Teotihuacán’s Murals

Teotihuacán’s greatest art forms were architecture and mural paintings. Facades of pyramids and interiors of palaces, temples, and homes were frequently decorated with splendid frescoes. The fragment shown here was part of a cycle painted on the interior walls of an aristocratic palace. It shows a rain priest walking or dancing in profile and wearing an elaborate headdress and costume. His speech-scroll, adorned with seashells and plants, indicates that he is praying for water and agricultural prosperity, which were highly valued in his society.

To create the frescoes from which this fragment came, workmen in Teotihuacán layered coats of ground lime or stucco over the palace’s rough walls. The artist then mixed and applied pigments to the wall while it was still wet. The colors used were earth tones, such as hematite red and ochre, as well as greens, blues, and whites. Once the composition was painted or drawn and the painting almost dry, artists would burnish the entire surface with a stone until smooth.

Teotihuacán’s murals constitute a primary source for understanding the city’s religion and social organization. Found throughout the city on the walls of apartment compounds such as Tetitla. In this mural, a priest prays for water and agricultural prosperity, as shown by the curling speech symbols with shells and flowers. Flowers and water are cast from one hand, while the other holds an incense bag. He wears the goggles that came to be associated with Tlaloc, the storm god.

Teotihuacán Masks

Life size stone masks, a signature of Teotihuacán, may have been attached to the bundled mummified remains of important deceased individuals, perhaps serving as oracles. This mask is made of shell, obsidian, and malachite mosaic. The tiny glyph on the forehead may record a name.
ART AND ARTIFACTS

Rulership and War in Teotihuacán: The Temple of the Feathered Serpent

In the first century BCE Central Mexico saw the rise of the powerful culture of Teotihuacán. The giant city of Teotihuacán was the center of this culture, which would dominate the political history of ancient Mexico for the next 800 years. With an area of 30 square kilometers and a population of 250,000 inhabitants Teotihuacán was the largest city of the period and one of the largest cities in the world. The people of Teotihuacán built monumental temples, streets, marketplaces and palaces and decorated them with splendid relief, murals and ground paintings. One of the most important temple was the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in the center of the city. Originally painted in bright colors this temple was part of the ciudadela or citadel, a complex, which served as dwellings and administration buildings for the lords of Teotihuacán.

"Temple of the Feathered Serpent" (110 cm x 150 cm, oil and acrylic)

Two warriors descend the steps of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. The balustrade of the temple is decorated with heads of the Feathered Serpent, the symbol of rulership and fertility in Teotihuacán. The serpent heads are breaking through water lily pads. Behind it, the stepped façade shows the plumed body of the Feathered Serpent winding its way through water, and in the water, shells. The goggles-eyed head of the Turquoise Serpent, the symbol of war can also be seen. Originally the eyes of the serpent heads were inlaid with volcanic glass (obsidian), which reflected the sun’s brilliance.

Both warriors wear elaborate headdresses and jewelry of polished jade. The man to the left wears the tassel headdress, an emblem of the storm gods of Teotihuacán often worn by Teotihuacán warriors and ambassadors. His right arm is protected by cotton armor. He carries two spears and a spear thrower, the common offensive weaponry of Teotihuacán. The man to the right wears a helmet in the shape of the Feathered Serpent. His shield is covered with parrot feathers.

The Great Goddess is usually depicted frontally, with additional motifs pertaining to agricultural fertility. The Storm God is usually shown in profile and is identified by his distinctive facemask and the lightning bolt carried in his left hand. Animals, including coyotes, owls, and jaguars, are also prominent in the murals. The paintings were laid down quickly on thinly plastered walls. Red dominates the color scheme, although blues, yellows, and greens appear. The style is flat and linear, and the primary deities often appear in abbreviated versions.