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Preclassic Figuration

Epistemological Premises and Problems

A central goal of this book is to contribute to what I think of as a “discourse of image theory” for Preclassic Mesoamerica. It pursues this goal rather modestly, with a focus only on human representations throughout this lengthy period. The “discourses” and “image theories” that I consider are both new and old: I am as interested in the ways we, as modern scholars, continue to define, organize, and understand ancient anthropomorphic representations as I am in the ways in which Mesoamericans articulated their own understandings of the human body and the social significance of its portrayal. In neither case, now or then, were these understandings static, and the patterns of continuity through time are as revealing as the moments of rupture and transformation.

The Preclassic period in Mesoamerica was marked by momentous events. It ushered in an era marked by sedentary lifestyles that, centuries later, gave rise to the first cities. It witnessed the aggregation of people in novel urban spaces as well as its corollary: the social tensions that inevitably arise in response to diverse people moving to and around newly constructed “life-spaces” (Thomas 2005: 168). It also saw the advent of state formation,¹ the birth of hieroglyphic writing, and, most importantly for this study, the emergence of a tradition of human representation that would leave its imprint on the entire trajectory of Mesoamerican art. One of the few constants throughout this extraordinary period in history was a fundamental recognition of the significance of human representation. What changed, I argue, was whose body was portrayed, and how and in what materials it was rendered. When, where, and why these changes occurred is the central focus of this book.

My task is complicated – or enriched, depending on one’s perspective – by consideration of the vastly different types of contexts in which figural representations were employed in Preclassic Mesoamerica. The spaces in which

representations of the human body were utilized include the plazas of sacred centers with their monumental stone sculptures, some of which weighed many tons (Fig. 1.1). They also include simple households if we add to the mix ceramic figurines, small enough to cradle in the palm of one’s hand (Fig. 1.2). Fortunately, there are many excellent studies of Preclassic stone sculpture and an increasing number of ground-breaking analyses of small ceramic figurines. But – and this is important – they rarely cohabit the same volume, or benefit from questioning the very premises that lead us, as scholars, to continue to separate “sculpture” from other representational objects such as “figurines.”

This study aims to remedy this problem, at least for the Preclassic period. I consider who crafted diverse representations of the human form, who manipulated them, where they were employed, and how the patterns of their use changed through time, in as fine-grained an analysis as is possible with the extant data. It is in this sense that this book contributes to a “discourse of image theory” for the Preclassic period: as the story gradually unfolds, it becomes both about the ways in which representations centered on the human body constructed meaning and the ways in which we can think about these meanings and their social significance. It is also about how, at times, the flip side of representation is even more revealing – when human bodies carved of stone or modeled from clay were deliberately broken or fragmented into their constituent parts. Disembodied heads and decapitated bodies speak to the inherent divisibility of the human body in a Mesoamerican worldview, of the relationship between the part and the whole. They also speak to Mesoamerican understandings of the human body as a powerful vehicle through which concepts of individuality and social collectivity were articulated.

This is obviously a sweeping goal, perhaps one not so modest after all. It is also not without epistemological pitfalls. The Preclassic period that I address here spans over two millennia and concerns a geographic territory that is no less expansive, as a map showing the location of principal Preclassic sites illustrates (Fig. 1.3).² While the map in Figure 1.3 makes clear the geographic boundaries of this study, the term “Mesoamerica” is far less precise: it encompasses “an amalgam of cultural practices and beliefs” whose boundaries “fluctuated through time and territory” (Clark et al. 2010: 3). Mesoamerica started small, my coauthors and I wrote in 2010, expanding along with the phenomenon of city living, which was frequently signaled by the presence of stone sculpture and monumental architecture. By the end of the



Figure 1.1 San Lorenzo Monument 1. Photo by Richard Stewart, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

Preclassic period, Mesoamerica nearly had achieved its maximum extent, stretching from the northern reaches of modern Mexico, south through Guatemala and Belize, and into the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador.

