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*Ancient West Mexican Sculpture:  
A Formal and Stylistic Analysis of Eleven Figures in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May 2006

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## **Abstract**

### **ANCIENT WEST MEXICAN SCULPTURE: A FORMAL AND STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF ELEVEN FIGURES IN THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS**

**By Crista Anne Pack, BA**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.**

**Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006**

**Major Director: Dr. James Farmer  
Associate Professor, Department of Art History**

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) has in its collection eleven ancient West Mexican ceramic sculptures. Given that the VMFA's West Mexican Ceramic figure collection has not been included in any extensive study, this thesis serves to provide a critical analysis of these figures through a formal and stylistic approach. These analyses are preceded by a brief history of the West Mexican cultures and highlight the artistic similarities and differences between each region. The primary regions under discussion are Colima, Nayarit, and Jalisco which correspond to modern geopolitical boundaries. Primary sources for these discussions are the figures themselves, while various published catalogues serve as comparative

sources. Where applicable, iconographical theories are introduced and discussed in conjunction with the formal and stylistic analysis.

## **Introduction**

This thesis provides a stylistic and iconographic analysis of eleven ceramic figures in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' (VMFA) collection of West Mexican ceramic figures. This is accomplished through an analysis of form and style that examines the overall shape and posture of each figure, as well as unique additions of ornamentation in order to identify within which region each was sculpted. Additionally, this thesis contains a general history of ancient West Mexico, including information on the geography, the shaft tombs, and the Mesoamerican ceramic figure tradition. This serves as a foundation on which to better understand the more detailed analyses of each VMFA figure.

Iconographic analyses that have been published in connection with similar figures are also discussed in relation to each figure. Various iconographical theories have been developed through ethnological research and cross-cultural comparisons. These have allowed scholars to speculate as to what the latent meaning and function of these figures might have been. Since it is difficult to prove these theories, any iconographical information presented here is considered secondary to the formal and stylistic analysis.

This collection of eleven figures (Figs. 1 – 11) showcases the diverse range of ceramic sculpture that has been discovered in the Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima regions

of Western Mexico. The history of these sculpted men, women, and animals is as multifarious as the figures themselves. As a result of this variety, these figures provide important clues as to the traditions and lifestyles of the people who created them. They also supply evidence as to how ideas and beliefs traveled throughout Mesoamerica. Additionally, theories have been developed on the various ways these figures may have been used to communicate information – both to the living and the dead.

Ceramic figures from pre-Columbian West Mexico have long been admired for their expressive qualities and by the middle of the twentieth century they became valuable additions to public and private collections worldwide. The artist Diego Rivera is often credited with developing the first extensive collection of West Mexican sculpture.<sup>1</sup> Today, there are numerous museums that house West Mexican examples in their permanent collections, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, VA can be counted among them.

Few of the West Mexican figures in the collection of the VMFA have been included in any publication. Aside from two exhibition booklets which display one figure apiece, relatively little attention has been given to the figures individually.<sup>2</sup> Given that the VMFA's West Mexican ceramic figure collection has not been

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<sup>1</sup> His collection is now housed in the Anahuacalli Museum in Mexico City. See *Anahuacalli: Museo Diego Rivera* (Mexico City: Artes de México y del Mundo, S.A., 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Figure 5, *Figure of a Seated Man*, was included in the catalogue by Richard Waller, Stephen Addiss, and Gary Shapiro, *Seeing Across Cultures: Objects from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts* (Richmond, VA: University of Richmond / Marsh Art Gallery, George M. Modlin Center for the Arts, 1996), fig. 29. Figure 11, *Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory*, was included in the catalogue by Alfred Stendahl and Vincent Price, *Pre-Columbian Sculpture* (Hollywood, CA: Hollicrofters, 1956), [14]. Neither was written about within those publications.

included in any extensive study, my aim within the research presented here is to provide the first critical analysis of this collection. By examining the individual characteristics of each figure in the VMFA's collection and then comparing these to similar figures documented and published from private and public collections worldwide, I have identified specific traits and potential meanings which have already been attributed to the West Mexican ceramic figure tradition. Through this process, my goal is to provide a thorough contextual base on which to better understand the VMFA's West Mexican collection.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter discusses the regional styles of Nayarit and the various characteristics of the subtypes included within this classification. Five of the VMFA figures fall under the category of Nayarit and are examined individually within this section. The second chapter analyzes the ceramic categories of Jalisco and the one figure in the VMFA collection belonging to this style. The last five ceramic West Mexican figures of the VMFA group belong to the various Colima subtypes and are discussed individually in Chapter 3.

## **Research**

The primary sources for this thesis are the VMFA objects themselves. High quality images of each figure were provided by the Photographic Rights and Reproductions department of the VMFA. I was also given the opportunity to personally view and photograph each figure myself. In order to document and

correctly categorize each of the VMFA figures, my research has chiefly been focused on comparative analysis. For this, I have relied heavily on catalogues and publications obtained through the Virginia Commonwealth University's Cabell Library and inter-library loan systems, as well as the VMFA Fine Arts Library and Library of Congress. Additional secondary sources include the VMFA collection catalogue and archives.

The VMFA's catalogue and object files provide information as to when each figure was obtained for the collection. This information can be summarized as follows:

- Figure 1 (*Standing Female Figure*; Nayarit)  
Figure 2 (*Seated Figure Playing Instrument*; Nayarit)  
Figure 8 (*Seated Figure*; Colima)  
Accessioned 1960.
- Figure 9 (*Dog with a Corn Cob*; Colima)  
Figure 10 (*Votive Figurine of a Woman*; Colima)  
Accessioned 1961.
- Figure 7 (*Figurine*; Colima)  
Accessioned 1979.
- Figure 3 (*Man Holding a Mace or Fan*; Nayarit)  
Figure 4 (*Man Holding a Club*; Nayarit)  
Figure 5 (*Figure of a Seated Man*; Nayarit)  
Figure 6 (*Jorobado [Hunchback] Figure*; Jalisco)  
Figure 11 (*Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory*; Colima)  
Accessioned 1980.

While this list does not provide details as to where the figures were originally obtained, it does tell how long each figure has been in the collection of the VMFA.

Whereas the regional categorizations of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima have been

provided by the VMFA, the specific sub-styles of each region had not been assigned to the figures. Therefore, after careful stylistic analysis and comparison, I have appointed these designations in relation to each of the VMFA figure's individual characteristics. These are documented and explained within the individual discussions of each figure (Chapters 1 – 3). I have not imposed such classifications in cases where these distinctions could not confidently be made, so as not to present misleading information.

### **Previous Scholarship**

West Mexican figures are often classified according to traditional geo-political demarcations, a practice applied by previous scholars such as Salvador Toscano and Miguel Covarrubias.<sup>3</sup> These broad categories are currently used to describe the VMFA's collection and consist of three primary identifications: Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima. In scholarship dating before the publications of Toscano and Covarrubias, figures produced in West Mexico from ca. 500 BC – AD 900 were often grouped collectively under the heading “Tarascan”, together with art and artifacts extending beyond this time period.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there was not only a lack of differentiation

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<sup>3</sup> Salvador Toscano, “El arte y la historia del occidente en México” in *Arte Precolombino del Occidente de Mexico*, ed. Salvador Toscano, Paul Kirchhoff, and Daniel F. Rubin de la Borbolla, 9-33 (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1946); and Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Kan, Clement Meighan, and H.B. Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico: Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, in association with Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1970), 15-16.

between styles, but the figures were neither distinguished chronologically nor according to region.

A timeline of important West Mexican scholarship begins with Toscano who, in his 1946 article, was one of the first to make a distinction between Tarascan art and that of Nayarit and Colima.<sup>5</sup> In the same catalogue Toscano's research was published in, another article of significance to West Mexican study was presented. Written by Paul Kirchhoff, it is important to art historical scholarship for its attempt to distinguish between stylistic differences of West Mexican ceramic art.<sup>6</sup> Only a few years later, the archaeologist Isabel Kelly was the first to introduce an independent Jalisco style.<sup>7</sup> Covarrubias, in 1957, published *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* and further organized these West Mexican categories. He also permanently separated them from Tarascan art, which he designated as pertaining only to "the culture that flourished after the tenth century in the area of lakes Patzcuaro, Zirahuén, Cuitzeo, and Yuriria."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, he defined the Colima-Jalisco-Nayarit region as "a compact and fascinating group of cultures with an important art based upon the

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<sup>5</sup> Jalisco and Colima were grouped together under one heading at that time. Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Kirchhoff, "La cultura del occidente de México a través de su arte" in *Arte Precolombino del Occidente de México*, ed. Salvador Toscano, Paul Kirchhoff, and Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1946), 49-69. While much of Kirchhoff's research has proven inaccurate, it is nonetheless notable for its attempt at categorization based on stylistic analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Isabel Kelly, "Ceramic Provinces of Northwestern Mexico" in *El Occidente de México, Cuarta Reunión de Mesa Redonda sobre Problemas Antropológicos de México y Centro America* (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 1948), 55-71.

<sup>8</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 16.

freehand modeling of small and large hollow clay figures and effigy vessels, made in the Pre-Classic tradition, as offerings to bury with the dead.”<sup>9</sup>

Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima designate wide, geographical borders that correspond to modern political state boundaries (See Fig. 12). As a result, these categories alone are often inadequate and do not indicate the many subtle stylistic variations that may transcend or even straddle the line between the broader definitions. In order to provide a more precise analysis, these larger groups can be divided into widely accepted sub-categories introduced by George Kubler in 1962.<sup>10</sup> These were elaborated on and further organized in the writings of Stanley Long and Peter Furst (1966) and then systematically outlined by Michael Kan in 1970.<sup>11</sup> The classifications developed by these scholars have been identified according to similarities in form and style, and therefore are crucial to understanding the VMFA’s collection.

Other major pre-Columbian sites have been studied for their art historical and archaeological importance since at least the mid- to late-nineteenth century. West Mexico, on the other hand, didn’t become a prominent part of Mesoamerican scholarship until the mid-twentieth century. However, interest in West Mexico’s pre-Columbian art and culture has increased significantly over the past fifty years, as has

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<sup>9</sup> Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Maya, and Andean Peoples* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962) 189-200.

<sup>11</sup> Peter T. Furst, “Shaft Tombs, Shell Trumpets and Shamanism: A Culture-Historical Approach to Problems in West Mexican Archaeology” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966), 1-35. Stanley Vernon Long, “Archaeology of the Municipio of Etzatlán, Jalisco” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966). Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 20-27.

the available scholarship. Nonetheless, information about this region is still considerably lacking, especially in comparison to that on Mesoamerican societies such as the Maya or Aztec. This slow response to the arts of West Mexico is due in large part to its relative isolation from the rest of the country, as well as the fact that the majority of the most impressive artifacts are buried underground. Unlike the Aztecs and Mayans, the West Mexicans did not create any large scale lithic art or monumental architecture that would capture the attention of a casual observer. Furthermore, many of the shaft-and-chamber tombs where the archaeological evidence could be recovered have been so thoroughly raided by looters that it is difficult to put together an accurate picture of what originally existed. Therefore, any new research added to the current scholarship can be seen as the addition of another small piece to a much larger puzzle. It is in this light that the work presented here is meant to be viewed, as it is purposely limited in its scope to eleven figures. The intent is to introduce the reader to both to the small, public collection of the VMFA, as well as to the larger realm of the West Mexican ceramic figure tradition.

### **West Mexican Cultural Relationships**

The culture in which the ceramic figures of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima were created is perhaps as mysterious as the figures themselves. Little is known about the people of ancient West Mexico or where they came from. As mentioned previously, there is a clear separation between the later Tarascan culture and the early inhabitants of the West Mexican region who were participating in the shaft-tomb tradition. Many

attempts have been made by scholars such as Peter Furst to connect these people to earlier indigenous populations across Mexico and Central America.

Relationships have also been explored between the ancient West Mexicans and more contemporary cultures such as the Cora and Huichol of West Mexico as well as the Pueblos of North America. One of the most frequently cited is the Huichol, who are found in the northern region of West Mexico. Furst has compared each of these cultures and their symbolism extensively and has repeatedly noted the similarities. In his research, Furst has found that “what is more interesting – at least in the present context – is that certain important recurring motifs in West Mexican shaft-tomb art turn out to be paralleled – far more often than could be accounted for by the laws of chance – in Huichol and, to an even greater degree, contemporary Pueblo symbolism.”<sup>12</sup>

However, the time period that separates the contemporary and ancient cultures is unaccounted for among Mesoamerican histories. Furst has additionally observed that “no one knows what happened to their builders, for there appears to be a clear cultural break between them and later peoples inhabiting the same region. Aboriginal life was thoroughly disrupted by the Conquest and its tragic aftermath, when much of the indigenous population succumbed to the hardships of the Spanish colonial rule and exploitation.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Peter T. Furst, “West Mexican Art: Secular or Sacred?” in *The Iconography of Middle American Sculpture*, ed. Dudley T. Easby, Jr. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

## Shaft Tombs

Deep shaft-and-chamber tombs are a distinctive feature to West Mexico in Mesoamerica. They are also commonly found in archaeological sites throughout northwestern South America and in some regions of Colombia and Ecuador.<sup>14</sup> To many scholars, this has suggested that there was a northward diffusion of the tradition from South America to West Mexico.

The structure of these shaft tombs is integral to tracing this diffusion since variations of this form of burial, though uncommon, have been found within the Americas. For instance, shaft tombs have been found in Michoacán, Mexico that date much earlier, to approximately 1500 BC.<sup>15</sup> However, some scholars, such as Michael E. Smith, refuse to identify these as true shaft tombs because their structure differs significantly from those associated with West Mexico and South America.<sup>16</sup>

Traditional West Mexican shaft tombs that contain ceramic figures have deep vertical shafts which lead to the tomb. The Michoacán tombs, however, have shallow, slanted shaft entrances that include stairs. Therefore, any direct relation is considered doubtful. As Smith has stated, "Shallow tombs entered from the side similar to those of El Opeño [Michoacán] are common in Formative period Oaxaca (e.g. Bernal

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<sup>14</sup> Michael E. Smith, "A Model for the Diffusion of the Shaft Tomb Complex from South America to West Mexico," *Journal of the Steward Anthropological Society* 9 (1978): 179.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, "A Model for the Diffusion," 190. J. Arturo Oliveros, "Nuevas Exploraciones en El Opeño, Michoacán," in *The Archaeology of West Mexico*, ed. Betty Bell (Jalisco, México: West Mexican Society for Advanced Study, 1974), 193.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, "A Model for the Diffusion," 190.

1948/49), but any resemblance to the full shaft tombs of later times is probably fortuitous.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Ceramic Traditions**

While the designations of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima are named after specific geographical regions where shaft-tombs have been found, these categories have also been arranged according to artistic similarities. In discussing these designations, Peter Furst has observed that

what we have is a number of local substyles that fall roughly within three main regional style traditions. These, in turn, happen to coincide, again roughly, with the three modern political states in which shaft tomb cemeteries have been found, and which for that reason are identified as “Colima,” “Jalisco,” and “Nayarit”, respectively. Although the boundaries between the three main stylistic traditions and their local variants are not always sharply defined, it is possible for the student of West Mexican art to differentiate between them and place ceramics belonging to the different local substyles generally within their proper geographic setting, even in the absence of a confirmed provenance.<sup>18</sup>

Such observations stress the point that a figure designated to a particular regional category does not necessarily mean that the figure was discovered in that region. Further emphasizing this point is the fact that figures of the Nayarit style have been found in the same shaft tombs with Jalisco and Colima types.

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, “A Model for the Diffusion,” 190.

