

# Art of the Americas

## Vocabulary

pre-Columbian  
totem poles

**M**any archaeologists believe that the first visitors to North America were groups of Asian hunters who crossed an ancient land bridge across the Bering Strait. They began to arrive in what is now Alaska between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago. Gradually these people spread out to cover all parts of North and South America. In this lesson, you will study the contributions of Native peoples of the Americas.

## Art of Mesoamerica and South America

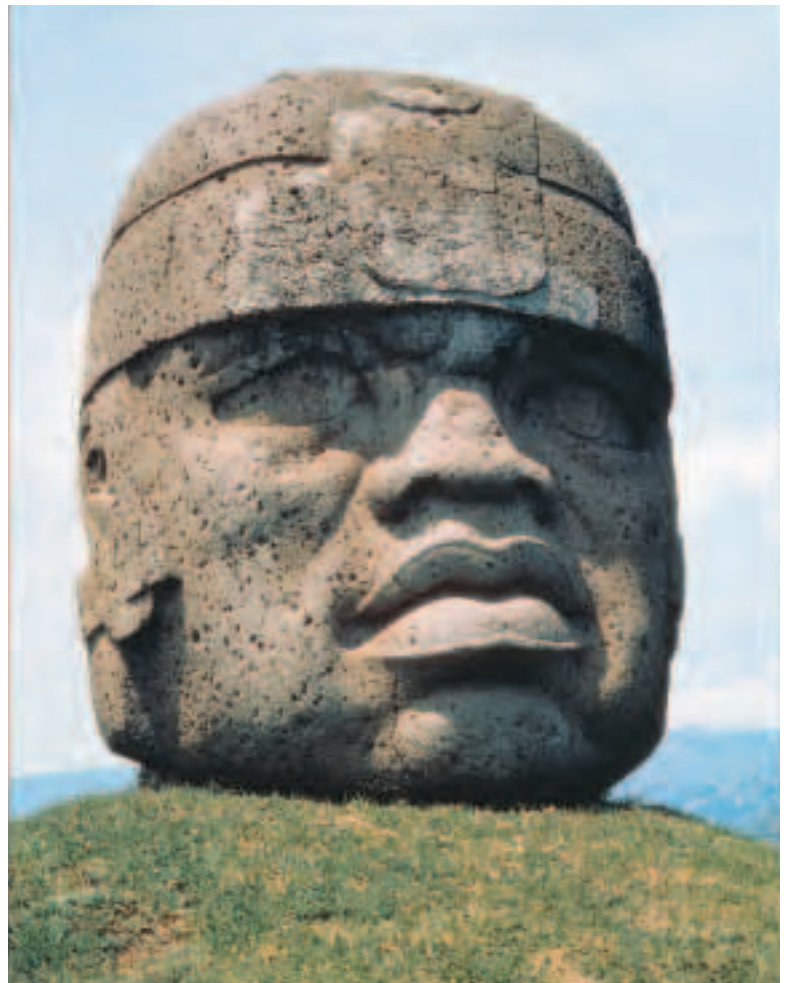
The term **pre-Columbian** refers to *the time period before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492*. Art historians use the term to refer to the art of the Indian civilizations of early Mexico, Central America, and South America. However, archaeologists are discovering that many of these pre-Columbian civilizations were highly sophisticated and created magnificent works of art and architecture.

### Olmec Culture

Olmec (**ol-mek**) culture is often called the “mother culture” of Mexico because the artifacts found in the region are the most ancient. The Olmec civilization dates from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 500. The artifacts left by the Olmec had an influence on all the civilizations that were to follow. They carved altars, pillars, sarcophagi (**sahr-kah-fuh-guy**) (stone coffins), and statues. Among the most interesting of the Olmec creations are four huge human heads carved from volcanic rock (**Figure 12.26**). These were discovered at La Venta, a center for religious ceremonies. These sculptures weigh up to 40 tons and stand 8 feet tall. Notice the childlike features on this giant face. The full lips, which seem almost to be pouting, are typical of the Olmec style.

► **FIGURE 12.26** This monumental sculpture depicts a simple, stylized face. The stone was quarried and transported over many miles of swampland before reaching its destination. What does this indicate about the technology of the Olmec people?

Olmec. Colossal Head. 1200 B.C.–A.D. 500. Basalt. 243.8 cm (8') high. Anthropology Museum, Veracruz, Mexico.



