

***Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica.* John E. Clark and Mary E. Pye, eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 343 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Jenna Wallace Coplin

Since Matthew Sterling investigated reports of a great eye staring up from the floor of the jungle, Olmec art has enthralled researchers, curators, and museum visitors alike. Sterling's work built interest in, and sparked exploration of, the material components of that, which decades later, is still a poorly understood archaeological culture. Titled "Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica: Social Complexity in the Formative Period," a 1996 symposium held in Washington, D.C. was designed to stimulate research and debate. Although not all papers presented at this event are included in this publication, the book retains the spirit of the conference and its papers cover a variety of debated topics. Considering research issues such as frontiers, the environment, and Olmec-produced versus Olmec-style art, researchers, directly and indirectly, address many of the most long-standing debates in Mesoamerican archaeology by adding new data and fresh perspectives to the literature.

The volume was produced in conjunction with an exhibit at the National Gallery of Art, which was on view from June to October 1996. It is divided into three sections: "Archaeology in the Heartland," "Archaeology in the Hinterland," and "Topics in Olmec Art." Its association with specific objects on display during the original exhibit is unclear, but its relationship with readers is intentionally transparent. In an intelligible summary of the region and its history of works, the volume's editors, John E. Clarke and Mary E. Pye, clarify terminology and introduce the subsequent articles. Considering average museum-goers and outside professionals alike, the authors make chronological, regional, and disciplinary differences accessible.

Opposed by a plate of Sterling measuring the eye of a colossal head from Tres Zapotes decades earlier, Richard L. Diehl's article furthers this introduction. Asking clear questions about what stared him in the face, Diehl addresses the still substantial gaps in knowledge about the ever-silent Olmec. Were researchers any closer to understanding this region now than in decades past? Although far from answering long-standing questions, Diehl suggests researchers not be "deter(ed) from asking more and better questions" (p. 25).

In their effort to ask better questions, one clear impediment acknowledged by authors is a paucity of data. Archaeology is driven by the value of context. The devastation of looting and loss to development in the region is particularly evident in the Early Formative. Uncommon finds like those described in Ponciano Ortiz and María Del Carmen Rodríguez's report from El Manatí offer researchers rare opportunities. Deposits of *in-situ* wooden busts, rubber balls, and jadite and greenstone axes suggest "elaborate rituals" and multi-"community participation" (p. 91). Intact deposits at Merced (also documented here by Rodríguez and Ortiz) also reinforce the importance of data from sacred locations within the heartland (p. 155). The archaeological record is not now unintelligible, but researchers still lack a greater body of data for comparison.

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How did the Gulf Olmec form? Are they the source of the iconographic representation so often associated with them or are they just one among many? Most participants put forth ideas; many used these dialogs to broaden discussion of other topics such as complexity, social inequality, participation, trade, and transference of ideas and ideology. Stark's discussion of degrees of openness present in Olmec communities acknowledges, "(w)e are still far from any resolution about how to account for the development of Gulf Olmec society..." (p. 45). If we consider, as she suggests, a more culturally open society, then "early centers faced prevailing conditions different from most of later prehistory" (p. 34).

Barbara L. Starke, Stacey Symonds, Philip J. Arnold, Christine Niederberger, Ortiz and Rodríguez, and others encourage a broader understanding of the expansive Olmec environment and its impact on the people of the region. Starke laments how "poorly aware the profession has remained about the environmental context of the Gulf Olmec..." (p. 34). Ortiz and Rodríguez discuss misinterpretation of the Olmec relationship with available water and its impact on interpretation of symbolic, ritual behavior. At El Manatí, "the most critical thing may have been too much water, with its attendant dangers...", not a dearth warranting solicitous offerings (p. 91). Arnold challenges "the degree to which the available evidence indicates that corn farming was the dominant component of Early Formative Gulf lowlands subsistence" (p. 118) as agriculture has often been assumed the necessary base for social complexity, and for the Olmec this meant corn. Arnold feels that complexity may involve a multiplicity of stimuli and that subsistence practices are questionable as a causative factor when discussing formative complexity in the region (p. 120).

Consideration of the environment is not strictly physical but also social. Arnold points out that so much of what is known about the Olmec relates specifically to the cores of the two most well-known sites (p. 121). Explorations of the hinterlands of these sites as well as regions outside these two foci are presented with expansive results. Work at sites from outside the Olmec heartland include the Basin of Mexico and the Pacific coast including Mazatán. Niederberger's work in the Basin of Mexico suggests trade needs to be considered from the more complex lattice-like perspective of those such as Arthur Demarest who emphasizes multidirectional paths (p. 187). Richard G. Leisure's work in Mazatan additionally suggests the "ideologies of social inequalities" developing in the Formative period was not solely an import (p. 245).

Research on Formative period Olmec requires consideration of art, style, and iconographic representation. Although the writing styles of individual authors are starkly different, the goals of the original symposium make their inclusion seem essential for a broader understanding of what Beatriz De La Fuente called the first Mesoamerican art (p. 253). As David C. Grove suggests, to better understand what is Olmec about Olmec-style art, one must understand what is not Olmec and look to sites outside the heartland to help make that definition clear (p. 292).

If you are looking for answers to questions such as, Who were the Olmec?, What were the boundaries of their realm?, How did they define social complexity?, or even, What meaning underlay the intricacies of their artwork?, look elsewhere. If you are looking for the posing of complicated questions, examinations of a wide variety of Olmec-focused topics, and a lot of compelling arguments, then you may find this volume more to your liking. Although the

collection runs the gamut on academic topics, it still provides valuable access points for interested readers.

Jenna Wallace Coplin teaches in the Department of Anthropology at Hofstra University. Her research has focused on pre-contact and contact Native Americans in the southeast, as well as, more recently, historic archaeology in the northeast. Among her research topics are the workings of antiquities markets, especially the trade in archaeological objects.