



The Connections Between Smoke & People Memories of Mesoamerica

Introduction

The region of Central and South America is considered to be the birthplace of tobacco. The tobacco plant is believed to have originated in the Andes Mountains of South America, and has been utilized for a variety of purposes and in various ways by people throughout the Americas. From Mesoamerica in particular, tobacco-related artifacts remain, including pipes, and pottery depicting scenes of smoking, indicating that tobacco was used as an offering to the gods worshipped by local people, as well as an implement in rituals. In addition, the smoke produced by smoking was believed to serve the function of conveying divine revelations and prayers between the gods in the heavens and humans on earth. Similarly, the smoke from incense burned in censers was essential to rituals, and is said to have played a role in purification as well as predicting the future. These ancient practices are still relevant today, and in regions where indigenous cultures thrive, people can still be seen offering tobacco on altars, and producing tobacco and incense smoke as part of their rituals.

This exhibition is centered on the relationship between smoke and people both ancient and modern, with a focus on the area surrounding present-day Mexico. Items from the museum's collection will be on display, such as vessels and smoking implements left behind by ancient people, as well as tools related to people and smoke in modern society, introducing a part of the culture surrounding people and smoke.



TOBACCO & SALT MUSEUM

Ancient People & Smoke

Until the Spanish invaded in the early 16th century, there was no single nation nor common language governing all of Mesoamerica. Rather, various ethnic groups formed nations and groups which at times traded and at times fought, building cultures based on their own worldviews.

Here we focus on three regions of ancient Mesoamerica where tobacco can be found: western Mexico, central Mexico, and the Maya region, examining connections between people and the smoke of tobacco and incense.

What is Mesoamerica?

The “meso” in “Mesoamerica”, as is the case with “Mesopotamia”, means “middle”, and refers to the central part of the Americas which spans from present-day Northern Mexico to Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and parts of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Mesoamerica is a cultural region where ancient civilizations were formed, and whose

history and culture live on to this day. This region is home to diverse natural environments, including tropical rainforests, deserts, and mountains, as well as to the distinctive cultures of various ethnic groups living there and speaking different languages.

As seen in the map below, Mesoamerica is divided into nine major regions.



What is Mesoamerican Civilization?

“Mesoamerican civilization” is a collective term for the various civilizations that flourished throughout Mesoamerica, such as the Olmec civilization, from around 1800 BCE to the early 16th century. Mesoamerican civilization did not use iron, but primarily used stone tools. Furthermore, there were no large livestock such as cattle, horses, or camels. However, it had agricultural and architectural techniques, writing systems, and calendars, and developed advanced civilizations in various regions.

Before the propagation of Christianity,

Mesoamerican societies commonly viewed humans as part of a natural cycle, and believed that humans were born into an orderly world created through the self-sacrifice of gods. Because of this, it was believed that the world would be destroyed if humans neglected to honor the gods, and that since the gods had brought order to the world through self-sacrifice, humans must also worship them through sacrifice. Based on this belief, ritual acts including human sacrifice were performed in various regions.

Regions Associated with Tobacco

Tobacco is known to have been used in ceremonies in ancient Mesoamerica as early as the 7th century. Relatively numerous documents showing people’s relationship with tobacco remain in western and

◆ The Tarascan Empire (Western Mexico)

This empire established its capital in 1440 at Tzintzuntzan, located on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro in the Michoacán region of western Mexico. By the late 15th century, it had unified nearly all of present-day Michoacán. The Tarascan Empire clashed with the Aztec Empire in central Mexico, but surrendered to the Spanish invasion without a fight. This is thought to have been due to the Tarascan people’s dualistic worldview, which holds that life and death repeat themselves, as well as the belief that while systems inevitably fall, new worlds are born under new rulers.

◆ The Aztec Empire

This empire rose and fell on the Central Mexican Plateau, near present-day Mexico City. The Aztecs (the Mexica), who had arrived in the Valley of Mexico from the north, founded the city of Tenochtitlan on a small island in Lake Texcoco in the early 14th century, believing they had received divine revelation from their guardian deity, Huitzilopochtli. The Aztec Empire was established in 1428 as a confederation of the three cities of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. Tenochtitlan later expanded its power, and by the 16th century, had become the largest kingdom in Mesoamerican history.

central Mexico, as well as the Maya region. Here, we introduce the kingdoms and civilizations that flourished in these three regions from this period up until the Spanish invasion.