If I were to try to do justice, in all sincerity, to every sculptural form created during the course of the Preclassic period, including both large and small-scale objects, I would be tasked with assembling a corpus of hundreds of thousands of objects. That is obviously an unwieldy goal. In order to engage in the meaningful analysis of a more limited body of works, I have made several deliberate choices. For one, I pay special attention to the south coast of Mesoamerica, which encompasses the Pacific Coast and piedmont of Mexico and Guatemala from the modern town of Tonalá, Chiapas, in the north to Chalchuapa, El Salvador, in the south. To contextualize my arguments, however, I constantly reference data drawn from other regions with the understanding that the peoples of the south coast were always in communication with individuals located to the north, south, east, and west. I have also chosen to refine this topic by focusing

exclusively on representations of the human form, as I have already indicated. Anyone familiar with Mesoamerican art knows that this still leaves a lot to get through: the human body was absolutely central to monumental sculptural expression during the Preclassic. When one factors in ceramic figurines – the small, hand-modeled, clay objects produced in abundance during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods – the corpus of human representations is expanded exponentially, into the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. So, while I do limit my discussion to human representations, I want to be clear that even this remains a daunting task. I trace the contours of human representation during the Preclassic period, zeroing in on certain key issues but, inevitably, neglecting others. There were any number of exceptions to the general rules I describe, any one of which warrants deeper scrutiny.³

The narrative that I construct in this book is an untidy, polyphonic one, even if narrowed to a specific region, limited time frame, and circumscribed theme. And that is, in my opinion, as it should be. Representations, particularly those of humans, were key to



Figure 1.2 Middle Preclassic ceramic figurine from La Blanca, Guatemala. Photo by Michael Love

visualizing authority in Mesoamerica; some of the earliest sculptures in Mesoamerica appear to portray rulers, whose bodies were monumentalized in stone (Fig. 1.1). But human representations did not necessarily, or only, begin with these goals in mind, a fact made especially apparent when one looks beyond monumental sculpture in order to think about figuration writ large. Once the lens of scrutiny is widened to include more diverse mediums, we can more fully appreciate the ways in which the history of human figuration transformed through time in Mesoamerica, beginning as one relatively accessible – at least in some forms – to most people and becoming, by the close of the Preclassic period along the south coast, a tool implicitly linked to specialized knowledge, privileged access, and divine sanction. By situating the study in this way, we can also identify and investigate the discourses and strategies of power – à la Michel Foucault (1983) – that were, in Preclassic Mesoamerica, indelibly anchored to the human form, its representation, and its accessibility.

At the risk of anticipating my conclusions, I believe that the social power of human representation was, eventually, appropriated nearly exclusively to serve the needs

of early Mesoamerican states, which emerged during the first part of the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250). Contextualizing this argument requires examination of the many sociopolitical transformations that paralleled, influenced, and/or responded to the transformations visualized in the artistic record. This study thus navigates between the imagery and the archaeological evidence, borrowing extensively from theoretical approaches grounded in the disciplines of art history and archaeology. But it also benefits from the wealth of anthropological, sociological, and interdisciplinary scholarship dedicated to exploring how the human body, in and of itself, was a locus for the construction of social identity.

