

## ZAPOTEC POTTERY SCULPTURE

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CLAY and its wiles have been left severely alone by many of the sculptors who are trying to restore sculpture as a masculine art. The soft sweetnesses of sculpture before the war have somehow brought the medium, as well as the men who used it, a reputation for sentimentality. Yet clay in the form of terra cotta has greater capacities for energetic and forceful treatment than almost any other medium. It was used with great effectiveness by the pre-Columbian artists of America and especially in the work of the Zapotecs, reached a unique pitch of power that is worth notice in an age that worships energy.

This is not an attempt to define Zapotec art, but simply to speak of the remarkable combination of explosive energy and coherence which Zapotec plastic art achieved. Very little is as yet known of this race which historically and geographically occupied a position half way between the Maya culture of central America and the cultures of the Mexican plateaus. They left behind them in Oaxaca the ruins of two imposing cities, a few extraordinary painted manuscripts, a little work in stone, gold, copper,



and jade, and a quantity of pottery funerary urns. They seem to have been independent of the Aztecs when the Spaniards came. Little else is known. The recent spectacular finds at their city of Monte Alban are described as a Mixtec intrusion into a Zapotec site, but the excavations will undoubtedly reveal more about Zapotec culture. At present, it is only the peculiar brilliance of their plastic tradition that can be studied.

All pre-Columbian art is at a disadvantage in competing with European art for popular interest. Whatever romantic interest may be attached to the jungle-covered pyramids of forgotten cities, it is not carried over to the plastic arts. Zapotec urns have no picturesque history as a background, no human interest of subject. Their subjects are frequently the gods of an unknown religion, treated with an elaborate symbolism that

*Left (figure 1)*

**FUNERARY URN OF SEATED FIGURE FROM A ZAPOTECAN TOMB AT OAXACA, MEXICO**

*In the collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York*

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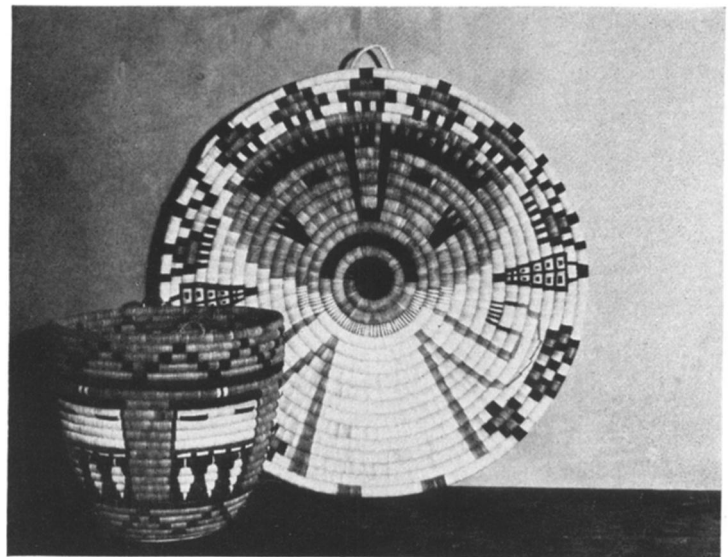
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makes them doubly obscure. Even human subjects are highly stylised and the hawk-like Indian faces which look out from beneath their feathered crowns are stern and reserved. They neither smile, charm with their physical grace, nor stir with action. Yet as plastic art their overwhelming characteristic is their vitality.

The pottery urn illustrated in Figure I is typical of Zapotec work. It represents a man seated cross-legged, wearing a feather headdress, a short cape over his shoulders, and an embroidered loin cloth. A mask over the upper part of the face, ear plugs and pectoral (characteristic Zapotec jewelry) of exaggerated size, and bracelets, add to the complexity of the figure. The back is treated as a plane, from which swells out a cylindrical urn forming the trunk of the man. Urns of this form are found buried in tomb mounds, generally in groups of five or seven, and in such places as over the lintel or in the floor before the door, never within the tomb chamber. They are always found empty and their function is obscure. The figure is built up by moulds and by modeling of a heavy blueish clay. The pottery is thick and unpainted but is usually coated with a white stucco slip.

