



Mesoweb Publications

The Olmec Notebooks of Miguel Covarrubias

Michael D. Coe

During the summer of 1968 I was in Mexico City with my wife and children, studying and classifying the large collection of pottery from three seasons of field excavation at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. We were joined there at some point by David Joralemon, an undergraduate student in my courses at Yale, who was thinking about doing a project on Olmec iconography for his senior year (1968-1969).

I had already met George Pepper and his wife Jeannette, who were then living in Mexico City, and we had become friends. George had previously been an independent film producer in Hollywood and had been a target of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the McCarthy era. To avoid being served a subpoena by HUAC, he and Jeannette had fled (without passports) to Mexico, joining a small cohort of other film industry leftists who had been placed on the famous (or infamous) Hollywood "Blacklist." Safe in Mexico, George had two

careers. As a film producer, he collaborated with the Spanish director Luis Buñuel on the film "Robinson Crusoe"; as an art dealer he sold paintings and drawings by well-known Mexican artists such as his friend Miguel Covarrubias, as well as Pre-Columbian art—particularly Preclassic material from sites like Tlatilco and Tlapacoya.

At dinner with him one evening, he spoke to me about the Olmec notebooks that Covarrubias had been keeping over a period of years. I had long heard rumors about them, but no one seemed to know what had happened to them; they seemed to have vanished into thin air. This is the story that George told me:

During the last year or two of Covarrubias' life, he and his American wife Rosa Cowell had become seriously estranged, particularly over his love affair with Rocío Sagaón, the beautiful young prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Mexico (of which Covarrubias was Director). He had moved most of his books,

many paintings, and much of his collection of Pre-Columbian art out of the house in Tizapan to his family house on the Calle Zamora, in downtown Mexico City. When he unexpectedly died in a Social Security hospital, on February 4, 1957, at the young age of 53, everything in his apartment, according to Pepper (and confirmed to me much later by Rosa Covarrubias) was divided up between three people: his brother Luis Covarrubias, Rocío, and William Spratling.

It was Spratling who got the two notebooks and who took them to his hacienda in Taxco Viejo, Morelos. Bill Spratling was an amazing character, and an important figure in modern Mexican history. It was he who had single-handedly revived Taxco's famous but largely defunct silver industry and made it world-famous. He had a very large silver workshop where several dozen young silver-smiths turned his designs into pieces eagerly sought by collectors. He was also a dealer in Pre-Columbian art, especially Olmec, not all of which, I'm sorry to say, was authentic.

Late on the night of August 7, 1967, Spratling was driving at high speed between Taxco and Iguala, probably "under the influence," when his car hit a tree and he was killed. It turned out that he had willed his collection to "the people of Taxco," but many things that he had owned disappeared after his death and have never been seen again—and that is the sad case with the famous notebooks.

However, all was not lost. While they were in Spratling's hands, he let George Pepper borrow them; George took them to Mexico City and had every page in them photographed professionally (with four notebook pages to each photograph). That summer (1968) George very kindly let me take the negatives back to New Haven, where I had them turned into two sets of prints, and then returned the negatives to George. One set of prints I kept for my own research, and the other I gave to David Joralemon, who used them to great effect for his *Scholar of the House* dissertation. David graduated from Yale in 1969; his senior thesis was published by Dumbarton Oaks in

1971, as *A Study of Maya Iconography*. This is now recognized as a classic in Mesoamerican studies. My own set of prints is reproduced in the pages that follow.

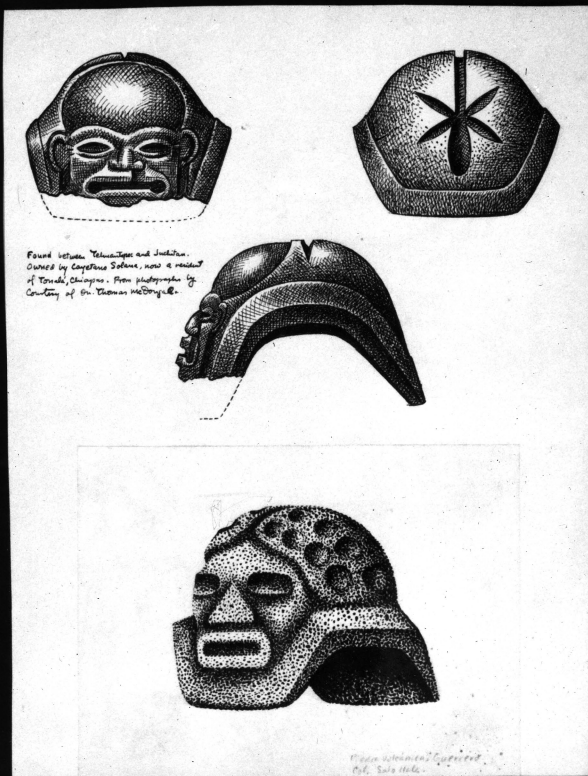
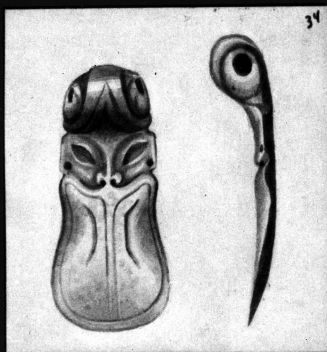
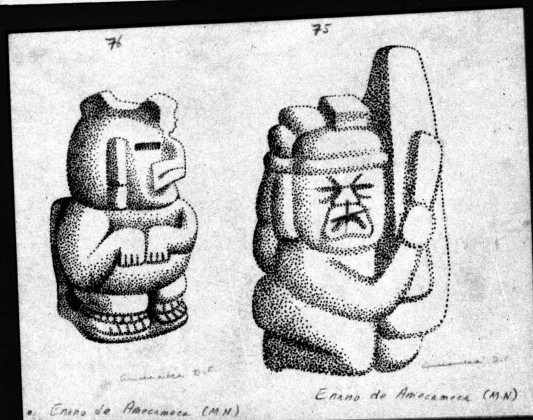
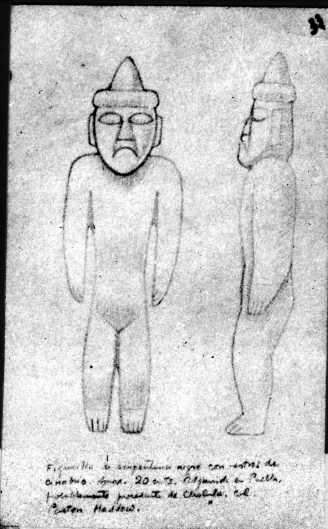
But the story doesn't end here. For my book *America's First Civilization: Discovering the Olmec* (Coe 1968), I thought of including a special section on Covarrubias and some of the wonderful Olmec drawings in the notebooks. However, the lawyers wanted to know who, exactly, owned the rights to the drawings? They soon found that Spratling's will had left the notebooks to Audrey Hepburn and her husband Mel Ferrer, but by this time the two actors were divorced. When contacted neither had ever seen the notebooks or had even heard of them.

It was finally decided that I should get Covarrubias's widow Rosa to give the OK. If anyone had a title to the drawings, it would be she. I had never met Rosa and was somewhat terrified, as she was said to be a very formidable lady. Once Matthew Stirling remarked to me, "She's no Rose, she's a Tiger Lily!" The situation was resolved when my friend Frederick Vanderbilt Field—also a HUAC target who had actually spent time in an American prison for being a Communist—persuaded Rosa to invite us both to lunch in the Covarrubias house in Tizapan. It was a success, Rosa was a superb cook and the meal was splendid, and she and I became friends. And I did get her permission for the drawings.

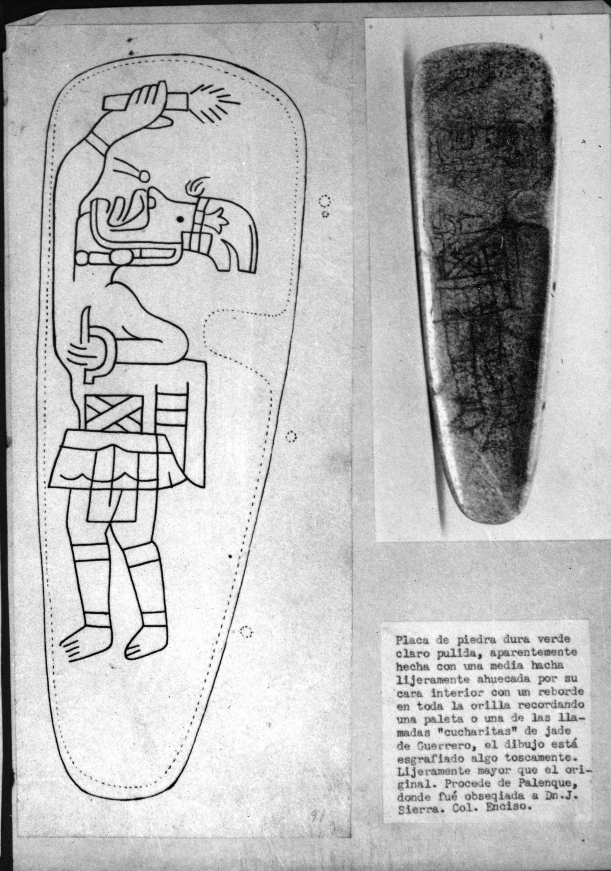
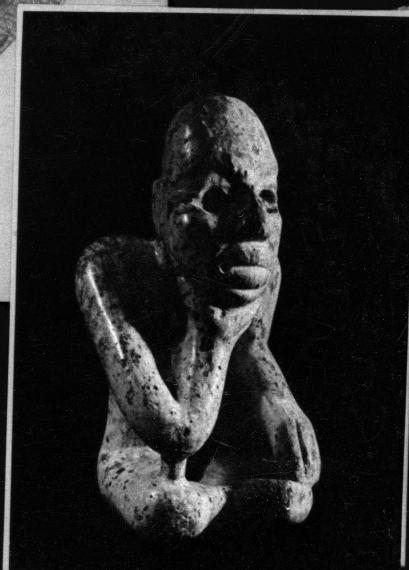
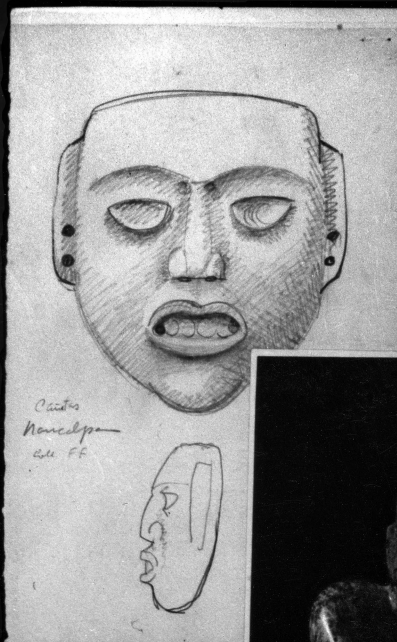
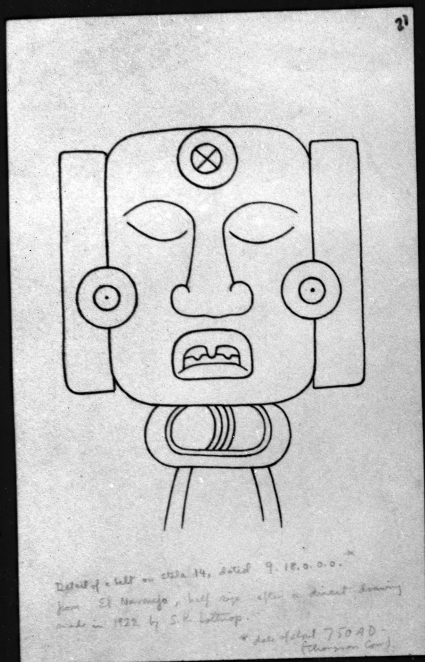
For now, the actual whereabouts of the original notebooks remains a mystery.

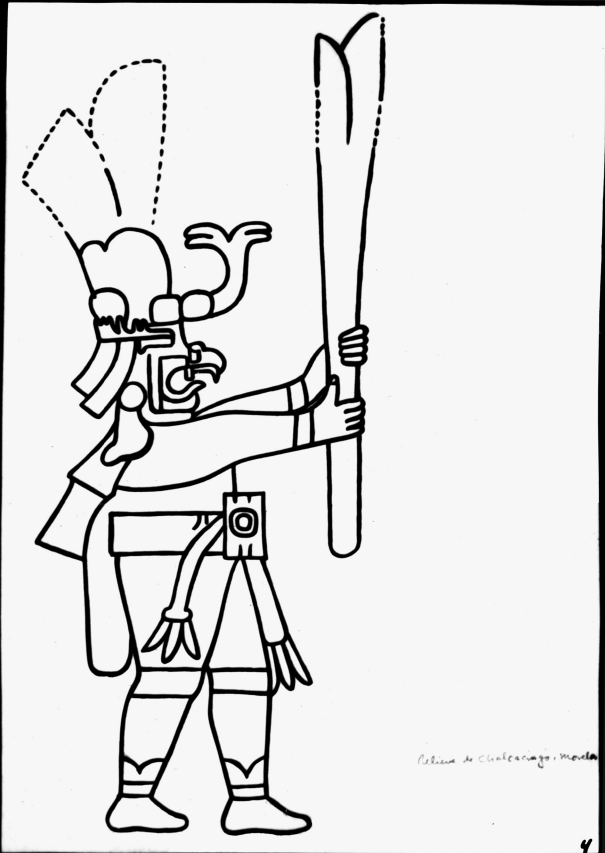
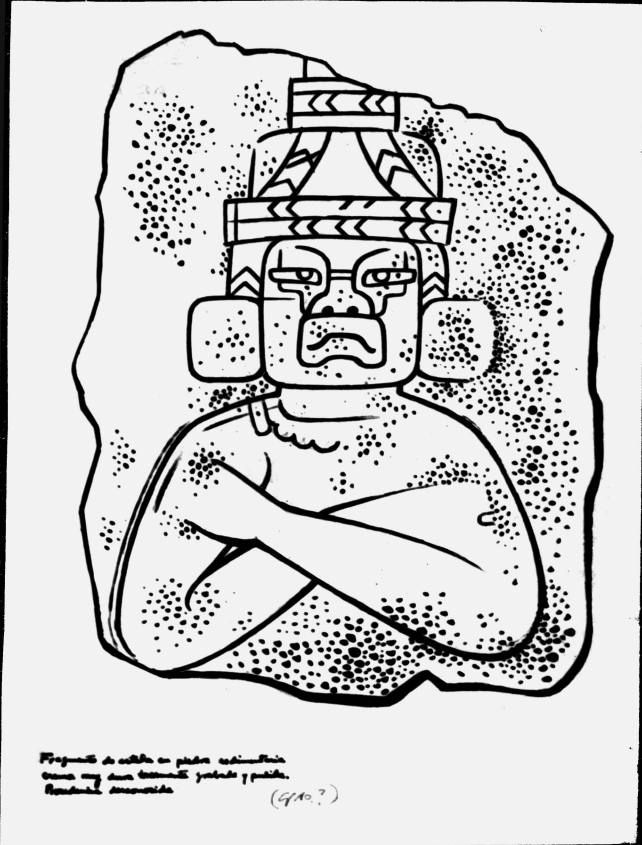
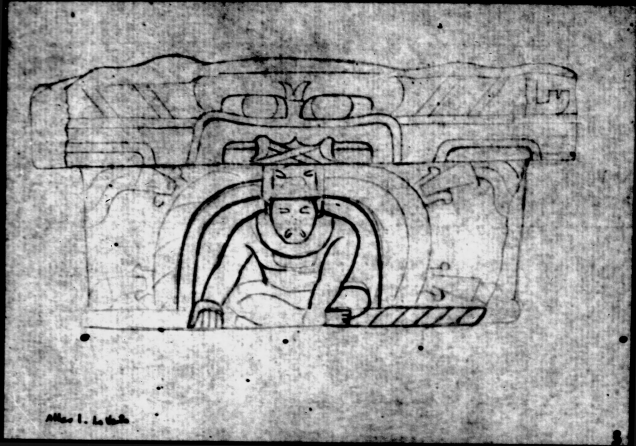
Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks go to María Elena Rico Covarrubias, who owns the copyright for unpublished drawings by her uncle, Miguel Covarrubias, for permission to publish this electronic version of the notebooks.

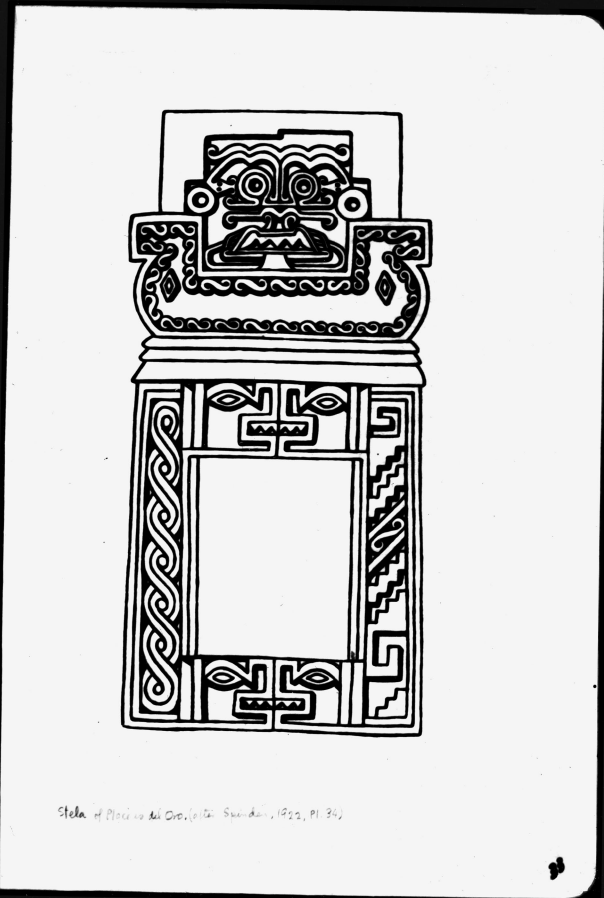


In this 8" x 10" photographic print, it is possible to see four individual pages of the Covarrubias notebooks. (The image rotated 90° appears on page 43 in its proper orientation.)



