

WINDOWS ON THE WORLD BACKGROUND

History

AFRICA

Africa The African continent, with an area of 12 million square miles, is more than three times the size of the United States, including Alaska. Its population of about 500 million people in 1993 lived at a density of fewer than 25 per square mile, making it the least densely populated continent. It also has more distinct peoples and cultures than any other continent, hence it is difficult to generalize about the culture of Africa as a whole. As a result, in the WOWs we focus on geographic regions so that no area is omitted, and within each region, we concentrate on selected peoples and their achievements. Africa's natural conditions—narrow coastal plains and few good harbors, except for the Western Mediterranean—helped isolate it from foreign contacts. Still, trade goods did find their way inland, although it was not until after the Industrial Revolution that penetration of the African interior by Europeans began in earnest.

AMERICAS

Andean Culture There have been many different cultures in the Andes. We focus in the WOWs on the Central Andes, a roughly 3,400-mile region extending from Quito, Peru, to Santiago, Chile, ultimately the lands of the Inca Empire of the sixteenth century. The earliest art from this era dates from about 8000 B.C., but the rise of an advanced art begins around 2500 B.C. The Central Andes contains the driest coastal desert in the world, the longest and second-highest mountain chain, and a vast and impenetrable tropical jungle. This difficult environment has shaped the art, religion and belief system, social organization, and agriculture of the peoples of this region.

Mesoamerica This region extends from central Mexico in the north to the coast of modern Guatemala. A land of wide diversity in climate and topography, Mesoamerica has both high, cool valleys and steamy lowland jungles. Most ancient cultures in the region were based in either the lowlands or the highlands, though the Maya lived in both. Between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago, the earliest settlers moved into the region, having crossed the Bering Strait and moved down the North American continent. About 1500 B.C., with the rise of the Olmec people, the first high civilization appeared. Olmec culture became the “mother” culture for all the later Mesoamericans.

Native North America Native North America extends from the Arctic Ocean to the Mexican frontier. Within this vast region, at the time of the first contact with Europeans, were about one thousand tribes speaking several hundred different languages. These tribes varied from simple hunter-gatherer communities to irrigation farmers in settled villages, from small family groups to stratified societies and centralized chiefdoms. As in the early stages of most civilizations, objects were created for specific purposes, not as works of art. Thus, in the WOWs, when we write about Native American art, we are dealing with artifacts with ritual, social, or domestic functions.

ASIA

China In the Neolithic Age diverse peoples inhabited a vast area, especially along the valleys of the Yellow River and its tributaries in the north, along the Chang (Yangtze) River to the south, and at remote sites in far northeast China. From about 5000 B.C. onward, they lived in villages and hunted, fished, and farmed. They domesticated the pig and the dog and made pots and carved tools from stone and bone. Their distinctive Painted Pottery with its changing motifs assists in dating cultural events in the region. Despite the rich variety of this pottery, there is no evidence to link these Neolithic cultures with the Bronze Age peoples who succeeded them.

India The Indian subcontinent, composed of modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, is separated from the rest of Asia by the Himalayan mountains in the north and by lesser adjoining mountain ranges in the east and west. Despite being isolated, the region was subjugated from time to time by incursions of peoples who crossed over the mountain borders, including the Aryans after 2000 B.C., and the coming of Islam brought by Arab, Turkish, Persian, and other invaders, starting in the early eighth century A.D. The region's prehistory is similar to that of Europe, with hundreds of Stone Age peoples engaged in hunting and gathering. Starting in about 3000 B.C., however, an urban culture began to emerge in the northwest region, eventually covering about 500,000 square miles, somewhat larger than Pakistan, its heartland. This culture, known as Harappan, was the first literate culture east of the Fertile Crescent. Centered in the Indus River Valley—hence its other name Indus—it has been compared favorably with the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, with which it was contemporary. For reasons not generally agreed on by scholars, this urban society broke down after 1900 B.C. Nevertheless, from this point on, India was virtually a self-contained political and cultural sphere, which gave rise to a distinctive tradition nurtured in Hinduism, the roots of which can be traced to the Harappan Civilization.

Japan Japan is an island chain, stretching in a northeast-southwest arc through the Pacific Ocean. Most of its land is contained in the four largest islands, in descending order, Honshu (home to the modern capital of Tokyo), Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Although modern Japan is noted for its ethnically homogeneous population, prehistoric Japan was a crossroads for numerous cultural migrations by peoples from Europe, Central Asia and the Altaic mountain range, and Siberia. Archaeologists call the period from 11,000 to 300 B.C. the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age. It is also called Jomon (“cord impressed”), from the unique cordlike surface of its pottery. Jomon people were hunters and gatherers. Artifacts show a blend of differing cultural styles, suggesting borrowing from cultures widely differing in social structure, religious ceremonies, and customs.

Culture

AFRICA

Neolithic Period *Giraffes* This rock engraving of giraffes found in Libya attests to the warm, humid climatic conditions that prevailed in the area before it was transformed into a desert. Presumably the artist based the image on knowledge of local wildlife.

AMERICAS

Mesoamerica *Olmec Culture: Colossal Head Only* In the last fifty years has the role of the Olmecs in the history of Mesoamerica begun to be understood. Still, some things remain controversial in interpreting Olmec culture, as, for example, the colossal head depicted in the WOW. Scholars agree that this probably depicts a local ruler dressed in a shaman costume, as indicated by the jaguar paws incised across the brow. The jaguar was a sacred animal, and, in Olmec thinking, which became the common view in Mesoamerican culture, the shaman not only wore a jaguar skin but also *became* a jaguar. Scholars disagree, however, about the facial features. The standard view is that they represent an idealized image of a ruler, but a few scholars deem the face to have Negroid features and speculate about what model was used by the artist to make this image.

ASIA

China Four-Legged Vessel Bronzes were usually small ritual objects cast for the king or members of the royal court. The human masks on the four sides suggest that this object may have been linked to human sacrifice.

India Bust of a Priest-King or Deity This bust is especially remarkable for the costume worn by the figure. The trefoil, or cloverleaf, design on the robe was a sacred symbol in several ancient cultures, including Egypt, Crete, and Mesopotamia. The style of wearing the robe—with the right shoulder bare—anticipates by more than one thousand years the style later adopted by Buddhist monks.