeite. Such is the case of the composite tadpole pendants. Widely known throughout the specialized literature by the misnomer “spoon” (fig. 5B), stylized images of tadpoles, arguably the most sophisticated rendering of a living creature ever created in Prehispanic America, were also depicted with serrated brows, a raptorial bird’s beak, and curving fangs (fig. 5C). The tadpole composite, for only images of living creatures were expressed as composites, appears to combine embrionic reptilian as well as avian attributes. There are depictions of the reptilian zoomorph showing a feathery tail, as in the Atlihuayan pelt, for instance.

While there are not many portable carvings of animal composites, standardized symbols and motifs directly related to the composite zoomorph were frequently incised on the faces of portable figurines and masks depicting baby-face type of individuals, one of the other fundamental themes of the Olmec representational system (fig. 6A). Some baby-face masks and figures show finely incised secondary images depicting symbolic versions of the anthropomorph sitting atop the zoomorph (figs. 6B and 6C). This relational representation between these two fundamental themes in Olmec art is fairly common and appears in a variety of contexts that range from elaborate headdresses (Benson and De la Fuente 1996: Cat. nos. 118 and 119) to full-length depictions of the anthropomorph riding a jaguar composite zoomorph, or an anthropomorph emerging from an animal's fauces (The Art Museum, Princeton University 1995: Cat. nos. 63-66). There are also portable depictions of an anthropomorph at cave entrances symbolized by elements related to the composite zoomorph (fig. 6D). Similar pictorial subject matter is also related on a monumental scale, such as in altars 5 and 7 from La Venta and in relief 13 from Chalcatzingo, Morelos (see fig. 7D). It is possible that these pictorial scenes depicting the composite anthropomorph sitting atop, emerging from, or sitting inside animals or symbols suggesting the composite zoomorph may most likely represent some sort of religious ceremony or ritual.

D. Monumental Carvings

Under this subheading are included monumental sculptures in-the-round, reliefs carved on rock outcroppings, stelae, large free-standing stone slabs, and cave paintings; large-scale works that most likely were intended for public display and ritual. Complete monumental images of the saurian or reptilian zoomorph may be seen as reliefs 7, 8, and 14 at Chalcatzingo, Morelos (J. Angulo 1987: figs. 10.5, 10.2 and 10.3, respectively). As in some clay effigy vessels of realistic animals, the zoomorph in relief 14, for instance, is crouched on an opposed volutes motif (fig. 7A). Also, reliefs 5 and 11 from the same site apparently depict zoomorphs with a serpentine body (Angulo 1987: figs. 10.18

figure 5

A



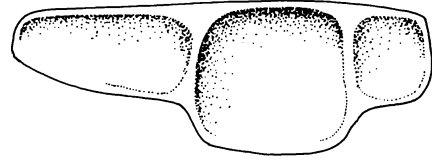
A

Full-length version of the zoomorph carved out of jadeite.

B

Jadeite carving of a tadpole, also known as “spoon”.

B



C



C

A composite version of a tadpole, showing serrated brows, a curved fang and an avian beak. Both tadpoles carved out of jadeite.

and 10.1, respectively). While relief 3 from Chalcatzingo depicts what appears to be a realistic jaguar, relief 4 shows two composite jaguars attacking prone human beings, as does the serpent composite in relief 5 (Angulo 1987: figs. 10.15, 10.16 and 10.17). On monument 21 from Chalcatzingo, a stela, the zoomorph appears as a squared double spiral motif, a stylized frontal “mask” of the zoomorph upon which stands a human figure touching a carved column (fig. 7B). The carving on monument 9 from this site, as is the case with reliefs 1 and 13, depicts the head of the zoomorph as a cave entrance (figs. 7C and 7D). It seems that these Chalcatzingo reliefs depicting various images of the zoomorph in different animal manifestations date to the Middle Preclassic, more precisely, after 700 B.C.

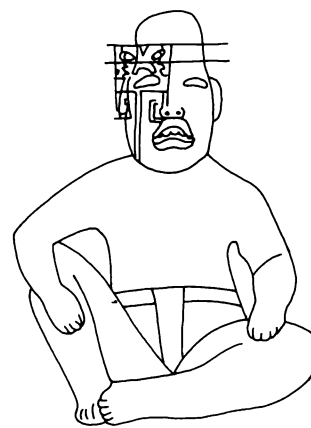
Traditionally, however, it appears that the representation of the composite zoomorph on a monumental scale was not in relief form, but conceived as tridimensional altars. On altars with remaining tabletops, such as altar 4 from La Venta (fig. 8A), monument 2 from Potrero Nuevo or Loma del Zapote (fig. 8B), and the tabletop from San Isidro, also known as Rancho de los Idolos (Cyphers 1997: fig. 9.7), the zoomorph-related motifs, such as gum brackets, are clearly

figure 6

A



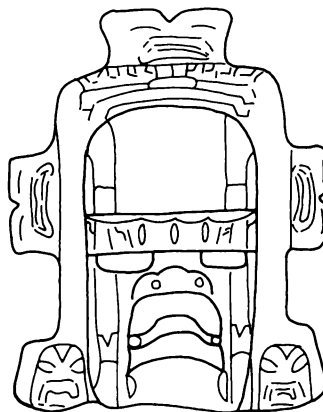
C



B



D



A

Adult baby-face mask with a "mask" of the zoomorph incised on its chin. This "mask" has four identical motifs related to the anthropomorph placed over its eyes.

B

Adult baby-face mask with the "mask" of the composite anthropomorph atop the symbol for the composite zoomorph finely incised on the right side of the mask.

C

Seated baby-face with an identical incision on the right side of its face.

D

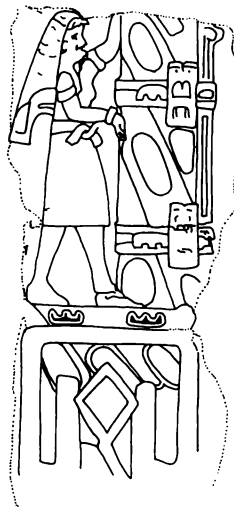
Head of the composite anthropomorph emerging from a cave that shows four anthropomorph masks symbolizing the vegetation shown on altar caves and above, the "mask" of the anthropomorph atop the frontal "mask" of the zoomorph.

figure 7

A



B



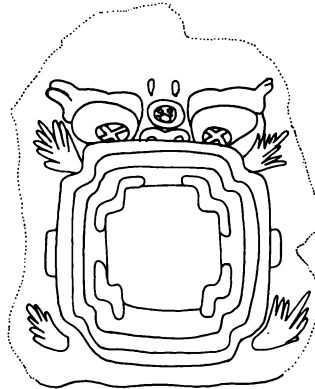
A

Full-length image of the zoomorph on an opposed volutes motif spewing forth a double scroll motif that produces rainfall. Relief 14 from Chalcatzingo.

B

Monument 21 from Chalcatzingo. A non-baby-face figure stands upon a symbolic frontal "mask" of the zoomorph.

C



D



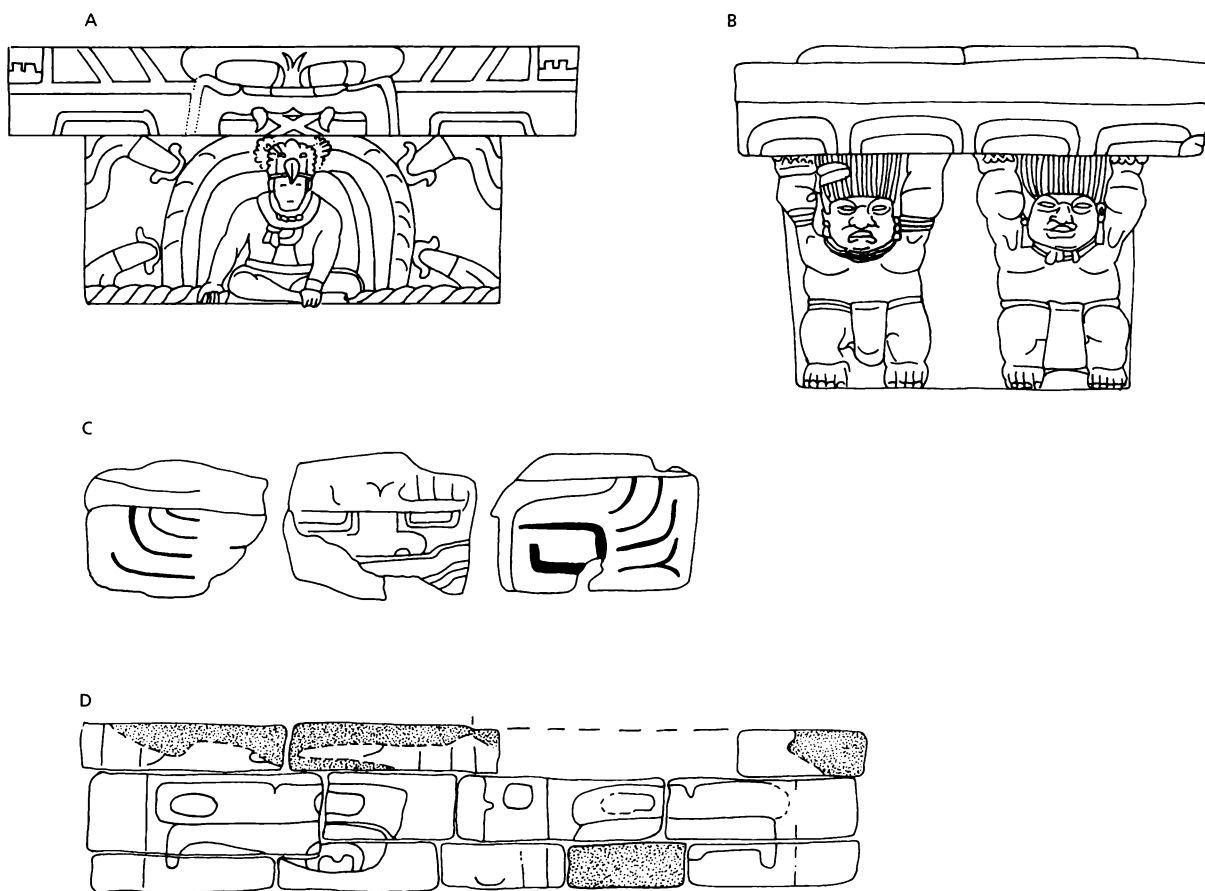
C

Monument 9 from Chalcatzingo depicting the "mask" of the zoomorph with the four vegetational motifs surrounding the open mouth, a symbolic cave entrance.

D

Relief 13 from Chalcatzingo depicting the composite anthropomorph seated inside a cave symbolized by the "mask" of the zoomorph in side view. Compare the cave conceptualization with the image in 7C.

figure 8



A

Altar 4 from La Venta, in which the entire face of the altar constitutes the "mask" of the zoomorph, with a feline "mask" as an insignia and a non-baby-face figurine emerging from its cave-like mouth. Note the serrated brows and trough-shaped eyes on the tabletop, and below, the four vegetal motifs surrounding the cave.

