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Mother and Child: Gender Ambiguity and Fluidity in Ancient Mesoamerica

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Abstract

In this paper I consider how gender was expressed in ancient Mesoamerican figurines. I focus on a Nayarit figurine (300 BCE-300 CE) from UCSB's Art, Architecture and Design Museum, considering its physical attributes, physique and clothing in reference to other Mesoamerican sculptures. The artwork's gender ambiguity reflects a more dynamic role of gender in ancient Mesoamerica; one not confined to biological characteristics but rooted in broader cultural and societal values.

Introduction

The object I am studying is a ceramic figurine titled *Mother and Child* (c. 300 BCE-300 CE) (fig. 1-3) originating from Nayarit, Mexico, and now housed in the Art, Design & Architecture (AD&A) Museum at the University of California, Santa Barbara.¹ This figurine, measuring 4 x 2¼ x 1½ inches, was donated by Mrs. MacKinley Helm in memory of Dr. MacKinley Helm, an author and collector of both ancient and modern Mexican art.² The figurine falls between the Middle Formative period (900–300 BCE) and the Late Formative period (100 BCE–300 CE), which marks a transitional time into the Early Classic period (100–600 CE) of ancient Mesoamerica.³

¹ AD&A Objects for Research Project, Google Sheet, shared by Alicia Boswell, UCSB Art, Design & Architecture Museum, accessed October 3, 2024.

² Ibid.

³ The. 1998. "Mesoamerican Civilization | History, Olmec, & Maya." Encyclopedia Britannica. July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mesoamerican-civilization#ref263843>; Cline, Howard F, and Henry Bamford Parkes. 1999. "Mexico | History, Map, Flag, Population, & Facts." Encyclopedia Britannica. July 26, 1999. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mexico/History#ref394289>.



Fig. 1. Nayarit *Mother and Child* Figurine, Front View

A ceramic figurine depicting a mother and child, Nayarit, Mexico, c. 300 BCE-300 CE, clay. Photograph by the author.

Results

One of the most significant cultural developments during the Late Formative and Early Classic periods was the emergence of shaft-tombs, a burial practice which took root in the modern-day states of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit.⁴ The mortuary tradition of shaft-tombs is unique to western Mexico, with “no known parallels within the rest of Mesoamerica”: it is characterized by a vertical shaft or tunnel that would lead into a burial chamber or tomb, often housing artifacts like figurines of varying sizes and styles, and other types of burial offerings thought to be associated with the burials inside the tomb.⁵ Modern art historians and archaeologists believe that much of the information about social and artistic conventions in ancient West Mexican society is “encoded” within shaft-tomb figures; the figures signifying how people looked, dressed and decorated themselves, how they interacted with one another, and the activities and rituals they performed.⁶ Large, hollow anthropomorphic and zoomorphic finely modeled figures are considered the most characteristic ceramics associated with the shaft-tomb tradition.⁷ The mortuary tradition of shaft-tombs is an archaeological construct that encompasses “a

⁴ “FAMSI - Eduardo Williams - Prehispanic West México.” 2024. Famsi.org. 2024. http://www.famsi.org/research/williams/wm_classicperiod.html.

⁵ Taylor, R. E. 1970. “The Shaft Tombs of Western Mexico: Problems in the Interpretation of Religious Function in Nonhistoric Archaeological Contexts.” *American Antiquity* 35 (2): 160–69. <https://doi.org/10.2307/278145>.

⁶ “Social Context - Hudson Museum - University of Maine.” 2017. Hudson Museum. The University of Maine. June 20, 2017. <https://umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum/exhibits/online/images-for-eternity/social-context/>.

