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Making Something of Herself: Embodiment in Life and Death at Playa de los Muertos, Honduras

Rosemary A. Joyce

Through an analysis of hand-modelled human figurines created in the Uluá River Valley of northern Honduras between 900 and 200 BC, this article explores the recursive links between crafting representations of bodies and crafting physical bodies. 'Playa de los Muertos'-style figurines are characterized by extremely detailed treatment of hair and ornaments. They have been treated as unique portraits, each individualized, and have resisted broader archaeological interpretation. Drawing on recent excavation data, this article explores the treatment of bodies and representations of bodies within a single set of interconnected villages as material media of embodiment.

Among the traditions of hand-modelled figurines that are hallmarks of the Formative period in Mesoamerica, those associated with the Playa de los Muertos site on the Uluá River in Honduras are particularly notable for their extreme detailing and apparent individuality. Manufactured in a number of distinct ceramic wares, likely representing localized production in several contemporary village sites occupied from 900 to 200 BC, Playa de los Muertos figurines raise issues of representation, embodiment, and experience. Attempts to create typological classifications of these figurines based on stylistic criteria failed, and researchers dealing with them suggested that each was a unique portrait. My own analysis of the figurines groups them by bodily traits — posture, gesture, and especially, treatment of hair — leading me to view them as media for the representation of marked physical states associated with transitions during life. Some of the distinctive traits can be associated with different age statuses, based on burials contemporary with the earliest figurines. Burials apparently involved a new set of practices of body processing. Late examples of the figurines were themselves pierced for suspension, probably to be worn as body ornaments.

In this article I examine bodily experience and materiality within the society that produced figurines in the Playa de los Muertos tradition. Attention is paid to the recursion between unrepresented ex-

periences of embodiment and representation at multiple scales: the individual life and multiple generations represented by household remains; the developmental cycle of the figurine tradition itself, and of the sites whose residents produced and used these objects; and the long-term trajectory of human representation of which the Playa de los Muertos tradition is only a small part.

Embodied places: villages of the Playa de los Muertos tradition

There is good reason to suspect that humans populated the area of modern Honduras long enough to significantly alter plant communities before 2000 BC (Rue 1989). But human settlements first become obtrusive in the Early Formative period (c. 1600–900 BC) with the creation of fired-clay vessels and figurines that draw attention to more ephemeral traces of perishable houses around which they were discarded (Joyce & Henderson 2001). By the succeeding Middle Formative period (900–400 BC) village sites, while hardly common, can be identified over a wide area. Some of the ubiquitous fired-clay objects from Middle Formative sites were recovered intact in human burials, a new feature of these villages (Joyce 1992; 2000). The first such site recognized by researchers in Honduras was detected through the erosion of burials along the Uluá River in its low-lying flood-

plain bordering on the Caribbean (Gordon 1898). Later work took burial sites along the river, in an area called Playa de los Muertos, 'Beach of the Dead', as the type locale for the Middle Formative culture of northern Honduras (Popenoe 1934; Strong *et al.* 1938; Kennedy 1981). Playa de los Muertos-style pottery and figurines have since been excavated at a number of sites in the lower Uluá Valley and along tributary streams to the east (Fig. 1).

With roots in the late Early Formative, and final expression in the early Late Formative period (c. 400–100 BC), figurines of the Playa de los Muertos tradition represent a millennium of continuous reproduction of conservative representations of the human body in villages undergoing substantial social change. The millennium from 1100 BC to 100 BC witnessed construction of the first monumental projects in Honduras, earthen platforms up to 20 m tall with stone pavements, ramps, and stairs at sites such as Los Naranjos and Yarumela (e.g. Baudez & Becquelin 1973, 17–50; Canby 1951; Joesink-Mandeville 1986). These structures marked points on the landscape at a newly-broadened spatial scale, and transformed spatial relations within the villages in which they were built (Joyce 1992; 1996; 1999, 38–40). The same millennium saw increasing social differentiation among villagers, manifest in the use of new burial locations and practices, primary and secondary burial in monumental platforms and secondary burial in cave shrines, restricted to certain individuals and groups (Joyce 1992; 1999). The post-mortem processing of bodies disposed of in these new fashions included both selection of body ornaments for inclusion with primary burials, and selection of body parts for reinterment in secondary burials.

Over the long span of time that figurines in the Playa de los Muertos tradition were created, used, and discarded, the village sites within which they were found must consequently also have developed and changed. Unfortunately, owing primarily to the deep burial of such early villages by river flood deposits and later settlements, only limited windows into them are available. The actual sample of scientifically-excavated and adequately-described Forma-