<sup>18</sup> Peter T. Furst and Debra Gabrielson, *The Ninth Level: Funerary Art from Ancient Mesoamerica* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1978), 22.

While we do not know specifics about the artists who created the ceramic figures of West Mexico, we do know that they used a wide range styles and forms to communicate similar ideas. Richard Townsend has speculated that each specific site within the region was home to its own unique workshop.<sup>19</sup>

working within these workshops produced variations of the culturally accepted style, thus generating the diverse array of figures that have been encountered.

The West Mexican ceramic figures have long been subjected to erroneous interpretation, stemming not only from a lack of a written history, but also from the massive removal of figures by looters in the early twentieth century. This resulted in a virtually nonexistent provenance for most figures attributed to these regions. It also resulted in a loss of context since the original placement of each sculpture in relation to the dead as well as to other interred figures has been forever lost. Scholarship came to a standstill due to the lack of historical background, as researchers struggled with the information. New interpretations were virtually nonexistent and, according to Furst, “because the situation seemed to lend itself to no more than speculation, without possibility of rigorous testing of hypotheses or scientific proof, simple descriptions and statements of the “obvious” became the standard.”<sup>20</sup>

These statements of the “obvious” were perhaps meant to objectively describe the figures under discussion, but they may have done more harm than good. For what

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Townsend, “Renewing the Inquiry in Ancient West Mexico,” in *Ancient West Mexico: Art and Archaeology of the Unknown Past*, ed. Richard Townsend (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Furst, “West Mexican Art,” 109.

is “obvious” to one person of a specific cultural background may not be obvious to another, and certainly may not have been so apparent to an individual working two thousand or more years ago. As Furst quipped: “Obviously, at least for some kinds of sculpture, the explanations must lie elsewhere, but they cannot be based solely on what seems “logical” or “obvious” within our ken.”<sup>21</sup>

From a stylistic point of view, the ceramic figures of West Mexico have been described as historical models of personal adornment. Additions of necklaces, nose rings and earrings are often viewed as the popular accoutrements of the region for the time of their creation. This type of insight is not limited to the figures of West Mexico, but can be found in discussions of figures from all over North and South America. Donald Lathrap has supported this belief, particularly in relation to one of the earliest cultures to develop the ceramic figure tradition – Chorrera, Ecuador. He believes that the figures “suggest that clothing was of a rather minimal nature,” but that the depiction of a variety of ornamentation indicates their inclusion in daily attire.<sup>22</sup>

While the interpretation of a popular, and therefore secular, adornment has not faced argument within West Mexican scholarship, the preceding discussion on the trouble with stating the “obvious” should be considered in relation to such an analysis. Even in recent publications, scholars such as Richard Townsend have viewed the West Mexican adornments as representations of daily ornamentation.

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<sup>21</sup> Furst, “West Mexican Art,” 103.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Lathrap, Donald Collier, and Helen Chandra, *Ancient Ecuador: Culture, Clay, and Creativity, 3000-300 BC*. An exhibition catalog (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1975), 48.

“Human forms are rarely encumbered by the elaborate ritual attire depicted on rulers and priests in the monuments of other Mesoamerican traditions. Only in exceptional circumstances do they portray masked performers and elaborate ritual paraphernalia.”<sup>23</sup> However, as we can see in the VMFA figures, many of the ceramic men and women are depicted wearing numerous earrings, nose rings, and other ornaments. These very well may have been worn daily, but without further evidence we can not be sure that such accoutrements were not specifically for ceremonial purposes, as special adornments for the dead, or to signify a political or spiritual leader.

Additionally, at this early stage of Mesoamerican development, Lathrap notes the frequency of painted designs on the bodies of the Chorrera figures. This occurrence signifies the importance of body painting and possibly tattooing, since genitalia is often clearly depicted and dismisses the idea of patterning meant to represent textile clothing.<sup>24</sup> However, such markings may have been added to identify each figure individually. These identifications may have been a reference to the creating workshop, the tribe of the individual represented, the status of the deceased, or perhaps a combination of all three, if not even more.

Lathrap has also observed that among Chorrera refuse, flat stamps and roller stamps are commonly found and may have been used in applying body paint designs

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<sup>23</sup> Townsend, “Renewing the Inquiry,” 19.

<sup>24</sup> Lathrap, Collier, and Chandra, *Ancient Ecuador*, 51.

on inhabitants of the region.<sup>25</sup> If this proves true, we may also speculate that such devices may have been developed and used to apply designs to the ceramic sculpted figures from Chorrera. Stamps have also been found in West Mexico around the Amapa site in Nayarit. While there is no evidence of their use on ceramic figures, such an idea should not be ruled out. Nayarit ceramic figures especially display repetitive patterning both on textile and body decorations.

The sculpted figures presented in the following chapters compose only a small sampling of the ceramic tradition of West Mexico. While they do not provide an example for every category of each region, they do present a wide range of formal and stylistic traits common to each of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit. As such, they can provide a valuable introduction to the arts and traditions of West Mexico as a whole. The cultural background provided within this introduction will provide a basis with which to better understand these ceramic figures.

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<sup>25</sup> Lathrap, Collier, and Chandra, *Ancient Ecuador*, 51.

## **Chapter 1: Nayarit**

In this chapter I outline the broad variety of Nayarit categorizations for ceramic sculpture and discuss general characteristics that are used to identify figures as such. Additionally, each Nayarit figure from the VMFA's collection is examined individually in terms of form and style. Lastly, any applicable iconography is discussed in conjunction with each figure presented.

The modern state of Nayarit is the northernmost state of the West Mexican region. The figures that take their name from this area have distinctive characteristics that set them apart from other West Mexican ceramic styles. Nayarit sculptural pieces exhibit a wide range of variation, and as a result have been further subdivided into three major classifications. These subcategories are the Ixtlan del Rio, Chinesco, and San Sebastian Red styles, which are discussed at length in the following sections (See also Chart A). Nayarit ceramic figures, perhaps more than those from other West Mexican regions, distinguish themselves from the rest of Mesoamerica in that most have the appearance of being made quickly, as if the sculptor was attempting to capture a moment in time.

## Regional Styles

General characteristics of all Nayarit figures include an emphasis on positive and negative painting; long, thin ropelike arms that are typically devoid of anatomical detail; attention given to hair, elaborate earrings, nose rings, and facial mutilations.<sup>26</sup> These figures of men and women often appear in pairs or groups. Nayarit is also the region from which numerous examples of clay models of homes and ceremonial centers originate. These depict entire communities interacting in specific events. Superficially, these arrangements might appear to simply depict the daily lives of these indigenous people. However, after decades of comparative analysis and ethnological research, it is now widely accepted that these figures are better understood in terms of their ritual associations. Peter Furst is one scholar who has argued extensively against the former interpretation, preferring instead to define these ceramics as having very religious, even shamanic, meanings.<sup>27</sup>

As initially stated, the first Nayarit subgroup is known as “Ixtlan del Rio” after the archaeological site of the same name in southern region of Nayarit (Fig. 12). According to Michael Kan, this was among the first of the recognized West Mexican style groups. Within this subcategory, further distinctions can be made between “abstract” and “naturalized.” Additional traits, as detailed by Michael Kan, consist of

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<sup>26</sup> Kan, Meghan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Furst, “West Mexican Art,” 98-133. See also Peter T. Furst, “House of Darkness and House of Light: Sacred Functions of West Mexican Funerary Art,” in *Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1973*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, DC: Trustees for Harvard University, 1975), 33-68; and Peter T. Furst, “Shamanic Symbolism, Transformation, and Deities in West Mexican Funerary Art,” in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 169-189.

“characteristic articles of male costume including a distinctive shirt reaching to the sex organs, which are frequently covered with a “scoop loincloth” and a small mantle tied with a cord over one shoulder. Female figures wear a longer loincloth that resembles a sarong.”<sup>28</sup> Within the VMFA’s collection, there are three figures that can be identified as belonging to the Ixtlan del Rio category and all show characteristics of the abstract variety (See Figs. 1, 2, & 3).

Another identifiable Nayarit subgroup has been labeled within scholarship as “Chinesco,” which is also from the southern region of the state. The Chinesco figures can be further divided among four distinct types. Type A, also known as “Classic Chinesco,” is identified by a high degree of naturalism, subtle modeling of the facial expression, and majestic pose. Type B Chinescos are often referred to in literature as “Martian Chinescos,” presumably due to their inflated form and exaggerated facial features. Type C figures do not have a common name that they are known by and can be identified by the shape of their heads and posture. Typically, Type C Chinescos have a head that is wide across the top and which narrows to a pointed chin. They are often in a seated position with arms folded over their legs. The fourth type, Type D Chinescos, are recognizable by their broad, rectangular heads. The female figures of this group are often seated with their legs outstretched. Kan additionally discusses a possible fifth type, known only as Chinesco Type E, which is characterized by a cream slip, but is otherwise similar to Type A, Classic Chinesco figures.<sup>29</sup> One of the

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<sup>28</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

VMFA figures can undoubtedly be classified as belonging to the Chinesco categorization and most closely aligns with the Type B, or “Martian,” variety (See Fig. 5).

The third sub-category of Nayarit ceramic figures is known as San Sebastián Red. This category is named for the archaeological site that is in the modern state of Jalisco, bordering Nayarit (Fig. 12), and is a style that encompasses figures from both Nayarit and Jalisco. This may be the most familiar type of Nayarit ceramic sculpture as it is often the most numerous among West Mexican collections.<sup>30</sup> While it is not the most common in the VMFA set, there is one figure (Fig. 4) which closely identifies with the San Sebastián Red category. Figures such as this are known for their dynamic posturing and many are highly burnished. Additionally, these figures can be recognized according to three different classifications: Classic, *Ojos*, or “Pointed Ears.” These categories can be distinguished through variations in the eyes, mouth, and hair.

As evidenced in this brief overview of Nayarit types and styles, there is quite a diversified range of figures within each subcategory alone. It is important to remember that chronological differences may also account for such style and form variations. The wide date range of 200 BC – AD 400 is now the most widely accepted period for the tomb figures of West Mexico. Some accounts go as early as 400 BC and as late as AD 900. To preserve the VMFA’s original records, I have

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<sup>30</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 23.

included the catalogued dates of each sculpture in parentheses beneath each in the List of Figures.

The titles that are given to each figure have also been taken directly from VMFA records. These are often short and descriptive which allows for easy reference within each discussion. However, these artworks were accessioned by the VMFA between 1960 and 1980, and what little information accompanied these figures from their donors was based on early scholarship. Therefore, the names based on this previous research may be derived from misinterpretations and lack of information in these early studies. Where appropriate, I have identified these inaccuracies and provided alternative interpretations based on current scholarship.

## **VMFA Figures**

### Ixtlan Del Rio

#### *Standing Female Figure (Fig. 1)*

The first object of this collection under discussion is a hollow female figure from Nayarit. This terra cotta sculpture stands approximately eighteen inches tall. Remnants of painted polychrome designs can still be seen from the top of the head down to the feet (See Figs. 1a, 1b, and 1c). The disproportionate “elephantine” legs of this figure, with toes barely indicated, lead me to believe this sculpture can accurately be categorized as an abstract variant of the Ixtlan del Rio subtype.<sup>31</sup> This

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<sup>31</sup> “Elephantine” is term used to describe the thick, trunk-like legs of these figures. Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 20.

is supported by the emphasis on positive and negative painting which is characteristic of art production from this region. This becomes especially evident when compared to known Ixtlan del Rio figures from other collections (See Fig. 13).

As mentioned in the introduction, earrings, nose ornaments, and thin ropey arms are all identifiable Nayarit traits on this figure. While the rendering of ropey, or un-jointed, arms on Figure 1 may be attributable to a broad regional technique, the emphasis on multiple adornments (earrings, nose rings, armbands), such as those applied to this figure, are specific to Ixtlan del Rio. The application of these embellishments may simply be a reflection of popular dress, but they may also work as a type of communicator. Kristi Butterwick, a West Mexican scholar, has studied the sociological implications of applied ornamentation on sculpted ceramic figures and believes that the adornments were used to encode a type of social message. She suggests that these applications, whether painted or modeled in clay, are indicative of membership in a group.<sup>32</sup> Butterwick offers archaeological evidence to support her theories: “The recent discoveries of shell bracelets, greenstone pendants, and other treasures that embellish a small percentage of human remains in shaft tombs offer conclusive support for the argument that the adornments worn by the figurines expressed social meanings that were extant in ancient West Mexican society.”<sup>33</sup>

While Butterwick has studied a number of large ceramic figures, similar to those under discussion, she has also focused her attention on clay models that depict

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<sup>32</sup> Kristi Butterwick, “Food for the Dead,” in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

groups of people. Her research on these group models has furthered the idea that certain features on the individual figures indicate a differentiation in social class. For example, the inclusion – or lack thereof – of applied ornamentation may signify an ordered social ranking. However, this stratification cannot be viewed exclusive of other qualities that are indicative of a communal bond. The activities being depicted in both large-scale ceramic figures and small-scale models transcend social standing. Butterwick's findings are supported by her own research on a significant number of models:

The presence or absence of adornments in the West Mexican tomb figures also points to the existence of social-group ranking. In the exhaustive study of architectural models that I previously conducted, a pattern of differentiation in adornment clearly emerged: just under half of the 590 figurines wear recognizable emblems of social rank; the remainder have none. This is surely a deliberate attempt to distinguish members of elite social groups, such as powerful lineages, from members of lower-ranked social groups. Lest there be any confusion, however, it should be noted that even the models with unadorned figures had feasting scenes. To judge from the models, at least, ritual feasting was an activity conducted by all sectors of the society.<sup>34</sup>

The ritual feasting indicated by Butterwick is a very important aspect of nearly all West Mexican figures. While seemingly secular activities such as feasting or warfare are often indicated through these ceramic sculptures, it is their ritual component that has in the past been the most overlooked. Yet, this may be the most important key to understanding these West Mexican figures.

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<sup>34</sup> Butterwick, "Food for the Dead," 96.

The now-defunct theory that these sculptures illustrate mundane activity has been replaced with one that explains these West Mexican figures as ritual symbols that express significant accomplishments achieved during the life of the deceased. This is not an uncommon practice in ancient Mesoamerica, as the Maya recorded the great events of their kings and leaders in murals and stelae, and the Aztecs recorded such events in their codices. In most societies, past and present, the passage of time and individual milestones are recorded within one's immediate familial circle, regardless of social standing. Richard Townsend has speculated that in West Mexico such rites of passage were recorded in clay and buried with deceased. Townsend puts it this way: "The initiation of young warriors and the taking of office by major chiefs; the initiation of young women into adulthood and the responsibilities of childbearing; marriage and the biological continuity of the family; and funerary rites and ancestor-worship – these emerge as dominant tomb-sculpture subjects. Seen in this light, a principle purpose of the sculptural works was to testify to the mature rank and status of the ancestors they accompanied."<sup>35</sup>

When viewed in this manner, the significance of the VMFA Figure 1 becomes clearer. However, to fully understand these connections, the details of form must first be closely examined. This Nayarit sculpture of a woman is depicted standing, wearing a skirt, and holding a bowl on her left shoulder. Her right hand is placed horizontally in front of her body with the palm pressed flat against her midsection, directly below her right breast. This positioning of one hand under the

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<sup>35</sup> Townsend, "Renewing the Inquiry," 26.

breast while the other holds a bowl or cup is a common motif in West Mexican female figures - especially those from Nayarit and Jalisco. They often have a festive expression about them, regardless of whether they are done in the abstract or relatively naturalistic styles.<sup>36</sup>

Figures such as *Standing Female Figure* are believed to have been created as half of a sculpted male and female couple. Often, the corresponding male partner will also be depicted holding a ritual item in his hand.<sup>37</sup> The art historian Hasso von Winning was among the first to suggest that these sculpted couples may represent a celebration of marriage. This would be in accordance with Townsend's suggestion that the figures are meant to represent important rites of passage. Townsend has furthered noted the importance of marriage to these ancient societies as he observes that "the frequency and broad distribution of festival couples point to their function as commemorating betrothal or marriage. The founding of a family follows the admittance of young men and women into adulthood, and marriage is certainly the most important and transcendent of all the transitions from one social category to another. As a rite of passage, marriage ceremonies may be as complex as those of a ruler's inauguration, although not on such a vast public scale."<sup>38</sup> Marriage rites were seen as a fundamental step towards insuring biological continuation. Additionally,

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Townsend, "Before Gods, Before Kings," in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 124.

