



Close-Up on Art
Bronia Sullivan, Provisional Docent
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Title: Vessel with Flared Rim
Artist: Unknown, Colima Mexico
Owned by PSAM,
Gift of Bruce and Marilyn Throckmorton
Medium: Ceramic
Category: Mesoamerican, 200 BC – 200 CE

Winston Churchill said that “history is written by the victors.” Almost nowhere in Western civilization does this seem more pertinent than in the study of the art and culture of Mesoamerica. After the arrival of Hernan Cortes in 1519, and the rapid subjugation of the indigenous peoples, the Spanish missionaries that followed set about destroying all signs of the previous culture, including temples, idols, and historical records, making scholarly study of this period frustrating and incomplete. For centuries, many of the artifacts that did survive were culturally marginalized as mere “folk art.”

Only in the last century did this point of view begin to significantly shift, and real interest increase. With the completion of the western coastal Southern Pacific Railroad of Mexico in 1927, increased tourism and the search for salable archaeological pieces resulted in many significant collections being formed in the 1930’s – with one of the most influential being that of the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who amassed a collection of nearly 60,000 pieces from West Mexico. Because of his fame as a painter, he proved instrumental in sparking serious interest in the ceramics discovered in this area. There is still so much that we do not know – and it is worth asking if we come up short because we don’t know the answers, or because we cannot find the answers, or because we cannot understand the answers? Or do we come up short (and not for the first time in history) because we had the answers, but destroyed them?

Recovered from a West Mexican shaft-chamber tomb, with radiocarbon dating placing it at approximately 2,000 years old, an example of the ceramic art of this period that seized my imagination is this strikingly modern-looking example of a flared rim vessel - sometimes simply described as a jar, and sometimes also as an “olla” in Spanish. The finish is created using an iron-rich clay “slip,” which is a thin mixture of water and clay added before firing; this can be used both to create a decorative glaze and also to make the vessel less permeable. It is then burnished after firing by rubbing with a smooth polishing stone. A glazed jar like this was likely used to carry and store water. Unglazed ollas have been used in the past - and are still used today - for irrigation, by burying the body of the olla in the ground, filling with it with water, and then allowing the water to slowly seep into the soil. Perhaps this piece appears so contemporary

because the shape serves a timeless function. The wide shape and sharp angle help stabilize the jar, making it less likely to tip over and spill its contents. And finally, jars of this design are frequently referred to today as “flying saucer” jars - which of course further stirs the imagination - but this is merely a contemporary reference based on the similarity in shape to aircraft that have been designed to be less likely to be detected by radar. Perhaps one takeaway from this modest look at a very old (and beautiful) piece is that “everything old is new again.”

Sources: 1) Michael Kan, Clement Meighan, H.B. Nicholson, *Sculpture of Ancient Mexico, Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima, A Catalogue of the Proctor Stafford Collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, copyright 1970, 1989
2) Justin Henderson and Avalon Travel, *Oaxaca*, Avalon Travel, An imprint of Perseus Books, copyright 2015
3) Sunset.com, *How to use an olla to water your garden*, Sunset Publishing Corporation, copyright 2018