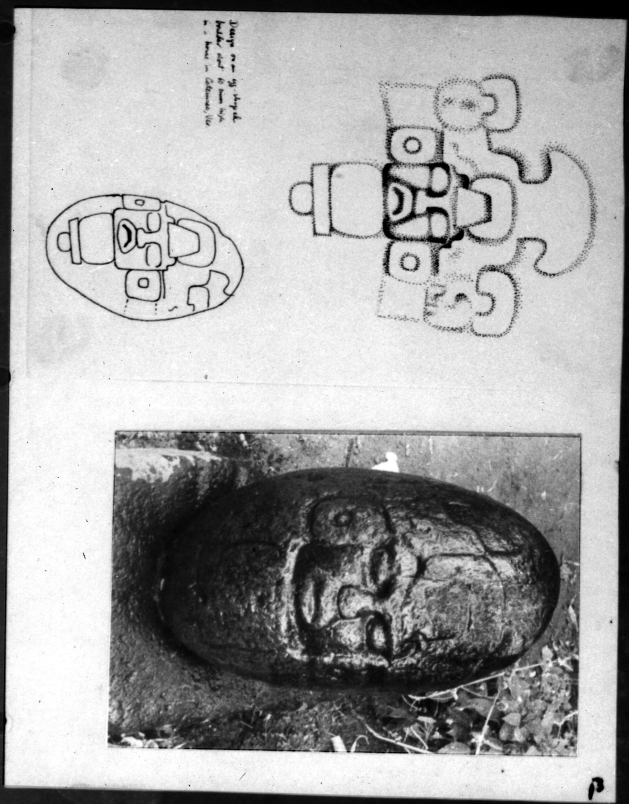
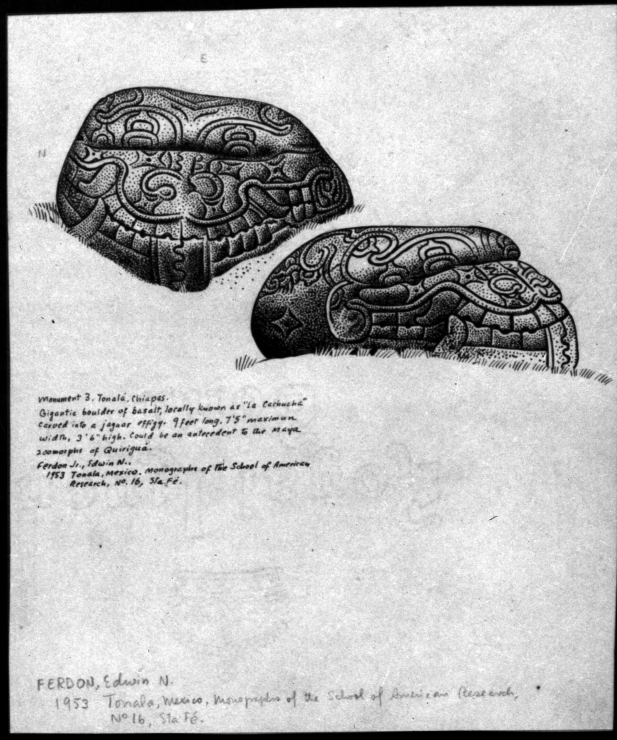


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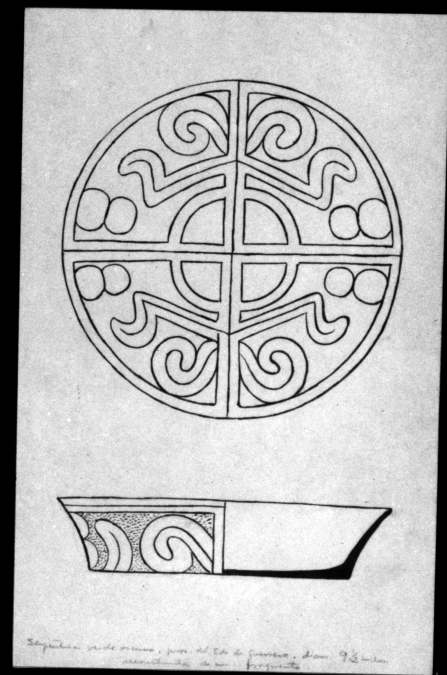
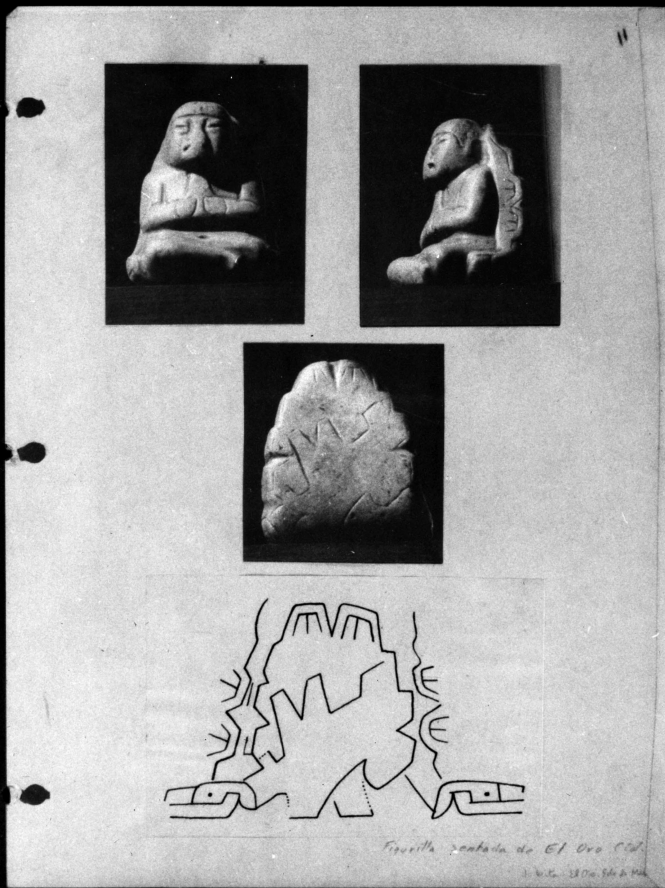
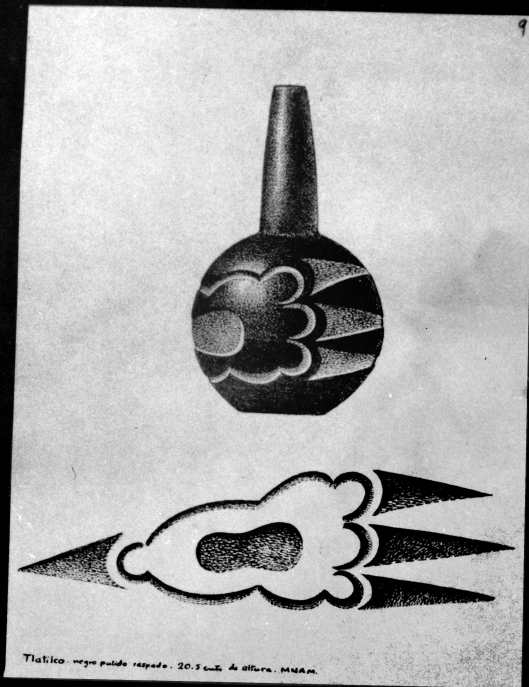


Stela H Placido del Oro, (after Sauer, 1922, Pl. 34)

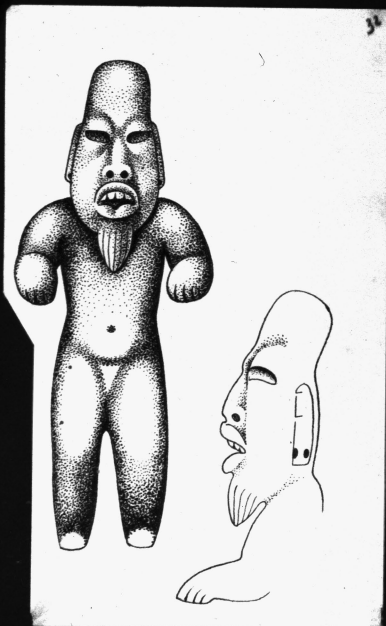
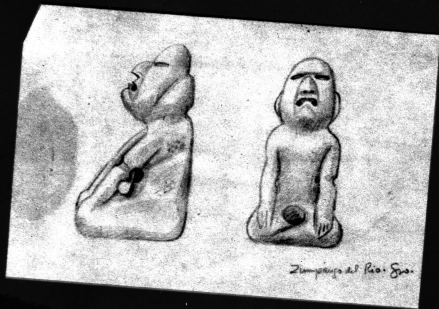
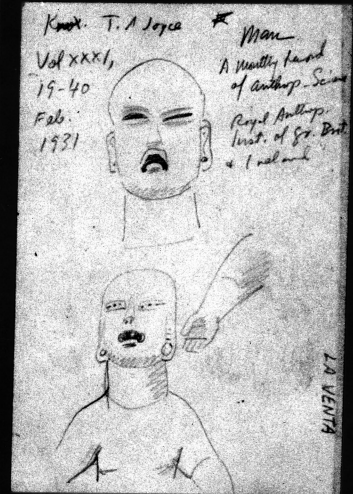
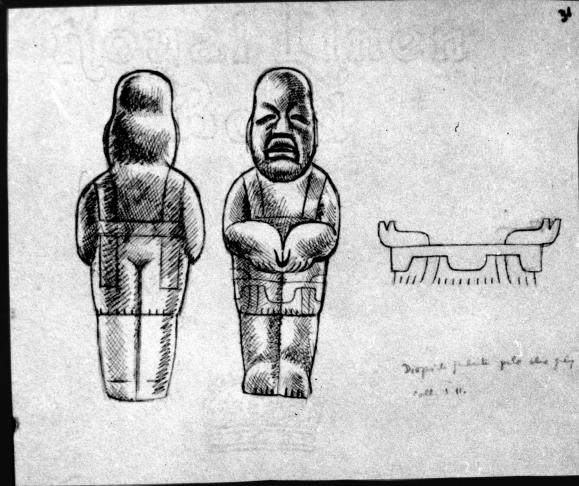


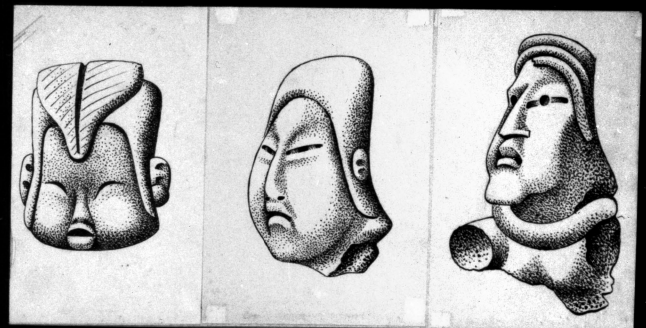
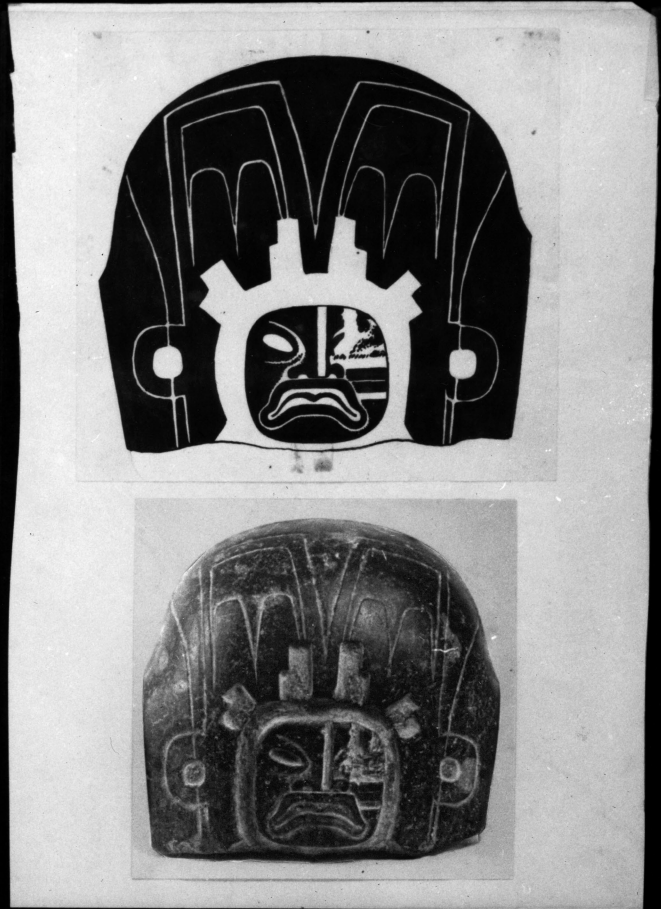
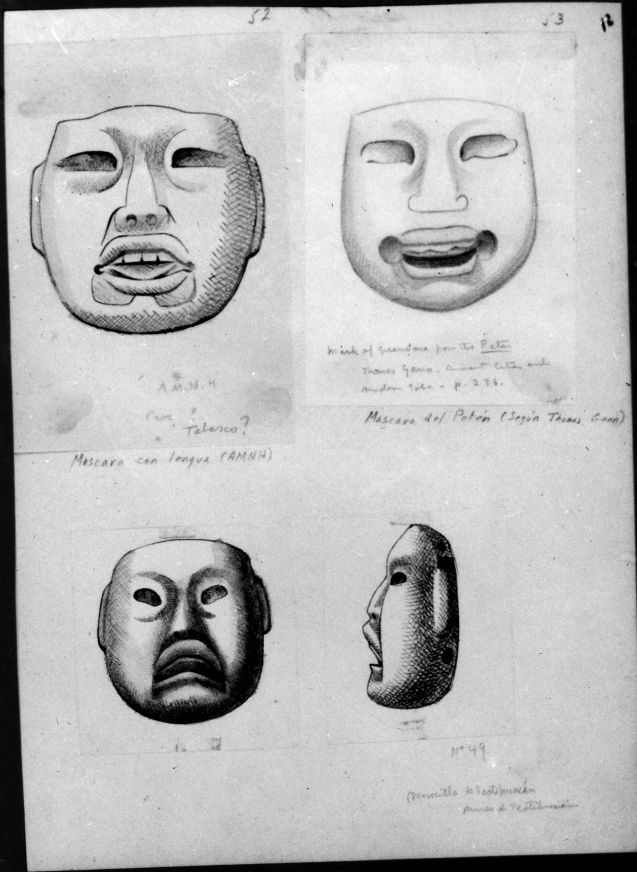


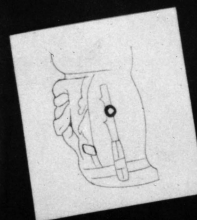
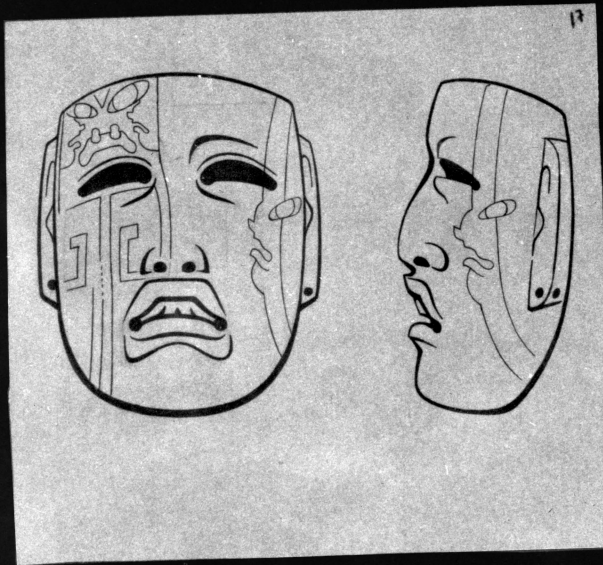
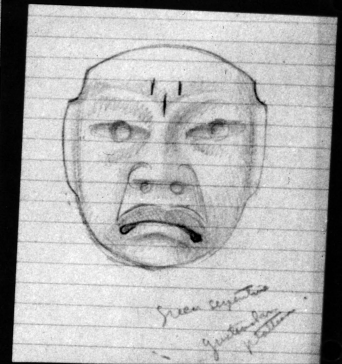
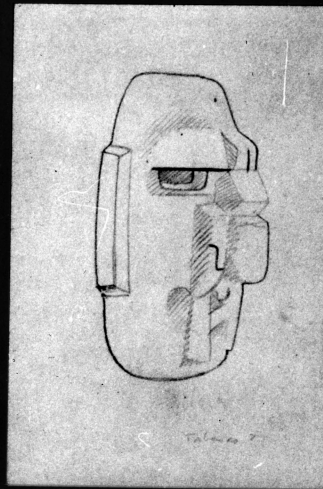
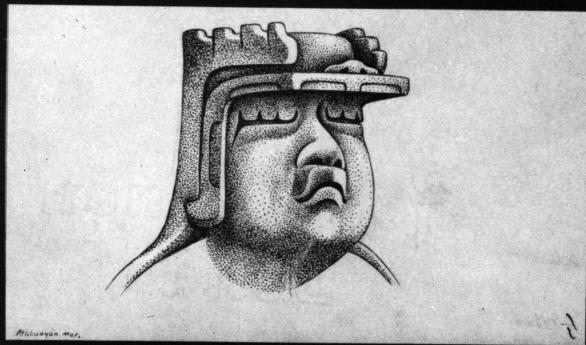
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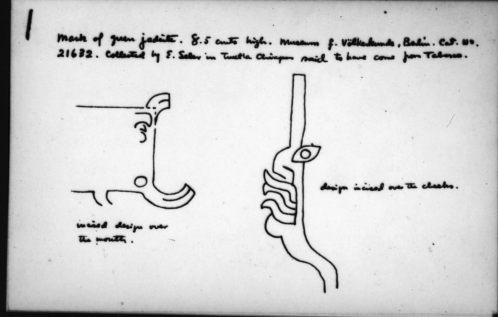
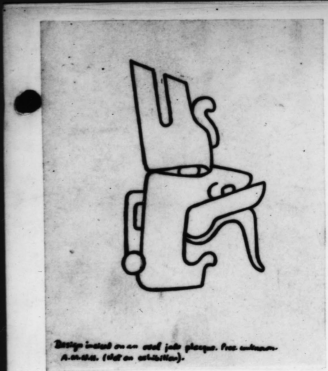
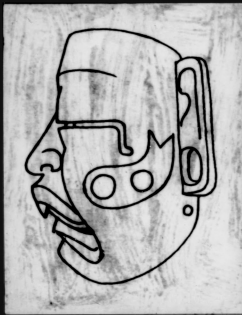
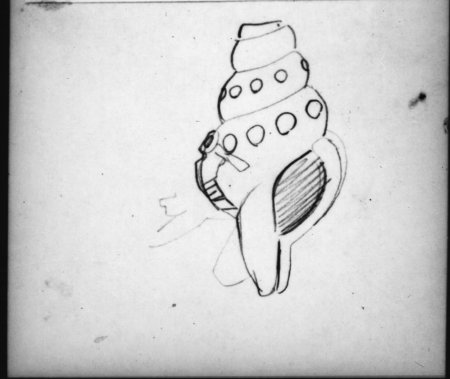
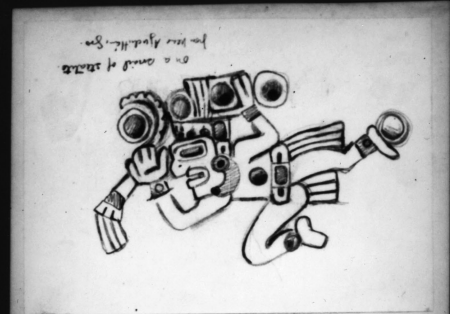


