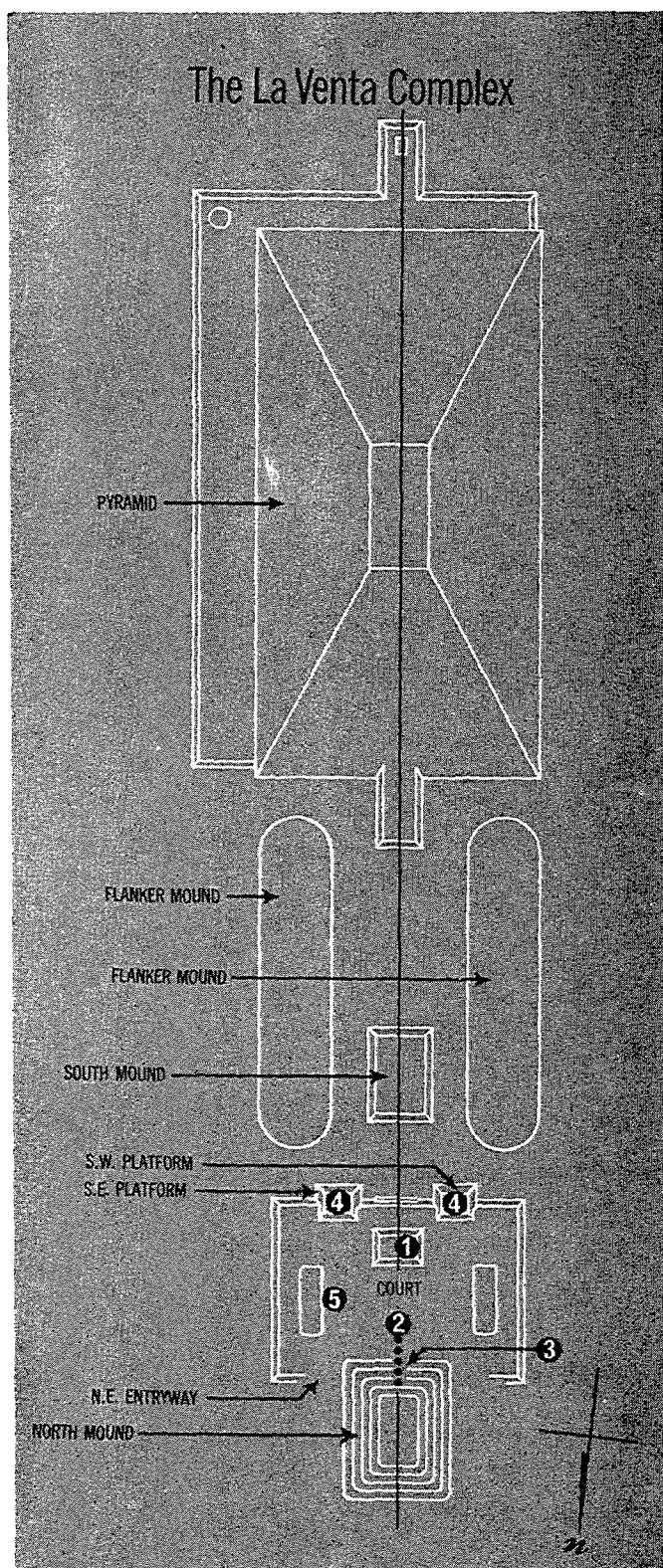


By ALINE EVANS

Archaeology

and the

Motion Picture



THE WORK of the archaeologist, so splendidly appropriate for motion picture documentation, is generally served up, frozen, in a static medium of communication. The delicate unearthing of a prehistoric figurine becomes immobilized in print and color plates. The toil which acquaints us with an unimagined civilization is captured and tamed between hard covers.

