

# OLMEC

## MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

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**O**LMEC CIVILIZATION, WHICH FLOURISHED MORE THAN 3,000 YEARS AGO IN THE TROPICAL rainforests and watery savannahs of Mexico's southern Gulf lowlands, is acknowledged as the oldest civilization in the Americas to create monumental art and architecture. The Olmec (1800–400 BC) are part of the broader Mesoamerican culture. A twentieth-century term, *Mesoamerica* defines a cultural region encompassing most of Mexico and northern Central America, including the Maya and the Aztec civilizations. Like other Mesoamerican civilizations, the Olmec had an advanced social system, networks of commerce extending far across the region, and possibly early writing, calendric, and numeric systems.

The term *Olmec* refers to an art style and an archaeological culture rather than an actual group of people. Olmec artwork is characterized by a focus on the human figure, the conjoining of human and animal elements into composite, supernatural beings, and the symbolic association of secular power and sacred authority. These same attributes are repeated among later Mesoamerican civilizations, demonstrating the artistic and cultural innovations of the Olmec and their widespread influence throughout ancient Mexico.

These curriculum materials explore the belief systems, social structure, and imagery of ancient Mexican life and culture. From monumental basalt sculptures depicting high-status individuals with naturalistic features to small jade sculptures portraying fantastic beings, the range of artistic expression is significant. The artworks highlighted in these materials are featured in the 2010 exhibition *Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico*, which presents the most recent archaeological and art historical investigations and interpretations of Olmec-style works.

As you explore these materials, consider these questions:

- What can be learned about a civilization by studying its artwork?
- What can objects reveal about a civilization's belief system or social structure?
- Like ancient cultures, we use visual representation as a means of expression. What do we honor as a society today? How and where do we use visual representation to express our beliefs?

## The Heartland Setting

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Olmec civilization arose in the Gulf Coast region of Mexico, in the modern-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco. This region is characterized by a tropical climate and abundant rivers, plains, and rainforests. Archaeologists identify the region as *Olman*, a name derived from the Aztec word *ollin*, meaning "land of rubber," referring to an important natural resource of the area. A series of major and minor Olmec centers flourished between 1800 and 400 BC.

Most people lived in small, agrarian communities where they raised crops of maize, beans, and squash and supplemented their diet with hunting and gathering. Fishermen, farmers, hunters, artists, warriors, and merchants lived adjacent to the water sources that provided fertile agricultural land and aquatic foods such as fish, turtles, caimans (crocodiles and alligators), manatees, and shellfish.

Just as geography affected daily life, Mesoamerican belief systems were also informed by the natural environment. Volcanoes and mountains dominated the landscape and played an important role in the Olmec cosmology. The Tuxtla Mountains, the main source of the volcanic stone used by Olmec artists for large monuments, were a presence in Olman and visible from every major center. Features of the landscape such as springs, caves, and mountaintops were defined as sacred, and Olmec urban centers were constructed in relation to these features as well as to the cardinal directions.

Correspondingly, Olmec religious practices focused on the powerful natural and supernatural forces of their universe. Attributes of the great animals of the coastal rainforest—snakes, eagles, sharks, caimans, and jaguars—are seen in ancient Mexican deities and supernatural beings. Olmec art represented supernatural beings as composite creatures that embodied characteristics of birds, fish, and powerful predators of the water and land. Life-sustaining foods such as maize, commonly called corn, were frequently depicted as well. See the description of the *Votive Axe* in these materials for more information about the importance of maize.

## The Hierarchy of Power

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Over the course of 1,500 years, large and small settlements rose and fell throughout Olman. Numerous populations inhabited the diverse Mesoamerican landscape, sharing in widespread exchange networks that disseminated ideological concepts as well as material goods and exotic resources such as jadeite, obsidian, shell, rubber, and iron ore.

As societies shifted from hunting and gathering to a more settled agricultural life, rulers played an increasingly important role. Rulers legitimized their power by placing themselves in a sacred and supernatural line of descent. Monolithic carved thrones and colossal portrait heads publicly proclaimed the ruler's importance and authority, which were also expressed through specific regalia emphasizing the ruler's ability to ensure maize fertility for his community.

Kings, priests, artisans, and their families resided in small cities, while most farmers lived in small villages. The three primary city centers are known today as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, which reached its zenith between 1200 and 900 BC; La Venta, which rose to prominence between 900 and 400 BC; and Tres Zapotes, whose trajectory began around the same time as La Venta but which continued to flourish until the fourth century. While we do not know the names of their rulers or dynasties, the presence of mutilated and recarved monuments at the three centers signals the rising or diminishing of authority as changes in rulership occurred.

