



Kneeling female figure

On display

Title/Description: Kneeling female figure

Born: 1200 - 1520

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Basalt, Pigment

Measurements: h. 356 x w. 188 x d. 210 mm

Accession Number: 146

Historic Period: Post-Classic (late) period (AD 1200-1520), 12th century, 15th century

Production Place: Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas

Cultural Group: Aztec

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The Aztecs or Mexica had created the last and most extensive of the pre-Hispanic polities by the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519. Their language, Nahuatl, was the *lingua franca* of Mesoamerica at the beginning of the sixteenth century and is still spoken today by around a million people. Although the architectural complexes erected by the Aztecs may not have rivalled the temples of Teotihuacan in size, they were profusely embellished with stone sculptures. Free-standing monumental stone sculpture was not as widespread in Central Mexico before the Postclassic period; it is thought to have derived from earlier traditions on the Gulf Coast and elsewhere (see 761). Aztec sculptors departed from their predecessors in many ways to develop new sculptural styles. These range from the rich, full forms of the animal sculptures to the more linear, hieratic, even blocky styles of some of the anthropomorphic figures.

In this sculpture, an aged, kneeling individual is depicted hunched over with head jutting forward and hands on knees. In the absence of iconographic details such as costuming associated with specific deities or other subjects, it is difficult to state with any certainty the identity of this figure. The representation of great age, indicated here by the heavily-lined face and the protruding vertebrae of the spine, is not common in Aztec sculpture, but it does occur in the depiction of certain male deities, such as the Old God, Huehuateotl. Females are almost always shown as youthful. Nevertheless, the kneeling posture, a canon for portraying females in Aztec iconography, as well as the skirt or *cueitl* and the indication of breasts, clearly imply that the figure is female. This image may represent a rare example in stone of the female aspect of Omeyteotl ('Two God'), the union of male and female principles responsible for the creation of gods and humans. Alternatively, it may represent Oxomoco, one of the aged progenitors responsible for the origin of life. When these deities are depicted in painted manuscripts of the Postclassic and early Colonial periods, they are shown simply dressed, like priests (see the *Codex Borbonicus*, 21, reproduced and discussed in Pasztory, 1983:195-6, pl. 147). Although prayers were offered to these deities, they are not known to have had a specific temple or a tradition of stone sculpture dedicated to their cult, unlike other categories of Aztec sculpture (see for example

Shelton, 1992; for general surveys of Aztec sculpture, see Nicholson and Keber, 1983 and Pasztory, 1983).

It is possible that the figure was originally brightly painted, although few traces of pigment remain. Excavations at the main temple precinct of the Aztec capital have revealed sculptures with bright polychrome paint intact (Matos Moctezuma, 1990). Such colour, along with other elements that may have once adorned the architectural and sculptural complexes, contributed to the overall vibrancy and power of the works.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Formerly in the possession of Sydney Burney, who exhibited it in London in 1932.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1962.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
