

## **The Classic Veracruz Style: A Reflection of Tradition**

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The ancient cultures of Mesoamerica produced a wide range of art forms and styles, a broad range of which are represented in the Mint Museum of Art's extensive collection. The term Mesoamerica refers to the region extending approximately from central modern day Mexico to Honduras and Nicaragua, where a number of Pre-Columbian societies flourished prior to Spanish colonization in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Classic Period in Mesoamerica is characterized by the growth and influence of the central Gulf Coast and Highlands. One of the most artistically productive regions of this period was the region of Veracruz, which included cultural centers such as Teotihuacan and Monte Alban, dating from roughly 150 - 900 CE. The people who lived in the Veracruz region were sedentary, depending heavily on agriculture as well as some hunting and gathering to survive. Similar to their Olmec predecessors, a strong belief system rooted in the appreciation of the life cycle and gifts of the gods unified their culture. These beliefs crossed regional and cultural barriers throughout Mesoamerica via conquest and shared beliefs, many of which centered on the rituals associated with the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame. Although many regions had varying artistic styles and practices, the Veracruz style was unique, making significant contributions to the sculptural traditions found throughout the Gulf Coast during the Classic Period.

This paper will focus on examples of Veracruz style art works specifically related to the Mesoamerican ballgame, several of which may be found in the Mint Museum of Art's collection. Through an examination of these works, I hope to show draw attention to the visual characteristics that have come to be associated with the Veracruz style, in addition to highlighting the way in which these works express key beliefs associated with the Mesoamerican ballgame, a ritualized practice that held deep meaning throughout the whole of ancient Mesoamerica.

From examples of the colossal-scale stone heads made by the Olmec people, to the Veracruz stone ballgame regalia and related art forms, it is evident that sculpture in both stone and fired clay played a key role in celebrating the importance of the ballgame in Mesoamerican culture. Though scholars do not know exactly how the game was played, the ballgame was most often a serious, ritualized event played with a rubber ball on a rectangular-shaped court by players clad in heavy, carved stone ornaments. The losers (often enemies captured in battle) were pre-determined, and would be ritually sacrificed as an offering to the gods upon completion of the game. Local rulers often took part in the game, and the most famous ballplayers were memorialized in sculptural form.

The Classic Veracruz style is very distinctive, characterized by a significant amount of ornamentation unseen before this time in the region. "It is a style in which all subject matter is secondary and bound to a complex or ornamental motif," as described by Michael Coe in *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs* (124). There are particular objects in which the Veracruz style is most evident, such as in yokes, palmas and hachas. All three of these objects were sometimes worn in the highly ritualized form of the

ballgame, requiring great strength and endurance on the part of the participating players, although similar objects made from lighter materials may also have been used in some matches, including games played for leisure. Yokes were worn around the waists by the players. Sculpturally, yokes are U-shaped and demonstrate the Veracruz style with their intricate carvings, termed “scroll carvings.” Palmas are described as “tall, thin stones flaring at the top and resembling a palm branch...[fitting] into the fronts of yokes worn by players” (*Sculptures of El Tajín*, 189). Hachas may have been used as markers on the ballcourt or inserted into the fronts of the yokes. In contrast to the palmas, however, hachas were thin and formed as representations of either human heads or animals (*Sculptures of El Tajín*, 188). The hacha shown here is characteristic of the Veracruz style due to the ornamentation seen in the headdress. There is a Veracruz style hacha similar to this one in the Mint Museum’s collection. Such elaborate scroll forms are generally characteristic of the yokes. Although not as intricate as the scroll patterns seen on the yoke, the Veracruz style is still evident in the hacha through the stylized form of the bird figure recognized as a crane. The carvings of the yokes, palmas and hachas are representations of the type of uniform or equipment worn by ball players in the ritual ballgame and their ornamentation and representation in the Veracruz style indicates their importance. Moreover, the Veracruz style is often described in association with the ritual ballgame for this reason. Through the influence of the Veracruz style in the depiction of ball players, the sculptural tradition was carried on into the Epiclassic period as seen at the site of El Tajín.

There are numerous examples of the Veracruz style at El Tajín. As a cultural center, the site of El Tajín has the most abundant amount of ballcourts found at any

Mesoamerican site. Archeologists have uncovered at least eleven ball courts at El Tajín, and the Classic Veracruz style can be seen in the sculptural reliefs that cover the walls of the ballcourts. “For whatever purpose, the courts were made in profusion [at El Tajín], and their walls present the most extensive architectural sculpture of Classic Veracruz,” as described by Mary Ellen Miller (*The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec*, 95).

There are several characteristics that reflect the Classic Veracruz style within the carved reliefs; these characteristics include a double-outline around forms depicted as well as the complex ornamentation described previously. The use of the Veracruz style to depict parts of the ballgame indicates how the style was revered at the time. The reliefs on the walls of the ballcourt depict scenes of ballplayers engaged in human sacrifice, as well as various gods and related symbolism. According to M. E. Kampen, author of *Classic Veracruz Grotesque and Sacrificial Iconography*, “the single most important theme in Veracruz art is the ritual of human sacrifice” (116). Depictions of human sacrifice are abundant on the ballcourt walls of El Tajín, supporting Kampen’s argument. It is well known that Mesoamericans of the Classic Period had firm beliefs in the life cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth, as well as the process of human sacrifice to please the gods. Therefore, it is of no surprise that this was the principal theme of the carved reliefs, especially on the walls that surrounded ballcourts where many lives may have been sacrificed. The sculptural reliefs are representative of how art, and narration through art, were very important in the development of ritual traditions in Mesoamerica.