While nothing is ever likely to replace the written word, its message can often be augmented and carried into wider dimensions by cinematography. A motion picture can say: this is happening *now*; look at it, be part of it. Feel the hot sun and the scrape of shovel upon stone. And it can teach: watch the progress of this excavation. Observe the technique. Look closely at this detail, much more closely than you could with the naked eye. A motion picture can also capsule time and space: see, in essence, wherever you happen to be, four hundred years of development uncovered in six months of excavation—something you could see in no other way.

If the fruits of archaeology are infrequently committed to film, they are still less frequently communicated by premeditated, professional films. I became intimately acquainted with one which, though unpremeditated, turned out to be of professional quality. Here is its history.

In 1955, at the Olmec site of La Venta, in the state of Tabasco, Mexico, an archaeological team found evidence of an extremely early high civilization. Nine years later, a film entitled "The Excavations at La Venta" was released at the University of California, Berkeley.

Twice explored briefly during the 1940's, the site had already achieved prominence through publication

(Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletins* 138 [1943] and 153 [1952]) and the full-scale study of 1955 was even more thoroughly documented. Anyone sufficiently interested could seek information in professional publications, magazine articles and contemporary histories of Precolumbian culture. The academic world had access to seminars and lectures, often illustrated by slides, and a favored few who traveled to Mexico were able to see the La Venta artifacts in museums there. But no one could see the complex of La Venta, for by 1956 it no longer existed. Nor had any of the expeditions made provision for a professionally produced film. Nevertheless, by a fortunate set of circumstances, "Excavations at La Venta" was brought to the screen nearly a decade after the fact.

Explored at various times by Matthew Stirling, Philip Drucker, Waldo Wedel and Robert Heizer, La Venta yielded its most significant secrets during the 1955 studies, conducted by Heizer and Drucker. Occupying a small island in the Tonala River, about twelve miles inland from the Gulf of Campeche, the site proved to be a highly developed and well organized architectural complex. It was dominated by a huge pyramid, to the north of which symmetrical clay mounds and a ceremonial plaza lay along a north-south center line. A staggering amount of stone had gone into its construction, both functionally and decoratively, although the closest source of stone was at least eighty miles away.

Basalt had been used for sculptures of great sophistication—monuments and stelae, altars and colossal heads. Serpentine slabs laid as pavements were found deeply buried, apparently deliberately. Two of these had been embedded in twin platforms east and west of the center line, each measuring 15 x 25 feet and laid like a mosaic to represent the face of a jaguar.

Smaller treasures included some two thousand exquisitely carved jade objects which had been cached in tomb-like structures, buried along the center line, or sealed within the mounds. Most of the artifacts bore the distinctive Olmec trademark—an art style reflecting no traceable earlier cultural influence.

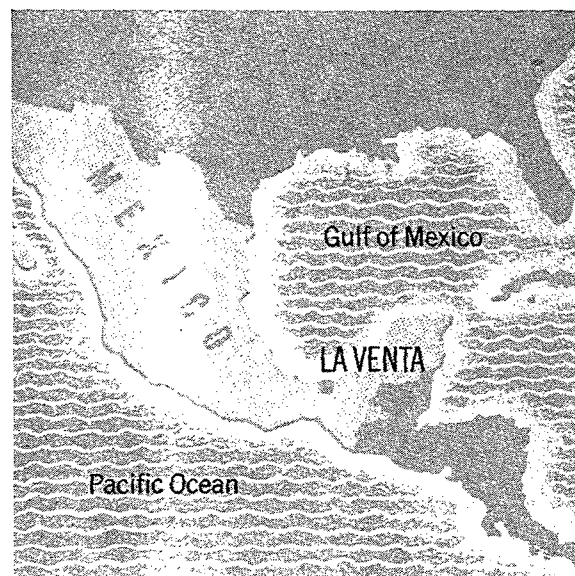
Here was exciting evidence of a great ceremonial center, superbly constructed, enormously wealthy, perhaps serving as an Olmec national treasury. But radiocarbon dating brought even headier news. La Venta, it appeared, had been founded about eight hundred years before the birth of Christ, earlier than any known Mesoamerican site of comparable development.