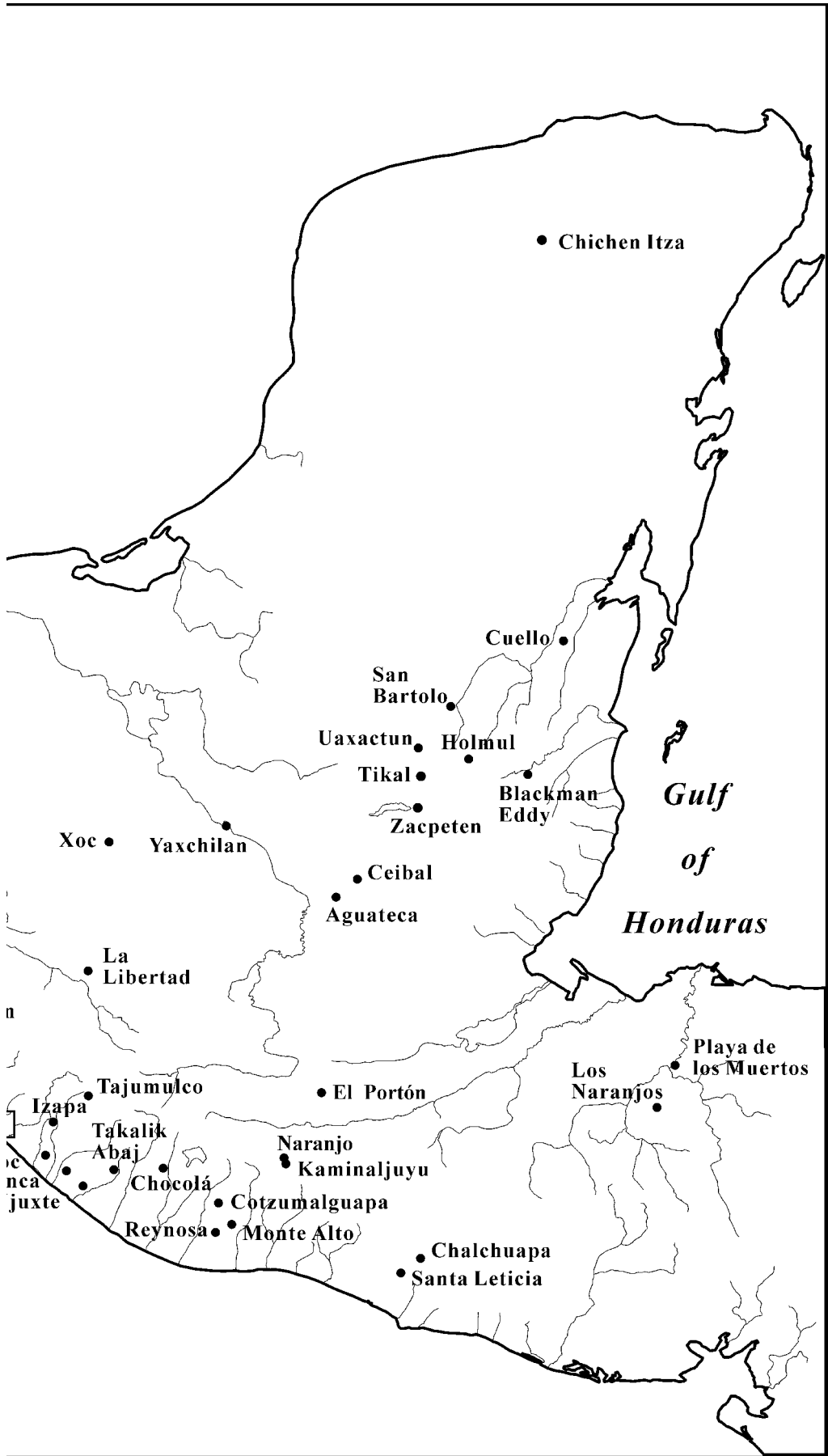
Throughout this text, I never presume that representations were merely passive responses to, or the epiphenomenal results of, sociopolitical transformations.⁴ Objects and images are the protagonists in this story, and I explore their affective presences, their roles in various “network[s] of intentionalities” and “system[s] of action” (Gell 1998: 6, 43). I view them as “potential site[s] of innovation” (R. Joyce 2008: 33) rather than as inert “backdrop[s] for human action” (Latour 2005: 72; also see Zedeño 2017), as essential mediums through which social change was formulated, as constitutive rather than accessory (borrowing from Baines 2007: 327). My premise is that human representations, in the form of stone sculpture and ceramic figurines, “actively construct[ed] the world in which people act[ed]” (following Dobres and Robb 2000) and were involved in implicitly conditioning and socializing an array of human actors (following Bourdieu 1977; Miller 2005: 6). Processes of material engagement mattered to ancient Mesoamericans, and acts of figural representation, in particular, provide us with the opportunity to explore their social and theoretical significance. As Colin Renfrew (2007b: xvi) asserted, “any figuration is, by definition, symbolic. It involves a representation and thus, usually, the prior existence of the thing represented. But that over-simplification should not obscure the power, in the hands of the creator of images, of calling new things into existence.” Phrased synthetically, what guides this study is my belief that the long, complicated, and deeply compelling story of human representation during the Preclassic period reveals much about the changing nature of visual art and its role in structuring and visualizing a variety of social processes.

