

INTRODUCING ART

MAYAN ARCHITECTURE

Please refer to the text on the back of the poster, also stapled to this lesson, for the background information.

Have the students examine this poster and pretend that they are an archeologist studying El Tajin. Have them explain what they think these structures could have been used for.

1. In what part of the world do you think these structures were built? (Mesoamerica) You can show on a map if one is available.
2. What time in history might you think that these were constructed?
3. Do these structures remind you of any other structures you have seen? What were those used for? (Pyramids used as tombs for Pharaohs)
4. How tall do you think these structures stood?
5. Do you think that these stones look like they did back in 600-900 A.D. ? Could they have been painted another color?
6. What do you think the small windows or niches might have been used for?
7. Can you guess how many there might have been on the structure?
8. Does that suggest what it could have been used for?
9. Do you think that the two pyramids served the same purpose?
10. What could the right pyramid have been used for?

FASCINATING FACTS

Archaeologists studying the ruins and artifacts of El Tajin believe it was once a cultural capital in Veracruz, Mexico. This area is part of *Mesoamerica* (Middle America), an ancient cultural region extending from central and southern Mexico into Guatemala and Honduras. Mesoamerican cultures were developing at least 2,500 years before the arrival of Columbus. The first people to arrive on the North American continent might have come from Asia. Experts believe they crossed the Bering Strait during the earth's last *Ice Age* and migrated south, following *mammoth* herds. Early civilizations such as the *Olmec* and *Maya* strongly influenced later Mesoamerican cultures, including the people of El Tajin.

El Tajin is located near the *coastal plains* of the Gulf of Mexico. It is considered one of the longest-occupied *city-states* in the area — from 100 A.D. to 1100 A.D. Studies suggest that El Tajin experienced flourishing trade and commerce from 600 A.D. to 900 A.D. It was the central marketplace along busy Mesoamerican trade routes. Traders met in El Tajin to buy, sell or barter vanilla beans, rubber, cotton and ceramic wares. In 600 A.D. there were no coins in the region, so people paid each other in *cacao beans*.

Stretching across 146 acres of lush valley, El Tajin's urban center had a population of more than 4,000. It was surrounded by gardens, fruit groves, terraced hillsides and many settlements. Like most city-states in the golden age of Mesoamerica, El Tajin was filled with *pyramids*, *plazas*, *palaces*, *markets* and *ball courts*.

Most Mesoamericans seem to have had at least one thing in common — they enjoyed the same ball game! No rules for the game have been found, but sculptures show a player bumping a ball from the hips. They probably were not allowed to use their hands. One element of the game was to pass a heavy rubber ball through a stone ring. The ring was not much bigger than the ball, so it was very challenging.

The grandest structure of the El Tajin site is the *Pyramid of the Niches* (pictured on the left). Standing sixty feet high, this six-tiered pyramid might once have been painted bright red with blue flames. The colorful *frescoes* that once adorned the Pyramid of the Niches crumbled long ago. But another fascinating feature remains — the niches.

There are 365 niches carved into the pyramid's stone walls. Archaeologists speculate that each niche represented a day of the year and contained a statue. It seems that El Tajin, like other Mesoamerican city-states, placed great emphasis on the passage of time. Mesoamericans seem to have shared an even more accurate calendar system than ours today. Observatories and artifacts found at other Mesoamerican sites suggest a passion for *astronomy*.

The pyramid to the right might have been a *grandstand* area. The *plazas* in the foreground could have been used in religious ceremonies and as platforms for theatrical performances and dances. After forty years of *excavation* at this site, much still remains to be discovered and understood about El Tajin.