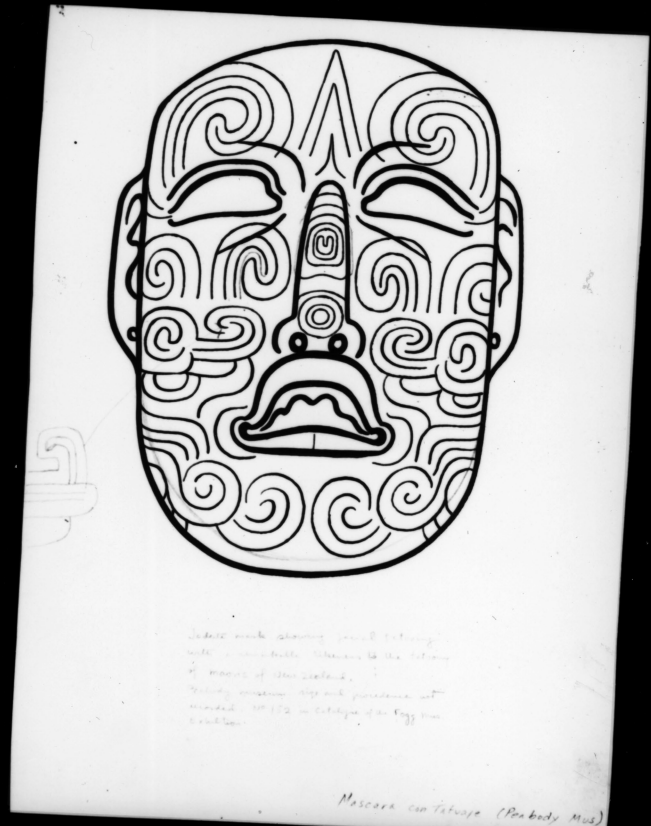
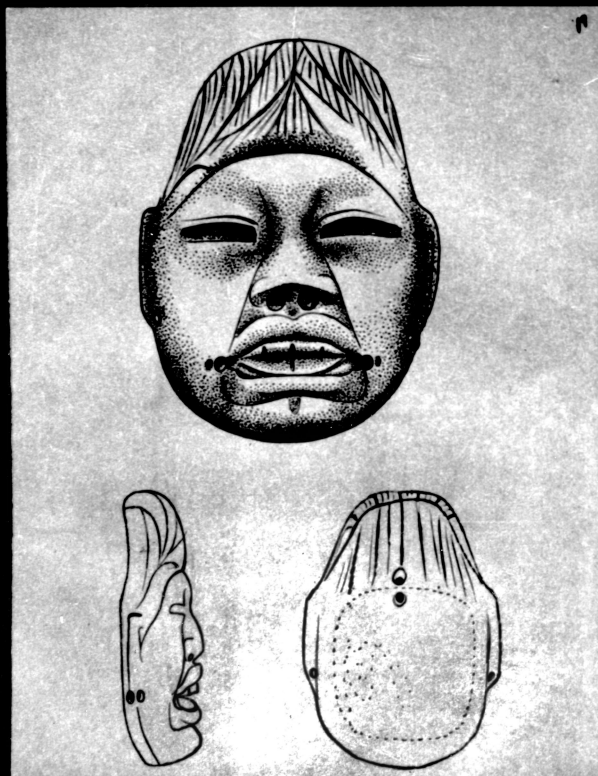
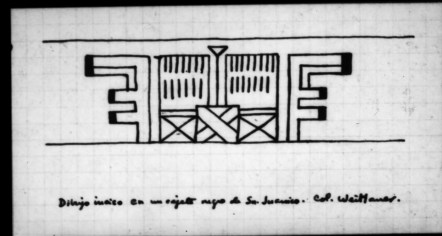
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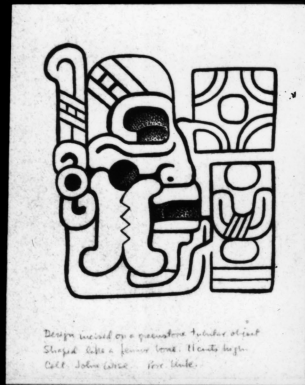
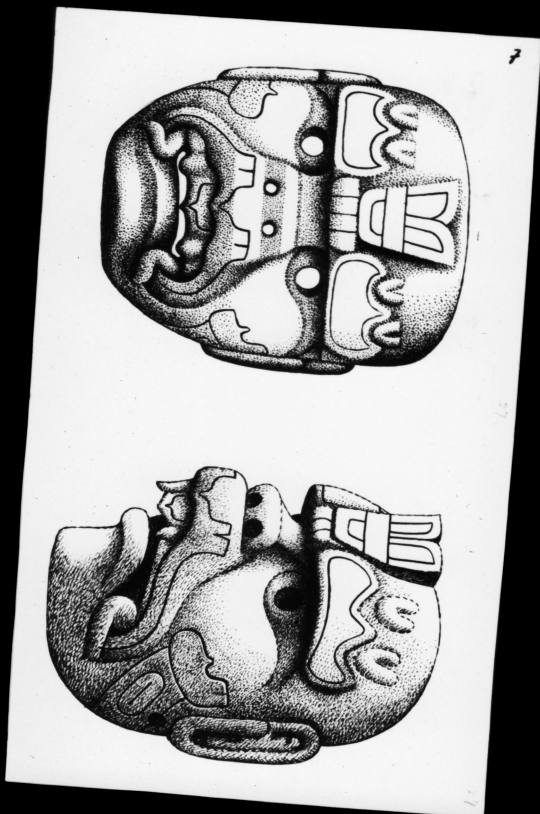
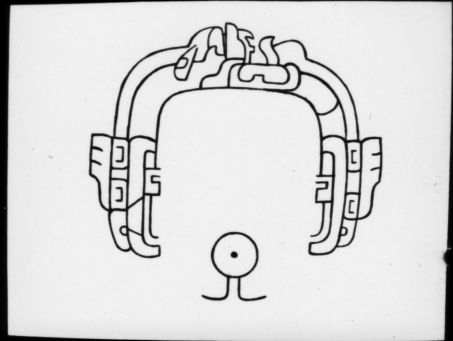




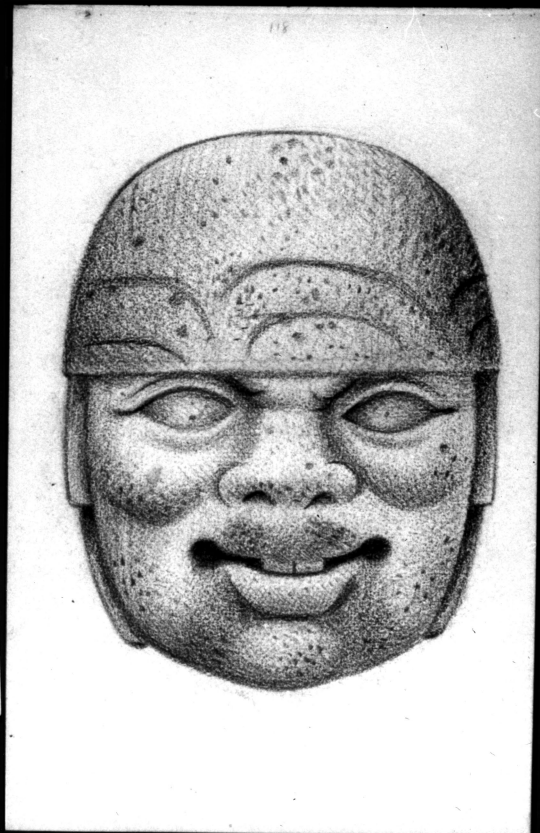
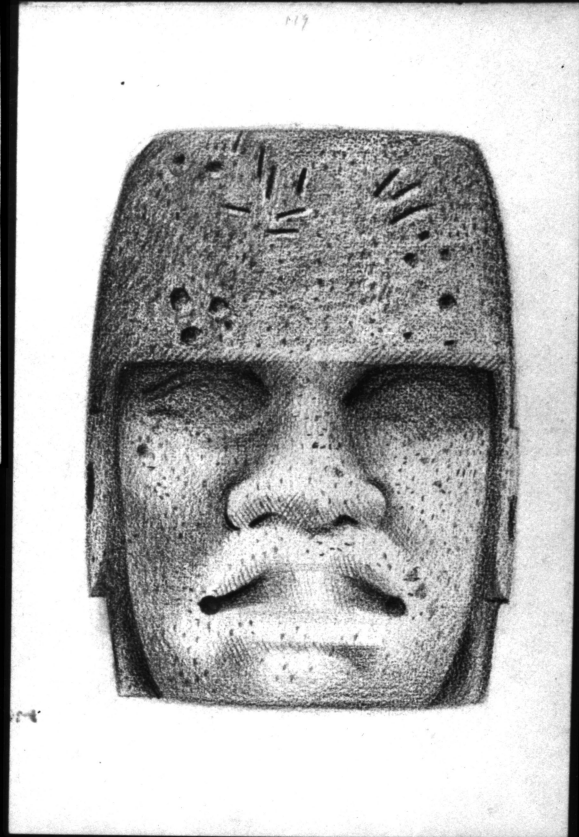


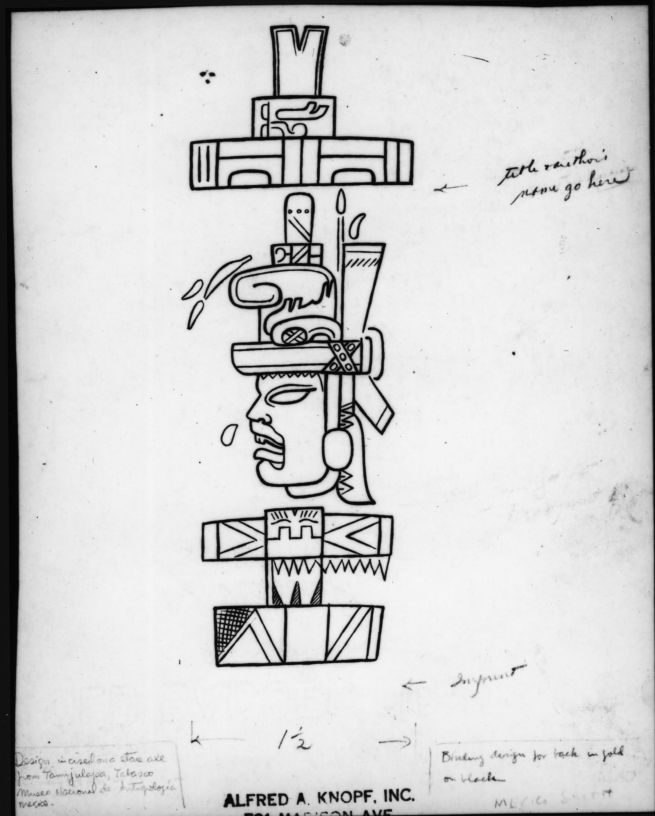
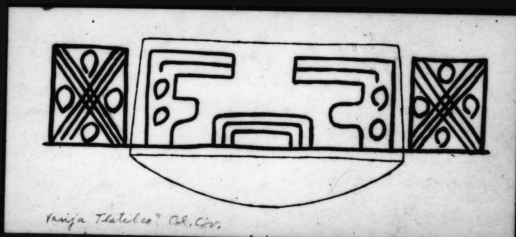
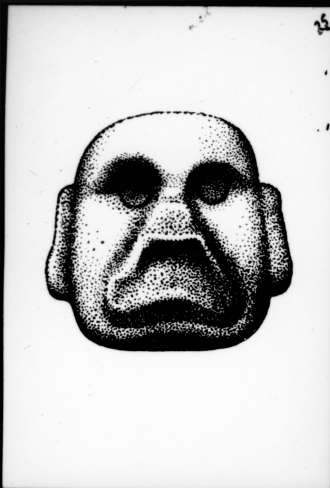
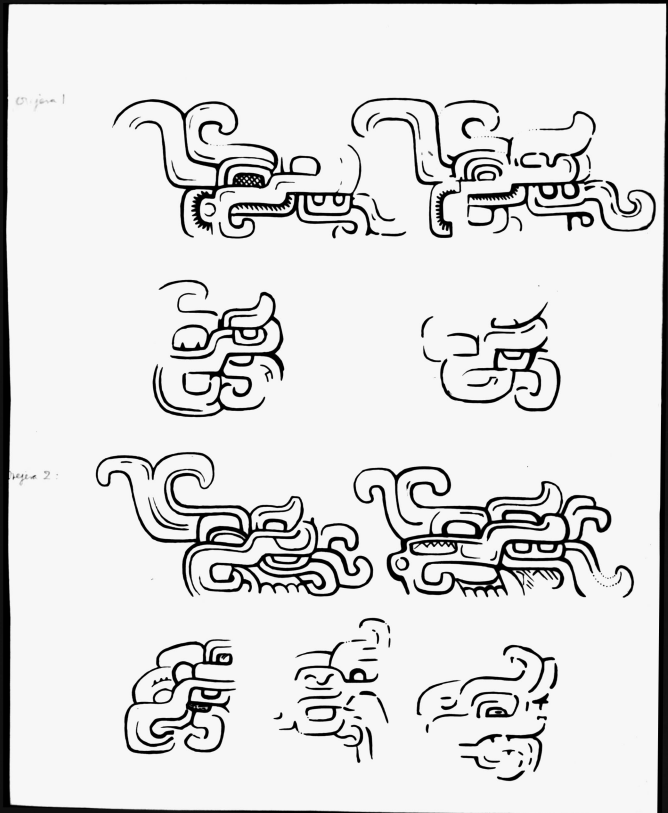
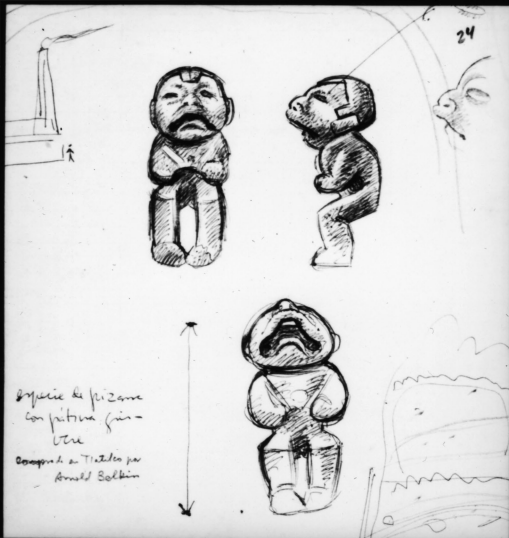


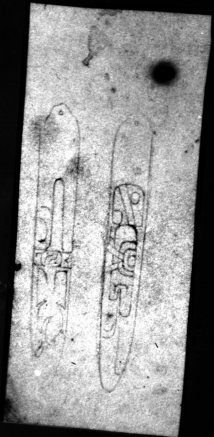
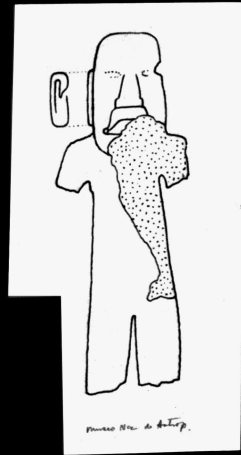
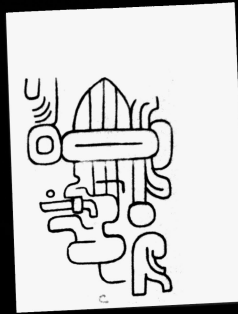
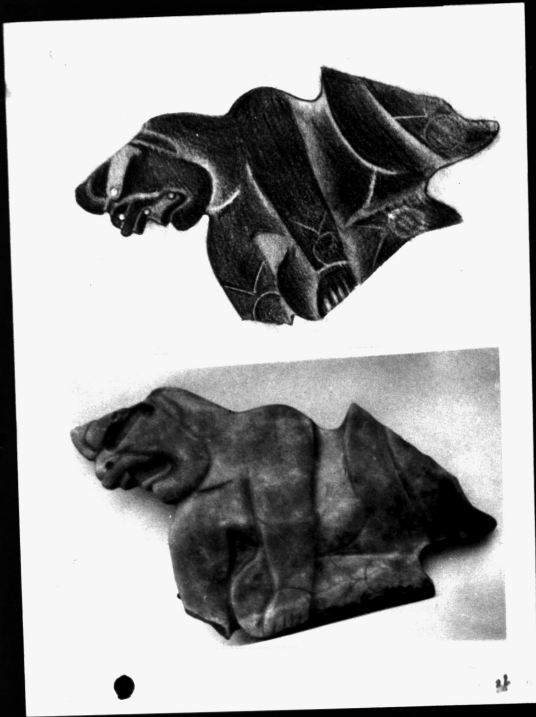




