



Storyteller Figure

A.D. 100/800

Jalisco, Ameca Style, Ameca Valley, Jalisco, Mexico

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center



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Ceramic and pigment

55.9 x 55.9 cm (22 x 22 in.)

Estate of Ruth Falkenau, 1989.83

The ancient cultures of West Mexico were little understood until serious study began in the 1900s of the region's extraordinary shaft tombs. "West Mexico has long been recognized as a region of shaft tombs and beautiful ceramic sculptures—both of which were manifestations of a reverence of ancestors and a belief in the afterlife,"¹ a scholar wrote recently. Ceramic pieces found in the shaft tombs have been thought of as works of **funerary art** and functional pieces that aid in the transition between life and afterlife. The tombs of ancient West Mexico were cut into volcanic soil and reached by shafts up to twenty feet in depth. Ceramics, bowls, and shells were placed around the perimeter of the body, which was laid in hollowed-out burial chambers in the tomb. This particular ceramic piece, the *Storyteller Figure*, was excavated from such a tomb in Jalisco, on the Pacific coast between Guerrero in southern Mexico and the Gulf of California.

Evidence of a hierarchy among the dead is seen in the objects placed within these tombs. The grade and functional purpose of the goods placed in the tombs differed according to the status of the person buried. Many of these pieces are also associated with the lives of kings. Rather than immortalizing their rulers with large pyramids, monuments, or stone stelae as in the Yucatan and Central Mexico, or celebrating and remembering their gods and rituals with sculptures and artifacts that displayed their symbols and **paraphernalia**, "...the artists of western Mexico instead portrayed their world by means of earthenware figures and vessels that were made to accompany the dead."² The royal family members celebrated in these tombs were buried in full **regalia** and surrounded by earthenware figures of warriors and ladies with lively expressions and gestures, as well as ornate vessels.

Throughout the Mesoamerican world, feasts were the catalysts for significant ritual, social, and political interchange. There are many other cultures, both ancient and modern, around the world that celebrate specific occasions with meals or special feasts. The correlation between feasting and death in West Mexican cultures was prominent; grand ritual feasts were held for the dead, as well as to honor and recognize the genealogy and lineage of the living. Time, or life and death, played a key role in the lives of these people.

Ancient West Mexicans placed a great deal of emphasis on the concepts of movement, change, and **metamorphosis**. They believed that the universe is time, time is movement, and movement is change. "Human beings do not occupy the center of the game, but they are the givers of blood, the precious substance that makes the world go round and the sun come up and the maize grow,"³ wrote a contemporary Mexican scholar.

Art of the ancient West Mexican cultures was seen as magical; the objects were believed to transmit psychic energy, universal sympathy, and link all animate beings. Art was not purely aesthetic, but linked with other experiences; it acted as a bridge that changes the reality we see for another. The work of art was seen as a medium or agency for the transmission of forces

and powers that are sacred, that are “other.” These ceramic pieces found within the tombs have been associated with **shamanism** and the world of the dead. Ancient West Mexicans believed the function of art was to open doors that lead to the other side of reality. This culture associated both beauty and expression with art. Village **artisans** made useful everyday objects out of clay or other fragile materials. Loyalty and respect to the idea of the piece and to the materials of which the piece was formed—stone, clay, bone, wood, feathers, metal—was essential to its creation.

The *Storyteller Figure* is made of a modeled clay material and partially covered with a deep, brick-red colored **slip**. The ancient West Mexicans’ “use of the ceramic techniques of incising and painting in both positive and negative slip colors is original and outstanding in the art of Mesoamerica and of the great pottery-producing areas of the world.”⁵ The piece’s surface is polished, and a few black patches caused by the **firing process** are visible on the head, fingers, and legs. Sensuous naturalism, power, and fluidity characterize the **effigies** from Jalisco and the neighboring regions of Colima and Nayarit. The flesh-like curves of the hands, torso, and limbs give this figure its naturalistic, sensuous look. The extreme elongation of the head, the hatchet-shaped nose, slightly open mouth, and wide-open eyes also make this piece typical of Jalisco area art.

