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ARTH 1300
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Pretty Lady



Unidentified Pre-Columbian (Tlatilco) Woman, *Tlatilco Figurine or Pretty Lady*,
1200-700BCE.
Ceramic, Clay, Wood, Paint.
6cm Tall.
CU Art Museum.

I will be discussing my analysis of the sculpture that we as a class have referred to as the “Pre-Columbian Man”. Despite our initial assumptions, this figurine actually depicts a woman. It was found in the Pre-Columbian farming village of Tlatilco on the outskirts of what is today Mexico City.¹ Recognized as one of the “earliest New World artistic centers”², this site contains numerous figurines similar to the one at hand (see Figure 1). The femininity of this tiny sculpture is apparent through closer observation of its “small and firm breasts”.³ The number of figurines depicting women that have been excavated at Tlatilco far outnumber those that depict men.⁴ This discovery, combined with the presence of breasts (and despite the absence of a lower body), allows for the reasonable conclusion of the womanly status of this sculpture to be made. The female sex of this figurine is what prompted my initial research question: How do the characteristics and context of this figure give us better insight to understanding the importance of women in this Mesoamerican culture? I will be making my argument concerning the answer to this question from a “womanist” angle. Anthropology professors and feminist thinkers, Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary Joyce, define this term as being “concerned with the actions, status, or simply presence of women in past societies”.⁵

¹ Gordon Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 43, 4 (2000): 477.

² Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 477.

³ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 478.

⁴ Richard G. Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 128.

⁵ Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce, *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 1.

Claassen and Joyce also present an argument for the social function of gender in their book, *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*.⁶ The argument states that gender functions in society as a means of categorization for organizing labor. Let's apply this definition of gender to Tlatilco society. Archeologists and art historians have suggested that a specific set of jobs was assigned to both women and men based upon their sex in Tlatilco as in many other Mesoamerican cultures during this time period. These duties ultimately divided the villagers into gender categories labeling them as women or men according to what labor duties they carried out. Through studies of other similar Mesoamerican figurines, Professor of anthropology at UCLA, Richard Lesure, has identified pottery making as one of the main roles that Tlatilco women assumed.⁷ This means that most, if not all, utilitarian ceramics and clay objects i.e. various tools, pots, cooking vessels, etc., were made by women. These objects served a very important role in maintaining the success of this society due to the usefulness of the pottery pieces. Some of the most vital utilitarian applications of the pottery likely aided activities for food obtainment, preparation, intake, and storage. It's safe to say that Tlatilco society would definitely not have functioned as efficiently without the women's pottery for this reasoning. Now that the important role of women as the potters of Tlatilco has been established, we are one step closer to answering the core question at hand. Again, the big question revolves around what we can derive from the context of this figure in order to ultimately draw conclusions about what importance women served in this society.

⁶ Claassen and Joyce, *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, 2.

⁷ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 154.

Before we can arrive at any conclusions pertaining to the ultimate purpose of this figure and what it says about the importance of women in Tlatilco, it is helpful to first observe patterns found in the several other, similar figurines that have been found (again, see Figure 1). Pre-Columbian art expert, Richard Lesure, made note of certain widely recurring patterns that he observed in the excavation of these figurines in his book, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*. These patterns include “femaleness, nudity, and an emphasis on the face and head”.⁸ I will be focusing on the specific widespread pattern of femaleness. According to Lesure, this pattern “may be largely accounted for by the position of women as the typical makers of figurines, perhaps often alongside pots or even from the clay left over from the manufacture of pots”.⁹ His argument is that since women were the chief potters of society, using the same, often leftover material (both clay and ceramic) from their primary job, they were also the foremost artists of these figurines. Essentially he suggests that the figurines are widely female because women made them. This argument can expand in a number of ways. The simplest idea being the figurines’ roles as a means of self-portraiture for the women artisans-turned-artists. Another, more widely accepted, suggestion has been made that these figurines were used as teaching devices and toys for children. Yet another pattern observed during the excavation of these figurines will help us deduce whether these theories are feasible.

These figurines, and likely the particular figure in the CU Art Museum, have been widely found in burial sites. Artist and ethnographer, Miguel Covarrubias, led the first controlled excavation at the site in 1942. By 1949, over 200 burials were identified in

⁸ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 153.