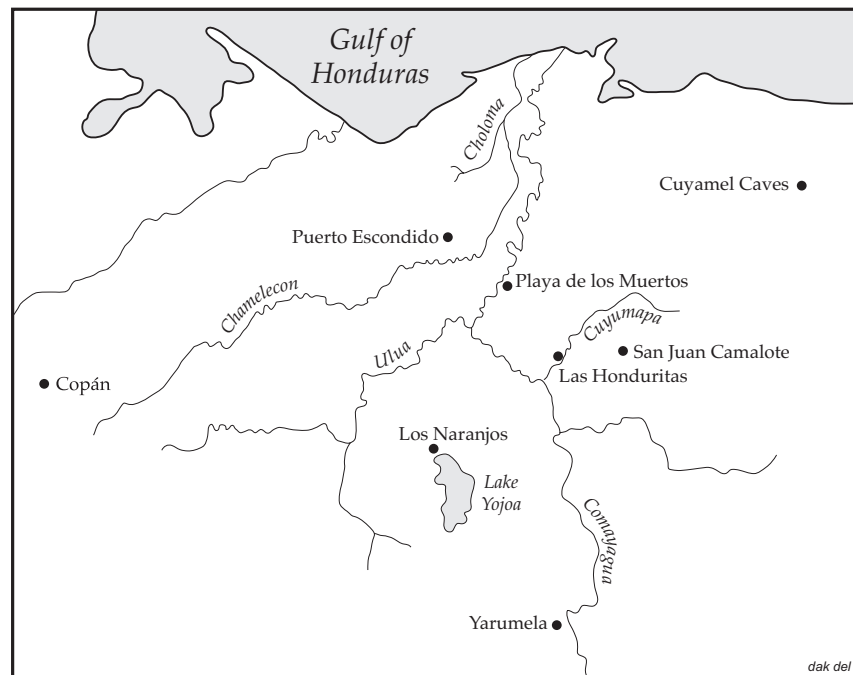


Figure 1. Map showing locations of Formative sites mentioned in text.

tive figurines from these sites is extremely small: only 131 examples that I have been able to confirm. These excavated examples nonetheless provide a basis for describing the kinds of contexts in which Playa de los Muertos figurines occur, and for considering what they might indicate about the use and interpretation of these figurines.

The earliest related figurines, dating between 1100–900 BC at Puerto Escondido on the Uluá River, come from the remains of perishable buildings of wattle and daub (Joyce & Henderson 2001). At the end of this period, some standing buildings were destroyed and the area around them was filled in to form a broad, low, stepped earthen platform with some preserved plaster stucco. Placed within this platform were at least two extended human burials, one with red pigment adhering to the poorly-preserved bones. Cached vessels and stone artefacts were also placed within the earthen platform. Newly-reconstructed buildings located close to this platform had thick packed earth walls, internal posts, and plaster surfaces. Fragments of early figurines, along with large segments of finely-finished and decorated serving bowls and bottles, formed a specialized fill that was part of the initial construction of the earthen platform.

The suggestion that figurines were associated with unusual events that marked the creation of special places within early villages is reinforced by the

context of slightly later (c. 700–570 BC) Playa-style figurines recovered at Las Honduritas on the Cuyumapa River, east of the Ulua Valley (Joyce & Hendon 1993; 2000; Joyce 1996). There, excavation exposed a 6 by 8 metre area of an ancient earthen surface on which were smashed bottles and bowls decorated with the most complex techniques in use at the time. Scattered in this context were fragments of figurines. Because the buried surface extended below a later, intact building, it could not be followed to the edges of the deposit. The area exposed showed no signs of construction, and it seems most likely that this was the remains of a specialized dump. From the frequencies of highly-decorated serving vessels, we suggest that the deposit stemmed from a ceremonial feast.

Slightly later (between 450–300 BC), figurine fragments were deposited in refuse from a sequence of remodelled pole and thatch houses at Playa de los Muertos (Kennedy 1981) and similar remains of remodelled houses at Puerto Escondido. At Playa de los Muertos, the sequence of houses continued to be renovated for several centuries (to c. 300–100 BC), incorporating burials under house or yard floors. While informally-excavated museum collections often attribute Playa-style figurines to burials, out of sixteen burials archaeologically-excavated at the site (Popenoe 1934; Kennedy 1978, 205), only one contained figurines, a pair, both intact. Clearly, while Playa-style figurines were sometimes deposited away from residences as a result of unusual events, they were also used and discarded around house compounds. Late Formative excavated contexts at Playa de los Muertos and Puerto Escondido were residential, but figurines were also recovered from extradomestic contexts at other contemporary sites. At San Juan Camalote in the Cuyumapa drainage, a refuse deposit on a terrace behind a ballcourt included high frequencies of bottles and bowls. It has been interpreted as evidence of feasts sponsored in conjunction with ballgames (Fox 1994). Intact Playa figurines were recovered in this deposit as well.

Playa tradition figurines, in other words, were used in practices carried out close to residential spaces, but also in ceremonies in newly-created spatial arenas separated from houses. While some intact examples come from burials, they are not limited to burial deposits, nor were burial contexts common among the archaeologically-documented examples. They were made and used for a millennium over a relatively well-defined region within northern Honduras. The highest frequencies are reported from sites along the Ulua River in its lowland valley, partly

because an ancient river levee segment was preserved from complete destruction by radical shifts in the course of the river (Pope 1985). This providentially preserved the type site of Playa de los Muertos, and sites on United Fruit Company's Farms 10, 11, and 13, localities near the modern towns of Santa Ana and Santiago. Wherever early deposits have been identified in the lower Ulua Valley Playa-style figurines are found (Pope 1985, 60, 124–5), especially along tributaries to the northwest, the Río Choloma (Sheehy 1976; 1979; Dockstader 1973, fig. 123) and Río Chotepe (Joyce & Henderson 2001).

Outside the lower Ulua River Valley, occasional Playa-style figurines are reported, possibly as a result of exchange, in sites throughout southern Honduras and El Salvador (Agurcia Fasquelle 1977, 21, Baudez & Becquelin 1973; Canby 1951; Dahlin 1978; Joesink-Mandeville 1986; 1987; 1993; Stone 1957). Only in the drainage of the Río Cuyumapa, a tributary immediately east, does the frequency of Playa-style figurines compare to those in the Ulua Valley itself. Distribution of the earliest Formative figurines is even more limited, to the lower Ulua Valley (Joyce & Henderson 2001) and the Cuyamel Caves in the Aguan Valley to the northeast (Henderson 1992; Healy 1974). Playa-style figurines are notably absent from Early and Middle Formative deposits described at Copán, to the west (Viel 1993; Viel & Cheek 1983).