While art was used to depict ceremonial and spiritual events, it was also used to depict the daily life of Mesoamericans, many of whom attended the ballgames as spectators and participated in a wide range of related social activities. As a unique region

in the Classic Period located along the Gulf Coast, the Veracruz style found in this region can also be found in the ceramic arts of Central Veracruz. The ceramic work of the Remojadas potters is a distinctive style seen in figurines that have been found within the region. The Remojadas figures such as this one are depicted with large smiles and are modeled in a naturalistic manner (Coe, 143). One possible theory is that figures such as these represented ballgame spectators, celebrating the victory of their home team and enjoying intoxicating beverages that would explain their smiling faces and puffy cheeks. This particular figure is also holding a rattle and posed in such a way as to suggest a person dancing. These figures are unlike any clay figures seen in the art of Mesoamerica during the Classic Period due to their facial expressiveness. This type of facial expression was used to portray many different community members including, children, ballplayers, lovers and warriors, as well as various gods (Coe, 143). Furthermore, Remojadas ceramic figures are typically hollow and can be found in monumental sizes.

In analyzing the unique Remojadas ceramic figures of Central Veracruz, it is evident that various regions of Veracruz during the Classic Period impacted Mesoamerican art through the use of different materials, motifs and subject matter. While the Classic Veracruz style can be seen in ceremonial and prominent places, for example, at the ball courts of El Tajín, the Remojada style of sculpture featured the less serious, more celebratory nature of the ballgame activities. The style of Central Veracruz ceramics and sculpture are representations of various individuals within the community who were likely active participants in the social activities associated with the ballgame rituals, and they serve as a window into the past to better understand the customs of Mesoamericans in the Classic Period.

Although the Classic Veracruz style has unique characteristics, these characteristics represent an evolution of pre-existing Mesoamerican art within the region. As with many aspects of Mesoamerican culture in the Classic Period, the ancient Olmec civilization provided a foundation for the development of the Veracruz style. In *Gulf Coast Archaeology*, Annick Deneels describes this progression;

After participating in the Olmec horizon (1200-400 BCE), the region developed what was to become the Central Veracruz Classic tradition, characterized by an ideology centered on the ball game, associated with the decapitation sacrifice, interlaced volute styles and a sculpture complex composed of the so called yokes, hachas and palmas (205).

While these characteristics have been discussed and describe the Classic Veracruz style, it is necessary to observe how these characteristics developed. The foundation of the Classic Veracruz style is rooted in the culture and artistic influence of the ancient Olmec civilization of Mesoamerica. The Olmec peoples produced art in many types of media with varying subject matter. However, what links these two cultures are the themes of the ritual ballgame, the importance of honoring the gods, and the respect shown for the deceased individuals depicted in the works of art. For example, Coe discusses the diverse art works created by the Olmec, "The Olmec were above all carvers of stone, from the really gigantic Colossal Heads, stelae...to finely carved jade celts, figurines and pendants" (67). The Colossal Heads referred to by Coe are thought to be depictions of rulers or ball players; this demonstrates the underlying theme of the importance of the ritual ballgame in both Olmec art and the Classic Veracruz styles. Further, the Olmec carved in a very naturalistic manner creating figurines composed of jade and stone. The influence of naturalistic form and its use in the modeling of figurines can also be seen in

the Remojada ceramic figures. In adding the distinct facial expression of a smile, the style of Central Veracruz was born with Olmec influence as a foundation. Additionally, it can be argued that the use of stelae by the Olmec to convey messages to the community influenced the use of carved relief as a method of communicating rituals and beliefs on the ballcourt walls at El Tajín. It is evident that although the region of Veracruz developed a unique artistic style, a foundation was provided through the artistry of the Olmec civilization.

The ancient cultures of Mesoamerica have emerged as remarkable artistic influences within the Americas. The lives of Mesoamericans in the Classic Period were centered on traditional themes of the life cycle, human sacrifice to please the gods, and the ritual ballgame. Through the artistry depicted it is possible to glimpse into the culture of ancient civilizations and their customs. The art of ancient Mesoamerica was idiosyncratic in nature and unparalleled in the world; the design and themes of ancient Mesoamerican art are immediately identifiable for this reason. Traditional themes, motifs and iconography created a foundation upon which the Classic Veracruz style was built. As the traditional equipment worn by the ballplayers, the yokes, palmas, and hachas served as a means by which the meaning of the ballgame could be communicated through the use of sculpture and carving. It is evident that with the widespread participation in the ritual ballgame in Veracruz and other regions of Mesoamerica, the Veracruz style was able to gain exposure to various regions during the Classic Period. Additionally, the carved walls at the ball courts of El Tajín enabled the artists of Veracruz to produce their work on a monumental scale in a sacred place where it would be both viewed and highly regarded as a means to communicate the beliefs of the community.

The works of the Remojadas potters further solidified the importance of the Veracruz style in Mesoamerica by virtue of creating a style with such distinction that the discovery of the ceramic figures in various parts of the region have enabled archaeologists to accurately date other sites based on the presence of Remojadas pottery. It is evident that the varying characteristics that comprise the Veracruz style are symbolic of a very spiritual and ritually-oriented culture. Through the creation of art in the Classic Veracruz style, one is capable of understanding what events held significant meaning for the people of ancient Mesoamerica. By means of the use of varied materials and techniques with the addition of ornamental motifs, the Classic Veracruz style was born and its influence remains as an area of great interest for archaeologists and researchers of ancient Mesoamerican art. It is for all of these reasons that the Classic Veracruz style is often regarded as one of the most distinctive artistic movements in the Classic Period of Mesoamerican art.



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Clay Model of Balicourt



Yoke



Palma



Hacha





Ballcourts at El Tajin



Carved Relief



Detail of Scene of Human sacrifice



Remojadas Figurine





Colossal Heads  
depicting ball players

San Lorenzo



## Works Cited

### Images