## Mayan Culture

By around A.D. 800 the Mayan (**my-uhn**) empire covered the Yucatán peninsula, modern Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. The Maya were gifted mathematicians. They had the most accurate calendar of any people in history and had developed the most advanced hieroglyphic writing in Mesoamerica. They were also great builders. The Maya erected huge temples and cities with tools of wood, stone, and bone. In the late 1800s, scientists discovered an ancient city in northern Guatemala. This Mayan city, Tikal (**tih-kahl**), is known to have covered an area of 50 square miles. The city is thought to have been home to some 55,000 people (**Figure 12.27**).

The surviving works of Mayan civilization range from the smallest objects to great temples covered with relief carvings. Among the smallest artworks of the Maya are many beautifully designed clay figures only a few inches high. However, most of the Mayan sculpture that has survived consists of relief carvings on buildings and monuments. In the early stages of the Mayan civilization, these carvings were mostly simple and realistic. In some later temples, a more complex, geometric style came to be the rule.

## Aztec Culture

The largest of the cultures of ancient Mexico and Central America was the Aztec. This civilization emerged sometime between A.D. 1200 and 1325. The Aztecs were a warlike people. Like other pre-Columbian peoples, they were very religious. When their god told them to leave their comfortable homeland and settle where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus, they obeyed. There, they built a magnificent city, which they called Tenochtitlán (**tay-noch-teet-lahn**). A collection of tiny islands, this Aztec city was connected by a network of canals. In the fifteenth century, the Aztecs embarked on an aggressive military campaign to force other groups in Mexico to pay them tribute. They reached the height of their power and domination less than a century before the arrival of the Spanish. By the time Spanish conquerors arrived in 1519, their island city covered over 25 square miles. Today we know the city, which is no longer surrounded by water, as Mexico City.

The Aztecs adopted many of the ways of making art from the people they conquered. They created a type of painted book called a codex. Such painted books told the stories of mythological or historical events. Like Mayan art, Aztec art was greatly influenced by religion.

► **FIGURE 12.27**  
The Mayan city Tikal included temples and other stone and stucco structures. The pyramids here are 230 feet high.

Maya. Great Plaza of Tikal, general view. A.D. 150–700. Tikal, Guatemala. Vanni/Art Resource, New York.







◀ **FIGURE 12.28**  
Machu-Picchu  
was built on a  
mountainside to  
discourage would-  
be attackers. The  
city has withstood  
five centuries of  
earthquakes.

Machu-Picchu, Peru.

The Aztecs also built temples and shrines, some carved directly into the mountains. Highly stylized and elaborately ornamented sculptures depicted gods and religious symbols in bold, dramatic style.

## Inca Empire

The Inca civilization flourished between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, and their empire stretched more than 2,500 miles from north to south. It included present-day Peru plus parts of Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia. In acquiring such a large territory, the Inca Empire absorbed many cultural and religious influences from neighboring groups and from civilizations that had flourished before it. Although governing such an immense territory required a vast administration and bureaucracy, the Incas managed to govern without the benefit of a written language. They made calculations and kept records using pieces of knotted string of different colors, called *quipu* (**kee-poo**). The Incas' ability with numbers is reflected in their art. Inca artifacts were made with great mathematical precision.

The Incas were masters of shaping and fitting stone. They were also highly skilled urban planners. Proof of both talents can be found in the walled city of Machu-Picchu (**mahch-oo peek-choo**) (**Figure 12.28**). The stones of its buildings were so carefully matched that a knife blade cannot be slipped between any two.

## Native American Art

When Christopher Columbus reached North America in 1492, he thought his ship had landed on the east coast of India. He referred to the natives he found living there as Indians. Today these first settlers are called Native Americans.

Some groups became hunters while others turned to growing crops as a way to survive. Artifacts found in these regions show that all of these people created art of some kind. These works have given us insight into the cultures of these peoples. Native American art and traditions are still being practiced today by these cultural groups.

## The Arctic Region

The Inuit (**in-yuh-wuht**) people inhabited present-day Canada and Alaska from the earliest times. Although they are often called Eskimos, they refer to themselves as the Inuit.

Inuit society is loosely organized into family groups that rely on hunting and fishing for survival. The images created by Inuit artists reveal the importance attached to the animals they relied on for food—seal, walrus, fish, whale, and caribou. Other animals such as the fox, wolf, and bear were also represented in their art. The human figure was shown in the masks and dolls that they created.