<sup>37</sup> The male may be depicted with items such as a turtle shell drum, fan, rattle or cup. A male partner of a sculpted couple may also be depicted simply folding his arms or with his hands on his knees. Richard Townsend, "Ancient West Mexico: Archaeology and the Art of the Tombs," in *Offerings for a New Life: Funerary Images from Pre-Columbian West Mexico*, ed. Mireille Holsbeke and Karel Arnaut (Antwerp: Antwerp Ethnographic Museum, 1998), 26.

<sup>38</sup> Townsend, "Archaeology and the Art of the Tombs," 26.

these ceremonies were marked by rites of protection and fertility, further underscoring the importance of the marriage union.<sup>39</sup>

Vessels held by the women in these sculpted matrimonial couples can differ widely and the contents of what they would have held are not known. However, ethnographic and historical accounts have pointed to the importance of intoxicating beverages for ritual consumption. *Octli*, also known as *pulque*, is known to have a long tradition in West Mexico and is made from the fermented sap of the agave plant.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Butterwick has pinpointed several West Mexican figures that illustrate *pulque* production and ritual drinking.<sup>41</sup> Cups such as the one depicted with Figure 1 could have been included to signify this ritual drink and may even identify the particular ritual being performed.

If viewed as half of a ceremonial wedding couple, this standing female figure in the collection of the VMFA exhibits elaborate decoration for the occasion - particularly in the polychrome designs painted on her body. A wide headband circles the top of this figure's head, and is painted with a white zigzag design. The prominent breasts and skirt identify this figure as a woman, while the modeling of the headband takes prominence over any inclusion of hair. Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, multiple ear and nose rings are prominently displayed and are typically depicted on men and women alike – a distinctive feature of Ixtlan del Rio ceramic figures.

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<sup>39</sup> Townsend, "Before Gods, Before Kings," 123.

<sup>40</sup> Butterwick, "Food for the Dead," 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The entire neck - front and back - of this figure is covered in a pattern of white dots. Directly below this patterning, a wide V-shaped clay appliqué seems to indicate either a necklace or the collar of a shirt. At the shoulders, it seamlessly blends into the body and is not continued around to the back. This is not true of the depiction of the skirt, which wraps around the entire body. The skirt is painted into six, almost identical sections. White bands mark the top and bottom edges of the skirt, while each section is divided by two parallel white lines. The design in each section resembles a backwards “C”. Such designs may have been used to identify her according to certain group or clan affiliations, perhaps those of her birth or those into which she was marrying.

Figure 1 therefore exhibits multiple attributes that help us identify her within the context of Nayarit, and Ixtlan del Rio in particular. Through extensive research, scholars have been able to determine specific traits of this style region that are applicable to this figure, as well as possible meanings for its creation. Thus, we are afforded the opportunity to better understand the social conventions in relation to women of this region. As we shall see in the next section, many of these characteristics can be identified on the male figures as well.

### *Seated Figure Playing Instrument (Fig. 2)*

This hollow terra cotta figure is identified in the VMFA object files as belonging to the Ixtlan del Rio sub-style of Nayarit. This identification seems appropriate, as the sculpture exhibits many of the same traits as other figures from

this region. For example, the seated figure displays the unique characteristics of multiple ear and nose rings as well as long, ropey arms. Additionally, this figure represents the same abstract variant as the previous VMFA example (Fig. 1). This may be determined through the lack of any detailed modeling of the fingers and toes. However, it should be noted that the figure's legs, which are sculpted in a seated position, are much more proportionate to his body than the "elephantine" style legs seen on Figure 1.

Additional identifying Ixtlan del Rio characteristics include appliquéd ridges surrounding the eyes and a wide, partially open mouth revealing teeth. There is a painted white "V" on the upper chest, perhaps indicating a collar, and is continued around the back of the figure (See Fig. 2a). While polychrome patterning is no longer visible on the front side of Figure 2, the back shows traces of paint that indicate a geometric design similar to that found on the skirt of Figure 1. The arrangement of these patterns seems to indicate that Figure 2 is represented wearing a shirt. These painted designs are evident on each of the VMFA's Ixtlan del Rio figures. They are clearest on Figure 3 and are examined in further detail within the discussion of that figure.

Additionally, this seated figure is portrayed holding an object. In this case he is holding a musical instrument that resembles a rasp. As discussed earlier, Nayarit figures were often created in pairs, with the female holding a bowl and the male holding a ceremonial, martial, or musical object. If such coupled figures are viewed

as engaged in ritual activity, then Figure 2 is performing the ritual through the playing of music, while a female partner would probably provide the liquid offering.<sup>42</sup>

This ceramic image underscores the importance of ritual performance in West Mexican society and religion. According to Christopher Whitmore, each individual interacted with and viewed his or her relationship to the cosmos differently.<sup>43</sup> Such rituals would have been acted out within the ceremonial centers of the major West Mexican sites. Whitmore has observed that “the individual’s presence within these complexes linked him or her to the grand scheme. It was through participation and performance that people understood and reaffirmed their place in the world.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, Figure 2 can be identified in relation to *Standing Female Figure* as marking a rite of passage as well as communicating a complex system of beliefs.

### *Man Holding a Mace or Fan (Fig. 3)*

When compared to Figures 1 and 2, this figure of a Nayarit man displays similarities to a degree that links it unquestionably to the abstract variant of the Ixtlan del Rio subtype. This hollow ceramic sculpture has been modeled with the signature characteristics of “elephantine” style legs, multiple earrings, and nose rings. Most importantly, this figure is covered from head to toe in polychrome painted designs that are distinctly similar to the previous figures, and here are very well preserved.

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<sup>42</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 79. See also Hasso Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures of West Mexico* (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, 1974), 66-68, 166.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher L. Whitmore, “Sacred Sun Centers,” in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 146.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

The attire of this and the other Ixtlan del Rio figures is typical of the region in both form and geometric patterning. For example, the oblong tab hanging from the waist of Figure 3 and covering the genitals is frequently depicted on figures from this region, including Figure 2 in the VMFA collection, and may have served as a protector. The short tunic-like shirt is usually indicated as part of the male dress and, as mentioned, is often covered in geometric patterns. On Figure 3, the painted designs are divided into squares, much like the skirt on the female Nayarit figure and those seen on the back of Figure 2. However, on *Man Holding a Mace or Fan* the patterned squares are much smaller. The design on the squares alternates between a red and yellow step-fret design and the same backwards “C” motif seen on the female’s skirt.

As of yet there has been no extensive study that specifically focuses on the polychrome designs painted on the bodies of the Ixtlan del Rio figures. However, on the sculptures where these painted patterns are still clearly visible, it is evident that this was an important stylistic addition to the figures. While almost all of the West Mexican regional styles used painted designs on their ceramic tomb figures, none of them used it to the extent of those belonging to the Ixtlan del Rio subtype.

The patterning on clothing is not the only place where painted designs are repeated on these figures. Another example that stands out immediately is the pattern covering the necks on both male and female sculptures. After comparing dozens of Ixtlan del Rio figures, it becomes immediately evident that the neck of almost every example is covered in small, closely painted white dots from the collar of the shirt to

the base of the head. Some sculptures, such as Figure 1, appear to have these markings arranged in somewhat structured lines around the neck. Others, as seen here in Figure 3, have dots that appear to be more haphazardly placed. From these examples, it appears that this would have been a customary design for body paint application in Ixtlan del Rio. The antecedents for this unique style of clothing and design have not been found in any area of Mexico or southern North America. However, Patricia Rieff Anawalt has researched the clothing traditions of Mesoamerica and has found possible connections to the styles of ancient Ecuador.<sup>45</sup> In particular, she looks at the Chorrera culture of the Early and Middle Formative periods (1500 – 300 BC) in Ecuador as producing ceramic figures that are depicted wearing similar types of clothing to those on West Mexican sculptures (See Fig. 14).<sup>46</sup> While the Chorrera examples may anticipate the clothing form found on the West Mexican figures, there is no connection found in the painted designs between the two cultures.

A joined pair from the Bahía phase (500 BC – AD 100) of Ecuador is somewhat closer in form and style to the Ixtlan del Rio figures (See Fig. 15). Here, the male and female both have ear and nose ornamentation, the male has a painted tunic-style covering, and the female is shown wearing a geometrically patterned skirt.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the dates of the Bahía phase are not much earlier than those

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<sup>45</sup> Patricia Rieff Anawalt, "They Came to Trade Exquisite Things: Ancient West Mexican-Ecuadorian Contacts," in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 233-249.

<sup>46</sup> Anawalt, "They Came to Trade," 238.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

attributed to the figures of West Mexico. This makes it hard to determine the amount of influence the Bahía phase would have had on West Mexico, though it may indicate an established trade system that allowed for an exchange of ideas.

A third Ecuadorian example also provides a convincing argument for stylistic connection between the two regions. A female figure from the Manabí Province of Ecuador wears a geometrically patterned skirt that is nearly identical to those on Ixtlan del Rio figures (See Fig. 16). This figure, however, cannot offer conclusive proof for an Ecuadorian originating influence as it dates to the much later Manabí period (AD 700 – 800).<sup>48</sup>

When comparing the three VMFA Ixtlan del Rio figures to one another, subtle differences in the modeling of the clay become evident on each. This is especially apparent when contrasting the modeling of the eyes, ears, and ornamentation between the two male figures. This may be due to the much later date attributed to Figure 3. As mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, the majority of West Mexican figures are dated between approximately 200 BC – AD 400, which places them in the Late Preclassic and Proto Classic time frame. The dates attributed to Figure 3 in the VMFA catalogue places it in a much later period (AD 300 – 900), corresponding closely to the Classic period of Mesoamerica.

The object held in the right hand of this figure is not well understood. In similar figures, it is often referred to as a weapon, as indicated in the VMFA's title *Man Holding a Mace or Fan* (See Fig. 3a). Such an object is not uncommon among

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<sup>48</sup> Anawalt, "They Came to Trade," 240.

male Ixtlan del Rio figures. Figure 17 shows an example from an exhibition assembled and installed by The Stendahl Gallery in Pasadena in 1952.<sup>49</sup> In this example, the male figure holds an object that is nearly identical to that held by the VMFA model. The title given to the figure in the Stendahl catalogue is *Painted Clay Warrior Holding Weapon*.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, there is a history of viewing this type of figure in a warfare context. However, more recent scholarship has disputed such associations. As discussed with VMFA Figures 1 and 2, it is preferred now to place the figures within the context of ritual and ceremonial activity.

In this capacity, Figure 3 could be identified as belonging to a marriage pair, much like other examples from this region. While numerous scholars agree that many of these Ixtlan del Rio figures were meant to be paired together as sets of marriage partners, physical anthropologist Robert B. Pickering and research archaeologist Maria Teresa Cabrero have disagreed with this interpretation. Instead, they have determined that the matching of male and female figures is a “false associate or set.”<sup>51</sup> Pickering and Cabrero explain their theory in the following:

We further suggest that the great similarity of form within sets of figures suggests that they are made around the time of death to be placed in the tomb, rather than being made when the individual achieved the particular status represented....If figurines were made in groups for individuals as we have here proposed, then the so-called “pairs” are individual figurines that have been pulled out of their set

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<sup>49</sup> Alfred Stendahl, *Pre-Columbian Art: An Exhibition Assembled and Installed by The Stendahl Gallery for The Pasadena Art Institute; 1 July- 28 September, 1952* (Pasadena: The Institute, 1952), [28].

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Robert B. Pickering and Maria Teresa Cabrero, “Mortuary Practices in the Shaft-Tomb Region,” in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 85.

and associated with another figurine from a set designed to commemorate a member of the opposite sex.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, Pickering and Cabrero support this postulation with evidence indicating that human-form ceramic figures appear to have been buried with people of the same sex.<sup>53</sup> However, the degree to which the majority of West Mexican tombs have been looted prohibits any corroborative evidence that would confirm this claim. Regardless, in Nayarit a category of warrior figures does exist. Therefore such an association can not be entirely ruled out for this example. The symbolism and theories regarding the West Mexican warrior sculptures are examined more thoroughly in the analysis of Figure 4, a figure that definitely appears to be connected to warfare imagery.

### San Sebastian Red

#### *Man Holding a Club (Fig. 4)*

This is the largest figure in the VMFA West Mexican collection, measuring nineteen inches tall and over fourteen inches wide. Like the others, it is made of terracotta. However, according to the VMFA's records, this figure has a solid clay body with a hollow head (See Figs. 4 and 4a). When compared to the Ixtlan del Rio figures, this Nayarit ceramic sculpture of a man appears much less ornamented. This may be the result of paint having worn off much of the figure's surface. The upper

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<sup>52</sup> Pickering and Cabrero, "Mortuary Practices," 86.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 79.

half of the body shows traces of red and black paint, indicating that garments or body decorations were depicted at one time.

A helmet with cross-hatched incised patterning is modeled on top of the head of Figure 4. Two horn-like peaks protrude from each side of this head covering. The cross-hatching on this type of double-horned helmet can be interpreted as representing wicker or woven cane.<sup>54</sup> There are also indications of thin, painted black lines which extend down from under the front of the helmet. However, it is unclear if these are meant to indicate hair or are simply indicative of tattooing or painted designs on the face. A nose ring and multiple earrings connect this figure to the larger Nayarit ceramic figure tradition. Furthermore, a distinguishing feature found on both Nayarit and Jalisco figures is the cluster of circular knobs on each shoulder that is suggestive of scarification practices. These traits lead me to believe this figure belongs to the San Sebastian Red sub-category, which is composed of figures from both Nayarit and Jalisco. San Sebastian Red figures were originally categorized by Stanley Long and based on evidence found in the Magdalena Basin area of Jalisco.<sup>55</sup> Characteristics belonging to the classic variation of this subtype include an absence of a navel, in addition to eyes and mouth indicated by wide, punched slits – all of which are evident on this figure. Generally, these figures have a head shape that is

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<sup>54</sup> Jacki Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead: Ceramic Tomb Sculpture from Ancient West Mexico* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1983), 105. See also Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 60-61.

<sup>55</sup> Long, "Archaeology of the Municipio of Etzatlán," 64.

elongated, constricted just above the ears, and flattened in the front and back; perhaps indicating a practice of cranial deformation (See Fig. 4b).<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, this figure holds a club diagonally across his body. Among ceramic figures, this motif is often associated with warrior imagery. The profusion of figures identified as warriors within West Mexico may point to a practice of small-scale endemic raiding and warfare.<sup>57</sup> This would indicate that the inhabitants of West Mexico had formed stratified societies, rather than simple village farming communities. However, while many West Mexican figures could illustrate warfare symbolism, the VMFA's example may not be portraying secular warrior imagery.