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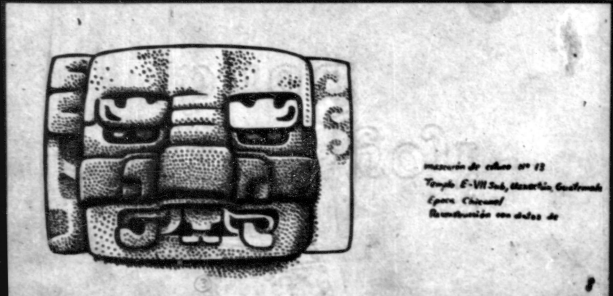




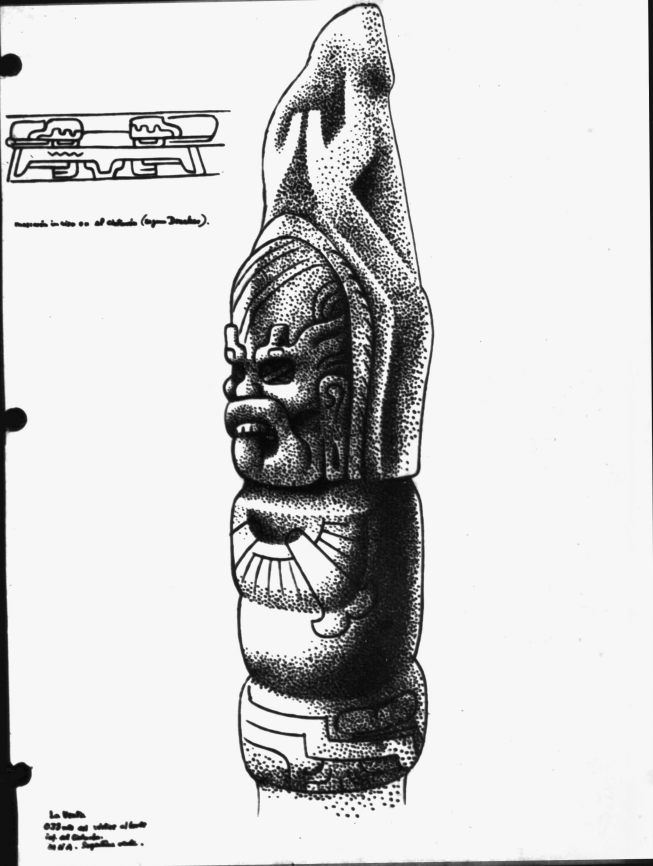




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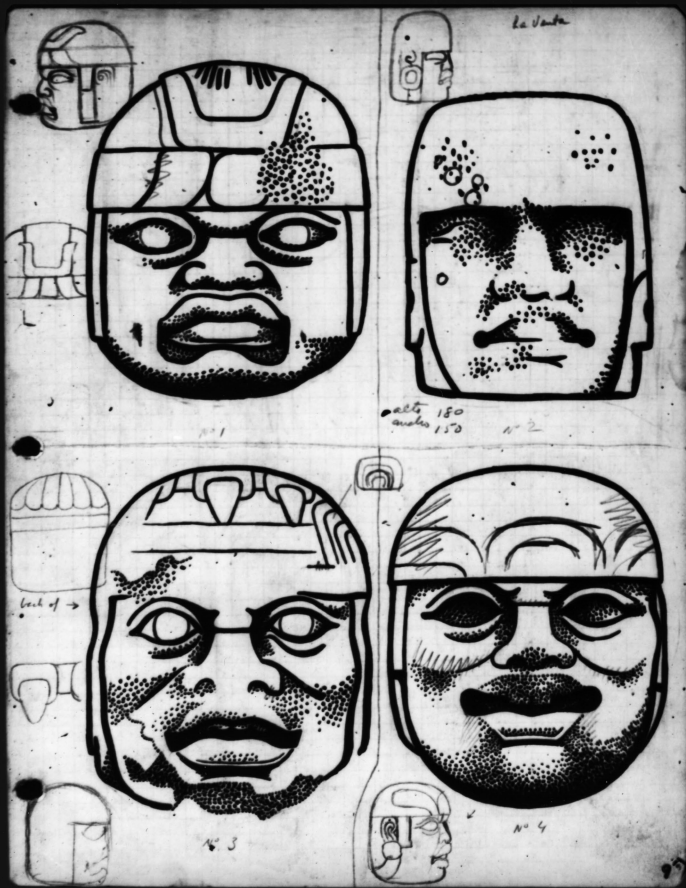


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Epoca Clásica
Reconstrucción con datos de



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La Venta
022 mts. en altura al borde
del río de la Venta
de N.º 12 - Epoca Clásica



La Venta

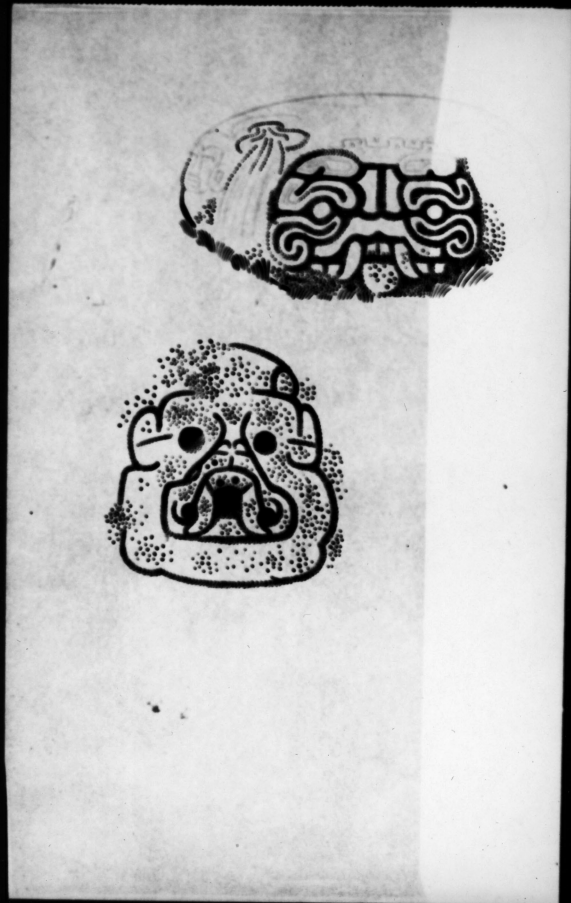
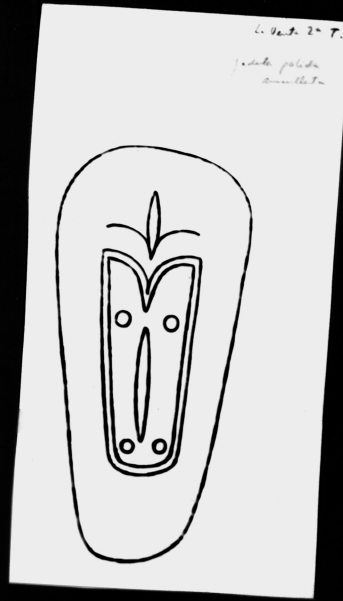
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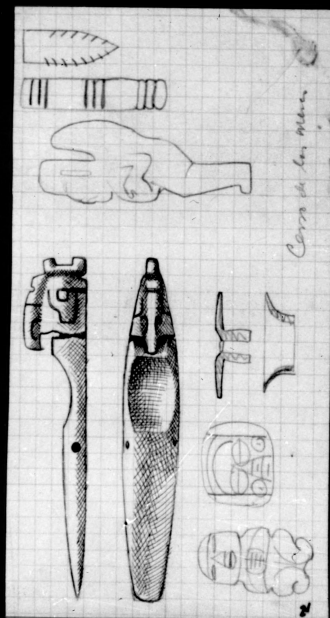
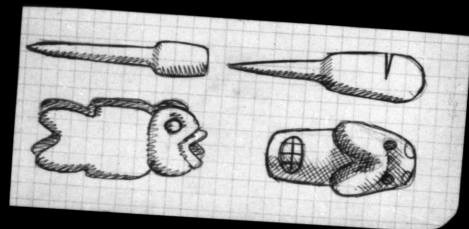
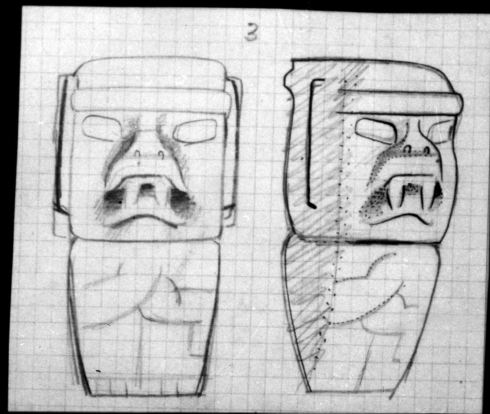
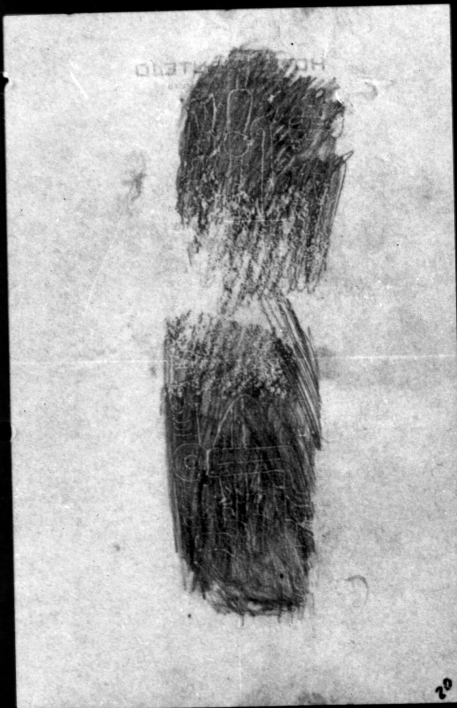
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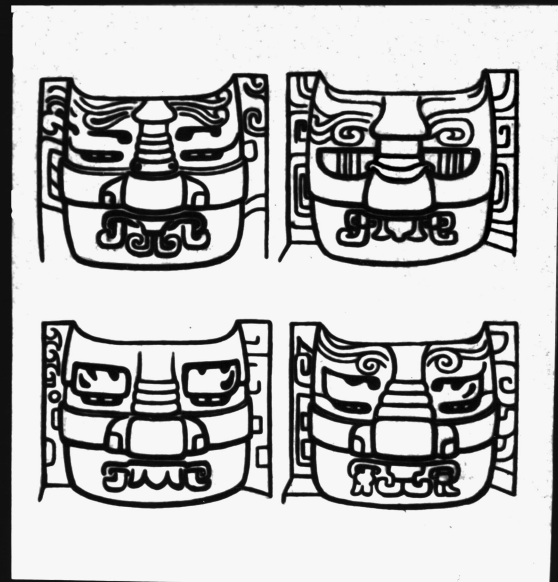
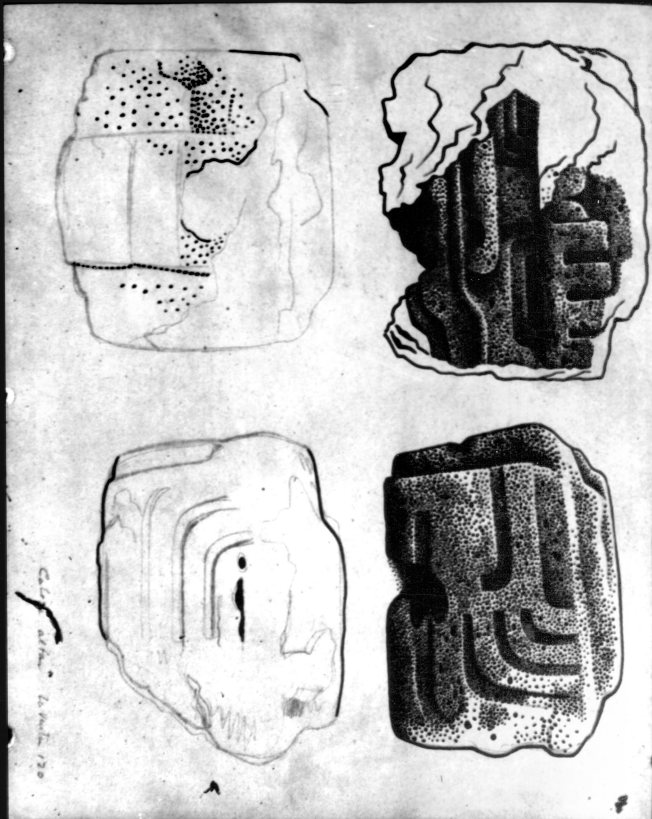
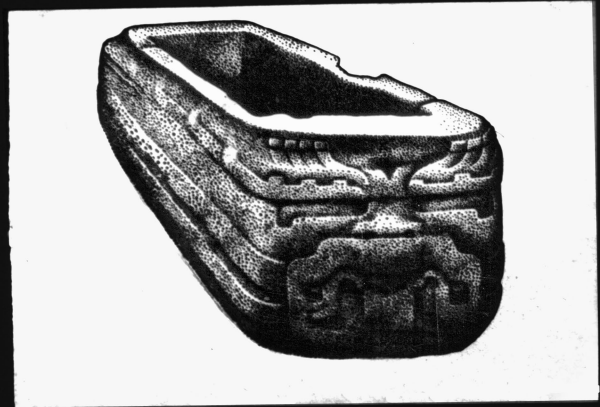
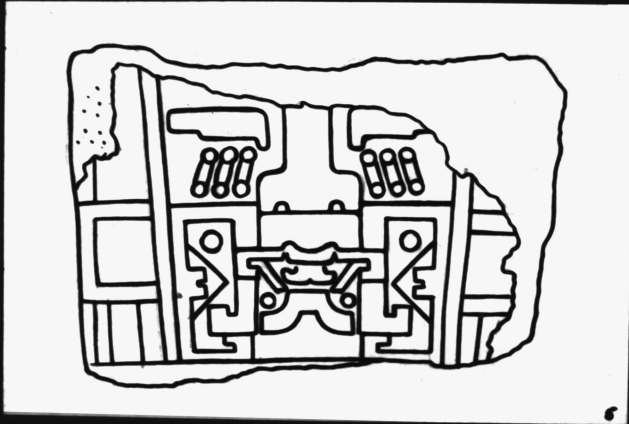
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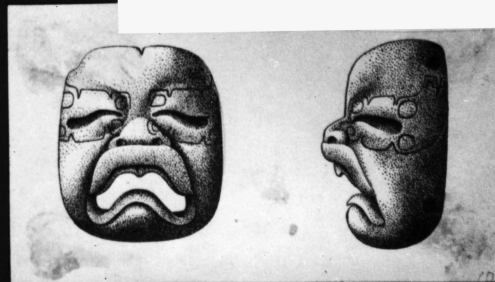
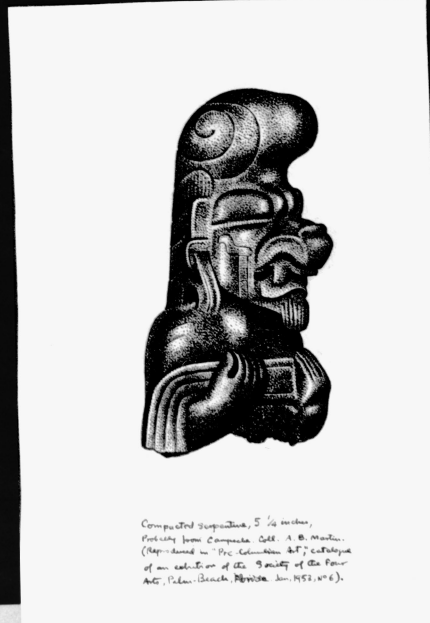
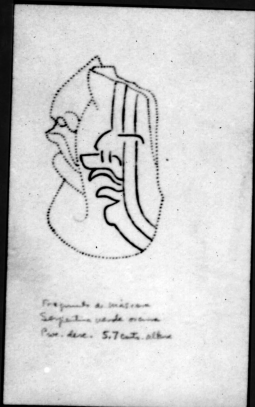
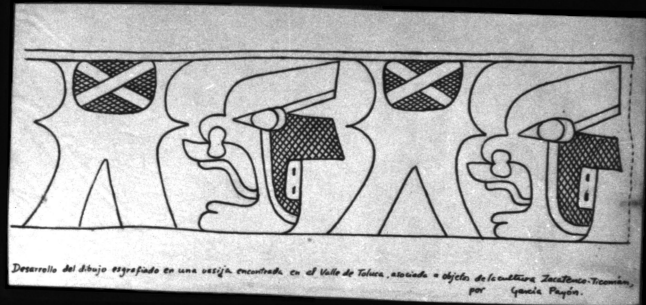
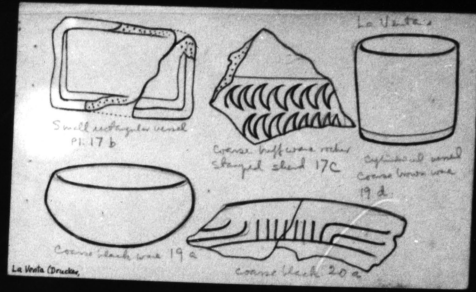
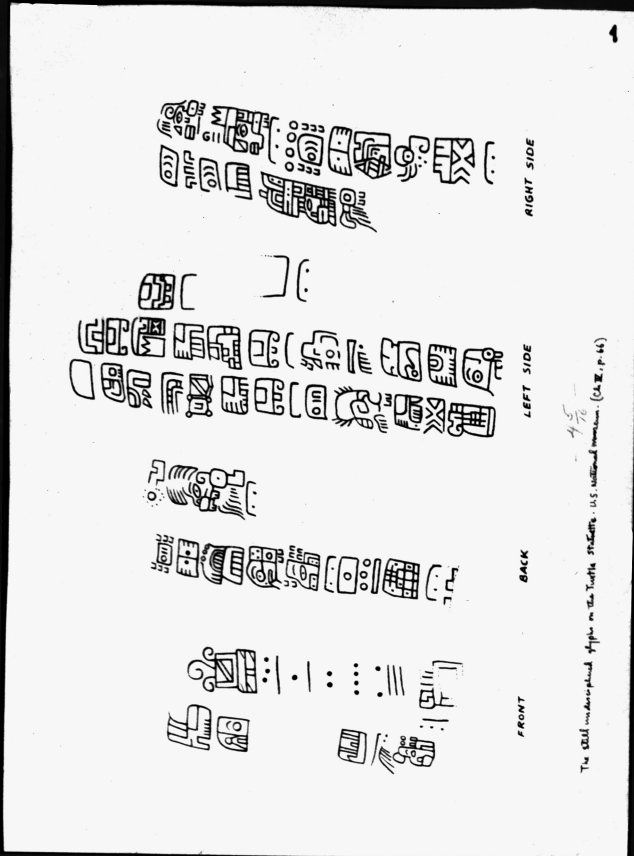


