

THE OLMECS

The Mysteries of the Stone Colossi



Directed by **Alexis de Favitski**
Produced by **KM & ARTE France**

52' & 90'

SYNOPSIS

In the tropical plains of the Gulf of Mexico, around 1800 BCE, a civilization as ancient as it is mysterious emerged. Who were the Olmecs? How did they live? As pioneers, builders, and artists, their influence left a significant mark on the history of pre-Columbian America.

In San Lorenzo, Mexican archaeologist Virginia Aerieta is excavating the ruins of the first Olmec capital, lost in the jungle. Thanks to exceptional access to the site and its discoveries, as well as the work of scientists from different areas of expertise —anthropologists, biologists, physicists—the film reveals the secrets of this little-known civilization.

For the first time, 3D animations based on twenty years of archaeological data unveil the architecture and organization of the great Olmec capitals, the founding metropolises of the Mesoamerican civilization.





Archaeological dig in the heart of San Lorenzo, the first Olmec city

Buried deep in the Mexican jungle, San Lorenzo is the first Olmec capital. It is the earliest known city in Mesoamerica. Thanks to the discoveries of Virginia Arieta, a Mexican archaeologist from the University of Veracruz, we will, for the first time, reveal in 3D this monumental city—which could have housed up to 12,000 inhabitants—with its palaces, dwellings, foundations, and ingenious canal systems.

From excavation sites to laboratories, scientists are deploying new investigative techniques to unravel the secrets of this enigmatic people: Lidar surveys to map the terrain, core drilling to delineate the city and its residential neighborhoods, basalt analyses to trace the origin of the stones used for the colossal heads, and phytolith analyses to better understand the Olmecs' diet and agricultural practices.

Slowly, science is bringing a buried world back to life—the world of a pioneering, organized, and visionary people, capable of making perfect use of their environment to build monumental cities and shape an art, beliefs, and rituals that profoundly influenced the famous pre-Columbian civilizations that followed them.

One question guides the archaeological mission: How was this first city—now entirely buried—organized?

To uncover the buried city, archaeologists are now combining open-pit excavations with core drilling. Over the past 20 years, more than 2,600 core samples have been taken across the plateau's 700 hectares, at regular 20-meter intervals, to a depth of up to 20 meters. This is an exceptional methodology that the archaeologists have implemented.

It was on the heights of the site that the most spectacular achievements of Olmec culture were unearthed: the colossal heads. At San Lorenzo, ten of these monumental basalt sculptures were discovered.

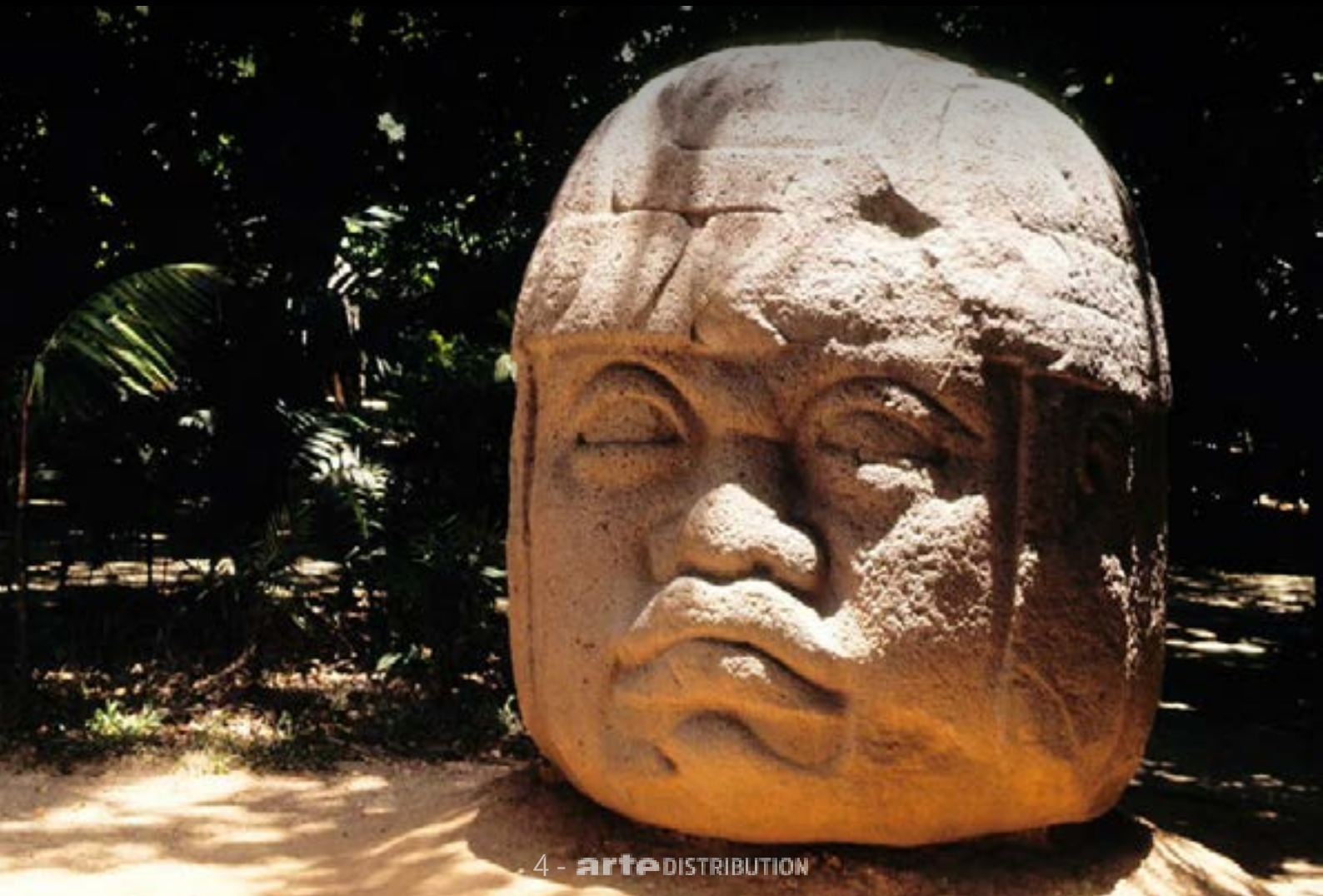
The Colossal Heads: Icons of the Olmec World

