



# **The Mother Culture of Mexico: The Olmecs**

**Goals 2000 - Partnerships for  
Educating Colorado Students**

**In Partnership with the Denver Public Schools  
and the Metropolitan State College of Denver**

**El Alma de la Raza Project**



# **The Mother Culture of Mexico: The Olmecs**

**By Daniel Villescas**

**Grade 6**

**Implementation Time  
for Unit of Study: 3-5 weeks**

**Goals 2000 - Partnerships for  
Educating Colorado Students  
El Alma de la Raza Curriculum  
and Teacher Training Project**

**Loyola A. Martinez, Project Director**

**El Alma de la Raza Series**

# The Mother Culture of Mexico: The Olmecs

## Unit Concepts

- Geography of Mexico
- History of the Olmecs
- Artistry of the Olmecs

## Standards Addressed by This Unit

### History

Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. (H1)

Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry. (H2)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

Students use appropriate technologies to obtain historical information; to study and/or model historical information and concepts; and to access, process and communicate information related to the study of history. (H7)

### Geography

Students know how to use and construct maps and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environments. (G1)

Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

### Reading and Writing

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

Students use appropriate technologies to extend comprehension and communication skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW7)

### Visual Arts

Students recognize and use the visual arts as a form of communication. (A1)

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive features of visual arts. (A2)

Students know and apply visual arts materials, tools, techniques, and processes. (A3)

Students relate the visual arts to various historical and cultural traditions. (A4)

## Introduction

For many hundreds of years the Mayan, Zapotec and Toltecs were considered by many to be the first Indians of Mexico. However, within the last 100 years, a newly discovered culture has come to the forefront of scientific and historical inquiry. This is Olmec civilization. The origins of this civilization are located in the states of Veracruz, Tabasco, and Oaxaca, between the Grijalva and Papaloapa rivers in southern Mexico.

The Olmecs began around the year of 1300 B.C. and began to die out around 200 B.C. They established grand cities with centers of worship, marketplaces temples and developed trade routes; they were able to navigate the waterways of Mexico to move large stone heads to various regions of the Olmec kingdom. The cities that flourished during the Olmec era were: La Venta, San Lorenzo, Laguna de los Cerros, and Tres Zapotes. These cities were supported by a fully developed agricultural system, based on corn (maize), beans (frijoles) and squash (calabaza). Art and culture also flourished under the Olmecs; artwork is still being uncovered today with the distinct artistic form developed by the Olmecs. Also still being unearthed are the colossal or giant stone heads that exemplify or symbolize the Olmec Indians.

## Implementation Guidelines

This unit coincides with the sixth grade social studies curriculum. It should be introduced prior to the introduction of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca Indian tribes. While the unit can be used to compare/contrast Indian tribes, it should be emphasized that much of the artistry, traditions, and customs of the Aztecs and Maya were inherited from the Olmecs. The teacher should use his/her discretion in implementing the art projects. Although they can be time-consuming and messy, they are very important to an understanding of Olmec artistry.

## Instructional Materials and Resources

Atlases

Maps of Mexico

Library and Internet access

Art supplies (clay, materials for papier mâché)

## Lesson Summary

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| Lesson 1 | Geography of Mexico<br>Developing a political map of Mexico and a map of the specific area of Olmec civilization.  |
| Lesson 2 | Olmec Civilization<br>Researching Olmec art, religion, and architecture.   |
| Lesson 3 | Olmec Timetable<br>Researching important Olmec dates and events and comparing them to significant dates and events in other civilizations in the same time period. |
| Lesson 4 | Olmec Artistry<br>Constructing Olmec giant heads, altars, and sculptures.  |

# Lesson 1: Geography of Mexico

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students know how to use and construct maps and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environments. (G1)

Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students know how to use maps and other geographic tools to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will complete a political map of Mexico, naming the states, capitals, and various bodies of water near or within Mexico. Students will create a map of the specific area of the Olmec civilization.

### SPECIFICS

The beginnings of Olmec culture were established in southeastern Mexico, in the states of Veracruz and Tabasco, between the Grijalva and Papaloapa Rivers. There were over 45 different Olmec cities throughout southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. However, there were three main capitals of the civilization—La Venta, San Lorenzo, and Tres Zapotes. Each of these cities was established strategically so its occupants could take advantage of the natural resources surrounding it.

