Human Figuration and Fragmentation in Preclassic Mesoamerica

In this book, Julia Guernsey examines the relationship between human figuration, fragmentation, bodily divisibility, personhood, and community in ancient Mesoamerica. Contending that representation of the human body in the Preclassic period gradually became a privileged act, she argues that human figuration as well as the fragmentation of both human representations and human bodies reveals ancient conceptualizations of personhood and the relationship of individual to the community. Considering ceramic figurines and stone sculpture together with archaeological data, Guernsey weaves together evidence and ideas drawn from art history, archaeology, and anthropology to construct a rich, cultural history of Mesoamerican practices of figuration and fragmentation. A methodologically innovative study, her book has ramifications for scholars working in Mesoamerica and, more generally, those interested in the significance of human representation.

Julia Guernsey is D. J. Sibley Family Centennial Faculty Fellow in Prehistoric Art at the University of Texas, Austin. She is the author of *The Place of Stone Monuments* (2010) and *Sculpture and Social Dynamics in Preclassic Mesoamerica* (2012).

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From Figurines to Sculpture

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To the usual suspects, with love:

My mother Rita Ford Guernsey,
my father Anthony Guernsey whose memory lives on,
my children Abigail Kappelman and Jack Kappelman,
my step-daughter Isabel Love, and my husband, Michael Love,
without whom this book would not exist

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Preface

This book explores how and why, over the course of many hundreds of years, representation of the human body in durable form became an increasingly privileged and circumscribed act throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica. This is a formidable task in many ways. The Preclassic period that I address spans over two millennia, from roughly 2000 BC to AD 250, and witnessed the development of representational traditions of art, often focused on the human body, which proliferated in a variety of mediums and, what is more, sizes, from massive blocks of carved stone to the smallest of modeled clay figurines. The contexts in which these anthropomorphic objects were used were just as diverse. None of these variables – the objects, the mediums, the contexts – was necessarily stable during the Preclassic period, and tracking their transformations, reinventions, and legacies constitutes the heart of my inquiry.

Human representations mattered in ancient Mesoamerica, as their abundance and diversity attest. Recognizing this is the first step. But this recognition, in fact, occurred long before the breathless descriptions of romanticized ruins by intrepid explorers of the nineteenth century and well before sixteenth-century accounts by clergymen bemoaning the use of "idols" by indigenous populations. It is attested by the sundry acts of ancient Mesoamericans who collected and preserved forms from more distant times, who repurposed earlier objects through acts of inscription and recarving, who enshrined and venerated objects from previous eras, or who even systematically broke, disarticulated, or fractured representations of humans in a manner more productively viewed as generative and constructive than punitive and destructive.

I came to this topic by way of a somewhat circuitous route. Having worked on Preclassic stone sculpture along the Pacific slope of Mexico and Guatemala for most of my career, I was a bit stymied by the lack of monumental sculpture that had been excavated at the site of La Blanca, Guatemala, where I was involved with archaeological investigations. Monumental sculpture was not absent from La Blanca, to be sure, and a modest corpus of fragmentary figural sculpture – a disembodied anthropomorphic head, a segment of a well-formed limb – existed. But these stone objects hardly competed with the corpus of figural objects modeled from clay, whose numbers were exponentially greater. Small, palm-sized clay figurines – equally fragmentary – abounded at La Blanca, and I was struck by the sheer quantity of human faces, torsos, and miscellaneous appendages that had been excavated from all sectors of the site.

And so, somewhat reluctantly, I began to think about figurines. What I found striking during my early forays was the lack of studies that integrated figurines with sculpture in spite of the fact that each was equally focused on representation of the human body. The more I looked, the more I realized that these distinct traditions – one small and focused on the medium of clay, the other large and (usually) of stone – had always, since the dawn of Mesoamerican civilization, been in conversation with each other, even if modern scholarship had ignored these dialogues. This book acknowledges and explores the ancient exchanges between these mediums, arguing that they were fundamental to the developmental history and significance of human representation in Mesoamerica. It gradually narrows its focus to the south coast of Mexico and Guatemala and the impressive sculptural achievements of the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250), but does so only after having explored the more encompassing arc of human representation throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica.

I begin my exploration in Chapter 1 by tackling the methodological issues at stake throughout this book. One of the most expressive vehicles through which people structured their visual world and navigated the social paroxysms that characterized the Preclassic period was figural objects focused on the human body. Regardless of the material of their manufacture, relative size, or even contexts of use, all of the objects and their diverse makers contributed to the formulation of canons of human representation that would endure for millennia. Moving between these types of objects, which served vastly different social roles, requires data and strategies drawn from a variety of disciplines. The purpose of Chapter 1 is thus to confront these complex issues squarely while also orienting readers to the many social dynamics of the Preclassic period, which gave birth to the earliest civilizations in Mesoamerica.