Methodological Considerations

Using three-dimensional human figuration as my point of departure in this book enables me to cut across traditional classificatory boundaries such as those that isolate



Figure 1.3 Preclassic Mesoamerica. Map by Michael Love



“sculpture” from “figurines,” or that view stone monuments as categorically distinct from smaller objects crafted of clay.⁵ To be sure, there are meaningful and important differences in terms of scale, viewership, audience, context, techniques of manufacture, accessibility, relative portability, and so on, between stone monuments and ceramic figurines. But if we challenge ourselves to think beyond these differences, conceptual common ground also emerges (R. Joyce 1993). Consideration of both the points of intersection *and* departure between human representations of stone or ceramic, whether large or small, enables us to say something productive about the processes and significance of human representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Objects and representations of all sorts interacted in the past, and we are better off thinking of “human representation as a practice, not as an arbitrary segment of objects delimited by archaeological classifications” (R. Joyce 2002: 603). Such an approach highlights the moments of formal and iconographic exchange instead of overlooking them.

In a previous publication I confessed that art historians, such as I, are often guilty of a certain bias toward the monumental works that, still to this day, visually dominate many ancient centers. Monumental sculpture appears to have been, in many cases, the prerogative of rulers: certain types of sculpture were commissioned by them exclusively, and these monuments speak to the concerns of the ruling elite and the messages they wished to broadcast in large-scale form. This type of sculpture was typically of stone, and size appears to have mattered. Or, as I have previously stipulated, size was often an index of power, both political and economic, especially when the stone was procured from a distant region, hauled to a site without the aid of the wheel or beasts of burden, and then meticulously carved without the benefit of metal tools (Guernsey 2012: 1). In many ways, this study confirms my previous suspicions: size often did matter, as did materials and contexts. But this study also emphasizes the fact that understandings of the power of representation did not emerge out of an intellectual domain exclusively occupied by ruling elites. Many of the ideas involved in acts of crafting the human form were broadly shared by people from all walks of life and grew out of belief systems, sculptural processes, and formal solutions whose precursors are found not only in large public plazas, but also in the spaces of modest households. A focus only on monumental sculpture precludes deliberation of some of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Preclassic human representation. It also, more dangerously, neglects consideration of a broader range of social actors whose contributions to the problems of human representation were equally vital to the solutions

that were visualized on the public, monumental stage. In some ways this book is a grand adventure in avoiding essentialism: not just the “figurine essentialism” that Douglass Bailey (2005: 13) warned of, but also the “monumental sculpture essentialism” to which art history can, at times, fall prey.

There are definitional issues at stake in constructing my arguments. One is hard pressed to provide a tidy description of what constituted “sculpture” for ancient Mesoamericans. The term “sculpture,” in the English language, refers to objects, figures, or designs that have been carved or modeled or deliberately shaped in some way; processes of “making” or “forming” are implied.⁶ Yet in Preclassic Mesoamerica, naturally formed objects were often accorded the same veneration as sculpted objects. At the Middle Preclassic site of Zazacatla, in Morelos, a piece of unmodified cave flowstone whose shape resembles a seated figure was given the same reverential treatment as other monuments carved by human hands (Canto and Castro 2010). So, too, numerous Preclassic communities displayed “plain” stone altars and stelae whose contours were only subtly shaped by humans, if at all. Objects such as these point to an interest in the materiality of sculpture in and of itself rather than its role as a vehicle for modification or decoration. Ceramic figurines complicate this further: although considerably smaller than most objects readily classified as “sculpture,” they were crafted during the Preclassic period through processes of detailed modeling by hand. Each is unique and sometimes even carries the ancient imprints of the fingers used to form the clay. They were every bit as modeled, deliberately shaped, and formed as their larger stone counterparts.

These are issues with which I have grappled before, and which in part led me to think even more expansively in this book about the conceptual interrelationships between categories of objects. As I have argued previously (Guernsey 2012: 2), many scholars often categorize objects by medium, and so ceramic figurines are often grouped in archaeological reports along with other “ceramic objects” such as spindle whorls and roller stamps. Figurines made of stone are classified as “stone objects,” and listed alongside utilitarian *manos* and *metates* as well as jade beads. Large-scale sculpture, however, is usually found under the heading “monuments,” which divulges an emphasis on scale as a defining criterion. These categorizations, while completely rational, inevitably reflect our Western biases and methods of classification, and we should not presume that ancient Mesoamericans would have organized these objects in the same ways or viewed the boundaries between them as impenetrable. More than that, it is fruitful to consider the ways in which certain

themes or subjects – human figuration, for example – were explored between mediums, at different scales, for a variety of audiences, to serve agendas that ran the gamut from the practical to the ritual and political (R. Joyce 1998, 2002).

