

## Object #5: Olmec Mask

Ancient America: Mask, Mexico, Olmec, 900-300 BCE, Mask | Jadeite, cinnabar, 2002.127



I want to acknowledge the help of:

1. Dr. Frank Riley, Chair and Professor of Olmec Art at the University of Texas at Austin. By accident, surfing the Internet, I made a connection with the professor. A link to an Olmec paper got me oddly enough to the web-site of a travel agency in California which organizes trips to the Olmec region. I called and talked with the receptionist who suggested contacting the professor (as he was a renowned Olmec expert). So I called him and he has been very gratuitous with his time and sharing his expertise on Olmec masks. He's looked at [www.artsconnected.com](http://www.artsconnected.com) for a better look of the Mask. And as stated below, I passed along a copy of the drawing Mr. Joralemon made for the MIA assessment.

Futher research for me:

Peter David Joralemon

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1971 | <i>A Study of Olmec Iconography</i> . Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, no. 7. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.   |
| 1976 | The Olmec Dragon: A Study in Pre-Columbian Iconography. In <i>Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Pre-Classical Mesoamerica</i> , edited by H.B. Nicholson, pp. 27-71. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, Latin American Center Publications. |

2. Also I'd like to thank Debbie for locating the assessment on this MIA Olmec Mask done by Mr. Joralemon. The assessment had not been in the docent object file. (Although I later found the mask drawing along with interpretation in a different format and different content piece in the file!)

### Questions and Activities

1. Since this object is small, please take your turn and take a close look all over. How would you describe this piece? What do you notice that interests you?
2. For what occasions do we wear masks? Are these occasions religious or secular?