Built in four construction phases, the site was in continuous use until at least 400 B.C., when it was abandoned at an apparent peak of development, its demise as mysterious as its origin.

After the 1955 studies, all the artifacts were removed to various Mexican national institutions, and subsequently unauthorized bulldozing obliterated the site's main area. Except for the great pyramid, the surface of which was barely scratched by excavation, the complex of La Venta was gone. Limited visual records remained: color transparencies, a handful of motion picture scenes of the earlier expeditions and about two thousand feet of film taken in 1955 by a member of the party for a personal record.

IN 1961 THIS FILM came to the attention of the University of California's Extension Media Center. This department, based at Berkeley, is the educational communications facility for the nine University of California campuses, producing the films or tapes required by the academic community as well as maintaining a public rental library and a film sales division. Generally the Motion Picture Production staff executes each of the myriad operations which transform an idea into a motion picture, but often a project presents itself with certain production phases already completed. In the case of La Venta all possible location photography had been accomplished.

AS A DEPARTMENTAL PRODUCER I was assigned to evaluate the 1955 motion picture footage. The photography had not been undertaken with a finished professional film in mind, and we concluded that such a film could not result from it alone. This was a challenging decision not only because of La Venta's unique historical significance but because of the won-

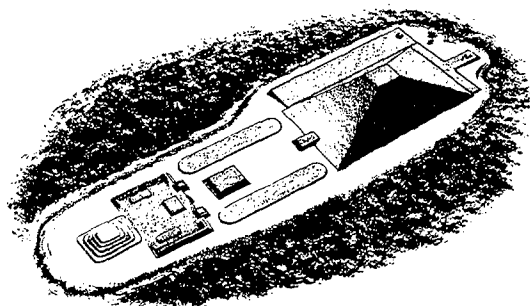




LA VENTA as the 1955 party found it, view looking north along central trench started in the 1940's.



THE PYRAMID at La Venta.



Motion Picture continued

ders we had seen upon the screen—a serpentine jaguar mask emerging from ancient clay, an astonishing pavement offering beneath it, consisting of twenty-eight layers of serpentine slabs. Sixteen arresting figurines were cautiously exposed in the positions chosen for them over two thousand years ago—an arrangement suggesting a ritual ceremony. As other treasures came to light before our eyes, we knew that some means of making a film about La Venta would have to be found.

Salvation lay in the eight hundred or more color transparencies which had also been taken in 1955. We considered the possibility of photographing these with a motion picture camera and combining the results with the best of the film footage. By means of camera movement, close shots of single details and adroit editing, this material could conceivably be brought to life. We ran a series of tests, with favorable results. The slides were technically excellent for re-photography, and their content would enable us to tell a connected cinematic story.

It was now necessary to finance the film. A proposal to the National Science Foundation made these points: La Venta no longer existed as a complex; we believed that the combination of motion picture footage, re-photographed slides and original animated sequences could put on record a significant phase of Middle American cultural development. The resulting film would have application for the undergraduate classroom, for professionals who knew La Venta only through publication and for a lay audience increasingly interested in art and antiquity. We outlined our proposed modus operandi and submitted a budget of approximately twenty thousand dollars for a half-hour 16mm. color and sound film. In July 1962 these funds were granted.

Another partnership between Motion Picture Production and an academic sponsor was thus officially consummated. Robert F. Heizer, Professor of Anthropology at Berkeley and co-leader of the 1955 expedition, had signed the grant proposal as principal consultant and would supervise the content throughout the project. The film staff, responsible for production details and cinematic excellence, consisted of myself as writer-producer-director, a cinematographer, an art director, assorted supporting personnel and, in a supervisory capacity, the head of the Media Center.

