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Cosmic Travellers: Iconography and Function of Two West Mexican Ceramic Figurines

The Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) has, in its collection, two ancient West Mexican ceramic figurines: one, a pregnant woman, and the other, a standing woman with a pot (fig 1, 7). Without definitavely knowing what these figurines meant to their creators, I have chosen to withhold titling them. Instead, will refer to them simply and descriptively as the “pregnant woman” and the “woman with the pot.” Because these figurines are intact, they were likely recovered from burials, where they sat in relative safety for the two millennia since their genesis. Their iconography, function, and meaning remain mysterious, but a comparative examination of them in the context of wider Mesoamerican views begins to reveal the uniquely powerful role they served: as a bridge for living West Mexicans to access different levels of their cosmos.

Ancient West Mexico

Unlike the Maya, the Aztec, or the Zapotec, scholars do not have a name for the various interrelated cultures living throughout ancient West Mexico. Yet the inhabitants of this cultural region, stretching across portions of the modern Mexican states of Colima, Nayarit, Jalisco, and Michoacan, left a rich archaeological record. These remains paint the picture of a historical culture whose cosmovision was profoundly Mesoamerican while simultaneously marked by certain entirely unique practices.

The most studied remains of this culture come from their burials, especially monumental shaft tombs, and the rich grave goods they contain. Between 1400 and 1000 BCE, at the site of El Openo in Michoacan, the inhabitants of West Mexico built earliest prototypes of a mortuary structure, the shaft tomb, that would come to dominate the bulk of research on their culture (Beekman 2012, 497). These prototypes, consisting of subterranean family tombs accessed by a staircase, would become more widespread and monumental by 300 BCE (Beekman 2012, 497). Although there is great variation between the morphology of different shaft tombs, and they did not represent a uniform mortuary culture, most consist of one or more subsurface hollow burial chambers linked to the surface by a one to sixteen meter vertical shaft (Pickering and Beekman 2016, 3-5). In addition to the dead, shaft tombs contained jewelry, earthenware vessels (Beekman 2012, 500) and likely many perishable goods such as food, clothing, and possibly even wood or dough figurines (Marcus 2018). While these wood or dough figurines would not survive to the present, their ceramic counterparts do. Many anthropomorphic and zoomorphic ceramic figurines, primarily dating from 300 BCE to 200 CE, have been recovered and constitute the best known remnants of West Mexican culture (Pickering and Beekman 2016, 3). WCMA's two female figurines, if they are authentic, are part of this group.

Ceramic figurines have captured a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention partly due to a data problem with ancient West Mexico. Looted ceramic figurines from West Mexico, robbed of their archaeological context, have inundated the art market for over a century. Compounding the issue, the number of comprehensive, start to finish archaeological studies on shaft tombs could be counted on one hand until the late twentieth century (Furst 1998). Peter Furst summarizes the problem succinctly when he writes, "the percentage of tombs that have

been discovered and excavated by trained professionals is so minuscule in comparison to those that have been looted as to be effectively invisible” (Furst 1998, 172). Correspondingly, much of the research on West Mexico has come from museum collections of figurines, severed from their burial context. This lack of context and the prominence of West Mexican funerary figurines on the art market has led to inaccurate claims that ancient West Mexico was organized around death (Weigand and Beekman 1998, Beekman 2016).

No society devotes itself entirely to death, and this illogical view is easily dispelled by mounting archaeological evidence of monumental surface architecture and by the ceramic models of West Mexican villages made by West Mexicans themselves (fig. 13). West Mexicans did not ignore life, and shaft tombs were accompanied by an aboveground culture as substantial as ours. Above many shaft tombs are “complex and very large” circular compounds (Weigand and Beekman 1998, 35) consisting of four (Lopez and Ramos 1998, 56) or eight platforms around a central circular ceremonial mound, called *guachimonton* (Beekman 2016, 88). Shaft tombs plunged into the earth below some of these structures (Beekman 2016, 88). West Mexico was not defined by death, nor was it defined by shaft tombs. Shaft tombs may be impressive to modern observers, but they rarely represented the dominant mortuary practice. Concurrent with shaft tombs were many more numerous and simple pit burials (Weigand and Beekman 1998). Moreover, shaft tombs were only dug for only a limited period of time; after 200 CE, circular monumental surface structures began to eclipse the use of shaft tombs (Weigand and Beekman 1998, 41). Living West Mexican culture was complex enough to have possibly reached state-level organization. In the valley surrounding the Volcan de Tequila in Jalisco, Weigand and Beekman have found evidence of state administered *chinampa* agriculture and defensive

outposts. With a conservatively estimated a population of 40,000 inhabitants, they suggest this valley's people, or the Teuchitlan Tradition, were centrally organized as a state. In addition, snapshots of long-past village events in ceramic architectural models (fig. 13) depict a rich ritual life for West Mexican communities that defies historical views of their culture as mortuary (Lopez and Ramos 1998, 57).