B

Monument 2 from Potrero Nuevo or Loma del Zapote, with a seating surface on the front end of the tabletop and a row of the zoomorph's gum bracket motifs surrounding the edge of the tabletop. In this altar the tabletop is held up by dwarfs and lacks a niche.

C

Altar 1 from La Venta, with a zoomorph's frontal "mask" and lateral panels depicting the splayed hand motif.

D

Altar from Chalcatzingo, Morelos, depicting the zoomorph's frontal "mask" made up of two pinched eyes surmounted by heavy brows. Both the brows and the iris carry zoomorph-related motifs.

shown on the frontal edge of the tabletop. While the Potrero Nuevo altar lacks a niche, altar 4 from La Venta shows, in addition to the gum brackets seen on the other two, a pair of serrated brows above them. However, the insignia in the form of a jaguar's head placed between the brows at the center front of the tabletop's edge suggests that the entire altar should be viewed as the frontal head of the zoomorph, with the niche symbolizing its mouth and, consequently, a cave entrance. As in many portable carvings, the figure seated in the altar's niche is, in fact, seated or appearing in the zoomorph's mouth, a scene often interpreted as indicating an entrance to the underworld and a ruler's validation of ancestral power (Grove 1973).

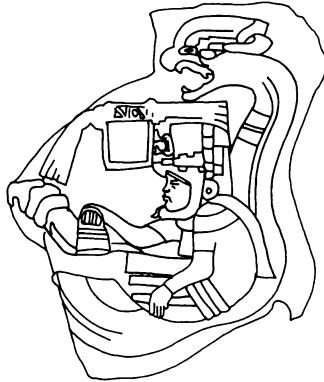
The fact that the tabletop altars were meant to represent tridimensional, large-scale heads of the composited zoomorph is further validated by the existence of altar 1 from La Venta (fig. 8C) and the Chalcatzingo altar (fig. 8D). The structure of the former, with a head and attached splayed hands depicted on the side panels, is nearly identical to the two-dimensional presentation of abbreviated versions of the zoomorph that were so frequently depicted on pottery walls (see figs. 1A and 1B).

As demonstrated by several of the Chalcatzingo reliefs, as well as altars 5, 6, and 7 from La Venta (De la Fuente 1973: 26-33), altar niches depict caves or cave entrances. Stela 1 from La Venta expresses the same concept, except that it is not an altar (De la Fuente 1973: 34-35). And the entire scene in stela D from Tres Zapotes takes place inside a cave, symbolized, no doubt, by what looks like the mouth of a zoomorph (De la Fuente 1973: 285-288). However, sideviews of caves in Olmec art are not limited to the pictorial convention seen in the Chalcatzingo reliefs. In other known contexts, however, caves shown in profile are expressed with the morphology of an arching composite serpent, as in monument 19 from La Venta (fig. 9A) and incised on a pair of jadeite earspools, also from La Venta (fig. 9B). In relief 13 from Chalcatzingo, on the cleft plaque worn by the figure in the Ojo de Agua monument (fig. 9C), and the earspools from La Venta, the image inside the cave is that of the composite anthropomorph, whereas in altars 6 and 7 from La Venta, monument 19 from La Venta, and relief 1 from

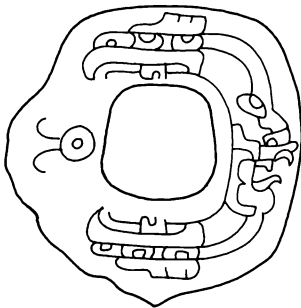
figure 9

Images of caves in Olmec art other than those found in Chalcatzingo.

A



B



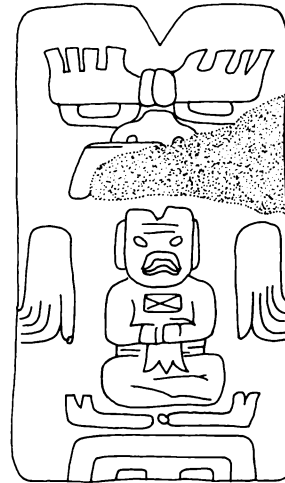
A

Monument 19 from La Venta shows the cave outlined in side view by a serpent, possibly a serpent composite.

B

A similar pictorial treatment of a cave is found incised on a pair of earpools found at La Venta. In this artifact the outline of the cave is a pictorial extension of the anthropomorph's head, suggesting the anthropomorph inside the cave.

C



C

Ojo de Agua monument with the plaque-axe depicting the anthropomorph seated atop the zoomorph's "mask," inside a cave depicted by the zoomorph's "mask" above and a pair of splayed hand motifs on either side.

Chalcatzingo, the figures inside the cave or emerging from it, to judge from their headdress, costuming, and overall physical appearance, are not intended to depict composite anthropomorphs, the other fundamental theme whose symbolic "masks" or heads are traditionally shown sitting inside the mouth or atop the composite zoomorph.

As noted in the portable carvings subsection, depictions of composite anthropomorph referential symbols or "masks" placed atop "masks" or symbols

representing the zoomorph are fairly common in Olmec art, especially as finely incised secondary representations on carved baby-face masks and figurines (see figs. 6B and 6C). The slightly raised surface on the top front portion of some tabletop altars seems to suggest that these altars, whatever else their symbolic significance might have been, were also used in public rituals and ceremonies. It is quite possible that at such events composite anthropomorph type of individuals, or life-size carvings depicting them, were placed upon these tabletop altars. Because this scene appears repeated in a variety of contexts in Olmec art, ranging from the afore mentioned secondary incisions on baby-face images to the structure of the headdresses worn by walking figures depicted on celts (Benson and De la Fuente 1996: Cat. nos. 118 and 119) to murals painted above cave entrances, as in Oxtotitlán, Guerrero (Joralemon 1971: fig. 150), it is quite likely that this scene and the pictorial relationship between the composite zoomorph and the composite anthropomorph is much older than these portable carvings and mural seem to indicate. Although not exactly depicting this scene, images of the zoomorph and the anthropomorph appear together, as already noted, on whiteware pottery found in both Oaxaca and the Valley of Mexico. Before Olmec altars became “thrones,” as proposed by Grove (1973), they most likely were, for the purpose of public ritual, collective symbols of nature, including all living beings and, more specifically, symbols of sacred mountains (Pohorilenko 1996: 125).

It is important to note that in Olmec art all living creatures such as fishes, birds, ducks, frogs, jaguars, serpents, and others, including baby-face type of individuals, seem to ultimately belong to the composite zoomorph iconic complex. Not only do motifs related to the zoomorph adorn other realistic and composite images of animals in nature, but, what is even more important, they seem to pictorially define another fundamental image in Olmec representation, that of the composite anthropomorph. Like all composite images in Olmec art, the composite anthropomorph is a hybrid image combining *pars pro toto* head features of the zoomorph onto the head of a baby-faced type of human individual.

The Baby-Face Thematic Complex

The basic human form in pre-700 B.C. Olmec art is an individual represented by what has come to be known as a baby-face type of individual. The head of a baby-faced type of individual is usually misshapen due to cranial deformation, bald, and large in relation to the body. The brows are never fully characterized, except as raised surfaces, with the tissues around the eyes nearly always depicted as swollen or puffy. The incised or carved eyes may be elliptical, slit, or almond-shaped. Some have irises indicated, sometimes showing crossed eyes or the condition of Strabismus. Most noses are short and wide, though there are examples that are elongated, arched, or pug-like. All baby-faces are heavy-jow-led and nearly always show prominent and well rounded chins. Except for an occasional goatee, they are usually clean-shaven. The rest of the body is rendered in a more summary fashion and shows no evidence of details usually lavished on the head and its physiognomic traits. Necks tend to be always short and wide, torsos compact, and limbs short and stocky. There are instances, however, when the torso is lean and the legs elongated. Sometimes, the upper body is sensitively carved or modified to show soft chest musculature. Baby-face images were modeled in clay, carved in jadeite and other greenstone, and sculpted as basalt and andesite monuments. Hollow clay baby-faces are pictorially expressive and show strong personal individualism, a trait they share with the colossal heads. Solid, smaller clay versions, small portable carvings, and monuments of seated baby-faces carved in-the-round seem to portray a class or type of person, rather than any particular individual. These unique human types first appeared in Mesoamerica at about 1200 B.C., as both large, hollow clay figurines and small, solid clay ones, together with pottery bearing motifs related to the composite zoomorph iconic complex. In pictorial terms, the baby-face image represents an important theme in the context of the Olmec representational system, since human figures characterized by its unusual visage were depicted as infants, adolescents and adults, as well as dwarfs and acrobats, and provided the physical frame for the third fundamental image in Olmec art, the composite anthropomorph. And, like the anthropo-

morph, baby-faces were depicted holding not only objects held by the composite anthropomorph, such as torches and knuckle-dusters, but infant images of the anthropomorph itself. Many baby-faces also show incised/excised/painted motifs related to both the composite zoomorph and composite anthropomorph iconic complexes.

A. Clay Figurines

It is usually said that hollow, clay baby-face figurines are so delicately and realistically modeled that they are the hallmark of the Olmec representational style. Slipped white to yellow and with a lustrous sheen, they often depict obese infants and children with oversized heads. The heads are usually shaved and artificially deformed. Sometimes the infants are shown wearing skull-hugging helmets that are not unlike those worn by the colossal heads. Facial features are always rendered realistically and with great sensitivity, as if they had been copied from life. And yet, all seem to share a certain unusual resemblance. The bodies are modeled with a characteristic infant obesity, although there are some that are not, and are usually naked and devoid of genitalia. Infants are sometimes depicted crawling and showing such typical motions as stretching their arms towards the viewer, a finger to the mouth, or a hand raised to the ear or back of the head. Mostly, however, they are shown seated with the hands resting on the thighs or slightly bent knees. Sometimes their legs are shown spread at widely uncomfortable angles. Of all Olmec anthropomorphic images, the hollow, clay baby-face infants appear to be the most dynamic and show the widest range of movement. On average, they tend to be anywhere from 25 to 35 centimeters high in a seated position (fig. 10A).

Some hollow, clay baby-faces show secondary pictorial motifs painted, incised, excised, or even cut through, on the top of the head, nape, or down the figure's back. One of the most familiar baby-face infants, that in the Metropolitan Museum, has the gancho motif decorating the length of its back (Coe 1965: fig. 184D). Others may show an animal claw cut into the top of the head

figure 10
Hollow clay baby-faces.

A



A

The helmeted infant from Las Bocas, Puebla.