As Agurcia Fasquelle (1977, 8) noted, stylistic features of Playa tradition figurines do not correlate with the multiple paste compositions that can be identified. In the core area of their production and use, Playa-style figurines were apparently manufactured in multiple locations independently, conforming to a single canon of representation. The archaeological data sketch out a regional network of linked villages throughout which Playa de los Muertos figurines were used. Contemporary with the figurines, specific mortuary treatment of the human body was practised in these societies. Linking the figurines and burials are a suite of body ornaments, depicted in figurines and placed on the body in primary interments. The figurines and the embodied practices to which they relate were part of a particular way of being in the world within the drainage of a single major river and its tributaries. Far from simply mechanical distinctions of 'style', the archaeological definition of the regional Playa de los Muertos figurine tradition recognizes the reproduction, over a long period of time, of a particular way of representing the body. The relationship between the production of figurines and the production of members of this regional society was recursive. The makers

and users of figurines learned stages of the social life cycle through the reproduction and use of representations of idealized moments in the lives of human subjects, through their own processing as living bodies by others, and through the retrospective processing of the bodies of the dead.

The represented body at Playa de los Muertos

Researchers have suggested that each Playa de los Muertos figurine was a unique portrait of a person conceived like a modern individual, denying any shared categorical features. In contrast, in my own analysis I grouped figurines by bodily traits and found that despite the individuality of each hand-modelled figurine there were general associations of posture, gesture, hair treatment, and ornaments (Joyce in press). For my study, I recorded attributes of 131 figurines in the collections of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, and compared these results to those of a study of 130 early figurines in the collections of the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University, analyzed by Ricardo Agurcia Fasquelle (1977; 1978). The 261 examples (Table 1) include all the excavated and informally-collected examples resulting from pioneering research in the lower Ulua Valley by George Byron Gordon (1898), Dorothy Popenoe (1934), William Duncan Strong *et al.* (1938) and Doris Stone (1941; 1957). To this sample I have since added figurines recovered from excavations at Puerto Escondido (Joyce & Henderson 2001) and in the Cuyumapa valley (Joyce & Hendon 1993; 2000), and examples curated by the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia in La Lima, Honduras.

The earliest figurines are relatively uniform in size, posture, and the features represented, although they vary greatly in surface finish (e.g.

Agurcia Fasquelle 1977, 17–18, fig. 16; Henderson 1992). All examples are seated, most with conical legs 4–5 cm long that end in blunt stubs, spread in a V shape (Fig. 2). Both arms are usually disengaged from the body with highly-conventionalized hands resting on the upper thighs. Toes and fingers, when shown, are deeply incised lines. Average dimensions are 13 cm tall, 10 cm wide at the feet, and 9 cm from front to back, with heads ranging from 4 to 7 cm high and 4 to 5 cm wide, markedly larger than later Playa de los Muertos figurines. Both solid and hollow examples are known, some with polished white slip or black slip on the typical brown paste. Traces of thick red-brown paint or slip, bright fugitive red paint, or black or brown paint are present on some.

Hair treatment, in comparison to Playa de los Muertos figurines, is extremely simple, with the head typically simply smoothed. Ear spools and ear pendants are depicted. Necklaces are common, made of raised appliqué bands with rows of punctations or slashes to indicate beads, but bracelets and anklets are absent. Appliqué bands that bridge the gap between the thighs immediately adjacent to the body,

Table 1. Comparison of characteristics of figurines in the Peabody Museum and MARI.

		Class 1 Punctate	Class 2 Topknot	Class 3 Beaded	Class 4 Basic	Totals Peabody	Totals MARI*
Peabody:	%	19	13	31	37	100	
	N	19	13	32	38	102	
MARI:	%	25	5	33	37		100
	N	16	3	21	24		64
Hair:	<i>tresses</i>	x	x	x	x	50%	?
	<i>shaved</i>	x	x	x	x	55%	80%
	<i>beaded</i>	x	x	x	–	40%	~33%
<i>Ear ornaments</i>	%	100	33	52	26	49	?
<i>Necklace</i>	%	66	15	70	75	69	75
<i>Bracelet</i>	%	80	–	100	89	93	75
<i>Anklet</i>	%	50	–	66	100	86	50
Posture:	<i>seated</i> %	71	–	64	86	74	70
	<i>standing</i> %	29	–	36	14	26	23
<i>Skirt/apron</i>	%	5	–	27	45	40	50***
Ware*:	<i>Type A</i> %	PM 41 MARI 50	PM 80 MARI 100	PM 78 MARI 66	PM 66 MARI 75	70	58
	<i>Type B</i> %	PM 24 MARI 50	PM 10 MARI 0	PM 6 MARI 34	PM 11 MARI 25	12	31
	<i>brown</i> %**	24	10	12	8	14	–
Small figurines:	N**	1	0	6	6	13	–
	%**	8	0	46	46	100	–

* PM = Peabody Museum (data from Joyce in press); MARI = Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University (data from Agurcia Fasquelle 1977)

** data available from Peabody Museum only

*** includes all lower body garments regardless of description



Figure 2. Early Formative figurine from the Ullua River Valley. Collection of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia. (Photograph courtesy of Rus Sheptak.)

found on about half of the examples, recall the more elaborately detailed aprons of later Playa de los Muertos figurines. In addition to seated human figures, a few fragments from Puerto Escondido can be attributed to depictions of animals (Fig. 3).