Based on their architecture and treatment of their dead, ancient West Mexico's cosmovision was familiarly Mesoamerican. The eight-platformed spatial layout of the *guachimonton* replicates, as Beekman observes, "a cross-section of eight-rowed maize" (Beekman 2012, 500). Relatedly, at the site of Huitzilapa, a woman was buried on two metates (Lopez and Ramos 1998). For West Mexico, like the rest of Mesoamerica, corn was at the center of practical and religious life. Other elements of West Mexican spatial layout are even more telling. Ceramic models as well as archeological evidence attest to pole climbing rituals at the top of the *guachimontones*, many of which sat above shaft tombs (fig. 13). With platforms oriented in four quadrants around a central pole above the shaft tomb, West Mexico's settlement organization reflects universal Mesoamerican views of a quadripartite, multileveled universe built around a central column, the axis mundi (Lopez 2006). Furthermore, their interest in mountains (symbolically represented in the *guachimontones*) and caves (symbolically created through the shaft tomb), as well as the symbolic importance of parrots (fig. 13) and conch shells, closely mirrors ideas widely held through Mesoamerica, where mountains represent the upper realm of the sky inhabited by gods and caves the lower realm of the underworld inhabited by ancestors and the dead (Pickering and Beekman 2016, Lopez and Ramos 1998).

Despite its vast similarities with the rest of Mesoamerica, West Mexico has drawn fascination for its differences. As Christopher Beekman explains, “Individuals [in West Mexico] expressed familiar ideas in often unfamiliar ways” (Beekman 2012, 502). Unlike any other major Mesoamerica culture, West Mexico dug shaft tombs, used predominantly circular architecture, and left no evidence of a hieroglyphic writing system (Michelet 2006). Moreover, unlike much of Mesoamerica, its imagery and culture do not appear to draw on Olmec influences (Pickering and Beekman 2016, 3). These differences have led scholars to cast West Mexico as belatedly incorporated into Mesoamerica or underdeveloped (Pickering and Beekman 2016). However, Pox pottery from 2300 BCE, one of the oldest ceramics in Mesoamerica, was found in West Mexico just south of the state of Colima (Michelet 2006). In addition, some of the earliest depictions of ball game players, another core Mesoamerica institution, were found at El Openo in West Mexico (Michelet 2006). Rather than lagging behind, West Mexico represented “another hearth, or nucleus, of civilization within ancient Mesoamerica” (Weigand and Beekman 1998, 36). West Mexico was not an outlier, backwards, or focused on the dead. Not only do they express pan-Mesoamerican beliefs, but they may have founded some of them. Thus as I investigate my two figurines, I will maintain a comparative perspective with other Mesoamerican cultures in order to shed light on their iconography and function.

Iconography

Seated pregnant woman

Aesthetically, West Mexican ceramics tend to fall into distinct styles or traditions. In 1974, author Hasso von Winning coined three categories: Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima, each named for the Mexican state where the style was found and each with various subtypes (Kan

1989). Without the provenance of many sculptures, these classifications have taken on a more stylistic than geographical meaning. WCMA's pregnant woman (fig. 1) closely resembles Von Winning's Lagunillas (formerly called Chinesco) subtype from southern Nayarit, and this iconographical analysis will compare WCMA's figurine to other Lagunillas pieces (figs. 2-6). Like these other figures, the maximum date range she could fall within is between 300 BCE and 500 CE, although 300 BCE to 200 CE is most likely, as the bulk of ceramic figurines recovered are from that period (Beekman 2011).