3. Who wears modern-day masks? What restrictions are there for who can wear masks?

**Key points:**

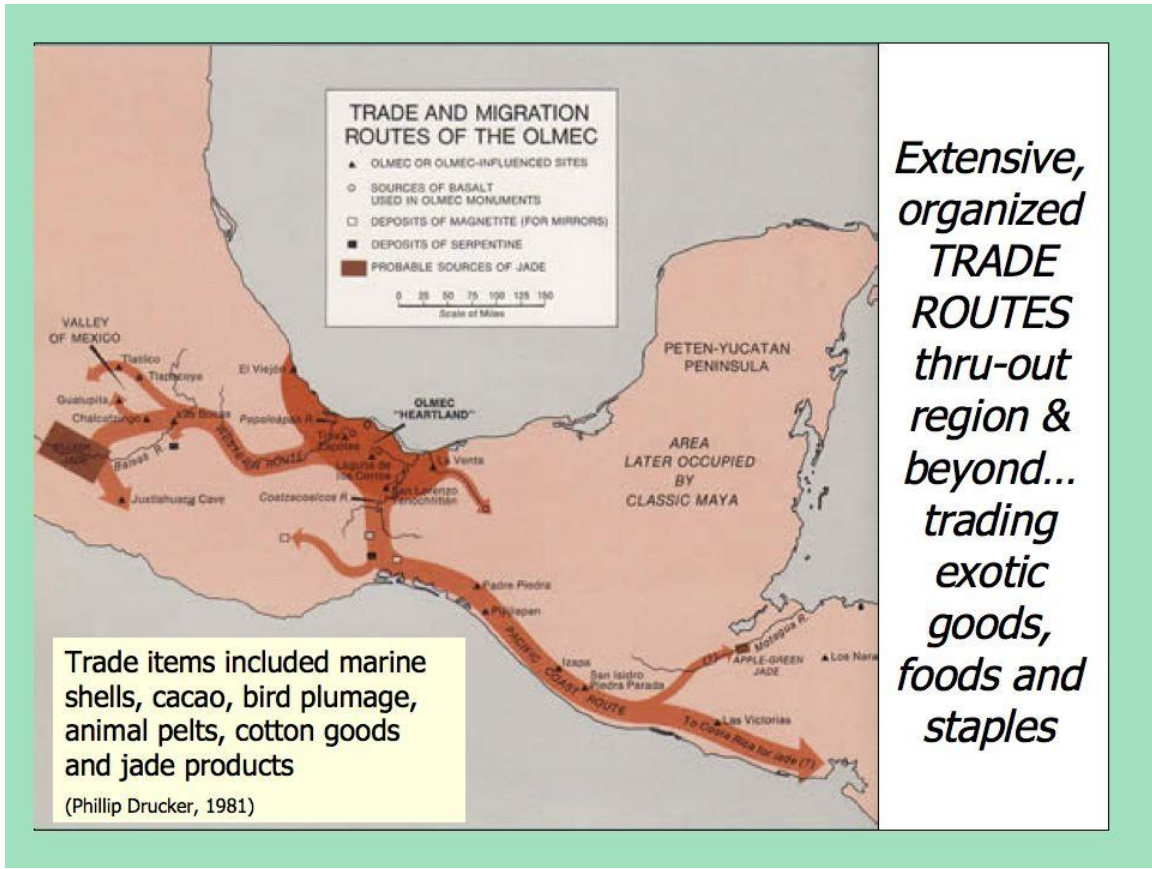
1. This mask was found in a shaman's burial site of the Olmec people. This mask was made by an Olmec artist sometime between 900 to 300 BCE. The mask is considered the most important of all the Olmec art forms. Masks were usually found in burial sites either placed over the deceased's head or wrapped in a bundle with other burial items alongside the deceased. (This mask was actually once owned by John Huston, the film director.)
2. The Olmec civilization is considered the first advanced civilization in Mexico (or the larger region referred to as Mesoamerica). This civilization flourished between 1200 to 300 BCE. They tended to live in small groups.
3. The Olmecs were very powerful, and rank right up there with the other Ancient Cultures of Egypt, Greece and China.
  - a. The Olmecs were the first to have great success in cultivating 3 staple crops of Mesoamerica: corn, squash and beans. And trade these with other regions for other resources to build religious ceremonial centers in large cities.
  - b. The Olmecs also had 2 calendars: a solar one (365 days) and a ceremonial calendar.
  - c. Recent research indicates that the Olmecs also had their own language (Epi-Olmec), which was in the form of hieroglyphs.
4. The Olmecs were a religious people – polytheistic – meaning they believed in many deities. Research done by Professor Joralemon at the University of Texas speculates that the Olmecs had 10 deities. Religious practice centered on the shaman, who conducted rituals and healed the sick.
5. The Olmecs revered and worshipped the jaguar. To these Ancient Indians, the jaguar was more than just a powerful animal. They considered it a symbol of a super-natural force – a god, as well as an ancestor. Jaguars were thought of as the shaman of the animal world and the alter ego of the shaman, himself.
6. Experts think that the Olmec shaman believed that they could transform themselves into the jaguar by putting on a mask like this one, and communicate with the supernatural world.
7. The Olmecs believed that a woman cohabited with a male jaguar to produce the were-jaguar. Some experts believe that the Olmec thought they were descendants of this union.
8. Primary motifs in Olmec art are the jaguar, the Dragon God (source of the ruler's power) and the Earth Monster (some experts say it's the same as the Dragon God). All of these we'll see in this mask. (Use Mr. Joralemon's drawing as a prop – from his MIA assessment document included in this section.) A major theme in Olmec art (and this mask) was that man (particularly the ruler, the dignitary, the priest) was to be represented as powerful and as deity incarnate! (Incidentally, to date, no Olmec art has been found represented the common people of Olmec.)
9. Let's look at some of the details of this mask: what the incisions may mean and discover what it is made of. (from the Joralemon MIA assessment document - ©2002 approximately)
  - a. Few Olmec masks have incising. This mask is one of the best. The incisions are in the form of Olmec icons. There are references to the major Olmec deities and references as to who the deceased was in earthly life. The incisions are colored with cinnabar, a red powder used to make the lines stand out.
10. I would either point to the mask directly, or use the drawing as a prop, pointing to the various locations. Would depend on the size of the audience.
  - a. Reference #1: Were-Jaguar head – cleft on top, almond-shaped eyes, down-turned mouth. All quintessential elements of the Olmec design. This design may indicate the actual identity of the deceased (according to Professor Reilly, bio provided.)