Making a motion picture from still material, while not uncommon, presents a special set of problems. Our first was to view, identify and evaluate all eight hundred slides. With Dr. Heizer's help, we grouped them into broad categories such as "Southwest Platform," "Ceremonial Court," "Colossal Heads" and



EXCAVATIONS at La Venta: Southwest Platform in left foreground. Above the central trench stands a columned tomb which contained a treasure trove of jade.

"Rejects"—the first of many winnowings. We then had to discover, within each category, some continuity from slide to slide which could be adapted for the motion picture. At the same time, the chosen film footage had to be considered and correlated, as well as the proposed animation sequences. Also to be digested were some slides taken in the 1940's and lent

by the National Geographic Society, which sponsored all three La Venta expeditions. These would enable us to correlate some of the earlier discoveries with the 1955 findings.

When I felt sufficiently familiar with the visual material and with the background texts supplied by Dr. Heizer, I wrote the first draft of a script and submitted it to him for approval. Ideally, the script comes first and dictates the construction of the film, but in the case of La Venta, as with all films involving field shooting, the material on hand dictated the script to a great extent. Since we had determined in advance what we were visually equipped to say, the final draft differed from the first only in length and literacy.

Concurrently with the writing went the further distillation of the slides. We reached the point of giving them scene numbers, which were written into the script. The mechanics of photographing them had been explored and solved—they would be shot flat on a professional animation stand, so that the effect of

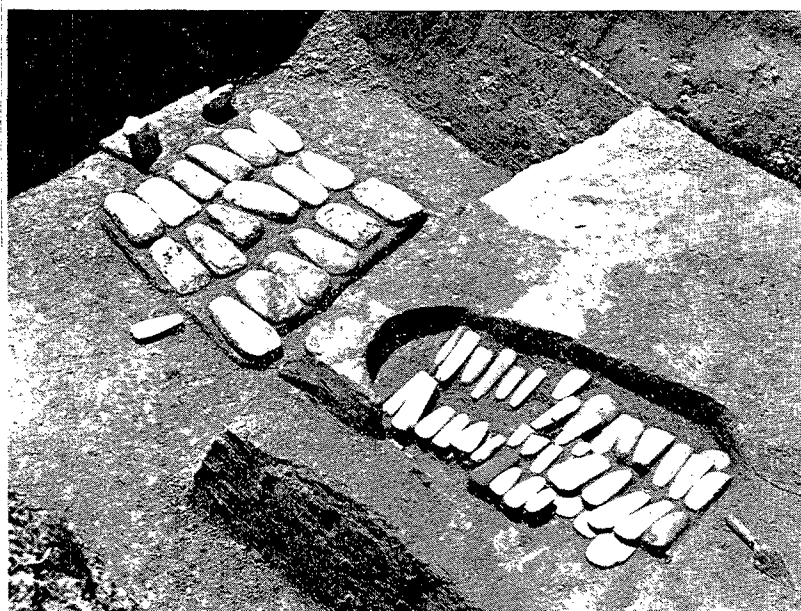
movement could be created. A macro-cinematographic lens would permit extreme close-ups of one-quarter of a 35mm. slide. Color-correction tests had been made on representative slides, and the cinematographer's notebook was filled with information on filters, focus and exposures.

A means had been found of designing and indicating specific shooting instructions for each of our small transparencies. We had postcard-size color prints made of the 140 slides chosen, and these were mounted on file cards with their scene numbers attached at the top. On the prints themselves we marked off in grease pencil the areas to be photographed, and in the margin of each card appeared the instructions (pan, tilt, zoom, full shot, etc.), along with the footage required and the type of filter, if any. Weeks of toil and scheming went into this phase, yet the color prints made it possible to forecast effective sequences with gratifying accuracy.

Fairly often the script's camera directions called for "ANIMATION"—a technique which can be an aesthetic pleasure, a demonstration tool, a means of orientation or a bridge of gaps. In the La Venta film it was needed for all of these purposes. A treatment with maps was designed in order to show the Olmec cultural area in relation to others; while upon an architect's blueprint of the site the important features



DEEP TRENCH exposing buried pavement offering. The columned tomb appears at the top.