This figurine's general morphology closely reflects that of other Lagunillas figurines. Overall emphasis is on the torso and head, while arms are reduced to thin ropes. Hands and feet are simplified: in the case of WCMA's figurine (fig. 1) and figure 6, just a few grooves evoke fingers (Pickering and Beekman 2016). The torso appears curved and full, and all of these Lagunillas figurines assume nearly the same posture: their hands rest on or near their stomachs as they sit with splayed legs (Townsend 1998). Some, such as figure 4, have bent knees instead of splayed legs. The vast majority of Lagunillas figures, including all of the ones reproduced below, are female. The frequent depiction of genitalia, such as in figures 3, 5, and 6, indicate most of these women are nude except for jewelry, waistbands, and tattoos or body paint. Even figurines without genitalia were likely nude: the genitalia, depicted with a single incised line, are simplistic enough that they could have easily disappeared in more stylized Lagunillas women, like the WCMA figurine and figures 2 and 4. From their body morphology to posture to lack of clothing, these Lagunillas women share a highly similar, stylized type that certainly would have held specific meanings to ancient West Mexicans. With their legs often open and their hands resting on their stomach, these nude Lagunillas women may have evoked pregnancy or the act of

birth. Alternatively, they could have represented a fertility rite involving ritual nudity (Townsend 1998).

Their heads are also similarly shaped. Oversized, broad, flat, and guitar-pick shaped, they share not only a common form but common facial features. Their eyes and mouths are approximately horizontal, minimalistic slits marked by a large nose in the center. While these eyes may appear closed, all Lagunillas sculptors depicted eyes in this way. Thus, unless this school exclusively depicted shut-eyed figures, the slitted eyes are likely only a stylization of open ones. Above their eyes, most Lagunillas figures have incised hair (figs. 3-6). WCMA's figurine as well as figure 3, however do not (fig. 1, 3). In addition, all five have some form of face painting. The black face paint of the WCMA figurine stops intentionally right where, were she like her counterparts, her hair should begin. Instead, the dome of her head is rough and unfinished, suggesting it was once covered with one of several possible items. Without evidence of breakage, whatever covered her head was likely either removeable or perishable. One possibility is that she wore a removable hat that has not survived with the figurine to the present. However, few Lagunillas figurines have headgear, and none of the figures provided here do. Instead, most have clearly modelled hair, making it unlikely their heads were covered with a hat. A second possibility is that the WCMA figurine was left unfinished. Most likely, however, is that she once wore a wig of hair or another perishable material, giving her a full head of hair to match the hair of her counterparts in figures 3-6. Rhodes and Mountjoy identify a West Mexican figurine that had holes around his chin for the insertion of beard hair, lending support to the idea that hair was sometimes incorporated with ceramic (Rhodes and Mountjoy 2016, 25-26).

This pregnant woman is covered in iconographical information that, when contextualized with information about West Mexico and wider Mesoamerican beliefs, reveals some of the associations and meanings this sculpture might have had to ancient West Mexicans. The distinctive head shape in most Lagunillas figurines may represent “tabular oblique” cranial modification, a common practice in ancient West Mexico (Rhodes and Mountjoy 2016, 30). Of seventy-nine intact crania excavated by George Gill in 1977 in West Mexico, including some from Nayarit, seventy had been modified in some way (Pirtle 2016, 155-156). This modification may represent status. Specifically, it may represent inherited status rather than earned status, as cranial modification must be begun in infancy (Pirtle 2016).

WCMA’s pregnant woman wears other symbols that suggest authority or elite status, mainly in the form of bodily adornments. While most figurines are unclothed, all nonetheless include jewelry and body paint, indicating the importance of these details for conveying a message about the status, power, or social role of the figurine. These adornments could be added at any point in life, and unlike cranial modification, could thus represent earned status (Pirtle 2016). In addition to a band around her waist, the pregnant woman wears two nose rings and two earrings, as well as a white or yellow cross shaped design on her torso, black face paint, and what is likely a shell-bead necklace (fig. 1, Stone 2016). While this cross design and nose rings are uncommon among Lagunillas figurines, her black face paint is common among Lagunillas figurines of one specific subtype, the Lagunillas “E” style (Norwood 2012). Earrings and waistbands are common among all Lagunillas figurines. While the specific historical significance of these decorations is unclear, piercings, body paint, and tattoos were often used throughout Mesoamerica to denote transitions in one’s status through life (Houston et al. 2006, Norwood

2012). Depictions of West Mexican children show no body paint or tattoos, while adults often have these in abundance, supporting the idea that adornment was correlated with adulthood, authority, and status (Norwood 2012). Indeed, many forms of body modification were limited to larger shaft tombs (Pickering and Beekman 2016). Earrings are the most ubiquitous form of jewelry among Lagunillas-style pregnant women, and fittingly, they must have been prized symbols of status. In the *Relación de Michoacán*, a text written about the West Mexican state of Michoacan shortly after the Spanish conquest, earrings are described as symbolic possessions worn by the elite (Pirtle 2016). Notably, WCMA's pregnant woman lacks the armbands and shoulder scarification common among many Lagunillas figurines (figs. 2-6), and her waistband and earrings are less elaborate than in other Lagunillas examples (figs. 3, 5, 6). While attributable to different workshops, this paucity of adornment may also denote comparatively lower power or status.