⁷ Ibid.

diverse array of burial practices,” many of which seem to reflect local variations in specific treatments of the dead.⁸ Distinctive characteristics of the shaft-tombs in the Tequila valleys of Central Jalisco, for example, include the high degree of labor invested in their construction, and the wealth of the offerings found within them.⁹ These qualities have led some researchers to consider the Tequila valleys as the “core” of the shaft-tomb tradition, where mortuary practices were “most strategically employed to demonstrate social distinctions.”¹⁰ Much of what is known—or could be known—about the ancient past of western Mexico, however, remains decontextualized as a result of massive looting in the early twentieth century. Fowler, Beekman, and Pickering explain:

Since at least the late 1920s, the illicit antiquities trade has proffered ceramic funerary objects plundered from shaft tombs to museums and private collectors in Mexico City, the United States, and Europe. [...] Despite the heroic efforts of archaeological pioneers [...] West Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s remained shrouded in the mysterious aura of the shaft tombs and their exotic contents. Ironically, no attempts were made to reconcile the richness of the tombs with the supposed peripheral character of the area.¹¹

Until the discovery of an intact shaft-tomb in Huitzilapa, Jalisco in 1993, practically all of the archaeological knowledge about the objects found in shaft-tombs in western Mexico has been derived from the activity of looters.¹² These figures not only suggest valuable social and cultural information, but also specific societal beliefs. As Prown argues,

The underlying premise [of studying material culture] is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.¹³

Stevenson Day, Butterwick, and B. Pickering reaffirm the archaeological significance of these figurines, claiming that scholars of West Mexico rely on the ceramic figurine tradition found in shaft tombs—“figurines, large and miniature, of humans, animals, and other creatures, as well as modeled scenes of houses and villages”—for interpreting the prehistory of the Late Preclassic period and advancing understanding of its culture and societies.¹⁴ The ceramics, the “dominant material remains” of the shaft-tomb complex, reflect the cultural and ideological paradigms of people existing between 300 BCE–300 CE. The role of material culture in conveying social ideas is particularly evident in the representation of gender:

⁸ Beekman, Christopher S. 2006. “THE CHRONOLOGICAL CONTEXT of the CENTRAL JALISCO SHAFT TOMBS.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 17 (2): 239–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536106060111>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Fowler, William R., Christopher S. Beekman, and Robert B. Pickering. 2006. “Introduction.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 17 (2): 231–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536106060202>.

¹² Williams, “Prehispanic West México.”

¹³ Haltman, Kenneth, and Jules David Prown. *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/125358>.

¹⁴ Day, Jane Stevenson, Kristi Butterwick, and Robert B. Pickering. 1996. “Archaeological Interpretations of West Mexican Ceramic Art from the Late Preclassic Period: Three Figurine Projects.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 7 (01): 149–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536100001358>.

Gender ideology is most frequently depicted in material culture as artistic representations of human figures. By its very definition, art is a material expression of mental constructs that are formed by the social structure in which one operates. As such, the imagery they display can provide an intimate view into how gender was perceived by past populations. With this type of access to the social structure, it is then possible to attempt to reconstruct gender relations within different political situations.¹⁵

This focus on gender becomes especially clear in depictions of women, where the societal beliefs surrounding fertility and gender roles are clearly reflected. Most small, solid figurines are clearly female and share many of the same fertility symbols found in larger figures. Many of these figures of nude women have swollen bellies, are seated or kneeling, and appear to be moaning—"as if in the act of giving birth."¹⁶ They are also frequently painted or incised around the hips to emphasize fertility. Some "bed figures" depicting women in "the throes of difficult childbirth" are accompanied by howling dogs. Ceramic dog figures appear in some tombs, which "may reveal a connection between birth and death in the West Mexican belief system."¹⁷ Moreover, many of those were also characterized by an accentuation of their traditional female physical traits: wide hips, rounded upper thighs, and a thin, pinched waist.¹⁸ This style, referred to as "pretty ladies," exclusively depicts females with "delicate features" such as "large, slanting eyes, small, upturned noses, and fine mouths."¹⁹