AXE BLADES mostly of jade or serpentine.

Motion Picture continued

would be progressively plotted. A motion picture sequence of the excavation of the Southwest Platform was to be followed by an animated build-up showing the construction techniques.

Animation's most valuable function in this film, however, was to recreate La Venta itself. Work proceeded on a three-dimensional scale model of the complex. The structures were of graduated sizes, so that the growth of four centuries could be shown. This device, together with the periodic color changes of the earth floorings, would, we hoped, impart to the viewer the immensity of such a long-range construction project.

Nine months were thus spent in assembling materials and data, in achieving a complete and specific shooting script. Every detail, from titles to the colors of the model, had been subjected to Dr. Heizer's approval. Several rehearsals were staged in which slides and motion picture scenes were projected in script order, while the accompanying narration was read aloud. The shooting of the slides became, as we had hoped, largely a matter of following the instructions on the color prints.

The animation sequences were somewhat more complicated. The heavy model base, mounted on wheels, had to be pushed manually past the camera a number of times for motion shots, and very precise record-keeping was necessary to ensure that the correct number of structures in the correct sizes appeared in each shot, as La Venta "grew." The blueprint presented similar problems of meticulous detail, but eventually we had the complete footage in hand.

IN THE EDITING PROCESS "La Venta" gradually became the film we had planned and hoped for. The slides did appear to come alive and they did blend, often dramatically, with the motion picture sequences. The model and blueprint, repeatedly intercut with live scenes of the excavation's progress, created a feeling of familiarity with the long dead complex.

After we had been through several cuts—the cinematographer and I each working on half of the film—we recorded the narration track, roughly to time. And in the fine-cutting stages, with the narrator's voice making points on cue with visual action, La Venta began to draw breath again.

One production item still remained: a musical background for opening and closing titles. We envisioned something very simple, possibly played on an ancient instrument. In the end, the Lowie Museum of Anthropology contributed a Maya slit-drum, for which a graduate music student composed a haunting and