- b. Reference #3: Down-turned L-shaped motif may be attribute of Olmec Dragon or Bird Monster.
  - c. References #4 and #5: Down-turned mouth, the four dots and cross over the mouth opening – signifies the portal to the other world, through which the shaman speaks to the super-natural powers. This joint motif may indicate that the deceased is a chief speaker with the super-natural powers. The square around the mouth may indicate the further sanctity of the mask and the sacred communication it permits. Mr. Joraleman interprets the cross-hatching and dots near the mouth as coming from La Venta, a principle city in the Olmec’s homeland.
  - d. Olmec Mask expert, Dr. Frank Reilly (University of Texas at Austin) suspects that the mask was not initially incised. But when the burial tomb was opened at some later date for a sacred ritual ceremony, the mask was incised at that time. It was a normal practice to open the burial mound periodically to conduct sacred rituals.
  - e. Mr. Joralemon suspects that there were two occasions when the mask was incised, but does not mention in his assessment if this was done before or after the burial ceremony. Incised once for the #2 motif which related the identity of the deceased, the burial site or the deceased’s lineage. A second time for #3, #4, and #5 to relate the major dynastic patrons. The other marked areas, Mr. Joralemon didn’t discuss.
  - f. Jadeite was considered the most precious stone that the Olmec people used. More expensive than gold or silver. It is known that jade and jadeite were available in Guerrero where this mask was found. (However, as stated above, the incision around the mouth may indicate that the mask came originally from La Venta, a principle city in the Olmec’s homeland on the opposite side of Mexico (bordering on the Gulf of Mexico). It is speculated that when the Olmec people wanted materials not available in their homeland, like jade and jadeite, they would either create trading posts in the areas that had these materials, or forcibly colonize the area.
  - g. *Additional information to be used as needed, and/or time allows...*
11. *Jadeite is a very hard stone (hardness 7) and would have required a stone of equal or greater hardness (like quartz or diamond) to cut the design into this mask. Olmec people didn’t have diamond, so quartz may have been used. Notice the almost glass-like quality to the jadeite.*
  12. *What about the burial ritual, itself? Research has found that the deceased were placed in a special burial mounds in the middle of the ceremonial court. The deceased might have worn earrings, beads, and necklaces made of jade. Experts think that the body was painted with a layer of thick cinnabar red putty - shaped as an oval with serpentine and jade celts (stone images). The burial site itself was decorated on top with jewels and other items. Experts think that the Olmecs believed that the deceased’s body was divided into three levels: the heavenly, the terrestrial (the earth’s surface) and the underworld. (from a paper by Fr. Thomas Hart)*
  13. *Ceremonies involving masks may also have been used in celebrations to honor and entertain the deities. The deities, in turn, would bless the people with abundant rain, fertile crops, successful harvests, good health and general well-being. This may have been different from the strictly burial rituals, particularly in reference to this mask. (from “Notes from book: Mexico – From the Olmecs to the Aztecs by Michael D. Coe and Rex Koontz” [noted Olmec experts]– on the Internet)*
  14. *The Olmecs were divided into two classes: the elite (urban), and the commoners (rural). It is speculated that the elite influenced art style, politics and economics and religious movements.*
  15. *The Olmec homeland is the tan-colored area on the map (use “Influencia” map as prop). However, as this map shows, Guerrero is on the west side of Mexico (the Pacific Ocean side). The*

*state is located on the Pacific side of Mexico. The Olmecs migrated to various regions outside of their homeland. Like over the mountains to Guerrero. They also were very interested in trading with other peoples in this area of Mexico. So this piece may have been made in Guerrero or was made in the homeland and traded by the Olmecs with the people of Guerrero. The mask is thought to come from the city of La Venta in the state of Guerrero.*

*Transition:*

We have now looked at a shaman's mask that when worn transformed the shaman into a were-jaguar and provided the communication channel to the supernatural. As this mask was found in a burial site, we can't be sure if it was also used while the shaman was alive. But certainly, in the after-life, he would have had this to use for supernatural communication – if he still needed it! Now let's go upstairs and look at some Christian items of worship.