Two very important aspects lead to a much different reading of this figure. First, the eyes of this man are shown closed. This would not be the typical depiction of someone engaged in warrior activity or participating in a warfare ritual. Secondly, the thin, tubular legs are bent in a seated position. Two stool-like posts have been added beneath the bottom edge of the man's torso, which allows the figure to stay upright in this seated posture. This positioning of the man is indicative of someone in a trance or meditative state, rather than a warrior. These traits, in combination with the two-horned headdress, have led some scholars to suggest that this type of posturing is more suggestive of a shamanistic tomb-guarding figure.<sup>58</sup>

The one- and two-horned headdresses evident on a number of West Mexican figures have been the subject of much study and debate over the past forty years.

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<sup>56</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 105.

<sup>57</sup> Townsend, "Archaeology and the Art of the Tombs," 23.

<sup>58</sup> Furst and Gabrielson, *The Ninth Level*, 31-32.

Furst, in his research on shamanism, has extensively explored the iconography of these protrusions, not only on West Mexican figures, but also in similar representations found throughout the Americas. This comparative analysis has led to the proposed, and now widely accepted, theory that the appearance of horns on representations of men indicates a figure of religious or political power. While not all scholars believe this means the men portrayed were necessarily shamans, there are very few that would identify these figures as straightforward warriors.<sup>59</sup>

The double-horned figures are found throughout Nayarit, while single-horns are more commonly found throughout Colima. In many cases, the double-horned Nayarit figures are portrayed encased in a type of body armor that appears to restrict movement, emphasizing the passivity of these figures.<sup>60</sup> While the VMFA figure does not wear restrictive armor of any kind, the body is nonetheless modeled as boxlike and rigid. The lack of movement, in addition to the closed eyes and meditative quality of the face, equally serves to stress the passivity of the figure, even while he holds a large club in his outstretched arms.

Furthermore, the double- and single-horns of West Mexico have been found by Furst to connect these regions to a much larger worldview of horns symbolizing

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<sup>59</sup> Furst's assessment and hypothesis of West Mexican horned figures representing shamans has been met with criticism and objection, especially in the 1960's when the prevalent understanding of these figures was that they were secular in nature. More recently, art historian Mark Miller Graham has argued equally persuasively that the appearance of the horn acts as more of a social and political marker as a symbol of power. See Mark Miller Graham, "The Iconography of Rulership in Ancient West Mexico," in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 191–203.

<sup>60</sup> Furst, "Shaft Tombs," 303–344.

power.<sup>61</sup> Within Mesoamerica, examples have been found at the early Central Mexican site of Tlatilco, which Furst has observed “curiously, share some features with comparable early pieces from West Mexico.”<sup>62</sup> The West Mexican horned figures may also be related to Mayan pictorial traditions. Mark Miller Graham has identified one of the earliest appearances on a Late Formative stela from Kaminaljuyú, Guatemala (See Fig. 18).<sup>63</sup> In this case, the horn is represented by a conch shell located in the headdress of the ruler portrayed.

Additionally, Furst contends that the association of power with horns can be traced as far back as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and even the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic periods of Western Europe.<sup>64</sup> While antecedents for this tradition clearly abound, the use of horned figures has continued throughout Mesoamerica, including within West Mexico, to the present time. This was also discovered by Furst through his research and published in a first-hand account: “Photographs of horned Colima and Nayarit figurines were shown separately to five informants, four of them supernatural practitioners of one kind or another and one, Ramon, a shaman’s helper and apprentice. All identified the figurines without hesitation as “shamans” on the basis of the horns, as well as certain other associated features.”<sup>65</sup>

With such overwhelming evidence for this horn symbolism, it can be assumed that interpreting Figure 4 as a shaman would be more accurate than as a warrior.

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<sup>61</sup> Furst, “Shaft Tombs,” 344.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>63</sup> Graham, “The Iconography of Rulership,” 195.

<sup>64</sup> Furst, “Shaft Tombs,” 361-363.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

These, however, are not the only possible explanations for what these figures could represent. While these figures are probably not secular warriors, they could be seen as combatants of a different type. According to Gallagher, such figures may represent warriors rather than shamans, but this “does not imply that they do not carry ritual, even supernatural, connotations.”<sup>66</sup> Rather, the warrior figures would also have a ritual purpose, but as protectors “guarding the dead against evil spirits.”<sup>67</sup>

These interpretations have given, and will continue to give, scholars in the West Mexican field new directions in which to pursue iconographical research in relation to these figures. Additionally, this opens up new ways in which to understand the society that created and subsequently buried these ceramic sculptures. The inclusion of a shaman or supernatural warrior figure with the deceased may serve as a marker of power and falls in line with the viewpoint that such figures served to commemorate important life events. However, these figures may also act on a sacred level between this world and the spirit world. This presents the cultures of West Mexico as less of an anomaly and more inline with the social practices of other pre-Columbian societies.

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<sup>66</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 32.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

### Chinesco

#### *Figure of a Seated Man (Fig. 5)*

This burnished clay figure is hollow with a dark red or brown slip. He is seated, leaning forward with both hands on his raised left knee. His right leg is extended forward. Lines of white paint appear to outline a garment and/or ornaments at the waist, chest, wrists, and ankles. Other identifying characteristics include an oval face with puffy eyelids and a prominent nose. The hairline begins just above the bridge of the nose and arches above the eyes, appearing as an exaggerated “widow’s peak” hairline.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, the firing hole located on top of the head; thin, curved arms; and a receding forehead all lead me to believe this figure can be confidently categorized as a Type B Chinesco (also known as “Martian Chinesco”), as outlined by Hasso von Winning.<sup>69</sup> A unique feature to this type of seated Nayarit figure is a concave depression under their buttock, permitting them to sit without tipping over.<sup>70</sup>

Chinescos received their name through the observation that many of the facial features seemed to convey an Asian physiognomy, hence the name “Chinesco,” which can roughly be translated as “Chinese-like.”<sup>71</sup> As can be seen in Figure 5, Type B Chinescos additionally have inflated looking, voluminous forms that, along with the exaggerated facial features, are cited as contributing to their more popular

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<sup>68</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 107.

<sup>69</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 70-71.

<sup>70</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 21-27.

<sup>71</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 107.

label as Martian Chinescos.<sup>72</sup> According to Jacki Gallagher, “Type B (“Martian”) Chinescos have a wider distribution than Type A [“Classic”], ranging across southern Nayarit from the Tequilita area to Ixtlan del Rio.”<sup>73</sup> This area is also known as Lagunillas, which today is a term that is also often applied to all categories of these figures, rather than Chinesco.

While Type B Chinescos typically have voluminous shapes, the back of Figure 5, which narrows in at the waist, may be exaggerated beyond the normal form to indicate a hunchback (See Figs. 5a and 5b). This is difficult to interpret with certainty, especially since many figures in this category do sit in a hunched-over posture. However, the appearance of the VMFA figure’s back has an almost bulging quality to it that is not often indicated on figure’s of this type. Additionally, it is fairly common for Type B Chinesco figures to be depicted with bones protruding from beneath their skin and to appear emaciated (See Fig. 19).<sup>74</sup> This is obviously not the case for the VMFA example. If Figure 5 is an actual hunchback, then it can be considered somewhat of a rarity, since depictions of hunchbacks in Nayarit occur less frequently than in Colima or Jalisco.<sup>75</sup>

Gallagher has compared the Type B Chinesco to similar figures of the San Sebastian Red style and found that both could exhibit characteristics of someone depicted in a shamanic trance. The positioning of a seated male, hunched over, with

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<sup>72</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 70.

<sup>73</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 107.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 63. Additionally, the VMFA object files label this figure as a hunchback.

arms resting on raised knee is common to both types and in the San Sebastian Red style these figures are often referred to as “mourners.”<sup>76</sup> However, Clement Meighan and H.B. Nicholson have suggested that rather than people in mourning, these figures might represent something much different. They have remarked that “an alternative explanation which has been suggested for the “mourners” is that such figures depict individuals in a narcotic trance from peyote or other hallucinogenic drug. Among the contemporary Huichol, persons in peyote trances sit the same way as do these figures.”<sup>77</sup> This explanation would account for the closed eyes and trance-like state of this and other similar figures. However, some incongruities between the VMFA figure and other examples must be pointed out before any conclusions can be made.

When compared to examples such as Figure 19 and Figure 20, it becomes clear that certain characteristics such as facial features, color, burnishing, and posture are nearly identical between each figure of this sub-style. Even minute details are amazingly similar. For instance, the cinched-in waist of each figure is highlighted by a wide band of deep red burnished slip that is in turn accentuated with a thin, white line running along its center. Each figure has shoulders covered with raised, round circles that are most likely indicative of scarification. There is a single nose ring on each figure, while there are no indications of any other type of adornment.

This, however, is where much of the similarity ends. As mentioned, the apparent hunchback modeling of the VMFA figure is very different from others in

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<sup>76</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 106-107.

<sup>77</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 62.

this category. This is noteworthy, because a gaunt, emaciated appearance is often considered one of the indicators of a narcotics-induced, shamanistic trance.<sup>78</sup> Other anomalies include the positioning of the figure's right leg. Gallagher has observed that most Type B figures are seated with one knee raised and the other leg tucked under, as in Figure 19.<sup>79</sup> The other most common posturing appears to be with both knees raised, as in Figure 20. However, Figure 5 is portrayed with a leg that sticks straight out, without touching the ground, and appears as though it may be deformed. Additionally, this leg terminates into a wide foot that clearly separates into five toes (See Fig. 5c). Usually, the feet are depicted abstractly with little indication of the toes, as shown on the left foot of this same figure. Thus, the inclusion of toes on the right foot is undoubtedly purposeful, though the meaning behind it remains unclear.

While the aforementioned abnormalities seem to deviate from the typical shamanistic posturing of others in this category, they should not necessarily be viewed as devaluing such a hypothesis. Quite often, deformities and/or disease are interpreted as indicative of special powers since their physical appearances are believed to have been viewed as an outward manifestation of the individual's unique abilities. So while the VMFA figure exhibits a number of unique characteristics that set it apart from others of the "Martian Chinesco" variety, it could very well be

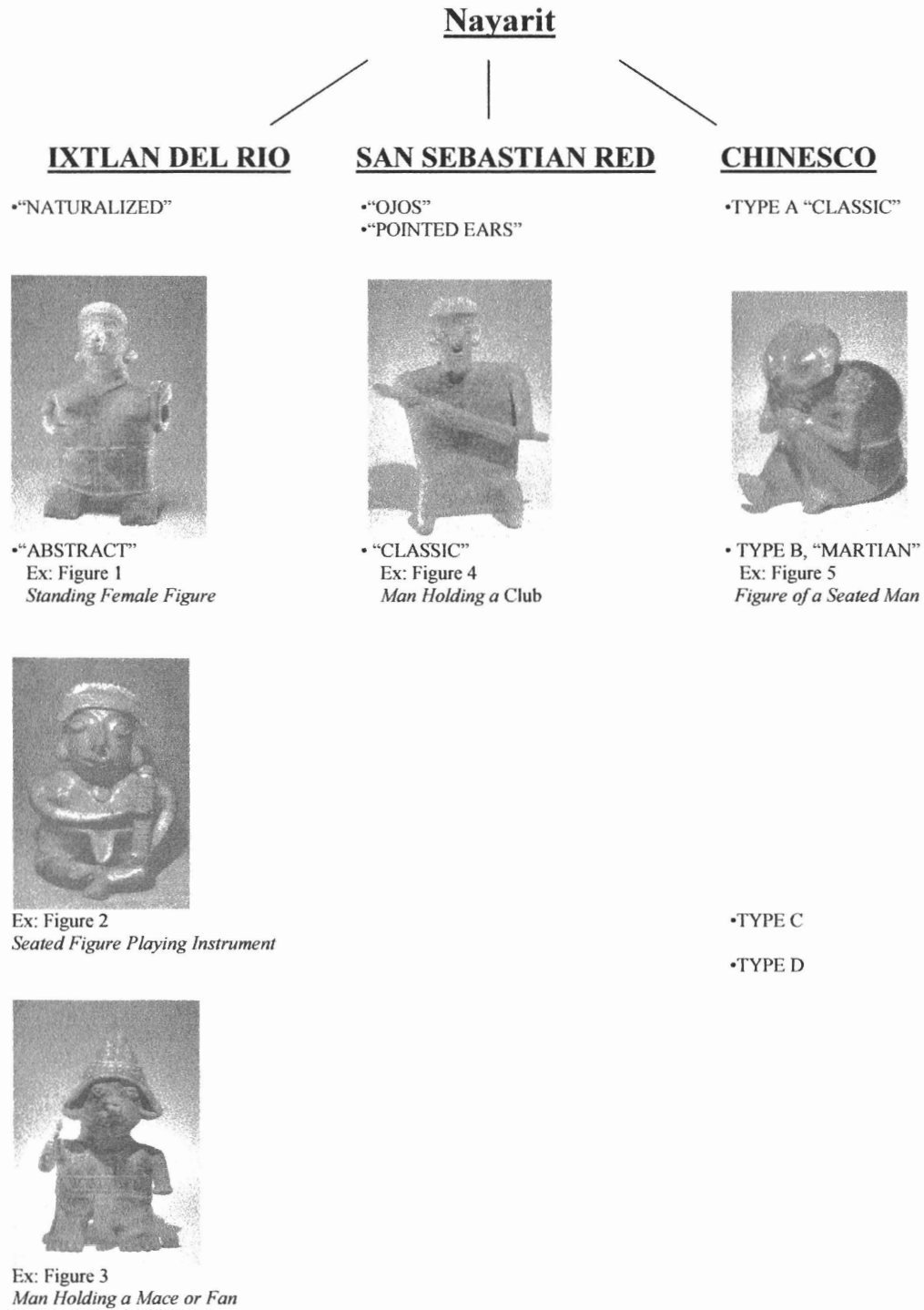
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<sup>78</sup> See Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 106; and Mireille Holsbeke and Karel Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life: Funerary Images from Pre-Columbian West Mexico* (Antwerp: Antwerp Ethnographic Museum, 1998), 175.

<sup>79</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 107.

communicating similar ideas. Subtle differences, such as those outlined here, may account for something as simple as status or a portrait-like individualization.

