

Pottery Figurine Heads from the Valley of Mexico

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Archeologists have always been intrigued by the little figurine heads that were produced in such a copious abundance in the Valley of Mexico. While visiting more than a dozen archeological zones in the summer of 1956, the author acquired those shown in plate 1.

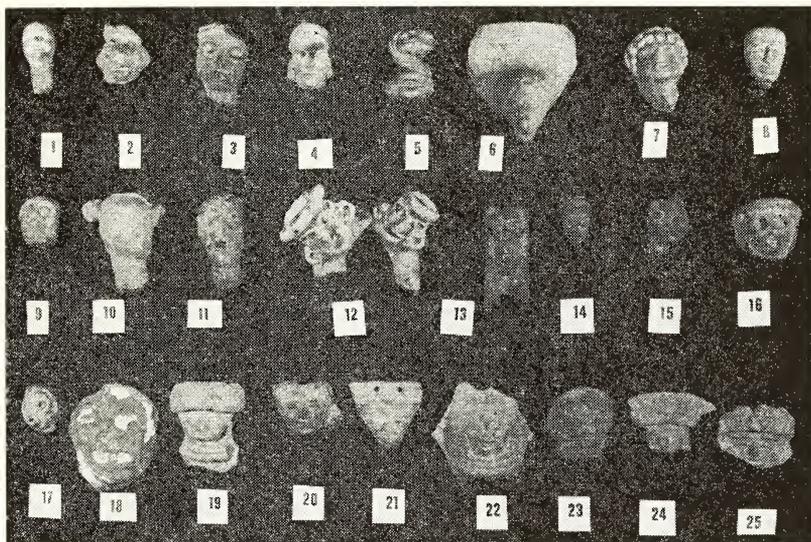


PLATE 1

Pottery Figurine Heads from Central Mexico

Competent authorities have come to realize the importance of figurines as a reliable index to the culture and chronology of the manufacturers of these tiny heads—they average less than 3 cm. each. Some of their conclusions are verified here. The numbers refer, of course, to the figurine numbers in the plate.

There are four techniques for making these clay heads. They are hand fashioned, with features: a) cut into the clay, No. 1; or b) cut out of the clay, No. 16; or c) added to the basic form, No. 4; or, they are fashioned entirely in a mold, No. 23. This last class is usually easily distinguished from the others by the mold line visible at the back of the figurine.

With reference to the formation of the anatomical parts, especially the eyes, Herbert J. Spinden (3) devised the following classification: "First there is the simple groove; second, a groove across an applied ball of clay; third, a round gouge made by the end of a blunt instrument held vertically; fourth, a round gouging in an applied ball or button of

clay; fifth, two gougings made with a round chisel-edged implement held at an angle." To these he adds two more classes, those with carefully modeled eye-lids, and those with eye-balls added between the lids. Examples of the last of these six classes are given in the plate, Nos. 3, 4, 7, 8, 17 and 19. No. 18 is a typical example of the painted type of face on Cholula figurines; No. 2 lost one of his button-like eyes; and No. 15 seems to elude this classification entirely.

Relative chronologies of figurine types have been worked out and these have relied heavily upon these anatomical variations. George C. Vaillant (4), for example, discusses five types of Teotihuacan figurines, and Eduardo Noguera (2) classifies ten types of heads from Cholula. In each of these series a self-contained chronology is established.

The cultural index-value of the figurines can be realized when one examines some aspects of the accompanying small group. There are represented a variety of hats and hair styles, Nos. 12, 19 and 5, 7; ear-rings, Nos. 5, 20; and a nose-plug, No. 4. Physical Anthropologists immediately notice the relatively thick lips in both archaic No. 2, and classical Teotihuacan types, No. 8.

Of equal interest are the uses to which these figurines were put. Both human and zoomorphic forms were made for handles for vessels, Nos. 6, 12; for whistles, Nos. 10, 11; and for pendants, Nos. 13, 14, 21. Some were used for votive offerings; maybe this accounts for the metallic (gold?) particles adhering to No. 1. Spinden (3) speculates that the female and male figurines may have been used, respectively, as fertility amulets to secure good crops and offerings for success at arms.

Thomas Joyce (1) does a masterful job at giving verbal descriptions of the gods and goddesses represented in the medium of figurine heads. Some appearing in the group under discussion are: Tlolac, god of rain, with his rain-drop eyes, No. 22; Xiuhtecutli, deity of fire, with his butterfly head-dress, No. 23; Coatline, deity of death, with her vacant stare, No. 9; Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers, love and pregnancy, with her coronet of corn and feathers, No. 24.

Obviously, it is no exaggeration to say, with Dr. Eduardo Noguero: "De capital importancia para las investigaciones arqueologicas de Mexico son las figurillas humanas."

Literature Cited

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3. SPINDEN, HERBERT J. 1946. *Ancient Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*. American Museum of Natural History, Series No. 3. New York. pp. 56, 59.
4. VAILLANT, GEORGE C. 1950. *The Aztecs of Mexico*. Penguin Books. Baltimore. pp. 72-80.