I am not by any means suggesting that we do away with the very expedient organizational schemes that guide much scholarship; I have spent enough years working on archaeological projects to recognize the necessity of such systems, which accommodate the ordering of a multitude of diverse objects. I, too, adhere to standard organizational schemes throughout this study: my chapters address “sculpture” and “figurines” separately, perhaps belying my own affinities for traditional taxonomies and an inadvertent reliance on (problematic) positivist legacies. I inevitably, at some level, succumb to the “tyranny of the category” in this book (Freedberg 1989: xxii).⁷ But, in my defense, I would stipulate that I recognize the utility of taxonomies as categories of analysis even if I do not view these categories as a system of meaning that reflects ancient Mesoamerican sensibilities. What I advocate for, throughout this study, is greater scrutiny of the gray areas between these categories, of the ways in which different types of objects “spoke” to each other, and of the legacy of these dialogues. If we pay attention to only one of these stories – say, monumental stone sculpture, to the exclusion of small ceramic figurines – we are writing incomplete histories.⁸

Some of these issues are particularly relevant to the field of art history, which has often distinguished, for better or worse, between “high” art, which includes “masterpieces,” and “low” art, which includes crafts and utilitarian objects (Freedberg 1989: xix). Such distinctions are neither terribly helpful nor pertinent when it comes to ancient Mesoamerica, where even the term “art” is problematic. Carolyn Dean (2006: 26) directed attention to the semantic conundrums especially acute in non-Western scholarship, noting that the lack of any “globally acceptable definition of art is the elephant in our disciplinary living room.” Her point was that by utilizing the term “art” to describe the creations of people who may not have had a concept of art or, if they did, one that differs from our own, risks “re-creating societies in the image of the modern West.”⁹ By the same token, however, and invoking the work of Hayden White (1983: 129), she cautioned modern scholars against any vainglorious attempt to “see” objects from an ancient, indigenous point of view. Dean (2006: 29) advocated, instead, that scholars “take cues” from the very people who crafted the ancient objects by scrutinizing them alongside the “still-visible traces of their practices.” In

Preclassic Mesoamerica, patterns of ritual accompanied the use, dedication, and veneration of the refined “masterpieces” of sculpture as well as the small, hand-modeled figurines produced in extraordinary abundance. Much can be gained not only by exploring these objects and the visible traces of their use but also by paying sustained attention to the potentially dynamic relationships that existed between types of objects, materials, functions, and contexts in the ancient past. Scrutiny of these relationships also moves us beyond questions of *what* – with its emphasis on taxonomic attributions and their delimitations – and into the domain of *why*, in which we can wrangle with issues of practice, context, and association. Even if questions of “why,” when directed at the creative production of Preclassic Mesoamerica, may not always be answerable, at least not fully, they should still be asked.

Throughout this book I consider evidence that comes from a variety of social sectors and pay special attention to what the changing scale, materials, and contexts of carved or modeled depictions of humans tells us about the social significance of representation during the Preclassic period. My chapters weave back and forth between the “high art” of the “public” plazas of ancient cities, and the figurines recovered from “private,” “domestic” contexts or intermixed with the detritus of daily life.¹⁰ Binaries such as these – high versus low, public versus private, elite versus commoner – pepper my study as they do much of the archaeological and art historical literature in Pre-Columbian studies. Rather than serving us well, Whitney Davis (1993: 254) argued, they “break down in any reasonably sophisticated view of representation and its role in social life.” I do not doubt the veracity of Davis’s claim, but I would counter that such categories are, nevertheless, useful, even though they by no means represent an empirical reality. What they provide is a framework for structuring categories of analysis based on opposites and stark contrasts, with one heuristic categorical extreme presupposing the other. Optimal utility of such an organizational strategy requires, ironically, recognition of the fact that it is, by nature, overly simplified, that it neglects the intermediate spaces between its analytical poles. I invoke a number of binaries throughout this study, but only in order to call attention to the paths of exchange that existed between them. Figural representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica truly took shape in the expanses in between.