San Lorenzo occupies a huge plateau, which Olmec engineers reshaped by moving tons of earth to create wide, projecting terraces. At San Lorenzo, archaeologists have discovered colossal portrait heads that memorialized at least ten rulers between 1400 and 1000 BC. The hard basalt stone used to produce these heads as well as other massive sculptures was quarried in boulders weighing many thousands of pounds and transported from the slopes of the distant Tuxtla Mountains.

The site of La Venta is dominated by a constructed, pyramid-shaped earthen mound, meant to symbolize a sacred mountain. It rises to a height of more than 100 feet and is the largest pyramid structure known from ancient times. At La Venta, powerful individuals were laid to rest in elaborate tombs with offerings of jadeite and serpentine objects. Artists played an increasingly important role because they created objects that signified elite authority in sacred and secular matters.

## **The Olmec Legacy in Later Mesoamerica**

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Like other ancient cultures, the people of Olman had advanced systems of trade and exchange in which ideas, beliefs, goods, and technologies circulated. Although Olmec civilization lasted only about 1,000 years, it left visible imprints on art, religion, governance, writing systems, culinary preferences, and many other Mesoamerican practices in the following two millennia. Only a handful of objects from diverse areas of Mesoamerica reflect knowledge of Olmec style; however, deeper patterns of awareness can be seen in the layout of cities and their structures within specific landscapes and in the veneration of ancestors, natural forces, and supernatural beings. The metaphors perceived in the cycles of nature, from seasonal weather patterns to the annual appearance of food sources, provided the basis for the enduring social and cosmological patterns expressed by Mesoamerican peoples over the course of their history; they are evident even today in traditional communities in Mexico and Guatemala.

# Colossal Head 5

MEXICO, VERACRUZ, MUNICIPALITY OF TEXISTEPEC, SAN LORENZO TENOCHTITLÁN, 1200–900 BC

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**T**HIS COLOSSAL PORTRAIT HEAD IS MORE THAN SIX FEET tall and weighs approximately 7,000 pounds. It is remarkable for both its scale and realism. (See the enclosed CD for additional images.) Look closely at the details of the face. Typical Olmec-style features are visible: furrowed brow; slanted, almond-shaped eyes; and thick, slightly parted lips with downturned corners. These features suggest an individual of mature age in a leadership role.

## Royal Portraits

Scholars consider this sculpture to be one of a number of portrait heads that memorialized rulers and therefore constitute the first royal portraits of ancient Mexico. To date, ten of the seventeen known colossal heads derive from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, each distinguished by size, expression, and personal adornment. Their gigantic scale asserts the ruler's power and authority, but their expressive faces are realistic portraits of specific individuals.

All of the portrait heads wear helmet-like headgear, each of which bears distinctive motifs that may have identified the portrayed ruler. This figure's helmet displays typical elements found on other San Lorenzo portrait heads, such as the horizontal band topped by a woven motif with circular forms. The woven-mat design is widely used in Mesoamerica to symbolize royalty, because mats were placed on stone thrones. Some scholars speculate that the three-toed bird feet or feline paws, each with a talon, may represent iconographic elements associated with the figure's name or lineage.

