

Olmec

Landmark

for LLILAS

by ANABELLA CORONADO RUIZ



FOR SOME TIME NOW, people have been stopping to look at the sculpture outside Sid Richardson Hall's Unit 1. In a common reaction, they stare, pause, then walk around the enormous stone head that marks the east entrance to the UT campus. Archaeologists are no strangers to this feeling of amazement about Olmec art

and culture. This ancient civilization occupied the coastal territory of the Gulf of Mexico in what are today the states of Veracruz and Tabasco from 1500 to 400 BCE. The name Olmec, meaning "rubber people" in Nahuatl, was given by twentieth-century art historians. Scholars believe that the Mixe-Zoque indigenous people of today are Olmec descendants, and their language is related to that of their ancestors. Much of Olmec

culture is shrouded in mystery because the humid tropical climate of the Gulf lowlands has destroyed archaeological evidence and many sites still remain to be excavated. We do know that the Olmec developed a religion, iconography, and rituals that were adopted and transmuted by later civilizations such as those of the Maya and Aztec, exercising a huge influence on these cultures. Most of our knowledge about the Olmec comes from the important archaeological sites of San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, and La Venta. Several of the nine still-extant colossal heads come from these ancient cities. The original of the San Lorenzo Monument 1 replica now at LLILAS was discovered by famed archaeologist Matthew Stirling, who excavated it at San Lorenzo in the 1940s (Coe 1994:66). His discoveries, and those of other archaeologists in Mexico during this time, unearthed for the world the culture of the Olmec.

San Lorenzo Monument 1 is popularly known as *El Rey*, a name that underscores the belief that such heads depict Olmec rulers who are wearing ballgame paraphernalia (Coe:68). The original sculpture is considered a signature piece of pre-Columbian culture and a world-class art object that represents New World civilization.



Replica of San Lorenzo Monument 1 sits at the entrance to LLILAS. Photo by Anabella Coronado



Universidad Veracruzana President Raúl Arias, Governor of Veracruz Fidel Herrera, and UT President William Powers Jr. cut the ceremonial ribbon at the dedication ceremony for the replica of San Lorenzo Monument 1 at LLILAS.

In November 2008, thanks to close ties between LLILAS and the Universidad Veracruzana, the Mexican Center brought the replica of the iconic sculpture to UT. The Universidad Veracruzana is one of Mexico's most prominent universities and houses the acclaimed Museo de Antropología near its campus in Xalapa, Veracruz. The museum is second in Mexico only to the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City in the importance of its holdings. LLILAS commemorated the arrival of the sculpture with a dedication ceremony and a symposium on Olmec civilization that featured leading scholars from the Mexico and the U.S.

The replica that now sits at the entry to LLILAS and the Benson Latin American Collection is made of solid stone and weighs 36,000 pounds, or 18 tons. "We went up the hill and carved a monolithic block with the rough measurements for the head. It took four people to roll it down the hill," said Ignacio Pérez Solano, the Xalapa-based artist who has spent his career exploring the history of the Gulf Coast and Mesoamerica. He has sculpted numerous colossal heads in basalt for display in museums and as public art in Mexico, the U.S., and Spain.

The artist meticulously reproduced San Lorenzo Monument 1 inch

by inch, recreating the powerful lines and imposing features of the original work. Pérez Solano began creating replicas of Olmec heads under the initiative of Miguel Alemán Velasco, who as governor of Veracruz from 1998 to 2004 wanted to make Olmec culture better known beyond the borders of Mexico. Since it is often difficult for the original colossal heads to travel outside Mexico because of logistical challenges, the replicas are a way for people to learn about the Olmec who otherwise might not encounter these works of art. Reproductions of colossal heads can be found at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Field Museum in Chicago, among other locations.

The Mexican Center began organizing the transportation of the sculpture from Xalapa to Austin in January 2008. Once a proposal for art in public spaces at UT was approved, it was necessary to contact a professional team of Mexican archaeologists working at the Museo de Antropología in Xalapa. Their assistance included helping to arrange the proper paperwork with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) to obtain the permit required to transport a full-scale archaeological replica outside Mexico. In the meantime,

another team at UT was putting together an architectural design for the base that would hold the sculpture in place outside Sid Richardson Hall. Engineers and architects had to ensure that the base could support a heavy work of solid stone over an indefinite period of time without collapsing or eroding.

The piece was loaded onto a flatbed trailer in Xalapa on October 16, 2008. After several delays at the U.S.-Mexico border, the Olmec head finally arrived on campus on October 22 and was set on its pedestal by a 150-ton crane. UT faculty, students, and staff, as well as the local press, watched in the parking lot outside the Benson Collection as the crane maneuvered the massive sculpture into position.

The dedication ceremony took place there on November 19, 2008, and featured remarks by UT President William Powers and his counterpart, Raúl Arias Lovillo of the Universidad Veracruzana. Former Governor of Veracruz Miguel Alemán Velasco and current Governor Fidel Herrera Beltrán were among others who also spoke at the event. The next day, the symposium *Olmec: The Origins of Ancient Mexican Civilization* began, the first conference held in the U.S. in more than twenty years to discuss findings in Olmec art and archaeology.

LLILAS and the Benson Collection can now more easily be identified by our striking landmark, which invites students and other visitors to learn more about the Olmec, one of Mexico's most distinctive cultural legacies. This imposing artifact symbolically depicts the greatness of the pre-Hispanic past in Mexico and is a permanent marker of the strong ties between the Mexican Center, LLILAS, and the Mexican academic world. *El Rey* is now both the welcoming and intriguing face of LLILAS, serving as a link between the past and the present, between the U.S. and Mexico.

Anabella Coronado Ruiz is a doctoral student in Maya archaeology at LLILAS and was instrumental in bringing the Olmec head to UT.

Reference

Coe, Michael D.
1994—*Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*. London: Thames and Hudson. ☀

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Photos by Anabella Coronado