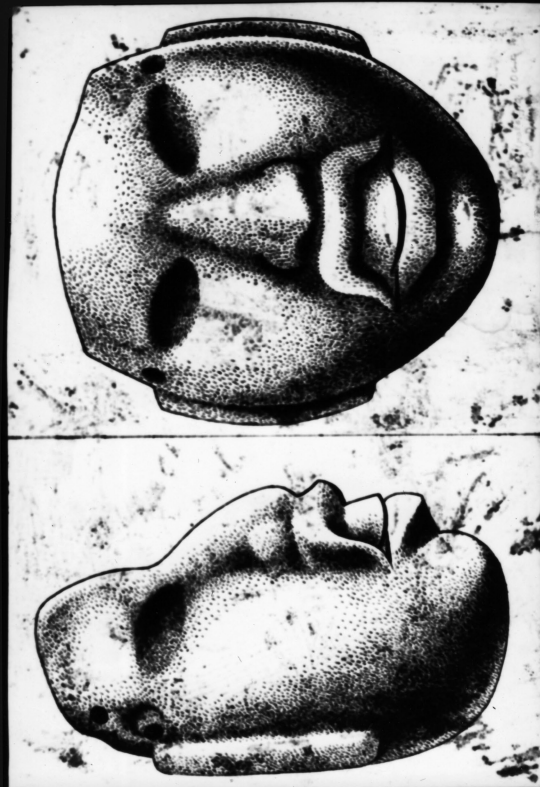
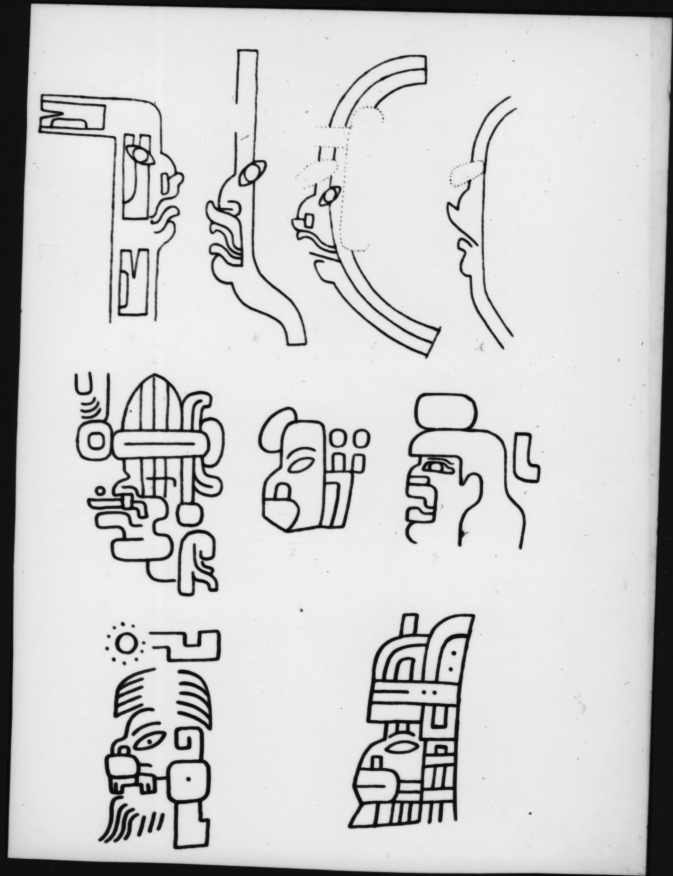
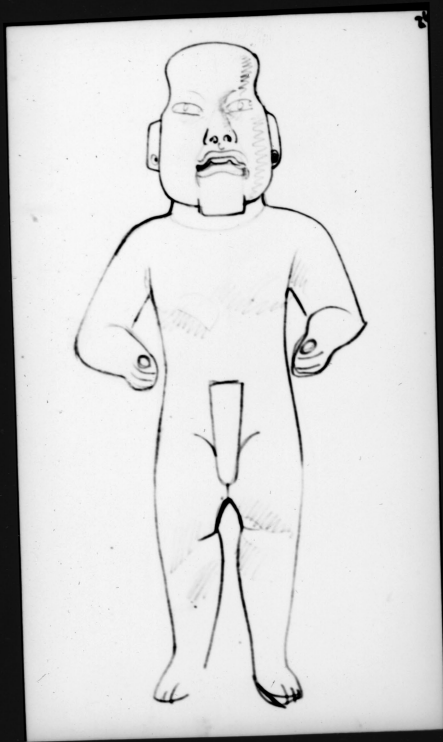


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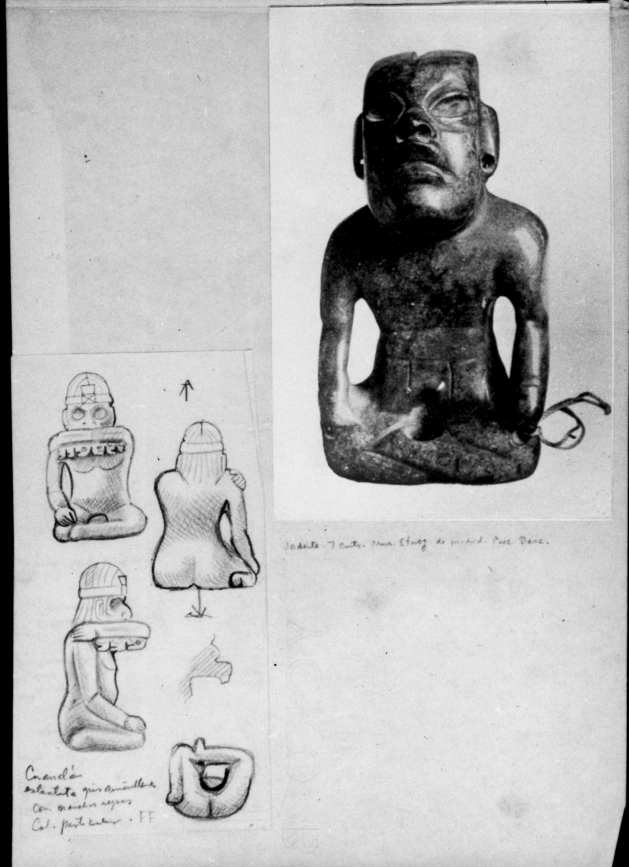
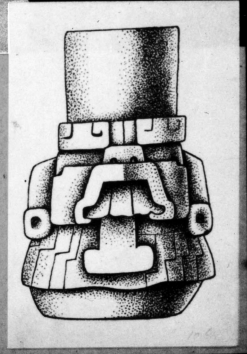
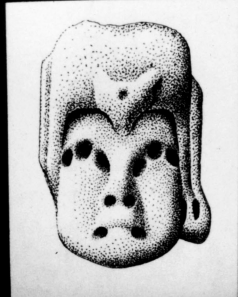
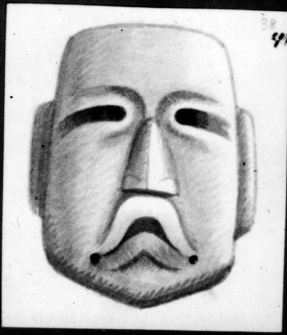


(The image rotated 90° appears on page 45 in its proper orientation.)

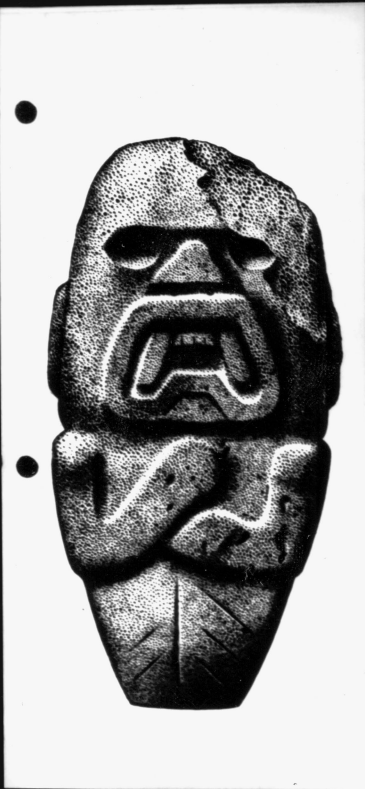




(The image rotated 90° appears on page 46 in its proper orientation.)



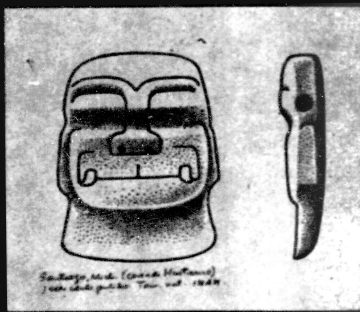
The image at bottom left was published in *America's First Civilization* (Coe 1968:152).



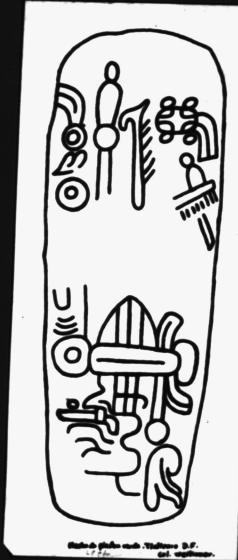
Hacha o hacha de pedregal negro, tipo desconocido. 28 cm (11") - Col. John U. S. 15



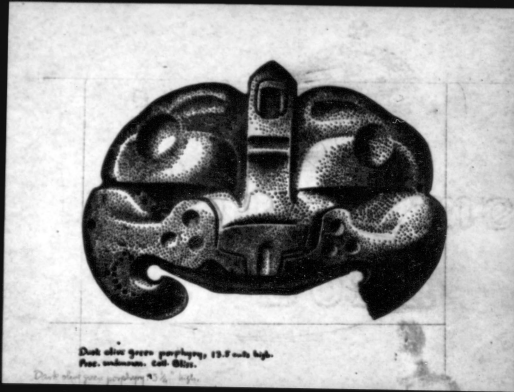
Fragmento de una hacha de jadeíta de procedencia desconocida. Tiene una banda romana en el lado izquierdo como si se hubiera tratado de cortarla en dos. Col. Particular. Mexico.



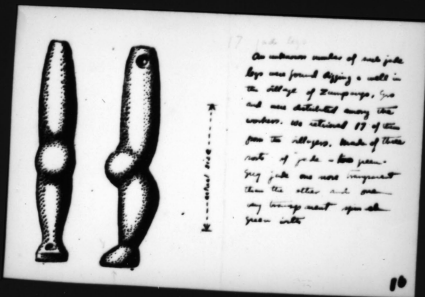
Chalchahu, tipo (Cancun, Yucatan) con chabacal. Tipo. Col. 1944



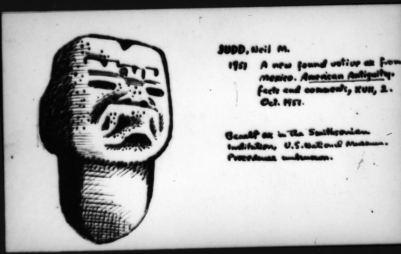
Hacha plateada. Tipo 37. Col. 1944



Dark olive green porphyry, 13.2 cm high. Face unknown. Col. S. U. S.

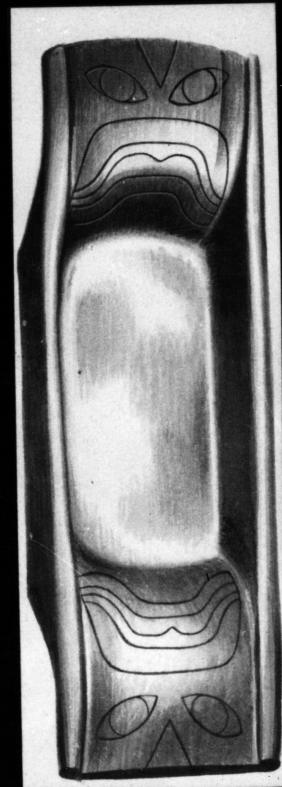
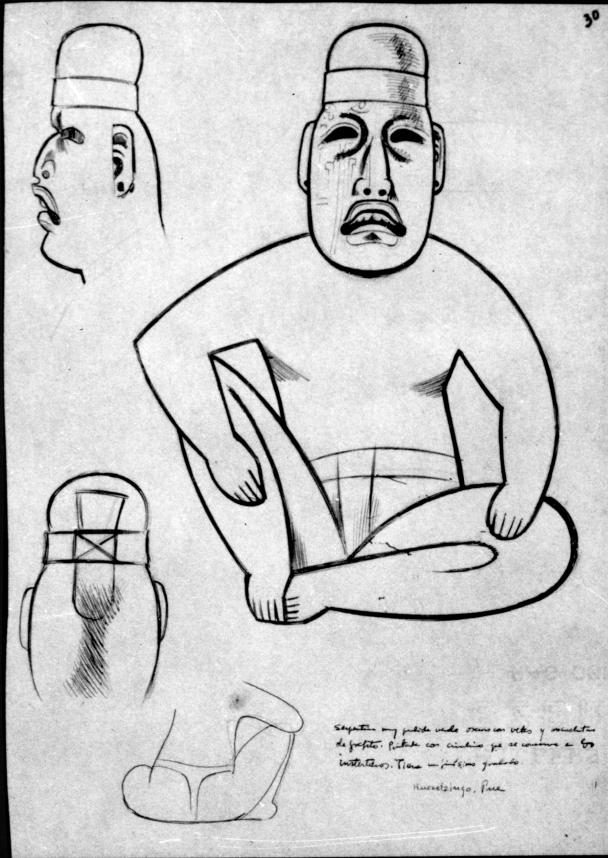


