

## ● Art History

Religious faith dominated almost every aspect of life during the Middle Ages. Churches were centers of wealth and power as well as worship. The village of Jelling was the home of the first king of Denmark, Gorm the Old. The stone in Fig. 1–6 was raised by his son Harald Blåtand, also called Harald Blue-tooth, in memory of his father and his mother, Thyra. The stone has stood in the churchyard of Jelling for more than a thousand years. It is inscribed in the runic alphabet, a form of writing used by ancient Germanic peoples from the third to the thirteenth centuries. Runic inscriptions were especially used to mark funeral monuments. Harald is credited with being the first Danish king to bring Christianity to Denmark. The Jelling stone features the oldest representation of Christ in Scandinavia. The art of this culture features swirling spirals, and cleverly hidden faces and animals disguised within the art.

## Internet Connection

There are many sites that show examples of Olmec art:

[www.witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHprehistoric.html](http://www.witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHprehistoric.html),  
[www.tribalarts.com/feature/olmec/](http://www.tribalarts.com/feature/olmec/),  
[www.crystalinks.com/olmec.html](http://www.crystalinks.com/olmec.html)



unchanged for more than 2,000 years. In ancient Asia, Chinese sculptors were masters of casting bronze, creating intricate ritual vessels and containers covered with designs of animal and human forms, while carvers in India produced figurative works of beautiful naturalism.

The sculpture of ancient Greece and Rome is often considered one of the great achievements in Western art. Although much Greek sculpture is known only through Roman copies, they show the preoccupation with achieving perfection of the human form. Sculptors focused on

**Fig. 1–6. Erected at the church in Jelling, Denmark, this stone honored the ancestors of a Danish king. The curving, intersecting lines are associated with Celtic art.**

Denmark, *Jelling Stone: Crucifixion*, c. 980 AD. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.

## The Olmec: Ancient Sculptors of Mesoamerica

The first evidence of Olmec culture, the earliest known Mesoamerican civilization, was discovered in 1862 when workers digging in a field uncovered a colossal carved-stone head with striking, unique features. Although details about the Olmec remain unknown, archaeological evidence suggests that they flourished along the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico from about 1200 to 600 BC. Living in a highly developed agricultural society with complex urban centers, the Olmec built their cities around a central raised mound, later replaced by pyramidal structures, that was used for religious ceremonies. Olmec political systems, city planning, art, and religious beliefs were continued and elaborated on by later cultures of pre-Hispanic Mexico, including the Zapotec and Maya.

During nearly 700 years, the Olmec created monumental sculpture,

including life-size statues of their rulers, huge carved portrait heads, and altars. Much of this monumental art was found damaged—parts had been broken off and heads removed from statues. Because this practice continued throughout the existence of the culture, scholars now believe that it was the Olmec who destroyed their own sculptures, perhaps for religious or ritual purposes.

Six colossal heads like this one have been found at the urban center of San Lorenzo; all had been mutilated and buried around 900 BC, the time of the city's decline. San Lorenzo was laid out on a central axis surrounding a ceremonial pyramid built of pounded earth; the colossal heads were likely placed on the four sides of the platform at the base of the pyramid. Because of the individualized features of each sculpture, scholars believe that

the individual, and their works became increasingly naturalistic, yet highly idealized. Following the decline of the Roman Empire during the third and fourth century AD, the Byzantine empire flourished in Constantinople, and present-day Europe saw the migration of nomadic tribes across the continent. Much of the art of these migratory peoples is small, portable metal sculptures, often with animal themes, that were used for personal adornment or as weapons. Later, during the period known as Romanesque, sculpture once again became closely tied to religion, and sculptors created expressive stone reliefs and large-scale figures for the interiors and exteriors of churches.

At the same time in the Americas, native cultures were thriving. Distinct sculptural traditions developed throughout both continents; most artists chose

they represent portraits of Olmec rulers. Not only are these sculptures heavy and huge—weighing more than ten tons and nearly ten feet tall—they are also made of basalt, one of the hardest stones. The Olmec transported the boulders almost sixty miles, probably on rafts navigated downstream. Basalt is very difficult to carve, yet the Olmec were able to create sophisticated sculptures using only stone and jade tools.

Olmec sculpture, both utilitarian and ceremonial, features animal as well as human themes. Carved jade figurines have been found in burial sites. Monkeys, serpents, and jaguars are also popular subjects and likely had important symbolic and religious meanings. But perhaps most important, Olmec sculptors decorated their objects with signs that were found to be a form of writing. The decipherment of these inscriptions has provided valuable insight into this fascinating culture.

**Fig. 1–8. The Maya erected huge stelae, elaborately carved stone images of their rulers. They were carved with stone tools because metal was not used at this time in Mexico. Notice the amount of detail the artist was able to achieve.**

Honduras, Copan, Stele H, *The Ruler Eighteen Rabbit*, c. 782 AD.

Stone with traces of pigment. Courtesy Davis Art Images.



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The Maya were one of the great early Mesoamerican civilizations. Between 300 and 900 AD they developed writing, a form of arithmetic, a calendar, and the corbeled arch. They also built some of the finest architecture in Mexico. The upright stone slab, or stela, was one of their most important sculptural formats used during the Classic Period (200–600 AD). Mounted in open squares between sacred buildings and pyramids, they were erected to commemorate the passing of time and the ascension of a new ruler. They were carved in low relief and decorated with images of Mayan rulers and gods. The Maya's maize god was a sacred symbol often found on their art and held great significance because maize was the main food staple of Mesoamerica.

### Interdisciplinary Connection

**Social Studies**—Have students choose two cultures mentioned in this chapter and research the funerary or burial customs of these cultures. What types of art were associated with their burial customs? Are there any similarities between the customs of the two cultures? What are the differences?



**Fig. 1–7. The Olmec carved huge basalt sculptures of the faces of their gods and rulers. This carving tradition greatly influenced the Maya, who also decorated their cities with stone portraits of rulers and gods.**

Mexico, Olmec, *Colossal Head*, c. 200 AD. Basalt, 305 cm high. Courtesy Davis Art Images.