B

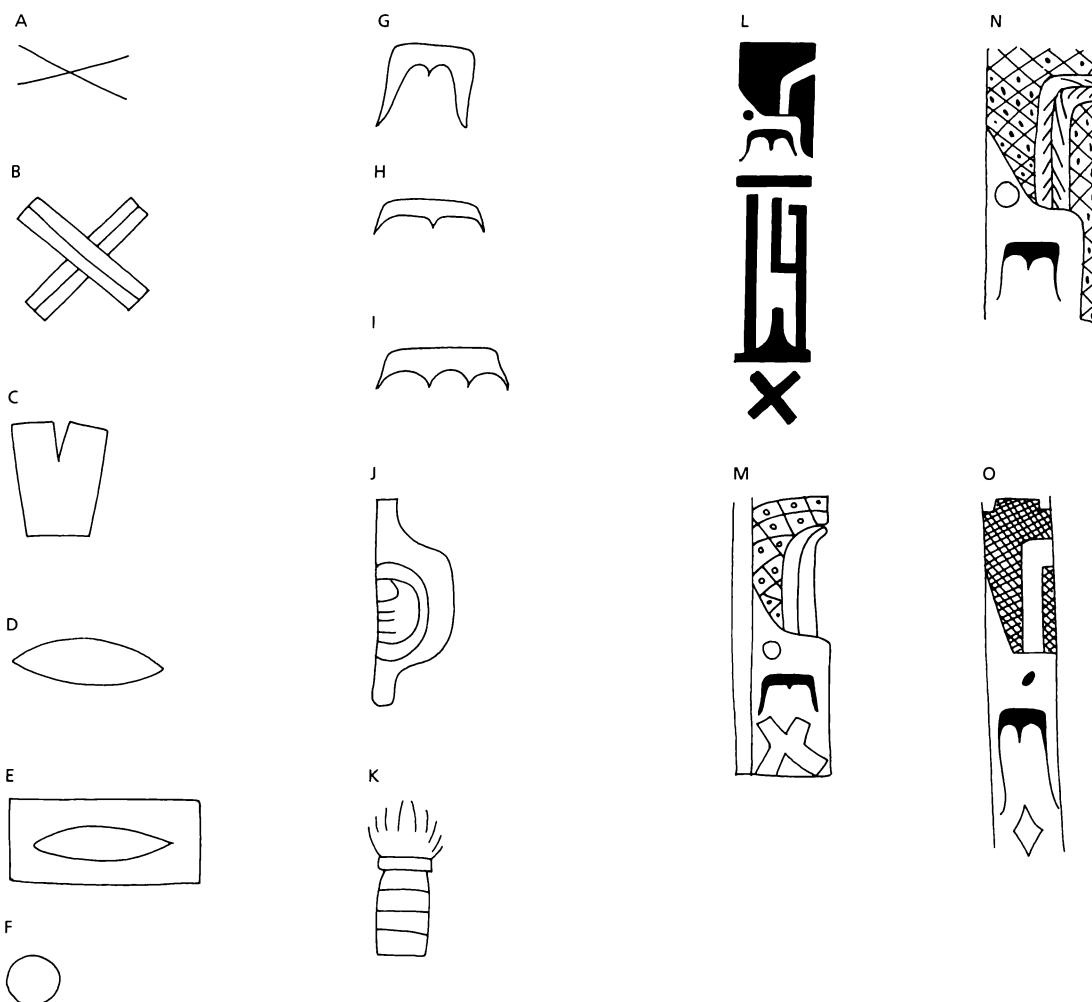


B

The Atlihuayan infant wearing the pelt of the composite zoomorph.

or a row of stacked opposite volutes motifs excised on its back (F. Feuchtwanger 1989: figs. 7 and 10). Like the pelt worn by the Atlihuayan Baby (fig. 10B), the *gancho* and other motifs usually seen depicted on hollow baby-faces are related to the composite zoomorph iconic complex, for they are also found on dark gray to black flat-bottomed bowls with vertical or near vertical walls, dishes, bottles, and *tecomates* (Art Museum of Princeton University 1995: Cat. no. 107). In addition to the *gancho*, claw, and opposed volutes motifs, most motifs associated with the baby-face iconic complex, such as the St. Andrews cross, ellipse, ellipse inside a rectangle, circle, and downturned E motifs, to mention a few, are motifs that belong to the composite zoomorph iconic complex (figs. 11A-11O).

figure 11
Motifs frequently associated with the baby-face
thematic complex.



A
Crossed bands as single lines.
B
Crossed bands with an inside line.
C
Cleft "V" motif.
D
Ellipse.
E
Ellipse contained in a rectangle.
F
Circle.

G
Downturned "E" with extended
outer arms.
H
Downturned "E".
I
Downturned "M".
J
Knuckle-duster.
K
Torch.

L-O
Variations on the *gancho* motif,
all containing the downturned
"E" with extended outer arms motif
and either the crossed bands or
lozenge motif.

Adolescent and adult baby-faces, on the other hand, were primarily modeled as small, solid figurines, ranging in size anywhere from 11 to 15 centimeters, on average. More numerous than the hollow infant variety, they often show elements of dress and a much wider range of positions and hand placements typical of adolescents and adults. When not wearing a turban-like headdress, the heads are shown clean-shaven or shaved in parts, forming sectional or geometric patterns. Some evidence “Prince Valiant” type of haircut. Most wear loin-covering garments in the form of short pants or skirts. They may be shown seated cross-legged, with one leg bent and other crossed in front or raised, reclining on the side, or simply standing. Even nude depictions of adolescent and adult baby-faces modeled in solid clay, are devoid of any specific sexual categorization (figs. 12A-12C). While some of the finest examples of this type of figurines express some degree of outward liveliness, others appear to be lost in inward contemplation (Benson and De la Fuente 1996: Cat. nos. 18 and 19). Hollow and solid baby-face acrobats and dwarfs were also molded in clay, though only a few examples are known. Sherds of hollow baby-faces and head fragments of solid ones, including a solid dwarf with a baby-face visage, have been unearthed at San Lorenzo, Veracruz, in contexts that date back to 1150 B.C. (Coe and Diehl 1980: 328).

B. Small Carvings

Small jadeite and other portable greenstone images of baby-face type of individuals were carved as standing or seated figurines, dwarfs, acrobats, and as separate body parts such as ears, legs, or splayed hands. The figurines usually range in size from 5 to 15 centimeters in height, although much larger ones are known. Portable carvings of baby-faces usually show adolescent or adult individuals with perforated earlobes and septum. Many also have drilled pits into the corners of the mouth, and occasionally, at the center of the upper gum ridge. These figurines, whether seated or standing, were usually carved without a supporting surface, although a few exceptions are known.

figure 12
Solid clay baby-face figurines.

A



A

Three heads from Las Bocas, Tlatilco, and Tlapacoya, respectively.

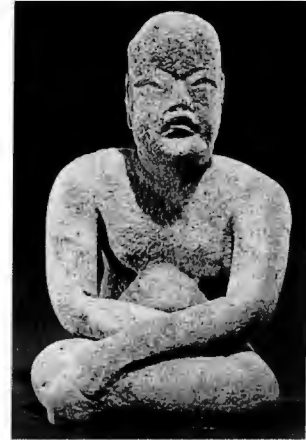
B

Seated figurine reported to be from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan.

C

Solid baby-face with a turban and long hair from Tlapacoya.

B

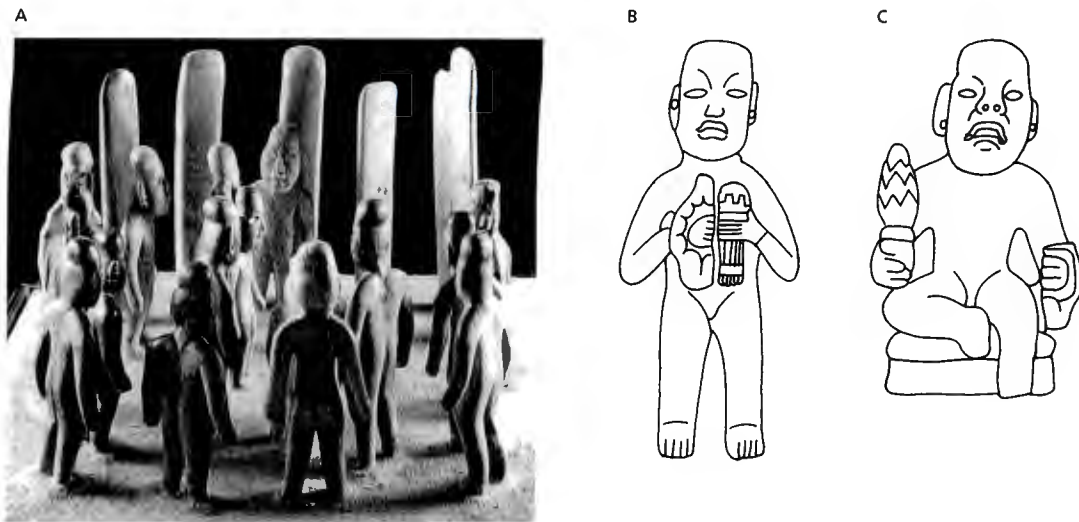


C



Portable depictions of standing baby-faces seem to outnumber seated versions by four to one. Usually, standing types are shown with shaved heads and wearing only an incised breechclout or loincloth. Some are shown wearing helmets. For the most part, the arms of standing baby-faces were carved in rigid symmetrical positions, either projecting forward from the shoulders or elbows with the cupped hands facing down, or simply hanging alongside, but away from the body, with outstretched palms. The hands of some standing examples were also depicted as either placed on the chest or held at waist level, separate, touching, or superimposed. The legs of small, standing, carved baby-faces are normal-

figure 13
Portable baby-faces carved out of jadeite
or other greenstone.



A
Standing baby-faces. Offering No. 4 from La Venta.

B
Standing baby-face holding a torch and knuckle-duster.

C
Seated baby-face holding torch and knuckle-duster.

D
Standing baby-face holding a composite
anthropomorph infant.

E
A costumed, seated baby-face from Rio Pesquero.

F
Baby-face mask with a finely incised cleft rectangle
motif and cheek bands depicting the profile head of the
anthropomorph.

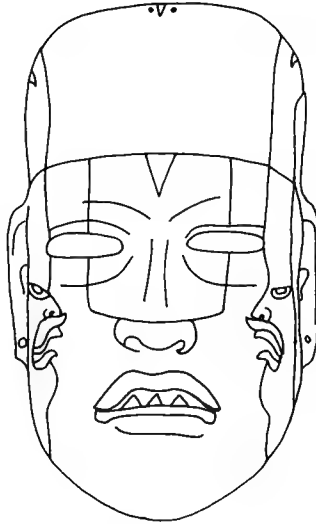
ly shown separated with forward projecting nubs, sometimes incised, to indicate the feet, and occasionally, the toes. One curious detail seen only on standing baby-face stone figurines is that their legs are nearly always shown slightly bent at the knees. This peculiar stance is exclusively associated with baby-face representations and not found outside Olmec art (fig. 13A). Sometimes, standing baby-faces, like seated ones, are depicted holding torches, knuckle-dusters, and composite anthropomorph infants (figs. 13B, 13C, and 13D).