Several features of the early figurines continue in the Playa de los Muertos figurines made after 900 BC. A seated pose continues to be most common, and in addition to human figurines, animal subjects are well represented. Specific items of costume, and the manner of representation of eye, nose, and teeth, continue. But the later figurines contrast markedly in size and in their solid construction. Standard size figurines (over 85 per cent of the recorded samples) average 6.6 cm tall by 6.3 cm wide by 4.0 cm deep when shown seated, and 8.9 by 6.8 by 3.9 cm when depicted in newly-introduced standing pose. The immediate effect of the smaller scale of Middle Formative figurines would be to reduce the visibility of these human effigies at a distance, requiring greater intimacy for someone to appreciate them as images. Smaller figurines that formed the remainder of the recorded sample averaged 5.1 by 3.3 by 2.5 cm. In addition to their smaller size, many of these small figurines were pierced for suspension, probably serving as pendants. All of the recorded animal figurines



Figure 3. Early Formative animal figurine from Puerto Escondido (CR372-5F-14). (Drawing courtesy of Yolanda Tovar.)

were small scale, and over half of these were definitely pierced for suspension. Their smaller scale, requiring even greater proximity for viewing, and the use of small figurines as body ornaments, would have reinforced their intimate connection with the person using them.

Middle and Late Formative Playa de los Muertos figurines are solid, hand-modelled, well-burnished, and when underlying paste colour is dark, slipped to create a light surface, highlighted by the use of red, orange, and white paints (Fig. 4). Their heads are almost cubical. Their broad square faces are marked by appliqué and punctate features, including an open mouth with upper row of teeth delineated, and eyes formed like those of the earlier figurines. Limbs and body are full and rounded, with wrinkled folds of flesh depicted. Human subjects are shown seated (74 per cent) or standing (26 per cent). Animal subjects include monkeys, armadillos (Fig. 5), a crocodylian, and a furry quadruped.

By tracing variation in secondary features among classes defined on the basis of non-overlapping and mutually exclusive traits of hairstyles, I was able to define four representational classes (Joyce in press). The frequencies of the classes thus defined in the Peabody Museum collection are quite close to



Figure 4. *Playa de los Muertos figurines, Uluá Valley, Honduras, Middle Formative Period (N31798). Right, top and bottom: Class 2 (Topknot). Left, Class 4 (Basic). Lower left: simple medium length hairstyle, necklace, and apron. Upper right: hair bound in side knot with beaded pendants hanging from headband. Lower right: hair bound in central knot with pendant beads, shaved stepped hairline, and necklace. Note prominent depiction of ear spoons. (Photograph: Steve Burger; copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by permission of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.)*

those that Agurcia Fasquelle (1977; 1978) recorded for the collection of the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane (see Table 1). The proportions noted in the excavated subset also parallel those recorded in the two museum collections as a whole. This suggests that, while these museum collections cannot be taken as statistically representative of the original population of figurines, they do not reflect specific collecting biases.

Most distinctive were figurines with hair represented by an over-all pattern of punctation extending from a defined hairline in front, above the ears, to the nape of the neck in back (Class 1, Punctate). Half of the examples have additional hair treatments:



Figure 5. *Small armadillo figurine pendant, Uluá Valley. Peabody Museum 33-57-20/2465. (Computer graphic: Rosemary Joyce.)*

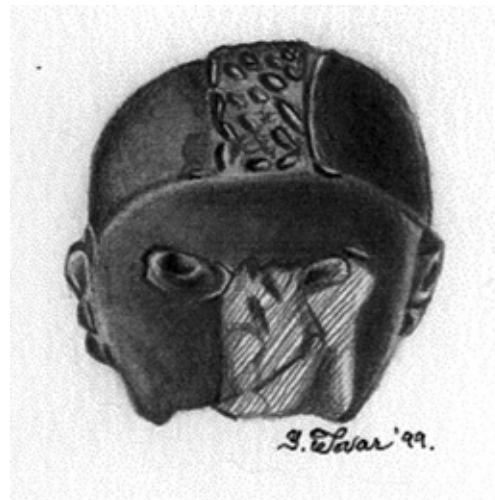


Figure 6. *Class 1 (Punctate) figurine head from Puerto Escondido (CR372-2G-23b). (Drawing: Yolanda Tovar, used with permission.)*

shaved areas (Fig. 6), beaded locks, and long tresses. This class has the highest proportion of figurines with ear ornaments or pendants, but the lowest proportion of figurines wearing necklaces, bracelets, or ankle ornaments. Clothing is extremely rare: only one example wore an apron. This class includes all the figurines depicting signs of age (37 per cent of the class), such as incised lines forming wrinkles on the cheeks or forehead, drooping breasts, a single tooth in the mouth, and sunken cheeks (Fig. 7).

Figurines in the second class have long hair drawn up into a knot, positioned at the peak of the



Figure 7. Class 1 (Punctate) figurine with signs of old age, Playa de los Muertos. Peabody Museum 30-46-20/C11020. (Computer graphic: Rosemary Joyce.)

skull in the centre or at either side (Class 2, Topknot; Fig. 4: top right, bottom right). The knot can be tied with a single band or overlapping bands (Fig. 8), or is bound with an ornament of linked squares or circles. Additional hair treatment, shaving or beading, is typical (62 per cent). All examples have at least a simple punctation indicating ear piercing (Fig. 4: top right). But Class 2 figurines share with Class 4 figurines the lowest frequency of depiction of ear ornaments in use (Fig. 4: bottom right).

