

The Ancient Americas

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The art and architecture of the ancient Americas is unique. Specific to this region is art of the Olmec and architecture and structures within the city of Teotihuacan. This lesson covers:

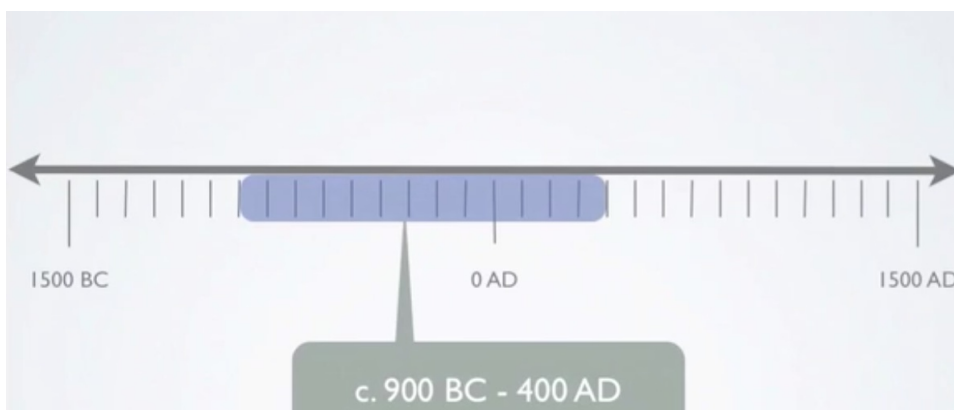


BIG IDEA

The art and architecture of the ancient Americas are the products of civilizations that developed after the migration of humans across the Bering Strait.

1. Time Period and Location: The Ancient Americas

This lesson covers 900 BC through 400 AD, a span of nearly 1,300 years, highlighted in the timeline below. Geographically, this lesson explores the Americas, which include all the major land masses of the Western hemisphere, most notably North, Central, and South America.



It is believed that early indigenous Americans crossed the Bering Strait sometime during Earth's last major glaciation period, when lower levels of the Bering Sea revealed a land bridge between the continents of Asia and North America. Most believe that some humans continued south, settling in the areas of modern-day Mexico, Central America, and South America. This lesson focuses on **Mesoamerica**, a region extending from Central Mexico which includes Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, and looks in particular at the locations of La Venta and Teotihuacan.



TERM TO KNOW

Mesoamerica

A region that extends from central Mexico through Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica

2. Colossal Head From La Venta

Many Mesoamerican cultural traditions can be linked to the **Olmec** culture native to La Venta in what is now the state of Tabasco, Mexico. Volcanic activity is frequent in this area, providing a healthy supply of nearby basalt. Basalt is a type of volcanic stone created from magma that cooled quickly and produced tiny crystals, as opposed to the larger crystal formations of slower-cooling granite.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is a colossal head from La Venta:



Colossal Head from Olmec Culture

900-400 BC

Basalt

La Venta, Mexico

This huge sculpture of an Olmec ruler is carved in basalt. At almost 10 feet tall and weighing several tons, it is believed that the features are rather individualized, and depict an actual person rather than a deity. The sheer size of the statue reflects the power and importance of this individual.



TERM TO KNOW

Olmec

The first civilization in Mexico

3. Ceremonial Axe

Another example of artwork from La Venta is this jade ceremonial axe in the shape of a jaguar human:





Ceremonial Axe

900-400 BC

Jade

La Venta, Mexico

These figures were like werewolves, human-animal hybrids that were thought to be used as votive statues for religious offerings to the gods. They are made of jade, which is a very hard stone.

4. Teotihuacan

Ancient indigenous cultures are often portrayed as primitive by those unfamiliar with them. However, the civilizations in the ancient Americas were very advanced, with an extensive understanding of mathematics and astronomical phenomena. Many of the major cities were economically important cultural centers of politics and religion.

The city of **Teotihuacan** was an Olmec metropolis, probably the largest **pre-Columbian** city in the New World, with a population around 150,000. It lies just northeast of modern-day Mexico City.

Teotihuacan was laid out on an **axial plan**, divided into quarters by two primary axes that run north/south and east/west for about four miles. There are a number of massive pyramids within the city.

Take a look at the picture below of Teotihuacan.



Teotihuacan

1st century BC to 3rd century AD

Teotihuacán, Mexico

The Pyramid of the Moon, which is an Aztec name, would be in the bottom center of the picture if it weren't cut off. The Pyramid of the Sun, also an Aztec name, is in the top left of the picture.

Here is another view of the Pyramid of the Sun:



Pyramid of the Sun

1st century BC to 3rd century AD

Teotihuacán, Mexico

One of the notable design features of the building is the use of what is called **Talud-Tablero** architecture. The tableros, Spanish for “boards,” were often decorated with sculpture reliefs.

Here is an example from the temple of the feathered serpent, or **Quetzalcoatl**:



Temple of the Feathered Serpent

1st century BC to 3rd century AD

Teotihuacán, Mexico



TERMS TO KNOW

Teotihuacan

An expansive archaeological site in the Basin of Mexico containing the largest pyramids built during the pre-Columbian period of the Americas

Pre-Columbian

An adjective referring to cultures that existed before the arrival of Columbus to the Americas in 1492

Axial Plan

The horizontal arrangement of the elements of a building or town along a central axis

Talud-tablero

A style of architecture characterized by a platform structure on top of a sloping surface, also referenced as the slope-and-panel style; often seen in pyramids built during the pre-Columbian period in Mesoamerica

Quetzalcoatl

Mesoamerican deity whose name means “feathered serpent.”

5. Mural From Teotihuacan

The buildings of the city would have been covered with brightly painted murals. Take a look at this example from within an elaborate apartment complex:



Mural Painting from Teotihuacan

1st century BC - 3rd century AD

Mexico

These buildings were not for just anyone. They would have been apartment complexes, or residential complexes, for the elite within the city.

This depicts what appears to be a masked goddess, and on either side of her headdress are two human hearts. These human hearts indicate the importance of human sacrifice to this community and its role in ensuring the blessings from what may be the city's patron deity.



SUMMARY

The art and architecture of the ancient Americas, such as the art of the Olmec and architecture and structures within the city of Teotihuacan, is unique. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of the ancient Americas**.

In doing so, you looked at several examples, including the **colossal head from La Venta**. This huge

sculpture is of an Olmec ruler carved in basalt. The sheer size of the statue reflects the power and importance of this individual. You also looked at a **ceremonial axe**, which was an example of a human-animal hybrid thought to be used as a votive statue for religious offerings to the gods.

Finally, you explored the city of **Teotihuacan**. One example of art and architecture from this city that you learned about was a **mural from Teotihuacan**.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Axial Plan

The horizontal arrangement of the elements of a building or town along a central axis.

Mesoamerica

A region that extends from central Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Olmec

The first civilization in Mexico.

Precolumbian

An adjective referring to cultures that existed before the arrival of Columbus to the Americas in 1492.

Quetzalcoatl

Mesoamerican deity whose name means 'feathered serpent'.

Talud-tablero

A style of architecture characterized by a platform structure on top of a sloping surface. Also referenced as the slope-and-panel style. Often seen in pyramids built during the pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.

Teotihuacan

An expansive archaeological site in the Basin of Mexico containing the largest pyramids built during the pre-Columbian Americas.