⁹ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 154.

what used to be the village of Tlatilco.¹⁰ Most of the Tlatilco figurines that have been discovered to date were excavated at these burial sites. Of the approximately 220 burial sites, figurines appeared in 46 of them. Another fascinating pattern within this discovery is that more figurines were buried with females than with men. 55 figurines were found in 80 female burials while only 20 figurines were found in 76 male burials.¹¹ According Dr. Richard Lesure's data, the figurines "constituted a greater proportion of the total assemblage of objects associated with women than with men", at 13 versus 4 percent respectively.¹² Lesure states that "furthermore, figurines associated with men were more likely to be fragmentary than those associated with women", at 60 versus 36 percent.¹³ Some argue whether these differences are statistically significant. But despite such speculation, there is no doubt that the figurines were "included in greater numbers in the graves of women" based upon the data from the excavations.¹⁴ Lesure suggests that this could mean that the "figurines may have been important to women's status but not to men's".¹⁵ This enlightening information leads us to our next question which pertains to why the latter may be true.

In order to grasp why these figurines may have been more important to women than to men, we first need to establish a plausible purpose for these sculptures. This subject is the most widely disputed among all analyses of these enigmatic sculptures. Of the innumerable proposals, most ideas are equally valid. As art historians, we cannot know for sure what these figurines were used for. The best we can do is make educated

¹⁰ Bendersky, "Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations", 477.

¹¹ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

¹² Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

¹³ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

¹⁴ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

¹⁵ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

guesses based on what we do know. I believe these figurines served as widely multipurposeful objects in both utilitarian and ritual contexts in Tlatilco society. I briefly mentioned two of the most frequently proposed purposes earlier in this piece. One argument defines these figures as a means of self-portraiture for the women potters/artists. The other argument suggests that these figurines functioned as toys or teaching objects for children. Likely the latter is most probable. Dr. Lesure's excavation data again will help us to support this idea through acknowledging that "children, particularly the very young, were likely to receive numerous [figurine] offerings" upon their untimely deaths.¹⁶ In fact, children were more likely to receive these figurines as offerings than adults. "28 percent of children and 22 percent of adults were accompanied by at least one whole or partial figure" in their graves.¹⁷ We might draw the conclusion that these objects were simply more important to women and children than to men considering the frequency of appearances of these figurines in the graves among these groups. The proposal of these figurines as toys and teaching objects helps us make sense of the data. Women likely spent more time than men with their children, especially with the very young and infants. This extensive amount of time spent together conceivably involved teaching via the mother upon her children. If these figurines were used as toys and teaching devices, it would make sense that the mothers, who probably personally made these objects themselves, would make use of these objects in these circumstances. This utilitarian-oriented argument of the purpose of these objects does not, however, help us too much in relating the object to the overall importance of women in Tlatilco culture. This is why I am making the suggestion that these figurines had many

¹⁶ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

¹⁷ Lesure, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art*, 128.

purposes. Thus, a ritualistic explanation of the relation of these figurines to women is more helpful.

Although *most* known Tlatilco figurines were discovered in burial site excavations, some have been found in fields that were once the location of vast maize crops. Maize was of fundamental importance to all Pre-Columbian cultures, especially to the Tlatilco.¹⁸ In addition to the agricultural focus and dietary staple of maize, the first humans were said to have been born of this sacred crop in Tlatilco culture. The “metamorphosis and the developmental cycles of both humans and maize were considered parallel”.¹⁹ The maize plant was a metaphor to the Tlatilco people for the “procreative force of nature” and the crop was “revered as though it were a pregnant human”.²⁰ Medical historian, Gordon Bendersky, suggested that these figurines were “placed in the fields at time of food crop cultivation to ensure an abundant crop”.²¹ In this way, Bendersky argues, that “the Tlatilco figurines may have functioned as goddesses whose death was to ensure a fertile spring”.²² This notion of the symbolism of fertility by these figurines correlates with the most emphasized characteristics of these sculptures: hips, thighs, and breasts.