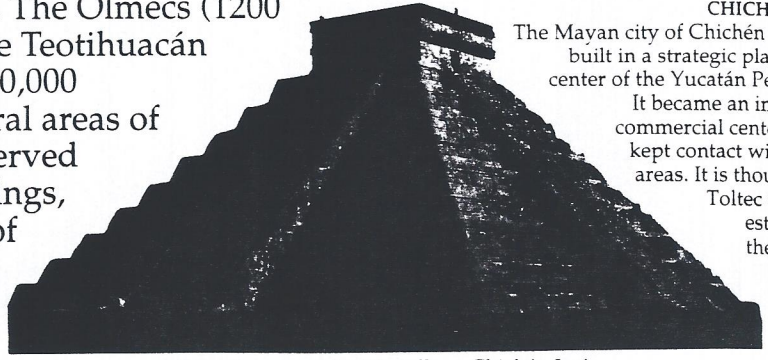
Mesoamerican cities



THE PEOPLES OF MESOAMERICA built their cities in a variety of geographic and climatic areas. Some were built in the highlands, and others in jungles or coastal regions. The Olmecs built their cities in tropical regions, and the people of Teotihuacán, the Toltecs, and the Aztecs, in the highlands. The Mayas built their cities in both highland and lowland regions. These geographical differences influenced the architecture of the cities. As time passed, the cities grew in size. The Olmecs (1200 B.C.) lived in small cities, while Teotihuacán (A.D. 200) had an estimated 150,000 inhabitants or more. The central areas of Mesoamerican cities were reserved for religious and public buildings, and the houses of rulers and of the elite. The houses for the common people were built outside these areas.

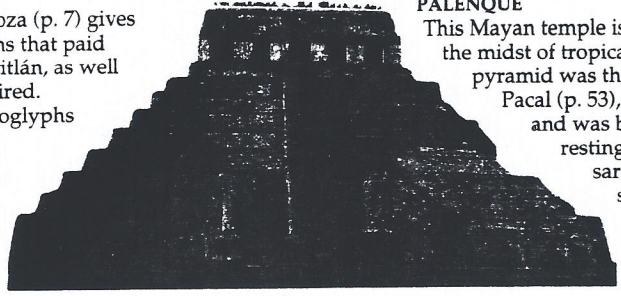
TRIBUTE TOWNS

The Codex Mendoza (p. 7) gives the names of towns that paid tribute to Tenochtitlán, as well as the goods required. Each of these hieroglyphs (left) represents a subject town.



Temple-pyramid El Castillo at Chichén Itzá

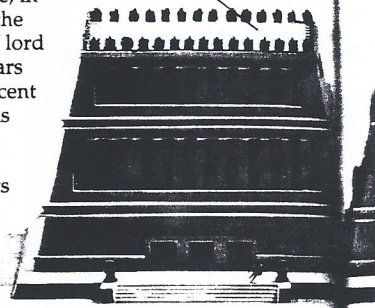
CHICHEN ITZA
The Mayan city of Chichén Itzá was built in a strategic place in the center of the Yucatán Peninsula. It became an important commercial center which kept contact with many areas. It is thought that Toltec invaders established themselves there.



Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque

PALENQUE

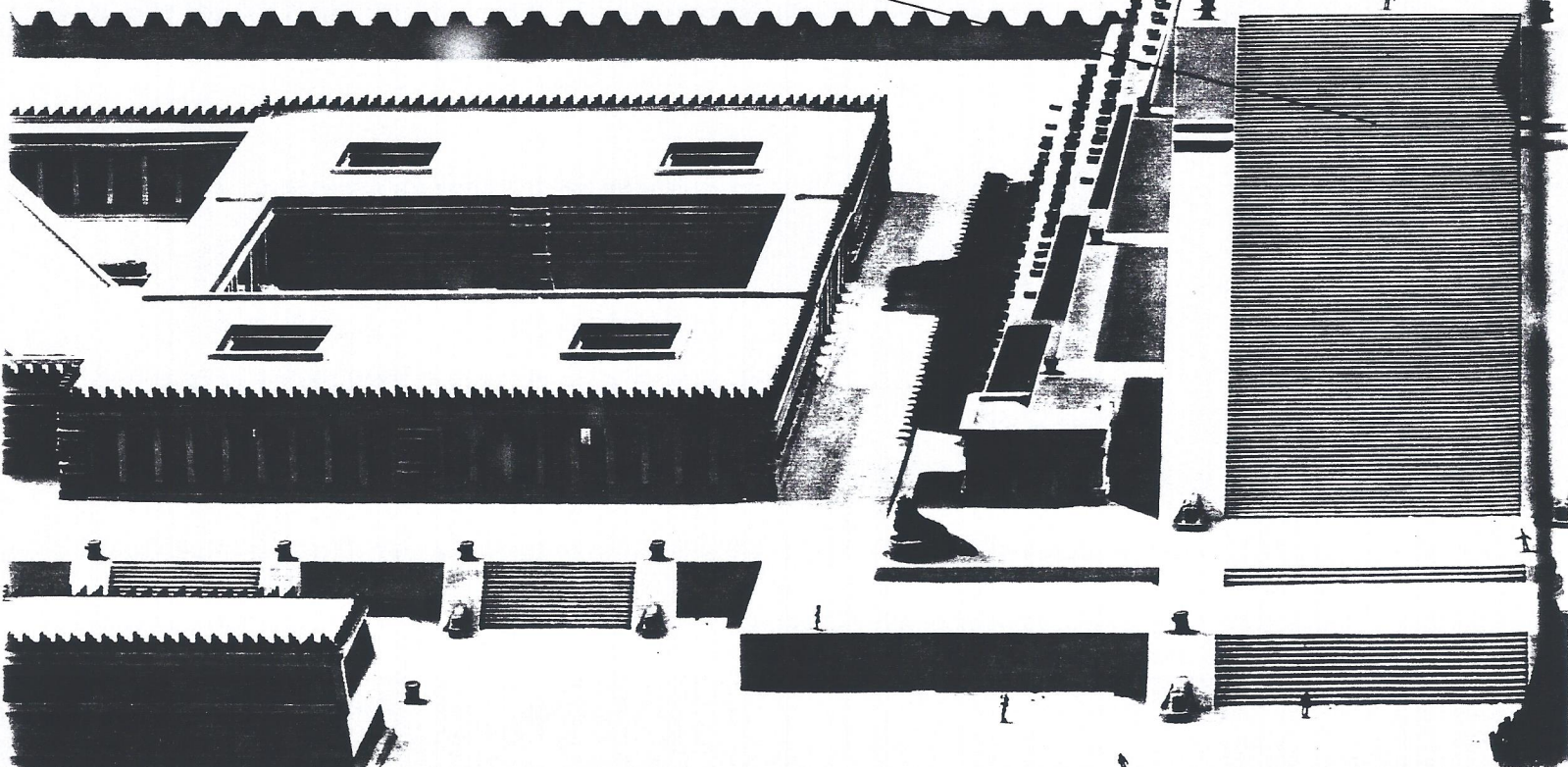
This Mayan temple is situated in Palenque, in the midst of tropical jungle. Hidden in the pyramid was the funeral chamber of lord Pacal (p. 53), who ruled for 68 years and was buried in his magnificent resting place in A.D. 683. His sarcophagus contained some of the most beautiful jade objects ever found in Mesoamerica.

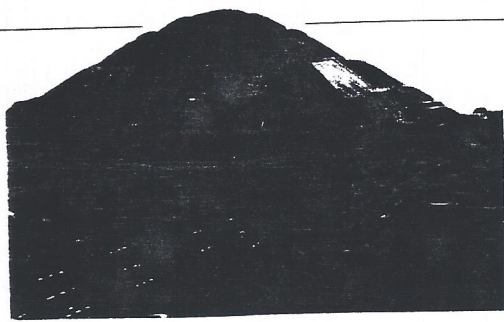
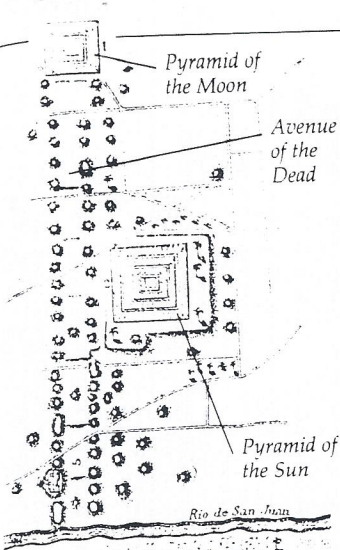


