

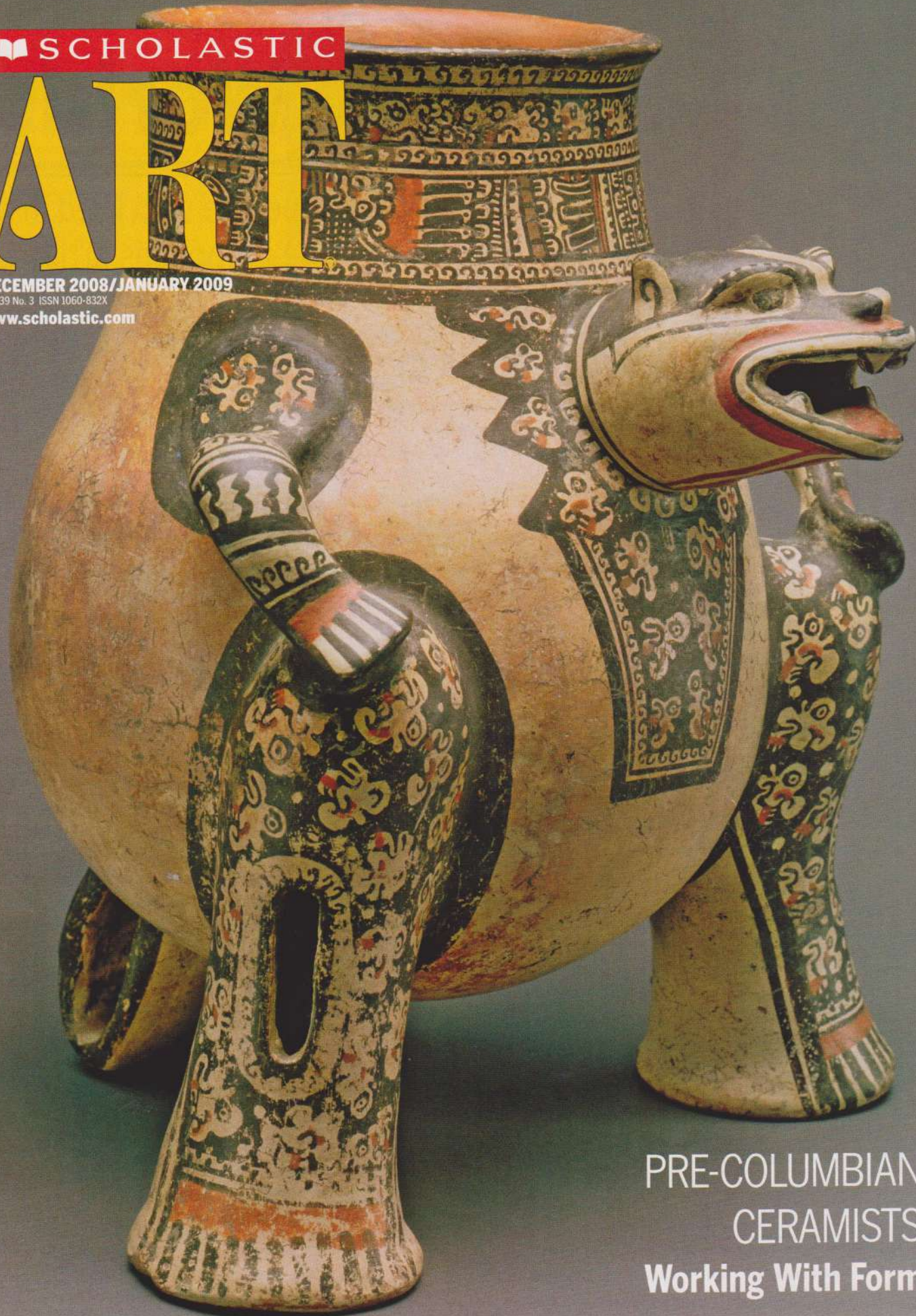
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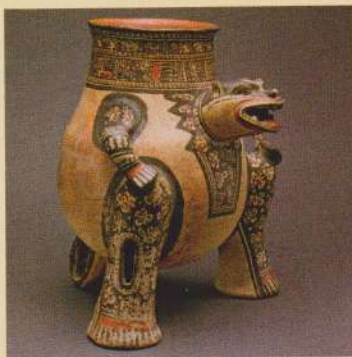
DECEMBER 2008/JANUARY 2009