In ancient figural art, obvious depictions of women often emphasize primary and secondary sex characteristics—full breasts, broad hips and thighs, a prominent belly, and accentuated genitalia (fig. 4). These sexual traits frequently found in other ancient Mesoamerican figurines of women are seemingly absent from the *Mother and Child* figurine I am studying. The figurine is made from clay; most likely one acquired locally like a red or brown clay. The "Mother" figure has a trapezoidal form, taller than wide, with her body positioned in a kneeling posture; her legs are splayed outward, tucked beneath her. While her right arm is missing, the base of it remains attached. Her head is elongated and ovular, and topped with what appears to be a headdress, and her eyes are depicted as bulbous, partially-shut eyeballs; the "eye" represented by a small and narrow slit. Her nose is large and triangular, and her mouth a small and narrow slit just above her large, pointed chin. An ovular shape resembling an ear is depicted on the left side of the head, a second "ear" absent from the other side. The child mirrors the mother's features: wearing a similar headdress and possessing the same distinctive eyes and nose style.

¹⁵ Logan, Melissa. 2007. Review of Gender Ideology in Late Formative Western Mexico: A Study of Ceramic Representations. Thesis, University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center. <https://digital.auraria.edu/work/sc/808a0f64-476b-4b78-a17c-e341103863bf/reader/6c9eca9a-85f5-4980-b26c-c773969934fa>.

¹⁶ "Social Context - Hudson Museum," University of Maine, 2017, <https://umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum/exhibits/online/images-for-eternity/social-context/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Examining Tlatilco Figurines | Unframed." n.d. Unframed.lacma.org. <https://unframed.lacma.org/2020/11/02/examining-tlatilco-figurines>.

¹⁹ Ibid.



Fig. 1. Nayarit *Mother and Child* Figurine, Front View.



Fig. 4. Jalisco, Mexico, Nayarit artist, *Mother and child*, c. 300 BCE-300 CE, ceramic, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN.

While the Mother figure does seem to possess a fold resembling a “belly,” the belly lacks the prominence and distinctiveness typically seen on other identifiably “female” figures. Moreover, this detail is ambiguous and could just as easily be interpreted as a loincloth. Ancient Mesoamerican clothing was structured around contrasting dyads, with loincloths recognized as gender-specific garments associated with men, while skirts and huipils were more frequently linked to depictions of women.²⁰ In the Nayarit region, “nearly-identical” and complementary pairs of ceramic male and female figures were placed in shaft-tombs to accompany the dead.²¹ In an example of a pair like this, a *Seated female figure* and a *Seated male figure* (fig. 5a, fig. 5b), the gender identities of the figures are “most clearly” indicated by their clothing: the female figure wearing a short skirt, and the male figure wearing a loincloth.



Fig. 5a. Nayarit artist(s), *Seated female figure*, 100–400 CE. Ceramic and slip, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

²⁰ Joyce, Rosemary A. 2000. “Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy: The Production of Adulthood in Ancient Mesoamerica.” *World Archaeology* 31 (3): 473–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438240009696933>; Demarest, Arthur. 2016. “Wearing Culture: Dress and Regalia in Early Mesoamerica and Central America by Heather Orr and Matthew G. Looper, Eds. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014. 544 Pp.” *American Anthropologist* 118 (4): 944–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12722>.

²¹“Nayarit Artist(S) | Seated Female Figure | Nayarit | the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” 2024. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2024. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/318991>.

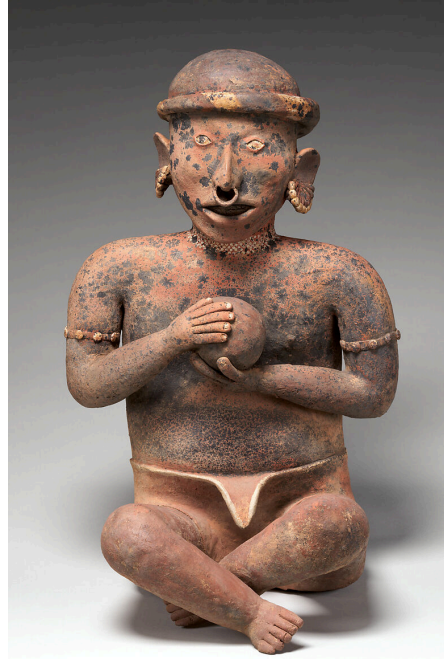


Fig. 5b. Nayarit artist(s), *Seated male figure*, 100–400 CE. Ceramic and slip, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Orr and Looper discuss how clothing in ancient Mesoamerican societies not only reflects gender distinctions, but also encodes broader cultural beliefs about social identity, including roles related to gender:

The classic ethnographic studies of the symbolism of dress find links to concepts of gender, sexuality, local identity, ethnicity, medicine, magic and protection, ancestors, spirits or other religious observance, morality, punishment/subjugation, warfare, exchange, and social class [...] One major area of research [in archaeology] has been gender, particularly with reference to later periods in Mesoamerican history.²²

The most distinguishable garment and gendered feature on the figurine is her headdress, a detail that has been used to identify male figures in other ancient Nayarit representations (fig. 6). In a Nayarit ceramic of a village scene, the genders of the figures are “clearly distinguished”; the male figures specifically identified by their “turban-like” headdresses.²³ The *Mother and Child* figure’s missing arm further complicates its interpretation; the base of the right arm almost resembles a breast, while the left arm cradles the child, obscuring a potential second breast. Considering the ambiguity in the figurine’s features, the question arises as to whether this figurine is definitively female. Via email, I consulted two specialists in ancient Mesoamerica: Dr. Karl Taube, a Mesoamericanist, Mayanist, iconographer, and

²² Ibid.

²³ 2019. Metmuseum.org. 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/317599>.

ethnohistorian, and Dr. Christopher Beekman, an anthropologist specializing in sociopolitical practices in ancient western Mexico. I requested their insights regarding the proper interpretation of this object, particularly considering the absence of clearly defined female characteristics. The Mother and Child figurine, while most likely representing a woman, exhibits deliberately ambiguous gender markers that challenge modern binary classifications. This ambiguity reflects ancient Nayarit notions of gender as flexible and socially mediated, suggesting that gender was negotiated through material culture, clothing, and bodily representation. By situating the figurine within its mortuary, artistic, and social context, this study demonstrates how ceramics from ancient western Mexico encode nuanced understandings of gender and social identity, offering insight into the complex cultural frameworks of the Late Formative period.



Fig. 1. Nayarit *Mother and Child* Figurine, Front View



Fig. 6. Nayarit artist(s), *Village scene*, 300 BCE–300 CE. Ceramic and slip, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

While the figurine's lack of overtly female characteristics initially complicates its identification, its kneeling posture and the subtle fold resembling a belly strongly suggest it represents a woman. Women were frequently depicted in a kneeling position to underscore their role as producers of food and cloth; the posture reflecting their involvement in activities like weaving, grinding corn, and tending the hearth (fig. 7).²⁴ The kneeling position is also believed to be indicative of pregnancy, as this is a position that women assume to give birth.²⁵



Fig. 7. Nayarit, *Mother and Child*, ceramic figurine, Stanley Crawford Collection, Museo de las Americas, West Mexico. Google Arts & Culture.

In his response, Dr. Beekman attests to this; referencing the kneeling position of the *Mother and Child* figurine and describing it as a “gendered posture in female figures in Mesoamerica.”²⁶ Additionally, he shared his interpretation of the figurine’s fold not as a loincloth, but as a depiction of her belly—“something often portrayed on female figures.”²⁷ However, he still affirms my hesitance in immediately identifying the figure as a woman:

I see what you mean about the broken arm leaving things a little ambiguous [...] Smaller [figures] like this are more challenging and the temptation is to use our own expectations about gender

²⁴ Logan, Melissa. 2007. Review of Gender Ideology in Late Formative Western Mexico: A Study of Ceramic Representations. University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dr. Christopher Beekman, email message to author, November 2024.