Even more than the WCMA figurine displays iconography of status and power, she displays universal Mesoamerican symbols for fertility. Lagunillas pregnant women, in general, are rich in details that evoke ideas about fertility. WCMA's pregnant woman is no different.

Mesoamerican cosmological ideas were profoundly binary. The world was shaped by complementary but opposite feminine and masculine forces (Lopez 2006). In West Mexico, this manifested in the frequent male-female pairing of ceramic sculptures (Kan 1989). For the Maya and Aztec, female sexuality was both creative and destructive, and was linked to darkness, chaos, water, the earth, and the act of planting (Taggart 2006). Similarly, West Mexico conceived of the earth in "essentially female terms" (Townsend 1998, 120). Women were also closely identified with family lineage and ancestors, as well as the continuity of the family. The sitting, pregnant

Lagunillas women are grounded and immovable, aesthetically connected to the earth, linking the fertile soil and the creative power of womanhood. The deposition of these figurines deep inside the earth in shaft tombs would have added even more layers of symbolism. Shaft tombs had to be dug in the dry season, when the ground was stable (Pickering and Beekman 2016). Pregnant figurines, deposited in the dry season, were planted at the same time and in the same manner as life-giving maize. For West Mexicans, the Earth was fundamentally female; perhaps this symbolic planting of pregnant figurines was connected with ensuring rain and by extension, the continued power of the Earth to birth new corn.

The WCMA pregnant woman has even more subtle iconographic associations with fertility and the continuation of the universe. The cross-shaped band winding continuously around the front and back of her torso strongly evokes continuous, quadripartite Mesoamerican organization of the universe. The band crosses on her core, locating the site of the axis mundi at the core of her being. Many Lagunillas type “E” figurines sport a distinctive red handprint, as figure 4 does above the right breast. This print is highly similar to that of a caiman, which, in turn, is also closely associated with both water and the Earth; many Mesoamerican cultures depicted the Earth as the back of a crocodilian (Johnson 2012). The WCMA pregnant woman, along with other similar Lagunillas figurines, evokes an expansive sphere of fertility imagery, from water to earth to planting to caimans to the axis mundi, each association cross referencing another.

Woman with Pot

WCMA’s Woman with a Pot (fig. 7) strikes a vastly different tone than the Lagunillas pregnant woman. While this female sculpture also hails from Nayarit, she falls squarely within

von Winning's Ixtlan del Rio subtype (figs. 7-13), one of the first subtypes to be recognized (Kan 1989). Ixtlan del Rio figurines tend to be highly ornamented, often wearing elaborate ear and nose rings, capes, headbands, or caps, and are painted in white, yellow, black, and red (Gallagher 1983). Most Ixtlan del Rio women wear a skirt around their lower half, often decorated with a grid-like pattern of backwards "c" shapes or step-frets (Pack 2006). Their chest is often bare or painted with black rings and spokes around the breasts, as found in the WCMA figurine (fig. 7). Many wear a shell-bead necklace, rendered in white or yellow dots around the neck (figs. 7, 8, 9). Many, such as in figures 7, 8, 10, and 11, have a raised collar below their necklace of unknown nature, and some (figs. 7, 12) have a black, striated, body-paint veil painted over the lower half of their face. Their often white-painted eyes are large and their mouths commonly bare visible white teeth. Most surfaces are painted with geometric designs of red, yellow, white, or black. Many of these designs, whether body paint, cloth, or tattoos, remain difficult to decipher, and no full study on the polychrome designs covering these figures has yet been performed (Pack 2006).

Like the Lagunillas figures, Ixtlan del Rio figures' heads and torsos are disproportionately sized, occupying a third of each figure. Both of these exaggerations may reflect wider Mesoamerican conceptions of the head or hair as the seat of reason and identity, as well as the locus of portions of the soul, such as the Aztec *tonalli* (McKeever Furst 1995). Also like Lagunillas figures, they tend to conform to standardized poses. The WCMA figure of a woman holding a pot represents a typical pose for female hollow figures from the Ixtlan del Rio tradition, many of whom stand upright while carrying a decorated pot on one shoulder.