<http://www.bmaf.org/node/203>

Douglas K. Christensen - Of Jaredites and Olmecs

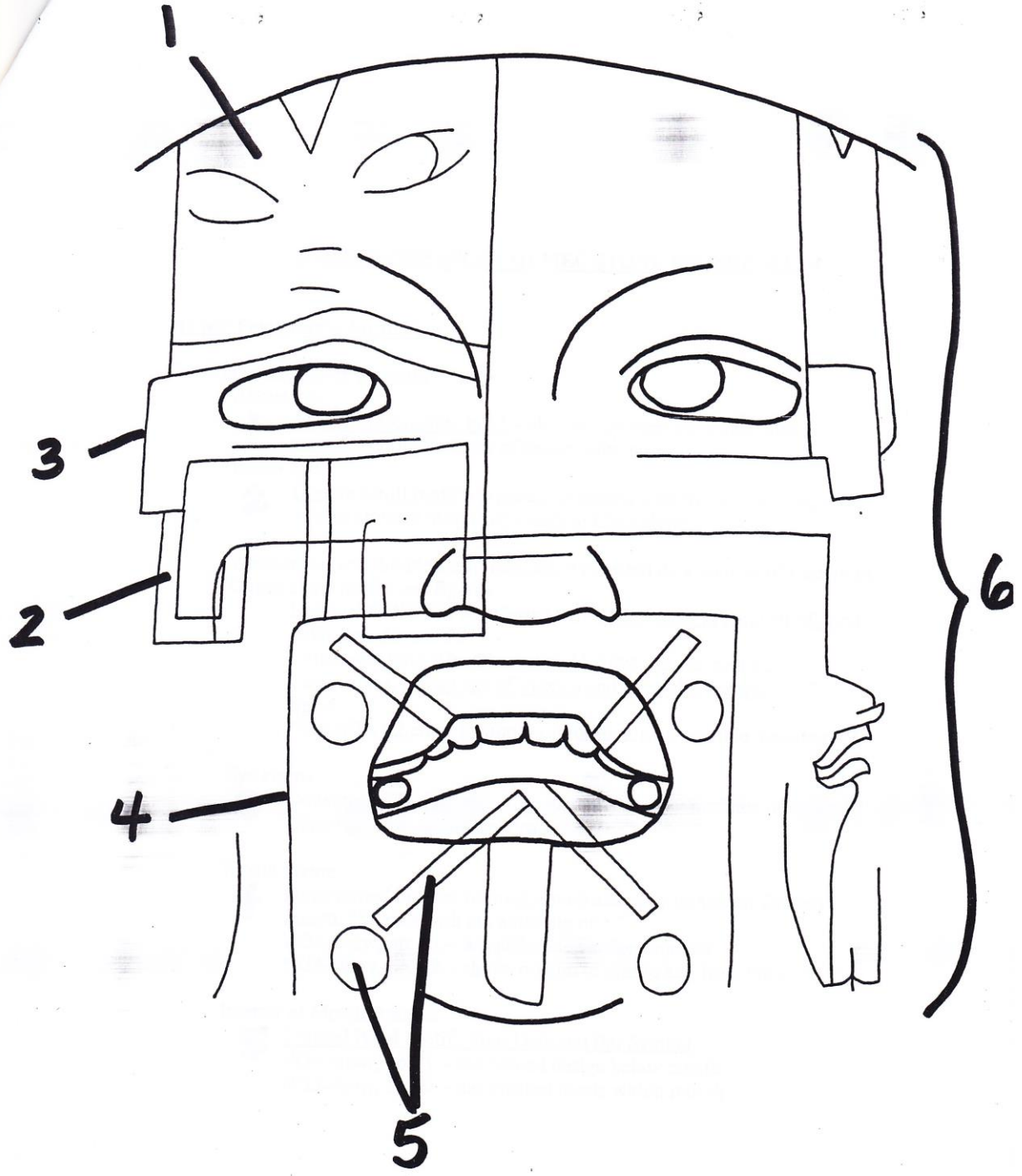


***Olmec sites or sites with Olmec influence***

- |                      |                  |                     |
|----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Tlatilco          | 9. Monte Albán   | 18. Chiapa de Corzo |
| 2. Cuicuilco         | 10. El Viejón    | 19. Xoc             |
| 3. Chalcatzingo      | 11. La Mojarra   | 20. Pijijiapan      |
| 4. Texpa             | 12. Tres Zapotes | 21. Izapa           |
| 5. Teopantecuanitlán | 13. San Lorenzo  | 22. Abaj Takalik    |
| 6. Olinalá           | 14. Las Limas    | 23. Monte Alto      |
| 7. Oxtotitlán        | 15. La Venta     | 24. Chalchuapa      |
| 8. Las Bocas         | 16. El Manatí    | 25. Copán           |
|                      | 17. Balancán     | 26. Cuello          |



Drawing of MIA Olmec Mask  
By Mr. Joralemon



**[Professor Reilly's bio]**

F. Kent Reilly

Professor

Director, Center for the Study of Arts and Symbolism of Ancient America

Ph.D., University of Texas, Austin, 1994

Email: [fr04@txstate.edu](mailto:fr04@txstate.edu)

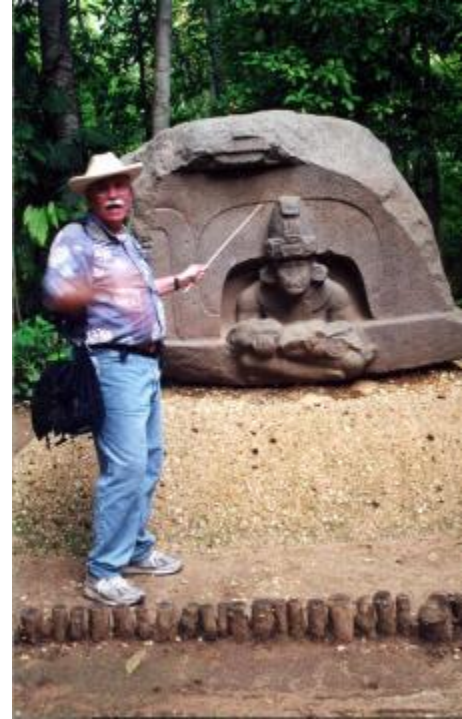
Phone: (512) 245-8272

Office: ELA 271

Research:

Mayan and Southeastern ideological systems and epigraphy