Characteristics of these “Pretty Lady”²³ images, as they are commonly referred to in similar arguments, follow recurring patterns as well. The majority of the figurines that have been discovered possess unusually short “flipper” arms, small firm breasts, and

¹⁸ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

¹⁹ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

²⁰ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

²¹ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

²² Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

²³ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 478.

very narrow waists (see Figure 2).²⁴ The figurine that we have at the CU Art Museum possesses each of these traits as well. The breasts present on our specific sculpture account for the argument of these figurines as objects of fertility. A skeptic might argue that this conclusion cannot be confidently drawn due to the lack of a lower half of the body on this object. It is true that without the lower body, we cannot know for sure if this particular Tlatilco figurine possessed the other common characteristics of “voluminous thighs and prominent hips”²⁵ which so frequently infer notions of fertility across the history of most world art. However, considering the other clockwork-like patterns observed within these figurines, I am confidently making the reasonable assumption that the lower half of this sculpture had once also possessed these attributes. This establishes another plausible function of this figurine as a representation of fertility.

So what does all of this mean for the status of women in Tlatilco? I am making the argument, based upon the ample evidence of context that I have provided, that women were highly regarded in Tlatilco culture and this specific figurine is a small piece of evidence that we have left to prove it. Tlatilco women assumed societal roles as potters, artists, mothers, and teachers, among imaginably, many other roles. In this way, women were extraordinarily indispensable to the success and survival of all of Tlatilco. Additionally, and more importantly I argue, Tlatilco culture acknowledged women as portals to human life. Women were so powerful in this way that the symbols of their fertility, the figurines, were considered divine enough to secure a fruitful harvest of the sacred maize plant every spring.²⁶ Art historians Kellen McIntyre and Richard

²⁴ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 478.

²⁵ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 478.

²⁶ Bendersky, “Tlatilco sculptures, diprosopus, and the emergence of medical illustrations”, 491.

Phillips suggest that there are “multiple messages encoded in visual representations of women”.²⁷ We are able to derive all of the ideas discussed from this 6cm tall figurine through scrupulous study of what we observe. Feminist writer and art historian, Asuncion Lavrin, reminds us that “an interdisciplinary and feminist approach to history can enrich our understanding of the connections that people made, the role that women played, and the meaning of genders in cultures of the past”.²⁸ As a woman and budding art historian, I am grateful to have studied such a tiny, yet femininely empowering piece of art for my analysis.

²⁷ Kellen Kee. McIntyre and Richard E. Phillips. *Woman and Art in Early Modern Latin America* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 21.

²⁸ Asuncion Lavrin, “Woman and art in early modern Latin America”, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 89, 1 (2009): 146.

Figures

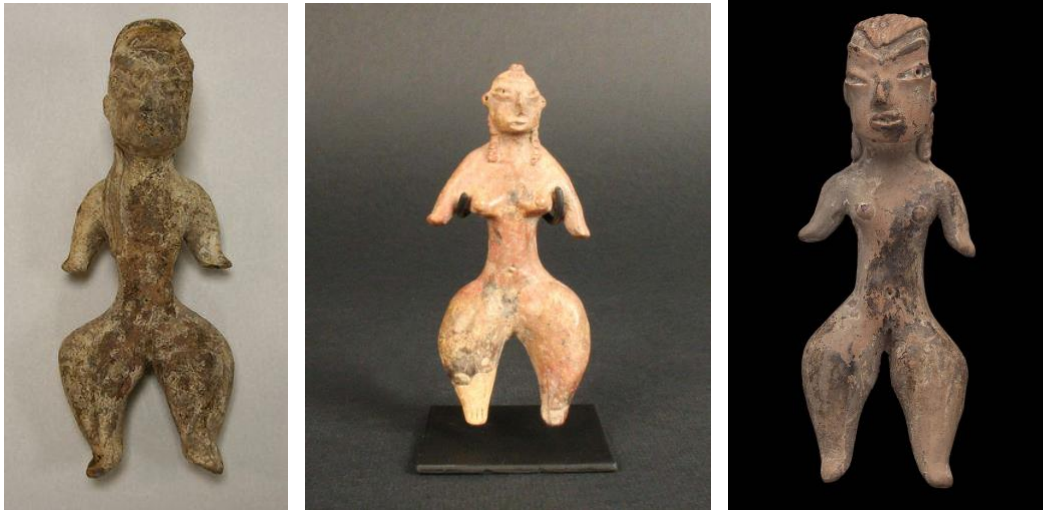


Figure 1: Tlatilco woman, Tlatilco Pretty Lady Figurines, 1200-700BCE, ceramic and/or clay with paint.



Figure 2: Tlatilco woman, Tlatilco Pretty Lady Figurines, 1200-700 BCE, ceramic and/or clay with paint.

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