Chart A



## Figures 1 – 5c



Figure 1: Standing Female Figure  
Nayarit, 200 BC – AD 400

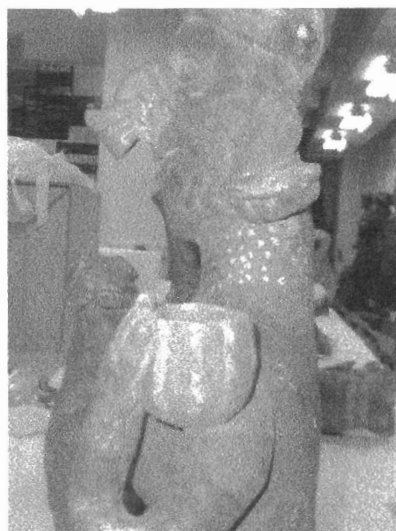


Figure 1a: Standing Female  
Figure, Side View



Figure 1b: Standing Female Figure,  
Back View

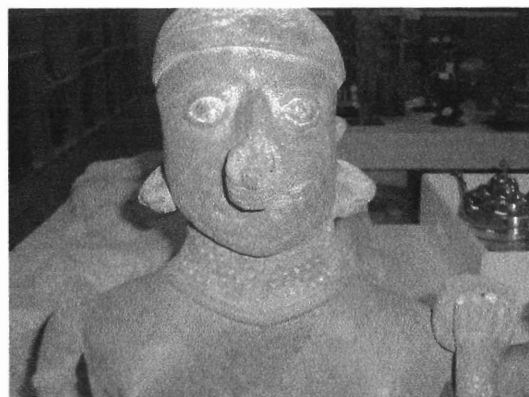


Figure 1c: Standing Female Figure,  
Close-Up, Face



Figure 2: Seated Figure Playing Instrument  
Nayarit, 200 BC – AD 400



Figure 2a: Seated Figure Playing Instrument,  
Back View



Figure 3: Man Holding a Mace or Fan  
Nayarit, AD 300 - 900



Figure 3a: Man Holding a Mace or Fan,  
Side View



Figure 4: Man Holding a Club  
Nayarit, ca. AD 300



Figure 4a: Man Holding a Club,  
Side View

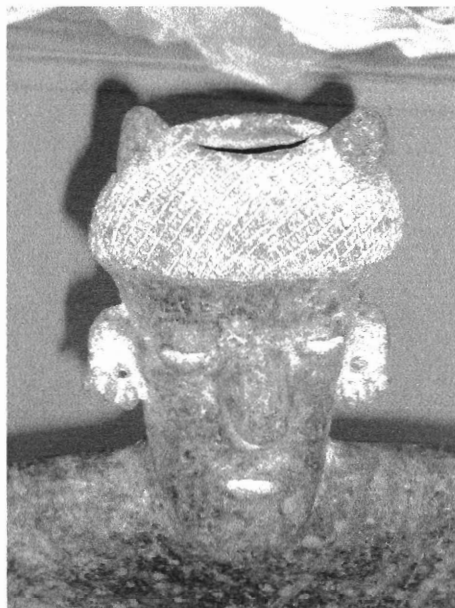


Figure 4b: Man Holding a Club,  
Close-up, Head



Figure 5  
Figure of a Seated Man  
Nayarit, 100 BC – AD 300

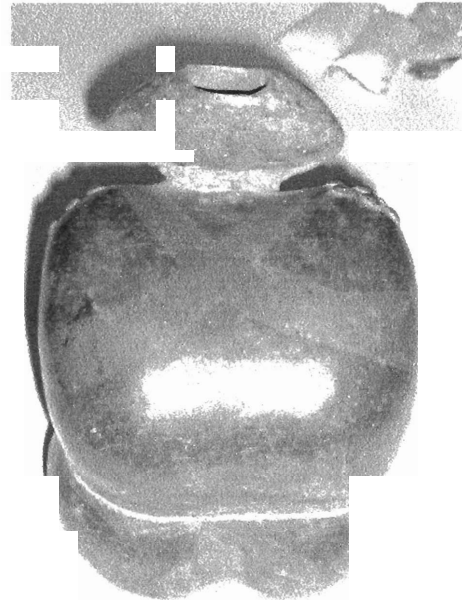


Figure 5a  
Figure of a Seated Man,  
Back View



Figure 5b: Figure of a Seated Man,  
Side View



Figure 5c: Figure of a Seated Man,  
Close-Up, Foot

## **Chapter 2: Jalisco**

This chapter will take a closer look at the ceramic figures and various subtypes that are part of the region known as Jalisco. The VMFA has in its collection one ceramic sculpture that belongs to the Jalisco classification (See Fig. 6). The specific characteristics of form and style used to identify this particular figure are examined thoroughly in the second section of this chapter. Additionally, any applicable iconography is explored in conjunction with this analysis of Figure 6.

### **Regional Styles**

The modern state of Jalisco can be found between Nayarit and Colima along the western coast of Mexico (Fig. 12). There are four subtypes commonly associated with this area of West Mexico (See Chart B). In 1948 Isabel Kelly was the first to identify a Jalisco style of ceramic figures from this region and labeled them “Ameca Gray.” This style is now more commonly referred to as “Ameca-Etztatlán” because additional figures have been found of this variety in the region stretching from Ameca northward to Etztatlán.<sup>80</sup> Most figures can be attributed to this Jalisco sub-style; however a number of other subtypes have also been identified. Those outside of the Ameca-Etztatlán categorization have such unique features that it is believed they were

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<sup>80</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 135.

limited to specific localities with short periods of production.<sup>81</sup> Such styles include San Juanito, “sheep-faced,” and Zacatecas. While figures belonging to these categories are distinctive from others found in Jalisco, they nonetheless have features that overlap with one another.

The San Juanito figures can be distinguished by their distinct “tasseled” ear pendant, which consists of a row or two of narrow vertical elements.<sup>82</sup> This fan-like representation of earrings may be an abstraction of the portrayal of multiple earrings common to Nayarit figures. Gallagher has outlined the additional following San Juanito characteristics: “Eyes and mouth are indicated by punched rectangular slits. Arms and legs tend to be long and ropey, with fingers and toes marked by incision.”<sup>83</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, this style of modeling the arms and legs is also found among Nayarit figures. Furthermore, many of the features discussed for San Juanito also reappear within various other Jalisco subtypes.

Zacatecas figures are another example where thin un-jointed arms are an identifiable characteristic. Male and female Zacatecas sculptures are usually depicted nude, while the males are often singled out for their distinctive head shape and facial features. These figures have an unusual pair of horn-like growths projecting outward

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<sup>81</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 85.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

from above the ears. Each horn consists of a cylindrical stem that flares out into a large circle at the top, resembling a mushroom.<sup>84</sup>

A third subcategory of Jalisco figures are the Tala-Tonalá, or “sheep-faced,” variety that appear almost zoomorphic, as implied by their more common name. They have large, projecting noses that resemble a muzzle or beak and small, pointy sheep-like ears. Their heads are very elongated. Ovals of white paint designate eyes and thin, incised lines depict mouths, which sometimes appear to be smiling. Furthermore, figures in this style often have solid earpools or a notched tab that may also be a stylization of multiple earrings.<sup>85</sup> This last characteristic connects the “sheep-faced” variety to both the San Juanito and Nayarit figures discussed earlier.

While a number of figures have been found that belong to each of these smaller categories, the majority of Jalisco figures do belong to the larger classification of Ameca-Etztatlán. These sculptural types can be identified according to their traditional slip of red or cream, or both. Additionally, their heads are typically elongated and adorned with an appliquéd headband or crested helmet. Firing holes are often placed inside the ears. Arms and legs are sculpted full and rounded. Kan has defined additional characteristics such as “large, staring eyes rimmed with thick fillets, an aquiline, almost hatchet-shaped nose, and a large, open mouth in which the

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<sup>84</sup> Both Kan and Furst have noted the mushroom form of these protrusions and Furst has speculated at the connection between this and a type of hallucinogenic mushroom common to Jalisco. Kan, Meghan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 23; and Peter T. Furst, “Some Problems in the Interpretation of West Mexican Tomb Art,” in *The Archaeology of West Mexico*, ed. Betty Bell (Jalisco, México: West Mexican Society for Advanced Study, 1974), 140-142.

<sup>85</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 85.

teeth are clearly defined.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, there seem to be a few reoccurring themes within the Ameca-Etztatlán tradition such as warriors with captives, joined couples, and crouching males.

In contrast to the ceramic figure traditions of Nayarit and Colima, the sculpture of Jalisco tends to be more limited in terms of represented themes. Mireille Holsbeke has observed that “armed tomb guardians are the most commonly represented male figures, followed by numerous figures of women...animal images are much less numerous than in Colima, while the representation of people with physical defects such as swollen stomachs, hollow chests and crooked backs with clearly visible ribs and backbone is striking.”<sup>87</sup> The representation of a crouching male with a physical defect and visible spine can be seen in the only Jalisco figure in the VMFA collection.

## **VMFA Figure**

### Ameca-Etztatlán

#### *Jorobado (Hunchback) Figure (Fig. 6)*

This VMFA Jalisco figure has been dated to the third century AD. This figure is composed of features that belong to a variety of categories, though may relate closest to the widespread Ameca-Etztatlán variety. Our understanding of figures within this classification is limited, as little iconographical research has been

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<sup>86</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 135.

conducted within the Jalisco ceramic figure tradition. However, certain formal and stylistic features can also be identified among Colima and Nayarit figures. This allows for tentative interpretations through comparative analysis, though most do not go beyond the more general “shaman” explanations.

*Jorobado* is the Spanish term for “hunchback” and is appropriately applied to this figure (See Fig. 6a). This particular hunchback has been sculpted of red-burnished terra cotta with a buff slip on the head and base. As with most Jalisco portrayals of hunchbacks, this male is unclothed and there is a minimal amount of decoration. In fact, the only ornamentation is limited to an appliqué headband, large ear embellishments, and a small bag slung over his left shoulder (See Fig. 6b). The protruding spine and hunchback may possibly have been the result of a disease such as tuberculosis.<sup>88</sup> The expressive grimace on his face gives the impression of someone in pain, perhaps resulting from the disfigurement. However, as is often the case with figures from West Mexico, such explanations may be superficial and belie the intended meaning.

The *Jorobado* figure is unique in that it does not appear to fit into any one specific subtype as outlined in the previous section of this chapter. Certainly, the long straight nose with accentuated nostrils and placement of firing holes in the ears are distinct Jalisco traits. More specifically, the Ameca-Etztatlán variety of Jalisco figures can be identified by a cream or red slip or a combination of both, as evidenced on this

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<sup>88</sup> Von Winning specifically references Pott’s disease, a form of tuberculosis of the spine that often results in a hunchback deformity. Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 54.

VMFA figure. According to Kan's description, the large open mouth with clearly defined teeth is also specific to the Ameca-Etztatlán region.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the reoccurring Ameca-Etztatlán theme of the crouching male is clearly evident in this example.

Figure 21 provides one of the closest comparisons of the Ameca-Etztatlán type for similarity in style and posture. Both this example and the VMFA figure depict males in a crouching position with both feet flat on the floor. There are additional similarities in the overall shape of the face, as well as in the modeling of the eyes. However, the most striking similarity is in the small pot or bag at Figure 21's right side, slung over his left shoulder.<sup>90</sup> This appears to be a feature that occurs infrequently and seems to be restricted to the Jalisco region, perhaps specifically to the Ameca-Etztatlán subtype. As of yet, I have not come across any literature describing or offering any explanations for this feature.

Nevertheless, Figure 6 lacks the typically identifying elongated head of the Ameca-Etztatlán style. Moreover, the long ropey arms are more characteristic of the Zacatecas or San Juanito figures. Of the identified subcategories for Jalisco ceramic sculpture, none recognize these traits together as a specific type.

The nude, crouching hunchback is also a theme that is common among Colima figures (See Fig. 22). Examples such as Figure 22 are believed to be depictions of shamans; a theory supported by the horns on the figure's headdress. In

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<sup>89</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 122.

describing this sculpture, Holsbeke confirms that this is an appropriate interpretation. She maintains that “the horned headdress, the contemplative attitude of hands on knees and the closed eyes indicate that a shaman in a trance is represented here. Furst mentions that Huichol shamans also assume this position when they are in a trance.”<sup>91</sup>

Additionally, an interest with deformity or disease is commonly found in all three regions of West Mexico. Among the Aztecs, such afflictions indicated that the victim had been chosen as an intermediary between men and the gods as a shaman.<sup>92</sup> Such a belief may have been widespread throughout Mesoamerica and could play a significant role in interpreting figures such as Figure 6. If figures depicting deformity and disease indicate another class of shamans in addition to those with horns, the possibility remains that there may be others that were created with similar designations. As intermediaries between men and gods, shamans must have played an important role in rituals of death. Perhaps in the future even more figures will come to be realized as fulfilling such a function when interred with the dead.

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<sup>91</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 73.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

## Chart B

**Jalisco****•AMECA-ETZATLÁN****•SAN JUANITO**

Ex: Figure 6  
*Jorobado (Hunchback) Figure*

**•TALA-TONALÁ****•ZACATECAS**

Figures 6 – 6b



Figure 6: Jorobado (Hunchback) Figure  
Jalisco, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD



Figure 6a: Jorobado Figure,  
Side View



Figure 6b: Jorobado Figure,  
Back View

### **Chapter 3: Colima**

The first section of this chapter will outline known formal and stylistic variations and subject types that reoccur most frequently within the Colima ceramic figure tradition. In the second section of this chapter I will then apply this information to each Colima figure in the VMFA collection. As with Nayarit and Jalisco, reliable iconographical research is somewhat limited for Colima ceramic figures. Therefore, any applicable iconographic theories are presented in conjunction with the formal and stylistic analysis of each individual figure.

The VMFA sculptures attributed to Colima are varied in form and style and excellently represent the range of ceramic figures from this region. While Colima figures are generally considered to display more stylistic uniformity than those of Nayarit and Jalisco, the few variations that do exist are well represented by the five figures belonging to the VMFA. There are three subtypes that are applied to Colima sculpture: Comala, Tuxcacuesco-Ortices, and Coahuayana Valley (See Chart C).

#### **Regional Styles**

Colima is the smallest and southernmost state of the West Mexican shaft tomb region. The majority of figures attributed to this area belong to the Comala phase, which dates between approximately 200 BC and AD 300. Colima is thought to have

received influence from Ecuador, both preceding and during this time period. This can be observed in the true-to-form modeling of Colima plant and animal forms which are remarkably similar to those of the Ecuadorian Chorrera phase.<sup>93</sup> These similarities in form, style, and subjects represented have led numerous scholars to conclude that this region served as a northern outpost for a South American ceramic figure tradition.<sup>94</sup>

One of the biggest stylistic differences between Colima figures and those of Nayarit and Jalisco is that the modeling of the figures takes precedence over decorative polychrome painting.<sup>95</sup> Typically, details of adornment are appliquéd or occasionally incised. The amount of ornamentation on Colima figures is often less than what is found within other regions of West Mexico; however clothing is commonly depicted, especially on males. The various portrayals of men are usually modeled wearing one of three possible items of clothing. Gallagher lists these as “a short-sleeved or sleeveless tunic reaching just below the navel, a pair of tight-fitting trunks, or a mantle which covers half the body and is suspended by a cord from the opposite shoulder.”<sup>96</sup>

One of the most easily recognizable features of many Comala ceramics is the highly burnished slip. The color ranges from light orange to deep red, often with a

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<sup>93</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 31.

<sup>94</sup> This South American tradition also included figures from Cupisnique (coastal Chavin) and according to Gallagher may have been fully realized in the Moche art of coastal Peru. Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 31.

<sup>95</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 67.

<sup>96</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 40.

black spotted patina covering the surface.<sup>97</sup> Firing holes are often placed on top of the figures heads and are usually in the form of a spout or vessel rim. Comala sculpture also tends to have more composure of form than their Nayarit and Jalisco counterparts. In other words, even when an action is portrayed, figures tend to appear frozen or posed, rather than in motion.<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps the most notable variable between the figures of this region can be found in the modeling of the eyes. Gallagher has observed that the “eye form – “coffee bean” type, modeled oval, incised oval, pierced oval, or inlaid circle – seems to be the most significant variable.”<sup>99</sup> Figures with these characteristics are often classified in publications as belonging to a general Colima style. However, they are also occasionally designated as “classic Colima” and in the more recent literature have been identified as Comala, named for the region in central Colima (see Fig. 12), in order to differentiate this style from other regional subtypes. The Comala ceramic tradition is believed to have originated in the central Colima region, while the variants are from the periphery, along the borders of Michoacán and Jalisco.

Comala style figures incorporate a wide range of forms and subjects. Some of the more common among these are a variety of human figures, including those identified as warriors, acrobats, shamans, musicians, and chieftains among others. Hunchbacks and dwarfs also occur frequently; so much so that they heavily

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<sup>97</sup> The black patina is sometimes very sparse, while on some examples is so thick the overall color of the figure appears black. Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 25. This may have been achieved through reduction firing.

<sup>98</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 39.

outnumber portrayals of women. According to Gallagher, this may be an indication as to the relative status of these two groups.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, a number of animal figures are known which represent a diverse range of fauna including turtles, armadillos, birds, lizards, crabs, sharks, and numerous dogs. Some of these figures also feature anthropomorphic traits, such as human face masks or human appendages.