Prior to the Olmecs, the Indians of Mexico were hunters and gatherers. They were nomadic, spending very little time in one location. As soon as the animals they hunted became scarce in one area, they gathered the few belongings they had and moved to a new location with the hope of more plentiful game. When the Olmecs settled in southeastern Mexico (Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca), they established agricultural staples such as corn, squash, and beans. They also constructed large cities, religious centers, and trade routes. They developed a distinct culture, characterized by highly developed art and religion.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Visual examples

Direct interaction

### ACTIVITIES

The teacher presents an introduction to Olmec civilization, describing the importance of the Olmecs to the history of Mexico. A class map of Mexico is used as an introduction to Mexico and the location of Olmec civilization. After receiving a map packet containing a political map of Mexico and an enlargement of the southeast area of Mexico, use classroom atlases and maps to label the maps in the packet. The cities, states, regions, bodies of water, and other geographic

## Lesson 1 (cont.)

areas and terms that need to be included can be found on the guidesheets: Labeling a Political Map of Mexico and Labeling a Map of Southeastern Mexico. Complete definitions for a list of geographic terms found on the Geographical Terms worksheet.

### VOCABULARY

The following words should be used as vocabulary in this unit. However, the teacher can use his/her discretion in adding or subtracting words.

bay	Body of water partially enclosed by land but with a wide mouth, affording access to the sea
canyon	Deep, narrow valley with high, steep slopes
coast	Land along a large lake, sea, or ocean
desert	Large land area that receives very little rainfall
forest	Large land area covered with trees
gulf	Large area of water that lies within a curved coastline
harbor	Sheltered body of water where ships can anchor safely
hill	Small area of land, higher than the land around it
island	Piece of land surrounded by water
isthmus	Narrow piece of land that joins two larger sections of land
lake	Inland body of water
mountain	Land that rises much higher than the land around it
mountain range	Row of mountains that are joined together
ocean	Any of the large bodies of water into which the whole body of salt water that covers much of the Earth is divided
peninsula	Piece of land that projects into a body of water and is connected with the mainland by an isthmus
plains	Extensive area of level or rolling treeless country
plateau	Large, high land area that is generally flat
river	Large body of fresh water that moves from higher to lower land. Rivers usually flow into another river, sea, or ocean
sea	Large body of salt water nearly or partly surrounded by land. A sea is much smaller than an ocean
valley	Lower land between hills or mountains. A valley usually contains a river or a stream

## Lesson 1 (cont.)

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

colored pencils

classroom atlases

Mexico roller map

Labeling a Political Map of Mexico

Labeling a Map of Southeastern Mexico

Geographical Terms

map of Mexico, such as from the Rand/McNally Cosmopolitan Series

reproduced copies of political map of Mexico

reproduced copies of enlarged area of Olmec civilization

magnifying lens strips or magnifying glass

### ASSESSMENT

Visual check of the maps, which includes checking location of states and capitals as well as proper use of geographic terms.

# Labeling a Political Map of Mexico

Include these bodies of water, geographic regions, states, and capitals on your political map of Mexico.

## Bodies of Water

Gulf of California

Gulf of Mexico

Pacific Ocean

Gulf of Tehuantepec

Gulf of Campeche

Caribbean Sea

## Geographic Regions

Sierra Madre Oriental Mountains

Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains

Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Tuxtla Mountains (in southeast Veracruz; may not be found on map, place at approximately 20° N latitude and 95° W longitude)

## States

Chihuahua

Sonora

Coahuila

Durango

Oaxaca

Jalisco

Tamaulipas

Zacatecas

Chiapas

Baja California South

Veracruz

Baja California North

Nuevo León

Guerrero

San Luis Potosí

Michoacán

Sinaloa

Campeche

Quintana Roo

Yucatán

## Capitals

Chihuahua

Hermosillo

Saltillo

Durango

Oaxaca

Guadalajara

Ciudad Victoria

Zacatecas

Tuxtla Gutiérrez

La Paz

Jalapa

Mexicali

Monterrey

Chilpancingo

San Luis Potosí

Morelia

Culiacán

Campeche

Chetumal

Mérida

## Labeling a Political Map of Mexico (cont.)

<b>States</b>	<b>Capitals</b>
Puebla	Puebla
Guanajuato	Guanajuato
Nayarit	Tepic
Tabasco	Villahermosa
México	Toluca
Hidalgo	Pachuca
Querétaro	Querétaro
Aguascalientes	Aguascalientes
Colima	Colima
Morelos	Cuernavaca
Tlaxcala	Tlaxcala
Distrito Federal	Ciudad México

# Labeling a Map of Southeastern Mexico

Include these bodies of water, geographic regions, states, capitals, and cities on your map of Southeastern Mexico.

