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Olmec-style Iconography



Research Year: 1995

Culture: Olmec

Chronology: Pre-Classic

Location: Veracruz, Guerrero and Puebla, México

Sites: Arroyo Pesquero, Las Limas, La Venta, Las Bocas

Submitted 01/01/1997 by:

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The Olmec Art Style

Three thousand years ago, Mesoamerica experienced the development of a geographically dispersed art style whose origins can be traced to the Olmec archaeological culture. Olmec art visualized a shamanic belief system that also functioned as the ideological foundations for political power. The symbol system, which is central to any discussion of Olmec art, was expressed as incised images on a range of objects and mediums. Olmec art is thematically conservative, primarily restricted to visually describing cosmology, the inhabitants of the supernatural Otherworld, ritual activity, and political power derived from supernatural access. Many of the objects created in the Olmec style functioned as empowered accoutrements in the shamanic rituals through which political power was sanctified by supernatural power. Much of the monumental art executed in the Olmec style was created as a permanent record of this shamanic ritual activity. The iconography and symbolism that are central to any discussion of the Olmec style were to be inherited by all later Mesoamerican cultures. The ideological messages conveyed by this highly developed Olmec symbol system continued to function as the underlying matrix for both political power and religion throughout the lengthy history of Mesoamerica.

My recent viewing of several objects in private collections has served to underscore the need for new and accurate renderings of the secondary incised images, which are carried by such objects. For example, a close observation of a jade mask from the Olmec heartland site of Arroyo Pesquero formerly in the Dyker collection ([Figure 1](#)) reveals that the published drawings of this object are inaccurate in at least one critical detail. That missing detail was a thumb carried on the two hand-paw-wing motifs incised on the left side of the mask.

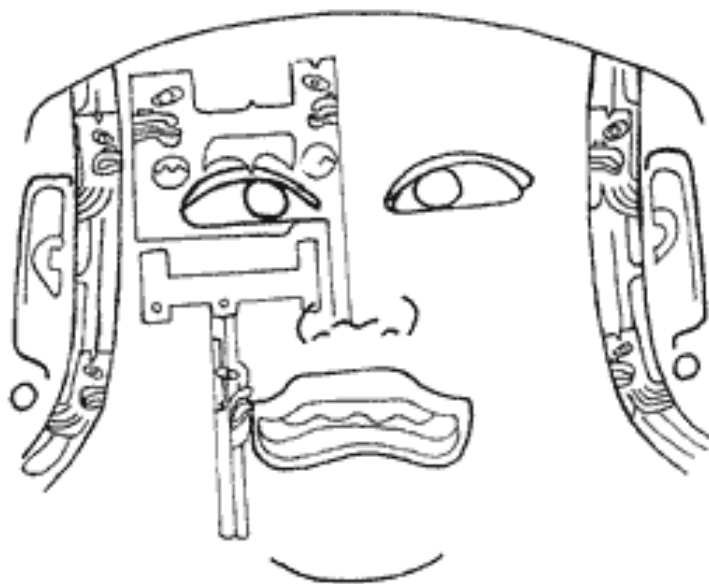


Figure 1. Incised Mask, white and gray jadeite with red pigment. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Private Collection (height 17cm, width 16cm, depth 9cm).

At first glance this may seem a small detail, an error that occurs primarily because the incising in this area is so shallow that the two tiny thumbs failed to pick up the red coloring that was applied to accentuate the visibility of design. Before my observation, I was prepared to posit the existence of a set of paired motif oppositions derived from the inaccurate drawings of the Dyker mask iconography. Specifically I had written a comparison of the left and right thumb/thumbless oppositions on the Dyker Mask and compared it to a similar left and right thumb/thumbless opposition carried by the incised imagery on the legs of "Slim," another important Olmec-style object from a private collection. I argued that the existence of a similar set of oppositions on these two Olmec works of art established an iconographic pattern, based on aquatic and terrestrial locomotion, that could be interpreted as "fin" opposed to "paw" and thus water supernatural opposed to land supernatural. In this case, a close observation of the art

object in question revealed the error in the published drawings. Undoubtedly, this episode underscores the necessity of accurate drawings in the dissemination of correct iconographic information.