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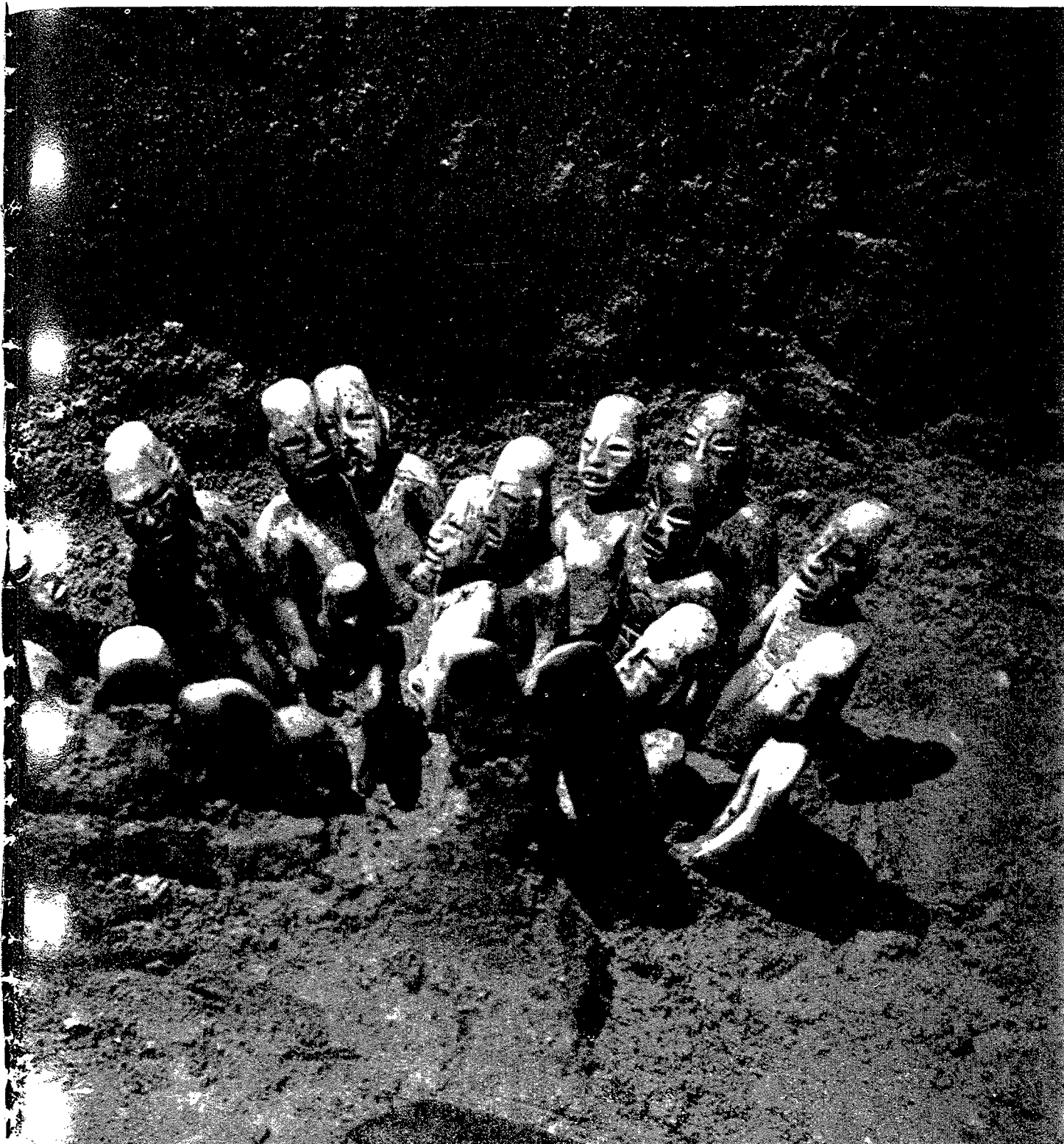
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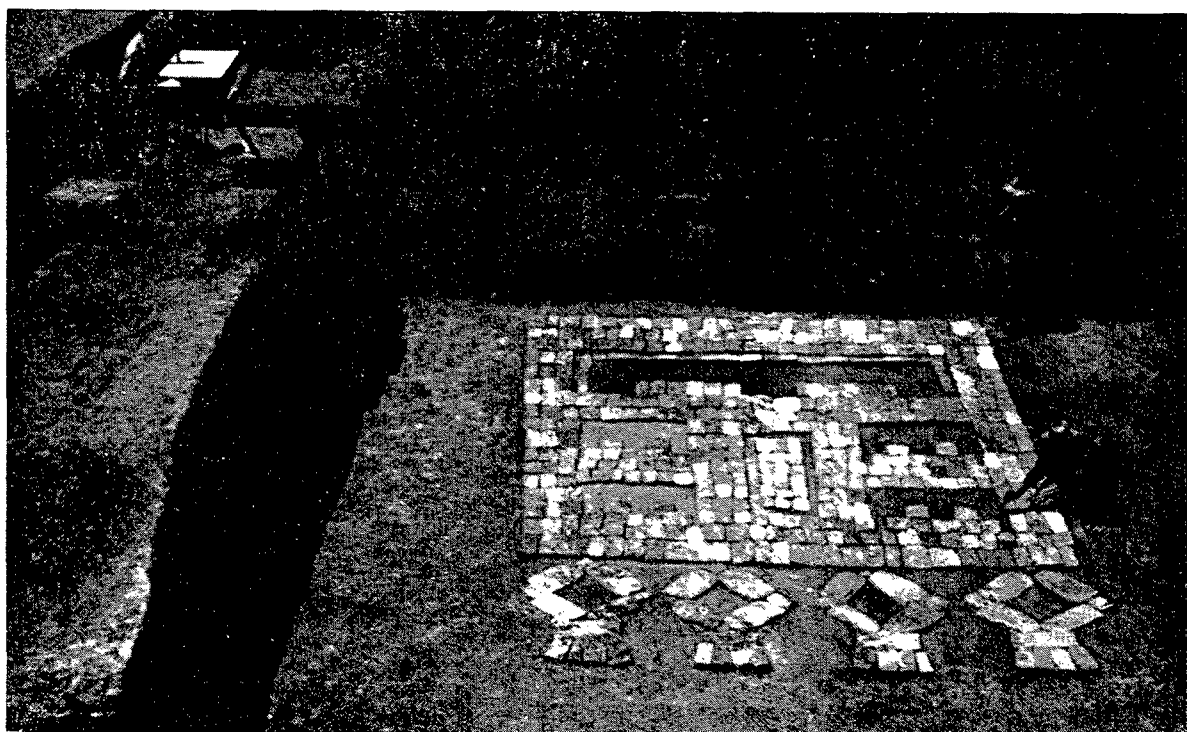
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GROUP of sixteen figurines as they were found. Thirteen are of serpentine, two of jade and one of granite.