Figures are also found on the engravings done on walrus ivory. In these engravings, Inuit artists used a kind of pictorial writing that described various activities and events associated with

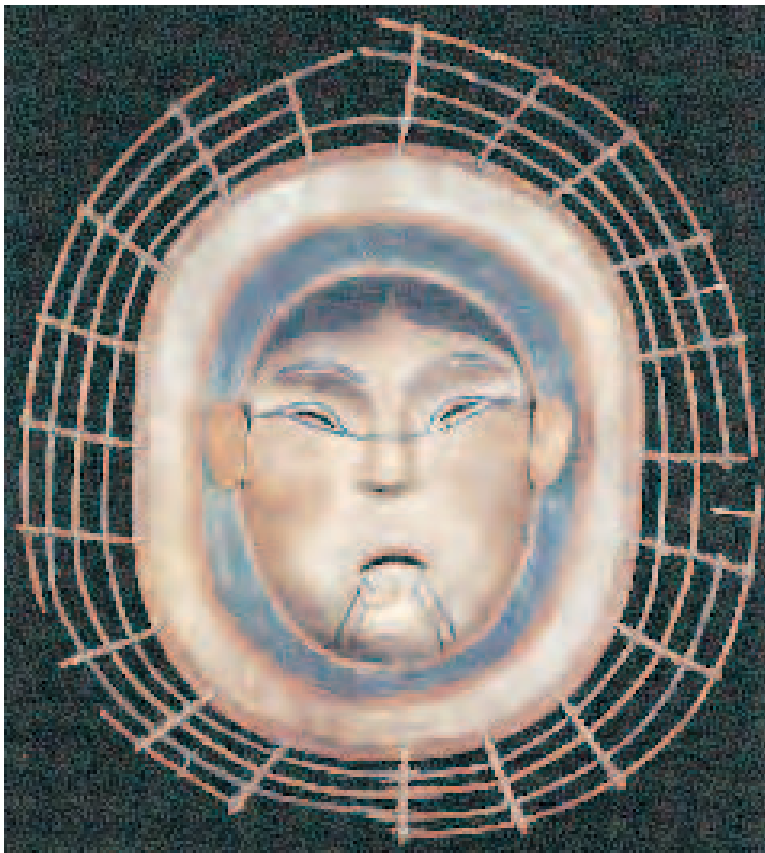
everyday life. In one such engraving on an ivory pipestem, a series of lively drawings record the activities associated with the daily quest for food. Since the surface of this pipestem is less than one inch wide, the engraving takes the form of tiny, decorative circles and miniature figures. Despite their small size, the artist still managed to present an easy-to-read account of the hunt. To accent the engraved lines used in works like this, artists filled them in with color or made them dark with soot.

Frequently, Inuit art was created to serve the religious needs of the people. The mask representing a moon goddess in **Figure 12.29** is an example. An Inuit shaman, or medicine man, wore such a mask during ceremonial dances. While dancing, he would go into a trance and act as a messenger between the world of the living and the mysterious world of spirits.

## The Northwest Coast Region

The Northwest Coast Region refers to an area rich in natural resources that runs from southern Alaska to northern California. Native cultural groups in this region, including the Haida (**high-duh**), Tlingit, and the Kwakiutl (**kwa-kee-yoo-tul**), developed a complex culture in which art played a prominent role.

Like other people, the Kwakiutl held annual rituals to initiate new members, reinforce the status of old members, and



◀ **FIGURE 12.29** A mask of this kind was worn only by a shaman during ceremonial dances. How do you think the purpose of this mask is reflected in its design? What feelings do you think the mask evoked in viewers?

Inuit. Mask of Moon Goddess. Lower Yukon or Northwest Bering Sea. Before 1900. 64.1 cm (25 1/4") high. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, The University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California.

demonstrate their magical powers. Ceremonial masks and dramatic costumes were created for these rituals. Look at the Secret Society Mask pictured in Figure 10.27 on page 273. It is composed of several hinged pieces that moved. This movement was intended to add surprise and drama to the ritual. Often after a Kwakiutl ceremony, or to celebrate another important event, people gathered to enjoy a *potlatch*. This event enabled the members of one clan to honor those of another, while adding to their own prestige.

Native Americans of the Northwest Coast lived in large family groups. Each family group traced descent from a mythological animal or human-animal, from which they took their name. In order to symbolize their association with this mythic ancestor, they carved totem poles. **Totem poles** are *tall posts carved and painted with a series of animal symbols associated with a particular family or clan* (Figure 12.30).

