

Nayarit (North America, Mexico, Pacific Coast region, Ixtlan)

House Group, 200 B.C.–400 A.D.

Ceramic, pigment

H.18 x W.9¾ x D.7 inches

The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 47.2.37

Theme

This sculpture shows that families enjoyed gathering together for meals in ancient Mexico just as they do in America today. Family life, which was marked by a strong sense of unity and warmth, was so important to the Nayarit (Nye-a-REET) culture that they sought to ensure its continuation even after death.

Background

The states of Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima make up a cultural area located in western Mexico along the Pacific Ocean. The terrain of the region is divided into two geographical zones, a highland area averaging 5,000 feet above sea level, and a relatively narrow tropical coastal plain. Today the region is home to Huichol and Cora Indians. Two thousand years ago, earlier Indian people lived there in small farming villages scattered among the foothills of the Sierra Madre. Isolated from the rest of the country by the mountains, these people led simple communal lives. There are no archaeological remains of their buildings, which were probably made of perishable materials—wood, straw, adobe bricks—nor do any historical records survive.

The numerous graves discovered in western Mexico are our only source of knowledge about the ancient cultures of the region. The Nayarit, Jalisco, and Colima people developed a distinctive form of burial. Rulers and other important members of society were buried in shaft chamber tombs found only in this region. These tombs consisted of vertical shafts extending 3 to 52 feet deep; the deepest shafts opened into one or more chambers, each of which could contain multiple burials. Clay figures and sculptural groups have been found in these tomb chambers. They consist of lively depictions of people playing musical instruments, grinding corn, tending children, and eating meals. Often whole families and villages are portrayed doing a variety of activities from daily life.

Between the 5th and 7th centuries A.D., the Nayarit culture began to fade. Cultural influences from central Mexico had penetrated the region, and by the 9th century, the distinctive local tradition of shaft chamber tombs containing clay figures had disappeared. Since tomb artifacts offer valuable clues to the everyday life, customs, and beliefs of this long-lost culture, it is unfortunate that many Nayarit tombs were damaged by local farmers, or looted by people searching for these very marketable clay figures. Though thousands of objects have been recovered from tombs in western Mexico, archaeologists are frustrated by the lack of systematic scientific excavations. Without texts, oral traditions, or controlled excavations, we cannot be sure of the meaning of these clay figures. They may have been placed in the tomb to honor or protect the deceased, or to serve as a link between this world and the next.

House Group

Like other ceramic pieces from western Mexico during the period, this Nayarit house group was made for a tomb. The sculpture consists of an elaborately polychromed, two-storied house inhabited by several men, women, and children, most likely a ruler and his family. They appear to be involved in activities of daily life—preparing and eating food, talking and relaxing. The women can be identified by their short skirts while the men wear loincloths (which are difficult to see) and sometimes hats.

In the upper story, which is open on two sides and is covered by an ornate pagoda-like roof, are eight seated figures. At the rear, one figure faces outward, while four are positioned in the room's interior. They are gathered around a bowl filled with cylindrical objects, most likely corn or tortillas for their meal. Two of the figures appear to be eating, their hands raised to their mouths. Outside on the porch-like structure are three more figures perched on their knees. Two appear to be children, since they are smaller in scale than the other figures. The child on the right sits in a relaxed pose. The one on the left is embraced by the woman seated nearby. The figures' poses, gestures, and actions, as well as the entire setting, suggest that the scene represents a time of feasting and relaxing for this family.

Two stairways along the sides of the piece lead to the area below, which consists of two rooms. A male figure wearing a conical hat leans against the doorway to the back room, while two women turn toward him and the container of food (similar to the one above) that sits on the floor between them. The representation of two stories probably has symbolic significance since multistoried buildings were uncommon in western Mexico at the time this sculpture was made. Recent research by archaeologists suggests that the two-story house represents the Nayarit worldview, in which the living and the dead coexist, sharing one place with only a fragile barrier between them. Here, then, the dwelling of the dead below is a mirror image of the realm of the living above. Feasting links the living family members with those who have died.

