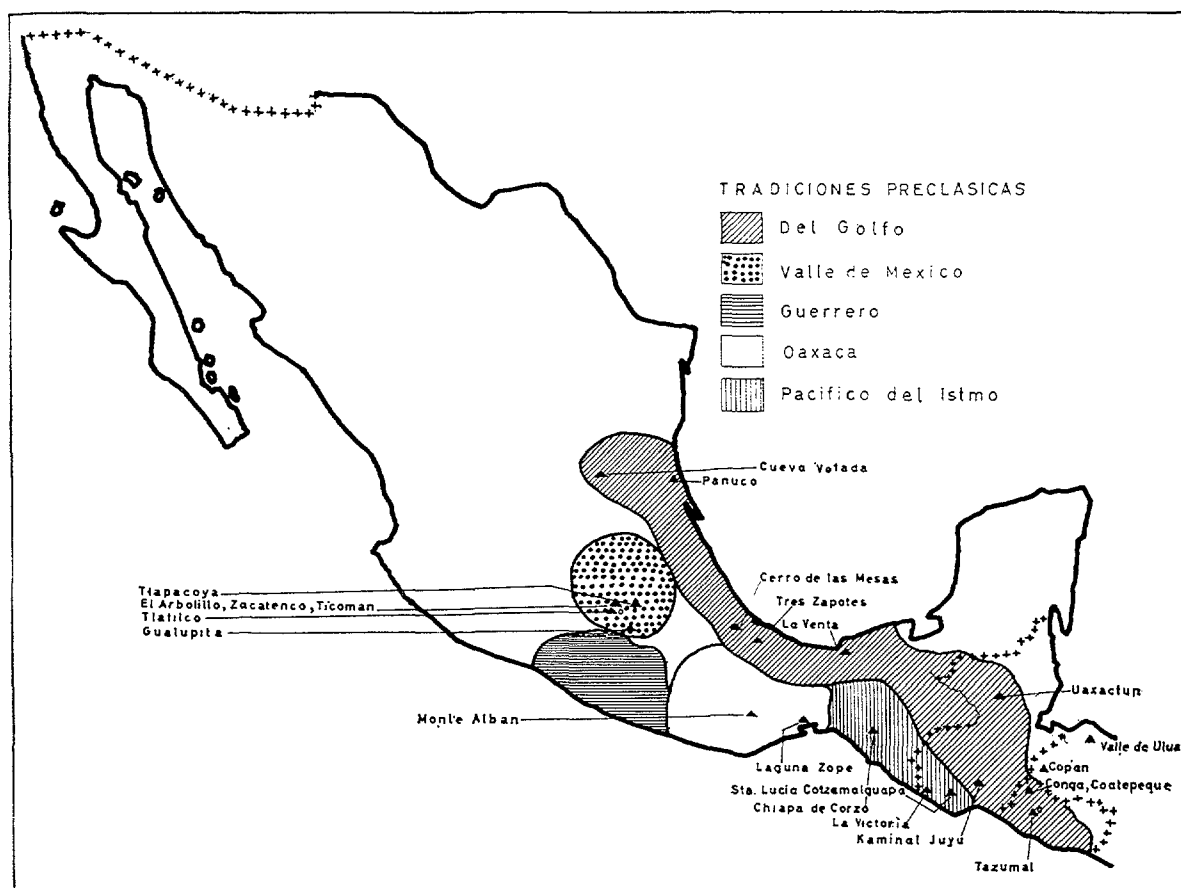


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Preclassic sites where examples of Olmec infantile sculpture have been found. Shaded areas indicate regional variations.

Infantile and Jaguar Traits in Olmec Sculpture

By AGUSTÍN DELGADO

THE OLMEC COMPLEX is a cultural manifestation which appeared in Middle America about 850 B.C. and lasted until about 200 B.C. Sculpture and pottery in Olmec style have been found as far north as Tampico, Tamaulipas, and to the south well into El Salvador, with more frequent finds in the Valley of Mexico, on the coast of Guerrero and along the Gulf Coast of Mexico, where the site of La Venta, Tabasco, was the principal center of the civilization (see map).