SOUTHWEST PLATFORM as it appeared during excavation.



MOSAIC of serpentine (15x20 feet) buried in Southwest Platform. A jaguar mask is represented (head at bottom of picture, mouth at top).

Motion Picture continued

The film "Excavations at La Venta" is thirty minutes long and is available for rental or purchase from University of California Extension Media Center—Distribution, Berkeley, California 94720.

primitive rhythm. This was the perfect final touch. Twelve months after the granting of funds, the picture and sound-track left our hands for the final stages of film-making—cutting the camera original and all laboratory processes. In September 1963 we screened the first print of "Excavations at La Venta."

Since its original release in 1964 the film has been in steady use. The seven rental copies in the Media Center Library remain booked well ahead by universities, colleges and high schools from Alaska to Florida, as well as by public libraries, museums and art groups. It has been shown in two film festivals, at a national anthropological conference, on library and museum film series, at archaeological conferences, in the classroom; it has also been viewed by architects, science groups, at least one school of design and by the general public. Its sales record includes purchases by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Art Library and the Low Memorial Library of Columbia University. Both professional and lay critics have called it a lucid, artistic distillation of an incredible amount of information.

To me "La Venta's" chief distinction lies in its rarity—it is one of the few professionally produced archaeological films. A better film would have been possible, of course, had the 1955 expedition made advance plans for a motion picture. Priceless moments, now lost, could have been preserved on the spot for less money and time than we spent in a salvage operation. Though it is obviously impractical to equip every expedition with a film crew, more thought might well be given to professional documentation of high-level projects, where there is reasonable promise of striking film-worthy material.

More cinematic use could certainly be made of the color transparencies which are now used as standard field documentation. There are many disadvantages to producing a film in this way—the frustration of limited or unusable material, the toil of photographing slides in meaningful sequences, and the results which can never quite equal live footage. Nevertheless, the La Venta excavations are now cinematically documented, while equally spectacular archaeological events remain imprisoned in static records.



REACHING nineteenth pavement layer with work now confined to small shaft.



STONE SCULPTURE ("Rattlesnake Monument") found in 1955. Note plumed serpent encircling human figure.

BORN IN MOBILE, ALABAMA, Aline Evans attended the University of Alabama, then worked in several cities as a radio copywriter. In San Francisco she began to learn film-making and worked as writer and film editor in commercial studios and for the University of California Extension (Berkeley). In 1959 she joined the Extension Media Center staff as a producer-director and remained six years. Mrs. Evans has produced films in various fields—microbiology, anthropology, physical education, ophthalmology, music education—as well as "La Venta." At present in New Orleans, she is doing research on jazz and on the psychology of New Orleans, as well as carrying on promotion work.