The jewelry worn by Ixtlan del Rio women closely matches that found on the people she was buried with (Stone 2016). Fabric stamps (fig. 14) with a grid pattern and step-frets have been excavated from West Mexico. These closely resemble the patterns painted on the dress of many Ixtlan del Rio women (figs. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11), indicating that ceramic figurines wore jewelry and clothing very similar to their living counterparts (Pack 2006).

Female Ixtlan del Rio figurines often perform domestic activities, perhaps embodying the ideal for female identity, and the WCMA figurine is no exception. She, along with figures 8-12, holds a pot, while one (fig. 10) breastfeeds an infant. These depictions likely reflect the reality for women in ancient West Mexico. Sixteenth century Spanish sources, while riddled with biases, indicate that ancient Mesoamerican women worked primarily near the home and were responsible for child rearing, cooking, and cleaning (Klein 2006). Based on the domestic roles many Ixtlan del Rio ceramic women assume, West Mexicans likely held many of the same associations between femininity and domesticity as the Aztec and Maya did a millennia later. Despite her domesticity, WCMA's figurine of a woman with a pot exudes power. She is highly adorned; her earrings, symbols of status, are complex and large, and the rest of her body is richly painted, tattooed, or decorated. To many modern Western viewers with negative assumptions about homemaking, the "regal domesticity" of the Ixtlan del Rio women might seem paradoxical. To her West Mexican creators, however, this was no paradox.

In ancient Mesoamerica, nobility and domesticity were not contradictory but complementary. While domestic activities were certainly tied to women, this difference did not necessarily imply inferiority. Instead of hierarchical differences between genders, West Mexican gender roles may have been complementary (Pirtle 2016) and "grounded in separate but

mutually supportive spheres of activity” (Stocket 2005, 567-568). This conclusion would explain why the Ixtlan del Rio women do not seem devalued by their domesticity and is further supported by ceramic depictions of West Mexican ceremonies. These ceremonies or dances often showed women sharing space with men, literally and figuratively in an equal position (Day, Butterwick, and Pickering 1996). Similarly, women are depicted bloodletting from the cheek alongside men (Townsend 1998, 131). While women may be depicted in gender-specific roles and clothing, they were not inferior and may have held equal importance to men in village events or rituals.

Domesticity, far from being degrading, could itself impart significant power to women. Kristi Butterwick suggests, based on comparisons with the modern Tarahumara, that West Mexican women may have controlled the production of alcohol from agave, which in turn may have been crucial to certain religious rites (Butterwick 1998, 103). Among the Aztecs, weaving and cooking were high status activities, and rulers’ daughters were encouraged to devote themselves to fine weaving and cooking of elite foods (Brumfiel 1991, 244). WCMA’s woman with a pot wears an intricate dress, as do other similar Ixtlan del Rio women, and many Ixtlan del Rio figurines depict women cooking. High status jewelry and adornment is paired with domestic activities in West Mexican figurines, suggesting that culture held similar ideas about the power of domesticity as the Aztec. More abstractly, weaving and cooking are linked to production or creation, making them both inherently powerful and inherently female (Johnson 2012, 57). Even activities like sweeping could be understood as crucial to bringing order into the cosmos (Johnson 2012, 55).

Alternatively, the WCMA figurine's pot could represent marriage, not domesticity. Throughout most of West Mexico, male and female figurines were frequently paired, with many even being physically linked to one another (Townsend 1998). While some of these pairs are modern, artificial couplings by collectors, the presence of many physically connected male and female figurines, constructed as one joined sculpture, indicates these pairings have a real archaeological basis (fig. 15). These pairings may represent marital pairings. Specifically, they could depict the union of the bride and groom, the "most critical rite" within the marriage process (Townsend 1998, 123). Many of these pairings hold cups or bowls, suggesting the pot held by the WCMA figurine could be a ceremonial marriage vessel. The woman with the pot, perhaps once paired with a now lost or separated male figure, could have enshrined in perpetuity the joining of bride and groom or provided eternal testimonial that the deceased had undergone this key rite of passage (Townsend 1998).

