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The Art and History of Oaxaca, Mexico

Historically, the art of Oaxaca, Mexico has been influenced mainly by the Zapotec people. The Zapotec settled in the Oaxaca Valley and the name of their civilization was Monte Albán. This great site of grandeur leaves archaeologists and artists wondering about the life of the ancient people and how the civilization was just as quickly deserted as it was built. Many examples of sculpture, pottery, and architecture exist today as a reminder of that time period and an inquisitive insight to the Zapotec way of life in early Monte Albán. With ruins filled with architectural and artistic examples, theories of that era vary vastly. Another great point of interest for artists is the modern-day versions of ancient Zapotec sculpture, the world-famous Oaxacan wood carvings. Monte Albán is truly an exquisite example, displaying old ruins, posing questions about the era, and giving insight to Zapotec style of pottery, sculpture, and art, which can certainly be traced to modern-day interpretations.

Marc Alexander, a European journalist that lived in Oaxaca in order to learn more about the mysterious Zapotec culture, wrote an article titled "The Olympus of Oaxaca." His thesis statement refers to the ancient ruins of the culture and states that "The remains of impressive Zapotec temples and pyramids at Monte Albán testify to the glorious past of a culture whose creativity endures even today."¹

Monte Albán was once the ceremonial capital of Mexico's Zapotec, who created an Olympus to honor their gods, priests, and nobles. Monte Albán was founded "some five hundred

¹ Alexander, Marc. The Olympus of Oaxaca. p 1.

years before the birth of Christ” and is located on top of an artificially leveled plateau, spanning about eight acres. The ancient site of the Zapotec has been deserted for more than thirteen hundred years.²

The name Monte Albán was actually imposed on the center. It was named after a seventeenth-century Spanish noble named Don Montalbán. The center’s original name was Danibaan³, which means Sacred Mountain. “The Zapotec were generally known by the Nahuatl name imposed by the Aztecs, but they called themselves the Be’en’a, meaning ‘the People.’” About thirty thousand commoners were dominated by fewer than three hundred aristocrats and religious figures.⁴

The Zapotec center went through five stages of development beginning around 500 B.C. It reached its zenith in the seventh century, a period of “great prosperity and stability.” There were palaces and temples, which were built from large stone blocks lugged to the mountain by peasants who did not have any assistance from machinery or large animals. This hard work from the peasants emphasizes the dedication and devotion to their gods and their leaders. Zapotec artisans constructed a “ball court, an observatory, pyramids, temples, and palaces, all heavily ornamented with intricately carved facades that were plastered and painted in array of colors.”⁵

The importance of Monte Albán in the Zapotec empire is evident not only in its size and complexity, but in its “monumental architecture and hundreds of carved stones and monuments that record events and places important to the center and presumably to the empire.” Some monuments are thought to depict Teotihuacán visitors to Monte Albán; fifty others may depict

² Ibid. p 1-2.

³ Ibid. p 1-2.

⁴ Ibid. p 1-2.

⁵ Ibid. p 2.

places conquered by the Zapotec. “Over 300 hieroglyphs, once arranged in gallery fashion, have been interpreted as depicting captives slain by the rulers of Monte Albán, apparently during the first few hundred years of the center’s existence.” Also found in this region were at least 2,000 man-made terraces that extend from the summit of the hill of Monte Albán and two adjacent hills four hundred meters to the valley floor.⁶

Monte Albán enjoyed trade and cultural exchange with other great civilizations. The trade center located to the north was Teotihuacán and the other major one was Tikal of the Maya lowlands. Because of these trade routes, the Zapotec enjoyed centuries of peace and prosperity. “Over time, Zapotec culture grew increasingly more sophisticated and complex. Monte Albán rose to new heights of achievement in architecture, sculpture, and gold and silver work. Zapotec priests devised two distinct time-management systems, a 365-day solar calendar and a 260-day ritual one, used as a divination tool.”⁷

Michael J. O’Brien and Dennis E. Lewarch composed an analysis of the area of the Oaxaca Valley, specifically concentrating on Monte Albán. One view for the development of the Zapotec center is that of Sanders and Nichols. Political centralization of the Valley of Oaxaca and the development of the Zapotec state in Monte Albán are believed to have not existed until after A.D. 400. This is because prior to that time, “Monte Albán was essentially one of a series of agrarian communities (settlements of subsistence farmers) with fulltime specialization probably limited to the production of sumptuary items.”⁸

⁶ O’Brien, Michael J. Lewarch, Dennis E. Regional Analysis of the Zapotec Empire, Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. p 264-5.