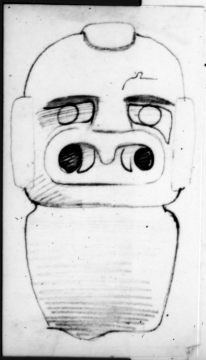
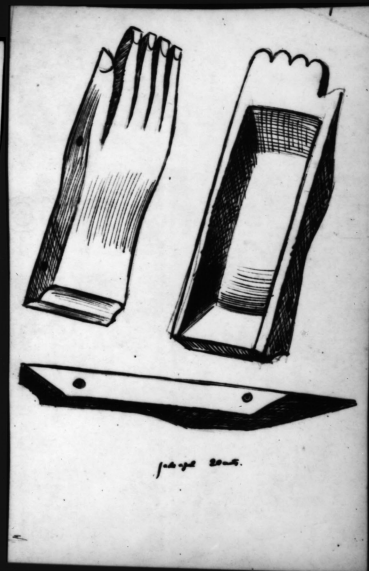
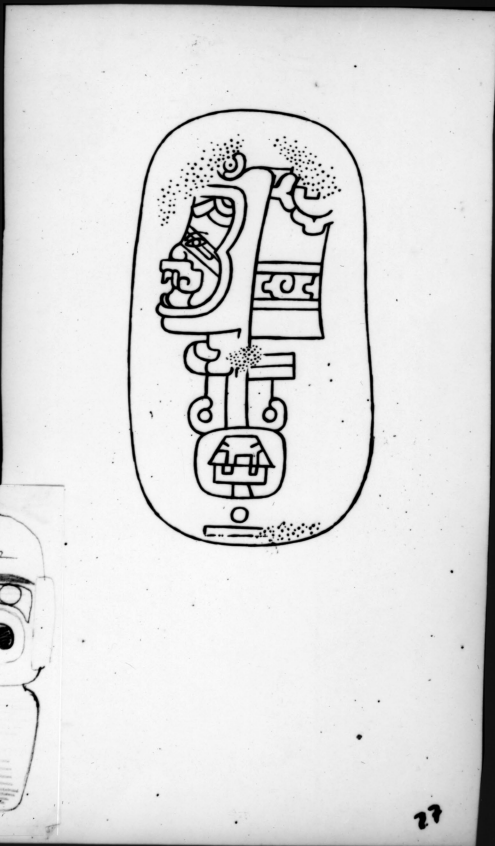
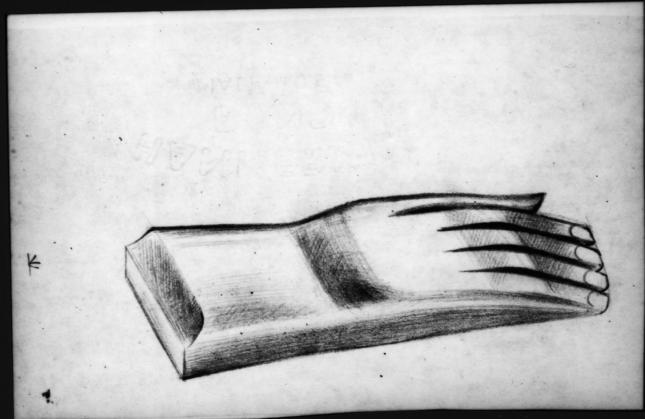
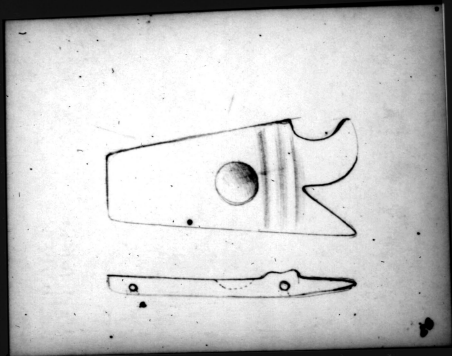
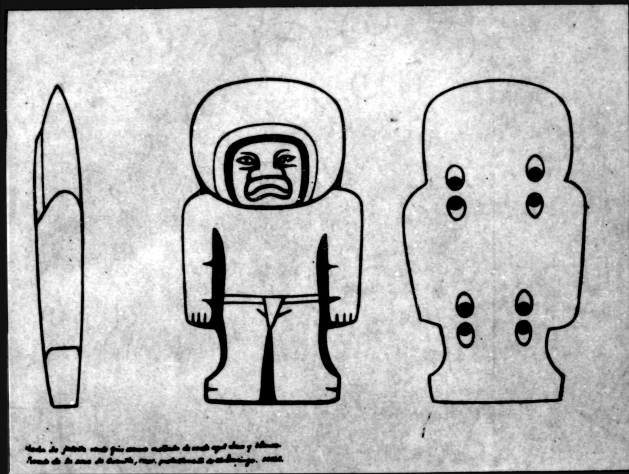
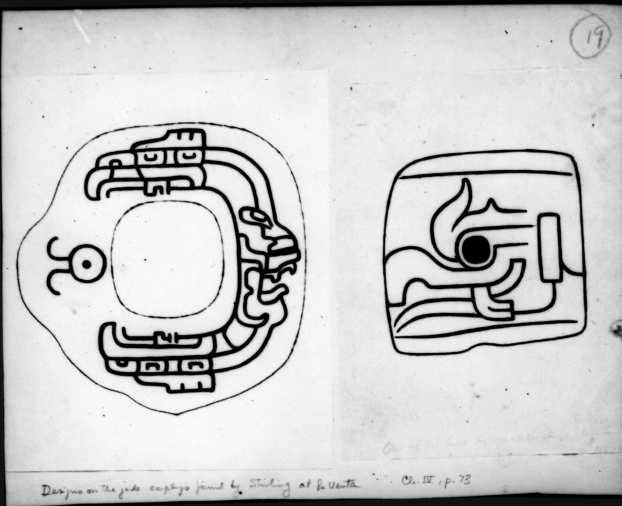
The numerous number of such jade objects were found during a visit to the village of Chalchahu, Yucatan, and were distributed among the workers. An additional 17 of this type were obtained. One of these was of jade - blue green. Big jade was more abundant than the other and some very large ones were also seen - white.

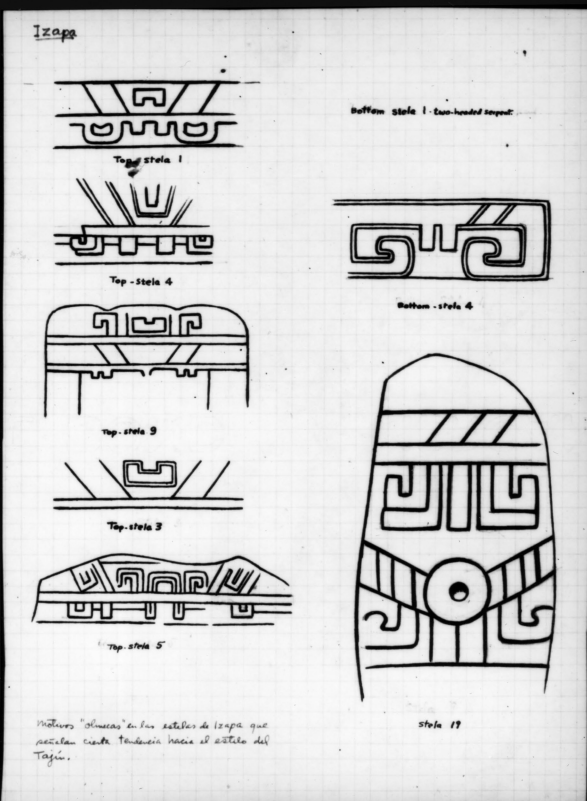
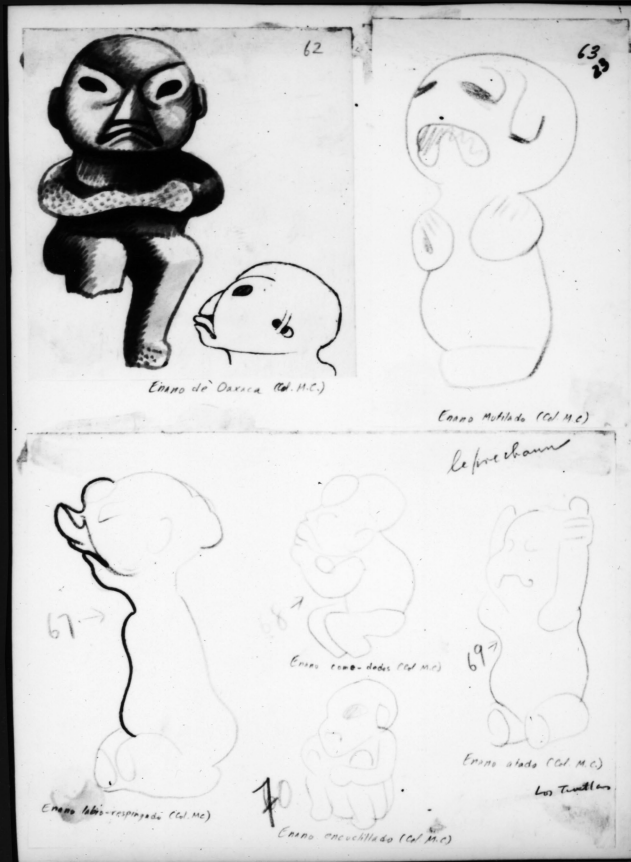
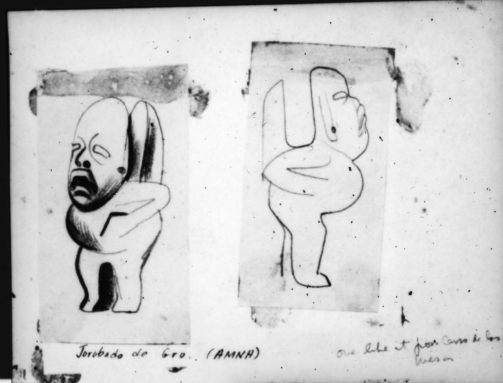
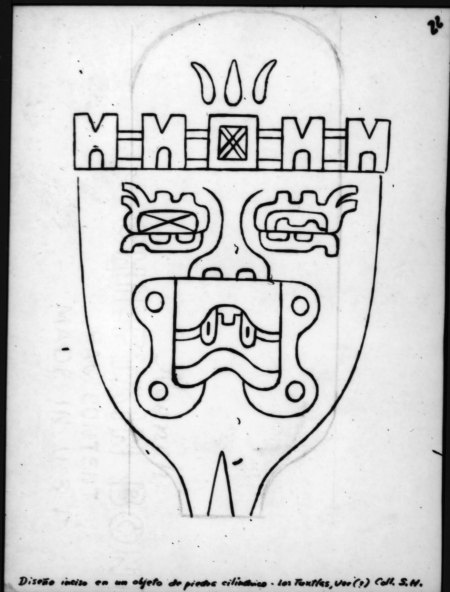


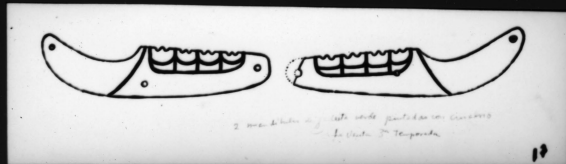
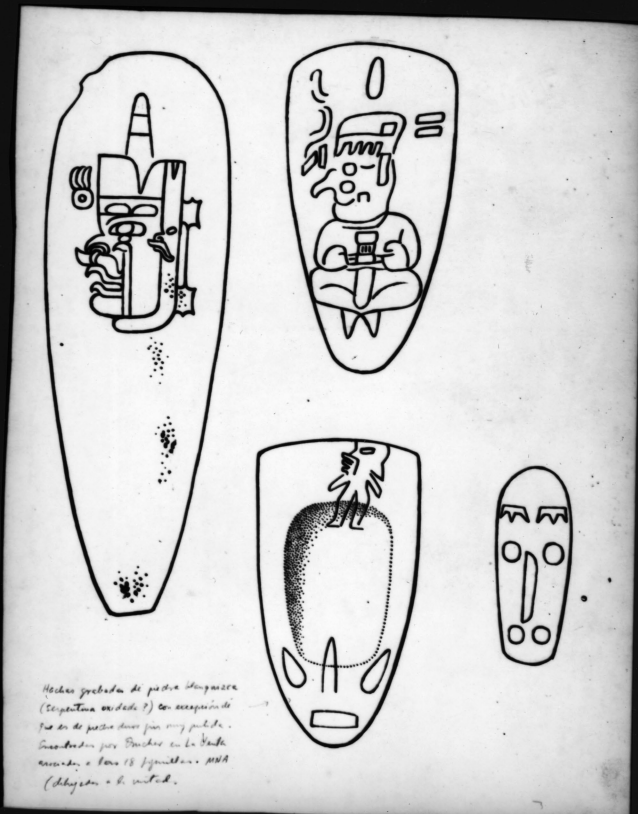
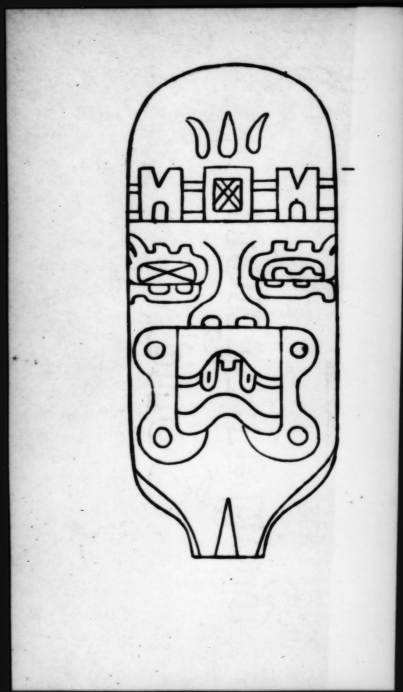
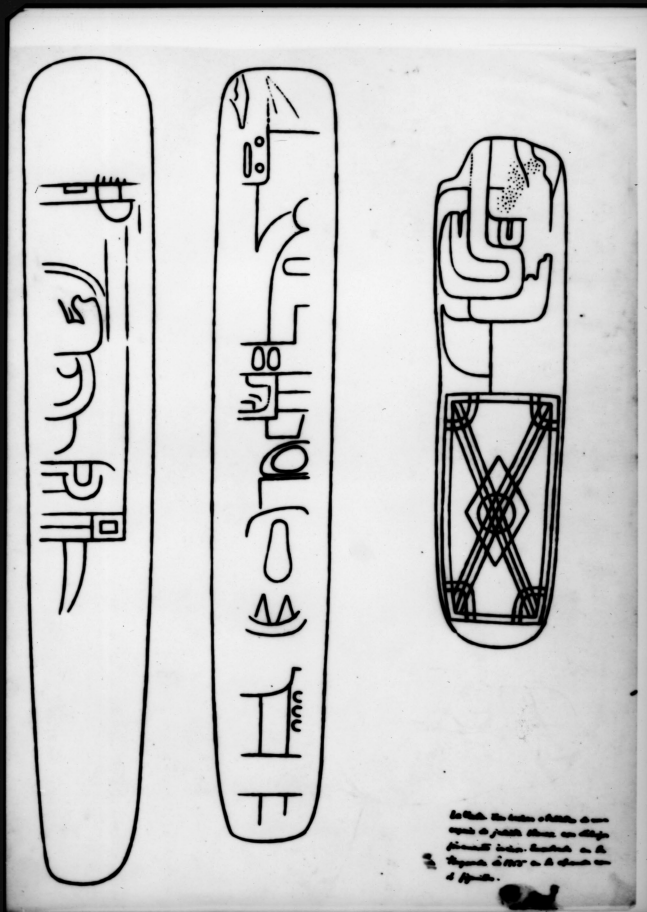
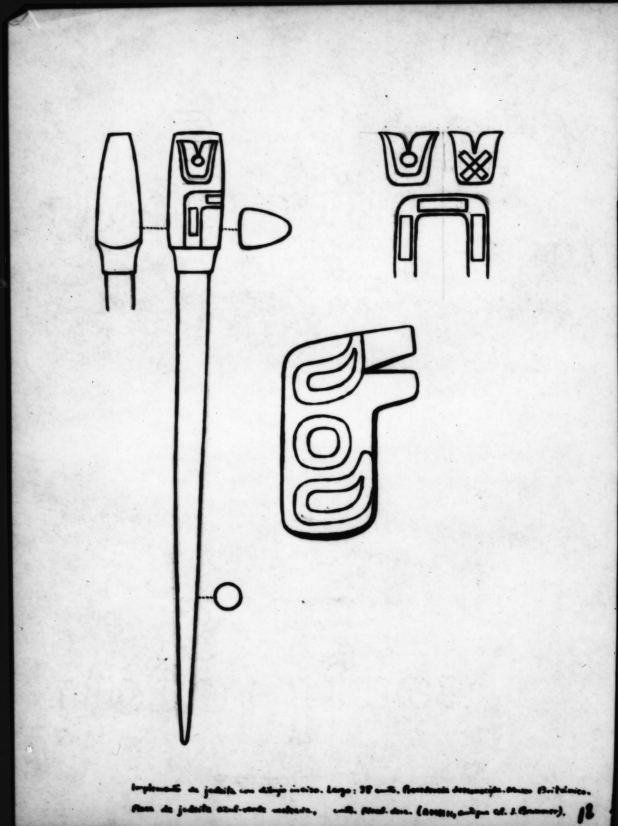
2000, Hill 14.
1971 A new found object from Mexico. American Antiquity. Facts and comments, 200, 2. Oct. 1971.