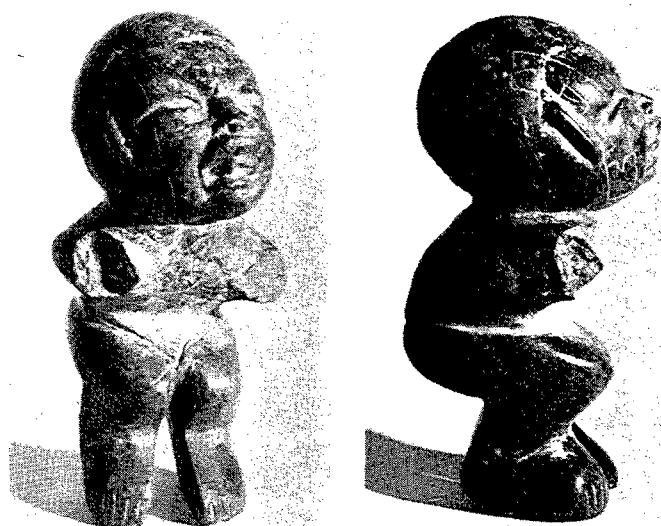
Within this culture flourished a unique art style, two characteristics of which are the skilful fusion of jaguar-like and human features and an emphasis on

infant portrayal. Both two- and three-dimensional representations reflect a varying balance between these elements. In some cases a feline body may bear a head with mixed feline and human features, while in others a distinctly human body, either adult or infantile, is combined with a human head in which tigrine elements may be present. Here we shall examine briefly some of the variants which occur in Olmec representations of infants. These include both normal and grotesque, probably pathological, types.

All these modeled or sculptured figures show certain common characteristics. They are always repre-



1. Chinantec Indian youth from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Note his mouth, which resembles the Olmec type.



2. Two views of a serpentine figure from Guerrero, Mexico. Height 9 cm. Niven Collection, American Museum of Natural History.



3. Basalt figure of infant from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz. Height 20 cm. Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Mexico.



4. Basalt figure of infant from Union Hidalgo, Oaxaca. Height 10 cm.



5. (Right) Squatting figure from La Venta, Tabasco, made of a hard polished stone. Height ca. 11 cm.

Olmec Sculpture continued

sented as naked or nearly so, and generally the sex is not denoted. Feline markings may or may not be present, but the mouth is characteristically portrayed in a pouting expression similar to that still seen among certain indigenous groups in Mexico (Figure 1). Many figures have a depression extending from mid-forehead to the occiput. The face may be oval or pear-shaped, and the eyes occasionally show a pronounced epicanthic fold. The gums, visible in open-mouthed figures, are usually toothless.

NON-FELINE INFANTS of normal physical aspect occur in both stone and clay. Whether squatting or standing, stone figurines showing normal physical condition are characterized by a semi-flexed position of the legs. Examples have been found in Guerrero, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Tabasco in Mexico, and from the site of El Baul in Guatemala.

The Guerrero example (Figure 2), made of serpentine, has its face contorted in a grimace apparently denoting weeping, and the cheeks bear an elongated engraved design of clearly Olmec type. The figure stands with knees flexed. A kneeling figure from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz (Figure 3), crudely carved in basalt, appears to be holding a small tubular object to its mouth. A similar piece (Figure 4) was purchased by the writer in Union Hidalgo, Oaxaca, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It shows a kneeling child gazing upward, with arms flexed and chin resting on the wrists, a characteristic attitude.

Another figure of this type (Figure 5) was found by Philip Drucker at La Venta, Tabasco. He describes it (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 153 [1952] 159) as a dancer with head thrown back, arms crossed at the chest, knees bent and an even distribution of weight which permits the figure to stand by itself. The head is elongated, and the chin is smaller and narrower than in the examples already cited.

