

Treasures from Mexico



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Map of Mexico



Thanks to an exceptional agreement with the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico, Louvre Abu Dhabi is honoured to exhibit a collection of five remarkable artefacts in its galleries starting in August 2024. This partnership allows us to showcase some chapters in the history and arts of Mexico through exceptional archaeological discoveries, including some of the most recent.

The initiative highlights the rich cultural heritage of the Americas for the first time in the region, and is of great importance to Louvre Abu Dhabi as we engage in a reinterpretation of a universal narrative in the heart of the Arab world, here in the United Arab Emirates.

Objects from Mexico have been exhibited in the museum's permanent galleries since its inauguration in 2017. This recent collaboration, featuring several masterpieces, enhances our cross-civilisational approach, which lies at the very core of Louvre Abu Dhabi's mission and is an integral part of its displays. A historic moment for the United Arab Emirates, the display of Colossal head No. 5 at Louvre Abu Dhabi marks the first time an Olmec monumental head has travelled to the region. This also marks the beginning of the partnership between Louvre Abu Dhabi and the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico.

Megalithic Monuments

Between 1700 and 400 BCE, the Olmec culture developed in several civic and ceremonial centres along the Gulf of Mexico. Its expansion had a profound influence on the cultural history of Mesoamerica. The Olmecs produced the earliest megalithic monuments in North America. Among the most emblematic remnants are the colossal heads of which seventeen are known today. Their fabrication involved transporting large blocks of basalt from volcanic fields located more than 100 kilometres away. These blocks were sculpted into heads measuring as high as 3 metres and weighing up to 40 tonnes. Believed to represent Olmec rulers, each head was carved naturalistically to memorialise a leader who may have held both political and religious positions.



Colossal head No. 5 originated from San Lorenzo-Tenochtitlan, the site that yielded the largest number of these sculptures. The features typical of Olmec art are clearly recognizable: thick lips, often downturned mouths, almond-shaped eyes, flat noses, fleshy cheeks, and individualised helmeted headdresses adorned with insignia that may represent identifying emblems, including animal motifs such as feline skin and raptor talons.

An accidental discovery of the first colossal head by a farmer at Tres Zapotes in the 19th century served as a catalyst for the initial archaeological investigations of Olmec culture, directed by American archaeologist and ethnologist Matthew Stirling between 1938 and 1946. This discovery led to their recognition as one of the earliest complex societies in Mesoamerica. Colossal head No. 5 was discovered in 1946 by Stirling himself.

Colossal head No. 5

Olmec culture (1200-500 BCE)
Mexico, Veracruz state, San Lorenzo -
Tenochtitlan
1200-900 BCE
Basalt stone
Museum of Anthropology of Xalapa,
Veracruz University, Xalapa, Veracruz
State
H. 186 cm, W. 144cm



Key Facts

Only seventeen Olmec colossal heads, originating from three different sites – San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes – are known to exist today. This one weighs about six tonnes. A historic moment, the display of Colossal head No. 5 marks the first time an Olmec monumental sculpture has travelled to the region.



Emblematic Vessels

The incense burners called "theatre type" belong to the most emblematic artefacts of Teotihuacan. Their production began in the first century of the current era. Initially, they were characterized by simple shapes, typically conical, resting on a base with a vessel. During the following phases, leading up to the decline of the city of Teotihuacan, moulds were used to make various ornaments that were glued to the main body or to plates arranged in superimposed layers. The moulded motifs are diverse,

with notable examples including phytomorphic designs (corn, cotton, gourd, etc.), zoomorphic depictions (butterflies, birds, snails and shells), anthropomorphic representations (masks or figures with attributes of gods or possibly warriors), and other motifs that could have glyphic connotations. The smoke from such incense burners may have been used to purify the air before rituals. Another theory suggests that the vessel itself served as an oracle, with the smoke acting as a conduit to the spirit realm.



Key Facts

The incense used likely included coal and copal (a type of tree resin), both of which were found in abundance in Mesoamerica. The birds represented on this burner, often identified as eagles, are animals that symbolise warriors.

Theatre-type incense burner

Teotihuacan culture (100 BCE-800 CE)

Mexico, Teotihuacan

200-400 CE

Terracotta

H. 72.6 cm, W. 35 cm

Archaeological zone of Teotihuacan, National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH)

Enigmatic Masks

Three-dimensional stone masks depicting a conventional human-like face are abundant in the sculptural style associated with the Central Mexican city of Teotihuacan. With its geometrically rendered horizontal brow, triangular nose, and oval mouth and eyes, this mask represents an idealised facial type that seems to function as a symbol, rather than a portrait, similar to other standardised motifs found in the art of Teotihuacan. The depressions in the eyes and the mouth indicate that this very large greenstone mask may have originally possessed an inlaid shell or pyrite to represent the eyes and teeth.