Following are 37 updated versions of similarly inaccurate drawings:



Figure 2. Carved Bottle, fuschite Izapa Style, Pacific Coast. Private Collection (height 27.94cm, width 13.46cm, diameter 13.46cm).

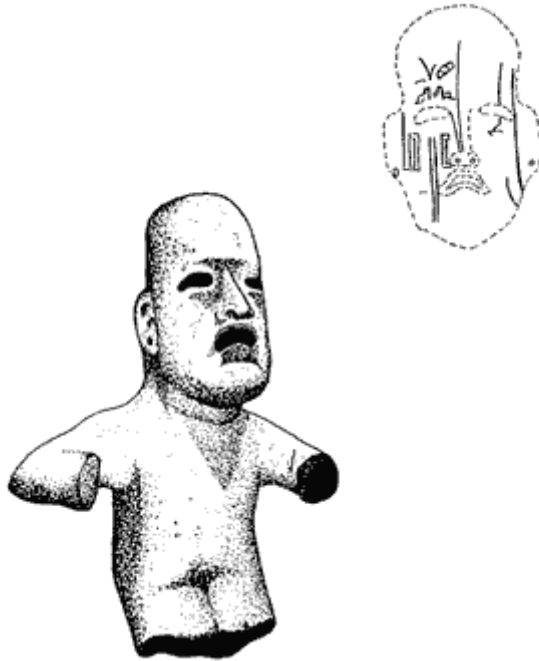


Figure 3. Standing Figure Fragment, mottled green jade. Private Collection (height 13.33cm, width 10.16cm, depth 4.3cm).



Figure 4. Seated Figure, mottled jade. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Private Collection (height 16.3cm, width 9.3cm, depth 5.7cm).



Figure 5a. Incised Maskette, dark olive-green serpentine. Private Collection (height 13.5cm, width 10cm, depth 5cm).

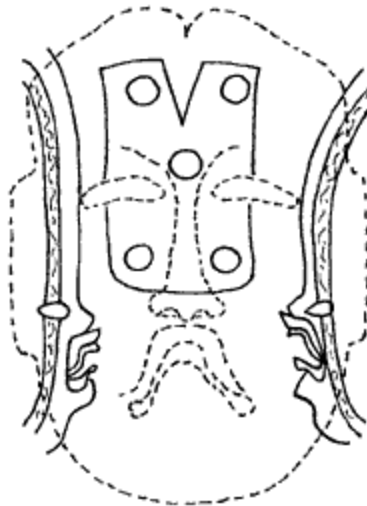


Figure 5b. Incised Image of Maskette in Figure 5a.

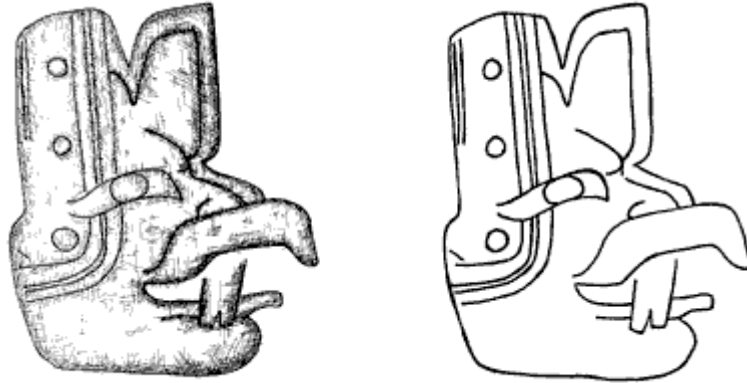


Figure 6a. Incised image from Las Limas Figure, right shoulder. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, México (height 55cm, width 42cm).

