The cultures of West Mexico, dating from 300 B.C. to A.D. 300, were once considered simple farming communities. Recent excavations in the area paint a remarkably different picture. They indicate complex and stratified societies led by chiefs and religious centers that emphasized the veneration of family ancestors. It is probable that the artworks displayed in this gallery were made in workshops by skilled artisans.

The ancient peoples of West Mexico buried their dead in deep shaft tombs under land that belonged to families of high status. They placed ceramics in burials to accompany the dead in the afterlife. Artists from cultures in Colima, Nayarit, Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán fashioned the ceramics in appealing animal and human figures. Local clay and minerals gave them vivid orange hues. After applying slip and paint, the earthen pots were polished with stones to create glossy finishes.

Female figures embodied the concepts of fertility, lineage, and community continuance. This kneeling woman wears a turban and elaborately decorated skirt. She proudly displays her baby. As a mother nursing her child, she is a symbol of the mythical womb of the earth, the source of all life.

Online Resources:

Hirsch Library Online Catalog
The Metropolitan Museum of Art Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Articles: (full-text access available on-site; off-site access available through your school library or Houston Public Library)


Print Resources:

The Shaft Tomb Figures of West Mexico
Mexico's Indigenous Past
Mesoamerican Figurines
Heritage of Power: Ancient Sculpture from West Mexico
The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec
Bibliography

Object Specific Information


General Surveys of Mesoamerican Art


Jalisco Art and Archeology


Pre-Columbian Art


Mesoamerican History


This reference guide is just the tip of the iceberg on helpful resources in the library's holdings. Many of the suggested resources above have their own bibliographies. Each of these may lead you to another resource that would also be helpful in your research here in the museum or in another library. To find additional resources, use keywords such as "Jalisco", "Mesoamerica", and "ceramics" in the online catalog and in periodical indexes. Once you find a few relevant titles, pay attention to the subject headings to identify similar materials. Examples of useful subject headings are:

- Indians of Mexico
- Indian sculpture--Mexico
- Mexico--Antiquities--Exhibitions
- Pottery
- Art, Primitive

For guidelines about writing it may be helpful to look at Sylvan Barnet’s *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, which includes tips for looking, reading, and writing about art. Ask for it at the reference desk. At every stage of your work, please allow the library staff to help you. Contact us at 713-639-7325 or hirsch@mfah.org