## **Bodies of Water**

Gulf of Tehuantepec

Gulf of Campeche

Grijalva River

Papaloapa River

## **Geographic Regions**

Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Tuxtla Mountains (in southeast Veracruz; may not be found on map, place at approximately 20° N latitude and 95° W longitude)

## **States**

Veracruz

Oaxaca

Chiapas

Tabasco

Guerrero

## **Capitals**

Jalapa

Oaxaca

Tuxtla Gutiérrez

Villahermosa

Chilpancingo

## **Cities**

Monte Alban

La Venta

Tres Zapotes

# Geographical Terms

Word	Definition
bay	
canyon	
coast	
desert	
forest	
gulf	
harbor	
hill	
island	
isthmus	
lake	

## Geographical Terms (cont.)

Word	Definition
mountain	
mountain range	
ocean	
peninsula	
plains	
plateau	
river	
sea	
valley	

## Lesson 2: Olmec Civilization

### What will the students be learning?

#### STANDARDS(S)

Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry. (H2)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

Students use appropriate technologies to obtain historical information; to study and/or model historical information and concepts; and to access, process, and communicate information related to the study of history. (H7)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information.

Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.

Students use appropriate technologies to enable historical inquiry.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will independently research information on the Olmecs using books, articles, encyclopedias, and the Internet.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Classroom lecture

Library and Internet access

#### ACTIVITIES

Read the Olmec Historical Summary. Then research Olmec art, religion, or architecture and organize the information and pictures into a report.

#### VOCABULARY

civilization

An advanced state of intellectual, cultural, and material development in human society, marked by progress in the arts and sciences, the extensive use of writing, and the appearance of complex political and social institutions.

#### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

books and encyclopedias

magazines (especially *National Geographic*)

CD-ROMs

Internet access

#### ASSESSMENT

Assess report for accuracy, quality of research, and writing.

## Olmec Historical Summary

It wasn't until this century that the Olmecs were acknowledged to be part of Mexico's history. Researchers prior to this time attributed many of the discoveries now associated with the Olmecs to Mayan, Toltec, or even Chichimecan cultures. However, due to advances in scientific dating, scientists were able to determine that the art, artifacts, and miscellaneous objects found at La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and San Lorenzo were from a period of time earlier than the Maya.

The Olmecs, which means "people of rubber" in Nahuatl (the ancient language of the Aztecs), began their civilization in southeastern Mexico between 1600 B.C. and 1400 B.C.. It is believed that the Olmecs created their first cities between the Grijalva and Papaloan rivers, in the present-day Mexican states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tabasco.

The Olmecs had approximately 45 different cities. However, there were three main cities. Some researchers claim that each city was a capital that controlled trade routes, provided defense from attacking tribes, and was responsible for the accumulation of natural resources in the area. The three cities were Tres Zapotes, La Venta, and Monte Alban. These cities were east of the Tuxtla Mountains and the Southern Mountain Range (Sierra Madre del Sur). The locations of these cities on a map show a triangle of control and power.

The geographical area of the Olmec civilization is varied in its features. It is close to the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It was a humid area and contained a varied landscape of jungles, plains, and mountains.

The Olmecs established cities, trade routes over land and water, and most importantly, an agricultural system that could feed those who lived in those cities. Corn (maize), beans (frijoles), and squash (calabaza) were planted and harvested. These crops are still prevalent in Mexico. The Olmecs were also known to have domesticated dogs and turkeys. There is some evidence that they practiced cannibalism as well; however, this has not been completely proven. The Olmecs lived in a society based on a theocratic form of government (government ruled by or subject to religious authority). Religion played a major role in the lives of the Olmecs. Scientists and historians have unearthed altars and other sculptures that support this.