Storyteller Figure was named due to the position of the man. He seems to be in the midst of telling a story, although no definite description of the piece has been uncovered. In many early societies, the storyteller transmitted the heroic legends and cosmic myths by which people explained their history and place in the natural world. The precise interpretation of his open, welcoming hand gestures remains unknown, although hands extended with the palms upward indicate a receipt of **supernatural** gifts, or, if the hands hold an object, an offer to the supernatural world. Although there is no documentation on this particular work of art, *Storyteller Figure* visually represents a timeless recounting of history, legends, and myths.

Notes

1. Camberos, Lorenza Lopez; Jorge Ramos de la Vega. “Excavating the Tomb at Huitzilapa.” *Ancient West Mexico: Art & Archaeology of the Unknown Past*. Richard Townsend, ed. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1998. p. 53.
2. Townsend, Richard. “Before Gods, Before Kings.” *Ancient West Mexico: Art & Archaeology of the Unknown Past*. Richard Townsend, ed. Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1988. P. 107.
3. Paz, Octavio. *Essays on Mexican Art*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993. p. 42.
4. Furst, Peter T. “West Mexican Art: Secular or Sacred?” *The Iconography of Middle American sculpture*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973. p. 104.

Glossary

artisan: a craftsman; a person manually skilled in making a particular product.

effigies: painted or sculptured representations of a person, as on stone walls or monuments.

firing process: the process in which a material (clay) is dried and hardened by the sun or in an oven-like structure (kiln) at very high temperatures.

funerary art: artwork that is made or suitable for a funeral or burial.

metamorphosis: a transformation or marked change in appearance, character, condition, or function, as in the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

paraphernalia: personal belongings; equipment or gear.

regalia: assorted finery which indicates status and rank; often associated with royalty.

slip: potter's clay thinned with water; used for decorating or coating ceramics.

shamanism: religious practice in which it is believed that good and evil spirits pervade the world and can be summoned or heard through inspired priests acting as mediums.

supernatural: of or pertaining to existence outside the natural world; especially not attributable to natural forces.

Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

• What Story is the Storyteller Figure Telling?

Notice that the mouth on the *Storyteller Figure* is partially open. Is the figure speaking? If so, what is he saying? Write the story *Storyteller Figure* might be telling. Keep in mind your audience. To whom is the story directed? Does the story deal with the time period in which this piece was created, or another? Use what you know now of ancient West Mexican culture, people, and religious beliefs.

• It Takes Two

Create a dialogue between the *Storyteller Figure* and someone, or something, else. Write down the conversation in order to perform it with a partner. In what time is this conversation taking place? In what area? Use other pieces from the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago to create this dialogue.

• Become a Journalist!

Journalists interview interesting people as a job. Use the following chart (at right) as a sample interview sheet (add more or different questions if needed). Ask these questions of your family to learn an often-told family story. If there are no family stories to consider, ask a neighbor, teacher, or other available friend. Or, create a story by using the following chart as a guideline for developing a new family story. Consider these questions as you write:

- What was the purpose of the story?
- What moral, historical occurrence, etc. does this story tell or explain?
- Who is the storyteller of your story? Why?

Now, write your story! Read stories aloud in class.

Optional: Write your story as a newspaper article or television broadcast news report. Create an in-class newspaper consisting of all the students' family stories, or a "live" television broadcast with breaking news coverage of the stories.

Where were you born? What kind of apartment or house did your family live in? What was the neighborhood like?	Who slept in what room? What were the busiest places in the house? Why?
Did your family have plants or a garden? Who took care of it? What did your family do with the produce?	Who lived in your house besides the regular family?
What holidays did your family celebrate? How were these celebrated? Were there any "traditions" celebrated? Did your family make up new traditions?	Did your family belong to a religious group? If so, were there any special religious holidays celebrated as a family?
How were special occasions (marriages, deaths, births, birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) celebrated?	Does anyone in your family have a special name or nickname? How did it come about?
What were family meals like? What kinds of foods were eaten? What was your favorite?	What are some favorite songs, jokes, or stories you remember?
Did you have a pet? What is your favorite memory of a pet?	Who do you admire most in your family? Outside your family?
Who were your friends as a child? What sorts of games, etc., did you play together?	What did you want to be when you grew up? What made you want that?
Did you play sports? What other things did your family play together?	What trips did you take? Which is your favorite, and why?
Do you have a favorite story or memory from childhood?	How many years did most people in the family attend school? Why?
What was your favorite part of school? Why?	As time passed, what old customs or traditions were kept up? Which weren't? Why?