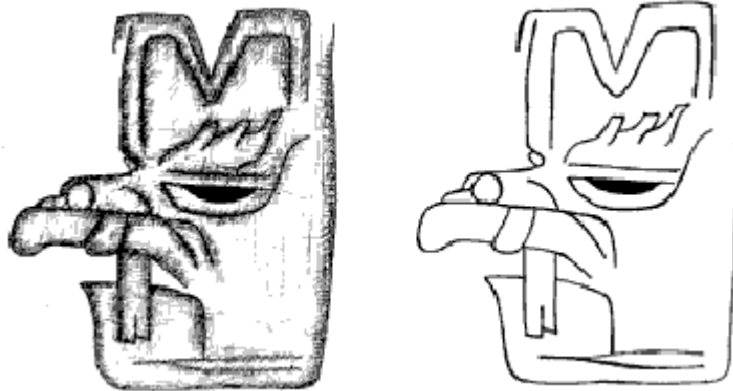


Figure 6b. Incised image from Las Limas Figure, left shoulder. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, México.

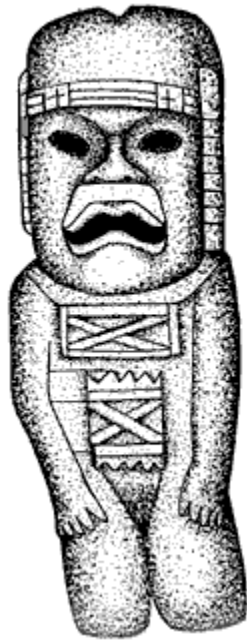


Figure 6c. Baby from lap of Las Limas Figure. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, México.

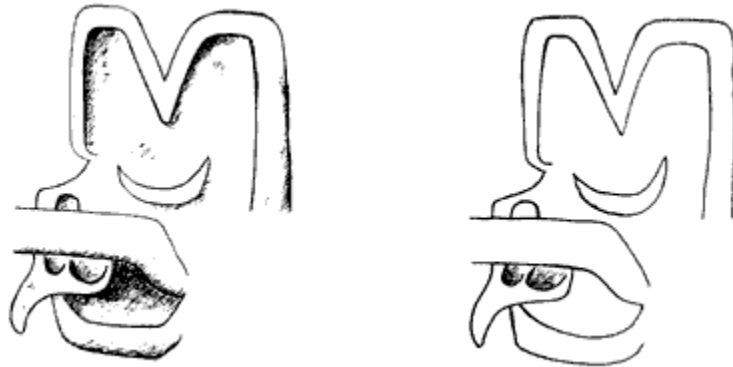


Figure 6d. Left leg of Las Limas Figure. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, México.

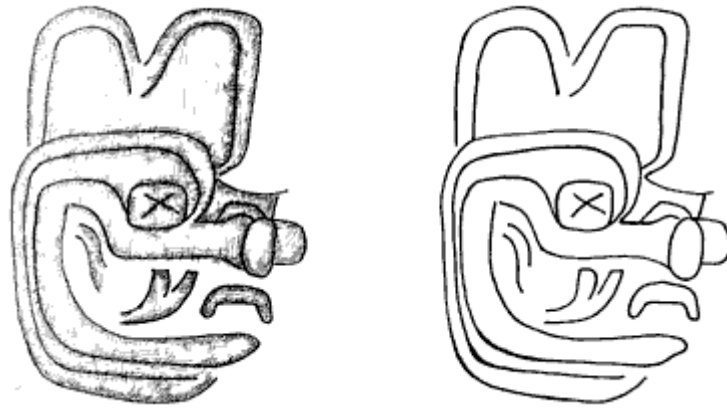


Figure 6e. Right leg of Las Limas Figure. Museo de Antropología de Xalapa, México.

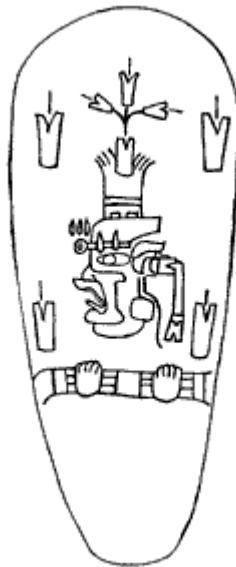


Figure 7a. Incised image from celt, blue/green jade. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Private Collection (height 24.8cm, width 10.2cm).