Vol. 39 No. 3 ISSN 1060-832X

www.scholastic.com



PRE-COLUMBIAN
CERAMISTS
Working With Form



Pre-Columbian artists based much of their pottery on familiar animals, such as this jaguar found in the surrounding rain forests.

Cover: Jaguar Vessel, Northwestern Costa Rica, Late Period VI, 1200-1400. Earthenware with polychrome slip painting by Guanacaste-Nicoya Culture. ©Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX/Museum purchase funded by 'One Great Night in November, 1991' The Bridgeman Art Library.

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POSTAL INFORMATION

Scholastic Art® (ISSN 1060-832X; in Canada, 2-c no. 55857) is published six times during the school year, Sept./Oct., Nov./Dec./Jan., Feb./Mar., Apr./May, by Scholastic Inc. Office of Publication: 2931 E. McCarty Street, P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710. Periodical postage paid at Jefferson City, MO 65101 and at additional offices. Postmasters: Send notice of address changes to SCHOLASTIC ART, 2931 East McCarty St., P.O. Box 3710, Jefferson City, MO 65102-3710.

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

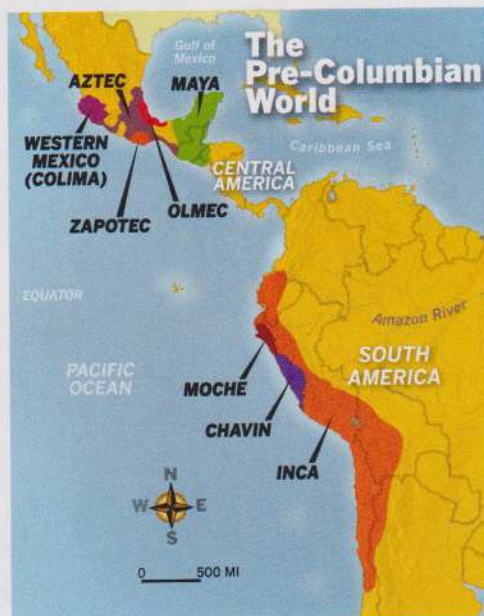
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Ancient Worlds

Learn more about the people who lived in the Americas long before Europeans arrived.

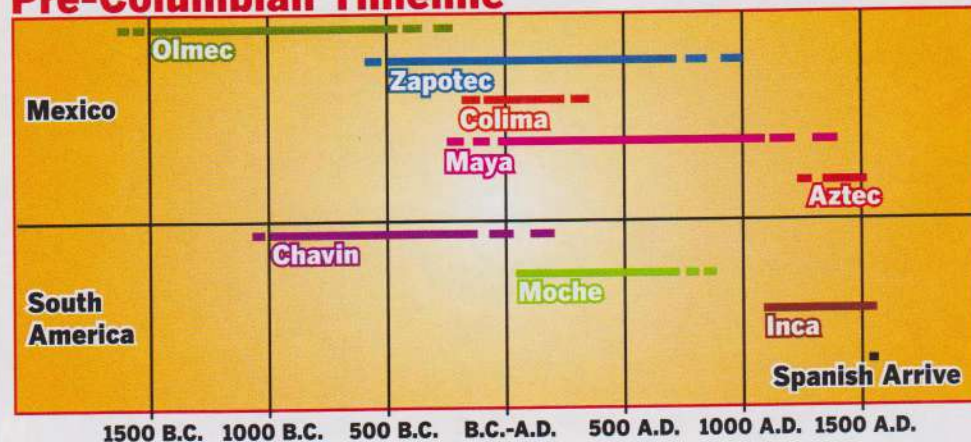
Three thousand years ago, few people lived in North America. Europe, as we know it today, didn't exist. Yet, deep in the jungles of Central America, an ancient civilization called the *Olmec* was already building vast, complex cities. These people constructed plazas, pyramids, and giant stone statues without the help of metal tools, machinery, or even wheels. Working with sharp pieces of stone, Olmec artists skillfully carved this massive head (opposite page, top) from a single 20-ton stone. Was this huge human likeness meant to be a god, or a portrait of an early ruler? No one really knows, since the Olmec left nothing in writing to tell us.