Seated portable baby-faces are also depicted wearing helmets and loincloths; however, only seated ones are shown elaborately costumed. Costumed portable baby-face carvings, as is the case with the monumental ones, show many of the visible attributes that relate them to composite zoomorph and composite

D



F

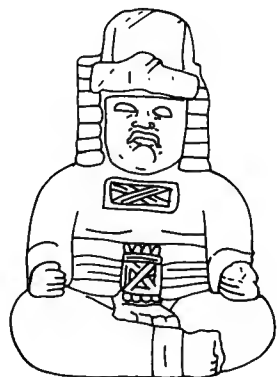


E



figure 14
Monuments depicting baby-face individuals.

A1



A2



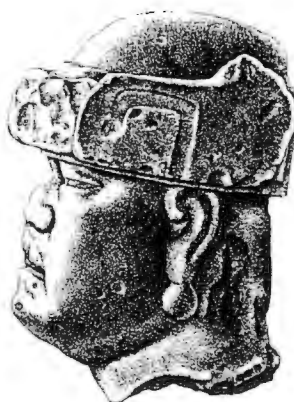
A1, A2

Frontal and side views of monument 77 from La Venta, a "classically" costumed baby-face individual.

B



C



B

Monument 44 from La Venta, showing the head fragment of a baby-face with a large "mask" of the anthropomorph on the front portion of the headdress.

C

Monument 6 from San Lorenzo showing the head fragment of a baby-face individual wearing a splayed hand motif on the sides of his headdress.

anthropomorph images. Such is the case of the Río Pesquero Figurine of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, in which the baby-face's headdress forms the classical Olmec ritualistic scene of the composite anthropomorph, symbolized by a "mask," sitting atop a symbol representing the composite zoomorph, in this case, symbolized by the headdress crown with rear-cleft indentations (fig. 13E). More often, as already mentioned, this pictorial connection between baby-faces and the other two *fundamental themes in Olmec art* is made by means of finely incised secondary motifs executed on the faces of carved baby-face figurines or stone masks. Such "relational" linkages may come in the form of buccal or cheek bands, the former always related to the zoomorph and its cave symbolism, and the latter to the anthropomorph in its cave-related context (figs. 13F and 15C1).

C. Monumental Carvings

Monumentally carved full-length images of baby-face individuals are found primarily as seated figures in-the-round, in three quarter relief in altar niches, and in low relief on lateral panels of altars. There are no standing depictions of baby-faces on a monumental scale. In this medium, baby-face individuals were also carved as expressive and individualizing colossal heads. However, it is only in this venue that one also finds in Olmec art, images of people whose visage does not generally conform to that of the baby-face type.

One of the most classical representations of a seated adolescent or adult baby-face type of individual is monument 77 from La Venta (fig. 14A). Carved out of olivine basalt, this tridimensional monument is 113 centimeters high and shows the seated baby-face individual with the fists resting on the knees of his crossed legs. He wears a zoomorph-related headdress with rear-crossed clefts, a pendant with the crossed bars motif, a breechclout, wristlets, and a cape that extends only as far down as the ground he sits on. The length of the cape suggests that it was specifically made for this ceremonial or ritual position. Although it lacks the anthropomorph's "mask" on top and the frontal symbols on the headdress band, its general form is identical to the headdress seen on the carved baby-

figure 15

A



B



A

Monument 17 from San Lorenzo, a colossal head.

B

Portable figurine of a standing, adult baby-face individual with a colossal head type helmet.

C1



C2



C1

The sculpture known as the Señor de las Limas, depicting a seated, adult baby-face. On its face, there are finely incised anthropomorph-related motifs on the brows, cheek bands with cleft rectangles, and a buccal band with four motifs identical to those on the brows separated by two profile "masks" of the anthropomorph. This band also contains two circle motifs.

C2

The composite anthropomorph held in the arms of the Señor de las Limas. It shows a rear-cleft headdress.

face from Río Pesquero (see fig. 13 E). Similar headdresses with rear-crossed clefts occur on the head fragment known as monument 44 from La Venta (fig. 14B) and on the monumental, seated baby-face known as San Martín Pajapan (Benson and De la Fuente 1996: Cat. no. 5). Both of these figures have the anthropomorph's cleft "mask" on the front of the headdress, immediately above the face. The fact that rear-crossed cleft headdresses are related to or suggestive of the composite zoomorph is predicated on the zoomorph-related motifs often depicted on them. Monument Number 6 from San Lorenzo (fig. 14C), even though the headdress worn by the adult baby-face is not of the rear-cleft type, it shows a clear splayed hand motif. The washboard bars seen in La Venta's monument 77, are also present on the baby-faces from El Azuzul, although they seem to wear a different type of headdress (Cyphers 1994: figs. 4.9 and 4.10).

There are also many monumental carvings of seated baby-faces that were depicted without a formal costume such as evidenced by monument 77 from La Venta and the Río Pesquero figurine. While they may not be "classically" costumed, they exhibit a variety of helmet-based headdresses and some form of short pants or skirts, often with a piece of cloth suspended from the waist, as is the case with such baby-face monuments as the one from Cruz del Milagro (De la Fuente 1973: 128). The existence of non-costumed or variously attired monumental baby-faces, as is the case with their portable versions, seems to indicate that what is visually important about these individuals is not their socio-political status, but the uniqueness of their physical type.

Infant baby-faces were also depicted on the side panels of altar 5 from La Venta, and possibly in the arms of badly damaged seated figures carved in the round (De la Fuente 1973: 26-30). Recently, a number of large baby-face infants carved out of wood, some still swaddled in cloth of fiber, were unearthed at what may be regarded as a sacred pilgrimage spot, the site of El Manatí, Veracruz (P. Ortiz, Ma. del Carmen Rodríguez, and P. Schmidt 1988).

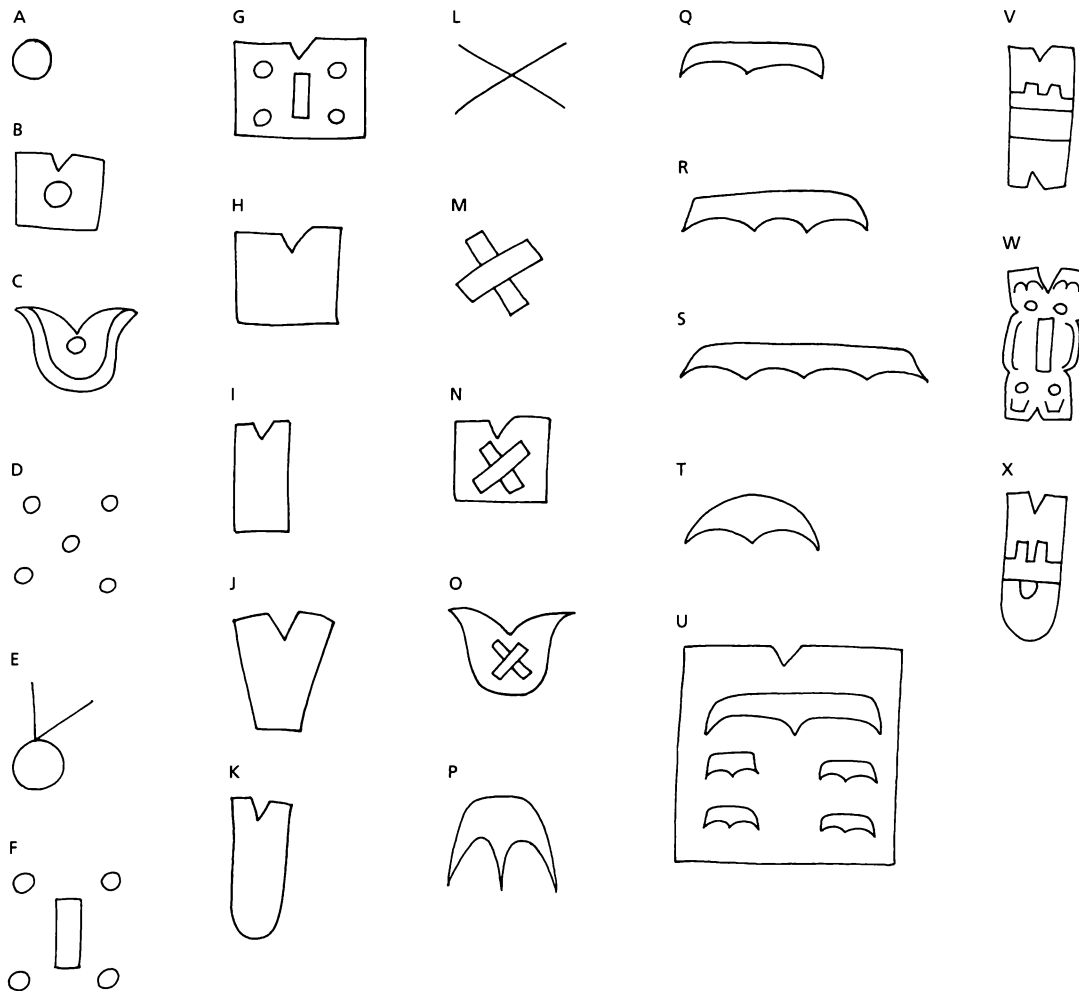
On the other hand, there is ample evidence to suggest that Olmec colossal heads were, in fact, "economical" depictions of baby face individuals (fig. 15A). Instead of full-bodied versions on a monumental scale, but more like the un-

costumed hollow and solid clay versions, as well as some standing portable carvings of these individuals, colossal heads appear to be individualized, portrait-like versions of adolescent or adult baby-faces, whose dress is limited to a helmet and ear adornments, but never anything like the ornate headdresses worn by the figures depicted on the stelae from La Venta. De la Fuente (1997b) has also drawn attention to this point with the portable figurine from Las Choapas (fig. 15B), now in the Museo de la Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa. Another fact that argues on their behalf as baby-faces is that, as I indicated elsewhere (Pohorilenko 1977), there are also composite counterparts to all symbolic living beings in Olmec art, namely composite fishes, jaguars, serpents, birds, ducks, tadpoles, and, most importantly, composite versions of the baby-face (see figs. 4B, 5B, and 5C, and 20A, for instance). Just like there are baby-face colossal heads, there are also examples of its composite counterpart (see fig. 20D).

Baby-faced dwarfs were also depicted on a monumental scale. Monument 5 from La Venta, also known as “La Abuelita”, and monument 65 from the same site certainly depict dwarfs (De la Fuente 1973: figs. 17 and 75). Dwarfs are also depicted on monument 18 from San Lorenzo, possibly a nicheless tabletop altar (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 446). The two dwarfs shown on the Potrero Nuevo or Loma del Zapote altar do not exhibit typical baby-face characteristics.