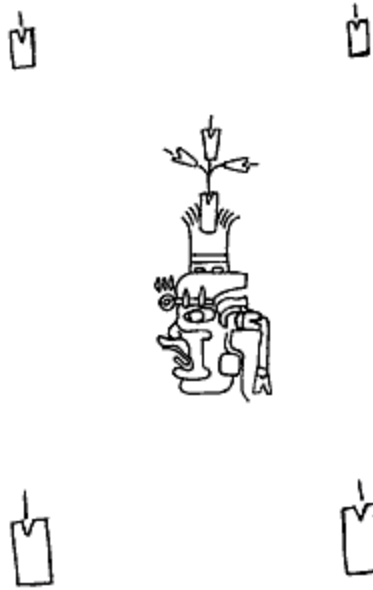


Figure 7b. Detail of image from celt in Figure 7a.



Figure 8. Incised image from celt, jadeite. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Private Collection (height 26.5cm, width 9.7cm).

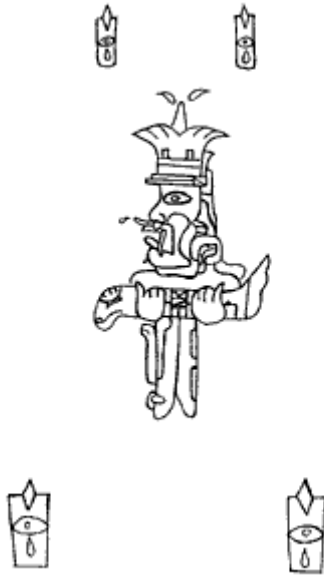


Figure 9. Incised image from celt. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Private Collection (height 26.4cm).



Figure 10. Incised image from celt, grayish/green jadeite. Guerrero, México, Dallas Museum of Art (height 27.9cm, width 9.7cm, depth 3.8cm).



Figure 11. Incised image from obsidian core Tomb C, La Venta, Tabasco, México. National Anthropological Museum, México City (height .75cm, width 1.2cm).

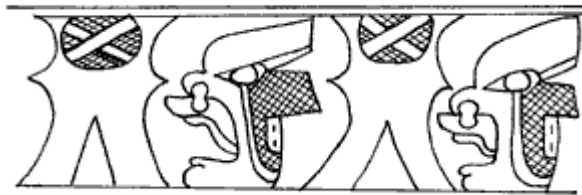


Figure 12. Incised image from ceramic vessel. Puebla, México City (height 11.09cm).



Figure 13. Carved figure, translucent blue/green jadeite with traces of cinnabar. Puebla México, Private Collection (height 35cm, width 7.9cm, depth 1.9cm).

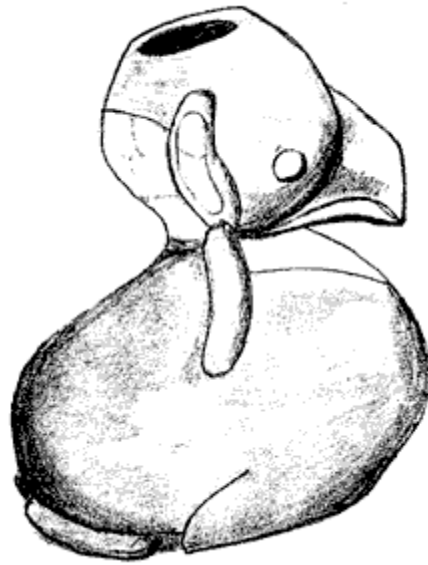


Figure 14a. Vessel, clay with buff decoration, Las Bocas, Puebla, México, Private Collection, Los Angeles, California (height 15.6cm, width 14cm, diameter 16.2cm).



Figure 14b. Vessel, clay with buff decoration. Las Bocas, Puebla, México, Private Collection, Los Angeles, California (height 15.6cm, width 14cm, diameter 16.2cm).