Function, Use, and Meaning

The iconography of WCMA's pregnant woman and Woman with a Pot would have invoked entire fields of meaning to ancient West Mexicans. Their iconography is not random, but charged with specific meanings that reflect specific functions and uses for these sculptures. What were these functions? What did WCMA's pregnant woman or woman with a pot *do* deep in their shaft tombs, and did they serve the living, the dead, or both?

Central to this question is who these figurines depict. Early interpretations saw these figurines as anecdotal, representing normal people in everyday contexts doing mundane activities (Furst 1998). This view, however, fails to recognize the many exceptional and supernatural features these figurines display (Furst 1998). Several figurines depict gods or shamans

mid-transformation. Even body paint, almost ubiquitous among West Mexican figurines, certainly would not have been worn on a daily basis. The cross design on WCMA's pregnant woman and the step-frets on the skirts of many Ixtlan del Rio female figurines seem to evoke the axis mundi or ideas about the shape of the cosmos, rather than being simply pretty designs. Figurines thought to depict normal warriors often wear a horn-like headdress associated with shamanic activity and usually face left, a direction associated throughout Mesoamerica with evil, meaning they may actually represent shamans battling otherworldly forces (Furst 1998). Other scholars have reinterpreted these horns as stylized conch shells, a Mesoamerican symbol of rulership, and suggested many figurines represent rulers or elites (Graham 1998). Another common interpretation is that these figurines represent links from the living to ancestors (Townsend 1998) or generic, distant ancestors themselves, perhaps the founders of a ruling lineage (Norwood 2012). The generic and standardized facial features of figurines do not necessarily preclude them from embodying or instantiating specific ancestors. In a society reliant on oral history, the distinctive or individuating characteristic of ancestors often disappeared at their death (Marcus 2018). Instead, these faceless ancestors were identified through the use of their name, which would not survive in the archaeological record, or features that denoted their social identity, which does in the rich ornamentation of West Mexican figurines (Norwood 2012, 68).

The last major realm of interpretation suggests a relationship between shaft tomb figurines and dead they accompany. West Mexican figurines are highly stylized and fall into distinct categories, as in the case with WCMA's Ixtlan del Rio woman with a pot and the WCMA's Lagunillas pregnant woman, so claims of direct, literal portraiture are not convincing.

Moreover, archaeological evidence shows significant gender discrepancies between the dead and the figurines in their tomb (Pickering and Beekman 2016, 18-19). However, there is an undeniable correlation between the figurines and the bodies they accompany. Their placement is not random. Figurines often wear the same high status jewelry as skeletons in the same tomb (Stone 2016). In addition, more ornate figurines are typically found in more monumental tombs (Beekman 2016). Beyond status and social role, the figurines may have portrayed the dead in ways no longer visible. The archaeological record does not preserve the working memory of West Mexican inhabitants. While many features of the ceramic figurines are stylized, some, like the unique black face paint designs present on many of them, may have clearly represented specific individuals in the memory of their creators (Norwood 2012). Ritual naming and dressing ceremonies, common in Mesoamerica both currently and historically, may also have transformed generic clay people into specific, animate individuals (Marcus 2018). Like memory, the perishable evidence of these rituals would be difficult to find preserved. While these figurines are not portraits in a literal sense, their generic clay forms could have been colored by memory or animated by ritual to depict specific individuals.

Mesoamerican views on individuality may hint at even more non-literal forms of portraiture. Modern conceptions of portraiture likely do not apply to ancient Mesoamerica. In Mesoamerica, humanity was fundamentally homogenous, and “differences between people are nonessential” (Monaghan 1998, 141). Individualization, as we think of it, may not have been West Mexicans’ goal. Including information about the status or social role of the dead might have constituted a more accurate portrait than facial details would have. In Mesoamerica, information about class was often conveyed through body adornment, explaining the attention to

detail in the ornamentation of WCMA's woman with a pot and the decision to include jewelry on the otherwise minimalistic pregnant woman. This ornamentation could also hint at another possible form of portraiture: that of a specific ritual moment in the lives of the deceased. Using comparative ethnographic information, Townsend suggests that nude Lagunillas figurines may depict an act of ritual nudity undertaken as a coming of age initiation into adult womanhood (Townsend 122). The inclusion of these "ritual snapshots" of personhood in tombs could have served as eternal proof the deceased had achieved a certain status or social role. Instead of representing the facial appearance of individuals, West Mexicans may have intended these figurines to depict individuals in a different way: through class or through specific ritual moments in their lives.