The giant heads of the Olmecs are quite unusual. The first head was discovered in 1862 in southern Veracruz by Jose Maria Melgar. It wasn't until 1925 that a second giant head was discovered, along with several other objects. In 1929, Marshall H. Saville, coined the phrase the "Olmec" in a paper that he published.

In much Olmec art and other objects, there are two repeating themes: the use of jade and the symbol of the jaguar. Both of these held special meaning for the Olmecs. The Olmecs and other Indians of Mexico believed that the jaguar had special powers.

The Olmecs used stone from as far as 60 miles away to sculpt their giant heads. It is now believed that these heads were meant to honor famous leaders and/or warriors. To date 16 heads have been found, the tallest standing over eleven feet.

## Lesson 3: Olmec Timeline

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. (H1)

Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry. (H2)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students use chronology to organize historical events and people.

Students know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will create a timeline of Olmec civilization relating Olmec dates and events to dates and events in other civilizations.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Independent research

Timeline

#### ACTIVITIES

In groups of 2–3, research Olmec events and dates. Include the beginning and ending dates for Olmec civilization and important events in between these dates. Also include important dates/events in Rome or Mesopotamia in the same time period. A minimum of five dates and events should be included on the timeline.

#### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

access to library or Internet

#### ASSESSMENT

Accuracy of sequence and number of dated events on timeline.

# Lesson 4: Olmec Artistry

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students recognize and use the visual arts as a form of communication. (A1)

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive features of visual arts. (A2)

Students know and apply visual arts materials, tools, techniques, and processes. (A3)

Students relate the visual arts to various historical and cultural traditions. (A4)

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Using modeling clay or papier-mâché, students will construct replicas of Olmec artwork.

### SPECIFIC(S)

Olmec civilization had a very complex division of labor; their population included artisans, craftspeople, priests, and a variety of other workers. It has become apparent in the last fifty years that the Olmecs made incredible achievements in art, architecture, and religion. Artistically, the Olmecs are known for their large stone carved heads, sculptures made of jade, and masks. Architecturally the Olmecs were great planners. Even today (in the ancient city of La Venta) a pyramid stands that is over 500 feet in diameter and 100 feet tall. The Olmecs' polytheistic religious beliefs are revealed in altars for worship and stone glyphs that tell their history. (At the time of the Olmecs, symbols and drawings were used to write and express ideas.)

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Demonstrations

Visual aids

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Provide resources that have visual examples of the altars, sculptures, and giant heads of the Olmecs (books, encyclopedias, magazines, Internet access).

### ACTIVITIES

After a class demonstration by the teacher, divide into groups of two or three. Using teacher-provided resources, groups will decide what they want to construct. Choose between a giant head, an altar, or a sculpture. Begin the process by drawing a rough draft of the final product. If there are symbols on the artwork, they should be explained.

If using clay to make a giant head, mold the clay into a large ball or oblong object. Manipulate the clay to create facial features and/or a helmet. If using clay to construct an altar, manipulate the clay into a table framework. Design the altar, forming symbols and objects.

If the class is using papier-mâché, the teacher should demonstrate. Inflate a balloon. Make sure that the balloon is not too large to work with. Using precut strips of newspaper (approximately one inch in width and six inches in length), dip the newspaper into a plastic bowl containing a pasty mixture of glue and water or flour, glue, and water. When pulling the newspaper out of

## Lesson 4 (cont.)

the mixture, run the newspaper strip through two fingers to remove the excess. Then apply the wet newspaper strip to the balloon and firmly press. This should be repeated until the entire balloon is covered. Allow approximately 24 hours to dry. Once the head is dry, paint can be applied on the newspaper to create the Olmec head. Encourage the students to be creative and not to copy their classmates. An important step in painting is to allow the students time to experiment with various colors and especially with mixing of colors.

### VOCABULARY

altar	Elevated place or structure before which religions ceremonies may be enacted or upon which sacrifices may be offered
sculpture	The art or practice of shaping figures or designs in the round or in relief, as by chiseling marble, modeling clay, or casting in metal. A work of art created by sculpture
art	The conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty, specifically the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium
style	The combination of distinctive features of literary or artistic expression, execution, or performance characterizing a particular person, group, school, or era
expression	The act of expressing, conveying, or representing in words, art, music, or movement; a manifestation
image	A reproduction of the form of a person or object, especially a sculptured likeness

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

access to Internet

books, magazines, and encyclopedias

balloon

water and water bucket

newspaper

flour

glue

tape

paint

scissors

modeling clay

synthetic models of Olmec art, such as Item #2153, Museo de Las Culturas Olmeca y Mixteco—Zapoteca, Figurines (Fernandez USA Publishing Co., (800) 814-8080).