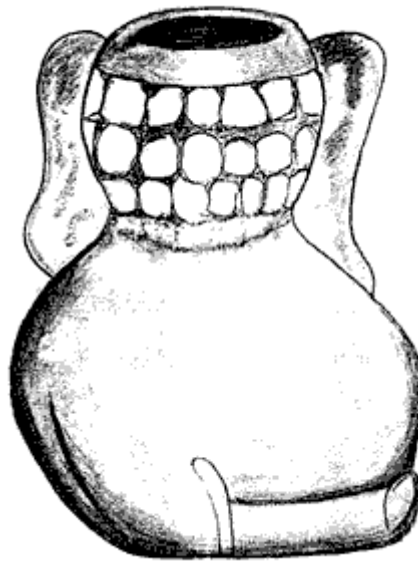


Figure 14c. Vessel, clay with buff decoration. Las Bocas, Puebla, México, Private Collection, Los Angeles, California (height 15.6cm, width 14cm, diameter 16.2cm).



Figure 15. Seated figure, clay with buff slip and traces of red pigment. Las Bocas, Puebla, México, Private Collection (height 34cm, width 33cm, diameter 18cm).

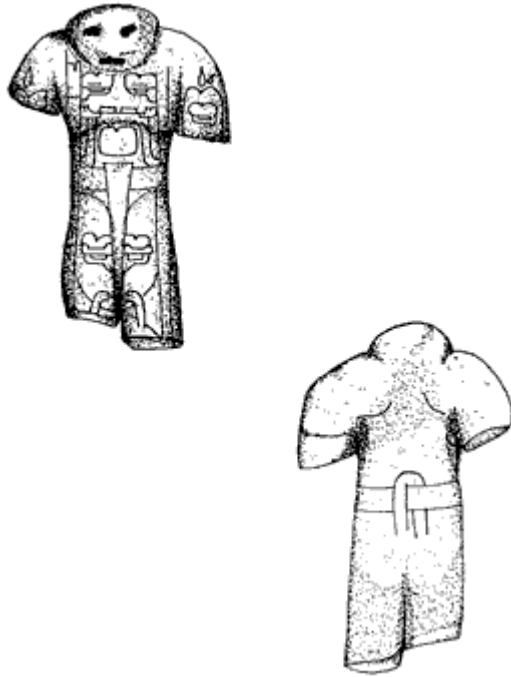


Figure 16. Standing figure with incisions, blue/green jadeite. Guerrero, México, Private Collection (height 8.9cm, width 5.5cm, depth 2cm).



Figure 17a. Stone figure with incised feet on head, and crossed arms. Private Collection (height 5.7cm, width 9.5cm, depth 3.8cm).

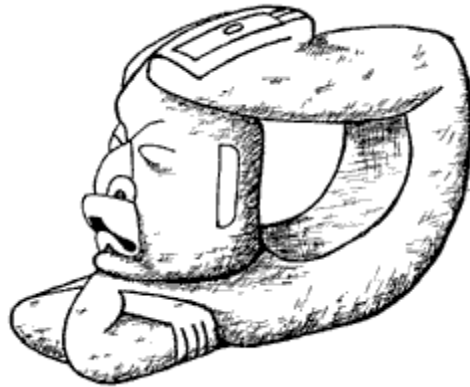


Figure 17b. Stone figure with incised feet on head, and crossed arms. Private Collection (height 5.7cm, width 9.5cm, depth 3.8cm).

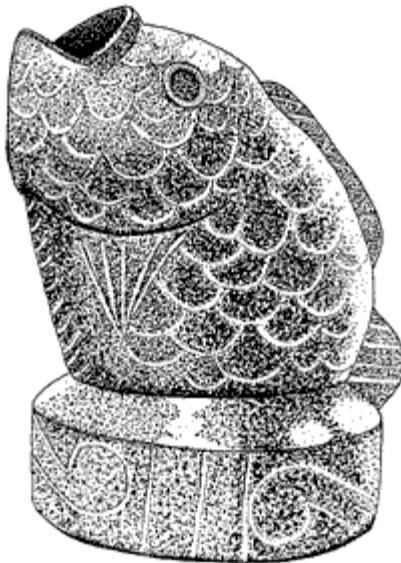


Figure 18. Fish effigy vessel, polished brown earthenware with red paint. Central Highlands, México. St. Louis Art Museum (height 9.5cm, width 19cm, diameter 5.1cm).