◆ The Maya Civilization

The Maya civilization was an urban civilization that flourished in what is now Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, and parts of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. It was broadly divided into the three regions of north, central, and south, based on differences in natural environment and culture. The northern and central regions are known as the Maya Lowlands, and the southern region as the Maya Highlands. There is no kingdom that unified these regions, but city-states were formed throughout. They developed writing, calendars, arithmetic, and astronomy, and built enormous pyramid-temples. Their calendars and religion based on their knowledge gained from astronomical observation were also closely linked to politics and economics.

1-1. Western Mexico

A large number of clay pipes excavated in western Mexico suggests that the smoking of pipes was widespread. Pipe smoking is believed to have been spread by tribes migrating south from northern Mexico from the 11th century onward. Records of people carrying pipes have also been found in documents relating to the Tarascan Empire, which

expanded into western Mexico and competed for power with the Aztec Empire in central Mexico. These records depict people holding pipes in ceremonies and trials, as well as people producing smoke to perform divination in war-related circumstances. In this region, tobacco is thought to have been available only to people of a certain status, such as chiefs or priests.

Relación de Michoacán ("The Michoacán Relation")

This document, created in the 16th century by Spanish friar Jerónimo de Alcalá, describes the history of the Tarascan Empire and the lives of its people. In it are depicted people using pipes and burning incense.



Head Chiefs of the Tarascan State are Shown Smoking Pipes at a Ceremonial Trial
Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial

Excavated pipes



Clay pipe with foot
11th century - early 16th century, Western Mexico



Predicting a Battle's Outcome by Placing Tobacco Balls in an Incense Burner
A priest inside a building holds a ladle-shaped incense burner. Tobacco balls, made by compressing tobacco into spheres, held important significance to predicting the outcomes of battles. The incense burners found in this region are seen in a variety of shapes, including three-footed, tall and cup-shaped, and cylindrical. While a resin known as copal (see p.10) was commonly burned for incense, tobacco was also used.
Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial



Pumpkin-shaped clay pipe with foot
11th century - early 16th century, Western Mexico

1-2. Central Mexico

The city of Teotihuacan emerged between 150 BCE and the 7th century CE. Subsequently, in the Valley of Mexico, located in Mexico's central highlands where the Toltec civilization flourished, the Aztec Empire wielded great power from the 14th century onward. It is believed that a substance called *acayetl* was used for smoking in the Aztec Empire, however, it is not known

about in detail due to inconsistent records. It may have been reeds or Mexican bamboo stuffed with tobacco leaves or coated with tobacco paste. Earthenware pipes have also been excavated in central Mexico, indicating that the people of this region also used pipes. Copal (a tree resin) was also widely used in this region. Records depict people burning incense in various settings.

Acayetl



The figures in the lower left and center are holding *acayetl*.
Florentine Codex Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

Pipe



Long neck clay pipe
11th century - early 16th century, Central Mexico

Incense

In the Aztec Empire, burning incense was not only a ritual practice for royalty and priests, but is also known to have been widely practiced by the general public. Incense burning ceremonies using ladle-shaped censers were held once in the morning and once in the evening in ordinary homes, as well as four times during the day and five times at night in temples. Incense smoke was circulated around the four corners of a room in order of east, west, south, and north, purifying the space, people, and household objects. Incense smoke was also considered to be food for the gods, and burning incense was intended to please them.



A Priest Holding an Incense Burner in His Right Hand and a Bag of Copal in His Left
In the morning, Tenochtitlan priests would smear soot from the hearth from face to toe, blackening their entire bodies. They would then use the thorns of the agave plant, known as maguey, to collect blood from their calves, and applied it to their temples before getting dressed.
Mendoza Codex Bodleian Library, Oxford University



A Woman Burning an Incense at the New Fire Festival
Florentine Codex Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana

1-3. Maya Region

The main form of tobacco used in this region is thought to have been cigars, or in a form similar to cigarettes, with tobacco leaves wrapped in corn husks or other materials. Its appearance is depicted in pictorial documents and on excavated pottery. Furthermore, at the Palenque ruins, located in what is now the southern

Mexican state of Chiapas, artifacts showing evidence of people's use of smoke at the time remain. Tobacco and incense also appear in the Mayan mythology of Popol Vuh, and it is believed that these items played important roles.