What experts do know is that the Olmec people (1500-200 B.C.), who lived on the coast of northern Mexico, were the first great *pre-Columbian* (before Europeans such as Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492) culture in *Mesoamerica* (Mexico and Central America). They were the first to build cities, sculpt in stone, invent a calendar, and develop systems for writing and counting.

Olmec culture and ideas inspired all the great pre-Columbian civilizations that followed. The *Maya*—who lived in southern Mexico and Central America from 250 B.C. to 1400 A.D.—developed a highly accurate calendar, a form of picture-writing, and a way

Pre-Columbian Timeline

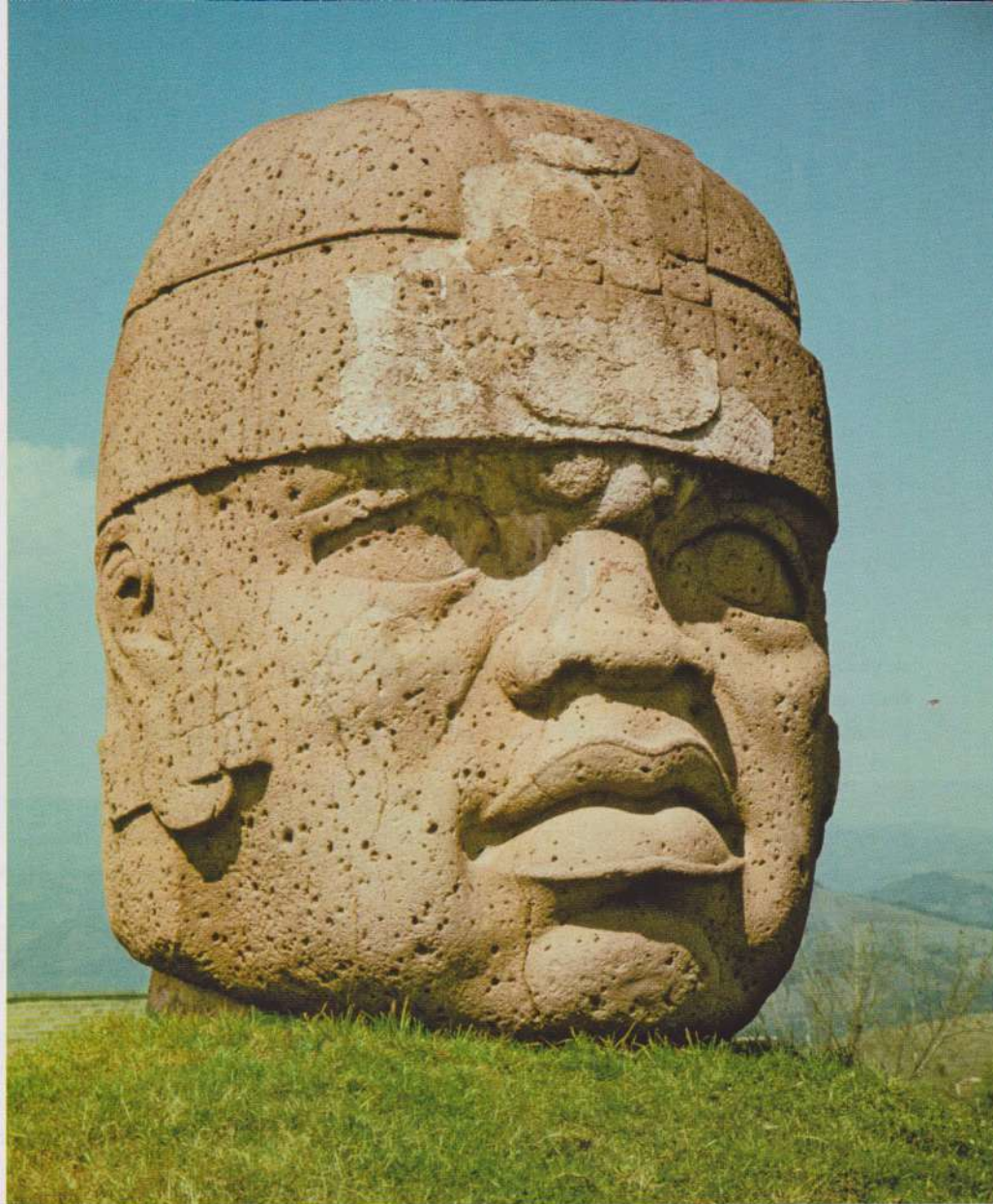


1500 B.C. 1000 B.C. 500 B.C. B.C.-A.D. 500 A.D. 1000 A.D. 1500 A.D.

of recording dates. Skilled farmers, the Maya built aqueducts and irrigation systems to supply water to crops and people. Ruins of cities with magnificent palaces, temples, and stone pyramids built by the Maya, and later by the Aztec, (who flourished in Mexico until the 1500s), are visible proof of these ancient peoples' knowledge of architecture, engineering, science, and math.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in South America, the powerful and vast Inca empire (1200–1533 A.D.) was forming. Located mainly in the high Andes mountains of Peru, the Inca built impressive stone cities and temples on steep mountainsides using only the most primitive of tools. They studied astronomy, invented complex calendars and time-keeping systems, and are still known for their creative work in gold and silver.