Optional resource: *Los Olmecas: La Cultura Madre* by Roman Piña Chan. This provides excellent visual examples for the students and teacher.

### ASSESSMENT

Evaluate participation, effort and completion of project.

# Unit Assessment

## How will students demonstrate proficiency?

### PERFORMANCE TASK

Use materials and information gathered during this unit to do a short oral presentation on the art, architecture, or religion of the Olmecs. Include maps, pictures, art objects, religious objects, timelines, or other materials as visual aids.

### SCORING RUBRIC

4. Accurate and comprehensive. Excellent use of visual aids.
3. Generally accurate and complete. Visual aids used fairly effectively.
2. Fairly accurate, but incomplete information. Visual aids not used effectively.
1. Inaccurate and incomplete information presented. Few, if any, visual aids.

# Bibliography

Chan, Roman Piña. *Los Olmecas: La Cultura Madre*. Barcelona-Madrid: Lunwerg Editores, S.A.. 1990.  
Excellent source about all aspects of the Olmecs. Published in Spanish only.

Davies, Nigel. *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico: A Magnificent Re-creation of Their Art and Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1982.  
Provides a good overview of the Olmecs, especially about their history, location, and traditions.

King, Jaime Litvak. *Ancient Mexico: An Overview*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985.

Does a good job of introducing the Olmecs; however, does not provide enough depth.

Loprete, Carlos A. and McMahon. *IberoAmerica: Sintesis de su civilization*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.

Does not discuss the Olmecs; however, has a nice map placing them in the correct region of Mexico.

Parks, Henry Bamford. *A History of Mexico*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.

Discusses the Olmecs; however, does not give full acknowledgment of their existence or contributions.

Smith, Bradely. *Mexico: A History in Art*. Mexico: Gemini Smith Inc., 1968.

Very good source that provides illustrations of Olmec art. Great visuals.

## Internet

<http://udgftp.cencar.udg.mx/ingles/precolombina/olmecas/docs/olmin.html>

Very good resource. Provides a brief, detailed history. Very good illustrations of sculptures. Includes information on the art, sculptures, themes, and forms of Olmec artistry.

<http://www.tam.itesm.mx/~jdorante/art/olmeca/iolmec04.htm>

This web page does not go into great depth regarding the Olmecs. However, it does provide a picture of an Olmec ax or *hacha*.

[http://www.cultures.com/contests/heads/em\\_all.html](http://www.cultures.com/contests/heads/em_all.html)

Excellent resource page with useful links. Illustrations of Olmec heads can be accessed from this site.

<http://www.cultures.com/contests/heads/olmecs-contest-e.html>

Extension of web page listed above. Good research page that provides important dates when discoveries were made by Western historians.

<http://homepages.luc.edu/~cwinter/priest2.htm>

Very difficult web page for sixth graders to interpret. However, the depth of discussion and facts are helpful to the teacher. The additional links are equally difficult. Provides the teacher with good resource bibliography for additional research. Not recommended for class research.

<http://www.crystalinks.com/olmec.html>

Good web page that provides a detailed summary of what is known about the Olmecs, as well as what has been accomplished by historians, archaeologists, and researchers since the discovery of the Olmecs in the 19th and 20th centuries. Also very good visuals.

## About the Author

Daniel Villescas was born in El Paso, Texas and moved to Denver in the late 1970s. He attended Metropolitan State College of Denver and graduated with a degree in history. He is currently pursuing a masters degree from Regis University in education.

Daniel has worked in Denver Public Schools for two years. Currently, he is at Lake Middle School, where he teaches sixth grade bilingual social studies and English as a Second Language. At Lake, Daniel serves on the ISA advisory team and is also the schools flag football coach.

Daniel is married and the proud father of his son, Alexander Xavier Villescas, who will turn one at the end of July. He is the third of four brothers and is the only one to choose a career in education. He believes that “we have the power and responsibility to educate the youth of today.”