⁷ Alexander. p 3.

⁸ O’Brien. Lewarch. p 267.

An opposing view to this theory, also represented by O'Brien and Lewarch's analysis is Blanton's opinion. He argues that Monte Albán was founded in 500 B.C. as a "neutral capital by several competing chiefdoms of fairly equal strength." After its founding, it was the "center of a state-level organization that sought to protect its interests from threats posed by groups outside the valley."⁹

Yet another view included in O'Brien and Lewarch's analysis is the view of Flannery and Marcus. They believe that the "existence of an expansionist Zapotec empire by 200 B.C. – a development caused by a population/resource imbalance in the valley. To reach such a level, the leadership would have had to develop the capacity to carry out administrative-military actions at great distances from the capital, requiring the development of internal administrative specialization and the concomitant capacity to delegate authority effectively. The costs of this administrative transformation were no doubt defrayed in part by tribute exaction in the conquered regions."¹⁰

It is believed that the fall of this great center started around the seventh century. There seemed to be a sense of "unrest and noncompliance spreading among the peasantry." The ruins show that Zapotec commoners "had ceased their sacred civic duty to maintain the great buildings of their ceremonial center." Structures were neglected, cracked facades of pyramids were not repaired, and paint began to peel off stone walls. The Zapotec city soon began to resemble a decaying ruin, a civilization that was "dying not by violence but from indifference and willful neglect." Only about one-fifth of the Zapotec population remained by the year A.D. 750. Only a

⁹ Ibid. p 267.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 267.

half-century later, Monte Albán's Great Plaza and its buildings were "empty shells, the tombstones of a dead civilization."¹¹

Marc Alexander also points out a reason that may have caused the quick decay of this civilization. He states that overcrowding and population growth have also contributed. Cultivating the same exact land repeatedly may have left the land incapable of being fertile enough to produce enough food for that many people; there were an estimated thirty thousand or more mouths. Therefore, crop failure may have caused the Zapotec culture to disperse.

Alexander's other proposal to the decline of this civilization derives from the government of that era. Monte Albán's government was a theocracy. The common people were supposed to comply with their rulers and follow their wishes. "If people ceased to believe in the divine rite of their kings, then theocracy is stripped of any spiritual or secular authority it may have had. A handful of princes and priests are therefore disempowered, unable to control the mass or prevent the peasants from packing up their belongings and walking away and leaving the bejeweled nobility to fend for themselves."¹²

Monte Albán's gods, priests, and rulers of its ancient civilization are gone, but the temples, palaces, and pyramids of that era still stand for people to view. Some of the descendants from the Zapotec still live in that general region, the valleys, and their culture still thrives. "Some 425,000 modern Zapotecs speak their traditional language and many live in the villages or towns of the Oaxaca Valley, such as Teotitlán del Valle, sometimes called "the City of a Thousand

¹¹ Alexander. p 3.

¹² Ibid. p 4.

Weavers.” Modern Zapotec culture continues the creative spirit of the ancestors who built one of the wonders of the pre-Columbian world.”¹³

A few more great findings from the Zapotec center of Monte Albán or the surrounding Valley of Oaxaca include a gold pendant, a statue of a jaguar, and an effigy head. The gold pendant was part of Tomb Seven’s treasure. It was discovered in the 1930s by Alfonso Caso and it dates to the Mixtec, who took over Monte Albán after its decline. The jaguar is a terra cotta statuette of a seated jaguar. It is thought to be iconic of the cult of the jaguar found at Monte Albán.¹⁴ The effigy head is actually thought to be a bell. It dates to about the late fifteenth century and it is made of gold. It was found in the Valley of Oaxaca, thought to be mainly Mixtec. The bell retains its original clapper. “The large opening through the nose is presumed to have held some sort of dangling ornament; such ornaments are often large enough to cover the mouth.”¹⁵