From the same site of La Venta comes a monumental example in basalt (Figure 6). Erroneously called *La Abuelita* (Little Grandmother), it is actually a seated child holding a small box in its hands in the manner of an offering. The figure has a distinctly feline mouth.

The most southerly example of an infant looking upward was found by Edwin Shook in Guatemala (Figure 7; see *ARCHAEOLOGY* 9 [1956] 260). This fragment, including only the head and shoulders, is from the site of El Baul, near Santa Lucia Cotzumalhuapa in the Department of Escuintla, which is known for its ruins featuring monumental art. The



6. Stone monolith popularly called *La Abuelita*, at La Venta, Tabasco. Height 1.20 m.

7. Olmec figurine from El Baul, Guatemala.



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8. Front of stone altar at La Venta, Tabasco, showing infantile figure held by a seated personage.

Olmec Sculpture continued

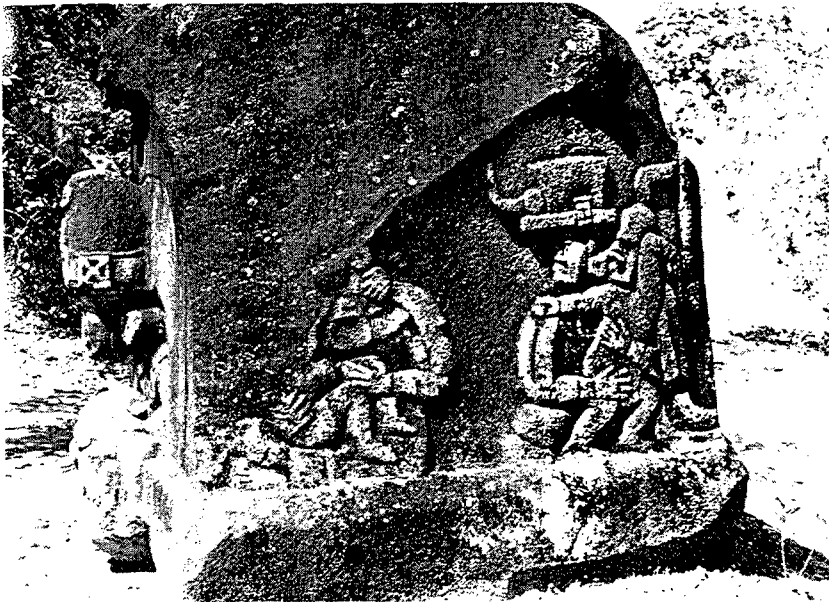
figure is of jadeite, with typical Olmec engraving on the cheeks and a helmet-like head-covering secured by a band under the chin. The infantile expression features a jaguar-like mouth with toothless gums, a rounded face and a marked epicanthic fold. In Shook's words: "When the head is held in a level position the posture suggests a seated figure, leaning forward slightly with shoulders hunched. . . . Behind the head and between the shoulder blades there is a projection, the nature of which cannot be determined."

ABNORMAL OR PATHOLOGICAL physical traits seem to characterize some Olmec figurines. Miguel Covarrubias, the Mexican painter who was a pioneer in the study of Olmec art, identified the following abnormalities: *dystrophia adiposa genitalis* and other irregularities in growth and distribution of fat caused by unbalanced secretion of the endocrine glands (particularly the pituitary), dwarfism, acromegaly, achondroplasm and abnormal curvature of the spine. That these figures may in fact represent misshapen children rather than adults with pathological traits is shown

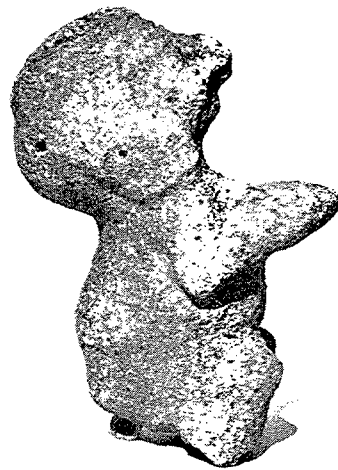
by the portrayal of the childlike figure held out in the arms of a seated personage on the front of La Venta Altar 5 (Figure 8) and other child-figures being cared for by attendants, all with jaguar-like mouths, on the sides of the altar (Figure 9).