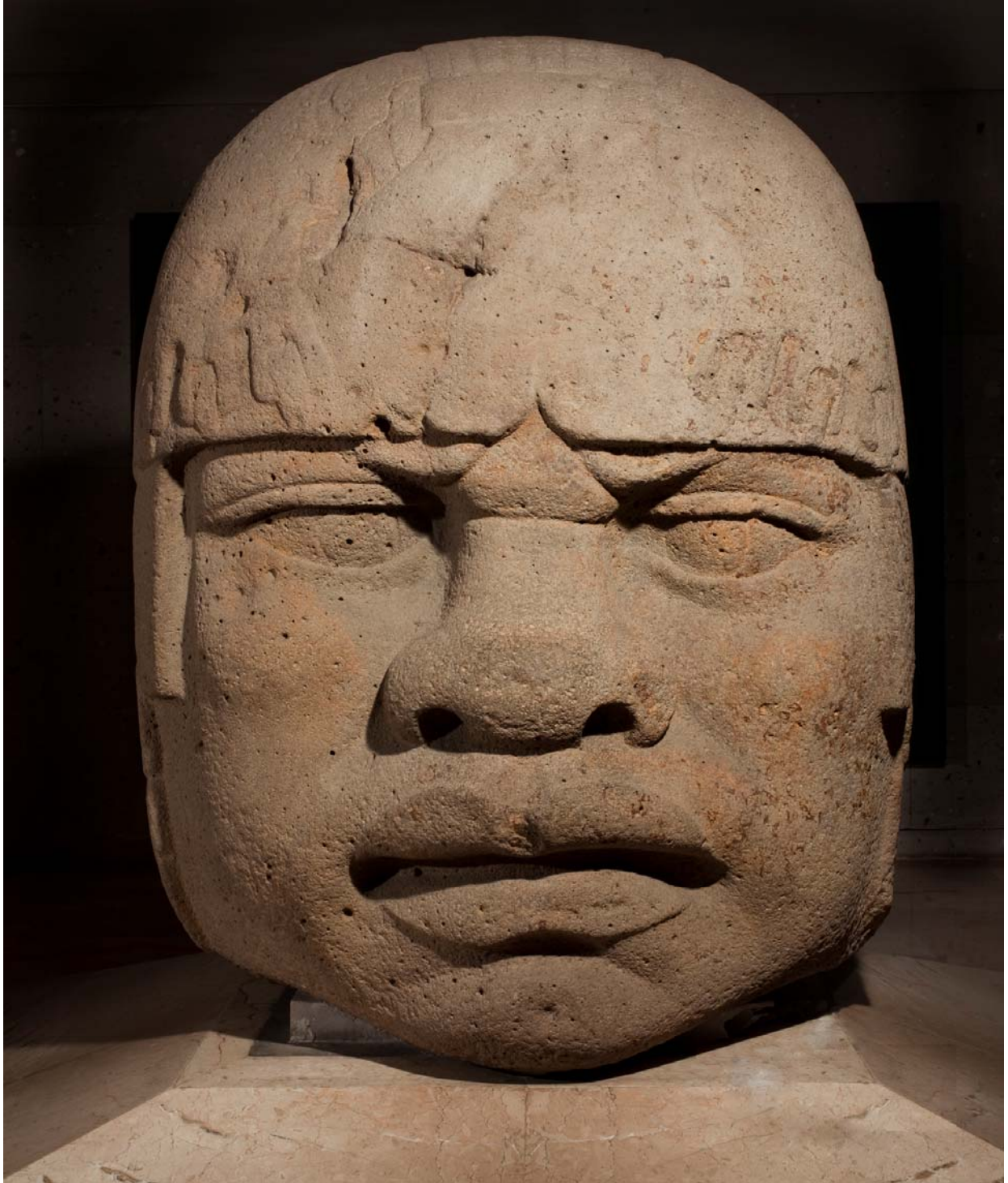
- What are some of the ways rulers or political figures communicate power or authority? Consider civic art, architecture, and portraits of political leaders from ancient times to today.

## Monumental Sculpture

*Colossal Head 5* is one of five colossal heads discovered by archaeologists at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán in 1946. Because it was carved from volcanic stone using only simple stone tools, it required enormous effort and skill to sculpt. The massive blocks of basalt used for this and other monumental sculpture came from the Tuxtla Mountains, approximately thirty-five miles from San Lorenzo, and they had to be transported overland or by river and sea. The magnitude of this task, which required the mobilization of a very large labor force, is evidence that the rulers of San Lorenzo were in firm control of a highly efficient, centralized society.

- Today, we view these colossal heads indoors, in a museum setting. However, when they were made, the heads were probably displayed outside, in bright sunshine or rain. Imagine seeing this sculpture outdoors, in a row with other colossal heads. What message might this presentation of monumental sculptures send?

This type of monument, which has been found only in the Olmec heartland, marks the beginning of a tradition of honoring the ruler and his figural representation. Rulers were represented in large cities throughout Mesoamerica. Their feats were recorded and their lineages were associated with patron deities. The power of the ruler was legitimized by both ancestral and sacred authority, a concept that seems to be the principal message of the Olmec monoliths.



COLOSSAL HEAD 5

MEXICO, VERACRUZ, MUNICIPALITY OF TEXISTEPEC

SAN LORENZO TENOCHTITLÁN, 1200–900 BC

BASALT, 73¼ x 56<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 49¼ IN.

MUSEO DE ANTHROPOLOGIA DE XALAPA, UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA (REG. 49 P.J. 4026)

# Votive Axe

MEXICO, TABASCO, LA VENTA, MOUND A-2, TOMB E, 900–400 BC

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**T**HIS SMALL GREEN AXE IS JUST OVER FOUR INCHES HIGH. The upper half of the sculpture displays a cleft head with flame eyebrows, downturned lips, an open, toothless mouth, and a flattened nose. Scholars currently identify these features as those of a composite supernatural being whose physical features are drawn from multiple sources in the natural world. The lower portion of the body is smooth and, aside from an oval shape suggesting a pendant, devoid of specific iconography. Red pigment, possibly hematite or cinabar, was rubbed into the carved and incised lines.