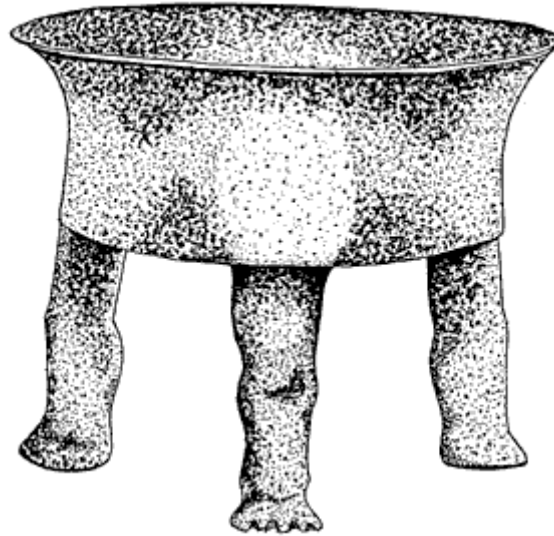


Figure 19. Tetrapod vase, dark grayish/green stone. Xochipala Culture, Guerrero, México, Private Collection (height 20.5cm, diameter 26.3cm).



Figure 20. Incised celt. Tlalenco Valley of México, (redrawn from Covarrubias' Notebook).

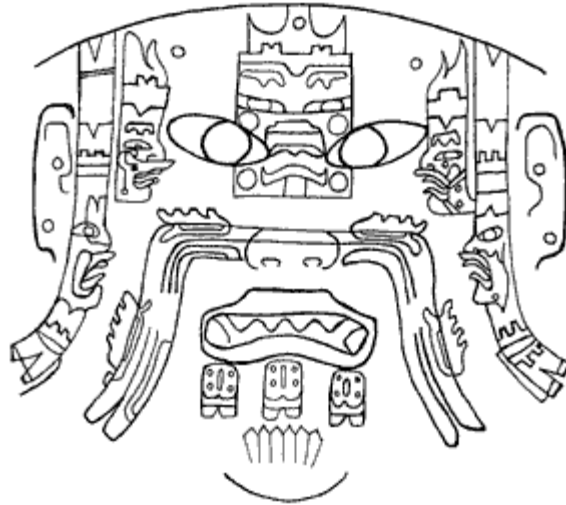


Figure 21. Incised image from mask, jade. Arroyo Pesquero, México, Sainbury Collection, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England (height 15.6cm).

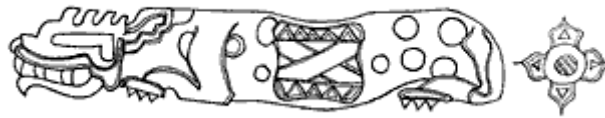


Figure 22. Rollout image from ceramic vessel. Tabasco, México, Private Collection (no size indicated).



Figure 23. Carved spoon, jade, with traces of red pigment. Brooklyn Museum (height 3cm, width 12.1cm, depth 1.1cm).

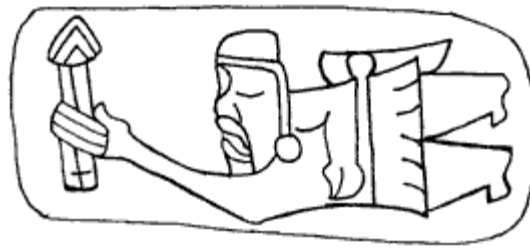


Figure 24. Oblong spoon with incisions, translucent blue/green jadeite. Veracruz, México, Private Collection (height 2.7cm, width 6.7cm, depth 0.5cm).