Chapter 2 focuses on monumental stone depictions of humans during the Early (2000–1000 BC) and Middle (1000–300 BC) Preclassic periods. It casts its net widely, exploring the sculptural production of many different geographic regions and noting the creative solutions engendered to accommodate both iconic representations of individuals and more narrative compositions in which multiple personages interacted. It emphasizes the restricted distribution and relative rarity of stone sculpture in these early years of Mesoamerican history, when it nevertheless served the agendas of rulers who took advantage of its ability to define the physical and sociopolitical contours of their communities. Monumental sculpture grappled with the representational boundaries between the human and the divine, with expression of what it meant to be human, and with the potential of the human body to encode social difference.

But monumental sculpture in stone was not alone in its engagement with these ideas, as a consideration of an entirely different medium makes clear. Chapter 3 makes this shift, pivoting from stone to clay and turning its attention to the many thousands of miniature representations that were far more abundant and accessible than their stone counterparts. Unlike stone sculpture, ceramic figurines appear to have been utilized by people from all socioeconomic sectors and paths of life. I survey the distribution of these figurines across the wide geographical span of Mesoamerica, highlighting the social contexts in which they were used. Figurines, although less grand and imposing than monumental sculpture, were far more pervasive and, I argue, vital to the ways in which human figuration was formulated, conceptualized, and – eventually – wielded as a sociopolitical tool in ancient Mesoamerica.

Chapter 4 narrows its focus to the south coast of Guatemala and focuses on the 5,000 or so clay figurines excavated at the site of La Blanca, which flourished during the Middle Preclassic period. While working over the course of the last fourteen years with the extensive collection of La Blanca figurines, I have peered back at the thousands of tiny faces that are so animated yet so enigmatic. The privilege of working closely with the objects has afforded me insights into the ways in which Middle Preclassic peoples articulated a sustained concern with corporeality and the expression of sensorial capacities. These tiny representations exhibit a palpable tension between individualization and more collective, repetitive aspects of human identity, an issue that becomes central to my study.

Although engaging, the La Blanca figurines – like most figurines throughout Mesoamerica – are also broken. Chapter 5 confronts the fact that investigators rarely encounter a Preclassic figurine fully intact. Most are fragmented, with heads separated from bodies and bodies missing some or all limbs. Fragmentation appears to have gone hand in hand with acts of representation, part of a persistent cultural trope that permeated all corners of Mesoamerican society and was reflected not only in figurine practices, but in monumental sculpture traditions as well as much later ethnohistoric accounts and mythological stories. Although stone sculpture endured acts of deliberate fragmentation, processes of bodily divisibility are most visible and pervasive in the corpus of Preclassic clay figurines. Figurines speak volubly, I posit, about both representation *and* bodily divisibility or the disassembly of the self. In so doing, they illuminate ancient concepts of personhood or what it meant to be human. Evidence suggests that ancient Mesoamerican notions of personhood are quite distinct from a modern, post-Enlightenment idea of the individual as possessing unfettered subjectivity and autonomy. Mesoamerican notions of the self were anchored in understandings of a person's indissoluble relationship to the larger community, the part to the whole. Although there were likely multiple and shifting understandings of individuality and personhood in ancient Mesoamerica, the self appears to have always been embedded in society; the "I" was inevitably a part of the "we."

Having established the extent and significance of figuration in both stone and clay, at both a large and small scale in the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, Chapter 6 turns to the exploration of why, along the south coast of Mesoamerica, there was an abrupt decline in the use of figurines at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period. As I investigate in detail, this cessation of the clay figurine tradition transpired alongside other momentous social shifts, including the advent of state formation, increased urbanization, and an explosion of monumental stone sculpture in both quantity and variety. Yet, as the chapter also broaches, not all regions of Mesoamerica witnessed a figurine cessation, and we learn much from paying attention to these disparities, which reveal the varied roles that figuration played in new strategies of social and political negotiation.

Chapter 7 builds on the evidence presented in Chapter 6, focusing on the south coast of Mesoamerica where the Late Preclassic figurine cessation was particularly acute. There, an outburst of monumental sculptural productivity orchestrated by ruling elites at an impressive scale took full advantage of the social significance and utility of figuration. Kingly bodies were inserted into increasingly complex narrative scenes, at times accompanied by hieroglyphic inscriptions, where they became the symbol par excellence of civilized

behavior. These new forms of monumental stone figuration, with their celebration of royal bodies and deeds, were unimpeded by competition in the form of small, clay representations of humans. I argue that this elite monopoly on figuration became central to the political discourse of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. It was, nevertheless, deeply indebted to the figural experimentation that had transpired in many mediums, been deployed in diverse contexts, and served a multitude of social goals for millennia. I linger on a consideration of the potential mechanisms through which such a monopoly on figuration was facilitated and sustained, pondering how, and why, certain kinds of representation achieved precedence and power over others (after Wolfe 1999: 33).