Figurines lacking the distinctive punctate hair pattern or topknot can be divided into two classes based on the presence or absence of beads in the hair. In one group, sections of hair are shown threaded through sets of vertically-oriented beads (Class 3, Beaded). Beads are found both in the bangs in front and in long tresses that typically extend below the shoulders in back (Fig. 9). A single or double lock of hair ornamented by beads may be centred on the forehead, extending down from the bangs to the top of the nose. Round beads are sometimes depicted at the base of these locks. Hair is represented by rows of vertically-oriented fingernail impressions, aligned so as to suggest successive waves. Shaved areas are combined with beaded tresses to form the most complex hairstyles recorded. Class 3 figurines have the highest overall degree of body ornamentation, and the greatest diversity of ornaments recorded at any one site on the body. All of the figurines with preserved wrists wear bracelets



Figure 8. Class 2 (Topknot) figurine, Ulua Valley. Peabody Museum 29-54-20/C10979. (Computer graphic: Rosemary Joyce.)

(Fig. 10), and most wear necklaces or pectoral ornaments and ankle ornaments. Class 3 includes the highest proportion of standing figurines, including all the standing figurines depicted wearing skirts or aprons, despite the fact that skirts are actually somewhat less common in this class than in the figurine population as a whole.

The remaining figurines have hair represented by parallel vertical lines, either fingernail incisions or continuous incised lines (Class 4, Basic; see Fig. 4: left). Most are shown with long tresses that reach below the shoulder, and more than half also show shaved patterned areas. The remaining examples have hair that extends only to the nape of the neck without marked tresses, but have shaved areas (Fig. 11). It would thus be possible to subdivide this class into a short-haired, shaved group and a shaved-with-tresses group, if in larger samples this difference were found to be constant and related to other kinds of variation. One composite figurine shows one human figure holding a smaller figure in the crook of the elbow. While the head of the larger

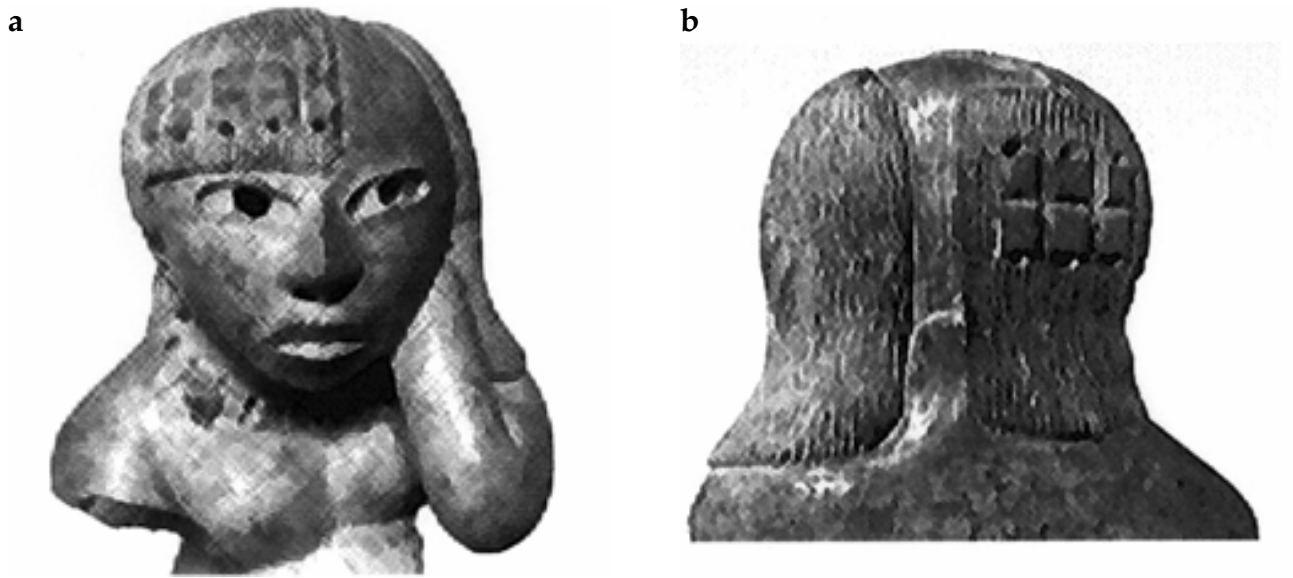


Figure 9. Class 3 (Beaded) figurine with hand entwined in hair, Playa de los Muertos. Front (a) and back (b) views. Peabody Museum 31-43-20/C13692. (Computer graphics: Rosemary Joyce.)

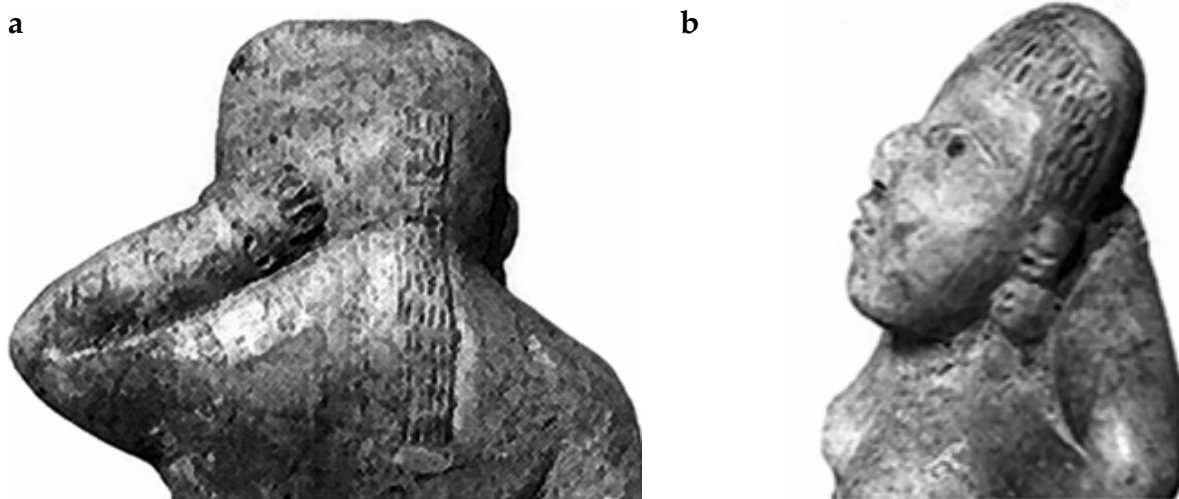


Figure 10. Class 3 (Beaded) figurine with hand entwined in hair, Playa de los Muertos. Back (a) and side (b) views. Peabody Museum 31-43-20/C13692. (Computer graphics: Rosemary Joyce.)