Gods Depicted in Pictorial Codices

The Madrid Codex is one of the surviving Maya pictorial codices. It is an accordion-style document made of plastered bark paper, with Mayan characters and icons painted on it. It touches on gods, religious rituals, calendars, astronomy, and more, with several gods shown smoking tobacco in the shape of cigars. When the Spanish invaded the Maya region in the 16th century, they burned most pictorial codices, leaving only four Maya codices remaining in existence. These were copies of codices created between the 3rd and 10th century.



The codex depicts three gods lying on the ground smoking tobacco. From left to right, they are the god of rain, the god of death, and the god of corn or sowing. This is thought to represent rest and peace.
Madrid Codex (also known as the Tro-Cortesianus Codex)
Museo de América, Madrid

Popol Vuh

This mythology was passed down among the K'iche' people, who live in what are now the Guatemalan highlands. In the 18th century, F. Ximénez, a priest in the parish of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango in Guatemala, discovered a text in the K'iche' language and translated it into Spanish. Consisting of four parts, it begins with the creation of the world by gods, then tells the story of twin heroes who journey to the underworld and defeat its master, as well as the creation of the four founders of the K'iche' people, and their descendants' migration from a legendary land and conquests.

In the second part, cigars appear in a scene in which the lord of Xibalba, the underworld, challenges two young men to a test.

A messenger hands each a torch and a cigar, saying, *"The lord says, 'These are your pine sticks. Return these torches to me tomorrow morning, along with your cigars. Bring them back intact, without losing shape.'"*

In response to this difficult problem, the two men manage to overcome the challenge by attaching red parrot feathers to their torches and fireflies to the ends of their cigars.

Palenque Ruins

This archaeological site, located in the Mexican state of Chiapas, flourished during the reign of King Pakal (615-683 CE), who is known for having been discovered wearing a jade mask. King Pakal's son, Kan Bahlam II, built the Temple of the Cross around the end of the 7th century. The temple's name comes from a relief of a Ceiba tree,



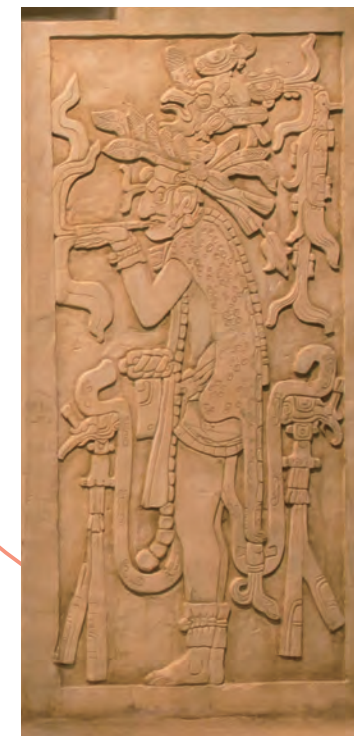
The Temple of the Cross, Palenque Ruins 2025

sacred to the Maya, in the shape of a cross found at the center of the sanctuary. On a pillar on the right side of the sanctuary is another relief of a god smoking cigar-shaped tobacco. This relief is currently considered to be the oldest documented evidence of people's relationship with tobacco.



Inner Chamber of the Temple of the Cross 2025

Relief of a God Smoking Cigar-Shaped Tobacco (Full-Scale Replica)



The museum's permanent exhibition room about tobacco on the third floor displays a full-size replica of a relief depicting a tobacco-smoking god from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque. This god, known as god L, is believed to be associated with blessed rain and the underworld.

A Small Detour



Smoking Figures Depicted on Pottery

Some Mayan pottery depicts images of people smoking. The purpose of the pottery and the contents of the illustrations are unclear, but judging from the attire of the people depicted, they are thought to be related to rituals or gods.

Polychrome vase showing a human figure smoking
7th - 11th century, Central Maya Lowlands



1-4. Other Regions

Among the materials in the museum's collection, not only are there materials known to be from western and central Mexico as well as the Maya region, which we have covered so far, but also a small number of materials from

other regions, as well as those whose regions have yet to be identified. We introduce these materials from other regions here.