Shrine to Tlaloc, god of rain

Great temple of the Aztecs

Temple steps





TEOTIHUACAN STYLE

Many of the structures at Teotihuacán were built in the same style. They consisted of a sloping base with a flat rectangular top. This architectural feature is also found in some Mayan centers, such as Tikal in Guatemala.

MAP OF TEOTIHUACAN

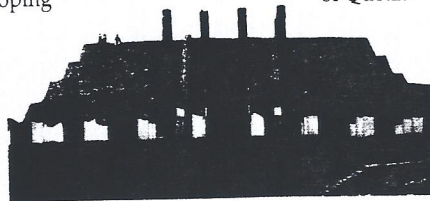
This is the plan of the ceremonial center of Teotihuacán with its main axis, the Avenue of the Dead. The two most imposing pyramids are the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. All the buildings at Teotihuacán were painted, some with mythological scenes.

TOLTEC WARRIOR

This is one of the warriors on the top of Temple B. These warriors once supported a roof. The warrior is equipped with a spearthrower, and his breastplate in the shape of a butterfly distinguishes him as a warrior.



This temple is known as Temple B, or the Temple of Quetzalcoatl



TULA

The Toltec capital of Tula reflects the beginning of an era of great military action. Despite it being the capital of the god Quetzalcoatl, who was opposed to war and human sacrifice, there are carvings everywhere of warriors equipped for war, including on top of temple pyramids.

Shrine of Huitzilopochtli, god of war

Map of Tenochtitlán

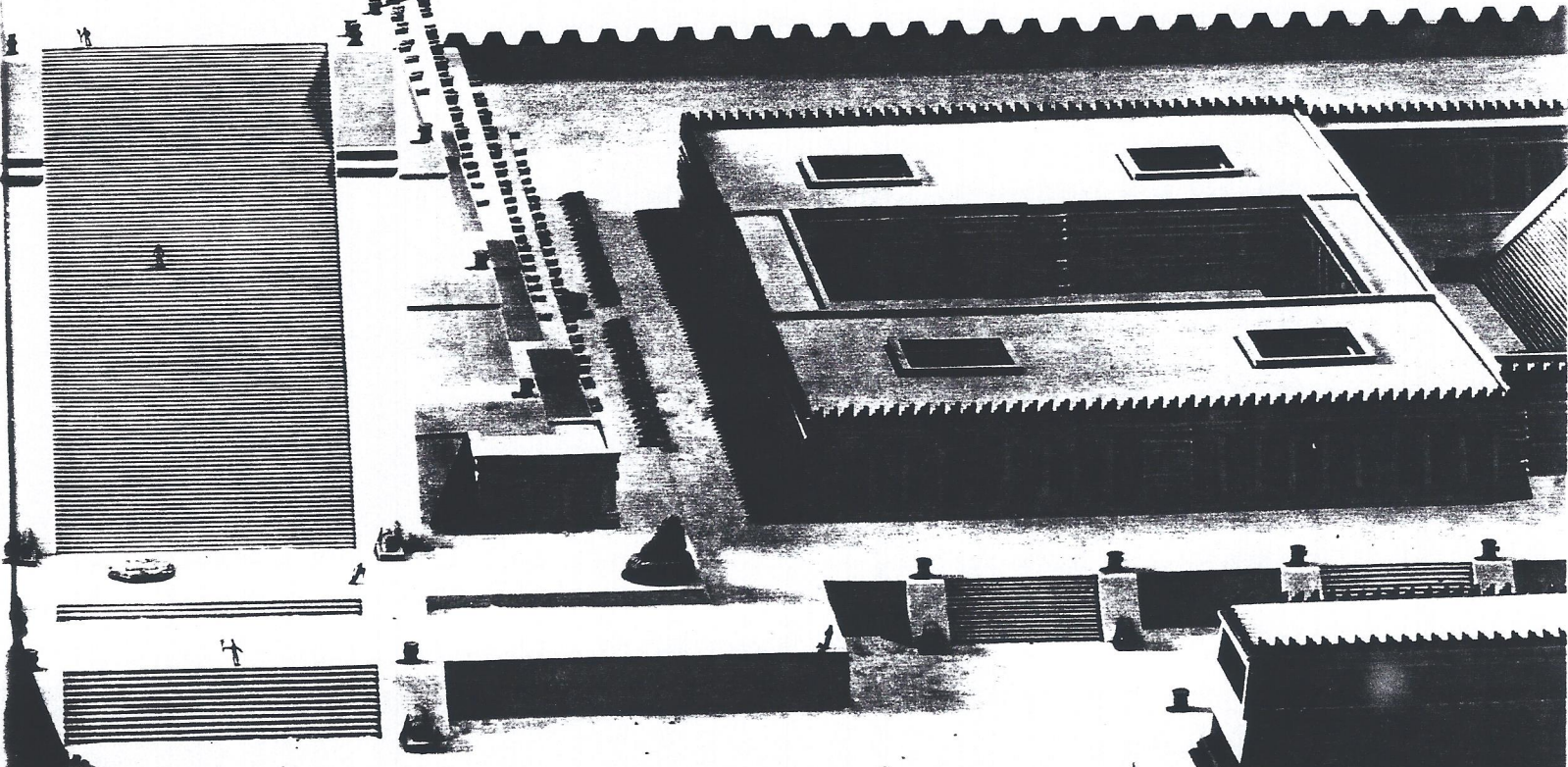
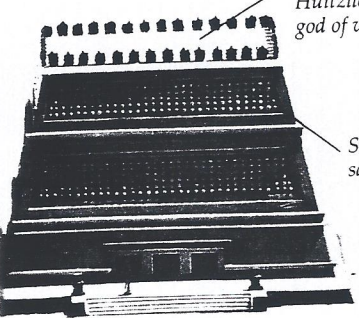
Skulls of sacrificed victims