In addition to the Comala figures, there are also a few Colima subtypes such as Coahuayana Valley figures and a category of small, solid figures from the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices area. The Coahuayana Valley figures are named after the region where they were found along the Colima/Michoacán border (Fig. 12). These ceramic sculptures tend to be very large with rounded torsos and limbs and have the appearance of being inflated from within.<sup>101</sup> While a number of male representations are known, the figures are most often female. Both male and female sculptures of the Coahuayana Valley subtype are probably the most notable exception to the relative homogeneity of the Colima ceramic figure tradition.<sup>102</sup>

Another notable exception are the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures, which were first identified by Isabel Kelly in 1949. This sub-style of Colima sculpture exhibits a unity of form among the solid flat figures which have been found in both Colima, around the site of Los Ortices, and across the border in Jalisco around the Tuxcacuesco area. These figures are attributed to a slightly earlier time frame than the hollow figure tradition and can be dated between approximately 300 BC and AD

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<sup>100</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 39.

<sup>101</sup> Townsend, "Renewing the Inquiry," 20.

<sup>102</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 41.

300.<sup>103</sup> Women are portrayed more often among the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures than they are among the other Colima classifications. As a result, these figures are often presumed to carry associations of fertility. This is similar to Mesoamerican female figures dating as far back as the Tlatilco and early Valdivia traditions.<sup>104</sup> However, the exact meaning or function behind these Tuxcacuesco- Ortices figures is still unknown and researchers can only speculate as to their particular significance.

## **VMFA Figures**

### Comala

#### *Figurine (Fig. 7)*

This is the smallest of the VMFA West Mexican figures, with a height of only 6 1/8 inches. The size of this standing figure undoubtedly led to its labeling as *Figurine*. However, for consistency and clarity I will not be using the term “figurine” in reference to this figure, or any of the West Mexican sculptures. While this figure is small, it will still be referred to as Figure 7 or “Standing Figure” to distinguish it from the other Colima examples. Additionally, supplemental information listed in the VMFA files for this object provides a narrower date of approximately AD 200 – 400. However, this is not the time period applied by the VMFA and I have not found any additional evidence to support this narrow of a time frame. Therefore, within the List

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<sup>103</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 67.

<sup>104</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 40.

of Figures, I have chosen to utilize the wider time span so as not to provide any misleading information.

This particular figure displays many of the general characteristics found among Colima figures that were outlined by Von Winning. These include a highly burnished red/buff surface, a round face with full cheeks, eyes marked with horizontal impressions (“coffee-bean” type), long nose, pursed lips, slab-like rounded ears, thick neck, and bulky torso.<sup>105</sup> These are also characteristics of the more specific categorization of Comala. Additionally, a broad belt around the waist and a crested helmet on top of this figure’s head indicate that it may represent a shaman.<sup>106</sup> This small figure is unique in that it is missing a spout, something normally placed on top of the head in Colima figures.

The crested helmet on this figure is a feature that is occasionally found on the Comala sculptures. Figure 23 shows another example of a Comala figure with a crested helmet. In that example, the figure is identified as a warrior and holds a slingshot in his hands. The crested helmet may then be a specific trait of warrior figures, perhaps intended as shamanistic warriors and tomb guardians much like Nayarit Figure 4. Crested helmets may also be related to the Colima one-horned headdresses found on other figures. However, it is hard to find any other indication of warrior symbolism on the VMFA figure. The only other noticeable feature is the sculpted belt mentioned earlier. This appears as a wide rectangle across the waist of

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<sup>105</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 32. See also Furst and Gabrielson, *The Ninth Level*, 29-33.

the figure with three raised oval forms placed horizontally within the belt. The modeling of the belt does not continue around to the back of the figure; however, white paint does indicate its presence (See Fig. 7a). With such little detail, it is difficult to interpret with certainty whether or not a belt is actually indicated through this form. Nevertheless, a belt is a common characteristic of Von Winning's classification of Colima horned male figures. He observes that "the figures have a red or reddish-brown slip over buff clay and are highly polished. Appendages are solidly attached and protrude but slightly....Garments consist of short trunks or broad belts around the torso. The former are outlined in relief, the latter are pattern-incised."<sup>107</sup> Therefore, although this feature appears vaguely indicated on Figure 7, it seems plausible that a belt of some type is depicted. Perhaps its inclusion signifies this figure's relation to a specific class of Comala figures.

While some Comala style figures display individualizing qualities, there are others, such as Figure 7, which appears to have been made with more generalizing features. As Pickering and Cabrero have noted, this differentiation may be at the heart of how to understand these figures. They maintain that "this topic is an important one because it is at the center of how to interpret the meaning of the figurines. If a figure is a portrait, then the accoutrements of personal adornment, clothing, and body postures may describe actual events and activities in daily life.

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<sup>107</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 32.

However, if the figurines are interpreted only as abstract or generalized ancestors, deities, or shamans, then their meaning is quite different.”<sup>108</sup>

What we can interpret this to mean is that such figures might have been created with specific spiritual and cosmological associations that were seen as essential for the afterlife. Thus, two general categories of figures may be identified that transcend regional and stylistic variations. The first would include figures that signify specific rites of passage accomplished in this world; while the second is a category of deity or shamanistic figures, such as Figure 7, that communicate the existence of other worlds.

*Seated Figure with Bowl (Fig. 8)*

This terra cotta figure from Colima portrays a seated person taking a drink from a large, shallow bowl. Following the characteristics outlined for the various Colima sub-styles, this figure can be classified as belonging to the Comala ceramic tradition. As with Figure 7, *Seated Figure with Bowl* may represent a type of shamanistic warrior or tomb guardian. A figure published in the catalogue *Offerings for a New Life* is very similar to this sculpted image and depicts a man also drinking from a bowl (Fig. 24). Both Figure 8 and Figure 24 wear a helmet/headdress that comes to a conical peak in the front, with rounded protrusions at each side of the head, just above the ears (See Fig. 8a). Each figure also shows an indication of clothing - modeled in clay on the VMFA figure and implied through incised lines on

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<sup>108</sup> Pickering and Cabrero, “Mortuary Practices,” 83.

the other. However, there is a significant difference between the two as the *Offerings* figure has the addition of trophy heads hanging at his waist.

Taking human heads as war trophies was frequently depicted in the iconography of many American cultures, as was the celebration of such feats. Townsend has discerned that “this imagery of warriors, head hunting and victorious celebration corresponds to the events of warriors’ initiations, including initiation of rulers into high office.”<sup>109</sup> The ‘victorious celebration’ Townsend refers to is indicated through the act of drinking. The VMFA figure, seen in this light, may represent a man partaking in a ritual rite of passage that is often associated with warriors and chieftains being promoted to higher office.

A different reading of this figure corresponds to the associations made in the previous example, Figure 7. As noted, the inclusion of a crested helmet or horn on top of the head may identify figures as shamans or shamanic tomb guardians. This would place a more sacred emphasis on the ritual being portrayed. Furthermore, Furst has maintained that “One-Horns also function as psychopomps or guardians of the soul on its journey to the Underworld and are generally thought to remain permanently with the dead in their subterranean abode.”<sup>110</sup>

One-horned imagery can be found in various places throughout Mesoamerica, but it is most often associated with ceramic figures from Colima. The morphology of horn symbolism has often been attributed to animals such as sheep, cattle, and bison.

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<sup>109</sup> Townsend, “Archaeology and the Art of the Tombs,” 23, 81.

<sup>110</sup> Furst and Gabrielson, *The Ninth Level*, 31.

However, the biggest problem in understanding the one-horned figures of Colima is where the idea for a single horn protruding from the forehead came from. Furst in his extensive studies of shamanism has offered several plausible sources located within Mexico.

One possibility for Mexico is the native male turkey, which has a hornlike wattle above the beak that becomes especially prominent during the mating season. Another, less obvious, is the rhinoceros beetle, which some Mexican Indian peoples connect with the underworld. Or it may be none of these but, like the single horn of the Avanyu, the horned serpent of the Puebloan Southwest, and the single horn that occurs sporadically elsewhere in Mesoamerica, the Andes, and Asia, may have originated in myth and in observations and reformulations of natural history dating back to an ancient common shamanic substratum.<sup>111</sup>

Other scholars have stayed away from the literal interpretations of the horn and prefer to view the forehead protrusion as indicating something entirely different. For example, Mark Miller Graham refers to these representations as headdress with conical elements.<sup>112</sup> This is according to his theory that the conical shape may represent a conch shell and its symbolism of power and authority. According to Graham, this does not necessarily indicate that all horned figures represent rulers; but rather that they might reflect “a relatively fluid emergent hierarchy in which even the symbols and insignia of power were in a state of flux and adjustment.”<sup>113</sup>

Since the VMFA figure is not depicted wearing specific warrior symbolism such as trophy heads or weapons, the shaman or shamanic tomb guardian

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<sup>111</sup> Furst, “Shamanic Symbolism,” 180.

<sup>112</sup> Graham, “The Iconography of Rulership,” 191-203.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 200.

interpretation does seem to be more appropriate. The modeling on this figure's headdress or helmet is especially unique and may offer clues as to the identity of the person seated. Headdresses and headbands have been, and still are, worn by shamans in the Americas when practicing. This is done in order to increase the effectiveness of their performances.<sup>114</sup> The same is true for shamans of North and East Asia, where "the shamanic cap or helmet is considered the most important part of the shamanic costume, containing as it does a great, if not the greatest, portion of the shaman's power."<sup>115</sup> Since the headdress or helmet of Figure 8 appears to be one of the most carefully sculpted aspects, it undoubtedly represents one of its most important features, possibly the source or symbol of the shaman's power. When placed in tombs, such figures may have signified the authority and/or abilities of the deceased during their life. These figures may also have been included as a source of power for the dead, perhaps as shamans or a type of shamanistic guardian.

Additionally, the act of drinking from a bowl, as Figure 8 is doing, is commonly associated with figures wearing a horn in Colima. As with the figures from Nayarit, the act of holding a bowl or cup is often interpreted as a ritual act and may indicate the figure is performing in a ceremony. If the signification of a horn is to be interpreted as indicating shamanic powers, then the corresponding act of drinking depicted on these figures must be read within this context. Therefore, the

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<sup>114</sup> Furst, "Shamanic Symbolism," 180.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

figure may not be reenacting a rite of passage such as marriage or rank promotion, but may be participating in ceremonial rituals associated with shamanism.

Regardless of interpretation, Figure 8 exemplifies the classic Colima form depicting a carefully posed figure as though frozen in mid-action.<sup>116</sup> This figure provides a terrific example of one of the most well known and revered forms of the Comala style. However, the VMFA holds one more figure that can be classified within this category. This third Comala ceramic sculpture provides a look at one of the more popular non-human ceramic subjects.

*Dog with a Corn Cob (Fig. 9)*

While *Dog with a Corn Cob* is the only non-human figure in the VMFA's West Mexican collection, it is nonetheless one of numerous canine figures that have been discovered in the Colima region. A large variety of ceramic animals have been found in Colima, ranging from armadillos, ducks, and parrots to crabs, snails, and tortoises. Of the known animal figures, dogs are one of the most common. In fact, Von Winning wrote that dog sculptures are thought to have been found in at least 75% and perhaps as many as 90% of the shaft tombs.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, Von Winning

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<sup>116</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 26.

<sup>117</sup> These percentages were based on the opinion of a local Mexican collector and were originally obtained by N.P. Wright. According to this source, those tombs that did not include dog effigies contained parrot figures. Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 42.

has grouped the ceramic dogs into four distinct categories: A) spoutless; B) spout on head; C) spout in tail; and D) spout on body.<sup>118</sup>

Figure 9 can be classified as category C, as the wide tail forms a spout above the hind legs. West Mexican ceramic canines are usually depicted as smooth skinned animals with very little hair and are commonly referred to as “Mexican hairless” dogs, or sometimes by their Nahuatl name, *xoloitzcuintli*.<sup>119</sup> The VMFA example depicts a dog that is standing on its hind legs, with the front legs resting on the floor and holding an ear of corn. Other examples of Colima ceramic dogs portray them sculpted in numerous poses, including curled up, seated, and standing. This may suggest that the particular posture of the animal is not significant to their interpretation.

Many of the ceramic dogs, including Figure 9, are sculpted with very plump sides and it is widely believed that dogs were fattened for eating (See Fig. 9a). There may be a similar significance to the ear of corn this dog holds between its paws, as both would have been valuable sources of nutrition. Furthermore, there is also a history of corn being affiliated with fertility and agricultural fecundity. If these canine figures were created with such associations, this would explain their large numbers in Colima - a region mainly inhabited by small groups of farmers.<sup>120</sup>

However, scholarly research has mainly been concentrated on the dog's associations with death, not life or rebirth. In this case, the influence of the shaft

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<sup>118</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 42.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>120</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 98.

tomb tradition may have resulted in a profusion of these figures within Colima. Von Winning has supported this in observing that “although the dog ranked below other animals such as the serpent and jaguar in religious importance, its connection with the death cult was important and widespread.”<sup>121</sup> The connections between death, tombs, and canines have been found outside of West Mexico as well. Dog skeletons have been found in graves throughout Mesoamerica, especially in Mexico and Central America. The ancient site of Tlatilco, in central Mexico, shares a number of similarities with the traditions of West Mexico and is a location of numerous dog burials within tombs.<sup>122</sup>

The Colima dog sculptures are believed to have additional importance as guardians of the dead, as well as companions and guides in the underworld. In connection with this role, these ceramic canines have been thought to represent the god of death, *Xolotl*, who was believed to lead souls on their journey through the underworld.<sup>123</sup> A number of these sculpted dogs are portrayed wearing human masks which may underscore these associations.

However, the role of dogs in accompanying the dead can also be understood somewhat differently. Otto Schöndube has pointed out that “the road to the hereafter was considered to be full of difficulties, and the Colima dogs, which are mostly represented as fattened and tranquil, were probably intended as provisions to be eaten

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<sup>121</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 44.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Kan, Meighan, and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 26. Additionally, Von Winning has noted that Mesoamerican mythology portrays the dog as a “servant to the god of the heavenly fire, the lord of lightning and thunder, namely Tlaloc.” Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 43.

en route.”<sup>124</sup> The portrayal of the VMFA dog eating a corn cob may hint at this “fattening” and the canine’s own future as a food substance. Additionally, there is a Colima ceramic figure that supports this idea of dogs as food (See Fig. 25).<sup>125</sup> In this example, the dog is depicted as roasted and served on a platter. While this is the only known figure of its kind, it strongly supports the notion that dogs were indeed valued as a food source in West Mexico. However, not all scholars agree with the interpretation of dogs as a food source, whether for sustenance in the afterlife or here on earth. According to Furst, the belief that dogs were bred for eating stems from a comparison to Aztec practices and is not necessarily an accurate theory, given that the Colima dogs predate the Aztecs by as much as fifteen centuries.<sup>126</sup>

It is fairly uncommon for the Colima dogs to be portrayed holding an ear of corn, as only one example other than Figure 9 is known.<sup>127</sup> There are a few sculptures of various other animals, such as the raccoon-like coatimundi, which have also been portrayed with corncobs. While their exact meanings remain unknown, the inclusion of corn must be significant if the sculptors were not merely copying scenes from daily life.

The importance of dog figures to the people of ancient West Mexico is also supported with contemporary ethnographic analogy that incorporates similar

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<sup>124</sup> Otto Schöndube, “Natural Resources and Human Settlements in Ancient West Mexico,” in *Ancient West Mexico* (see note 19), 210.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>126</sup> Furst, “Shamanic Symbolism,” 187.