Pipes

While both of these items were excavated, the museum has no record of where they were found. However, given that items with similar shapes and characteristics are housed by Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology, we can assume that both pipes date back to the 13th to early 16th century, and were excavated in central Mexico.



Bird's head-shaped clay pipe



Carved clay pipe

Incense Burners

Cylinders are affixed to the backs of these items, suggesting they were made to be incense burners. Although similar in shape, the item on the left is thought to have been excavated, while the one on the right is believed to have been made in modern times. The place of production of the item on the right is unknown, but it suggests that ancient motifs may have a connection to the present day.



Painted seated figure

6th - 8th century, Oaxaca, Hayashiya Collection
In the Oaxaca Basin in the southern Mexican highlands, centering around Monte Albán, the Zapotec civilization flourished, built on a mountaintop. This incense burner is thought to depict Cocijo, one of the Zapotec gods. Cocijo is the god of rain and lightning, and even today, incense is burned to pray for rain and fertility.



Incense burner with figure wearing luxurious headdress
In the 20th century, Mexico?, Hayashiya Collection

2 Modern People & Smoke

With the start of Spanish colonial rule from the 16th century onward, various European cultures were introduced throughout Mesoamerica. Some indigenous faiths that had been practiced up to that point were eradicated, while others were able to continue on, intermingling with Christianity and undergoing changes. By the 19th century, most regions of Mesoamerica had achieved independence as

nations. Despite being struck by major social changes, elements of ancient rituals continue to be practiced today. Even now, smoke is used for the purification of spaces and people, and to seek connections with gods and ancestors. Here, we introduce examples of the connections between people and smoke in Mexico and Guatemala from the 20th century onward, divided into three major themes.

The United Mexican States

- ◆ Date of independence: 1821
- ◆ Population: Approximately 120 million
- ◆ 32 states in total, with an area roughly five times that of Japan
- ◆ *Mestizo* people, those of mixed Spanish descent, account for 60% of the population
- ◆ Many indigenous people live in the southern part
- ◆ Languages spoken are Spanish as well as over 60 indigenous languages
- ◆ Approximately 70% of the population is Catholic
- ◆ More than 70,000 people of Japanese descent live here



The Republic of Guatemala

- ◆ The country gained independence from Spain in 1821, and was established as part of the United Provinces of Central America in 1823.
- ◆ It separated from the latter in 1838.
- ◆ Population: Approximately 17 million
- ◆ 22 departments in total, with an area slightly larger than Hokkaido and Shikoku combined
- ◆ Approximately 56% of the population is Ladino, a mix of Spanish and ethnic minorities, and approximately 44% is indigenous
- ◆ Languages spoken are Spanish as well as over 20 indigenous languages
- ◆ The population is primarily Catholic and Protestant Christian
- ◆ Civil war lasted from 1960 to 1996



2-1. Things Seen in Everyday Life

Even today, incense smoke from censers and tobacco smoke from pipes and cigars make their appearance in ceremonies and festivals, particularly those held within

indigenous societies. This is thought to reflect the worldview of the local people, which has continued on since ancient times.

Rituals

The smoke generated during rituals is said to have various functions, including purifying people, and connecting the realms of heaven and earth. These functions have remained unchanged since ancient times, and are still used today. Current rituals include those based on calendars, such as annual events and agricultural ceremonies, as well as personal ones such as weddings and funerals.



Ritual clay pipe Latter half of the 20th century, Mexico or Guatemala
Pipes are used as important ritual implements among the Nayarit and O'dham peoples of western Mexico.



Incense Burner 2025, Mexico
A typical incense burner sold in a market in Mexico City. Distinctive shapes and designs can be found depending on the region and maker.



Copal
The resin of the *Bursera bipinnata* tree. Copal can be solidified into rods, cones, or balls, or it may seep from the bark and harden into lumps. Smoke is produced by heating copal placed over a charcoal fire.

Festivals

Each region in Mexico holds its own unique festival. Many of these festivals have been influenced by Christianity, having incorporated Western elements, which makes it difficult to say that they have continued unchanged since ancient times. However, in them there are performances and elements that evoke the worldview of people since those ancient times.



San Pablo Villa de Mitla 2001, Mexico, Photo by Naoyuki Sawada
A woman carrying an incense burner leads a bride and groom.