There are a number of monumental carved images, both in-the-round and in altar niches, of a seated individual holding an infant over his/her crossed legs. This pictorial scene occurs on monuments 12, 14, and 20 from San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: figs. 436, 439, and 451, respectively), an unnumbered monument from San Lorenzo in storage at Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology (Ma. A. Cervantes 1974), altars 2 and 5 from La Venta (De la Fuente 1973: figs. 2 and 5), and, most importantly, the monument known as El Señor de las Limas (A. Medellín Zenil and A. Beltrán 1965). Except for the last one, all the others are severely damaged, with heads either broken off or their individual facial features ground beyond recognition. If the Las Limas and portable carvings depicting this scene are any indication (see figs. 13D and 15C), these sculptures were meant to depict an adult baby-face individual holding a composite anthropomorph infant.

figure 16
Some motifs and motif combinations associated
with the composite anthropomorph thematic complex.



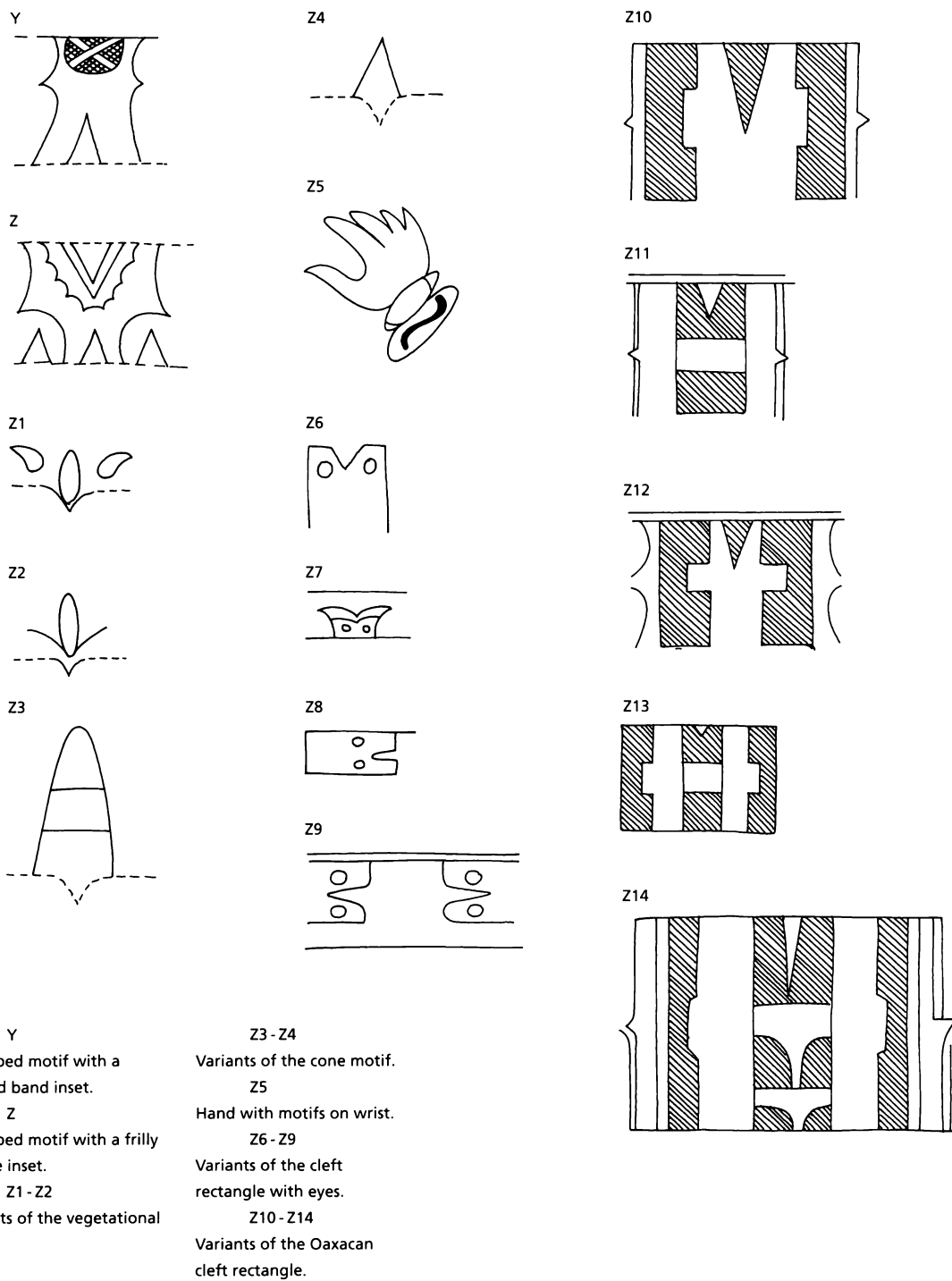
A
Circle.
B
Circle in a cleft rectangle.
C
Circle in a leafy cleft rectangle.
D
Four-circles-and-circle.
E
Circle with "V".
F
Four-circles-and-bar.

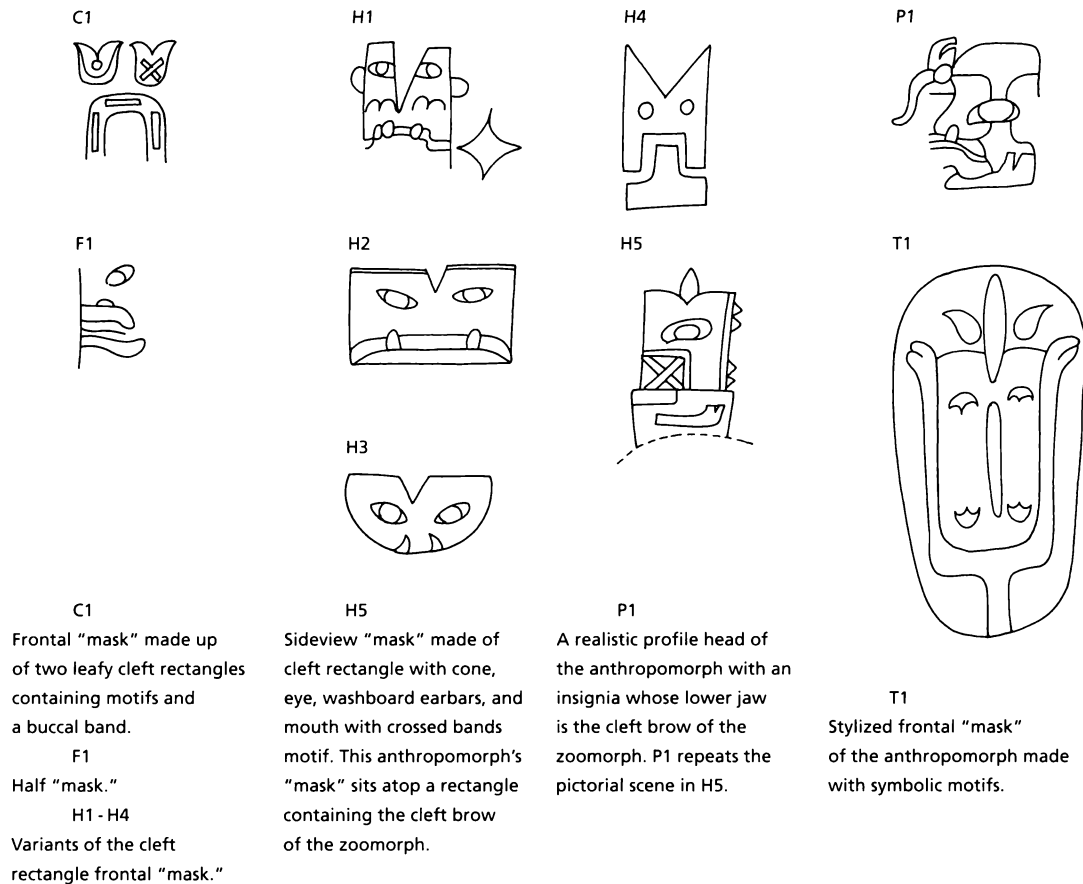
G
Four-circles-and-bar inside a cleft rectangle.
H-K
Variants of the cleft rectangle.
L-O
Crossed bands or crossed bars inside a cleft rectangle or leafy cleft rectangle.
P
Downturned "E" with extended prongs or arms.

Q-T
Variants of the downturned "E" motif.
U
Four downturned "E" motifs and bar under an elongated "E" motif, all inside a cleft rectangle. This combination of motifs, as in the case of G, generally stand for the symbolic "mask" of the anthropomorph.

V
Double cleft rectangle with a double merlon.
W
Double cleft rectangle with the four-dots-and-bar motif.
X
Cleft rectangle with rounded bottom with the double merlon above a circle with descending line.

figure 16





The remarkable monumental and portable carvings of baby-faces, as well as the existence of sensitively modeled clay versions of this theme, attest to its importance in Olmec art. Its extraordinary pictorial range as small artifacts, both in clay and stone, may reflect its ritual significance in ancient contexts. Many have been found as part of dedicatory or burial offerings. Others, such as offering no. 4 from La Venta (see fig. 13A), can only be understood as participants in an astonishing ceremonial ritual or congregation. And yet others have been found as "heirlooms", namely, reworked or as part of offerings that also included artifacts that were non-Olmec in style. However, in pictorial terms, it appears that only baby-face types of humans were selected to create composite anthropomorphic images that exhibited attributes related to the composite zoomorph.

Just as there are composite versions of ducks, serpents, tadpoles, jaguars, and other living beings in Olmec art, the existence of composite anthropomorphs in Olmec art, an image based on the baby-face type of individual, may have played a related or parallel symbolic function, as did these animals, perhaps representing humankind.

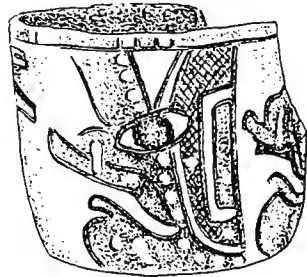
The Composite Anthropomorph Thematic Complex

The defining characteristics of the third fundamental theme in Olmec art, that of the composite anthropomorph, are a product of a seamless articulation of composite zoomorph head features, such as brows, eyes, mouth and teeth, onto the head of a baby-face type of individual. In Olmec art, the result of this pictorial hybridization is best expressed by the image of the infant held in the arms of the standing baby-face in the Brooklyn Museum Collection, the infant in the arms of the Señor de las Limas sculpture, and the adolescent or adult depiction in monument 52 from San Lorenzo (see figs. 13D, 15C2, and 20A, respectively). Defined by an everted upper lip, it may, in different instances, also exhibit serrated brows, trough—or L-shaped eyes, fangs of canines, and lip bars also known as the “hourglass or figure-eight element.” Sometimes the everted upper lip is the only indication that distinguishes a composite anthropomorph face from that of a baby-face. In images of the composite anthropomorph the everted upper lip is never optional, it is the marking trait. If the Tlapacoya effigy vessel of the zoomorph (see fig. 4A) and the profile heads of the anthropomorph depicted on whiteware pottery are any indication, the everted upper lip was held in place by a fairly flexible U-shaped device with curved or turned in ends, made of either bone or wood, that was inserted through the perforated septum of a baby-face individual as part of his composite zoomorph costuming (see figs. 17A-17E). Pictorially, these lip bars were depicted as short vertical bars or bands that extended over the everted upper lip, from the nostril down to the lip’s lower edge. This is why the old connotative appellation “were jaguar” is inaccurate for this fundamental image of the Olmec representational system.