figure is missing, the head of the smaller figure is intact, with incised vertical lines extending to the nape of the neck over the entire skull, with no shaved areas, beads, or other ornaments. Class 4 figurines share with Class 2 figurines the lowest frequency of ear ornaments, despite an indication of ear piercing on most examples. The highest proportion of figurines with ankle ornaments is assigned to this class. A higher proportion of Class 4 figurines are shown seated than is typical of the collection as a whole,

including all but one of the figurines wearing an apron.

Late in the sequence of production, small figurines (Fig. 12) rise in frequency, forming 27 per cent of the excavated sample in the latest Formative contexts at Puerto Escondido. Examples were found in a burial at Playa de los Muertos (Popenoe 1934), in the specialized trash at the ballcourt at San Juan Camalote (Fox 1994), and in refuse near monumental platforms at Los Naranjos, south of the lower Ulua Valley



Figure 11. *Shaved hair pattern on back of head, Class 4 (Basic) figurine, Playa de los Muertos. Peabody Museum 31-37-20/C13493. (Computer graphics: Rosemary Joyce.)*

(Baudez & Becquelin 1973, fig. 150Q). Solid, hand-modelled, full-size Playa-style figurines remain a majority at each of the sites for which quantitative data are available, although at Playa de los Muertos the small figurines are said to 'predominate' (Stone 1972, 62).

The body represented in Playa de los Muertos figurines is selective and stereotyped. The determination of sex is not always clear. Agurcia Fasquelle (1977, 13–14) identified 84 per cent of the figurines he examined as female based on the presence of 'large breasts, as genitalia are not depicted on any of the large figurines'. My own analysis avoids treating ambiguous physical characteristics as indications of distinct gender categories, in recognition of the fact that gender in Mesoamerican societies was more complex than a binary division between male and female (Joyce in press; 1993; 2000; 2001; compare Knapp & Meskell 1997). Of the figurines that could have presented physical sexual characteristics, 35 per cent depict pre-adults, while only 6 per cent can be associated with a defined (female) adult sex. While the majority (58 per cent) may be interpreted as indicating stages in adult female sexual status, only one figurine does so through the depiction of primary sexual characteristics. Rather than being concerned with distinctions between female and male (a category entirely unmarked in the assemblages I have studied), the depiction of sexual status in Playa de los Muertos figurines may more accurately be characterized as emphasizing transitions in age, perhaps



Figure 12. *Small figurine pendant, Class 4 (Basic) from Puerto Escondido (CR372-2C-2a). (Drawing: Yolanda Tovar, reproduced with permission.)*

primarily of sexually female subjects. Agurcia Fasquelle (1977; 1978) made a related argument, noting that the subset of Playa de los Muertos figurines with the most explicit depiction of female genitalia also had body proportions and postures suggesting they represented infants. Body form, processing of hair, and ornamentation were combined in these figurines to commemorate the gradual production of social persons, an activity concretized in the parallel manipulation of clay to produce the figurines themselves.

Embodiment and representation

The discovery of figurines in household settings in other early Mesoamerican societies has led Cyphers (1993) and Marcus (1999) to argue that they were used in household-based ceremonies, such as ancestor veneration and life-cycle rites. Formative figurines used in these and other ways in household settings were a medium for the objectification of stereotyped social identities (Joyce 1993). Early Mesoamerican figurines were produced during periods when social relations were undergoing transformations that radically reformulated everyday life (compare Lesure 1997, following Clark 1993). The tension between the extremely individualized execution of specific figurines in the Playa de los Muertos style, and the restricted range of actors and actions depicted, is in my view a consequence of the use of figurines as media for the negotiation of social identity. The figurines reflect both a desire for social intelligibility and the evasion of ultimate intelligibility on the part of the persons making and using these items (see Butler 1993, 93–119).

This theoretical perspective has implications for the kind of typology that I proposed for the Playa figurines. The selection of hair treatment and ornaments as key traits was not arbitrary. My decision to record extensive information about these features was conditioned by my prior knowledge that in later Mesoamerican societies, life-transitions related to age and the formation of adult genders were accompanied by the modification of bodily appearance cues (see Joyce 1993; 2000; 2001; 2002). From this stand-

point, the classes I defined for Playa-style figurines may be interpreted as objectifications of turning points in the formation of social personae. This figurine classification forms a theory of the experience of embodiment in Playa de los Muertos by those subject to the practices that were depicted.

The unprocessed hair of some Basic figurines — and that of the single infant in arms identified in the sample — is a raw material that in the other Playa de los Muertos figurines has been socially marked. Because hair grows, it is possible to view the figurines in this class as a sequence from the straight, short hair of the infant, to the nape-length hair marked with shaved patterns, to hair falling in tresses below the shoulders. Texts explicitly describe and illustrate a similar sequence of hair growth at various life stages for Mexica women in the sixteenth century AD (Joyce 2000). Playa de los Muertos figurines mirror the bodily experience of the people who made and used them, effectively linking embodiment and representation.