Guelaguetza

Every July, the state of Oaxaca holds the Guelaguetza, a festival of indigenous dances. While this festival is held on different days in various parts of the state, the main event is a dance that takes place on a stage set up on Fortín Hill in Oaxaca City. People from eight regions in the state perform traditional dances, tossing gifts into the audience at the end. Some of their dances imitate weddings and other ceremonies, featuring incense smoke, tobacco, and altars.

San Antonino Castillo Velasco
2004, Mexico, Photo by Naoyuki Sawada
Men place cigarettes they have been given behind their ears.

Masks

Masks have been used in rituals in Mexico since ancient times, as evidenced by codices, excavated wooden masks, and paintings and reliefs on pottery. Stone masks worn by the deceased can also be seen. After contact with the Spanish in the 16th century, masks were used in performing arts and religious plays for Catholic evangelism. While the content and characters of indigenous mask rituals have been changed under the influence of Christianity, masks continue to be essential items in ceremonies and festivals to this day.

Latter half of 20th century, Guerrero, Mexico
This is a fisherman's mask that appears in the "Fish Dance" (*Danza de los Pescados*) in Guerrero. Holding tobacco in its mouth, the masked figure fights an attacking fish, which lashes out with its long tail like a whip. The state of Guerrero has a higher proportion of Black people than other regions, upon which this masked figure is also based as a motif. The red patterns on the face represent scars from fighting the fish. The significance of the tobacco is uncertain, but the dance is believed to be in prayer for a good catch.



Altars

During ceremonies and festivals, altars are set up. They are prepared for the gods and ancestors, who are the objects of prayer. Offerings are made on these altars, which include local food, bread, fruit, alcohol, and tobacco. The altars are also decorated with flowers and other plants, and lit with candles. The room in which an altar is located is filled with the scent of incense smoke.

Day of the Dead Altars



Day of the Dead Altars 2013, Oaxaca, Mexico
Photo by Masahiro Yamamoto, Atsuko Yamamoto (LABRAVA)

The Day of the Dead is a combination of the Catholic Church's All Saints' Day, celebrated on November 2nd, and an ancient religious calendar. In the Catholic sphere in Latin America, it is the general name for a period of celebration, coinciding with All Saints' Day on



Permanent Altar 2012, Chiapas, Mexico,
Photo by Masahiro Yamamoto, Atsuko Yamamoto (LABRAVA)

November 1st, during which a series of ritual practices related to the dead are carried out. However, the content and duration of the celebration varies widely, as its course reflects the views of each region and ethnic group on life and death.

In Mexico, families build altars for the Day of the Dead, complete with a floral arch called a *cempazúchitl*, decorated with marigolds. This arch is believed to be the entrance to the world of the living, through which the deceased return. Food, drink, and miscellaneous items are arranged on the altar according to the preferences of the departed. Because adults who have passed away are considered to be ancestors, they protect their descendants, but are also believed to punish their descendants if they are not treated well enough. For that reason, the living make generous offerings to the deceased, and pray to their ancestors for the happiness of their families.

A Small Detour



Purification of Malice

In the city Tlayacapan in the state of Morelos, there is a method of healing by casting out malice or ill will using clay dolls. These dolls make up a set of twelve, each with tobacco tied to its back with red string. The healer then covers the dolls in smoke. By holding a doll close to the target's body while chanting a spell in the indigenous Nahuatl language, the doll absorbs the ill will within the body, and purifies it. Dolls with similar purposes can be found in other regions as well, though their motifs may differ.



[Reference] Purification of Malice
1998, Tlayacapan, Morelos, Mexico, Made by Felipa Hernández Barragán
Colección Acervo de Arte Indígena, Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas, México. Foto: Denisse Lara.

Modern People & Smoke

2-2. Offerings to the Gods

In Guatemala and Mexico, deities to which people present tobacco as an offering can be seen. Some are indigenous deities that have been worshipped since before the introduction of Christianity, while others have been influenced by Christianity and changed

form, or become new objects of worship. In any case, by offering tobacco to the god, or by having a statue of the god hold the tobacco in its mouth to smoke, the god will be pleased, and prayers answered.