I am primarily a pre-historian and my interests converge around the religion, art, and visual validation of elite authority in New World chiefdoms and early states. My primary focus is Mesoamerican Civilization. I spend a great deal of my research energy examining the art and symbols of the ancient Olmec (1200-400 BC), and Classic Maya (AD 200-900) cultures. In 1995 I was a guest curator and a catalog contributor to the Princeton University exhibition "The Olmec World: Art, Ritual, and Rulership." I have published articles on the ecological origin of Olmec symbols, the influence of Olmec symbols on the iconography of Maya rulership and the origin and function of the Olmec symbol system. My current interests, besides the ancient Olmec and Maya, include the art and iconography of the prehistoric Mississippian Period of the Southeastern United States. In 2004 I was a member of the advisory board and a catalog contributor to the Art Institute of Chicago exhibition "Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand; Ancient Native American Art of the Midwest and South."



Undergraduate Courses:

ANTH 3332: Myths and Moundbuilders (stacked with 5332)

ANTH 3333: North American Indians

ANTH 3363: Art and Arch of Olmec (stacked with 5363)

ANTH 3376G: Aztec: Native American Empire

Graduate Courses:

ANTH 5332: Myths and Moundbuilders (stacked with 3332)

ANTH 5363: Art and Arch of Olmec (stacked with 3363)

ANTH 5374Q: Anthropology and Art

Other:

Mississippian Art and Iconography Workshop

Field School: CRM (ground penetrating radar), Etowah GA