²⁷ Ibid.

roles. I think you're right that we should be more cautious, however. There has been a lot less work done on the smaller solid figurines like this one.²⁸

Dr. Taube also offers his perspective on the figurine, further supporting its likely identification as a woman:

There are a great many maternal figurines of women holding babies, including among the Classic Maya, I cannot think of one male example. Although there are no specific genitalia, I am skeptical that it is male, [partly] for that reason. [...] The burden of proof is to demonstrate that [it] is male, and I don't readily see that.²⁹

Like Dr. Beekman, Dr. Taube points to the "horizontal fold" on the figurine as a belly—explaining that in ancient Mesoamerica, "women who have borne children can be portrayed with sagging bellies," such as in the Codex Borgia of the Late Postclassic period.³⁰ He also suggests the possibility of the fold representing a skirt as well. I have identified another example of a Nayarit *Mother and Child* (c. 100 BCE-250 CE) (fig. 8) that closely resembles the one I am studying; most notably in its form and the matching headdresses worn by both the "Mother" and the "Child." Ultimately however, the Mother and Child figurine demonstrates that gender in ancient Mesoamerican society was dynamic and socially negotiated, and that such flexibility was intentionally expressed through material culture, clothing, and posture. A published thesis by Melissa Logan titled *Gender Ideology in Late Formative Western Mexico: A Study of Ceramic Representations* investigates this idea with a data set of ancient Mesoamerican ceramic figurines:

There are two possible ways of identifying the presence of other genders in the dataset. A figure could either have traits characteristic of both men and women (i.e. wearing an article of clothing associated with females as well as one associated with males); or a figure's biological sex is contradicted by the presence of traits characteristic of the gender defined by the opposite biological sex.³¹

In the case of my *Mother and Child* figurine, the figure's biological sex is determined as female—suggested by the kneeling position and swollen belly—but contradicted by the headdress, a trait characteristic typically associated with male figures. Alternatively, if the broken arm is interpreted as a breast and the fold as a loincloth, these could also be seen as contradicting traits. Furthermore, I have identified another Nayarit figurine, a "Seated Man" from a pair titled *Seated Man and Standing Mother* (fig. 9), which bears a striking resemblance to the figurine I am studying. The headdress worn by the Seated Man is nearly identical to the one worn by the Mother in my *Mother and Child* figurine, and the overall form of the Seated Man's body is also notably similar.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dr. Karl Taube, email message to author, November 2024.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Logan, *Gender Ideology in Late Formative Western Mexico*



Fig. 8. Nayarit *Mother and Child* Figurine
Nayarit, Mexico, c. 100 BCE–250 CE, ceramic. Image source: *LiveAuctioneers*



Fig. 9. Nayarit Pottery Figures - *Seated Man* (right) & *Standing Mother* (left)
Nayarit, Mexico. Image source: *LiveAuctioneers*

The Mother and Child figurine reinforces the societal importance of nurturing and fertility, central values in ancient Mesoamerican culture. Its ambiguity may reflect a belief that the essence of motherhood transcended rigid gender distinctions; highlighting the interconnectedness of gender roles within the community. The significance of fertility in ancient civilizations is reflected in its prominent role and presence across various ancient mythologies, representing a fundamental human concern for

survival and reproduction.³² In ancient Mesoamerica, deities such as Coatlicue, the Aztec Earth-mother and patron goddess of childbirth, illustrate the centrality of maternal figures: she both gives birth and consumes the dead, embodying a cyclical understanding of life and death.³³ This duality, where life and death are seen as complementary and interconnected rather than as opposing forces, parallels other pervasive dualities in Mesoamerican civilization—the sun and the moon, sacrifice and survival, and arguably the gender roles of men and women.³⁴ Nelson and Rosen-Ayalon discuss how ancient Mesoamerican gender complementarity fostered an inclusive worldview based on interdependence, where both genders were considered vital to symbolic and functional structures.³⁵ Classic Maya monuments frequently featured male and female elites paired together in “left” and “right” imagery; reflecting a deliberate emphasis on the duality and interrelationality of gender. These existed within both horizontal (left/right) and vertical (up/down) spatial relationships. Moreover, many representations also incorporated both aspects of male and female costume in the same image:

The power of the Maya elite is shown to depend not on their individual and bounded gender identities but on the complementarity they embodied and the power that derived from possessing aspects of both genders. The reiterated cosmological order in spatial and symbolic elements underscores an ideology of gender complementarity where power derives from wholeness, which in turn is achieved by combining the male and females aspects of being.³⁶

The presence of Coatlicue in the Aztec pantheon highlights the cultural significance of fertility and motherhood in shaping both spiritual beliefs and social structures. This is further reflected in the prevalence of ceramic figurines like the *Mother and Child*, which depict women engaged in roles associated with motherhood, pregnancy, and childbirth. Yet, the figurine’s ambiguous gender markers—the combination of a kneeling posture, a subtle belly fold, and a headdress associated with male figures—signal that gender in ancient Mesoamerica was fluid and socially negotiated, suggesting that the role of the mother or nurturer was understood as transcending biological sex. The figurine’s gender ambiguity aligns with a broader ancient Mesoamerican cultural understanding that gender roles were dynamic and socially flexible rather than rigidly tied to biological sex. This flexibility may have stemmed from societal values that prioritized collective responsibilities—such as parenting and sustaining fertility—over fixed individual identities. Depictions of gender in ancient Mesoamerica were complex and multifaceted: while men and women were often portrayed in traditional roles, these roles were not strictly enforced. Men could appear in attire typically associated with women, deities often combined male and female traits, and androgynous figures, as well as female rulers and warriors, indicate that the

³² Behjati-Ardakani, Zohreh, et al. "An Evaluation of the Historical Importance of Fertility and Its Reflection in Ancient Mythology." *Journal of Reproduction & Infertility* 17, no. 1 (2016): 2-9.

³³ Cartwright, Mark. 2013. "Coatlicue." *World History Encyclopedia*. November 28, 2013.

<https://www.worldhistory.org/Coatlicue/>; Krippner, S. 2022. "The Meso-American Goddess Coatlicue: Too Terrifying for the Spaniards." *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 38 (2). <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2019.38.2.234>.

³⁴ Krippner, S. 2022. "The Meso-American Goddess Coatlicue: Too Terrifying for the Spaniards." *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 38 (2). <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2019.38.2.234>.

³⁵ Sarah Milledge Nelson, and Myrian Rosen-Ayalon. 2002. *In Pursuit of Gender : Worldwide Archaeological Approaches*. Walnut Creek, Kan.: Altamira Press.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

relationship between gender and sex was nuanced rather than hierarchical or strictly complementary.³⁷ Such fluidity is also evident in the “Great Goddess” of Teotihuacan: although some of her identifying features, like a nosebar and headdress, are atypical for female depictions, other visual markers attributed to her have been interpreted as symbols of female fertility.³⁸

The traditional identification of female figurines as symbols of fertility, and of depictions of adult women with children or infants as “Mother and Child” figures, has been critiqued for relying on assumptions that may oversimplify or misrepresent their cultural significance. As Christmas observes:

Throughout Mesoamerica, figurines depicting adult women in the company of children or infants have been identified as “Mother and Child” figures [...] The association of adult women holding children with the concept of *Mother and Child* appears to be an automatic response for Western researchers. However, the very ease with which these artifacts, modeled by the hands and minds of people from a culture distant in both time and space from the culture that has produced the researchers themselves, are identified with this concept requires that this association be examined carefully.³⁹

Christmas’ critique raises an important caution about imposing contemporary Western assumptions onto artifacts from distant cultures. Jointly with scholarship on ancient gender and identity worldwide, New World prehistorians have produced a diverse body of literature that emphasizes a more nuanced, multivocal approach to understanding gender in ancient societies. However, there also exists in this body disagreement on fundamental issues such as the role of biology in gender, whether sex as a biological concept exists outside of Western society, and how the material evidence of gendered behavior can be interpreted as both an indication and a subversion of normative gender roles.⁴⁰ Arden expands upon this:

Scholars working around the world have argued that careful study of gender as an organizing principle contributes to an improved scientific methodology, one less tied to Western assumptions and more sensitive to cultural variations or nuances. Engendered archaeology rejects unproven assumptions and is based on the extremely careful observation and reinterpretation of data (often overlooked or misinterpreted data). The scientific study of ancient New World cultures has been greatly strengthened by the frequent use of rich multiple lines of evidence available to address gender roles in the prehispanic New World, and by the wealth of new questions suggested by both data and comparative examples.⁴¹

Evidence from figurine studies further demonstrates the difficulty of assigning fixed gender identities to ancient representations. Joyce notes that a significant number of figurines found at the Tlatilco site in the Valley of Mexico lack clear sexual characteristics and have nevertheless been classified as female by

³⁷ Stockett, Miranda K. 2005. “On the Importance of Difference: Re-Envisioning Sex and Gender in Ancient Mesoamerica.” *World Archaeology* 37 (4): 566–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438240500404375>.

³⁸ Mandell, Elisa C. 2015. “A NEW ANALYSIS of the GENDER ATTRIBUTION of the ‘GREAT GODDESS’ of TEOTIHUACAN.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 26 (1): 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536115000024>.

³⁹ Christmas, Patricia S. 2011. “Bearing Memory: Woman and Child Figurines from Tlatilco,” December.

⁴⁰ Ardren, Traci. 2007. “Studies of Gender in the Prehispanic Americas.” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 16 (1): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-007-9016-9>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

default. She argues that instead such figures may instead represent “an aspect of human identity that is independent of sharply marked dichotomous sexes, a sexually neutral human,” and cautions that the common practice of identifying gender through the presence or absence of specific anatomical markers reflects modern assumptions about sex and maturity.⁴² Joyce further suggests that some figurines traditionally interpreted as adult women may instead depict individuals at different stages of life, with bodily decoration, hairstyle, and costume indicating age, status, or social role rather than biological sex:

The difference in costume raises the possibility that some or all of these figurines are not meant to illustrate such fully adult women, but females of some other status. Because of their intricate hair and jewelry and costumes that reveal female bodies, I suggest that these figurines represent a record of practices of beautification linked intimately with the expression of emerging sexuality at the transition from childhood to adulthood. Burials at Tlatilco provide evidence for the everyday performance of some of the practices of beautification represented in figurines and document their strong relationship with age, not simply biological sex.⁴³

These observations reinforce the need to question automatic interpretations of adult figures holding children as mothers, and to consider the possibility that such images conveyed more complex ideas about identity, social relationships, or ritual meaning in ancient Mesoamerican societies. Simultaneously, there is substantial evidence supporting the traditional interpretation of figurines such as the Mother and Child as symbols of motherhood and fertility. Across ancient Mesoamerica, fertility was central to social, spiritual, and artistic life, with depictions of motherhood, childbirth, and nurturing frequently linked to cultural beliefs about survival and the cyclical nature of life. Recurring artistic motifs and mythological references—such as maternal deities like Coatlicue, and visual depictions of pregnancy and childbirth—attest to the societal and spiritual prominence of motherhood. The Nayarit *Mother and Child* figurine embodies these interpretative tensions about gender, motherhood, and societal values in ancient Mesoamerica. Its lack of overt female characteristics like breasts, genitalia, or gender-specific clothing suggests a nuanced representation of gender that transcends biological or cultural markers. This ambiguity aligns with arguments emphasizing the fluidity of gender roles in ancient Mesoamerica, revealing that societal concepts of motherhood and nurturing were not strictly tied to biological sex. As such, the figurine challenges simplistic readings and invites a deeper understanding of how ancient Mesoamerican societies conceptualized gender, motherhood, and social identity.

⁴² Joyce, Rosemary A. 2009. *Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*. University of Texas Press.

⁴³ Ibid.

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- Dr. Karl Taube, email message to author, November 2024.