Brazier

TENOCHTITLAN

This European map of Tenochtitlán, the physical and spiritual heart of the Aztec empire (left), shows the city built on a lake and crossed by four artificial causeways. The conquistadors described the streets as being wide and straight. The Great Temple of the Aztecs (pp. 30-31) was at the center. This model (below) shows the Great Temple inside the sacred precinct. The temple was dedicated to the god of rain as well as the god of war, who was the god of the Aztecs. Just outside the ceremonial center were palaces, warrior schools, shrines, and a ball court (pp. 58-59).



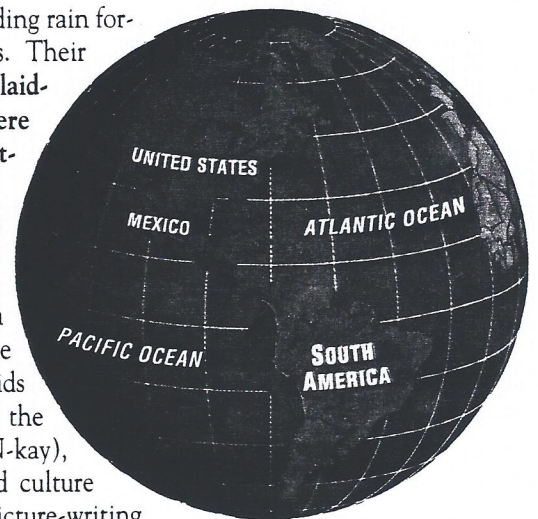
Civilizations

The mysterious reclining figures on the cover and above left, as well as the majestic palace (left), were all created over 1,000 years ago. The 20-ton stone head (below left) was carved 16 centuries earlier. The artists who built these works lived in great civilizations that grew up in Mexico and South America long before the establishment of any of the European nations we are familiar with today. These *pre-Columbian* cultures go back as far as 4000 B.C. and lasted until they were taken over by Europeans in the 16th century A.D. Today, only traces remain of their vast, complex cities.