Maximón / San Simón

In Santiago Atitlán, a city in the Sololá department of Guatemala and home to the Tz'utujil Maya, a masked statue called Maximón is enshrined and cared for by *cofradías*, mutual aid organizations of believers, who offer flowers, candles, alcohol, and tobacco. During Holy Week, marked by Easter, the death and resurrection of Christ is celebrated. At the same time, traditional *cofradías* celebrate the death and resurrection of *Mams*, ancestral gods derived from the Mayan mythology of the *Popol Vuh* and the calendar. The rituals of Maximón are said to be a fusion of the worship of indigenous gods carrying on an ancient worldview, and the belief in Catholic patron saints.

This faith was adopted not only by indigenous people, but also by people of mixed race known as Ladinos, who further transformed the practice and worshipped him as San Simón.



Maximón Latter half of the 20th century, Guatemala



San Simón Latter half of the 20th century, Guatemala
San Simón is usually depicted dressed in a suit or military uniform. His size varies from small enough to be held in both hands to the same size as a human being, like Maximón.

Santa Muerte

This skeletal female saint is worshipped throughout Mexico, and her name means “Our Lady of Holy Death”. Tobacco is presented to this holy Lady as an offering as well. Although worship of Santa Muerte is not recognized by the Catholic Church, she is said to have over 3 million believers. In this faith, there are several sect-like practices, with manners of worship varying from person to person. Altars are set up in homes, chapels, and even on the street. Though it is unclear when worship of her began, chapels have appeared since at least the 1960s. There are several theories as to her origins, including Western Europe, Mexico, Cuba, the southern United States, and various parts of South America. Because she grants wishes both good and bad, she came to be associated with the image of a holy Lady who saves the marginalized, which flourished in the latter half of the 20th century in Mexico City’s Tepito district. This area is considered to be poor, and many people there live in economic hardship. There are various rules concerning altars and offerings, and tobacco is offered as the element of earth. In addition, the smoke from incense is said to possess purifying and energy wave-balancing properties, ensuring the desires of believers are conveyed accurately.



Santa Muerte 2025, Mexico
The clothing in which statues are dressed is typically white or ivory, but there are also other colors, with different effects depending on the color.



A Small Detour



Ekeko

There is a god to whom tobacco is offered in South America as well. It is Ekeko, a deity worshipped by the Aymara people, who live in Peru, Bolivia, and other regions. Ekeko is significant as the god of fortune. Every year in La Paz, capital of Bolivia, a festival is held known as Alasita, which lasts for several weeks beginning on January 24th. *Alasita* is the Aymara word for “buy

me”, and street stalls are lined with miniature figures of Ekeko, as well as miniature food, household goods, houses, cars, and more. It is said that if you buy a miniature of something you want, then have Ekeko hold it or place it near the doll, and finally place a cigarette in Ekeko’s mouth and make a wish, you will receive what you desire.



Ekeko and Miniatures of Household Goods
2000, Bolivia



Alasita Stalls 2025, Bolivia

Modern People & Smoke

2-3. Things Representing the Essence of Ancient Times

In addition to pipes used as ceremonial implements, pipes seen today also include those made as folk art and souvenirs. Of these, there are some resembling clay figurines excavated from the ruins of ancient civilizations. Such ornaments

are thought to reflect the image modern people have of ancient times. Pipes, which have been used since ancient times, can also be seen as a tool that expresses an ancient worldview in the modern day.

Human Shapes

These are pipes shaped like human figures, reminiscent of ancient civilizations. Some have snake-shaped handles, thought to stem from the association of snakes with fire in ancient Mesoamerica.



All snake-shaped clay pipes with human heads
Latter half of the 20th century, Mexico