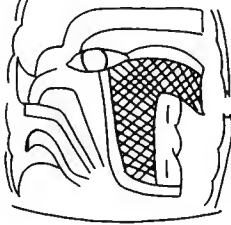
figure 17

Images of composite anthropomorph heads depicted on pottery.

A



B



C



A

Profile head of the anthropomorph with top cleft shown on Paloma Negative ware from Tlapacoya.

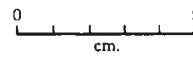
B

Profile head of the anthropomorph with rear cleft. White to buff ware, Morelos.

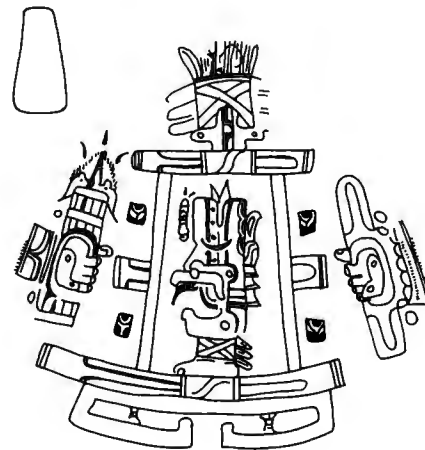
C

Profile head of the anthropomorph from Tlapacoya. More elaborate profile and frontal versions of this theme are also known.

D



E



D

Clay masquette showing the anthropomorph's visage found at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan.

E

Elaborate depiction of the anthropomorph's head and foot inside a symbolic dwelling flanked by torch and knuckle-duster symbols. This entire composition sits on a frontal symbol of the composite zoomorph. Vessel reported to be from Morelos.

As is the case with baby-faces, composite anthropomorphs were also depicted as infants, adolescents, and adults, costumed in the same manner, and also shown holding torches and knuckle-dusters. Full-length images of the anthropomorph appear as tridimensional monuments, as relief carvings on boulders and rock outcroppings, as portable jadeite figurines, and as small and life-size jadeite masks. On pottery, whether as profile heads or frontal cleft “masks,” their greatest incidence is on burnished and slipped white to buff ware. Profile incised heads of the anthropomorph also occur as part of buccal and cheek bands and were depicted frontally as cleft rectangle “masks” and symbols that were placed over the eyes and brows of baby-face and composite anthropomorph images. Profile heads of the anthropomorph and other motifs related to this image, such as the cleft rectangle and the four-dots-and-bar, belong to its extensive thematic or iconic complex (fig. 16).

A. Clay Pottery

García Payón was the first scholar to identify profile head versions of the composite anthropomorph in his Calixtlahuaca whiteware as pertaining to the Olmec style (Marquina 1951). These profile heads are usually characterized by almond-shaped eyes with an iris, a scalloped or bar-shaped ear, a short pug nose resting directly upon an everted upper lip revealing a gum ridge, a lip bar holding the everted lip in place, a smaller, receding lower lip, and a prominent rounded chin (figs. 17A-17C). An unusual aspect about these profile heads is that they appear to extend upwards or backwards, not unlike the profile heads of the anthropomorph on buccal and cheek bands. In every instance, whether upward or backward, they terminate in a deep cleft depression. An examination of these images in the context of the entire representational system has revealed that such extensions are, in fact, two dimensional versions of the baby face’s and the anthropomorph’s typical cleft headdress, a symbol of the composite zoomorph usually seen on such sculptures as monument 77 from La Venta (De la Fuente 1976). On pottery the cheek band usually extends from the inside edge of the headdress cleft,

goes under the eye, only to immediately reappear and descend the length of the cheek, turn backward at jaw level, and disappear below the earlobe. Most known intact vessels bearing the profile head of the anthropomorph come from looted contexts in the Central Highlands.

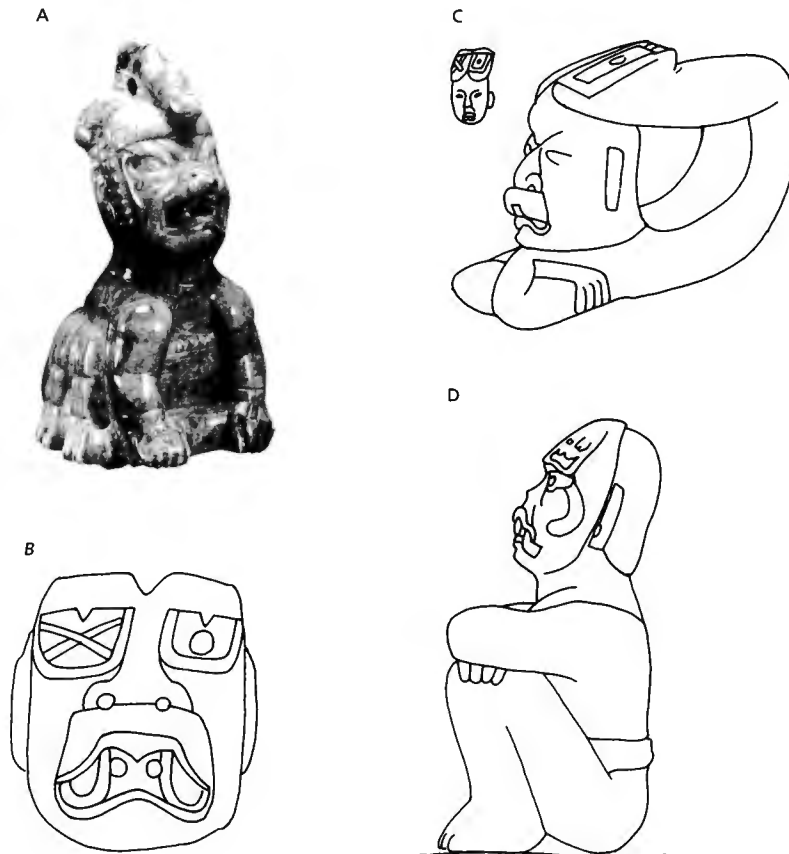
In addition to profile heads a number of motifs related to the composite anthropomorph appear incised on slipped white and differently fired ceramic wares. At Zohapilco, fragments of Pilli White and Cesto White clay vessels exhibiting motifs related to the anthropomorph's thematic complex were found in Ayotla and Manantial temporal contexts, which Niederberger (1976: 175-183) dated to a period extending from 1250-850 B.C. Paloma Negative, a resist ware showing profile heads of the anthropomorph, she placed squarely in the Ayotla phase (1250-1000 B.C.). As already noted in another subsection, occasionally sherds related to these wares show symbolic frontal cleft "masks" of the anthropomorph together with profile heads of the zoomorph or such related abstract symbols as the "double-line-break" motif (see fig. 1C). Both of these images also co-occur on Oaxaca's Atoyac Yellow-White (Flannery and Marcus 1994: 180). Stylized versions of the anthropomorph's cleft "mask," apparently unique to Oaxaca (figs. 16Z10-16Z 14), occur prior to 900 B.C. on Leandro Gray Pottery (Flannery and Marcus 1994: figs. 12.9 and 12.10). Incised motifs related to the anthropomorph have also been found incised on whitewares excavated at Altamira (Green and Lowe 1967: fig. 91), El Pajón (M. Pailles 1980: fig. 39), and at La Blanca (M. Love 1990: figs. 1-3), as well as other sites in central and coastal Chiapas and the Pacific littoral of Guatemala. It is curious that no whitewares bearing motifs related to the composite anthropomorph thematic complex have been reported from the site of San Lorenzo, in the Gulf Coast.

B. Clay Masquette

Although structurally admissible, no full-bodied effigies of the anthropomorph modeled out of clay have yet been uncovered. A single clay masquette of the anthropomorph's face was found in San Lorenzo B contexts (1000-900 B.C.),

figure 18

Portable carvings showing the composite anthropomorph.



A
The Necaxa Figurine.

B
A mask depicting the visage of the anthropomorph with cleft depression, cleft rectangles with motifs covering the brow and eye areas, and an everted upper lip revealing an upper gum ridge with two curving fangs.

C
The composite anthropomorph shown as an acrobat with feet over the head and soles showing the same cleft rectangle motifs seen on previous mask.

D
Carved seated figure wearing a mask depicting the anthropomorph's visage.

at San Lorenzo, in the Gulf Coast (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 397). About 7.0 centimeters high, it shows evidence of white slipping and rests of hematite pigment (fig. 17D). Lip bars are clearly visible on this masquette. The nearby site of Remolino also produced a large Yagua Orange fragment from a deep bowl with an everted rim with a modeled “mask” of the anthropomorph on its outer wall (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 158b).