The earliest pre-Columbians were the *Olmec* (OL-mek), who lived on the coast of southern Mexico from about 1200 to 400 B.C. They developed a sculptural style that can be seen in most pre-Columbian art—**giant, simplified, stylized figures** decorated with images from the surrounding rain forest—jaguars, alligators, toads. Their vast cities of **geometrically laid-out streets and buildings** were dominated by huge, flat-topped pyramids.

The next great civilization was that of the *Maya* (MY-ya), who lived in southern Mexico and Central America from 250 to 900 A.D. The Maya built great stone pyramids and complex structures like the palace at *Palenque* (Pal-EN-kay), above left. This sophisticated culture also developed a kind of picture-writing and a way of recording dates on carved stone blocks.

After the Maya, the *Aztec* flourished in Mexico. At about the same time, the *Inca* civilization arose in South America, mainly in Peru. Like the pre-Columbian civilizations before them, the Aztec and Inca practiced religions that focused on natural forces. They also built huge temples, invented complex calendars and time-keeping systems, carved monumental sculptures, and created unique masks and ornaments.



Pre-Columbian civilizations (see areas in red) existed in Mexico (Olmec, Maya, Aztec) and South America (Inca) long before Columbus came to America from Europe in 1492.

Map: Jim McMahon

This 1,000-year-old Maya palace covers a vast system of underground passages.

Palenque palace, c. 700 A.D., Chipas, Mexico. © D. Donne Bryant

Even today, much about the ancient Maya still remains a mystery, and new Maya sites are being uncovered all the time. It has long been known that these warlike people, whose culture reached its height between 250 and 900 A.D., developed a writing system, a complex system of mathematics, and a 365-day calendar based on the sun's movements. They also built a massive system of pyramids throughout Mexico and Central America.

Early Maya civilization was centered in southern Mexican cities like Palenque (page 3). Religion was vital to the Maya. They believed that everything around them—rocks, earth, water, sky—was alive and filled

with spirits. Later, when Maya culture moved north, cities like Chichén Itzá (Chee-chen EET-za), below left, became large religious centers dedicated to a god who took the form of a feathered serpent.

In pre-Columbian art, the snake was a positive symbol. Serpents were believed to be reborn every time they shed their skin; they stood for renewal, transformation, and immortality. Maya religious art often featured sculptures of this deity.

One of the most famous Maya serpent monuments is the pyramid at Chichén Itzá (left). This triangular structure, with a temple set on its flat top, reflects the movements of the earth. On the shortest and longest days of the year, each stairway casts a shadow resembling a segmented serpent. Sculpted serpents surrounding the pyramid (left) repeat the structure's massive, simplified, stylized shape.

This pyramid might also have had another function. In 1930, archaeologists found inside a *chacmool* (chock-MOOL) figure (cover), a jaguar throne, and a sealed stairway leading north, all clues that this may be the tomb of a great king. No burial chamber has yet been found, but archaeologists continue to search for the lost tomb of Kukulcan, one of the last of the Maya emperors.

No one knows why the ancient Maya culture declined around 900 A.D. There are many theories which sound all too familiar today. Some archaeologists believe the Maya tribes became too violent and destroyed one another; others say overpopulation was the cause; still others think Maya farmers cut down too much of the rain forest, destroying nature's ecological balance.



The stone mask above, with no eye openings, was not made to be worn but created for ceremonial purposes.

Stone mask, mid-7th century. British Museum, London. Photo, Superstock.

The Maya used great blocks of stone to create most of their art and architecture.

Chichén Itzá, Yucatan, Mexico.
© Robert Frerck, Odyssey.

“I love the Maya . . . lost jungle cities, secret messages, treasure-filled tombs, and the mystery of why it all collapsed.” —ARTHUR DEMAREST, ARCHEOLOGIST, 1993.