



Funerary urn

Date

c. 350-600 CE

Medium

Terracotta with remnants of pigment

Description

"The Zapotec peoples lived in the southern, southeastern, and central parts of current-day Oaxaca, Mexico. Their civilization began around 500 BCE and reached its height between 200 and 700 CE. The capital city, Monte Albán, was one of the earliest metropolises in the Americas, and elements of the Zapotec culture still exist in Oaxaca today. Anthropomorphic urns such as this one are commonly found at archaeological sites in the area—often in a funerary context but elsewhere as well—and have become indicative of the Zapotec culture. Although called urns, they are typically found empty, with no traces of ash, but some have contained nonhuman offerings, such as obsidian knives, beads, and animal bones. The urns are often discovered in large groupings of identical examples, perhaps made from the same mold. The form of this urn, a male figure seated cross-legged with his hands resting on his knees, is typical of those created during the Monte Albán III period (c. 350–800 CE). The figure wears a headdress, a face mask, a pectoral that hangs from the neck, and

a garment that covers the lap. The headdress and necklace both bear glyphs in the Zapotec language. Although the urn figures have historically been considered representations of gods, scholars today have not reached a consensus, and among the alternative theories is that they are representations of human figures, perhaps rulers, wearing the mask or attributes of a god or that they are representations of the deceased's own ancestors." (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) "The pre-Columbian Zapotec civilization thrived from 500 BC to 900 AD in the Valley of Oaxaca located in central Mesoamerica. The Zapotecs developed from surrounding agricultural communities in the area. As their civilization grew, the Zapotecs were able to establish a profitable trade network with the Olmec Civilization, providing them economic opportunities and inspiration to build the capital Monte Alban. Monte Alban was intentionally built on top of a mountain overlooking the other valleys. This placement enabled the state of Zapotec to control the region through a political hierarchy, military conquest, and imperial projects. Monte Alban transformed into a vibrant urban center, home to all classes of society. Many Zapotec civilians lived on leveled terraces cut into the mountain and numerous other settlements in the Valley of Oaxaca. These terraced hillsides also served as farming beds irrigated by a system of canals supplied with spring and rain water. Their architecture and methods of agriculture weren't the only sophisticated facets of Zapotec civilization. Both religion and art played a big role in daily life on the hill. The Zapotecs practiced a polytheistic religion, worshipping deities such as the Bat-god, the god of corn and fertility, or Cocijo, the god of rain and lightning. The Zapotec pantheon also had other deities for sun, wind, earth, love, war and more. Civilians offered prayers, gifts, and various forms of sacrifices to these gods in the hope that they would bring good fortune and positively influence natural elements like amount of rainfall, fertility of the land and people, and more. The Zapotecs also used rituals and made offerings to worship their royal ancestors. The seated funerary urn at the Wellin Museum is an ritual object that helped to facilitate the connection between the living and the dead. This urn symbolizes a deity like being or god sitting cross-legged wearing an elaborate feathered headdress, ornaments, and a loin cloth. The figure's exaggerated features draw attention to the details and intensity of its face. Groups of these urns were placed in tomb mounds surrounding the outside of the tomb itself. The groups consisted of five to seven figures. They were found empty, however, rendering their function unknown. The color of each urn also ranges based on the pigment of the earth in different areas of the Oaxaca Valley. Seated funerary urns exemplify not only the advanced craftsmanship of the Zapotec people, but also their distinct ceramic tradition." (SOURCE: Written by Annelise Vought, Class of 2019)

Dimensions

Overall: 13 1/2 × 9 1/2 × 6 in. (34.3 × 24.1 × 15.2 cm)