All Human figure-shaped clay pipes
Latter half of the 20th century, Guatemala

Animal Shapes

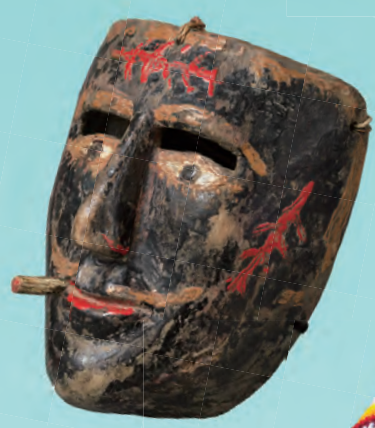
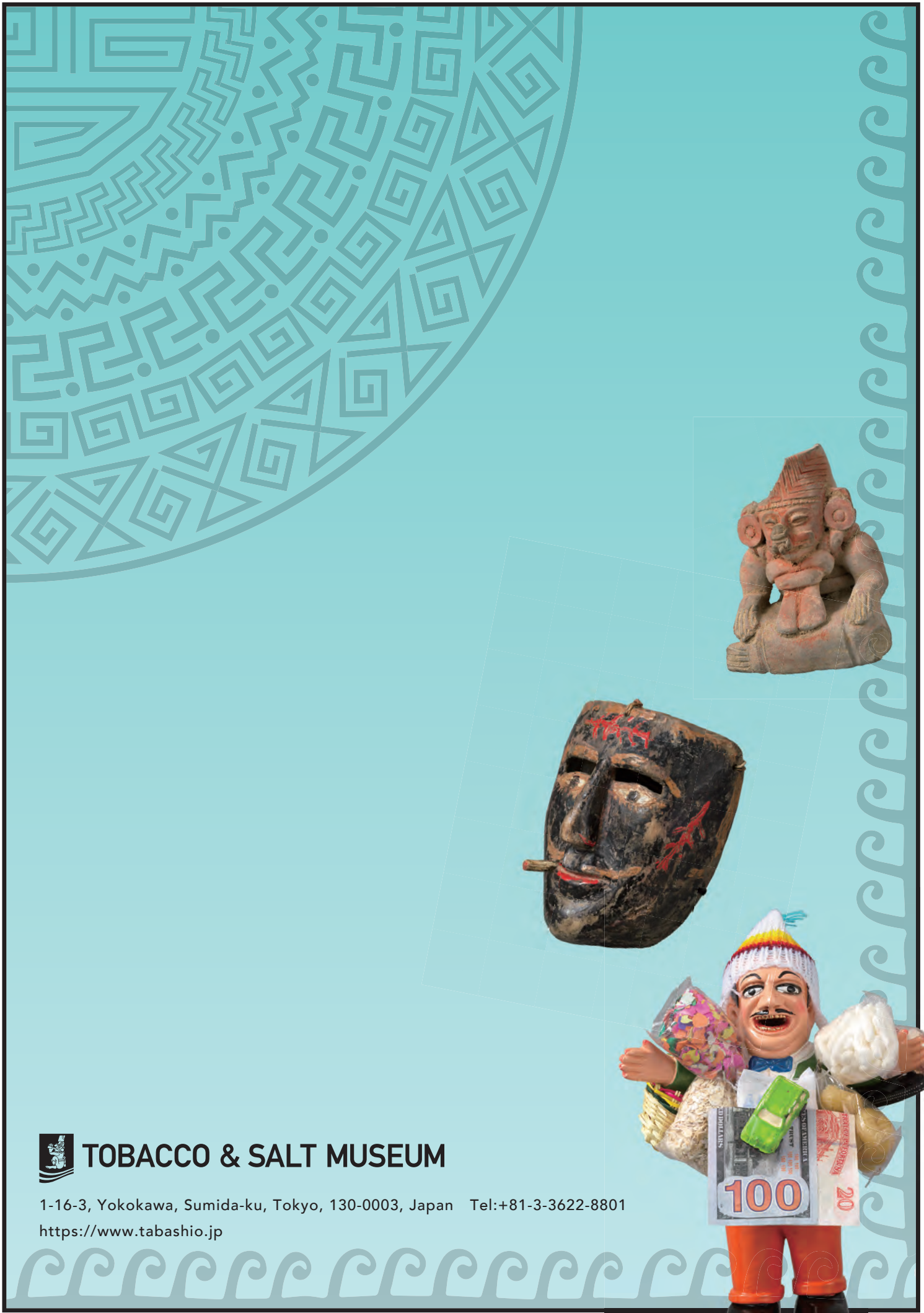
Items carved into the shapes of birds, reptiles, and other animals are often seen. These animals have also inhabited Mesoamerica since ancient times, and have been associated with mythology and human life. Crocodiles are associated with water, and crocodile-shaped pipes may reflect the dualistic concept of water and fire.



From left to right: bird-shaped clay pipe, lizard-shaped clay pipe, crocodile-shaped clay pipe
All Latter half of the 20th century, Guatemala, Tsuchiya Collection



Dog's head-shaped clay pipe
Latter half of the 20th century, Mexico



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