More exquisitely detailed sculptures were found from the Oaxaca Valley, dating to the Zapotec. E.P. Richardson, the Educational Secretary at The Detroit Institute of Arts, records his findings and beliefs about these ancient pottery figures. “Clay in the form of terra cotta has greater capacities for energetic and forceful treatment than almost any other medium. It was used with effectiveness by the pre-Columbian artists of America and especially in the work of the Zapotecs, reached a unique pitch of power that is worth notice in an age that worships energy.” The Zapotec left behind “ruins of two opposing cities, a few extraordinary painted manuscripts, a little work in stone, gold, copper, and jade, and a quantity of pottery funerary urns.”¹⁶

¹³ Ibid. p 4.

¹⁴ Ibid. p 5-6.

¹⁵ Jones, Julie. Vogel, Susan. *Primitive Art*. p 175.

¹⁶ Richardson, E.P. *Zapotec Pottery Sculpture*. p 48.

Zapotec funerary urns primarily represent a god of the unknown Zapotec religion. They tend to be highly decorated, some with a human-like face and animal features and some with an animal-like face and human representations. However, any reference to human parts is actually to represent the god or deity not an actual human. Most faces are stern and reserved and the figures “neither smile, charm with their physical grace, nor stir with action.”¹⁷

Included in Richardson’s article, are four prime examples of urns that represent the typical Zapotec style of art. The first urn, referred to as ‘Funerary Urn of Seated Figure from a Zapotecan Tomb at Oaxaca, Mexico,’ represents a “man cross-legged, wearing a feather headdress, a short cape over his shoulders, and an embroidered loin cloth.” There is a mask over the upper part of the face, ear plugs and pectoral Zapotec jewelry, and bracelets. “Urn of this form are found in tomb mounds, generally in groups of five or seven, and in such places as over the lintel or in the floor before the door, never within the tomb chamber.” The figure was built from moulds and by modeling of heavy bluish clay, which is thick and unpainted, but coated with a ‘white stucco slip.’ The second figure, known as ‘Seated Figure, funerary Urn,’ is “an arrangement of arcs and raying lines but into their swift movements comes the simple mass of the body.” The lines of its fingers and toes and its pectoral region are used to bring up the plain bulk of the body into relation with the upper half without destroying its value as a contrast. “The face has a fierce impersonal intensity one is not surprised to see in a representative of a pyramid-building race.” Figure three, known as ‘Funerary Urn of Old Man with Peccary Head Cap,’ mainly represents a toothless old man. “The lively wrinkled old face beneath a cap in the form of a peccary head, in spite of a blunt stylization of the body, gives the effect of a genre portrait, shrewdly narrating the character of a bouncing, nervous, fussy, talkative, old man.” The fourth

¹⁷ Ibid. p 49.

figure, 'Composite Bat-Dog Urn,' is actually one of a pair found in a cave temple facing each other across an empty niche, where the statue of the principal deity once stood. The Bat God was one of the important deities in the Zapotec (and Mayan) religion, symbolizing the underworld and worship of caves; the dog is considered to be connected with death and to be the messenger after death.¹⁸

Dudley M. Varner, author of 'Two Ethnographic functions of Bird-Form Pottery from Oaxaca, Mexico,' shows readers that bird-form pottery is very prevalent in the southern half of North America, throughout Mesoamerica and Central America, and in parts of South America. It has been around for over 3,000 years and known as duck, shoe, or boot-shaped pottery as the widely accepted bird-form pottery term. One of the proposed functions of this bird-form pottery is that "like other effigy forms, it may in some places or at various times have had ritualistic meaning; many specimens are mortuary objects in that they are found in burials, but this allows them only minimal ceremonial significance." "Bird-form pots occur in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, beginning in Formative times, perhaps as early as 1000 B.C. They are usually referred to as patojos (ducklike) or zapatos (shoe-shaped)." Today, these pottery forms are still being created by the Mixe, which produce a crude brown ware decorated with pine pitch designs. The Mixe shoe-form has two basic functions: "the toe end is placed in the coals of a fire, allowing the contents of the vessel to be kept warm, and permitting them to be stirred or ladled out without the cook getting singed knuckles" and "three vessels used in a group provide support over the coals for a comal, the flat ceramic griddle for cooking tortillas. This function accounts for the knobs or ridges on the toe end of many Oaxaca shoe-forms, which were specifically designed to serve as comal rests." It is possible that many effigy forms -bird or animal- also arose from an