Apparently pathological cases which occur in other infantile representations are those in which the lower jaw seemingly is lacking and some which, because of their strained "listening" position, appear to represent deaf children. Agnathous individuals are said actually to possess a mandible that is very flat and lacking in dentition, so that persons thus afflicted are reduced to nourishing themselves with fluids (but the impression is inescapable that the flat chins on some of the infantile sculptures are intended to represent a feline trait).

We show three figures which exhibit this presumed pathological condition: one from Iguala, Guerrero, a second from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz, and a third of unknown provenience, now in the American Museum of Natural History. The Iguala specimen (Figure 10) was found by Miguel Covarrubias, who described it as "a fat-bodied piece, minus the head, in black polished serpentine with an astonishing realism and workmanship. . . . Eight years (after my



9. One side of the stone altar at La Venta.



11. Basalt figure from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz. Height 16 cm.

10. (Left) Polished serpentine figure of infant from Iguala, Guerrero.



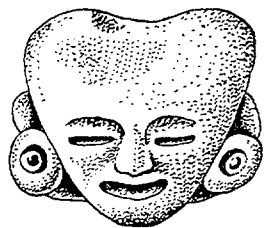
12. Basalt head stylistically associated with Mexico's Gulf Coast cultures: two views. Height 21 cm.



13. "Listening" infant of basalt from Veracruz.



14. Olmec figurine of hard gray stone showing forehead cleft. Covarrubias Collection, National Museum, Mexico City.



15. Clay figurine head with forehead undulation, from Teotihuacan.



16. "Baby-face" type of figurine from Morelos, Mexico.



Olmec Sculpture *continued*

having found the torso) . . . the painter Diego Rivera, another avid collector, gave me a figurine head of black serpentine which by a stroke of rare fortune turned out to be the missing head of my figurine. It was pear-shaped, with protruding eyes, fleshy jowls and an extremely strange mouth . . . like that of a child or dwarf born without the lower jaw, showing the trachea sculptured in realistic form" (*Cuadernos Americanos* V, 4 [1946] 153).

The figurine from Cerro de las Mesas (Figure 11), in the storerooms of the National Museum of Archaeology in Mexico, is made of basalt. The figure is squatting with knees flexed, the head thrown slightly backward, and holds in its hands a rectangular object, as in the case of the *Abuelita* sculpture from La Venta. There is a ridge of hair along the top of the head and locks on each side falling to the shoulder, but the back of the head is clean-shaven. Only two shallow perforations remain to show the eyes, and the open mouth shows a complete upper dentition, but the lower jaw and the teeth are completely lacking.

The third agnathous example (Figure 12) is a

basalt head associated stylistically with the south coast of the Gulf of Mexico. It was originally part of a complete figurine probably broken in antiquity. The scalp is clean-shaven in the Olmec manner, with incised eyes, heavy jowls, rectangular ears and a mouth with a distinctly feline upper lip and flattened lower jaw. The neck is almost nonexistent and merges into what was evidently a fleshy body.

Passing to figures of the "deaf" type, we show a magnificent basalt figure representing a child, which Covarrubias found in the state of Veracruz (Figure 13). The left hand is raised to the ear and the mouth is slightly open. The head is clean-shaven. The figure stands with knees slightly flexed, the feet enlarged to afford a better balance.