High Culture

The story of human figuration told in this book culminates in the Late Preclassic period. Or, better said, it

contextualizes the explosion of monumental sculptural activity during the Late Preclassic within the many hundreds of years of figural experimentation and conceptualization that preceded it. The sculptural achievements of the Late Preclassic period were, indeed, remarkable, but they were also deeply indebted to what had come before. Their success was further amplified because it coincided with a dramatic cessation, at least along the south coast of Mesoamerica, of the ceramic figurine tradition that had thrived for over a millennium. This coincidence, I argue, was not serendipitous. The two phenomena – the debut of an innovative Late Preclassic sculptural tradition and the waning of a centuries-old figurine tradition – are best understood in concert, one as the beneficiary of an awareness of the power of figural forms and the other, perhaps, its victim. Again, although I do not wish to give away prematurely the ending to the long and circuitous story of Preclassic figuration traced in this book, I believe that the conceptual significance of human representation was not lost on Late Preclassic rulers who increasingly appropriated its devices in order to assert their social, political, and economic privilege. But recognition of this significance was not an invention of the Late Preclassic period, nor of elites only: it was an ancient idea, deeply understood and attested in myriad ways by people from all walks of life who had been engaged with the crafting of human representations for many centuries.

Broadly shared recognition of the power of human representation, which was nurtured, defined, and surely redefined repeatedly throughout the course of the Early and Middle Preclassic periods by people from all socio-economic sectors, fueled the monumental art traditions of the Late Preclassic period whose legacies endured for centuries. These Late Preclassic monumental art traditions, many anchored in the representation of kingly bodies or, at the very least, the portrayal of bodies in the service of the king, constitute a system of representation best thought of as an integral component of “high culture.” John Baines and Norman Yoffee (1998) developed a theoretical model for understanding the concept of “high culture” in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, which was later summarized and refined in a second publication (Baines and Yoffee 2000).¹¹ Their model serves as an enormously useful point of departure for this study and, especially, my arguments in Chapter 7, which focus on the monumental sculpture of the Late Preclassic period. According to Baines and Yoffee (1998: 203), high culture was expressed through specialized rituals, objects, and symbols that were wielded exclusively by rulers and their elite cohort in order to define themselves as qualitatively distinct from non-elites.¹² This suite of elite material culture and ritual formalized a system of inequality as well

as “a ‘core-periphery’ structure with the external world” in which ruling elites occupied the center; the rest of society pivoted around it. They linked the development of these ideas and traditions to the burgeoning of urban centers and the advent of state formation in the Old World, a point that is equally salient to discussions of high culture in the New World.

Baines and Yoffee framed their arguments around three key ideas, each equally germane to the formulation of high culture: order, legitimacy, and wealth.¹³ Order refers to the ideological systems, integrated across political, economic, and religious domains, which are designed to maintain civic and cosmic order (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 253). But order, they qualified, is fragile: it cannot be taken for granted, and the repercussions of its successes and failures reverberate beyond the confines of elites. Non-elites share an interest in the maintenance of order because it is seen as both a “stabilizing institution” and “as an almost unalterable given” (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 238). Legitimacy is the process through which elites successfully appropriate and maintain order. Even though elites could not fully monopolize certain legitimizing forces, like religion, aspects of which were dispersed across the social spectrum, they nevertheless had “access to more grandiose varieties of it and to more of its profound meanings” (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 213). The same holds true in Mesoamerica: the corpus of Late Preclassic art makes clear that privileged access and control of certain forms of ritual by elites (in both economic and religious terms) was formulated as a cosmological imperative (after Wolf 1999: 280–281). The third component, wealth, was probably not the prime motive in the development and maintenance of complex social forms, according to Baines and Yoffee (1998: 213). They described it instead as “an enabling factor, one that has an extraordinarily powerful communicative and persuasive potential.” Lavish display, concomitant with the considerable appropriation of material resources, was legitimized, cast as central to the maintenance of order because elites were the “principal human protagonists and prime communicants to the deities” and, thereby, required the finest cultural products (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 234–235). High culture required artistic display and performance, and elites were “aestheticized” via an array of materials and practices (also see DeMarrais et al. 1996).

For Baines and Yoffee, high culture was constituted by elites and presented as immutable. It benefited from sustained attempts to obscure connections to earlier or non-elite traditions, which were recast as divinely inspired rather than derivative (see Helms 1993). Many of the hallmarks of Late Preclassic high culture attest to the

same tensions between tradition and innovation. Monumental art, by the Late Preclassic period, took full advantage of centuries of figural traditions, tailoring them to serve elite agendas. Sweeping changes accompanied the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period, and the artistic record provides a particularly sensitive record of the ways in which new forms of authority and privilege were formulated and legitimated.¹⁴ Perhaps the Late Preclassic high culture system was a logical outgrowth of this tumultuous period in history: high culture systems are, Baines and Yoffee (1998: 252) asserted, “particularly warranted in times when new political leadership requires stabilization and legitimation.”