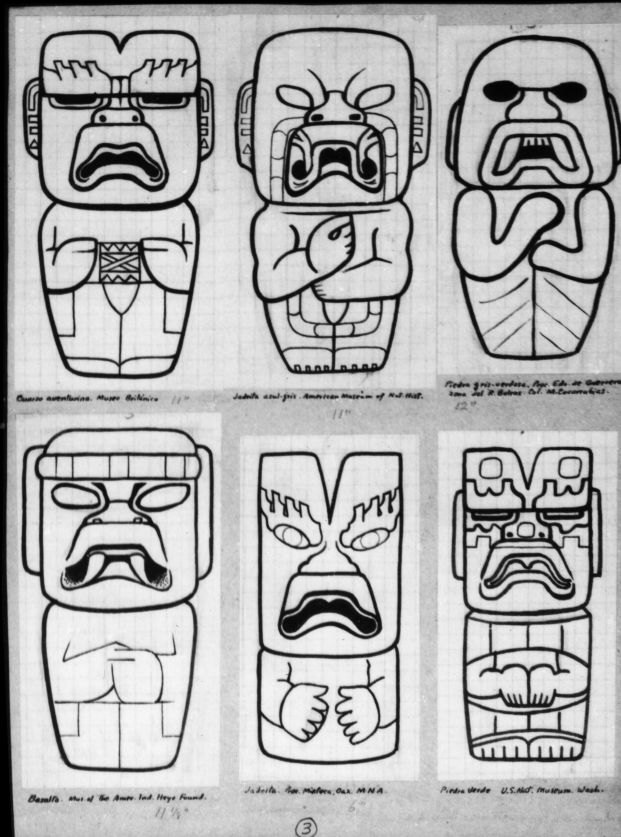
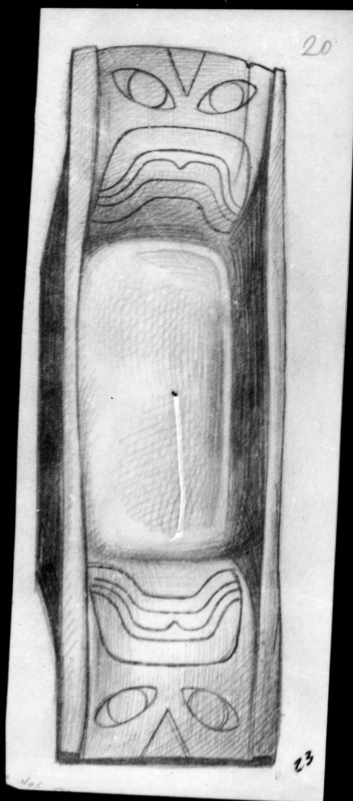
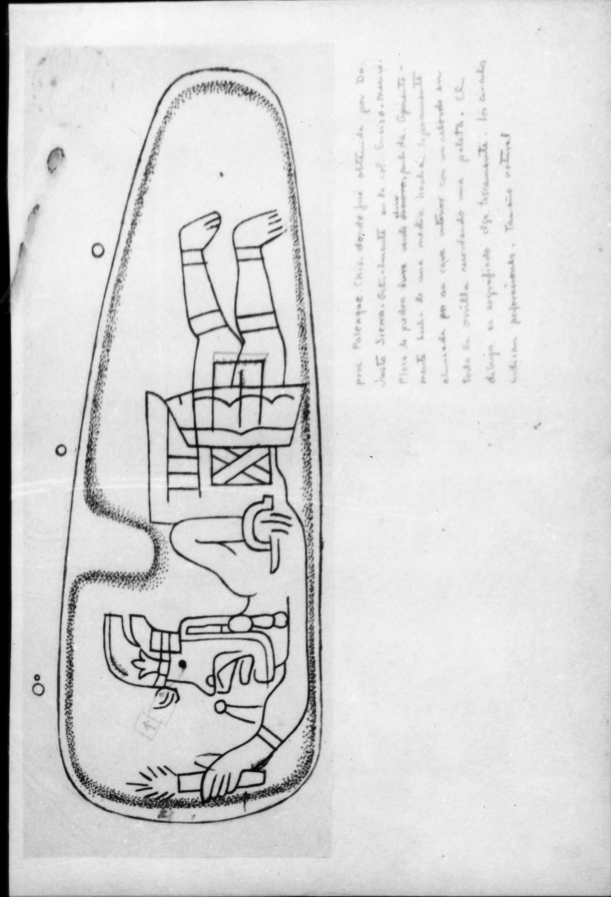
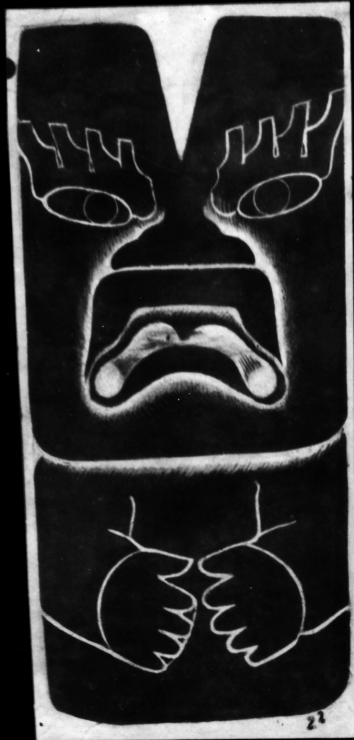
Found in the Yucatanian... U.S. National Museum. Permission unknown.



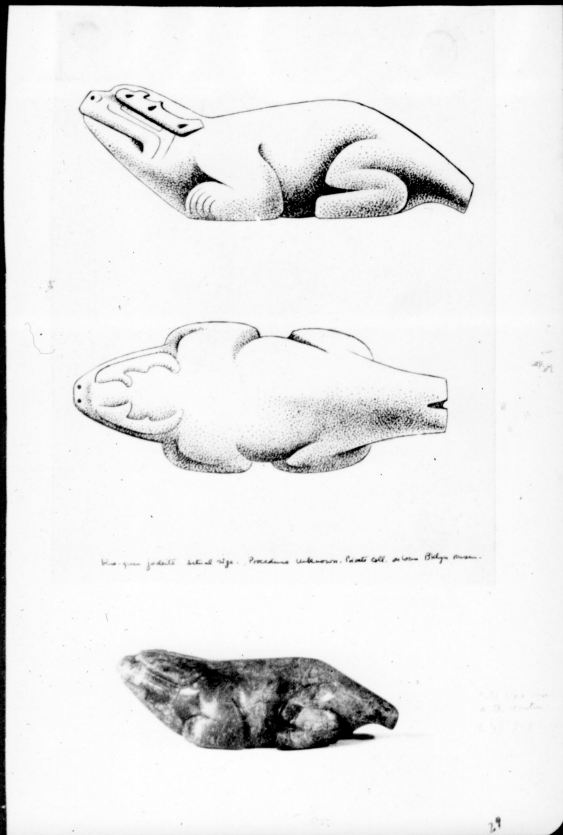
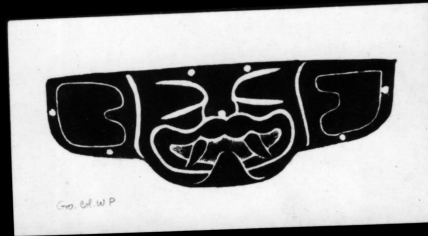
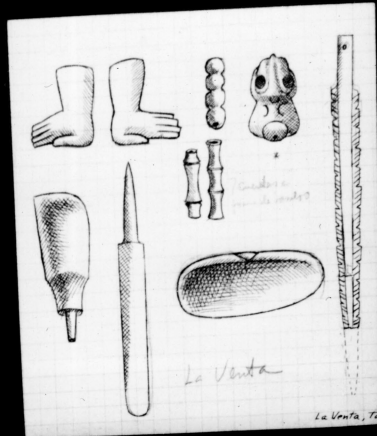
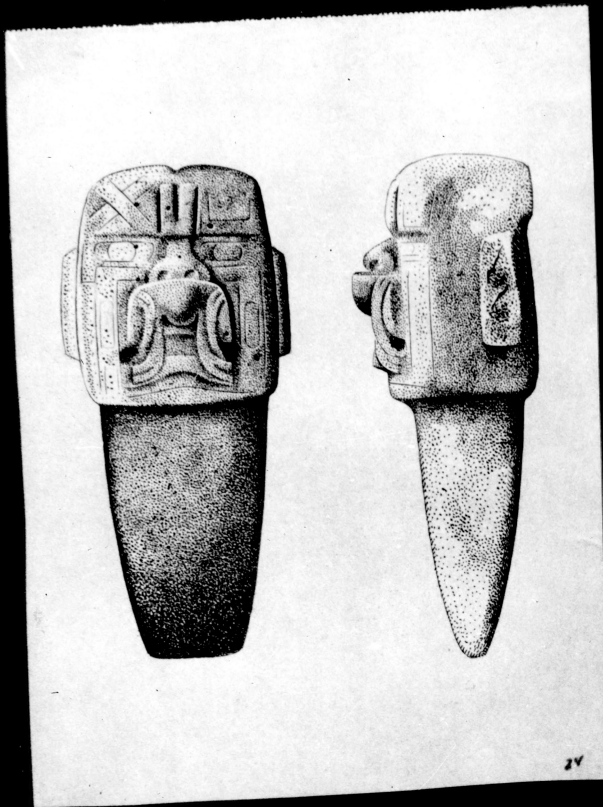


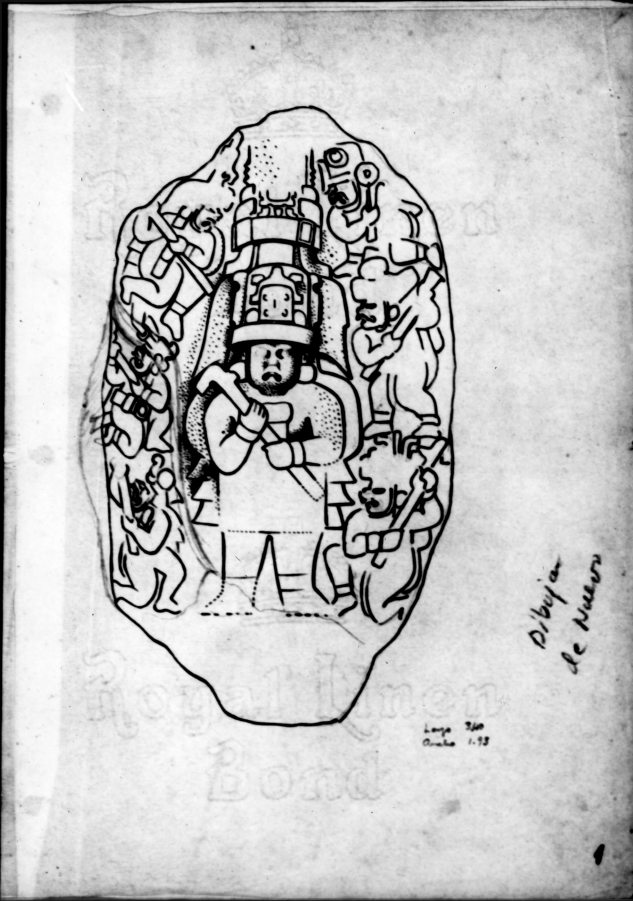


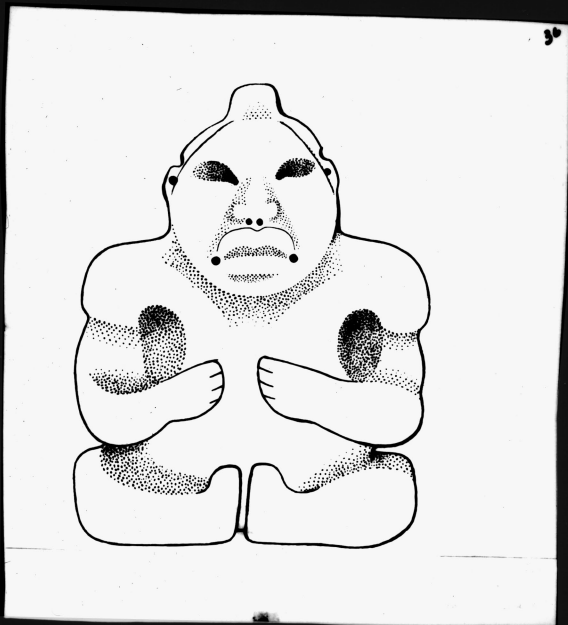
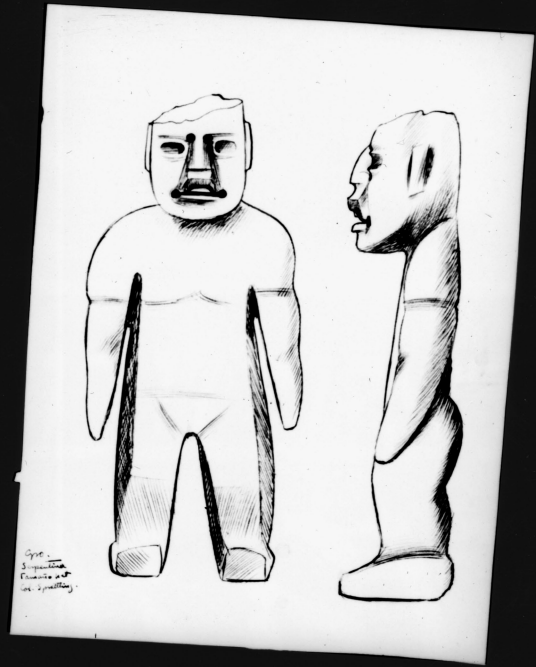
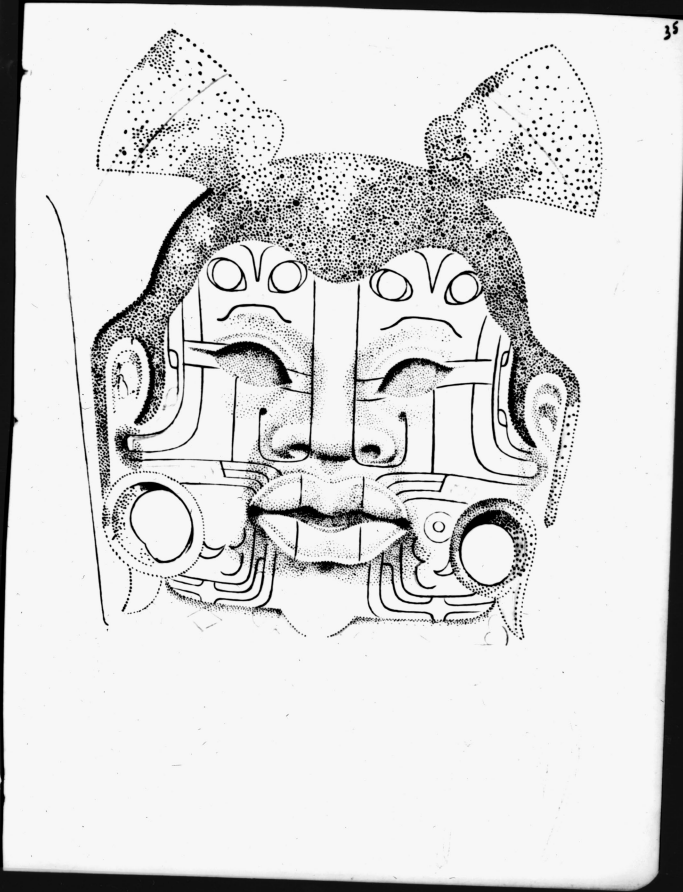


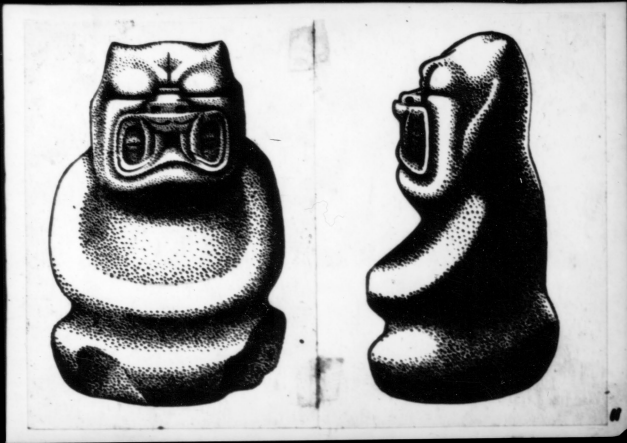


(The image rotated 90° appears on page 47 in its proper orientation.)

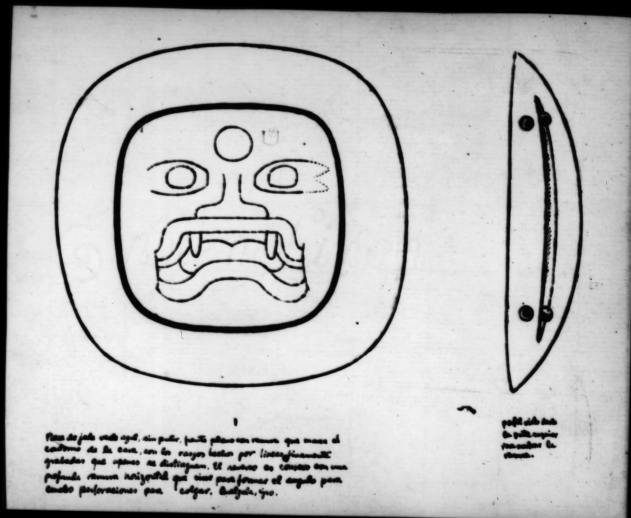
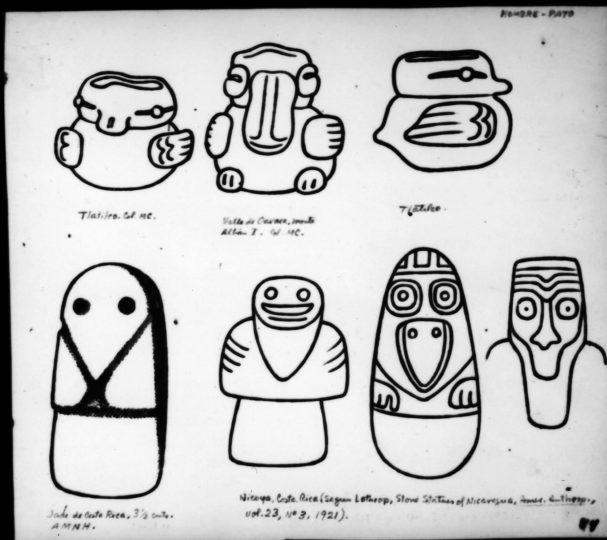


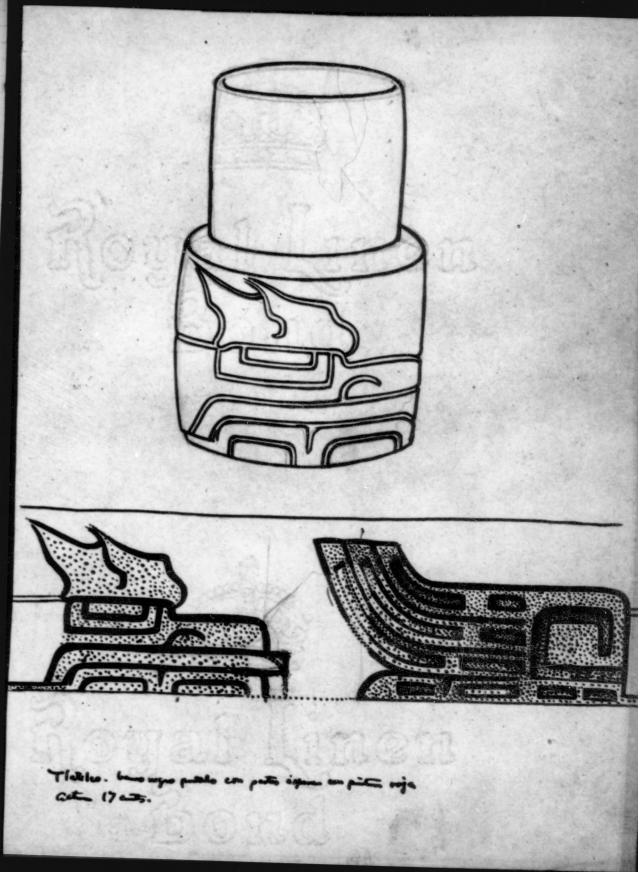




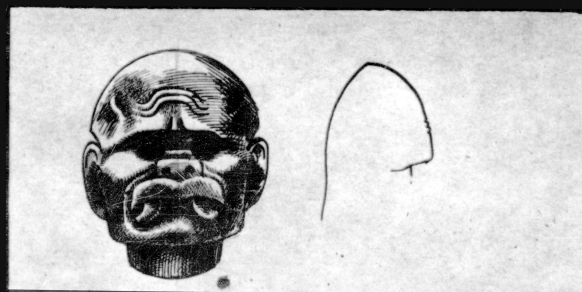
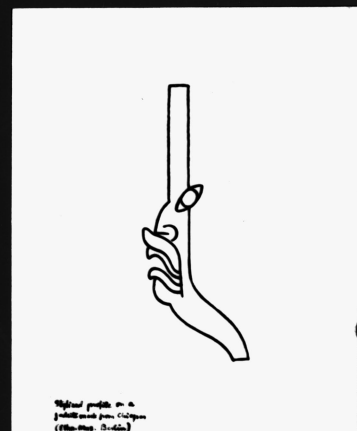


Ston jaguar
tempo antiguo
Yucatec museum.