## The Southwest Region

The Native American groups of the southwestern United States include the Pueblo (**pweb-loh**) and the Navajo (**nav-uh-hoh**). Early Spanish explorers used the term *pueblo*, meaning village, to describe groups of people living in large, highly organized settlements. Ancient Pueblo dwellings were built with adobe, or sun-dried clay, walls.

The Pueblo were especially skillful in creating painted pottery. Each community developed its own distinctive shapes and painted designs. In the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico, for example, Pueblo potters used black outlines and geometric shapes to create bold designs over a cream-colored base (Figure 12.31).



◀ **FIGURE 12.30** Totem poles are similar to a European family's coat of arms and were erected in front of a dwelling as a means of identification and a sign of prestige.

Haida totem pole. Prince of Wales Island. c. 1870. Originally 16.2 m (53') high. Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado.



▶ **FIGURE 12.31** The materials and techniques used in this water jar identify it as a Pueblo work. What elements of art can you identify in this design?

Water jar. Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico. 1910. Ceramic. 24.1 cm (9½") high × 24.45 cm (9⅝") diameter. Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.



The Navajo, another Southwestern cultural group, learned the art of weaving from the Pueblo. Male Pueblo weavers taught the Navajo weavers, who were women, to make cloth with looms at the beginning of the eighteenth century. As Spanish and Mexican settlers moved into the Southwest, they introduced new designs and patterns, which the Navajo adopted. By the first half of the nineteenth century, the Navajo were using European dyes and Spanish wool to create weavings that matched the work produced by the best looms in Europe. A blanket once owned by the Civil War general Philip Sheridan (**Figure 12.32**) exhibits many of the qualities associated with the finest Navajo weavings. These include the closeness of the weave, rich, vibrant colors, and bold design.



## Great Plains Region

The Native Americans of the Great Plains followed the huge herds of bison that roamed the broad grasslands of central North America. The different cultural groups of the Plains—including Blackfeet, Crow, Cheyenne (*shy-ann*), and Sioux (*soo*)—were highly skilled in the preparation of skins used for clothing, footwear, shields, and various kinds of containers. These were then painted or embroidered with porcupine quills and, later, glass beads.

Because they were nomadic hunters, they created the *tepee* (*tee-pee*). This was a portable shelter made of buffalo hide stretched over poles that were lashed together in an upright position. The hides were covered with designs symbolizing the forces of nature and telling stories of heroic events. At its base, a tepee could range anywhere from 12 to 30 feet in diameter. A large tepee contained about as much space as a standard living room of today.

These artisans also created ceremonial headdresses for chieftains, which were worn during ritual dances. The elaborate headdress shown in **Figure 12.33** was created with natural materials found in the surrounding environment.

◀ **FIGURE 12.32** This saddle blanket, created for everyday use, is now on display in a museum. How are the principles of harmony and variety used in this design? How is rhythm suggested?

Saddle blanket. Navajo weaving. c. 1890. Wool. 129.5 × 83.8 cm (51 × 33"). Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.



◀ **FIGURE 12.33** This feather bonnet was created for a ceremonial dance. Does the use of natural materials seem to fit with the function?

Northwestern Plains people. *Feather Bonnet*. c. 1890. Rooster hackles, wood rods, porcupine hair, ermine skins, horsehair, buckskin, glass beads. 83.8 × 68.6 cm (33 × 27"). Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming. Chandler-Pohrt Collection.

## Woodlands Region

The Woodlands made up the largest cultural group of Native Americans east of the Mississippi River. The Woodlands people combined hunting and gathering with simple farming. The Iroquois (**ear-uh-kwoi**), made up of six different Woodlands groups, combined to form the highly organized Iroquois nation.

Expert wood carvers, the Iroquois created wooden masks that were usually painted and decorated with horse hair. The best known masks were created for a society of healers known as the False Faces because of the masks they wore. These False Face masks were thought to be sacred and represented the spirits who gave healers the magic they needed to treat illnesses. Because they were considered to be so powerful, these masks were hidden away when not in use so they would not cause accidental injuries. The masks were considered sacred and were not intended to be seen by nonbelievers.

### Activity

### Sketching an Event

**Applying Your Skills.** Native Americans of the Great Plains painted tales of their battles on skins. Look through a newspaper or magazine for coverage of an important event in your city or in the world. On a sheet of paper, sketch the story behind the event.



### Check Your Understanding

1. What does the term *pre-Columbian* refer to?
2. Which culture created huge heads carved from volcanic rock?
3. Which culture created the walled city of Machu-Picchu?
4. What were totem poles used for?