## Celts: Symbols of Royal Authority

Axes, also called celts, were traditionally used as work tools for clearing the land for agriculture. When used in offerings, they became sacred objects buried as part of a ritual. This celt was found at La Venta as part of a large cache, a hidden deposit of valued objects, which contained 108 jadeite axes, ornaments, and other articles. Of the 108 items, this was the only one that was decorated.

Stone celts played an important role in Olmec ritual and belief. Although considerably smaller than the colossal heads, they also symbolized royal authority. Polished celts of fine jadeite were frequently worn or carried by rulers. Caches containing celts laid out in symbolically significant patterns have been discovered at La Venta and other sites, attesting to their use as ritual symbols.

## The Importance of Maize

Celts like this are also significant because they symbolized maize, or corn. A number of celts found at La Venta include incised imagery that attests to the importance of maize to the local populace. No other food plant had a more profound impact in Mesoamerica. As a primary food source, maize played an essential role in the development of Mesoamerican civilizations and also permeated their rituals and beliefs. It started to become a staple food crop around 4000 BC, and maize symbolism appears in Olmec imagery circa 1150–500 BC. During this time, many of the fundamental meanings and associations of maize were conceived and established.

The appearance of maize and greenstone items at La Venta is not coincidental but rather reflects the period in which maize use increased markedly (c. 1200–500 BC). Look again at the *Votive Axe*. Notice how the verdant color and oblong shape of the celt symbolize an ear of corn. Look at the V-shaped cleft at the top of the celt, one of the most common Olmec motifs. This cleft cranium regularly appears in representations of the Olmec maize god, and a maize cob is often shown emerging from the cleft.

- Nature is an important part of the Olmec cosmology or worldview. What is our relationship to the natural environment today?

## Jadeite: A Precious Resource

The Olmec were the earliest civilization in Mexico to craft large amounts of jadeite into a variety of objects of extraordinary value. They created items of personal finery including necklaces and other decorative pieces, as well as votive axes and figurines. Jadeite is a hard mineral composed of a silicate of sodium and aluminum colored with various trace elements. It is as hard as steel, and it required enormous technical skill and expertise for artists, who used a grinding process, to work the mineral without metal tools.

Jadeite is not commonly found in the tropical jungles of the coastal lowlands. Artists had to import the translucent blue-green mineral from the distant Río Motagua source in southern Guatemala. The presence at La Venta of so many jadeite objects is evidence that the region was a cosmopolitan center that maintained distant trade relations.

- Jadeite objects are found in other Mesoamerican cultures and in cultures across the globe. Since prehistoric times in China, jade was reserved for precious jewelry and ceremonial objects. In India, during the early seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries, a broad spectrum of jade objects—including dining vessels, jewelry, and daggers—was created for royal courts. To learn more, visit Collections Online at [lacma.org](http://lacma.org) and search for the words *jade* or *jadeite*.



VOTIVE AXE  
MEXICO, TABASCO, LA VENTA, MOUND A-2, TOMB E, 900-400 BC  
JADEITE WITH PIGMENT,  $4\frac{3}{8} \times 2 \times \frac{1}{2}$  IN.  
MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTRÓPOLOGÍA, MEXICO CITY (10-9668)

# Personage of Atlahuayan

MEXICO, MORELOS, ATLIHUAYAN, 1200–900 BC

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**A** SEATED MALE FIGURE LEANS FORWARD WITH HIS ARMS bent. The left hand and foot are broken, as is the right leg. The eyes marked by deep incisions, wide nose, and downturned mouth are all features found in the characteristic Olmec-style face. The figure wears an elaborate cape, which resembles a stylized jaguar or other animal skin. Notice how the head of the animal covers the head of the man like a helmet. The animal's nose is small, the eyebrows are flames, and the claws are humanized by five fingers. On the back of the figure, star-shaped crosses cover the skin. A wide tail falls in folds at the base of the figure.

## Composite Creatures

This human figure wearing the pelt of an animal signals an aspect of human power and authority derived from powerful creatures in the surrounding landscape. Strongly anchored in the human form, Olmec style is also represented by composite supernatural creatures ranging from realistic to abstract. In both monumental and miniature form, Olmec art is rich with examples of composite or zoomorphic creatures. See the enclosed CD for more examples.

