

**BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS***Colima Tomb Dog Vase*

Many expressive ceramic sculptures of small, hairless, fat dogs have been found in tombs in Northwestern Mexico. There a culture known as Colima evolved around 2200 and 1500 years ago. The people of the Colima Culture valued their dogs, who were their companions, guardians and sometimes even their food. Ancient stories illustrate the importance of dogs in pre-Columbian culture. One story tells us of the first man who survived the great flood thanks to his friend—dog. Dog did everything for the first man including finding corn to eat and making fire.

Some of the pre-Columbian peoples believe dogs were the companions of the god of the underworld. Others believed that dogs guarded the souls of the dead as they traveled through the dangerous regions of the underworld. Dogs were probably placed in Colima tombs to accompany and guard the soul in the afterlife.

Colima ceramics can be identified by their smooth, round forms and their warm brown-red slip. Colima is particularly known for its wide range of animal, especially dog, figurines. Human subjects within the Colima style are more "mannered and less exuberant" than other shaft tomb figurines.

The Western Mexico shaft tomb tradition or shaft tomb culture refers to a set of interlocked cultural traits found in the western Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, and, to a lesser extent, Colima to its south, roughly dating to the period between 300 BCE and 400 CE, although there is not wide agreement on this end-date. Nearly all of the artifacts associated with this shaft tomb tradition have been discovered by looters and are without provenance, making dating problematic. The first major undisturbed shaft tomb associated with the tradition was not discovered until 1993, at Huitzilapa, Jalisco.

Originally regarded as of Tarascan origin, contemporary with the Aztecs, it became apparent in the middle of the 20th century, as a result of further research, that the artifacts and tombs were instead over 1000 years older. Until recently, the looted artifacts were all that was known of the people and culture or cultures that created the shaft tombs. So little was known, in fact, that a major 1998 exhibition highlighting these artifacts was subtitled: "Art and Archaeology of the Unknown Past".

It is now thought that, although shaft tombs are widely diffused across the area, the region was not a unified cultural area. Archaeologists, however, still struggle with identifying and naming the ancient western Mexico cultures of this period.

## **SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### *Colima Tomb Dog Vase*

1. Do you know where clay comes from?  
If you take ordinary dirt and mix it with water, what happens?  
If you take clay and mix it with water, what happens?  
How are the two different?
2. What does the piece of pottery you see look like?  
Have you ever seen anything like it before? Explain.  
Why do you think it was made in the shape of a dog?
3. How do you think it was made? What shape or form does it have?  
Does it contain space? Does it define space?
4. How many dimensions does a painting have?  
How many dimensions does this vase have?  
How do you view a painting? How do you view this vase?
5. What is its color? Why do you think it is that color? (because of the type of earth material from which it was made)  
What is its texture? Why does it have that texture?
6. Do you think it will hold water? Why or why not?  
If you mix up clay and water, then pour water on it, what happens?  
If you bake a clay object, put it in a very hot oven (kiln) or fire, the molecules undergo a transformation called vitrification, which changes their structure so that they can never return to the earth in their original form. It makes the clay so that it can hold water without dissolving.
7. Transport yourself back in time to when this piece of pottery was made.  
Remember, there was no machinery or electricity. How do you think this vase was formed? How do you think they fired or baked it?  
Why do you think they made it? To look at or to use?
8. Would you say this is a simple form or a complicated one?  
Can a simple thing be beautiful? In what way?
9. How would you describe the character of this little dog?  
Do you think it is important that he represent a particular dog?  
If you had it for a long time, you would get tired of looking at it?

## **SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

### *Colima Tomb Dog Vase*

#### **Ritual or tomb bowl**

Materials: Clay (any type – one that will dry when finished would be ideal.)

Have students make their own “tomb vase”. Use either pinch pot or coil method. Have students make a vase or bowl and then create an animal from that piece which represents themselves.

- Mexican Red clay, similar to the dog vase, can be purchased at Dick Blick.
- Directions for making clay are attached.

#### **Paper Mache bowl**

Materials: Bowls (one for each student), Vaseline, newspaper strips, flour or wallpaper paste, toilet tissue or shredded paper mache.

Invert bowl and grease the underside with Vaseline. Dip newspaper strips and apply to bowl, criss-crossing to make sure an even base is applied. When dry. Remove bowl and trim edges with scissors. Using toilet tissue or shredded paper mache, add details to make an animal. When dry, paint if desired.