<sup>127</sup> The VMFA object files state that there is only one other known example, which can be found in Roman Pina Chan, *Mesoamerica: ensayo histórico cultural* (Mexico City: INAH, 1960), fig. 47. This is the only other example I have come across in my research as well, but there are examples of other animals, such as coatimundi, which also hold corn cobs.

symbolism. The Cora are situated along the border between Colima and Jalisco and have remained relatively unacculturated to Western influence. This allows for ethnographic comparisons that are not as readily available among other cultures of the Americas. In his study of the contemporary Cora, Von Winning discovered a myth that was still prevalent among the people concerning the role of dogs in the afterlife.

[The] dog was considered to be an independently acting demon in the myths of the creation of the earth and mankind, particularly in the myths of the flood among the ancient inhabitants of Colima. ...According to this the people followed the trail of a dog, leading to a high mountain, in order to escape from drowning in a rising flood. Meanwhile the dog beat a drum, the sound of which caused the water to swell up in waves, whereupon the people climbed to the summit. Most of them died of starvation while waiting for the water to recede. Those few who survived are believed to be the ancestors of mankind. The dog disappeared into a large lake where the wandering souls visit it on their way to their final resting place.”<sup>128</sup>

This myth was shared with the Huichol and dates back to at least the time of conquest. In 1581 the Spanish chronicler Juan Suárez de Cepeda recorded this same myth in his *Relaciones de los Indios Colimas de la Nueva Espana*.<sup>129</sup> If the inhabitants of Colima during the Late Formative and Early Classic periods held beliefs similar to this, then the profusion of ceramic dog figures could be understood for their associations with both the underworld and the creation of mankind.<sup>130</sup> This may indicate that dogs played a significant role in the West Mexican cosmological belief system and thus would have been important to

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<sup>128</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 43

<sup>129</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 90.

<sup>130</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 35.

include with the dead. As such, their significance would not have been as a food source, but as powerful figures of the underworld.

### Tuxcacuesco-Ortices

#### *Votive Figurine of a Woman (Fig. 10)*

The title *Votive Figurine of a Woman* suggests that figures such as this have been viewed by collectors and scholars as offerings to the deceased or ancestral deities. In early scholarship, both small and large ceramic figures found in burials were often referred to as tomb offerings. To a certain extent, these figures are grave offerings as they appear to have been created expressly for burial. However, as is evident in the following analysis, these ceramic sculptures can no longer be explained by such narrow interpretations.

Solid, flat figures from Colima are believed to date as far back as 300 BC, but continued to be made for approximately seven hundred years thereafter. Figure 10 from the VMFA collection falls into this category of flat, unslipped and unburnished sculpture and belongs to the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices style. Occasionally, these types of figures have been found in tombs alongside the large hollow sculpture of the Classic period. Many of the figures belonging to the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices classification are so similar that they were probably made according to specific guidelines. They may even have been made by the same artists and workshops. Take for example this VMFA figure (Fig. 10). When compared to another female Tuxcacuesco-Ortices

style figure, the forms appear nearly identical (See Fig. 26). The only difference between the two is a slight variation in headband and necklace style.

The body of Figure 10 is thin with slightly rounded arms and flat legs. The hips and thighs have accentuated proportions in comparison to the rest of the figure. This unclothed female sculpture is similar in style to the larger, hollow Colima example of Figure 11. The similarities can be seen in the emphasis of ornamentation and genitalia on both. Adornments on the smaller solid figure include a headband, large earrings, a necklace, and two armbands on each arm. The headband is the only feature to wrap around the figure, where it appears to have a loose end that hangs down the back of the neck (See Fig. 10a). Additionally, the back of the head is unique in that it has a depression in the center. Perhaps this was done by the artist to push forward the clay on the front to resemble a face. Her eyes and mouth are shaped in the familiar “coffee-bean” style. This is made by applying a small pellet of clay and pressing down the center with a thin, flat instrument. On the eyes, this creates a horizontal gouge that gives the figure a trance-like expression.

Studies done in 1972 by Clement Meighan identified twenty attributes that are shared between the small flat figures of the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices type. As a result of this study, Meighan also concluded that these small figures were simpler versions of the larger hollow ceramic sculptures.<sup>131</sup> This was supported with archaeological evidence that the small flat sculptures were found in ordinary graves as well as small, shallow shaft-tombs. Thus, the connection was made between smaller, simpler

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<sup>131</sup> Kan, Meighan and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 41.

tombs and smaller, simpler figures. This could indicate that the more complex shaft-tombs with larger hollow figures had been reserved persons of high status.<sup>132</sup>

However, it must be mentioned that the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures have also been found occasionally with the large hollow figures in the deeper tombs and vice versa. Although this is rare, it may point toward an alternative explanation for their production and inclusion in burials.

The Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures have such similar forms that it is unlikely that they were meant to describe individual people. While the variation in clothing and adornment between each figure shows a certain amount of differentiation, they nonetheless lack any individualizing physical detail.<sup>133</sup> However, as with many of the other West Mexican ceramic figures, it may not be the identity of the person that is important, but rather the meanings to which they were connected.

Small flat figures such as *Votive Figurine of a Woman* may be related to earlier Mesoamerican sculptures that are similar in form. For example, flat female figures have been found in the El Opeño tombs which date to 1500 BC and are located in Michoacán, West Mexico (See Fig. 12).<sup>134</sup> Additionally, the central Mexican sites of Tlatilco and Chupícuaro also produced flat female figures that are similar in form to the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices sculptures. These sites date to the middle and late first millennium BC, respectively. The Tlatilco style in particular shares a number of characteristics with sculptures such as Figure 10. The Tlatilco sculptures

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<sup>132</sup> Kan, Meghan and Nicholson, eds., *Sculpture of Ancient West Mexico*, 41.

<sup>133</sup> Pickering and Cabrero, "Mortuary Practices," 83.

<sup>134</sup> Townsend, "Before Gods, Before Kings," 116.

are often referred to by the sexist label “pretty lady” figures in Mesoamerican scholarship and are usually found sculpted with enlarged hips and thighs. Additionally, attention is given to details of the hair and accoutrements.<sup>135</sup> An emphasis on hips, thighs and genitalia is evident on figures from each of these ancient Mexican sites, clearly indicating their importance to widespread cultural beliefs.

Women and fertility had an important place in the Mesoamerican cosmological belief system. Among most Mesoamericans, the cosmos were structured with a view of an over-world, middle-world, and under-world through which deities, the deceased, and shamans could travel between. The elaborate shaft tomb tradition of West Mexico may show a manifestation of the underworld dimension as well as recreate a common Mesoamerican origin myth. Townsend explains that “on one level this sphere embraced the idea of the earth as progenitor of all living forms, an inexhaustible source of new life, the mythic womb whence humankind originally emerged, and the place where the dead are laid to rest and from which, reborn, they will return to the living.”<sup>136</sup>

Emphasis on genitalia, such as on the VMFA Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figure, serves as a good indication that fertility and female sexuality are key components of the overall message these figures were meant to communicate. Therefore, these sculptures reference the cycle of life of those with whom they are interred and may also have symbolic connections to the tombs themselves. The shaft tombs may have

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<sup>135</sup> Townsend, “Before Gods, Before Kings,” 116.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

been designed to purposefully reference life and death symbolism. Scholars such as Furst have suggested that these burials are intended to mimic the female reproductive organs, “with the entrance tunnel as symbolic birth canal and the vaulted funeral chamber as womb, to which man returns after his death and from which he is reborn.”<sup>137</sup>

However, another theory has been suggested for the creation of sculptures with these emphases. The Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures share with other West Mexican sculpture the proposal of the placement of nude female figures in burials as an indicator of specific rites the deceased had been involved in. This is assuming that such figures were only placed in burials of women. Since most figures were looted from the tombs, there is little evidence to support such a connection between tomb objects and deceased.

Nevertheless, the supposition that representations of nude females were created to commemorate ceremonial rites of passage for women has been accepted by scholars such as Townsend. These theories are based on comparative analysis to widespread beliefs in ancient Mesoamerica that involve female initiation rites and ritual nudity.<sup>138</sup> Specifically, these rites entail a ceremonial process during which women go through various stages marking the passage from childhood into an adult capable of childbearing. The last of the ceremonial stages involves a public presentation of these women to the community. The women are usually richly

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<sup>137</sup> Furst, “West Mexican Art,” 128.

<sup>138</sup> Townsend, “Before Gods, Before Kings,” 121-123.

adorned or symbolically painted.<sup>139</sup> Townsend relates the connection between the ceramic figures and these ceremonies in the following passage:

It is this pivotal public exhibition that is most likely represented by the West Mexican sculptures, showing them decorated yet with the lower body and genitals exposed as they stand or sit in contact with the soil. The young woman is thus presented as an adult, ready for a creative role proper to women. In this action she becomes part of a hierophany, manifesting archetypal principles that reach back to the immemorial, universal idea of the earth as a goddess.<sup>140</sup>

These interpretations give the ceramic figures such as the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices female a quality of sacredness that goes beyond simple interpretations of fertility offerings. The emphasis on genitalia derives from a pervasive ceramic female figure tradition that can be traced back to Tlatilco.<sup>141</sup> Another subtype of Colima, the Coahuayana Valley style, shares the exaggerated detail of female genitalia with both the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices and Tlatilco traditions. However, as can be seen in Figure 10 of the VMFA, Tuxcacuesco-Ortices figures additionally employed the small, flat form of the Tlatilco tradition.

#### Coahuayana Valley

##### *Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory Bowl (Fig. 11)*

When Figure 11 is compared to other similar Colima sculptures, it becomes evident that this figure must belong to the Coahuayana Valley tradition. Townsend describes examples such as *Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory Bowl* as having a meditative quality to them: “[Far] to the south in the Coahuayana River

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<sup>139</sup> Townsend, “Before Gods, Before Kings,” 123.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 42.

valley between Colima and Michoacán, pairs of figures are shown modeled with full, rounded limbs and bodies, seated on four-legged stools. Quietly gesturing with an upraised hand holding a bowl, the eyes closed and face composed with a sense of concentration, these seated effigies seem suspended in a moment of ritual introspection.”<sup>142</sup> This ritual introspection is due in large part to the modeling of the eyes. Their trance-like depiction is similar in style to the “coffee-bean” type seen on Figure 10. This was also a characteristic of the shamanistic figures from Nayarit of the San Sebastian Red and Chinesco varieties (Figs. 4 and 5).

Figure 11 provides a good example of the Coahuayana Valley sub-style of Colima ceramic sculpture. Female figures belonging to this type typically depict stout, broad-shouldered women. Most are portrayed nude with genitalia clearly depicted, while breasts are vaguely indicated. Figure 11 additionally has the typical squatty legs that are common to this subtype, as well as hands and feet that are defined by simple incised lines. Additionally, scarification is represented by raised circular markings on the shoulders.

Ornamentation is sparse, but includes a necklace and armbands. Abstracted round strips of clay near the ears may indicate large perforations for earrings or ear plugs. These ear abstractions have alternatively been described as “napkin-ring earspools.”<sup>143</sup> Additionally, long thin strips of clay have been appliquéd to frame the face and their placement may reference a hairline and perhaps a headband of some

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<sup>142</sup> Townsend, “Archaeology and the Art of the Tombs,” 26.

<sup>143</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 41.

type. The top of this figure's head has an opening with a large flaring rim.

Coahuayana Valley figures are also usually covered with a brownish slip. Remnants of this can still be seen on Figure 11, though much of it has worn off.

The bowl or cup held in this figure's right hand appears to be an unusual feature among ceramic women of this classification. Gallagher has noted that occasionally these figures will hold a raised dish in one hand, however this is considered rare within the Coahuayana Valley tradition.<sup>144</sup> However, among West Mexican figures in general, there are many instances of women and men holding cups or bowls of various forms. Many scholars in the past had interpreted these inclusions as indicators of feasting and as utilitarian vessels used to hold food and beverages for daily use. Contemporary interpretations explain these depictions of cups and bowls in terms of ritual and ceremonial function. This has not been determined in connection with any particular marking on or forms of vessels, but rather is due to the overall posturing and expressions of the figures portrayed holding them. Butterwick has observed that "many large hollow figures from different regions hold cups, drinking gourds, or large beverage vats; they often have quiet expressions suggestive of ritual contemplation or death itself."<sup>145</sup> The indication of closed eyes lends itself readily to interpretations of trance-like states or even death. A vessel in the hand of a figure fitting either of those categories would signify these were not merely daily activities portrayed. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 1, there may have been intended

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<sup>144</sup> Gallagher, *Companions of the Dead*, 41.

<sup>145</sup> Butterwick, "Food for the Dead," 98.

associations between vessels that ceramic figures held and intoxicating drinks for ritual use.

The left hand of Figure 11 is placed directly beneath her left breast with the palm pressed flat against the torso. When compared to Figure 1 of the Nayarit figures, it becomes immediately evident that these two mirror each other with identical gestures. Some of the peculiar gestures made by Nayarit and Jalisco figures have been studied by Furst. In 1970 he worked with Huichol informants who had suggested that the specific positioning of arms and hands may indicate particular ritual gestures.<sup>146</sup> For instance, certain figures are sculpted holding up one hand that touches the back of their head. When interpreted by the Huichol informants, such figures were identified as establishing communication with the gods.<sup>147</sup> The Huichol were also able to identify a number of other poses; however, the particular posturing depicted by VMFA Figures 1 and 11 was not discussed. Nonetheless, it is clear that such specific placement of the hands was intended to indicate some sort of ritual gesture.

*Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory Bowl* depicts a woman who is, as the title indicates, sitting. The body has been sculpted in such a way that that it will not remain upright without some support underneath for the figure to sit on (See Figs. 11a & 11b). For display purposes, this figure rests on a wooden wedge-shaped block. However, many figures of the Coahuayana Valley style have stools that were

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<sup>146</sup> Furst, "West Mexican Art," 125.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

sculpted for them to sit on and sometimes these are attached to the figure itself (See Fig. 27). Butterwick explains that “stools are associated with authority, for it is widely established that in ancient Amerindian art only leaders are depicted sitting on thrones, or stools of power.”<sup>148</sup> This indicates that female figures, such as Figure 11, may have been sculpted to sit on stools that connote power. This would suggest that men and women were understood to have equal status in this society.<sup>149</sup>

While they may be associated with power, female representations such as Figure 11 can also be viewed in terms of illustrating themes of fertility and cosmological beliefs. Pre-Columbian values throughout the Americas encompassed a reverence for the female domain as an essential part of society and the cosmos.<sup>150</sup> On the sociological level, women represent themes of family continuity as well as lineage legitimacy.<sup>151</sup> Women would have then probably played important roles within a West Mexican society that embraced a cult of the dead and which was centered on ancestral worship. Thus, the inclusion of female sculpture, such as Figure 11, in burials is understandable in terms of the connections between fertility, family lines and ancestral deities. As discussed with Figure 10, female figures may have also had important cosmological associations. Within the cosmological belief system, women acted as symbols for fertility, including the life, death, and rebirth cycles of the earth. Within the rituals of presenting young women to the community as adults, the

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<sup>148</sup> Butterwick, “Food for the Dead,” 96.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>150</sup> Townsend, “Before Gods, Before Kings,” 115.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

community bestows “an aura of sacredness on the young woman and places her, as ‘mother of the earth and of all life-giving plants,’ in a cosmological dimension.”<sup>152</sup>

It is important to note that the title of VMFA’s Figure 11, *Seated Pregnant Woman Holding an Offertory Bowl*, may be somewhat of a misnomer. First, the designation of an offertory has clear Western European religious implications that do not fit with the ethnographic evidence for the interpretations of figures with bowls. Secondly, while the robust build of this woman together with the well-defined genitalia could very well indicate fertility symbolism, it is difficult to accurately determine if she is actually portrayed as pregnant. She is sculpted as a large woman and her abdomen does appear swollen in comparison to the rest of her body (See Fig 11a). However, Von Winning’s research had led him to conclude that “pregnancy is not shown in large hollow Colima figures, but is indicated on smaller solid figures.”<sup>153</sup> Perhaps at the time of his writing, sculptures such as Figure 11 had not been found. The lack of exaggeration of the abdominal area does make it hard to determine with confidence if this figure is in fact pregnant. Nonetheless, the emphasis on genitalia and the full female form communicate the same fertility associations regardless of whether or not the figure is depicted as bearing a child.