- What is your favorite animal? What are some of the attributes or characteristics of the animal? Make a list. Create a composite portrait of the animal and yourself using drawing, collage, or other art materials of your choice.

## Cosmology

The Mesoamerican cosmos consisted of three realms: the watery underworld, on which the earth floats; the terrestrial level, where people live and crops grow; and the celestial realm of the birds and heavenly bodies. Rulers and priests communicated with the spirit world, providing essential links between the natural and spiritual realms. Rulers and other high-status figures mediated the relationships between humans and the supernatural to ensure agricultural fertility, the welfare of the community, and the perpetuation of their society. Sculptures representing composite creatures express concepts that became cornerstones of indigenous thought in the Americas for centuries to come.

## Ceramic Tradition

Objects made of ceramic, or fired clay, were used in both daily life and for ceremonial purposes. Vessels may take the physical form of birds, fish, opossums, or composite creatures (see the enclosed CD for examples). Other vessels were painted or incised with natural or cosmological imagery. Ceramic images of animals, humans, and composite creatures reflected the world in which the people of Olman lived and represented complex beliefs in metaphorical forms.

Ancient artists used some of the same ceramic techniques that are used today, including coiling, modeling, and incising. To make this ceramic sculpture, the artist first constructed the figure in sections, joined them together, and then formed the elaborate cape. This sculpture, like other ceramics from Mesoamerica, was slip-painted before firing and then fired once.

- Experiment with various ceramic techniques. Model clay into different shapes, incise designs onto the surface, or use the slipping and scoring method to adhere pieces of clay to one another.





PERSONAGE OF ATLIHUAYAN  
MEXICO, MORELOS, ATLIHUAYAN, 1200–900 BC  
SLIP-PAINTED CERAMIC, 11 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> X 8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> IN.  
MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA, MEXICO CITY (10-3060)

# Monument 13

MEXICO, TABASCO, LA VENTA, 1000–400 BC

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**T**HIS CIRCULAR MONUMENT DEPICTS A BEARDED figure striding toward a column of three hieroglyphs or picture writing symbols. A netlike turban covers his hair, and a section of tied hair is visible at the back of his neck. He wears a beaded necklace, bracelets, and a nose bead, as well as a loincloth and sandals. In his left hand, he carries a banner. The isolated foot behind him may be a fourth hieroglyph.

## Early Writing Systems

The three or four hieroglyphs visible on *Monument 13* provide clues to the development of writing. Although the Gulf Coast heartland centers lacked a fully developed writing system, the idea of writing, systematic notation, and a calendar system developed during this period. The Mesoamerican calendar, the exact origins of which are unknown, consisted of both a sacred cycle of 260 days and a solar calendar of 365 days. The two cycles ran concurrently, culminating every fifty-two years.

Scholars assume that the hieroglyphic column on the right that ends with a profile bird head names the individual depicted. Recent scholarship suggests that the text begins with the number one (the circular glyph), followed by a lobe-shaped sign representing a day name from the Olmec calendar, such as wind, water, earthquake, cloud, or flower. The bird head may signify a title, and the footprint behind the figure may be a verb suggesting travel or movement.

- Artworks often provide clues to the time and place in which they were made. How might this monument have been used? What message does it communicate? Identify sculpture and monuments that are visible in public spaces today. What political, historical, or religious message do these monuments convey?

## Stone Monuments

This circular monument shares many similarities with *stelae*, upright, carved stone blocks that are generally decorated with relief sculpture on one side. In this case, the carving is a *bas-relief*, an art historical term meaning that the forms are shallowly raised from the background. This monument was intended to be viewed from the front, in contrast to the colossal portrait heads, which could be viewed in the round.

Many later Mesoamerican civilizations used *stelae* to commemorate or recall major events of the past. They were set upright in the ground, usually outdoors, and placed in relation to ceremonial structures. *Stelae* were also used by the ancient Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks as grave and site markers, memorials, and monuments.

- Visit [lacma.org](http://lacma.org) and search for the term *stelae* to view examples from other ancient cultures. Compare and contrast *stelae* from ancient Egypt with *Monument 13*. What is similar? What is different?



MONUMENT 13

MEXICO, TABASCO, LA VENTA, 1000—400 BC


BASALT,  $39\frac{3}{4} \times 35\frac{7}{16} \times 39\frac{3}{8}$  IN.

INSTITUTO ESTATAL DE CULTURA DEL ESTADO DE TABASCO—PARQUE MUSEO LA VENTA (PMV-001)

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