Perforations along the sides on the reverse suggest that this object was likely intended to be attached to another item but given the weight of the stone and the lack of holes for the eyes and mouth, it is probable that these masks were not worn by living people. Instead, they may have been attached to larger, perishable sculptures of human or deity figures, or mounted on mummy or deity bundles. They could represent a local interpretation of the Mesoamerican maize deity.

A highly organised and hierarchical society, Teotihuacan (100 BCE–650 CE) achieved rapid growth, including the development of extensive trade routes, making the city the first and largest power in Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan's adept urban planning led to Mesoamerica's first centralised city built on a grid layout featuring boulevards and impressive monuments - like the Avenue of the Dead from which the monumental Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent were built, all based on geometric and symbolic principles.



Key Facts

Such masks were not worn on the faces of the living. Teotihuacan culture valued green stones primarily for their likeness to water, which symbolised agriculture and fertility.



Anthropomorphic mask

Teotihuacan culture (100 BCE-800 CE)
Mexico, Teotihuacan
200-400 CE
Green serpentine stone
H. 22 cm, W. 27 cm
Archaeological zone of Teotihuacan, National
Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH)



Anthropomorphic Sculptures

Among the sculptural innovations of Mayan culture are the representations of atlantes - anthropomorphic sculptures with arms raised above their heads holding an altar, a bench, or the lintel of a building that is most likely a place of worship. They are dressed in loincloths and are adorned with various accessories, notably a headdress tied around the forehead, earrings, and bracelets around their wrists.

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1988, Chichen Itza is located in the Yucatan region of Mexico. In the fall of 1912, a plan was presented by Sylvanus Griswold Morley for archaeological research at the Chichen Itza ruins to the Board of Trustees of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. The board approved the plan in December

1913, but the commencement of the research was postponed for a more favourable time. Due to unstable conditions, twenty archaeological expeditions were sent by the institution to Peten (Guatemala) and Copan (Honduras) instead between 1915 and 1937. The Chichen Itza Project, exploring the largest city in this area, only began on the 1st of January in 1924 and continued until 1940 under a contract between the Ministry of Agriculture and Interior of the Mexican Government and the Carnegie Institution of Washington.



Key Facts

This sculptural piece was part of fifteen atlantes that supported a stone bench in a temple, possibly the Temple of the Jaguars, at Chichen Itza.

Atlante from Chichen Itza

Maya culture (600 BCE-1521 CE)

Mexico, Yucatan, Chichen Itza

900-1200 CE

Limestone

H. 87 cm

National Museum of World Cultures,
National Institute of Anthropology and
History (INAH), Mexico City



Funerary Masks

Tombs uncovered at the site of Calakmul were most likely constructed for Mayan rulers. They contained thousands of pieces of intricately crafted jadeite artefacts, along with incense burners and various vessels. Notably, they featured offerings in memory of the dead, including jadeite mosaic masks, like this one, which has pyrite eyebrows and obsidian pupils that replicate the gaze of the deceased, along with an ornate jadeite headdress. An Early Classic 5th-century tomb included three similar masks: one intended to adorn the man's face, another was placed on his chest, and a third affixed to his belt. Similar masks have also been identified in royal tombs throughout other Maya cities.

Located in the state of Campeche within the Biosphere Reserve of



Key Facts

Known as the Kingdom of the Snake or Snake Kingdom, Calakmul governed a large territory, as evidenced by the extensive markings of its emblem glyph, which feature a snake head sign reading "Kaan". This Snake Kingdom thrived during most of the Classic period (200 to 900 CE).

Calakmul, the archaeological site of Calakmul is the second largest site in the Americas and was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014. Calakmul is one of the largest and most important cities in the Mayan world between 250 BCE and 700 CE. The Early Classic period (230-430 CE) witnessed the emergence of the Maya state and the founding of several political dynasties. Calakmul was one of the prominent cities, extending over 70 km and containing more than 6,000 structures. The site is believed to have been discovered by explorer and botanist Cyrus Longworth Lundell in 1931 while on a scouting trip for a chicle gum company operating in the region. The name "Calakmul" translates from the Mayan language as "two adjoining mounds", referring to the two tallest pyramids, each about 45 metres in height, which stand close together.

Ceremonial mask

Maya culture (600 BCE-1521 CE)
Mexico, Campeche, Calakmul site
200-400 CE
Jadeite, shell, obsidian
H. 25 cm
Archaeological zone of Calakmul,
National Institute of Anthropology and
History (INAH), Campeche State



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