Both figure and costume are conventionalized to create a design which seems at first

repetition in scale. The staccato vehemence of the treatment is superb. For variety a second motive is introduced in the circles which, repeated whole or in arcs, make up the earplugs, the frontal of the headdress, the pectoral and other details.

The development of two simple motives into a design of such richness, movement and

the lines of fingers and toes, together with the pectoral, are used to bring the plain bulk of the body into relation with the upper half without destroying its value as a contrast. The face has a fierce impersonal intensity one is not surprised to see in a representative of a pyramid-building race.

The toothless old man (Figure III) is an exceptional piece. The lively wrinkled old face beneath a cap in the form of a peccary head, in spite of the blunt stylisation of the body, gives the effect of a genre portrait, shrewdly narrating the character of a bouncing, nervous, fussy, talkative old man.

The Composite Bat-Dog urn (Figure IV) is the best example of the furious vitality of Zapotec work. It is one of a pair found in a cave temple facing each other across an empty niche, where the statue of the principal deity once stood. The significance of this astonishing creature was suggested by Dr. J. Alden Mason in an article in the *Museum Journal* of the University of Pennsylvania, June, 1929, p. 182, from analogies in Maya thought. "The Bat God was one of the important deities of the Maya, many elements of whose religion were shared also by the Zapotec. The Bat God in particular is known to have been revered also by the Zapotec, but was not recognized by the Toltec and Aztec of the Valley of Mexico. He



Above (figure 2)  
SEATED FIGURE, FUNERARY URN  
In the University Museum, Philadelphia



Left (figure 3)  
FUNERARY URN OF OLD MAN WITH PECCARY HEAD CAP  
In the University Museum, Philadelphia



Right (figure 4)  
COMPOSITE BAT-DOG URN  
In the University Museum, Philadelphia

confusingly luxuriant, yet is basically simple. The knees, cape, and brim of headdress make three horizontal bands across the vertical axis of the body. But across this rigid frame of line there radiates from the center a sunburst of finger-like shapes that burst out triumphantly in the plumed headdress. Starting in the small, sharp rectangles of the teeth, the shapes become larger and longer with each repetition upward in the nose-piece and plumes. Downward they are drawn across the cape in ribbon-like lines; then becoming suddenly large, are carried on in the shapes of arms and trunk as well as the openings between, and so into the fingers, toes, and the band of ornament on the loin cloth. The one motive is carried through all these variations without anywhere a

coherence is a triumph of inventiveness. The tempo of its clash and interlock of shapes is distinctive of the Zapotecs among New World arts. The pure Maya art of the Old Empire is brilliant and profuse, with a strong easy grace of line running through and organizing its maze of interlinked parts. Toltec reliefs are brusque and angular, formed of small, emphatic parts hung loosely together like gaudy beads upon a string. The Zapotec lies between them, at once staccato and fluent.

Urn figures are usually, however, less complicated than this. The seated subject (Figure II) is again an arrangement of arcs and raying lines but into their swift movements comes the simple mass of the body. It is extremely interesting to see with what skill

was especially associated, among the Maya at least, with the underworld, and with worship of, and in, caves. It is therefore quite natural that bat figures should be encountered in a cave temple. The dog, among the Maya, was considered to be connected with death, and to be the messenger to prepare the way to the hereafter."

But whatever mythological symbolism has gone with a religion vanished centuries ago, the beast has lost none of its bristling reality. The outward swelling contours are tense with fantastic life; the eyes glitter, the lungs swell to utter some astounding sound. The decorative stylisation of details, the balance of large and small elements, the strange and salty life of the creature, are the evidence of a powerful and distinctive plastic tradition.