In 1862, the discovery of the first colossal head at Tres Zapotes sparked astonishment and bewilderment: who could possibly have carved such a monument? The object, too massive to move, remained in place for more than seventy years. Over the decades, other heads emerged from the ground along the Gulf Coast, intriguing researchers: their size, style, and age challenged existing hypotheses about pre-Columbian civilizations.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a turning point occurred: supported by the National Geographic Society, American anthropologists Matthew and Marion Stirling conducted decisive excavations at Tres Zapotes, La Venta, and then San Lorenzo—which alone yielded 10 of the 17 colossal heads identified today.

Archaeologists confirmed that these sculptures are far older than the great Maya works, predating the classical civilizations of Mesoamerica by several centuries. They are the work of a previously unknown founding people: the Olmecs, a name that means “the people of the land of rubber” in the Aztec language.

Now partly housed at the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, no two of these heads are alike—a clue, for researchers, that they may be portraits of rulers. These monuments raise a central question: what do we really know about the Olmecs, a people who left no written records?



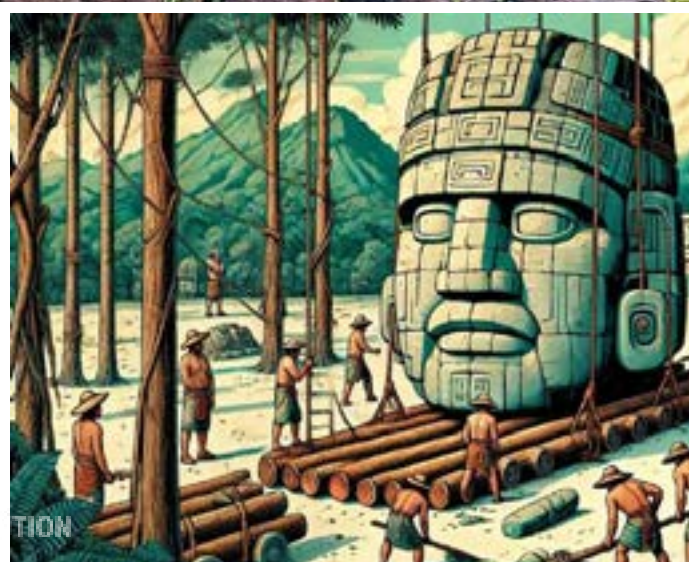
Filming Techniques and Visual Elements

Among the Olmec artifacts, the sculptures are the most captivating. The film uses photogrammetry to digitize the colossal heads and other major objects with unprecedented precision, freeing them from their museum settings to explore their details and monumentality. 3D also brings the Olmec cities back to life—San Lorenzo, the heart of the film, as well as La Venta—revealing palaces, a port, and a pyramid, and their evolution over time.

The film weaves a connection between two forms of expression: 3D and animation. From a 3D reconstruction, the camera glides into animation, as volumes become lines—Amaury Brumauld's style extending the reconstruction into the realm of the imagination.

It also draws on a vast body of archival material (Smithsonian Archives, universities, Mexican museums), integrated into the film's very fabric: drawings that transform into photographs, landscapes into archival footage, creating a graphic and narrative continuity.

Yannis Dumouthier composes using sounds from the real world—tools, the jungle, rivers—which become a melodic framework, sculpted by sound editing to create total sensory immersion. Archives, drawings, 3D, photogrammetry, and music form a shared narrative thread, bringing to life a civilization of the earth: that of the Olmecs, a people of engineers, navigators, and visionaries, whose modernity is still revealed in every glint of stone and every reflection on the water.



SPEAKERS

Main characters

Virginia Arieta (Mexican)

Archaeologist and anthropologist, Universidad Veracruzana; director of the San Lorenzo excavation site

Henri-Noël Bernard Medina (French-Mexican, based in Mexico)

Archaeologist, Xalapa Museum of Anthropology

Carl J. Wendt (American)

Archaeologist and anthropologist

Rebecca Gonzalez Lauck (Mexican)

Archaeologist, National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Mexico City

Secondary characters

Takeshi Inomata (Japanese, based in Arizona)

Archaeologist (pending approval)

María del Pilar Ponce Jiménez (Mexican)

Curator

Cora Falero Ruiz (Mexican)

Historian and curator

Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos (Mexican)

Archaeologist

Alberto Ortiz Brito (Mexican)

Archaeologist, National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Mexico City

José Luis Ruvalcaba (Mexican)

Physicist, Institute of Physics at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)

Irad Flores García (Mexican)

Archaeologist, School of Anthropology, Universidad Veracruzana

Juan Francisco Correa (Colombian, living in Mexico)

Ph.D. candidate in archaeology, Centro de Estudios Arqueológicos de El Colegio de Michoacán

Carlos Mario Pérez Ramírez (Mexican)

Biologist, Institute of Anthropological Research at UNAM

Gerardo Jiménez (Mexican)

Archaeologist and topographer

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