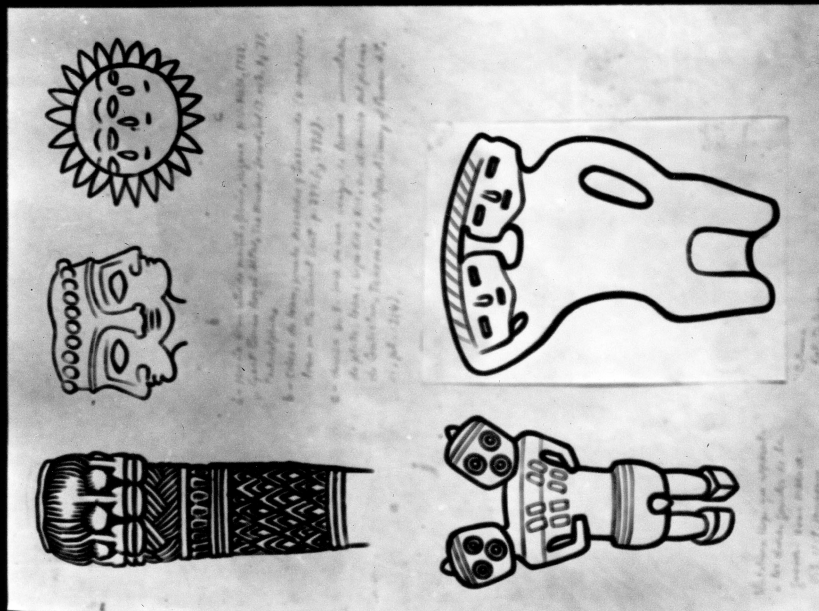


Two "Olmec" pictographs in the Los Victoria group, Chalchicomula, El Salvador. (after Boggis, S.B., "Olmec" pictographs in the Los Victoria group, Chalchicomula, archaeological zone, El Salvador. *Mexico M.A. Archaeology and Ethnology*, Consejo Nat. de Invest. 1979, Tom. 5 no. 1930.)





The photograph of this notebook page was printed on a single 8"x10" sheet as indicated.



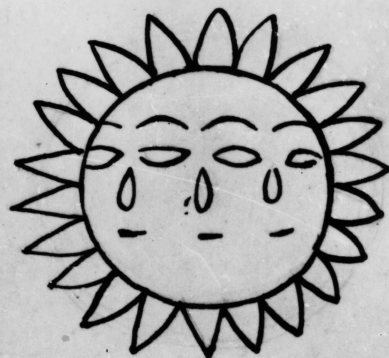
The photograph of this notebook page was printed on a single 8"x10" sheet as indicated.
The image appears on page 48 in its proper orientation.



a



b

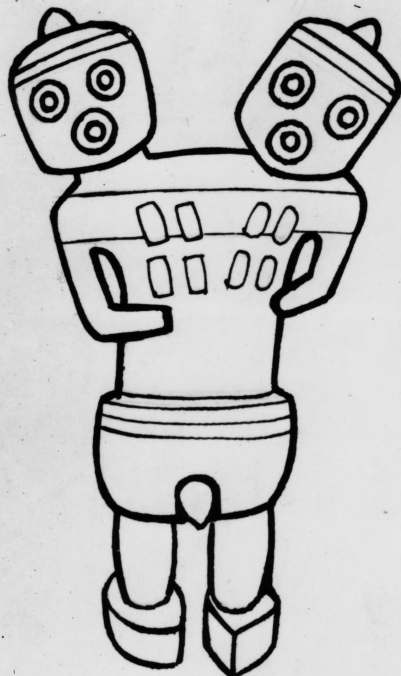


c

a - Remate de un cetro de marfil, Benin, Nigeria (H.V. Hall, 1922, Great Benin Royal Altar, The Museum Journal, vol 13, no 2, fig. 73, Philadelphia,

b - cabeza de tran, periodo Arsacido y Sassanido (E. Herzfeld, Iran in the Ancient East, p. 299, fig. 393).

c - diseño en la base de un varija de bronce incrustada de plata, Iran, siglo XII o XIII, en el museo del palacio de Gulistan, Teheran. (A.V. Pope, A Survey of Persian Art, vi, pl. 1314).



Katchina Hopi que representa a los dioses gemelos de la guerra. Nuevo Mexico.

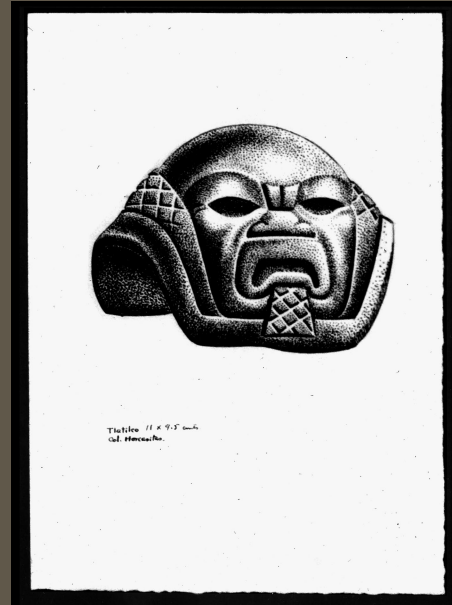
U.S. Nat. Museum



Columna
Est. D. Rivera



From page 3.



The Olmec 11 x 9 1/2 inch
Old Olmec Art.

From page 4.

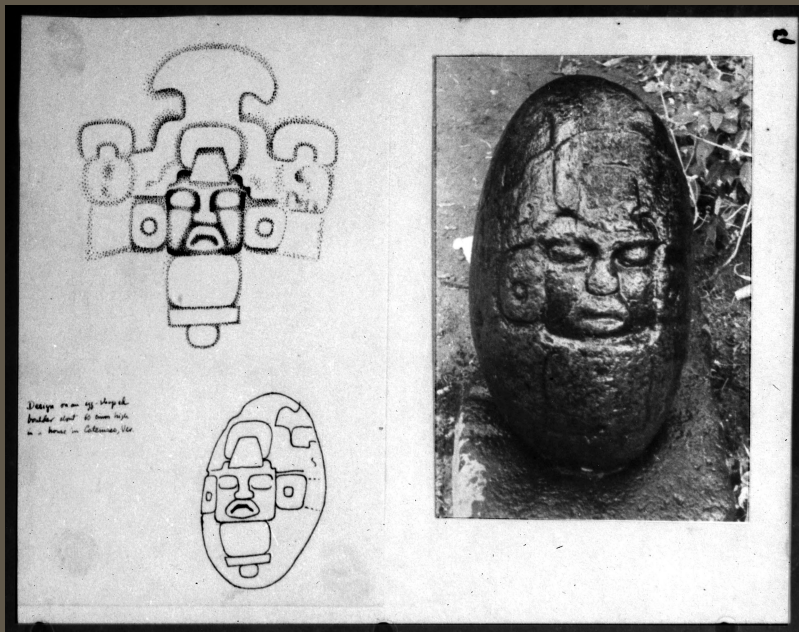


Reconstruction of the mask found on 5200 C and 4000 A in the same place.
Ch. 11, p. 66

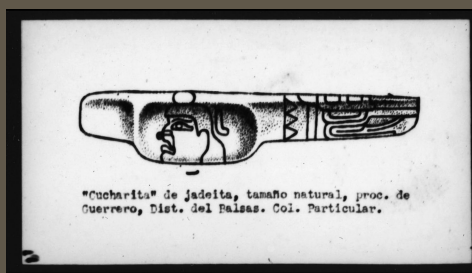
One large spot across page

Take out 1/2
open for comparison
The piece is 4 1/2

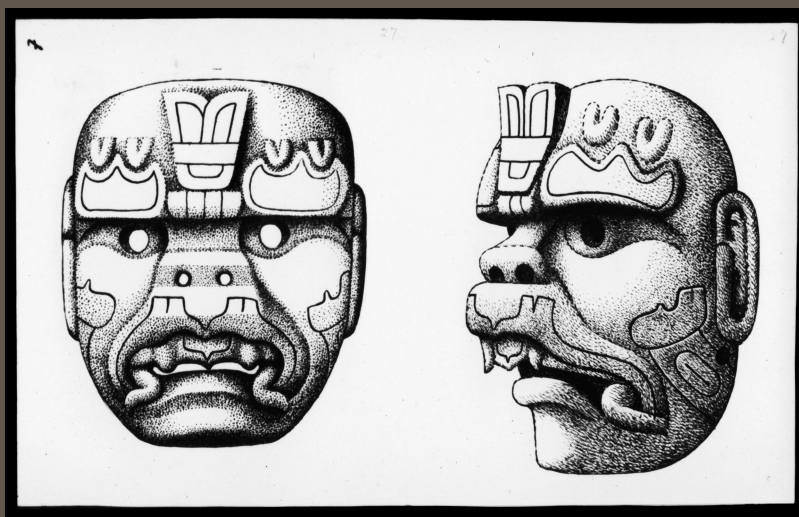
From page 6.



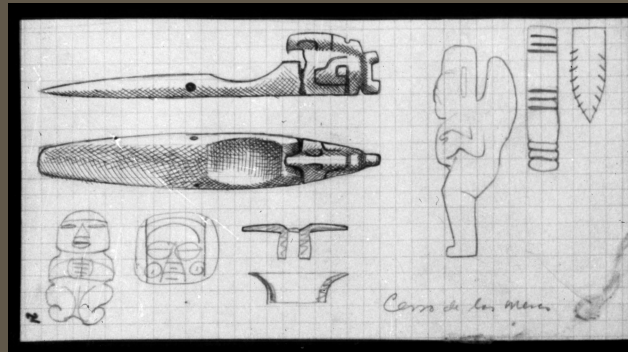
From page 8.



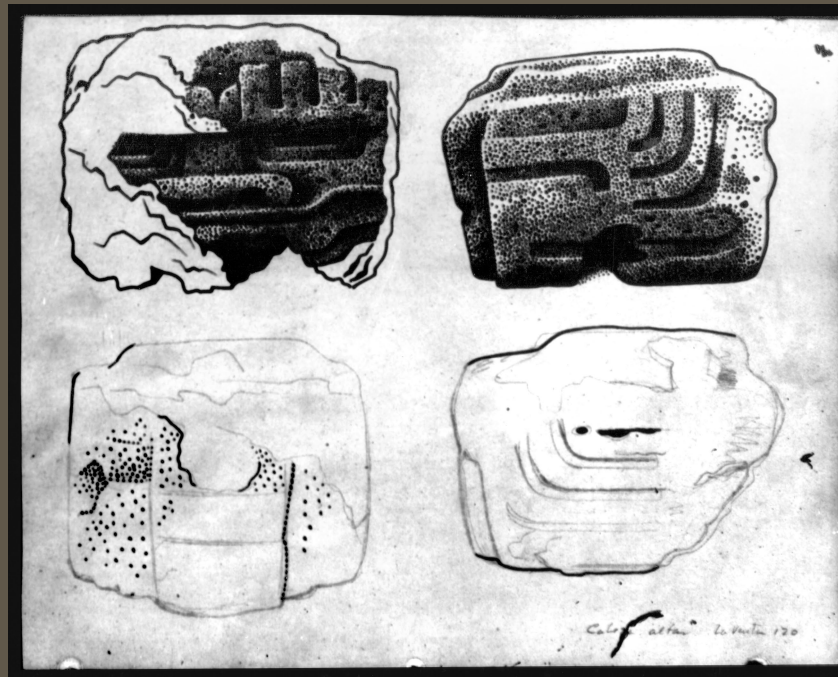
From page 14.



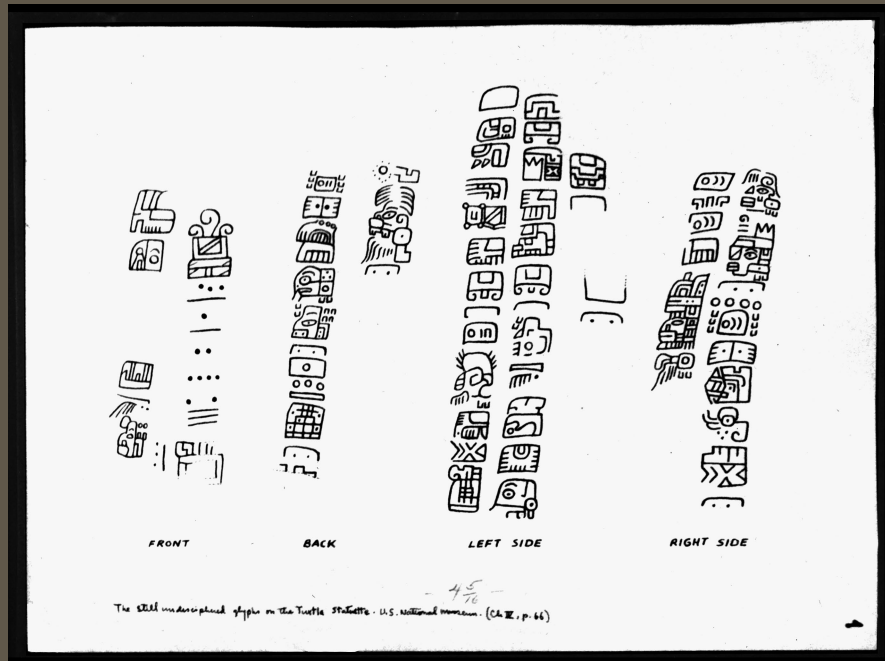
From page 16.



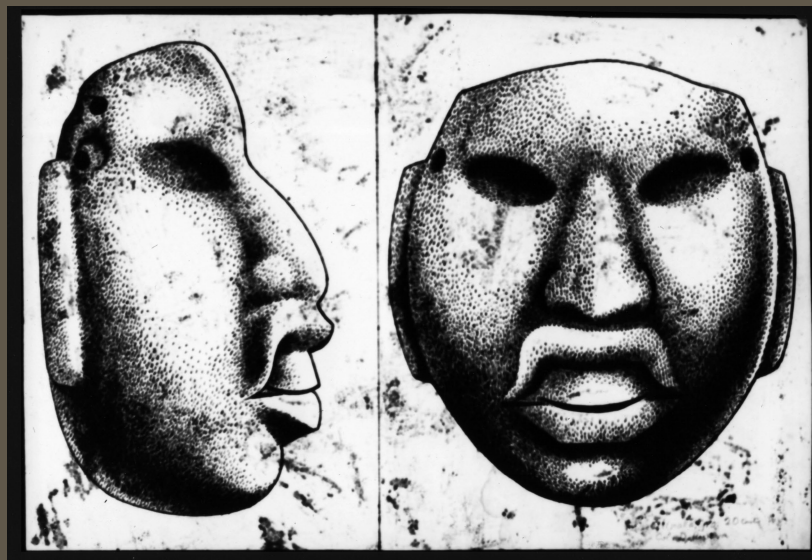
From page 22.



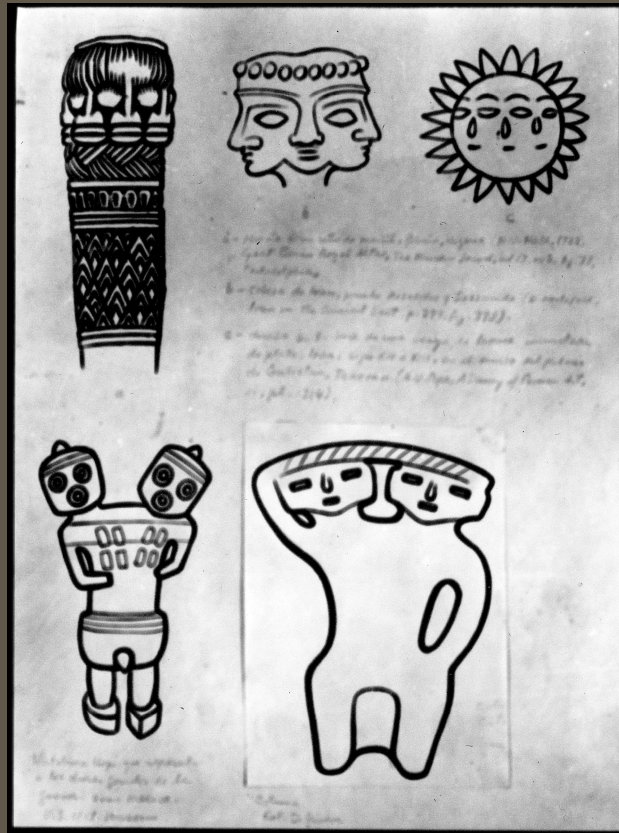
From page 23.



From page 24.



From page 25.



From page 41.

References cited

Coe, Michael D.
1968 *America's First Civilization*. American Heritage, New York.