So what do we know about these figurines? As we look at consistencies across these theories, from shamans to rulers to portraits, a few truths become evident. These sculptures are certainly not ordinary. They are marked both by the supernatural and by elite status signifiers. They are related to the people they are buried with, mirroring at least their status or social position, if not more. Lastly, and most crucially, we must add one trait: they were alive.

Throughout Mesoamerica, "art" was not a representation or a depiction, but was the thing depicted itself. Thus, depictions of living beings were themselves alive (Stone 2016). A dancing figure, "whether on a stela or in a figurine, danced always and forever" (Houston et al 2006, 252). The Mesoamerican world was saturated with an impersonal lifeforce, *pée* for the Zapotec, *ch'ul* for the Maya, and *teotl* for the Aztec, that rendered all things animate to different extents (Tate 2006). Mesoamerican sculptors engaged these lifeforces, injecting them into their work and rendering their medium animate (Tate 2006). The fact that many West Mexican figurines show

evidence of ritual breakage prove they shared these wider Mesoamerican views. Excavation at Parcelas in Colima have uncovered intentionally decapitated ceramic figures and olla with intentionally drilled holes (Lucido and Ramirez 2016). Ritual breakage has been found at sites across West Mexico and Mesoamerica as a whole. Why kill something that is not alive?

If broken figurines are dead, then to ancient West Mexicans, WCMA's intact figurines are alive. The pregnant woman and the woman with the pot lived on underground with the dead. Ultimately, who are these living women and why do they accompany the dead? These ceramic figurines might have served many purposes, all stemming from their unique position as living beings embedded with the dead. Occupying this liminal space—alive in the world of the dead—they could have facilitated communication between the two. Perhaps these figurines were mediators between the world of the living and the supernatural realm in which the dead resided. Through these figurines, the living could contact ancestors, deities, supernatural forces, reaching into normally inaccessible worlds. In order for figurines to function in this manner, they may have needed to reflect the status or social role of the deceased. The first descent of these figurines into a shaft tomb may have been one of many trips up or down the axis mundi, giving these cosmic travellers a uniquely powerful role in bridging the gap between levels of the cosmos in ancient West Mexico.

Figures



*Figure 1: Lagunillas, Ixtlan del Rio, 300 BCE - 300 CE
12 x 8 in.
Williams College Museum of Art
70.18*



*Figure 2: Lagunillas Type "D," Nayarit, 100 BCE - 250 CE
Arizona Museum of Natural History
No accession number listed*



*Figure 3: Nayarit, 200 BCE - 500 CE
16 x 15 x 9 in.
The Proctor Stafford Collection
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
M.86.296.7*



*Figure 4: Nayarit, 200 BCE - 400 CE
8 ¼ x 5 3/10 x 4 ½ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
M.2010.115.144*



Figure 5: Nayarit, 200 BCE - 500 CE

23 x 14 x 12 1/2 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Proctor Stafford Collection

M.86.296.3



Figure 6: Lagunillas, Nayarit, 100 CE - 300 CE

18 3/4 x 16 in.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Andrall and Joanne Pearson Collection

2005.91.9



*Figure 7: Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, 100 BCE - 100 CE
13 ¼ x 9 x 5 in.
Robinson Loan
Williams College Museum of Art
TL.98.13.2*



Figure 8: Nayarit, Ixtlán del Río, 200 BCE - 500 CE

19 11/16 × 11 13/16 × 5 1/2 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Proctor Stafford Collection

M.86.296.17



Figure 9: Nayarit, 300 BCE - 200 CE

18 1/4 × 11 1/2 × 6 1/4 in.

Virginia Museum of Fine Art

60.29.1



*Figure 10: Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, 100 BCE - 250 CE
14 5/8 in. height
Yale University Art Gallery
1958.15.17a*



*Figure 11: Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, undated
11.3 x 4.5 x 9.1 in.
William P. Palmer III Collection
Hudson Museum (University of Maine at Orono)
HM4122*



*Figure 12: Nayarit, 100 - 400 CE
23 x 12 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2018.443.3*



*Figure 13: Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, 100 - 800 CE
13 × 18 1/2 in.
Art Institute of Chicago
1989.639*



*Figure 14: Fabric Stamp, Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, Late Preclassic/Early Classic
William P. Palmer III Collection
Hudson Museum (University of Maine at Orono)
HM799*



*Figure 15: Nayarit, Ixtlan del Rio, 100 BCE - 200 CE
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1978.412.156*

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