¹⁸ Ibid. p 49.

embellishment of a simple utilitarian shape and that “naturalism (effigies) can arise from abstraction (geometric forms) rather than necessarily the reverse.”¹⁹

Modern versions of the old Zapotec forms of art are well-known in current day Oaxaca. Pottery and sculpture transformed into carving for this type of art known as the Oaxacan wood carvings. Each individual carving and work of art starts out as branch from the copal tree, native to Oaxaca. This type of wood is immensely pliable, has a natural gnarled form, and can be sanded to a “smooth porcelain finish.” “Originally, Oaxacan wood carvings were very big and bulky but the work rapidly evolved into streamlined dynamic forms. Master carvers now sculpt an entire creature from one piece of wood.” Different parts of the branches are used for different animals; for example, a wispy branch may turn into a lizard, but a knot or knob may turn into a turtle. The shape of the wood piece determines the animal it will become. Carvers may also use wood from grapefruit, pine, or cedar trees, but most commonly used is the copal tree. No matter which wood is used, the majority of chiseling of the figure is done when the wood is wet. Large machetes as well as small kitchen knives are used as chiseling tools to help the animal take shape, but the sanding process helps the animal take personality. “As the wood continues to dry, cracks are sanded out and sealed. Arms and appendages are carefully nailed on unless it is a single piece carving.”²⁰

Each carving is representative of a different animal and each animal is representative of a different myth of nature that has been around the Oaxacan culture since the time of the early Zapotec people. “Steeped into traditional folktales and beliefs, the Oaxacan wood carvers borrow and improvise themes and motifs from the region’s diverse Indian tribes.” “In many instances,

¹⁹ Varner, Dudley M. Two Ethnographic Functions of Bird-Form Pottery from Oaxaca, Mexico. p 616-617.

²⁰ Art of Oaxacan Wood Carving. Copal Tree. p 1.

the animals were either once gods or worked with the gods or men of the ages. The artistry produced in the different villages reveals that ubiquitous knowledge carried on from the distant past.” The rabbit is known as the symbol of the moon because its profile fits the shape of the dark region of a full moon and the Zapotec saw a rabbit in the moon, not a man like our culture. Both land and aquatic turtles are associated with music because their shells were used as instruments that represented thunder; the Zapotec god of thunder, Yahui, wears a turtle shell. Because toads have twenty digits just like humans, they are seen in art as giving birth to kings. The hard ridged surface and aquatic domain associated with crocodiles with the idea of the earth floating over the sea and they are always shown as being older than most deities, representing a creator god, Itzamma. Deer are recognized as god of the hunt, but they resemble freedom and the seventh day for the Zapotec. The jaguar, referencing the god known as Tepeyolloti, is the most revered beast of the culture because it bestows fear; therefore, kings and chiefs wore their pelts and sometimes made them into shoes. The nahual is also known as the nagual, nahuatl, or nahulli, but whatever the name, it is the sorcerer or witch god because it is believed to possess powers of transformation and higher enlightenment, is usually depicted as a petty thief or protector of villages, and is supposed to connect humans with terrestrial earth. In the Zapotec culture, the butterfly is associated with fire and war because it is the soul of dead warriors. Skeletons are also a commonly carved shape that represent deceased ancestors that have a powerful influence on the living and help the living connect with gods; today, these skeletons are most commonly used to decorate altars during Day of the Dead celebrations. Bats typically symbolize death and it was used by the Zapotec on funerary urns, emphasizing large claws and round ears. Monkeys reference the monkey god, Ozomatli, and the idea that anyone born on the eleventh day would be lucky and happy. Dogs hold a supernatural reverence in the eyes of the

