

The Lady of Chalma

LEONARDO LÓPEZ LUJÁN

AND LAURA FILLOY NADAL

A mong the masterpieces in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, the statuette known as the “Goddess of Coatepec Harinas” occupies a special place [FIG. 1]. Exhibited in the Mexica Gallery, it stands out for its unquestionable aesthetic value and because it is one of the rare sculptures made of wood that have survived from pre-Hispanic times. A quick examination of the object indicates that this female statuette was designed to be seen from the front and to transmit the indigenous ideals of harmony and temperance through its rigorous use of compositional symmetry. As is typical of Central Mexican art works, the face does not express sentiment, while the body adopts a firm but serene posture, upright and with the feet well grounded. True to this region’s sculptural canon, the anatomic proportions are compacted by the vertical axis while the size and details of the head, hands and feet are magnified.

The artist of this beautiful image depicted a woman of youthful features with her hair braided on top of her forehead. He emphasized the nude torso, which reveals her protruding chest, her hands surrounding the breasts in an offering gesture. By contrast, the hips and legs are hidden below a long skirt. Measuring only 39.5 cm in height and weighing 1.2 kg, the statuette is not large. It was made from

a broadleaf, reddish wood of fine grain, perhaps cedar, which allowed the artist to create well rounded, terse and shiny surface textures. The sculpture was complemented by the application of black pigment over the entire face and an inlay of shell (*Turbinella angulate*) for the eyes and two upper teeth.

Until recently, very little was known about its provenance. The only information about it was from the North American archeologist Marshall H. Saville, who left the following record: "We were informed by Dr. Nicolas León that this image, along with the other which has disappeared, was discovered some years ago in a mound in Coatepec Harinas, Estado de Mexico."¹ This information, provided by the famous anthropologist from Michoacán, has always seemed suspect, not so much because of the references to the Matlatzincas population on the southern skirts of the Nevado of Toluca, but because it would have been difficult for a piece of wood to be preserved in such mint condition among the ruins of a pre-Hispanic building in this area. In general, these kinds of works only survive in wooded areas of the plateau because indigenous communities continue to use them and have passed them down from generation to generation, or because they have been abandoned inside dry caves.

A recent discovery has revealed that our suspicions regarding the provenance turn out to be correct. Working in the Archivo Histórico of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, the historian Ana Luisa Madrigal came across four black and white photographs of the statue taken on 28 March 1897.² The photographs show the statuette from different angles, revealing that over a century ago the left eye was still covered with a circular black stone, the right ear was already broken, and the moth-eaten holes had not yet been treated. Besides these details, one of the photographs includes a rectangular piece of paper next to the statuette [FIG. 2]. Although also moth-eaten, its handwritten text reveals that:

The attached wood figurine was found in the mountain of Tam-bor close to Chalma, buried in pyrite along with another figure whose current whereabouts are unknown. Said figure is ceded by he who writes this to his dear teacher and friend Mr. A. M. Hunt, lover of Mexican antiquities. Tenancingo, December 1, 1888. José Ma^a de J. Ríos.³

FIG. 1

The Lady of Chalma,
13th–16th century, wood,
shell, 39.5 x 15 x 10 cm.
Museo Nacional
de Antropología,
Mexico City.





FIG. 2
The Lady of Chalma,
 photograph, March
 28, 1897, Archivo
 Histórico del
 Museo Nacional de
 Antropología, Mexico
 City, box 2, photo 87c.

The Cultural Biography of the Object

The brief text in the photograph is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, because it allows reconstruction of the so-called “cultural biography of the object,” that is, the vicissitudes that the sculpture underwent from its discovery until its arrival in the new Museo Nacional in Chapultepec. Thanks to the note we learn that one of its first proprietors—possibly also the person who discovered it—was José María de Jesús Ríos, known in the Mexican city of Tenancingo for having founded the Colegio Pío Gregoriano in 1879. The text also reveals that by the end of 1888 Professor Ríos donated the sculpture to Agustín M. Hunt Cortés, a Catholic priest

of Irish origin, who was born in New Orleans and spent most of his life in Mexico. It is worth noting that Hunt dedicated himself to the education of abandoned and orphaned boys, and in his free time, studied Nahuatl grammar, especially phonetics. Under the pseudonym Celtatécatl (“the Celt”), he published numerous translations into Nahuatl, Spanish and English of litanies, prayers, stories, salutations, panegyrics, fables, and even Mexico’s national anthem.⁴