The mirroring of embodied experience in figurines is not limited to natural processes, but also includes careful and selective representation of social practices of adornment. In the sample, Class 4 (Basic) figurines have the lowest proportion of ornamentation of the head, the locus that was the site of marking of adult identity in many Central American societies (Joyce 1998). Like the actual bodies of juveniles in contemporary burials, these figural representations of what may be children on the verge of young adulthood have a very high incidence of marking of the limbs through the use of jewellery. The one figurine depicting an infant held in the arms of an adult shows ornaments on all the preserved limbs of the child, but lacks a necklace or pectoral ornament.

The sixteen burials excavated at Playa de los Muertos yielded ten strings of beads, no two alike (Popenoe 1934; Joyce 1992; 1996). Both juveniles and adults were buried wearing wrist and neck ornaments, with shell employed in children's costume and green stone in both adult and juvenile ornaments. Ear ornaments, whether of ceramic or green stone, were worn only by adults. For example, Playa de los Muertos Burial 8 (Popenoe 1934) was a child buried with four pottery vessels and two figurines. This child wore an ornament of white shell beads with a central shell pendant around the crown of the head. A series of green stone 'duckbill' pendants was located at the neck, and a double row of green stone beads formed a belt at the waist. Despite the otherwise lavish treatment, the child had no ear ornaments. The burial adornment is consistent with

that depicted on Beaded (Class 3) and Topknot (Class 2) figurines. Comparing the two contexts, these classes of figurines appear to represent a moment of transition, between childhood and adulthood, also marked in the burial.

The versimilitude of the depictions of body ornaments on figurines does not end with their position on the body, but includes tiny, meticulously executed details of form and colour. Red, white and yellow painting on strands of beads shown on figurines suggests the colours of shell ornaments like those from contemporary burials of children. Necklaces are often shown forming a V at front centre, further evidence that they did not represent simple strands of round beads. A few carefully detailed beads are modelled with a raised or folded-over segment above a lower-relief, expanding trapezoidal section. They suggest the form of the 'duckbill' pendants found in contemporary burials. Round pendants with incised features suggesting masks, simple round and oval pendants, and round beads at both sides of a single long bead, are repeatedly depicted, suggesting representation of specific forms of ornaments that were actually in use.

In Middle Formative lived experience, standardized forms of beads were combined in a diversity of ornaments. Local manufacture, or at least local preferences, are evident in contrasts in the materials used at different sites. Most common throughout the region was the use of 'napkin ring' ear spools of polished black and brown ceramic (Sheets 1978, 45–7) or fine green stone (Popenoe 1934, 67). In the Ulua Valley most costume ornaments were manufactured from green stone or shell. At contemporary Chalchuapa (El Salvador) amphibolite (a red-brown stone), bone, and animal teeth were more common (Sheets 1978, 42, 48–52). Individual flat discs, cylinders, animal teeth or claws, skulls, and 'duckbills' were executed in shell, bone, iron pyrites and green stone (Baudez & Becquelin 1973, 387–8; Healy 1984, 125; Popenoe 1934, 64, 74; Fash 1985, 138). Standard materials and standardized forms of ornaments supported play or competition within common standards of beauty (Joyce 1992; 1996).

The play of ornamentation in lived experience was permanently recorded in figurines with detailed depictions of age-appropriate ornaments, detailed to suggest specific ornament forms and materials. Over 85 per cent of the figurines I recorded were depicted with ornaments on the ears, neck, wrists, and/or ankles. The majority of figurines had necklaces or pendants. Figurines with preserved arms or legs almost always had additional strands of beads

at wrists (93 per cent) or ankles (86 per cent). The ubiquity of these forms of ornaments parallels the data from burials, where juveniles and adults used a variety of bead ornaments at the same sites on the body. Ankle ornaments, most common on Class 4 (Basic) figurines, were also found only with juveniles in burials.

Burials call attention to the more restrictive distribution of one form of body ornamentation, ear ornaments. These were found only in adult burials, despite the extreme elaboration of ornaments on children's bodies. In figurines, three modes of ear ornamentation can be distinguished: punctation to indicate piercing, without a clear depiction of an ear ornament; ear spools, sometimes quite wide; and pendant round or cylindrical beads hanging from the ears. Class 4 (Basic) and Class 2 (Topknot) figurines share the lowest frequency of ear ornaments, despite clear depiction in almost all cases of a punctation at the earlobe. For the makers and users of these figurines, the distinction between ear piercing and the wearing of ear ornaments depicted in the figurines would have commemorated and recalled their own embodied experience of preparation of the ear for use of these ornaments. In later Mesoamerican societies, ear piercing was part of life-cycle rites, and in other contemporary and later societies, wearing ear ornaments was a prerogative of adults (Joyce 1999; 2000).

As possible representations of a young age grade within the society that produced them, Playa-style figurines also served as models of decorum, citational precedents for the kind of action that was viewed positively for children of that age (Joyce 2001). The posture typical of Class 4 Basic figurines is a seated pose, in which the frontal apron is displayed lying undisturbed across the thighs. This pose might be considered not only as a precedent for action by living viewers of the figurines, but also an historical precedent, since it is the sole documented posture of the larger early Formative figurines (Fig. 2). But the later figurines differ fundamentally from their historical predecessors in the extreme attention given to details of the treatment of hair.