While compelling and productive to pursue, arguments concerning high culture are not without their limitations, and, in fact, Baines and Yoffee (1998: 211) were quick to note the biases of the ancient artistic record, which is “mainly monumental and centered on the ruling group.” George Marcus (1992: 294) recommended that scholars relentlessly problematize the “grounded practices of control and discipline that ensure the production” and visual materializations of elite ideologies. Susan Gillespie (2008a: 107) expressed similar concerns about a singular focus on the elite record, both visual and archaeological, which can result in the construction of a “totalizing scenario” that pays inadequate attention to the paths and forms of contestation, or that bills commoners as “people without history.” Creative responses and resistance to the dominant core of any civilization should not only be assumed to have existed, but should be a focus of intellectual inquiry, in spite of the fact that the dominant ideologies (*sensu* Scott 1990) are almost always more readily accessible to art historical and archaeological investigation (DeMarrais et al. 1996: 69).

Many of these same issues are pertinent to discussions of Late Preclassic sculpture, which was centered on the bodies and actions of elite individuals and came to serve their ideological interests (*sensu* Berger 1972: 86). This very privilege was one of the most powerful aspects of Late Preclassic art, in fact. But it was not novel: it clearly traces its ancestry back into the Early and Middle Preclassic periods when the communicative potential of human representations was first explored across a spectrum of media and scale by elites and others. What was new in the Late Preclassic period, at least along the south coast, was the elite monopoly on human representations, especially those crafted from durable materials (Clark et al. 2000: 469). If we stretch the boundaries of “sculpture” to include figurines, then we can conclude that the Early and Middle Preclassic sculptural corpus celebrated the bodies of peoples from many walks of life, crafted in materials both precious and readily available and at a scale that

ranged from the minute to the monumental. During the Late Preclassic, however, the boundaries of figural sculpture contracted, as Chapter 6 describes in detail. Along the south coast of Mesoamerica, in particular, opportunities for non-elites to “materialize ideology” in lasting figural form declined precipitously.¹⁵ Through a monopoly on durable human representations, especially when paired with an emphasis on monumentality, elites ensured that their bodies, alone, became the “repository of civilizational meanings” (Baines and Yoffee 2000: 16–17).

This is not to say that there were no challenges, active or passive, to the ideological rhetoric of Late Preclassic elites in regions where the figurine tradition waned considerably. There certainly were arenas for subaltern strategies of social expression that developed even while the horizons for crafting durable human representation narrowed. It is foolish to assume that the ideologies or strategies of dominant groups were necessarily or always successful. The appearance of new burial traditions during the Late Preclassic along the south coast, as much engaged with the human body as any sculptural representation, remind us of this (see Chapter 6 as well as Guernsey 2012: 118–119; Love 2016; Love and Castillo 1997; Love et al. 2002). The elite strategies and justifications of privilege explored in this book developed in conversation with complicated, and at times archaeologically unrecoverable, negotiations with many levels of society – a point I also consider. At the end of the day, the history of human figuration in Preclassic Mesoamerica provides one of the most substantive records for exploring these tensions. The imagery, objects, and contexts tell us as much about power as they do about its contestation. They become, in this story, central protagonists instead of passive markers of cultural or political change.

I take many of my clues from Janet Richards and Mary Van Buren’s (2000: 3) edited volume that called attention to weaknesses in the “high culture” model, which often fails to adequately consider the “points of interaction between elites and the populations they ruled.” Van Buren and Richards (2000: 9) questioned Baines and Yoffee’s assertion that the discourse of high culture was “restricted almost entirely to the inner elites, their rulers, and gods” and that individuals “outside this small circle play[ed] little if any role in the creation or consumption of high culture, even as audiences for legitimizing performances.”¹⁶ They argued that the endurance of civilizations hinged on the myriad and complex directionalities of exchanges that transpired between all members of society. Questions of order and legitimacy, Elizabeth Brumfiel (2000: 131) asserted in her contribution to the volume, always need to engage with a “broader interest in culture as it affects all social action.”