Further research about Hunt reveals that he lent the sculpture to the well-respected historian Francisco del Paso y Troncoso so that he could include it in the Mexican section of the *Exposición Histórico-Americana* of Madrid which was organized in 1892 on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the discovery of America. The sculpture was exhibited in a case in Gallery II as a fine example of “Cohuisca culture.”⁵ It is worth noting that around that time, the lawyer and historian Alfredo Chavero identified this object as a “Malinalli,” confusing the hair with the mask of the earth deity.⁶ Although when exactly it entered the collections of the Museo Nacional is unknown, this probably happened a few years after it returned from Spain. At that point, the photographs noted above were taken, and it was likely donated by Hunt at the suggestion of Paso y Troncoso who had been the director of the museum.

The Context of the Discovery

The most significant part of the note in the photograph is the reference that Professor Ríos makes to the Cerro del Tambor as the place of discovery. This information provides a means to reconstruct the cultural context in which the sculpture was used. Thanks to the archeologist Rosa de la Peña Virchez we have been able to locate this elevation in the southern part of the Estado de México. The Cerro del Tambor (2000 meters above sea level) is in the western flank of the rugged canyon of Ocuilan, through which the river Chalma flows. It is precisely located between the towns of Ocuilan and Chalma, 3.4 km in a straight line to the southwest of the former, and 2 km to the northeast of the latter. Clearly, this site location reveals that the statue’s place of origin could not have been Coatepec Harinas as previously thought, since it is 35 km west of the Cerro del Tambor.

During pre-Hispanic times, this mountain and canyon belonged to the Chiefdom of Ocuilan, which was conquered by Tenochtitlan during the reign of Axayacatl (1469–1481 CE).⁷ After this military defeat, the Ocuiltecas were periodically forced to pay tribute to the Triple Alliance by providing great quantities of cotton and

henequen, military uniforms, shields, corn, beans, amaranth, chia and salt. According to the Mexicas, those “called Ocuilteca also have their homes there in the land of Toloacan. Their way of life is also like the way of life of the Toloque, only their language is not like the language of the Toloque. They are much given to bewitching others.”⁸

In addition to its exuberant vegetation, the canyon of Ocuilan is known for its many caves and small rocky shelters, many of which provided the setting for intense ritual activity in the sixteenth century. As various historical documents reveal, images crafted from wood and stone were venerated in such caves. For example, the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City holds the proceedings from an interesting inquisitorial process against the people of Ocuilan. The documents mention a man by the name of Juan Tezcatatl who confessed to having seen “in Poçan a cave and inside it many idols and around them blood and things to be venerated, and it is said where the Tetelneoya cave is located.”⁹ The document also mentions an Indian man named Acatonal as the person responsible for the images and the offerings of copal, flowers, and food; another man, named Coatl, is identified as the carpenter who made the images. Following the discovery of this ritual, an Augustinian friar “went to the mountain where they said the big wooden idols were made, and he had them brought to the monastery of Ocuila, and he warned and admonished the Indians that the bishop ordered that anyone who had idols or things for sacrifices should surrender and reveal them [...] and if they did not give them to his holiness, they should destroy them in our presence.”¹⁰

A more famous cave is the one in Chalma, where the Augustinians erected a sanctuary. In this location, a mysterious sculpture of stone was venerated in a cave until it was destroyed and replaced by a Christian image in 1539. The Jesuit Francisco de Florencia provides further information about the previous devotion: “In the time of the heathens, the peoples of Ocuila and its surroundings had in great esteem an idol of whose name among them there is no recollection, because of the much time that has passed, and because of a complete transformation in religion and customs. There are those who think that it was called Ostoc-Teotl, which means God of the Caves, but this is conjecture.”¹¹ According to Florencia, both local inhabitants and outsiders or visitors venerated the sculpture “by offering incense, and tributes in cups and boxes of [...] the hearts and blood shed by innocent children, and other animals, which the insatiable cruelty of the common enemy enjoyed.”¹² According to another narrative, the Ocuiltecas themselves destroyed this image and the Augustinians replaced it with the Black Christ.¹³ In time, the friars also incorporated in the cave images of the Archangel St. Michael and St. Mary of Egypt.

