BOOK REVIEWS

I highly recommend this volume to scholars interested in Mesoamerica, complex societies, religion, politics, public performances, and craft specialization.

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_Wearing Culture_ is an edited book consisting of 14 chapters with a common overall theme: the role and interpretation of costumes, adornments, and body modifications in Formative period Mesoamerican and Central American cultures. Each chapter addresses a separate site or region, draws on a different dataset, and proposes an interpretative perspective or conceptual framework. Together, these chapters highlight significant themes and issues in the study of costumes, adornments, and body modifications for a particular time and place: (1) the kinds of data available; (2) the wide range of interpretations forwarded to enhance, with caution, scholarly understanding of the extant materials; (3) the identification of gender and age in Formative imagery; (4) the relationships between artifactual/human remains and actual human practices; (5) framing and bundling; (6) comparisons; and (7) changes in style and cultural priorities over time. These issues cross-cut the chapters, and their repeated consideration by different authors speaks well to the cogency of the issues and the integrative success of the book. The book’s conclusion by John W. Hoopes emphasizes the contexts in which the Formative materials occur.

Each chapter addresses more than one of these themes. All of the authors attend to the nature of the evidence (ranging from human remains in burials to ceramic figurines and effigies, stone sculptures, jewelry and other adornments, and murals). Many of these objects are rich in imagery and iconography. Some authors focus on refining the data into more useful typologies (Chapter 3: “Ties that Bind” by Rosemary A. Joyce, and Chapter 6: “Dressed Ears as Corneliness and Godliness” by John E. Clark and Arlene Coleman) or by emphasizing the importance of analyzing data sets or classes (Chapter 1: “The Sitio Conte Cemetery in Ancient Panama” by Karen O’Day, and Chapter 13: “Early Maya Dress and Adornment” by Matthew G. Looper).

Interpretations of the Formative data in this volume are wide-ranging and thought-provoking. They include concepts of personhood (Chapter 1); transcendance (Chapter 2: “Barley There but Still Transcendent” by Laura Wingfield); transformations, temporary or permanent (Chapter 3, Chapter 4: “The Naked and the Ornamented” by Jeffrey P. Blomster, and Chapter 9: “Making the Body Up and Over” by Sophie Marchegay); reciprocity (Chapter 12: “The Symbolic Vocabulary of Cloth and Garments in the San Bartolo Murals” by Karen Winiarski); and performance and social constructions (Chapter 5: “Aspects of Dress and Ornamentation in Coastal Oaxaca’s Formative Period” by Guy David Hepp and Ivy A. Rieger). Indexical (Chapter 3) and relational (Chapter 4) approaches emphasize context to yield underlying meanings. Gender emerges as a particularly enigmatic but pervasive issue; it is not always definitively depicted in Formative imagery and iconography (Chapters 4, 5, and 7: “Unsexed Images, Gender-Neutral Costume, and Gender-Ambiguous Costume in Formative Period Gulf Coast Cultures” by Billie J. A. Follensbee). The possibility is forwarded that the imagery on some artifacts (notably painted ones) could be altered at another time, permitting fluid and changeable identities.

Another tricky question addresses the extent to which the human and material evidence mirrors real-life experiences. After all, graves display funerary customs, not...
necessarily daily-life practices, and figurines and sculptures can be highly stylized. These challenges are thoughtfully addressed in Chapters 5, 9, 12, and in Chapter 11: “Wrapped in the Clothing of the Sacred” by Whitney Lytle and F. Kent Reilly III.

Framing and bundling customs and depictions set boundaries, defined persons and places as exclusive, and could imbue personages with supernatural identities. Their appearance as early as the Formative is discussed in convincing detail in Chapters 11, 12, and Chapter 10: “Framed” by Caitlin Earley and Julia Geursey.

Comparisons can yield insights into change, continuity, contact, and consistency (patterns). In this book, an in-depth comparison between two elaborately encoded statues, one Formative Olmec and the other Postclassic Huastec, suggests shared themes and cultural principles (Chapter 8: “More than Skin Deep” by Katherine A. Faut). Other comparisons focus on different types of data (Chapters 6, 7, 10, and 13), alerting readers to the different messages that may be conveyed on different media.

The Formative in Mesoamerica and Central America is the first period to provide sufficient data to address these intriguing questions. As such, it provides a baseline for assessing changes and continuities throughout Mesoamerican prehistory. Change in form, style, medium, and meaning is overtly and usefully addressed in Chapters 4, 6, and 13.

This book provides a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in the costumes, adornments, and body art of the Mesoamerican and Central American Formative period. It contains detailed descriptions of varied data sets, is abundantly and appropriately illustrated, and includes a plethora of useful references for further investigation. It deals with issues central not only to the Formative period but also to later times.

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There has been no greater champion of Mixtec research than Spores; his enthusiasm has inspired numerous scholars, including myself, to focus on this region. In the ambitious The Mixtecs of Oaxaca: Ancient Times to the Present, Spores and Balkansky synthesize the development of Mixtec civilization (located in Oaxaca, Mexico) from the first villages, ca. 1500 BCE, to modern Mixtecs living both at home and abroad: what the authors refer to as 3,000 years of adaptation. This well-intentioned book attempts too much and lacks a clear focus.

The authors use ethnohistoric and archaeological sources to push back the origins of the territorially small Mixtec city-state, or cacicazgo, as observed by the Spaniards. Their concept of urbanism and the state, crafted to correspond to survey data, consists of size, dense occupation, civic-ceremonial architecture, and three types of residential structures. They argue for a revised Mixtec kingdom model, separating the place of residence from the cacicazgo as an institution, with a dispersed population around the urban center. Using survey data, they believe this “clustering” settlement pattern can be seen as far back as 1000 BC, with actual states by 500 CE. The cause of Mixtec urbanism, interpreted as a response to an external threat (such as Monte Albán), is of less interest to the authors than establishing if this first “wave” of urbanism led to later Classic and Postclassic developments. They conclude that the cacicazgo was established in the Classic (ca. 300 BCE) because survey data reveal a pattern of equally sized centers throughout the Mixteca, similar to the distribution of Postclassic kingdoms. They trace changes in the cacicazgo after the Spanish invasion, noting that caciques disappear from the documents in the late nineteenth century.