One quality that all pre-Columbian civilizations shared was a deep respect for nature. Their temples were devoted to natural forces such as the sun, moon, and rain. The pottery they created took on the form of animals they saw all around them. Animal vessels, like the jaguar *tripod* (standing on a base made up of three parts) jar shown on the cover, were made for religious ceremonies. Jaguars represented strength and courage, and were considered gods in many ancient cultures. The animal's head is the **focal point** of this work and serves



▲ Olmec sculptors carved mysterious giant stone heads like this one, with its simplified, symmetrical, stylized features.

Colossal Head 1 from San Lorenzo, Veracruz, Mexico, preclassic (basalt), Olmec (1200–200 BC)/Museo Antropológico de Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico. Photograph: Jean-Pierre Courau/The Bridgeman Art Library.

as a functional spout. The power symbolized by the lunging head and muscular legs is visually emphasized by

◀ This Olmec jug, made to resemble a fish, was created more than 30 centuries ago.



Jug in the Form of a Fish, 1200–600 BC, Olmec, from Tlatilco, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City, D.F., Mexico. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

the painted **black patterned shapes** that frame them.

Since Olmec artists were surrounded by the ocean as well as by the rain forest, the potter who created this jug (left) modeled it in the shape of a sea creature. Made up of a single smooth, stylized, **organic shape**, its most basic features are suggested by a few, simple **incised lines** (scratched in). The **geometric fins**, set at **right angles** on either side, form the work's flat built-in base.

Sadly, much pre-Columbian architecture and art was destroyed by the Europeans who arrived in the 16th century. Entire cities were ruined, and precious objects lost. The traces that remain, however, offer us a glimpse into the culture of these sophisticated civilizations—from Olmec to Inca—and show us how they worshipped nature through their religion and their art.

