Our journey today takes us to the galleries of the ancient Americas, where we will look at objects from Mexico. These galleries are on the lower level of the Museum. Walk down the stairs and turn right. Walk through the ancient Greek and Egyptian galleries and turn right again, into the galleries of the ancient Americas.

Between the last Ice Age and the sixteenth century, when European explorers arrived, there were thousands of distinct societies in the Americas. By examining the objects they left behind, anthropologists (people who study humans and how they live) and art historians have been able to learn a great deal about these ancient cultures.

Find the Gulf Coast area on the map (the pink/red area). This is where the Olmec peoples lived. The Olmec were one of the first great civilizations in the Americas; their civilization lasted from 1500 to 500 B.C.—from around three thousand to two thousand years ago. They were excellent farmers and astronomers. The Olmec were also amazing sculptors.
You will see the figure on the left in a case toward the back of the gallery, on your left. What do you think this Olmec sculpture is made of?

Many people guess clay because of the reddish color, but it is actually stone. The color comes from a mineral called cinnabar that has been rubbed onto the stone.

Who do you think this man is? What do you think he is doing? Does his pose seem unusual?

Some historians believe that he is in the process of changing from a man into a were-jaguar (half-man and half-jaguar). Other sculptures depict a similar figure in different stages of the transformation process. Some figures have more jaguar features than this one does.

He was probably a very important person in the Olmec society. This transformation ritual was likely part of a ceremony performed as a way of communicating with the gods or the supernatural world.

Many Mesoamerican cultures believed that people had companion animal spirits. We often see images of people depicted with animal characteristics like fangs, feathers, or wings.

If you could have a companion animal spirit, which animal would you choose? Why?

The Olmec people did not have metal tools. This sculpture is made of very hard stone.

What do you think the Olmec might have used to carve and polish this figure?

If you guessed other rocks, you are probably right. Most likely, they also used a leather strap that they rubbed back and forth, and possibly an ancient tool called a bow drill. Sand or other rough materials would have been used to polish it. Imagine how long it must have taken to get the stone so smooth!
Companion Animal Spirit

Use the space below to draw what your companion animal spirit might look like. (Remember, it’s ok to use characteristics from more than one animal.)

Animals

You have probably noticed that animals are mentioned frequently when we talk about ancient Mexico. Different kinds of animals had different meanings in rituals and myths. For example, the jaguar was very important because it was thought to be a link between this world and the Underworld.

Which animals can you find in this gallery?

This object was probably a toy. The animal's feet are resting on wheels so that it could roll. Wheels were not widely used in ancient Mexico, but because of objects like this one we know that they existed.

What animal do you think this is?

Does this seem like a fun toy? Do you have any toys like it?
The Ballgame

The people of Mexico played an early team sport, the ballgame. Many different cultures played a version of this game. Because they made balls for this game from rubber, the Mesoamerican ballgame would not have been possible without the rubber tree. The size of the ball seems to have varied from location to location.

Below is a Zapotec ball court from a place called Monte Albán. Can you find Monte Albán on the map on page 2?

This court is shaped like a capital letter “I.” The long, central alley is where the teams played the game. We think that the goal of the game might have been to get the ball past the other team, or possibly to hit stone carvings that were placed along the sides of the alley. Players were not allowed to use their hands.

Can you find this ballplayer holding a ball?

The ballgame was dangerous! The ball was heavy and could even break bones. The players had to wear special gear for protection.

Can you think of ballgames we play today that have special protective gear?

The yoke, a hard, U-shaped brace, was part of the ballplayers’ uniform. It would have been worn around the waist for protection. This one is made of stone and weighs almost 50 pounds, which was probably too heavy to wear in a real game. The yoke also isn’t nicked the way it would be if it had been worn in a game. Maybe it was worn in a special ceremony or was given as a trophy to the winner of a game.

Can you think of a game played today in which the winner receives a trophy that looks like a piece of equipment used to play the game?
LABELEDING ACTIVITY

Below is a ballplayer in full uniform. See if you can label the different pieces of his uniform by filling in the blank boxes with the words in bold below.


Sash      Jade necklace      Loincloth      Bracelets      Yoke      Anklets      Bird headdress

You can find this ballplayer figurine in the case on the right side of the gallery. He wears a spectacular bird headdress painted a brilliant blue and set into a crown of feathers. These headdresses might have been used to distinguish one team from another or one player from another.
Thank you for joining us today to explore the art of ancient Mexico. Don't forget to stop at the information desk to collect a sticker for your Artful Adventures Passport. We hope that you enjoyed your visit to the Princeton University Art Museum and that you join us for another Artful Adventure!

On the following pages you will find suggestions for ways that you can continue your Mexican Adventure at home:

**ART PROJECT: MAKE YOUR OWN COMPANION ANIMAL SPIRIT**

You will need:
- A cardboard toilet paper tube
- Construction paper of different colors
- Scissors
- Tape or glue
- Markers, crayons, or colored pencils

1. Think about what you would like your companion animal spirit to look like. Is it going to be an imaginary creature made up of the characteristics of different animals? Perhaps with the wings of a bird, the horns of a bull, or the mouth of a crocodile?

2. Cut a piece of construction paper long enough to wrap around the cardboard tube.

3. Tape or glue the construction paper to the tube.

4. Using other pieces of construction paper, and your markers or crayons, add the animal characteristics you selected in step one.
**Suggested Reading**

*Miro in the Kingdom of the Sun,* by Jane Kurtz and David Frampton (woodcuts)
In this folktale a young Inca girl succeeds where her brothers and others have failed, when her bird friends help her find the special water that will cure the king’s son.
(Gr K–3)

*Aztec, Inca, and Maya,* by Elizabeth Baquedano
This book chronicles the history, beliefs, and everyday lives of the ancient Aztec, Inca, and Maya peoples.
(Gr 3–5)

*Amazing Maya Inventions You Can Build Yourself,* by Sheri Bell-Rehwoldt
This rich resource combines historical facts about the Maya with entertaining and educational craft projects.
(Gr 3–6)

*National Geographic Investigates Ancient Inca: Archaeology Unlocks the Secrets of the Inca’s Past,* by Beth Gruber and Johan Reinhard (consultant)
Photographs and illustrations pepper this informative guide to recent archeological finds and what they tell us about the Inca.
(Gr 3–7)

*Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491,* by Charles C. Mann
This study of Native American societies is adapted for younger readers from Charles C. Mann’s best-selling *1491.* Turning conventional wisdom on its head, the book argues that the people of North and South America lived in enormous cities, raised pyramids hundreds of years before the Egyptians did, engineered corn, and farmed the rainforests.
(Gr 6+)

All of these books can be found in the children's section of the Princeton Public Library.