



c. 250-650

Volcanic stone with traces of pigment

36 1/4 x 16 1/4 x 16 inches
(92.1 x 41.3 x 40.6 cm)

Mexican, Central Mexico,
Teotihuacan

The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection,
1950, 1950-134-282

FIRST LOOKS

What is the sculpture made of?
How do you think it was made?

Describe the shapes.
Which ones are repeated?

What colors do you see?

How is the figure's face
like a mask?

Try standing with your arms
extended and palms facing up,
like this figure. How does it feel?

SECOND LOOKS

What is the figure wearing?

Is the figure male or
female? Why?

What sort of a person
could this be?

What might it represent
or symbolize?

How is this sculpture
like a building?

GODDESS FIGURE (CHALCHIUHTLICUE)

This sculpture was carved from volcanic stone about 1,500 years ago in a city named Teotihuacan, located in central Mexico. Like the monumental architecture of Teotihuacan, this three-foot-tall figure is formed of geometric shapes arranged symmetrically. The stone of this sculpture was originally covered with a thin coat of white plaster and then brightly painted. Where can you see traces of red and green pigment?

The large block at the top of the figure may be a headdress and was originally painted with colorful designs. The two circular shapes on either side of the face could be earrings or earplugs—decorative rings that are inserted into the earlobe rather than hung from it. The flat, masklike face was once painted red and has two blank, oval eyes and an open mouth shaped like a trapezoid. The figure is wearing women's clothing—a necklace made of rectangular shapes, a fringed blouse called a *huipil* (wee-PEEL), and a skirt. The large, strong hands are made of simple, curving shapes, while the wide, flat feet are rectangular, like the block on which they stand.

Amazingly, this sculpture was made without metal tools. Before 1,000 CE, people in Mesoamerica made picks and hammers from various stones—obsidian, slate, alabaster, and greenstone—to cut stone blocks. To shape a figure like this one, they also used chisels made from animal bones and horns, and bird-bone drills to hollow out eyes and mouths.

We can see similar figures in the colorful mural paintings and elaborate incense burners discovered in Teotihuacan. In one mural, the central figure is a goddess in an earthly paradise. Behind her is a flowering tree full of spiders and butterflies, and birds flutter nearby. The goddess's face is covered with a mask and huge drops of water fall from her outstretched hands. The tree above her is full

of droplets of water, as if it had just rained. Below her is a cave filled with seeds. The outside of the cave is covered with maize (corn) and fruit trees, and surrounded by water and shellfish. This goddess and a storm god may have been the two primary deities worshiped by the people of Teotihuacan. The goddess was probably a personification of nature, perhaps of the earth itself. Although she looks stern, she was usually kind and generous, providing life-giving water and seeds. Like nature, she could also, at times, become violent.

ABOUT TEOTIHUACAN

Teotihuacan was a great city that existed from 100 BCE to 700 CE in central Mexico, beginning thirteen centuries before the Aztec civilization. The Aztecs were so impressed by the organized plan of the city and the enormous size of the pyramids that they named it Teotihuacan, “The City (or gathering place) of the Gods.” For over 700 years, Teotihuacan was the largest city in Mesoamerica, with a population of around 200,000. The two pyramids at Teotihuacan—the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon—were nearly as big as the pyramids in Egypt. The city was larger than imperial Rome, covering eight square miles. It is divided by an avenue more than one mile long and 55 yards wide—roughly half the length of a football field. This road is aligned on a north-south axis with the Pyramid of the Moon at the northern end, providing a dramatic route for processions. The Pyramid of the Sun, an even larger structure built over a watery cave, is on the eastern side of the avenue. The magnificent Temple of the Feathered Serpent faces a vast sunken plaza that could hold 60,000 people and is located in the southern part of the city.

The art and architecture at Teotihuacan seem to indicate the people’s deep desire to be in harmony with nature and the cosmos. Unlike the Aztecs, there is little evidence of powerful male rulers, conquests, or captives in Teotihuacan. Instead, there may have been two important deities—the storm god and the goddess. Rather than living in small towns, the people of Teotihuacan lived in clusters of apartments in the city, which was organized on a grid plan. The open porches of the dwellings were decorated with thousands of colorful, well-crafted murals painted in a flat, abstract style. The murals featured peaceful, orderly scenes of gods and goddesses, people, animals, plants, and symbols. Many hundreds of abstract masks were discovered in Teotihuacan. Although the masks represent humans, they are not naturalistic and do not symbolize specific people.

Why did Teotihuacan culture develop in this way? One explanation is that around 50 BCE a volcano erupted, burying the nearby city of Cuicuilco (COO-ee-koo-EEL-ko) under a thick layer of lava. The

leaders of Teotihuacan may have decided that a single, united city would be their best protection against the anger of powerful gods and goddesses who could cause such an eruption. Their belief system and highly organized, communal way of life focused on the worship of nature in both public and private spaces.

TEOTIHUACAN: THE PAINTED CITY

Can you imagine an entire city painted in bright colors? The temples and apartment complexes at Teotihuacan were covered with images of goddesses and gods, people, animals, trees, and flowers painted in maroons, pinks, greens, blues, and yellows using the fresco technique. This technique involves painting directly and rapidly on fresh, damp plaster walls before the plaster dries. Only a few murals from Teotihuacan, however, have survived over the centuries.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

How is the *Goddess Figure* similar to modern sculpture by Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso, and Jacques Lipchitz?

Compare the size and grid organization of Teotihuacan with your city or town.

Research and discuss the symbolism of Athena, the Virgin Mary, the Teotihuacan goddess figure, and Lady Liberty.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Working as a group, brainstorm and draw different shapes on the blackboard. Refer to the *Goddess Figure* and your surroundings for ideas such as triangle, circle, oval, and trapezoid. Then, draw a line down the center of a piece of heavy, white paper. Use a variety of shapes to sketch a symmetrical face on your paper, making sure that the shapes are the same on each side of the line. Use paint to fill in all the shapes and spaces you created, keeping the colors symmetrical. After the paint has dried, use a small brush to add details, designs, and patterns. Finally, glue on feathers, yarn, or sequins.

This sculpture is included in Mexican Art, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group, Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company, and The Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Foundation.