Gods and Monsters

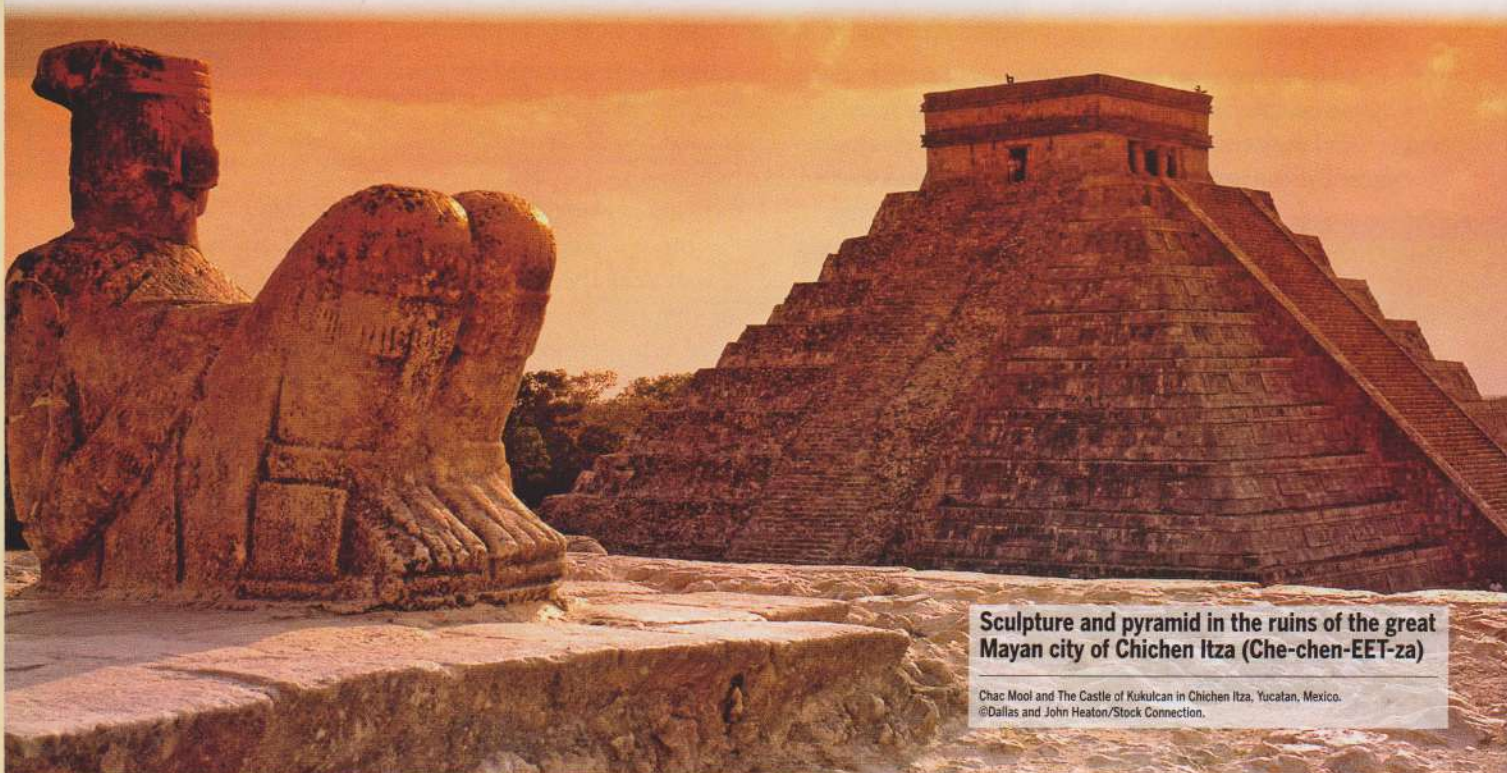
Mesoamerican ceramic artists were inspired by nature in general, and animals in particular.

Ancient Mayans were remarkable people. Their vast empire extended over much of Mesoamerica and lasted more than 10 centuries. The Maya were one of the first civilizations in the Americas to develop an advanced form of writing. They also created a 365-day calendar based on the sun's movements, and developed a complex system of mathematics. But perhaps their greatest achievements were the magnificent step pyramids (below at right), stone sculptures (below at left), and the pottery they created. Mayan people were deeply religious and worshipped many gods and goddesses. Like most pre-Columbian cultures, they believed that everything in the natural world was alive and filled with spirits that could either help or harm you. Many of these beliefs were expressed through their ceramic work.