While large hollow figures of the Coahuayana Valley seem to be extremely different from those of other West Mexican traditions, they most likely belong to the same female figure tradition as the Tuxcacuesco-Ortices style. The differences in

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<sup>152</sup> Holsbeke and Arnaut, eds., *Offerings for a New Life*, 88.

<sup>153</sup> Von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures*, 90.

form do not necessarily negate the underlying themes of fertility or cosmological significance. Thus, there may have been a widespread belief system throughout West Mexico that manifested in various forms through an equally widespread ceramic figure tradition.

## Chart C

COLIMACOMALA

Ex: Figure 7  
*Figurine*

TUXCACUECO-  
ORTICES

Ex: Figure 10  
*Votive Figurine of a Woman*

COUAHUAYANA  
VALLEY

Ex: Figure 11  
*Seated Pregnant Woman  
Holding an Offertory Bowl*



Ex: Figure 8  
*Seated Figure*



Ex: Figure 9  
*Dog with a Corn Cob*

Figures 7 – 11b



Figure 7: Figurine  
Colima, 150 BC – AD 900



Figure 7a: Figurine,  
Back View

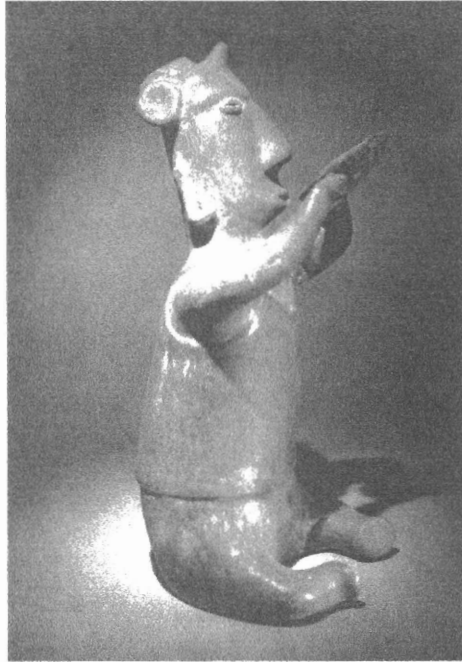


Figure 8: Seated Figure  
Colima, 200 BC – AD 400



Figure 8a: Seated Figure,  
Close-Up, Head



Figure 9: Dog with a Corn Cob  
Colima, AD 200 - 400



Figure 9a: Dog with a Corn Cob,  
Top View



Figure 10: Votive Figurine of a Woman  
Colima, 300 BC – AD 400

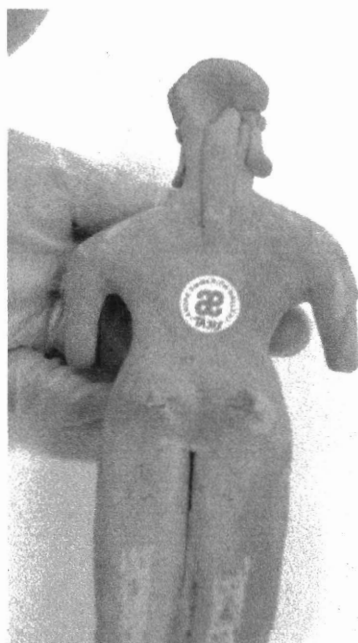


Figure 10a: Votive Figurine of a Woman,  
Back View



Figure 11: Seated Pregnant Woman  
Holding an Offertory Bowl  
Colima, 100 BC – AD 100

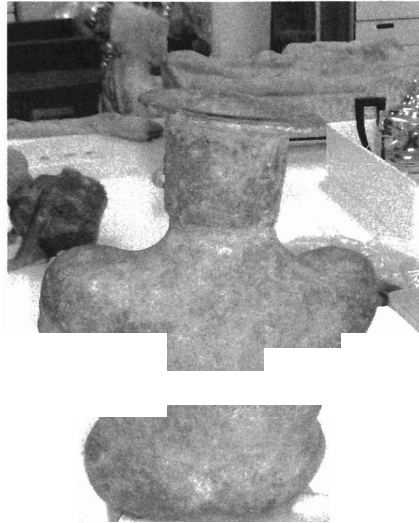


Figure 11a: Seated Pregnant Woman,  
Back View



Figure 11b: Seated Pregnant Woman,  
Side View

## **Conclusion**

As outlined within this thesis, the analysis of the eleven ceramic sculptures from the VMFA provides a good introduction to the forms and styles of the West Mexican figure tradition. The similarities and differences between each category and sub-style of figures provide us with clues as to how a widespread cultural belief system could manifest in various ways within the hands of different cultural groups and artists. While the obvious and subtle stylistic differences provide for appealing art historical research, the similarities between each of the West Mexican ceramic figure traditions are what may prove valuable for understanding the belief systems of these cultures.

The importance of ceramic sculpture within Mesoamerica can be best understood through two essential features: portability and three-dimensionality. The portability of these figures is essential to a cross-cultural exchange of ideas. While the figures in West Mexico were buried with the dead in shaft tombs, the juxtaposition of diverse forms and styles from different regions indicates that such figures may also have been part of a wide-reaching trade network. The figures themselves may represent men, women, and animals of the natural world. However, their import can be considered similar to David Freidel's description for Olmec

ceramic figures as “appositions of perceived and unseen reality.”<sup>154</sup> In this way, not only were artistic traditions transferred between cultures, but also cosmological beliefs.

The three-dimensionality of the West Mexican ceramic figures additionally allows for a thorough examination from all angles. This gives the viewer a much better understanding of particular aspects of costume, posture, and ornamentation. This three-dimensionality may also be important to spreading ideas cross-culturally. The exchanging of ideas between cultures is enhanced when each party is afforded a comprehensive view. This sharing of artistic traditions does not mean there is a full appropriation, but rather that ideas are accepted and integrated in various degrees. In connection with this, Freidel has observed that “once invented, however, worldly visions are locally reinvented repeatedly over time, reflecting the particular histories of regional societies within the broader civilization. The result is a mosaic of cultures that while different and distinct, shares elements of a common intellectual heritage.”<sup>155</sup>

Such a “common intellectual heritage” has hopefully been communicated within this thesis. Within each chapter, the connectivity of the individual sub-categories to each other has been documented and applied within each individual figural analysis. Additionally, the relationships between figures of one regional tradition and those of another have shown a much broader association that transcends

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<sup>154</sup> Freidel, *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1995), 126.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the traditionally applied boundaries. By highlighting the differences between each regional style, it becomes evident how different cultures reinterpreted the common intellectual heritage to meet their own tastes and traditions. The existing scholarship has provided enormous amounts of information that made this thesis possible.

However, the amount of research available has only scraped the surface on what will surely be long future for the research of the West Mexican ceramic figure tradition.

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## Additional Figures





Figure 13: Ixtlan Del Rio Female Figure

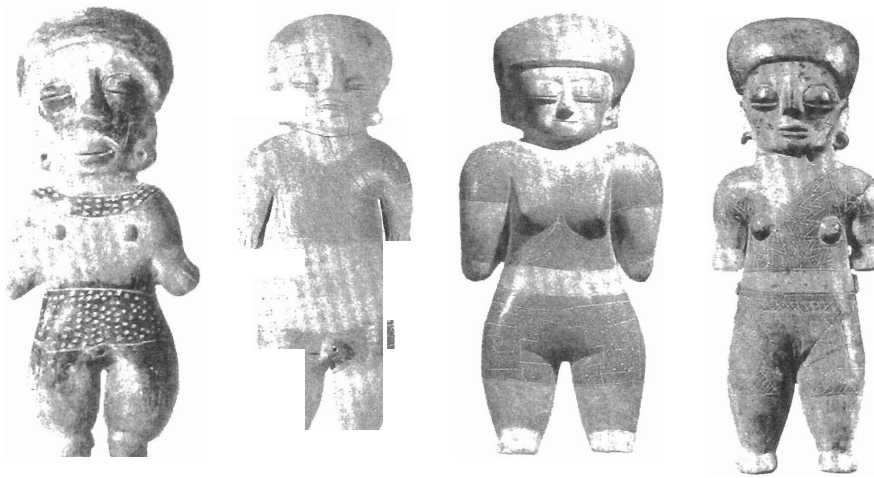


Figure 14: Chorrera Figures, Ecuador



Figure 15: Bahía Phase Figures, Ecuador



Figure 16: Manabí Province Figure, Ecuador



Figure 17: Painted Clay Warrior Holding Weapon

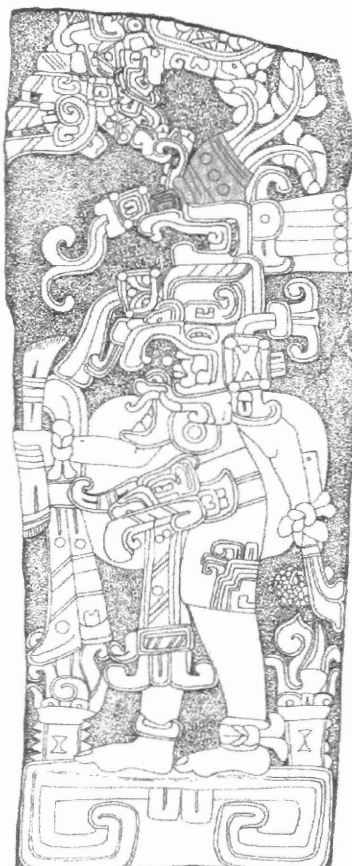


Figure 18: Kaminaljuyú, Guatemala Stela

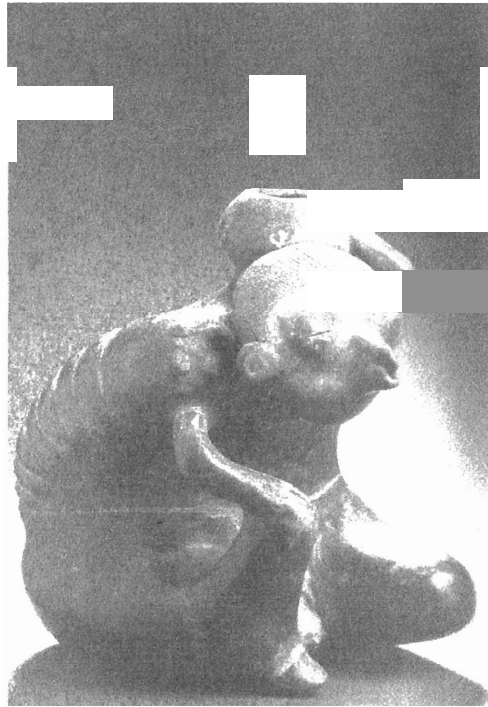


Figure 19: Seated Figure with Crooked, Hollow Back



Figure 20: Seated Figure with Crooked, Hollow Back



Figure 21: Jalisco Crouched Figure



Figure 22: Seated Man in a Trance

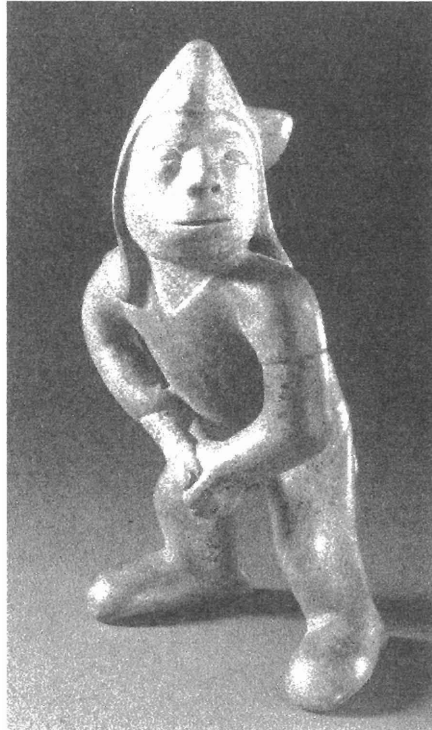


Figure 23: Standing Warrior with Slingshot



Figure 24: Warrior with Drinking Bowl and Trophy Heads

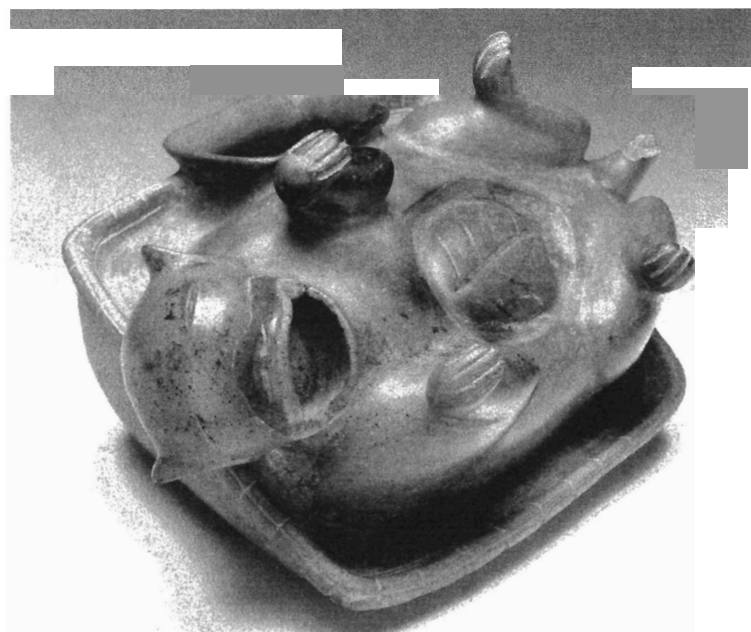


Figure 25: Roasted Dog



Figure 26: Standing Female Figure

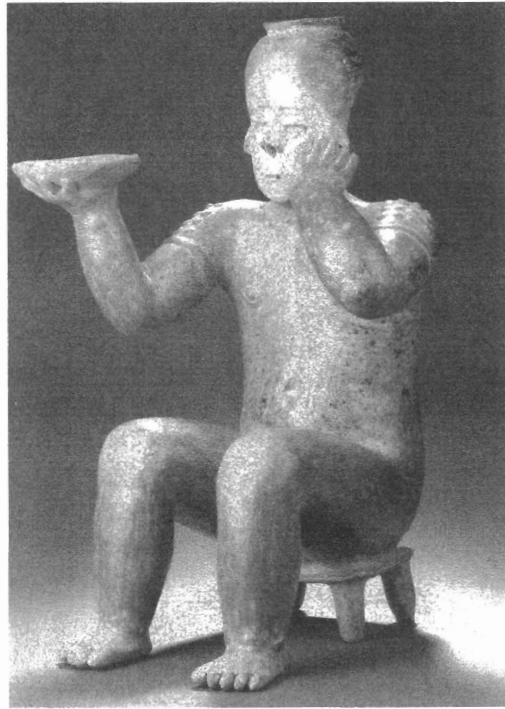


Figure 27: Seated Woman

**Vita**

## Vita

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