But who is this Oztoteotl described only vaguely by Florencia? Given that there is no record of any known deity with this name and that the cults in the cave in Chalma attracted peoples from faraway places, the wise anthropologist Miguel Othón de Mendizábal has suggested that it was probably not a provincial deity but rather a god “who enjoyed universal cult following among the indigenous of Central Mexico.”¹⁴ Other historians have been more precise and have suggested that it may be Huitzilopochtli himself, or Tlaloc, Tepeyollotl-Tezcatlipoca or even Tlazolteotl.¹⁵ Clearly, the latter three are excellent candidates for the substitution of cults orchestrated by the Augustinians and the typical process of religious adaptation. Following this logic, Tezcatlipoca could be the immediate antecedent of the Black Christ, Tlaloc of the Archangel St. Michael, and Tlazolteotl of St. Mary of Egypt.

In this same vein, the research undertaken by Louise M. Burkhart is revealing. She concludes that Tezcatlipoca and Tlazolteotl were a pair of deities responsible both for dissolute behavior and its subsequent absolution.¹⁶ On the one hand, they instigated sexual transgression: Tezcatlipoca had as her attributes dust and garbage, symbols of immorality, while Tlazolteotl—associated with the lustful Huastecs—was a terrestrial goddess and patron of adulterers and promiscuous women. At the same time, however, both were invoked in the ritual of confession because they could grant pardon and had the necessary powers to remove the impurities in people who had led decadent lives. This explains why Tlazolteotl, a goddess of supposed Huastec origin, was also known as Tlaelcuani or “she who eats filth” and is occasionally identified with Chalmecacihuatl, “spouse of those of Chalma.”¹⁷

The Advocation of the Statuette

We have seen that the statuette of the Cerro del Tambor follows the sculptural style of central Mexico. However, in this area we do not find female images that are iconographically related and could thus aid in identifying the subject more precisely. Certainly, various female deities of the earth and fertility show their bare chest, and dress with some kind of skirt as seen in this piece: for example, Coatlicue, Tlaltecuhtli, Chicomecoatl, Cihuateotl, Toci, Tlazolteotl and Ixcuina. In addition, there are other images that have, like her, black paint on their faces: such as Cihuacoatl, Tetoinnan, Tzapotlatenan, Tlazolteotl, Ixcuina, Temazcalteci, and to a lesser extent, Chicomecoatl and Chalchiuhtlicue. However, it is disconcerting that this wood statuette does not wear the specific headdress of any one of these deities, nor the typical hair arrangement (“*de cornezuelos*”) used by Mexica women.

On the contrary, the design of the hair in the statue recalls the Huastec *petob*, a crown that is made by dividing one's hair at the base of the nape in two large parts; these are then twisted and intertwined with colorful ribbons and wound towards the front of the head to complete the roundel above the forehead.¹⁸ As is well known, the *petob* is not only used today; it is also represented in pre-Hispanic sculpture of the Huasteca and is noted in historical descriptions of women of this ethnicity.

Despite these differences in the arrangement of the hair, one could hypothesize with caution that the statuette is a kind of Ocuilteca evocation of a female deity of the Huasteca. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that in Huastec sculpture images of female goddesses of the earth and of fertility predominate, and many of them have been identified by experts as Tlazolteotl. As a norm, their upper body is unclothed, their arms lie close to the body, their hands either rest on their bellies or cup one of their breasts, they wear plain skirts, and they are barefoot. Obviously, to take this suggestion further would be risky.

Let us conclude that the note written by Professor Ríos completely changes our knowledge of this wooden statuette, permitting us to rename it "The Lady of Chalma." Thanks to his brief text we have been able to reconstruct a cultural biography, the social context and the basic functions of the object.

NOTES

¹ Marshal H. Saville, *The Wood-Carver's Art in Ancient Mexico* (New York: Heye Foundation, 1925), 83.

² Archivo Histórico del Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico City), box 2, 87a–d.