Class 2 (Topknot) figurines share with Basic figurines the lowest frequency of depiction of ear ornaments. This draws greater attention to the way that these figurines make hair treatment itself their central representational theme. Hair, shown as incised lines, is pulled up and tied in a knot (Figs. 4 & 8). Accompanying this distinctive treatment are examples of beading applied to locks of hair. Among the later Mexica, the long hair of young girls was

pulled up and shaped into a knotted style on the crown of the head when they entered adulthood (Joyce 2000). Topknot figurines suggest a concern with the same embodied moment: the period when hair began actively to be transformed, by shaving and elaborate dressing, into prescribed social forms that required constant maintenance and self-monitoring.

The peak of hair elaboration, and of general bodily ornamentation, is in Class 3 (Beaded) figurines. Universally provided with beaded locks of hair, usually sporting shaved hair designs, more than half wear ear ornaments and anklets, and all the examples I recorded were provided with bracelets. Beaded figurines are further distinguished by their posture. They include the highest proportion of standing figures, and many — whether standing or seated — have arms raised, hands touching the face or the back of the head, even entwined in the hair (Figs. 9 & 10). This is in stark contrast with the majority of other figurines, in which hands rest along the side of the body, are crossed on the belly, or are placed on the thighs. The raised arms and standing postures of Beaded figurines suggest movement, and combine with their elaborate costuming to hint at the possibility that they commemorate dance (Joyce 2002).

Musical instruments are another new feature of the material culture of the Formative period. Tinklers, shells pierced to create rhythmic sound, have been excavated in the earliest deposits at Puerto Escondido. In burials at Tlatilco, Mexico, contemporary with early Playa de los Muertos, musical instruments were most commonly included in the burials of older individuals (Joyce 1999; 2002). Tlatilco figurines represent younger persons standing, dressed in extremely elaborate costumes, while burials present the bodies of young people wearing similar costumes. If the ceremonies carried out in the patios, plazas, and ballcourt terraces of villages in Formative Honduras included dance, they would also have been embodied practices simultaneously commemorated and disciplined by the citational precedents provided by figurines.

Making something of herself

Representation of the ornamented body of youthful subjects has also been identified at the contemporary village of Paso de la Amada, where Richard Lesure (1997) argues that young women were objectified in marriage exchanges negotiated by elderly men and women. At Paso de la Amada, figurines of young, standing women complement a group of

seated, older males and females dressed in highly-individualized costumes. While the situations are not entirely parallel, Class 1 (Punctate) Playa-style figurines also present an image of embodied old age. Defined originally on the basis of the distinctive use of punctuation to denote short cropped hair on the skull, the possibility that this class of figurines commemorates old age is supported by both unique depiction of physical features and representation of cultural practices. All figurines in this category wear ear ornaments, and the largest and most elaborate examples are limited to this class. If ear ornaments are, as burial data suggest, a prerogative of adults, all of these figurines represent adults. Unique to this group of figurines are modelled physical features that suggest old age, including a single tooth, rather than the row of teeth normally present, and furrows on forehead and in cheeks (Fig. 7).

The diagnostic feature of punctuation is absent from most of the early Formative figurines. They universally depict ear ornaments, however, with close parallels between specific ear ornament forms and examples limited to Middle Formative Class 1 Punctate figurines. These observations suggest that the earlier figurines represented an idealized adult status. The decorous seated body of the earliest, larger, and consequently more easily visible figurines served as a model for only one stage of life in the house compounds where these figurines were made and used.

In contrast, the variety within Playa-style figurines of the succeeding Middle Formative suggests an explosion in the expression of individuality. But in fact, the same dimensions of bodily experience are foregrounded in the new, smaller-scale figurines, used both in house compounds and more public venues. The greater range of Playa-style figurines makes more explicit a sequence of embodied experiences whose end-point is the decorous body of the adult. The extreme attention to details, such as the forms of the minuscule ornaments threaded in the hair and worn around the neck, would have reinforced the application of these processes to the living bodies of those in sufficiently close proximity to view them.

This would notably have included those who manufactured the figurines with such care to reflect details of embodied experience. It is difficult even today to see all this detail without holding the figurines close to one's eyes. Even if used in some form of ritual practice within households (Cyphers 1993; Marcus 1999), most of the detail would have been undetectable to participants. But for those who par-

ticipated in their construction, knowledge of the details would have filled in the gap in experience. Forming the clay into its final shape was effectively a metaphor for the shaping of the actual substance of the human body that was a significant part of socialization, beginning with shaping the skull in infancy (Joyce 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001).

That this recursion between embodied practices and practices of representation that I am suggesting was more than my own projection on these figurines is supported by the use of small figurines as pendants (Fig. 12). This practice grew in frequency over time. This leads me to suggest that the miniaturization of figurines for suspension followed the initial elaboration of figural precedents for stages in the process of shaping the adult body. Worn as pendants, small figurines would have been the most intimate form of bodily representation, a kind of mirror in a mirror for the practice of ornamentation in which they were used. This intimacy also allowed space for the production of otherwise unknown subjects, including unusual forms of costume (all examples of human figurines wearing a textile cape) and especially, animals (Fig. 5).

Animals were already subjects of figural representation in the earliest large-scale figurines (Fig. 3). But the small animal figurines used as pendants suggest that one final aspect of the experience of embodiment documented for later Mesoamerican peoples was also relevant in these early villages. This was the recognition of a non-material part of the self, represented as an animal, that acted while the body was asleep, and could act in arenas where the physical body could not, including the realm of ancestors and sacred beings (Houston & Stuart 1989). Here, finally, we may see some scope for the commemoration of individuality on the part of makers and users of Playa de los Muertos figurines. But this resides not in the western notion of portraiture, but in the Mesoamerican practice of recognizing a unique animal spirit companion as a part of the embodied self.

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