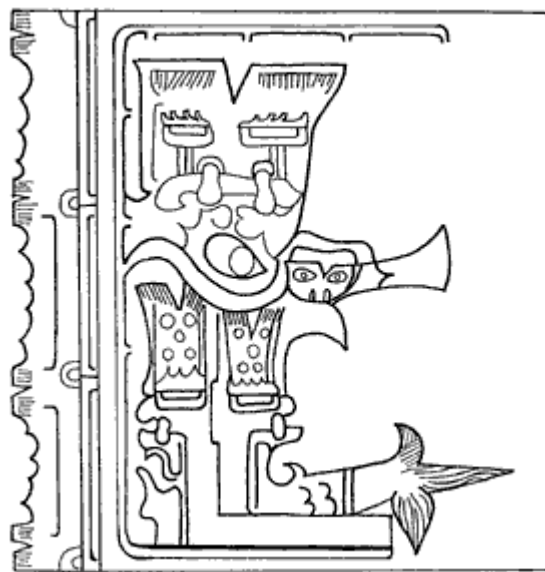


Figure 25. Rollout of incised image, ceramic vessel, brown to buff. Tlapacoya Valley of México Art Museum, Princeton University (height 15cm).

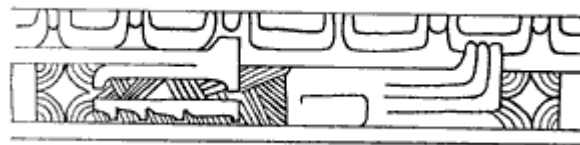


Figure 26. Rollout of incised image, ceramic vessel. Tlatilco, National Museum of Anthropology, México City (height 8.89cm).

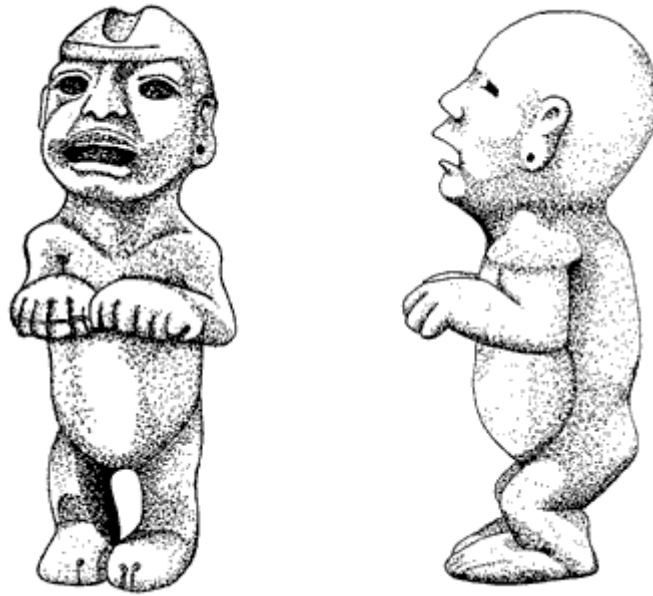


Figure 27. Standing figure with incisions, light grayish/green, albite. Chiapas, México, Private Collection (height 14cm, width 5.4cm, depth 5.8cm).

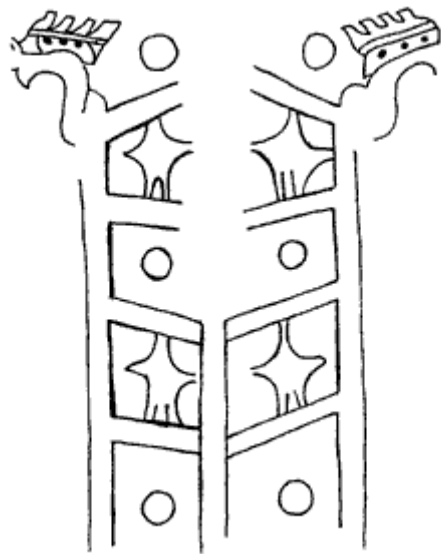


Figure 28. Incised image of cape from standing Figure 24. Private Collection.

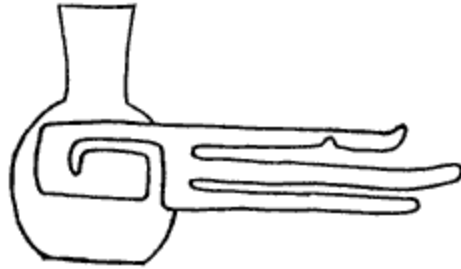


Figure 29. Incised image from bottle, blackware with red pigment (jaguar paw design). Los Bocas, Puebla, México, Museum of Primitive Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art (height 19.68cm).