Typical of Nayarit sculpture, the figures have been depicted with ovoid heads, distinctive hatchet-like noses, and flattened chests. They are adorned with painted body tattoos and other ornaments. Also characteristic of Nayarit sculpture, the figures are full of energy and evoke a sense of individual personalities. Even though they are rather general in appearance, their poses are quite naturalistic. The roof of the house and the facade below are covered with a geometric pattern of concentric diamond shapes, which gives the sculpture a highly decorative surface and a unifying design. This colorful display reflects the vital spirit of the Nayarit people and their faith in both this world and the next.

Style and Technique

In contrast to the subtractive process of stone carving used in *Shiva's Family*, this sculpture was made by an additive process using various simple techniques. The piece was made with wet slabs of clay. The artist shaped the roof, walls, floors and steps by hand, perhaps using a paddle-like tool to help flatten the surfaces and a cutting tool for precise edges. The bodies of the figures were also shaped from wet clay slabs. Thin clay strips were rolled to form the arms and legs, which were then added to the bodies. After forming the rounded heads, the artist made certain features such as the noses and ears by pinching the clay. These too were added to the figures.

A ceramic object like this would have been dried and then fired on or near an open flame. Firing makes clay harder and stronger, better able to survive the passage of time. Afterward, the artist painted the details—the patterned roof, face decoration, and clothing—in red, buff, and black pigments. Some of the colors have faded over time.

Artist

We do not know the name of the expressive artist who created this house group. Art in ancient Mesoamerica was not signed, and no written records of Nayarit traditions exist to provide clues to the artist's identity, training, or even gender.

Suggested Questions

1. How many rooms can you find in this house? Do you think these people have separate rooms for sleeping, dining, preparing food, talking and relaxing? In what ways is this different from your house? Are there any ways in which it is the same?
2. Look at the people in this house. How many do you see? What does each one seem to be doing?
3. Do you think these people are all related? Do they seem relaxed and comfortable with each other? How can you tell?
4. What can we tell about their lives from looking at this work of art? Consider family ties, clothing, what houses were like, food and how it was cooked, furniture, relationship to nature.
5. By looking carefully, can you guess if these people lived in a warm or cold climate? What do you see that makes you say that? Do you think the place where they lived had lots of mosquitoes as we do in Minnesota? Why or why not?
6. **Discuss additive and subtractive sculpture.** How do you build a form when you are working with clay? Do you usually cut away material from a block of clay or start with a lump and manipulate it, adding on as you go? We call this kind of sculpture additive. Why? What would you call a sculpture made from a bar of soap or a potato? Do you add on or cut away to produce the form? We call this kind of sculpture subtractive. Why?
7. What parts of this sculpture look as if the clay were rolled? (*Heads, arms, etc.*) Pinched? (*Noses, ears, steps.*) Cut? (*Sides of house, etc.*)
8. Which do you think would require more tools, a sculpture made from clay or a sculpture made from stone? Which would require more strength? More time? Can you think of any reasons why this early Mexican artist used clay? (*Availability of material, no need for complicated tools, etc.*)

9. If the clay used to make this piece was soft, how would it become hard? (*By drying in the air or being fired in a kiln.*)
10. Can you find areas on the house that are painted? What color paint was used? What shape was used most often in the painted decoration? (Diamond.) Were the people painted too? Point out areas where they are painted. Would the artist have painted this sculpture before or after it dried? Did all the paint stay on?
11. This sculpture was made in Mexico almost 2000 years ago. What material do you think was used to make it? Where would the artist have found the clay? Why would the clay be reddish in color? Have you ever seen earth that looked red?
12. How many colors did the artist use to decorate this house model? Since the artist could not buy paints at a store, where do you think the colors came from? (*Plants, soil, minerals.*) What do you think the artist may have used for a brush?
13. How do you suppose the Nayarit people cooked their corn or tortillas? In an oven? Over a fire? Have you ever eaten food cooked over a fire? What kind of food was it? Where did you cook it? At home? On a picnic? Camping? At the lake?
14. **Describe what an archaeologist does—digging up things buried long ago that give us clues about how people used to live.** This house group and other like it tell us that home and family were important to people living in Nayarit Mexico long ago. What would you bury in a time capsule that would show people in the future about your life and what you like to do?