The brief Epilogue revisits the central issues in the tumultuous history of Preclassic figuration. Perhaps most importantly, it argues that figuration's developmental trajectory in Mesoamerica hinged on the formal and conceptual ingenuity of actors from many regions and many paths of life. It played out in stone, in clay, and in an array of other more ephemeral materials. As this chapter concludes, human representation was central to the ways in which social decorum, political power, and understandings of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, of individuals to their larger communities, were materialized and negotiated in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

This book is a first attempt not only to explore the diverse extent of figuration in Preclassic Mesoamerica but to articulate its role in structuring the social world of Preclassic Mesoamerica. It is a synthesis of objects, data, and ideas drawn from many regions, commingled for the first time. My arguments are facilitated by an admixture of art historical analysis, archaeological data, and theoretical perspectives. For example, I move, throughout each chapter and the book more generally, from the presentation of data to discussion of far more theoretical domains, extrapolating the social, political, and economic roles of disparate figural forms. To do this, I cross bridges that many others before me have built, utilizing their analyses and interpretations of comparable data to pivot from the world of objects and things to the realm of ideas. This is standard practice, whether one is engaged with art history or archaeology or something that straddles a sort of interdisciplinary middle ground. In the world of archaeology, "inference to the best explanation" (Kelley and Hanen 1988; Wylie 2002) enables scholars to offer explanations for any given data points, evidence, or phenomena, which are arrived at through processes of elimination. Explanations less well supported are set aside, while those best supported by the material evidence are favored and built on. We "accept" the best explanations even while bearing in mind that, in the world of archaeology (or art history, for that matter) – where new data are always emerging and interpretations being refined – there is a critical difference between "accepting" and "accepting as true" (Hanen and Kelley 1989: 15). My arguments build on one another as I move from objects and data to ideas and interpretations, or from fact to inference. Although my book is an art historical one, first and foremost, I recognize that my methods often embrace the methodological tools of archaeology and utilize an "inference to the best explanation" approach that, for the sake of transparency, is important to acknowledge.

Perhaps another way to phrase this is to concede that the history of Preclassic figuration can be told only in a choral voice rather than a singular one. Although the Preclassic period gave rise to the first hieroglyphic writing in Mesoamerica, we lack the sort of contemporaneous textual accounts that

might illuminate the artistic practices of the period. Argumentation proceeds, accordingly, through the creation of webs of interconnected data and ideas assembled by many scholars over the course of the last century or so when Mesoamerican studies began to develop as a distinct field of study. An astute colleague recognized that the images included throughout this book confirm the choral nature of this project: they are an eclectic mix of classic archaeological field photos, informal field photos never intended for publication, professional photos, and photos taken in poorly lit *bodegas*, or storage rooms, throughout Guatemala and Mexico. Some were taken recently, others in the early twentieth century. I have included photos whenever possible, deliberately, instead of drawings, in order to convey the volume, contours, dimensions, and textures of objects, qualities often lost in even the best illustrations. The results may well disappoint those hoping for an aesthetically beautiful tome. But, for all their shortcomings, the images attest to the many decades of contributions by scholars, investigators, and field crew members throughout the still relatively youthful history of Precolumbian studies.

Put more succinctly, the convoluted and often surprising story of Preclassic figuration as told in this book relies on many decades of interdisciplinary investigation, insights, and reasoning. It hinges on both facts and the many inferences they have generated. The book can be construed as a cultural history, concerned as it is with identifying and exploring Preclassic *practices* of figuration and fragmentation – their significance and the ways in which they made meaning – as well as with understanding individual objects. It tells a story at once cultural and art historical.

The arguments assembled here have ramifications for scholars working in later Mesoamerican periods and anyone interested more generally in human representation and its significance. That said, I do not emphasize in this book the implications of my findings for later periods, nor contemplate how they might constructively be applied to the equally extraordinary representations of humans that came to characterize later eras of Mesoamerican history. That task is best left to other scholars who command those bodies of material. I view the ideas presented in this book as a contribution to – rather than the definitive, final word on – the story of human representation in Mesoamerica. It puts a new spin on an old story, opening up possibilities for profitably rethinking the past in innovative and exciting ways.

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