A NUMBER OF INFANT FIGURES have accentuated jaguar-like features. Covarrubias says of this classic Olmec style: ". . . Its ideology is . . . impenetrable. It represents exclusively gods or mythic beings who appear to be simultaneously jaguars and children or humanized jaguar cubs, with humpbacked dwarfs and other deformed types. The stylistic ideal of the Olmec artist was undoubtedly based upon his own physical type, modified in certain aspects of a pathological character and imbued with the feline traits" (*Cuadernos Americanos* V, 4 [1946] 178).

It is interesting to speculate that the connection between infant and jaguar features may have arisen from the similarity between the pouting mouths of Indian infants and those of jaguars. Moreover, the eminent ethnohistorian Wigberto Jimenez Moreno comments (*Cuadernos Americanos* I, 5 [1942] 113-145): "The obsession with feline characteristics must have had an essentially religious motivation." This seems a point well taken: both children and adults represented with feline features may thus acquire divinity and power from the jaguar, which symbolized force, mystery, the night and, ultimately, death.

In Olmec representations of both infants and adults there is a depression or cleft in the forehead. A typical example is shown in Figure 14, a child with a jaguar-like mouth.

The forehead depression is carried over into Classic (A.D. 250-850) Teotihuacan clay figurines from the Valley of Mexico, appearing as an undulation which gives the head a heart-shaped or bilobate form. At sites of the Teotihuacan culture, this head shape appears particularly during periods II and III, on thousands of small hand-modeled and, later, mold-made clay figurines (Figure 15).

In Late Preclassic times appears one of the most interesting figurine types associated with the Olmec culture, the so-called "baby-face" type, hand-modeled



17. Left: Female "baby-face" figure from La Venta, Tabasco. Above: Figure of "baby-face" type from Coatepeque, El Salvador. The arms were jointed. Height 21 cm. Collection of Pedro Geoffroy.

Olmec Sculpture continued

in clay. The figurines are usually large and hollow and are frequently painted white. This type may be represented standing or seated, with childlike facial features and smiling, but sometimes with feline features ranging from only slight distortion to an almost perfect copy of a jaguar mouth.

Until a few years ago these clay figures were attributed only to the Valley of Mexico, the state of Morelos and the Gulf Coast from Veracruz to Tabasco. Recently they have been found as far south as El Salvador. Figure 16 illustrates a typical Morelos example. Three unusual "baby-face" figures showing well defined female sexual features were found by Roberto Gallegos in La Venta in 1959, one of which is shown in Figure 17 (*left*). A "baby-face" figure from the site of Conga, in the province of Coatepeque, El Salvador, is the most unusual example (Figure 17, *above*). It is large and hollow, and its arms, now lost, were made separately and articulated. It apparently dates to the Late Preclassic period.

WE HAVE SEEN that the representation of infants, often with jaguar-like features, played an important part in Olmec art. But what of the significance behind these strange, often grotesque, combinations? In Early and Middle Preclassic times the people in Mesoamerica were nomadic hunters (with incipient agriculture) who wandered in the jungle or on the plains and because their weapons were simple lived

in fear of the stronger animals. They tended to worship the jaguar because of its power, its mystery and its nocturnal prowess. Probably they yearned to possess such power so as to be able to dominate the jaguar and, indeed, all situations beyond their control.

The jaguar cult may be seen to have a long and almost unbroken existence in Mesoamerican history. We have noted its combination in the Preclassic period with infant and adult anthropomorphic features in Olmec sculpture; during the same period in Atlihuayan, Morelos, adult figures of clay are represented with jaguar costumes and masks. At Teotihuacan the jaguar is the most common figure in recently discovered murals of the Classic period. During the Toltec period at Chichen Itza there are jaguar thrones, and at Tula, the Toltec capital, the jaguar representation is frequent. Among the Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico the *caballero tigre* order of warriors was highly regarded. Thus the Olmec infantile sculptures with occasional jaguar features illustrated here are early representations of a religious theme central to most of the Mesoamerican civilizations.

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