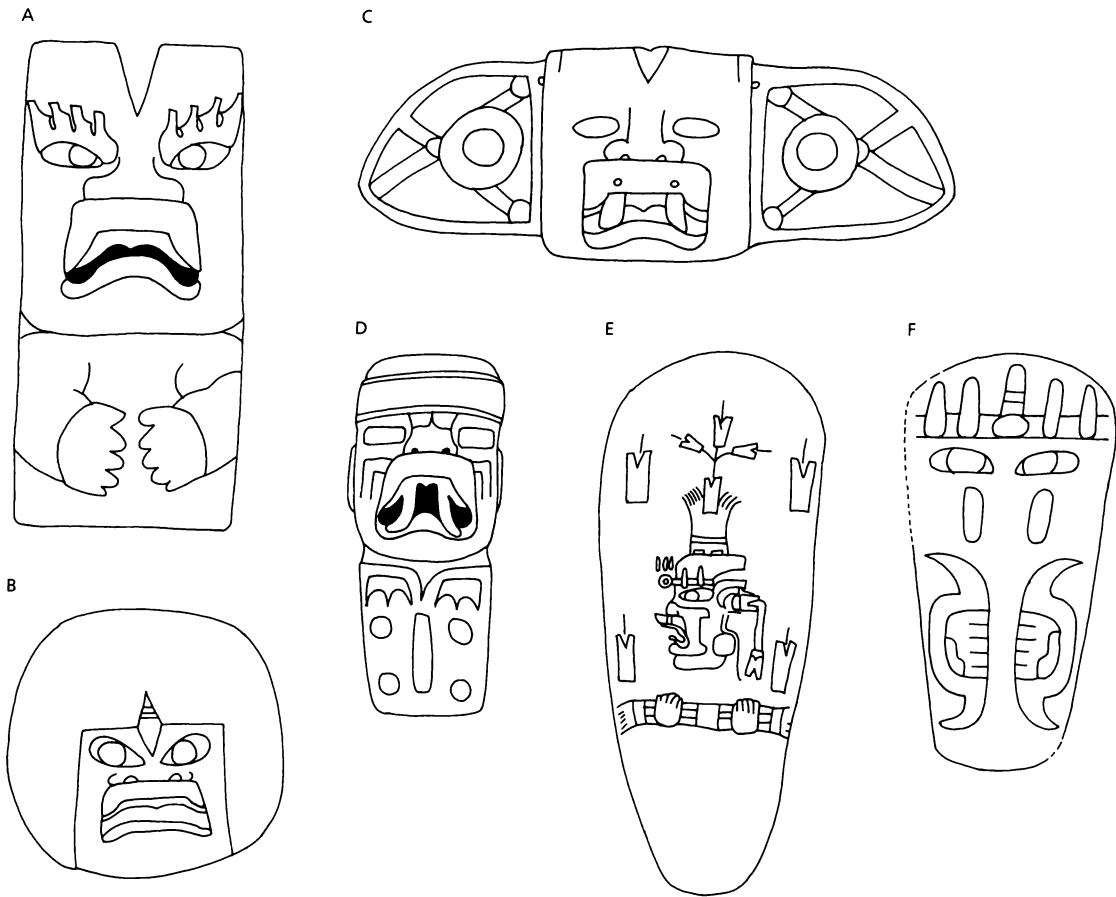
C. Portable Carvings

In this medium, the composite anthropomorph reaches its maximum range of expression. Jadeite or other greenstone images of the anthropomorph were carved as seated or standing figurines, small or life-size masks, and as faces on button-sized masquettes. Frontal head or full-bodied versions of this theme were also carved in low relief or incised on greenstone copies of objects used in daily activities such as axes, perforators, *canoitas*, and celts, objects of personal adornment such as earspools and a variety of pendants and on such artifacts of indeterminate use as *yuguitos* and double-headed staffs (Pohorilenko 1996: 125-128). Profile head versions of the anthropomorph, as part of finely incised buccal and cheek bands, also occur on a variety of portable artifacts showing both anthropomorphic and baby-face visages.

One of the masterpieces of Olmec portable carving is the highly polished jadeite anthropomorph known as the Necaxa Figurine (fig. 18A). Barely 8.5 centimeters high, it depicts an anthropomorph with almond-shaped eyes, an everted upper lip sustained by a pair of lip bars carved in low relief and, inserted in the mouth, a dental frame or buccal mask with fangs or canines. It is seated in a feline-like pose, leaning forward with the shoulders raised and the arms extended before the legs on the ground. A similar pose is assumed by another known jadeite carving of the anthropomorph reported to be from Oaxaca (P. Joralemon 1971: fig. 215). Like in some hollow, clay baby-faced infants, the Nexaca anthropomorph has a cleft rectangle with a circle motif incised on its nape. Other secondary depictions include a finely incised cheek band, with the anthropomorph's profile "mask" facing the figurine's mouth. The placement of the cheek band on this carving is identical to the way it usually appears on profile versions of the anthropomorph's head depicted on pottery. Cleft rectangles containing single motifs also appear on eye-brow areas on masks depicting the image of the anthropomorph and on anthropomorphs carved as acrobats (figs. 18B and 18C).

Life-size masks depicting the anthropomorph's visage may range simply from those that only show an everted upper lip, as in the impressive jadeite mask

figure 19
Carved objects of adornment and of utilitarian significance.



A
Plaque-axe pendant depicting a full-bodied anthropomorph.

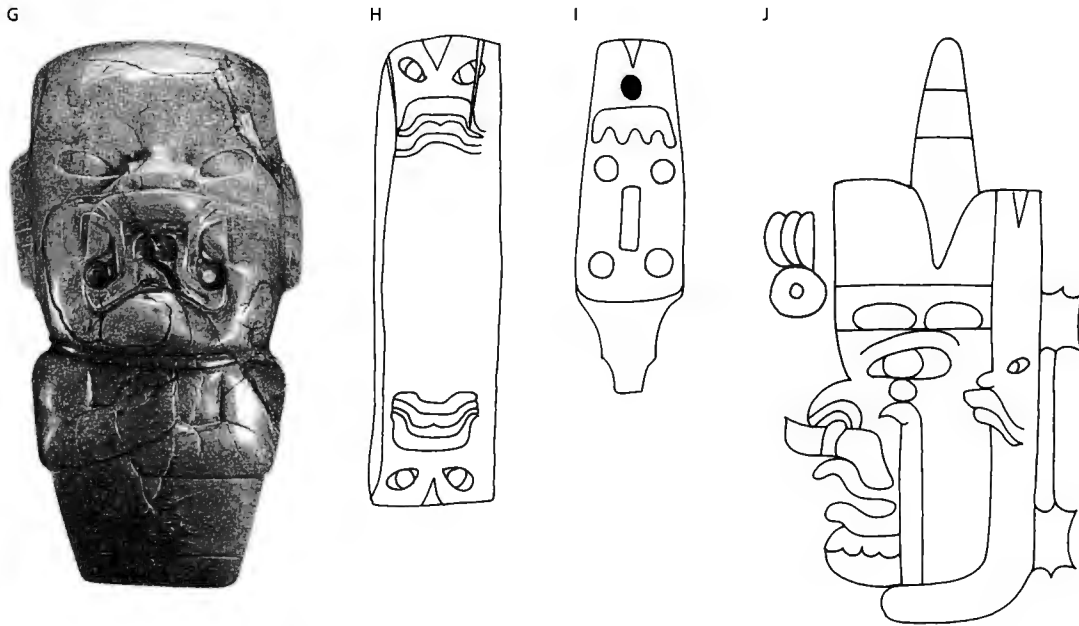
B
Squarish pendant with a cleft rectangle "mask" of the anthropomorph.

C
Mask-with-panels pendant with a cleft rectangle "mask" of the anthropomorph. The "mask" is flanked by two crossed bands motifs incised on the lateral panels.

D
Votive axe depicting the anthropomorph's visage on the head portion, and a cleft rectangle with motifs related to the anthropomorph on the blade portion.

E
Celt with incised profile head of the anthropomorph surrounded by four cleft rectangle motifs. Below this image, a pair of hands holds a bundle.

F
Celt from La Venta depicting an anthropomorph holding a pair of knuckle-dusters. The mouth of the anthropomorph is suggested by a pair of lip bars.



G
The Kunz Axe.

H
Shallow-water boat carved out of jadeite with incised "masks" of the anthropomorph.

I
Perforator handle with an incised cleft rectangle motif containing a four-dots-and-bar motif and a variant of the downturned "E" motif above.

J
Profile head of the anthropomorph incised on a large celt from La Venta offering no. 2.

from Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Benson and De la Fuente 1996: Cat. no. 82), to those that show serrated brows, trough-shaped eyes, and fangs or canines (Joralemon 1976: fig. 13). A carved Figurine published by De la Fuente (1983) shows that these life-sized masks were probably worn during rituals that required the impersonation of the composite anthropomorph (fig. 18D).

A number of Olmec artifacts carved out of greenstone and depicting the image of the anthropomorph may be classed as objects of adornment, such as pendants, pectorals, earspools, and "buttons." Plaque-axes are rectangular pendants which show, incised and carved in low-relief, full-length images of the composite anthropomorph (fig. 19A). They usually carry a top indentation on the head end of the rectangular plaque to indicate the anthropomorph's headdress.

The head-to-body ratio on these plaques is virtually identical to that seen on votive axes, often causing scholars to mistake one for the other. An oversized monumental version of a plaque-axe occurs on the Ojo de Agua monument (see fig. 9C). Other types of known pendants depicting the anthropomorph are the squarish pendant and the pendant with a central “mask” and lateral panels. Regarded by many as an imitation of the so-called Olmec “mirrors,” squarish pendants have a convex and concave side. The image of the anthropomorph, usually its cleft “mask,” is often placed off-center, with its bottom edge coinciding with that of the pendant on the concave side (fig. 19B). Pendants with lateral panels have a raised central portion that usually carries the cleft “mask” of the anthropomorph flanked by two panels or “wings” that sometimes exhibit zoomorph-related motifs (fig. 19C). Of the eight such pendants known, five show the “mask” of the composite anthropomorph and three depict the “masks” of realistic baby-faces. A monumental stone mask-with-panels depicting the anthropomorph, was found in the vicinity of La Venta (Pohorilenko 1997: photos 3 and 4). All three types of pendants have tiny, indirect suspension holes that go from the top of the piece to its back, so as not to be visible from the front.

Jadeite or serpentine artifacts imitating objects used in everyday activities also carry images of the composite anthropomorph. Votive axes, for instance, often show frontal, full-length images of the infant anthropomorph, even though there are specimens in which the blade portion of the axe, instead of showing the figure’s body, will be left plain or depict the four-dots-and-bar motif (fig. 19D). Sometimes on celts, a petal-shaped axe, the incised head of the anthropomorph is presented in frontal or sideview, and other times they show full-length, richly-costumed individuals in profile. On a celt uncovered at La Venta, the full-bodied, incised frontal image of the anthropomorph is skillfully reduced to a headdress band with symbols, large almond-shaped eyes, two lip bars standing for the entire mouth, and a pair of hands holding two knuckle-dusters, all outlined by the shape of the celt (fig. 19F). On some celts showing richly costumed individuals, the headdress may show a pictorial structure that depicts symbolic representations of the anthropomorph placed over symbols indicating the zoomorph (see

figs. 16H5 and 16P1). Some celts show the head of the anthropomorph in profile with four identical motifs, repeating the pattern of the four-dots-and-bar motif (fig. 19E). Olmec celts come in two sizes, with the smaller ones measuring below 20 centimeters in height, and the larger sometimes reaching nearly 40 centimeters in height. A celt measuring nearly 35 centimeters, with an incised “classical” profile head of the anthropomorph was found at La Venta as part of offering no. 2 (fig. 19J). In addition to the unparalleled Kunz Axe (fig. 19G) and the exquisite image of the anthropomorph on a perforator handle (Joralemon 1976: fig. 10W), other jadeite replicas of utilitarian artifacts, such as the boat from the Cerro de las Mesas offering (fig. 19H), nearly all utilitarian type of artifacts tend to show images or pictorial references to the composite anthropomorph. A perforator handle also shows the four-dots-and-bar motif (fig. 19I). Because portable jadeite artifacts depict primarily cult figurines, objects of personal adornment, and copies of artifacts used in daily activity, it is possible to suggest that these beautifully carved and highly polished artifacts depicting the image of the anthropomorph and its related symbols were probably used in propitiatory rituals either by themselves or in contexts involving individuals attired or resembling the composite anthropomorph.

D. Monumental Carvings

In this medium, the composite anthropomorph was carved in-the-round as full-length seated individuals, as colossal heads, as infants held in the arms of seated figures, as block sculptures, and as animal impersonators. Carved in relief, images of the anthropomorph are shown as seated figures, suspended figures on stelae, sitting inside symbolic caves, as *voladores* on rock outcroppings, on stone slabs, and as acrobats on large stone discs. No other Olmec theme has the contextual and pictorial range of the composite anthropomorph, both in the portable and monumental media.

The best known and most representative composite anthropomorph carved in-the-round is monument 52 from San Lorenzo (fig. 20A). This theme is repeated

figure 20

Monuments depicting images of the composite anthropomorph.