- **A Piece of History**

Create a story based on the “life” of a family heirloom or memento. Pick an object and create its history, its life. Who made it? Where did it originally come from? Who owned it? How did it get to where it is now? If true answers are not known, speculate by examining the piece and its present-day use.

- **“See” Your Storyteller!**

Use soft clay to sculpt the storyteller who tells your story (refer to Activities 1 and 4, if needed). What costume does it wear? What hand or body motion does it show? What facial expression does it wear? How does it sit, stand, bend, etc.? Is it human?

Optional: Sculpt, draw, or mime the different stages of the storytelling process. What was the *Storyteller Figure* doing the moment before this position was captured? The moment after?

- **Like With Like**

The *Storyteller Figure* is made of clay, also known as kaolinite. The largest component (60%) of clay is silicon dioxide, SiO₂, the same chemical that makes up sand (which, when heated then cooled, becomes glass).

What are the physical properties of clay (before and after firing), sand, and glass? (e.g. smooth, hard, soft, grainy, sharp, etc.) What similarities and differences do you find?

- **Creative Comparisons**

Research other works of art from around the world that were made in the same time period as the *Storyteller Figure*. Works specific to the Art Institute of Chicago include:

Roman

Fragment of a Sarcophagus

Imperial Period, 240–250 A.D.

Gift of the Alsdorf Foundation, 1983.584

Pakistan, Gandharan region

A Yakshi Grasping a Tree

Kushan period, 2nd/3rd century

Samuel M. Nickerson Fund, 1923.316

Chinese

Mastiff (Tomb Figure)

Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220), 2nd Century

Gift of Russell Tyson, 1950.1630

Greek, Attica

Funerary Stele (Grave Marker)

c. 330 B.C.

Alexander White Collection, 1928.162

Egyptian

Relief Plaque Showing a Queen or Goddess

Ptolemaic Period (332 B.C.–30 B.C.)

Museum Purchase Fund, 1920.259

Use one of the above works of art and the following questions to prompt a thought-out essay.

What similarities or differences do you see or find?

What technological advances or inadequacies are evident from the quality of these works?

Why do you suppose one culture possessed the ability to create more technologically advanced works, while another culture of the same period did not?

Do you feel one culture’s works are more creative, artistic, or beautiful than the others? Is your answer based on the culture’s technological advancements or lack thereof?

Is the purpose or function of the work—why it was created—the reason for the technology used or advanced knowledge of the art materials shown? Or is the work indicative of the period’s style?

• **Me and My Storyteller Figure**

Describe *Storyteller Figure*'s visual aspects. Then describe those same aspects of you. Fill answers into the following chart to create a comparison. Suggested possible answers are given.

	Texture	Smell	Color	Shape(s)	Size
Storyteller Figure	smooth hard	earthy, like dirt (clay) paint smell of slip	red black tan face reflected light	spherical torso oval head oval eyes noodle-like arms	long arms large head long ears long nose short legs big fingers big belly little feet
You!	smooth hairy muscular soft	perfume shampoo soap shoe leather cotton cloth food dirt	skin color hair color	shape of head (round or square) shapes of fingers, toes, arms, etc.	size of head, torso, hands, feet, arms, legs, etc.

• **Take Apart & Put Together**

Find the shapes that make up the *Storyteller Figure*.

Examples:

- circles (belly, shoulders, pectoral muscles)
- ovals (head, ears, eyes)
- rounded rectangles or elongated ovals (arms, nose, legs)
- rounded squares (fingers, toes)
- rectangle (mouth)

Cut templates of these shapes out of colored cardstock or cardboard; arrange pieces to create a new storyteller. These beings need not be human! What sort of story does your new storyteller tell?

• **Innovative Ideas**

Mesoamerican people developed the idea of the zero and positional numeration. Research other cultures around the world that also developed these, similar, or new mathematical ideas during this same time period.

Why do you think these cultures developed the same or similar ideas at the same times?

What aspects of the world or the cultures prohibited them from knowing about and learning from other cultures? What topographical challenges may have disallowed cultures from meeting?

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