The ceramic **bas-relief** (objects emerge partially from a flat base) on pages 8-9 was found in the ruins of a temple in an ancient Mayan city. This **frontal** (designed to be seen from only one point of view) work gives a visual overview of the Mayan world. The Maya believed that the universe was made up of three realms: an upper world

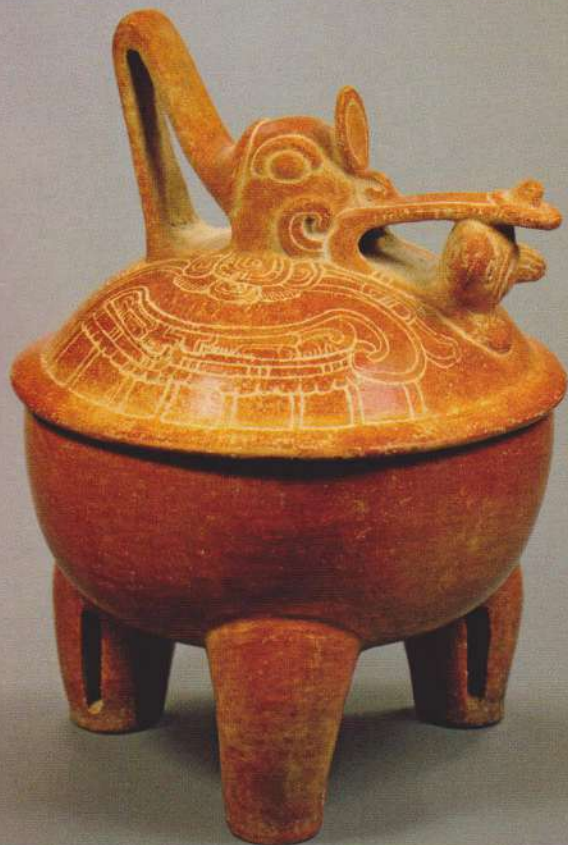
full of supernatural beings and gods, an earthly middle world, and a watery underworld. The face of the sun, at the bottom of the central column that divides this **symmetrical** (same on both sides) piece in half, is the work's **focal point**. All the surrounding shapes **interlock** and **overlap** to visually underscore the importance of the sun as the primary life force. Above the sun is a kind of head-dress symbolizing life on earth. It is made up of two pairs of eyes keeping watch over the bird and animal on top.

Even before the Maya came into power, earlier Mesoamerican cultures used animal images to gain the help of gods and spirits. These ceramics were created for special occasions, such as the death of an important person. The Zapotec (500 B.C.–1,000 A.D.), in southern Mexico, made urns (opposite page, bottom) in the shape of the rain god and placed them in tombs. A combination of human and animal qualities, the god has human hands, arms, and eyes and a forked snakelike tongue. Constructed from **flat, geometric** slabs of clay, this work is seen from one side. The frontal viewpoint, **matte** (not shiny) surface, and single **monochrome** color all add to the god's some-



Sculpture and pyramid in the ruins of the great Mayan city of Chichen Itza (Che-chen-EET-za)

Chac Mool and The Castle of Kukulcan in Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico.
©Dallas and John Heaton/Stock Connection.



▲ What visual clue has the artist included that might suggest that this bowl was made to hold some form of fish?

Tripod Bird Bowl, 3rd-4th century. Ceramic, 9 1/4 x 7 3/8 in. Gift of Carolyn C. and Dan C. Williams, 1984 (1984.614a, b). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Image copyright: ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

what formal and frightening appearance.

Ceramic dog water pitchers, such as the one top right, were created by Colima (300 B.C.–300 A.D.) artists of western Mexico to be placed in the graves of people who had just died. The deceased would have water to drink and an animal spirit to act as a guide into the next world. Although the dog wears a human mask, the artist *modeled* the clay in a highly realistic manner. The sculpture is completely three-dimensional; it works visually when seen from any **point of view**. The **organic curves** that make up its body add to the sculpture's lifelike appearance.

