

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN SCULPTURE

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Overview Sculpture has played an important role in Latin American culture because of its use in the public sphere where it served to remind people of history, beliefs, identity, and community. While the Conquistadors often attempted to destroy the artifacts of the indigenous peoples, later artists integrated the cultural history of the past to reflect the often complex blend of cultures and traditions which typifies the Latin American nations.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Mesoamerica

Olmec (1200 – 400 BC): Living in the tropical forests of south-central Mexico (Veracruz and Tabasco), the Olmec produced massive basalt portrait heads of their rulers. They also created small-scale jadeite objects that corresponded to religious roles and practices. The Olmec were remarkable in their ability to create sophisticated products without the use of knives.

Maya: Maya sculptures, especially during the Classic Period (250 – 900 AD) are worked from limestone and volcanic tuff. They are primarily carved bas relief into walls and portals in the pyramids and large buildings. The subjects are individuals, deities, and animals, the most common being Quetzalcoatl, Chac (rain god), aristocracy, priests, and animals (jaguars, lizards, etc.). They also carved calendars and representations of the Tree of Life.

Jade figurines: Costa Rica (400 – 800 AD) Atlantic watershed. Abstract figures of people and animals, masked people, frog (fertility), birds (offerings).

Gold figurines: Colombia and Costa Rica. (400 – 800 AD) Primarily animals, reflecting shamanistic beliefs and practices. Frog, birds, deer, jaguar, iguana, lizard gods.

Terracotta figurines: Small terracotta figurines have been found in tomb shafts in Mexico and in graves in the Andes. They often depict people, roles, and daily life in their communities.

South America

Moche: A pre-Inca civilization, the Moche (100 – 800 AD) lived in northern Peru where they produced useful yet intricate ceramics for daily and ceremonial use. The ceramics were often in the form of humans and animals, often in humorous or surprising poses (monkeys sitting next to each other, arms on each others' shoulders; a couple engaged in the act of copulation).

Tiwanaku (300 – 1150): Large carved blocks in shape of human, with huge heads, massive eye sockets. These are largely monumental to accompany the blocky architecture of the ceremonial centers. The figures are sometimes depicted with human heads in their hands, which suggests human sacrifice.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Aztecs: Archeologists have found many thousands of Aztec sculptures that were produced in all many sizes and with many functions ranging from personal homes, public monuments, temples, ball courts, and more. They were produced from volcanic rock as well as from semi-precious stones such as jade. In addition to shapes corresponding to gods, animals, and leaders, the Aztecs also intricately carved calendars.

Inca: The Inca created vast quantities of sculptures and figurines of all sizes. Some of the sculptures and figurines had a purpose in daily life, but the vast majority was used in conjunction with ceremonial practice.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

Baroque sculpture: Often carved of wood, then gilded with a layer of gold, or covered in plaster and then painted. They were often dressed in rich costumes. The subjects tended to be religious (Virgin Mary, Jesus, saints and the apostles). There were also elaborately carved crucifixes and altarpieces, often quite ornate, as in the case of the complex and detailed ultrabaroque Churrigueresque style, which features ornate decorative detailing.

Antonio Francisco Lisboa (1730 – 1814) (Brazil) created painted wood sculptures as well as stone statues of the twelve apostles.

Bernardo de Legarda (1700 – 1773) sculpted the Virgin of the Apocalypse (1734) of wood. It is the most outstanding example of the “Quito School” which is characterized by color, motion, and intricate carved details.

Retablos, which resemble triptychs, often contained tiny figurines depicting religious scenes such as the Nativity and the Ascension. They represent a blending of folk art and religious monuments.

Rococo sculpture: Life-sized carved sculptures of the Virgin Mary were painted with bright pastel colors then dressed in elaborate costumes, and installed in a church where they served as reminders of religious teachings and devotion.

19 TH CENTURY : Independence and Nation-Building

Monuments to liberators and heroes: Simon Bolivar, who led independence movements throughout Latin America, appears on horseback as a triumphant figure in many countries. Many countries recognize national heroes, particularly those who died during a turning point battle. One example is the Monument to the Heroic Cadets of Chapultepec (Mexico City).

Pegasus statue, Cartagena, Colombia. A large statue of the winged horse, Pegasus, was erected to commemorate the valor of the people of Cartagena after declaring independence from Spain in 1811, and then enduring a siege in which more than 7,000 died. The sculpture, which was erected in the mid 19th century, is near the gates of the wharf. The artist is unknown.

20TH CENTURY : Modern

20th-Century Latin American Sculpture: Sculpture in the 20th century in Latin America was often commissioned by governments to honor indigenous cultures. Other works were commissioned by hotels or tourist developments to unify themes associated with the town or region. Often surreal or abstract, the sculptures are often placed in colonial settings, where the juxtaposition with buildings from the 17th century creates a postmodernist blend.

Christ the Redeemer (1921-1933). Created by French sculptor Paul Landowski and constructed by Brazilian engineer Heitor da Silva Costa, the Christ the Redeemer statue is an enormous Art Deco monument 125 high (including the pedestal). It is located on Corcovado Mountain, and has become a cultural icon of Rio de Janeiro and of Brazil.

Fernando Botero (b. 1932, Medellin, Colombia) is the best-known Latin American contemporary sculpture. His large bronze sculptures depict people and animals with large, balloon-like bodies, often with humorous or satirical effect.

Discussion/Questions

1. When the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they found a veritable treasure trove of sculptures. Unfortunately for the indigenous peoples, many of the sculptures were made of gold and precious stones, which inflamed the greed and ambition of the explorers. The most finely worked were in gold and in jade. While many were melted down, some still exist. Describe some of the gold and jade sculptures and explain how the cultures differed from each other.

2. When construction began on churches, cathedrals, and government buildings, one primary goal was to create a monument that would transmit many messages, both of religious and political importance. How did religious

sculpture communicate Christian history and values? How the large sculptures also communicate the wealth, power, and influence of Europe? Please provide at least four examples that explain how sculpture communicated history, values, and collective aspirations?

3. PreHispanic art tended to be semi-representational, which is to say that it clearly indicated what it was, but it was rarely realistic in the sense of Greek and Roman sculpture. Colonial and Nineteenth Century sculpture tended to be every elaborate and realistic. However, Twentieth Century sculpture represents a dramatic break, and is often abstract or uses unusual colors or materials. How do the Modernist styles reflect the larger political and aesthetic trends that were occurring at that time? Please provide at least four examples.

Reading

Scott, John. Latin American Art: Ancient to Modern. University Press of Florida, 2000.

Sullivan, Edward. Latin American Art. Phaidon Press, 2000.