Zapotec because they were seen as guides in the underworld and many humans were buried with their dogs so that they could navigate the underworld. The dragon is known as the sky god and is usually depicted with a paw and a wing or flame eyebrows, but flying serpents are also in this category and they represent lightning. Owls are found at the entrance of caves that were thought to lead to the underworld and they were seen as angels or messengers between humans and the divine.²¹

As well as symbolic meaning with each animal, each Oaxacan wood carving is symbolic to a certain village and the style of that village. “Methods of painting Oaxacan carvings are uniquely localized to the particular village they originate.” Because most villages were used to weaving before these carvings were introduced, many villages incorporated their weaving designs, such as geometric rug patterns and mosaic floral designs, into their specific carvings. In the Arrazola village, the carvings are very diverse because they have anything from uniform circles or lines, multicolor outlines, finer dot and line work, geometric patterns, and a soft look using colors as tinting and accents. In the San Martin village, one can see carvings that are very much tied to nature, nature colored paints, a tapestry of birds, insects and flowers on figures. In the village of San Pedro Cajonos, carvings are painted in a wash of rainbow hues, micro fine color play in pointillism fashion, detail added with cactus quills dipped in inks and dyes, meticulous detail and artistry, and infinite dimension. In the village of La Union, carvings serve as a window into the past due to the ancient form of toy making, vegetable and aniline dyes, a deep feel that fades over time, rustic finesse, and presence and personality. In other villages elsewhere from those previously named, the style varies because they only have one or two

²¹ Art of Oaxacan Wood Carving. Myth and Nature. p 1-3.

artists instead of an entire village that are carvers; these carvers may either approach the art form with natural realism or they may develop a completely new style.²²

As stated previously, some artists prefer simplistic beauty, eye dazzling complexities, uniformity, symmetric shapes, precise calculated brush strokes, or perhaps a timeless look. No matter what the preference, each piece fits into one of eight categories. The first category, ‘Animalitos Clásico,’ has characteristics such as “smooth porcelain works with the emphasis on carving and clean painting.” The next group, ‘Folk Art Traditional,’ is defined as having “festival figurines and animals depicting village life sometimes painted with aniline dye.” Carvings that belong in the ‘Reptile Masters’ category are “dazzling amphibians and reptiles painted to mimic their inherent coloration and movement.” Figures that belong to the ‘Whimsical Color’ category are “vibrant eye popping pieces that integrate a wealth of color combinations.” Those that are known as ‘Impressively Big’ are “sculptures designed to grab attention with their size and grandeur.” (The larger the sculpture, the higher the price to purchase.) ‘Precision Painters’ paint carvings that have “crisp and exacting brush strokes in vivid clarity and ornately ordered perfection.” Carvings described as ‘Flashy Complex’ are “sophisticated, stand alone works that raise the bar in what is possible.” Those works of art in the ‘Classic Icons’ group are works of art from artists “recognized for a particular motif identified as timeless collection cornerstones.”²³

Oaxacan wood carvings can take up to one week to finish because of their meticulous detail. “The artists use fantasy and imagination in their painting to make animals appear more alive.” Oaxacan wood carving is considered an authentic folk art, especially since each

²² Art of Oaxacan Wood Carving. Village Styles. p 1.

²³ Art of Oaxacan Wood Carving. Rough Guide. p 1-2.

individual carving is unique. Carvings are signed by the artists and “appreciation in value is possible due to the high demand and uniqueness of this work,” but “many of these figures have become collector’s items.” This is why Oaxacan wood carvings are so popular today. They connect the ancient past idea of the gods with the present. They are designed to represent the old gods and reference the Zapotec heritage, but not to be used to worship them this day in age. Many people find the heritage of the Zapotec and their left-behind ruins captivating. Therefore, having a piece of that heritage in the form of a small wooden, whimsical figure seems to be the perfect solution to connect to the once large and bulky stone sculptures carved by the Zapotec in recently explored Monte Albán.²⁴

²⁴ EarthView Inc. Handcrafted Collectibles, p 3.

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well done
very nice
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