Many ceramic bowls (top left), handbuilt in the form of birds, have been found in Mayan burial sites. The Maya believed that birds were messengers between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. The bottom half of this vessel is a simple and undecorated half **sphere**. In contrast—perhaps to encourage the viewer to lift the lid and look inside the bowl—the **three-dimensional shapes** on top are dynamic, the designs complex. The linear markings incised on the lid suggest the bird's folded wings. The bird's "neck" functions as a handle. The neck's graceful swooping organic curve contrasts with the sharp intersecting diagonals of the beak. The artist incised a pattern of **negative white lines** on the lid to suggest the feathers that make up a bird's wings.



▲ The mask worn by this ceramic dog may symbolize the link between the human and the animal world.

Dog with Human Mask, 200 BC-AD 500. Slip-painted ceramic, 8 1/2 x 15 1/2 x 7 in. Mexico, Colima. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Proctor Stafford Collection, purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Allan C. Balch (M.86.296.154). Photograph: ©2008 Museum Associates/LACMA.



▲ Slab-built in the form of the powerful god of rain and lightning, this ceramic work was constructed to burn sweet-smelling incense.

Urn in the Form of Cociyo, God of Lightning and Rain, c. 400-500. Ceramic, 28 1/2 x 21 x 18 in. Mexico, Oaxaca, Monte Alban IIIa, Zapotec culture, Early Classic period. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, TX. Photo credit: Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas/Art Resource, NY.

Cities in the Clouds

Nature was an important theme for pre-Columbian ceramic artists working in South America.

Nearly 7,000 feet above sea level, perched between two peaks in the South American country of Peru, is a city (right) as spectacular as the mountain landscape that surrounds it. This city—Macchu Picchu (Ma-chu-PEA-chu)—was built by the Inca people more than 500 years ago.

Like the Olmec and Maya of Mesoamerica, the Inca were an extraordinary people. They controlled an empire extending more than 2,500 miles from what is now southern Columbia to central Chile. Without the use of the wheel, they built a vast network of stone-paved roads to connect every part of their empire. Without an alphabet, Inca rulers governed millions of people.

To build Macchu Picchu, Inca stonemasons shaped enormous granite blocks—some more than 15 tons—using only rounded rocks. One giant stone built into a city wall has an astonishing 33 corners. The stones around it fit so snugly, even a knife blade can't fit between. No more intricate stonework can be found anywhere in the world.

The Inca, like other pre-Columbian cultures, believed nature was alive with religious meaning. Gold symbolized the sun, which the Inca worshipped as a supreme god. The Inca also worshipped the moon, earth, and other natural forces that affected the growing of food. Inca craftsmen produced gold and silver ornaments, textiles, and pottery, many made for use in religious ceremonies.

It is believed that the Inca vessel (opposite page, bottom) was used to ritually pour sacred liquid onto the earth to ensure plentiful crops. The sculptor modeled this stylized container so the decorative shapes of the animals would also be functional. Two long-necked creatures,



▲ The ancient Inca city of Macchu Picchu was built high in the mountains of Peru.