³ *La figura de madera adjunta fue encontrada en el cerro del tambor cerca de Chalma, enterrada en marmaja, junto con otra figura cuyo paradero se ignora. Dicha figura la cede el que suscribe á su querido maestro y amigo Mr. A. M. Hunt, amante*

de las antigüedades mexicanas. Tenancingo, Diciembre 1° de 1888. José M^a. de J. Ríos.

⁴ Ascensión H. de León-Portilla, *Tēpuztlahcuilolli: impresos en nāhuatl*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988), 189–92.

⁵ Francisco Paso y Troncoso, *Exposición Histórico-Americana de Madrid: catálogo de la sección de México*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Sucesores de Rivadeneira, 1893), 18, 141.

- ⁶ *Homenaje a Cristóbal Colón: antigüedades mexicanas* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1892), xxx.
- ⁷ Rosa de la Peña Virchez and Vladimira Palma Linares, "Desarrollo histórico del Altépetl Ocuilán," *Estudios de Cultura Otomí* 7 (2010): 35–48.
- ⁸ For the original Nahuatl and its Spanish translation by Sahagún, see *Florentine Codex*, Book X, chapter xxix, fol. 132r and v. The English translation cited here is from: Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* [1575–1580], trans. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1950–82), vol. 14, Part XI, 183.
- ⁹ [E]n Poçan una cueva y en ella muchos ídolos y alrededor sangre y cosas de santificar y se dice dónde está la cueva Tetelneoya. Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico City), Inquisición, 1548, vol. 1, exp. 3, fols. 5–7.
- ¹⁰ [F]ue al monte en donde decía que estaban los ídolos de palo grande y los hizo traer al monasterio de Ocuila y les predijo y amonestó a los indios de que el Sr. Obispo ordenaba que todos los que tuviesen ídolos o cosas de sacrificar los diesen e descubriesen... y que si no los daban a su señoría los destruyesen en su presencia de ellos... Ibid.
- ¹¹ En tiempo de su gentilidad tenían en gran veneración los naturales de Ocuila y sus contornos un ídolo de cuyo nombre, ni aún entre ellos —así por el mucho tiempo que ha pasado, como por la total mudanza de religión, y costumbres— ha quedado memoria alguna. Hay quien piense, que se llamaba Ostoc-Téotl, que quiere decir Dios de las Cuevas; pero es adivinar. Francisco de Florencia, S.J., *Descripción histórica y moral del Yermo de San Miguel, de las Cuevas en el Reyno de la Nueva España*, y invención de la Imagen de Christo nuestro Señor crucificado, que se venera en ellas (Cádiz: Compañía de Iesus, 1689), 5–7.
- ¹² [O]freciéndole olores, y tributándole en las copas de sus cajetes... los corazones y sangre vertida de inocentes niños, y otros animales de que gustaba la insaciable crueldad del común enemigo. Ibid.
- ¹³ Joaquín Sardo, *Relación histórica y moral de la portentosa imagen de N. Sr. Jesucristo crucificado aparecido en una de las cuevas de S. Miguel de Chalma* (Mexico City: Casa de Arizpe, 1810), 19.
- ¹⁴ [D]e las que gozaron de culto universal entre los indígenas del Centro de México. Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, "El Santuario de Chalma," *Anales del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía* (Mexico City) 3 (1925): 100.
- ¹⁵ Ignacio Borunda, *Clave general de jeroglíficos americanos* (Rome: Scotti, 1898), 118–22; John J. Hobgood, "The Sanctuary of Chalma," in XXXVIII International Amerikanistenkongress (Munich: K. Renner, 1971), 256–61; Noemí Quezada Ramírez, *Los matlatzincas* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1972), 61; Walter Krickeberg, *Felsplastik und Felsbilder bei den Kulturvölkern Altamerikas mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Mexicos*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Palmen, 1949), 161.
- ¹⁶ Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), 87–93.
- ¹⁷ Miguel León-Portilla, *El destino de la palabra* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), 99–104.
- ¹⁸ Claude Stresser-Péan, *Des vêtements et des hommes: une perspective historique du vêtement indigène au Mexique* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2011), 151–52.

The Significance of Small Things:

ESSAYS IN HONOUR
OF **DIANA FANE**

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