A



B



A

Monument 52 from San Lorenzo.

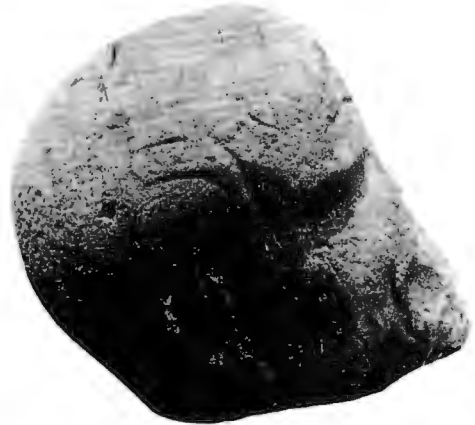
B

Monument 10 from San Lorenzo depicting an individual possibly wearing the anthropomorph's mask.

C



D



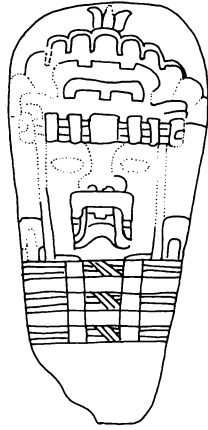
C

A head fragment of an anthropomorph's sculpture from La Venta.

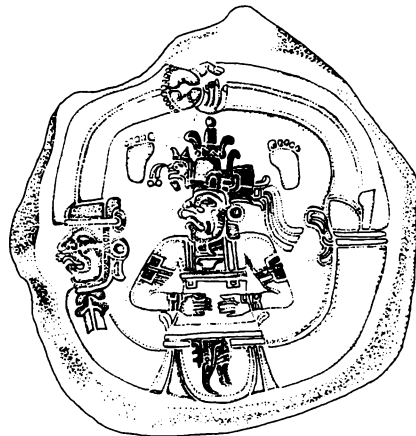
D

Monument 78 from La Venta depicting a colossal head with the image of the composite anthropomorph.

E



F



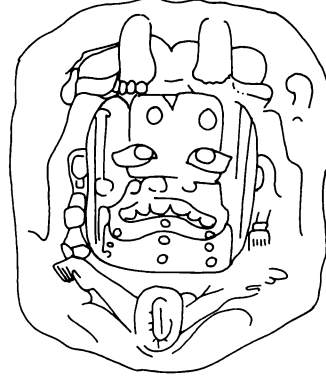
E

Stela 25/26 from La Venta.

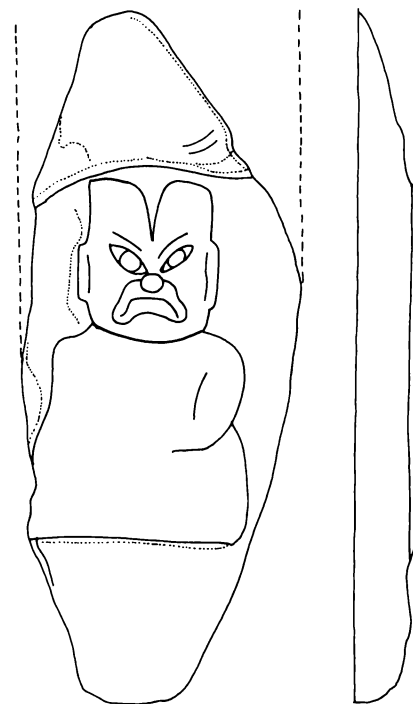
F

Large stone disc with a central image of an acrobatic anthropomorph inside a cave outlined by another acrobatic anthropomorph found in San Antonio Suchitepéquez, Guatemala.

G



H



G

Large stone disc depicting an acrobatic anthropomorph found at Emiliano Zapata, Tabasco.

H

Stela from Balancán, Tabasco, depicting a seated anthropomorph. Present location unknown.

The monuments listed here do not appear to scale.

on monuments 8, 10, 11, and 64 from La Venta (De la Fuente 1973: figs. 20, 22, 23 and 74), monument 1 from las Choapas (Grove 1996: 17, figure on upper left), the head fragment known as monument 5 from Estero Rabon (De la Fuente 1973: fig. 97), and monument 16 from La Venta (Pohorilenko 1997: photos 1 and 2). Monument 9 from La Venta and monument 10 from San Lorenzo (fig. 20B) apparently depict individuals wearing a mask depicting the composite anthropomorph, as already noted for some portable carvings. The existence of such life-size masks, carved both in stone and wood, only strengthens this identification. Also, it is pertinent to note the remarkable resemblance between the anthropomorph's head in monument 16 from La Venta (fig. 20C) and the head on a full-length image of the anthropomorph depicted on the handle of a jadeite perforator (P. Joralemon 1976: fig. 10W). Other monuments carved in-the-round show the anthropomorph as if seated, forming a block-like figure, as in monument 75 from La Venta (R. González L. 1991: figs. 1-3). As is the case with baby-faces, there are also composite anthropomorph colossal heads (fig. 20D). Listed as monument 78 in González Lauck's renumbering of La Venta monuments (González L. 1988), this 92 centimeters tall colossal head shows, unlike any other, serrated brows and cleft cheek bands (Pohorilenko 1997: photos 9-11). More stylized versions of the anthropomorph's head occur on the smaller monuments 1 and 2 from Laguna de los Cerros. Like in so many portable versions of this pictorial theme, the eyes on these heads are covered by plaques with circle and crossed bands motifs, respectively, conceptually not unlike the sideward view of the anthropomorph depicted in low relief on monument 30 from San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: figs 460 and 461). •

Other monuments in-the-round depicting the anthropomorph show it in a cat-like stance. Unfortunately many sculptures depicting animal poses have been decapitated or severely damaged. Monument 80 from La Venta, though terribly eroded, clearly shows the anthropomorph seated in feline position and holding a two-headed serpent in its jaws (González L. 1991: figs. 4 and 5, 1988: 55, cover). This monument strongly alludes to monument 1 from Los Soldados and monument 37 from San Lorenzo, even though portions of the former's

head are missing or may depict another animal, and the upper half of the latter is also missing.

Different versions of the composite anthropomorph were also depicted in low-relief, on stelae. A clear image of a seated anthropomorph occurs on a stela registered as monument 6 from Balancán, in the Usumacinta drainage in Chiapas (M.I. Hernández A. 1976). Monuments 25/26, 27, and possibly 58 from La Venta, all stelae, show the anthropomorph's head, in the form of a "mask," above triple horizontal bars, as it is often depicted on portable double headed staffs (Porter 1992: figs. 8 and 7, respectively, Navarrete 1971: fig. 2). The unusual aspect to these anthropomorphs is their large and ornate headdress, so unlike those worn by anthropomorphs carved in earlier times. In Teopanticuanitlan, Guerrero, low-relief combined with incision depict the composite anthropomorph in an architectural context and show him more traditionally, in full-length and holding torches (G. Martínez Donjuán 1994: figs. 9.13 and 9.14).

Relief images of the anthropomorph are also found on large stone discs, where they usually are depicted as acrobats, in the form of a head with a human foot on either side (C. Tate 1995: figs. 24-28). A much more complete version of such a carving, not included in Tate's piece, has been reported from Emiliano Zapata, Tabasco (R. García Moll 1979: fig. 3). In monument 16 from San Lorenzo, a probable anthropomorph, though much eroded, appears surrounded by vegetal motifs (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 442), while in the Shook Panel (fig. 20F), the acrobatic anthropomorph is depicted inside a symbolic cave outlined by yet another figure depicting an acrobatic anthropomorph in sideview. Not all depictions on discs show the anthropomorph as an acrobat. On monument 27 from Laguna de los Cerros, the image of the anthropomorph appears as a face inside a wide band (De la Fuente 1973: fig. 114).

Another pictorial manifestation of the anthropomorph in relief occurs on rock outcroppings, and has been called "El Volador." As in many portable carvings, this image of the anthropomorph is shown suspended in midair and holds a torch and knuckle-duster, as in relief 12 from Chalcatzingo (Grove and Angulo 1987: fig. 9.14). Although holding "sticks" instead of torches and knuckle-dusters,

similarly suspended dynamic images of the anthropomorph occur in low-relief as background images to large and richly dressed figures on stelae 2 and 3 from La Venta (De la Fuente 1973: figs. 9 and 10).

As noted in the subsection devoted to portable images of the anthropomorph depicted inside caves, there are a number of monumental carvings that share a similar scene. The figure holding an infant in the niche of altar 5 from La Venta is holding, as occurs in many portable images depicting such individuals, a composite anthropomorph infant. The connection between composite anthropomorph images and caves is quite obvious in relief 13 from Chalcatzingo (Grove 1984: fig. 32) and on the plaque axe pendant depicted on the Ojo de Agua monument (see fig. 9C). In the latter monument the anthropomorph is not only shown inside a cave, as indicated by the “mask” of the zoomorph above, but also seated on an abbreviated “mask” of the zoomorph symbolized by the two cleft brows and the downturned “E” mouth.

By the time stelae 2 and 3 from La Venta were carved, sometime about 500 to 400 B.C., composite anthropomorphs, baby-faces, and composite zoomorphs were no longer the principal pictorial subject depicted on Olmec style monuments. They continued, however, to be carved as buttons, medallions, masks, and pendants, or incised as secondary pictorial elements on costumes and headdresses worn by figures whose visage no longer corresponded to that of the baby-face.

Conclusion

A holistic and systems-oriented approach to the study of text-free art such as the Olmec is methodologically sounder than impressionistic and analogical approaches that rely on interpretations based on the free manipulation of randomly selected traits because it affords the analyst a view of the entire representational system, the themes that compose it, and an understanding of the behavior of its smallest pictorial units. While the criteria for inclusion are based on the stylistic aspects of individual artifacts, the analytical process is synchronic and does not necessarily address questions of interpretation and meaning. It does

provide, however, the parameters of the system, pictorial guidelines to the themes that inform it, and access to the “grammar” that underlies the articulation of the motifs into themes and their relationships among themselves. Moreover, the approach is formalistic in that it is strictly based on that which is visible. Its application to the Olmec art revealed that it is a representational system composed of three fundamental themes, their interrelationships, and the fact that, on a deeper conceptual level of expression, they function as two complementary but opposite entities: one that exists in nature and another, living creature-related, that does not, even though the visual elements that structure the latter are *pars pro toto* elements of the former. Furthermore, this type of analysis seems to indicate that in the Olmec representational system, nature or its forces, including inanimate things, were subsumed under the pictorial concept underlying the image of the composite zoomorph, including the image of the baby-face, the likely symbol for humankind in this pictorial scheme. This approach has also shown that during its “classical” period, that is, from about 1000-700 B.C., the Olmec representational system did not depict deities or rulers. As the art increasingly shows, these were likely introduced in post-700 B.C. times. In closing, I cannot help but feel that the results of any contemporary study of the text-free archaeological art are only as good as the methodology that led to them.

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