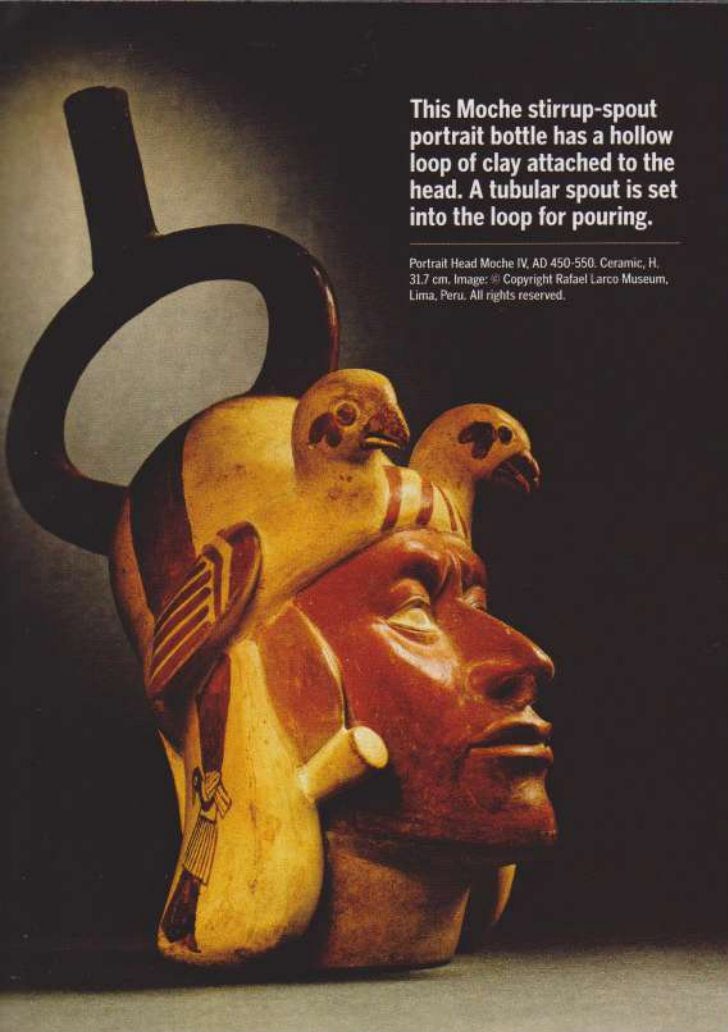
©Frans Lanting/Corbis.

a llama and a bird, are connected to the inner and outer bowls, and serve as spouts. A third animal—possibly a jaguar—draped over the top of the large bowl—acts as a handle. The **convex shape** formed by the jaguar's body and paw covers and contrasts with the **concave space** of the bowls below. **Dots, patterns, and linear** decorations cover the **smooth, painted surface**. Each animal symbolizes a different part of the Inca empire: the seabird represents the ocean, the llama stands for the Peruvian mountains, and the jaguar suggests the rain forests.

Many civilizations came before the Inca in Peru. One of the oldest cultures in South America was the Chavin (1000–200 B.C.). A Chavin

potter created the stylized bottle (opposite page, top right), meant to be put in a grave for use in the afterlife. The **fragmented, free-form lines** incised on the bottle's side probably represent an abstracted jaguar. Its fanged head **visually balances** the curled tail. The painted circles in the center suggest the jaguar's spots while the repeated **serrations** (notches) resemble its sharp teeth.

The Moche (100–800 A.D.), another Peruvian culture predating the Inca, created realistic ceramic portraits (opposite page, top left). Found at a gravesite, this hollow, life-size vessel is a likeness of a Moche ruler living more than 16 centuries ago. His double-bird headdress shows the Moche peoples' harmony with nature. The **solid, geometric shapes**, determined expression, and **symmetrical** features suggest a commanding personality. No two Moche portrait pots are alike, so it's likely this ruler "sat" for the artist while his clay portrait was being created.



This Moche stirrup-spout portrait bottle has a hollow loop of clay attached to the head. A tubular spout is set into the loop for pouring.

Portrait Head Moche IV, AD 450-550. Ceramic, H. 31.7 cm. Image: © Copyright Rafael Larco Museum, Lima, Peru. All rights reserved.



Some pre-Columbian designs such as this Chavin bottle are so stylized they seem to resemble modern abstractions.

Feline-Head Bottle, 9th-5th c. B.C. Ceramic, postfired paint, 12 1/4 x 8 1/16 in. Peru, Tumbleria. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967 (1978.412.203). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Image copyright ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.



In this Inca ritual vessel, each bowl has its own spout.

Ritual Vessel (Paccha), 15th-early 16th c. Ceramic, H. 3 11/16 x 5 3/8 x 7 in. Peru, Inca. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1149). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Image copyright ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.