I do not, in this book, return to the idea of “high culture” until Chapter 7, with its focus on Late Preclassic monumental art. And I do so only after contending with the vast array of figural forms, contexts, and people who were actively engaged in formulating the meanings of human representation at many scales and in multiple mediums. It is only by doing so that we can get at the deep and complicated significance of human representations for ancient Mesoamericans. My methods are informed by a commitment to go well beyond “the categories and objects of humanistic study that have built up in Western and other scholarship,” including the field of art history, and which often coincide all too readily with “high culture” models (Baines and Yoffee 2000: 17). To be frank, it was both my attraction to and deep suspicions of the analytical capacity of a “high culture” model that inspired much of this book.

The Meanings and Significance of Human Representation in Mesoamerica

One cannot pursue a study of the history of representation in Mesoamerica without paying heed to the complex interrelationships between acts of human figuration and ontologies of being. Fortunately, there have been a number of recent studies dedicated to better understanding ancient Mesoamerican ontological systems. Many draw from the art historical and archaeological records, but are also productively informed by ongoing advancements in hieroglyphic decipherment, which utilize textual clues to illuminate the ways ancient people understood images. Although I rely on the truly extraordinary advances in hieroglyphic decipherment since the mid-twentieth century, I do not wish to oversell their utility for elucidating the Preclassic period. Even though we can now speak of a robust Mesoamerican literary tradition, at least from the Classic period onward, its passages dedicated to describing practices of human representation do not compete with the vivid prose of Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ Recounted in that narrative poem is the story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with the object he carved because it was so beautiful and lifelike. Inspired by his own creation, he petitioned Aphrodite and was rewarded when, on bestowing a kiss to the statue, it came to life. The textual evidence in Mesoamerica lacks such poetic elaboration, but it nevertheless elucidates the significance of the materialization of human forms and has enabled the formulation of an intellectual framework through which we can – cautiously – begin to move back into the Preclassic period, an era without adequately deciphered writing systems.

In a consideration of evidence from the Classic period (AD 250–900), Elizabeth Newsome (1998: 116) wrote that the Maya “ascribed a set of qualities and attributes to . . . monuments that defined them as ‘beings’ within the scope of their ontological universe.” Sculptures created by them were understood, she argued, as possessing “being, spiritual essence, and power.” Newsome (1998: 122) likened these ancient conceptions to Robert Plant Armstrong’s (1971) notion of “affecting presences,” in which material forms generate “interactional dynamics of meaning that unite the observer and works of art.” Evidence for these understandings comes from the hieroglyphic record and, in other cases, is more circumstantial, gleaned through archaeological vestiges of the behaviors that accompanied the creation and use of these objects. Newsome noted that colonial accounts also preserve indigenous ideas concerning the potency of objects. She pointed to a passage in Bishop Diego de Landa’s sixteenth-century *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan* (Tozzer 1941: 159–160), which describes the carving of wooden idols and the various ritual prescriptions – fasting, abstinence, and the procurement of a certain type of wood – that accompanied their production, which was viewed as a dangerous endeavor. The idols were crafted in a hut that afforded privacy and secrecy and which was anointed with blood drawn from the earlobes of the artisans and sanctified with the smoke from incense.

Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube (Houston and Stuart 1998: 81; Houston et al. 2006: 58–62), following the early lead of Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1968), explored the significance of the Classic Maya hieroglyphic term *u-baab*. Unlike the Maya term *winik* (or *winaq*),¹⁸ which means “person,” *u-baab* “relates less to a general meaning of ‘being’ or ‘person’ than with the material form of the person” (Houston et al. 2006: 59). Houston and Stuart argued that *u-baab* encompasses references not only to the self or person but also to objects or images that extended aspects of that self. There was, thus:

an extendable essence shared between images and that which is portrayed . . . The act of carving, modeling, or painting creates a semblant surface and transfers the vital charge conferring identity and animation to the original. (Houston and Stuart 1998: 86–87)¹⁹

Houston (2004: 291) described this equivalency, in ancient Mesoamerican thought, between a sculpture, its representation, and the person portrayed as an “ontological fusion of spirit and matter,” in which “neither matter nor spirit is necessarily valorized over the other.” As Houston and Stuart (1998: 87–88) put it, Classic Maya notions of the self superseded the boundaries of