

# CHRISTIE'S

PRESS RELEASE | PARIS | 01 MARCH 2018

## A QUANTUM OF HISTORY: THE PRIGOGINE COLLECTION

9 APRIL 2018 CHRISTIE'S PARIS



**Paris** – The late Nobel Prize Laureate Ilya Prigogine (Moscow 1917 – Brussels 2003) and his wife Maryna, started acquiring a variety of Mezcala, Chontal and Olmec works of art in the mid-1960s. This selection of 148 pieces, will come for auction on 9<sup>th</sup> of April at Christie's Paris and has been the subject of several publications, including Carlo Gay's *Ancient Ritual Stone Artifacts*, published in 1995 and has been shown in exhibitions in Brussels, Geneva and Antwerp. The Prigogine's were great friends of curators, collectors and gallery owners, such as Frances Pratt; Ed Merrin, of Merrin Gallery New York; David Bramhall, Sentino Micali of Mermoz Galerie, Paris, where they have acquired many of their pieces.

The art of Mezcala and Chontal, from the mountainous region of Guerrero, Mexico, is known for its stone sculptures including animal effigies, masks, architectural models and most specifically, figurines dating from 300 to 100 BC. Like many Mesoamerican cultures, they were most probably ritual offerings for the hereafter.

The Prigogine Collection is one of the premier private groupings of Mezcala art in the world and Ilya's time spent as professor in Austin, Texas as of 1967 surely attracted him to the ancient art of his new geographical surroundings. Furthermore, these pieces inspired his work and provoked an exploration of the supposed contradiction between art and science.

### **40 Years of Unravelling the Art of Guerrero and a long lasting Friendship**

Ilya Prigogine met Carlo Gray in the late sixties, and was immediately smitten with Mezcala portable sculpture and the two men had an ongoing correspondence, exchanged views and ideas, to learn as much as possible about it. Ilya, the man of science, had a unique perspective that came from a lifetime of studying the building blocks of the universe. Used to dealing with the unknown, he immediately recognized the universal symbolism so powerfully conveyed by Guerrero lithic art.

Ilya Prigogine understood that Mezcala art is highly simplified/abstract by choice and not because of the intractable material they used. He was attracted to the universal symbolism of the stone celt, from which Mezcala figures appear to evolve. He and Carlo shared an irrepressible curiosity and a sense of wonder about life and the universe, and the same interest in how the human mind attempts to rationalize the unknown. Each in his way studied the myths and beliefs that have always sustained this endeavor, using different cognitive tools to interpret their symbols, while reaching similar conclusions.

## MEZCALA STONE CARVING

The small scale stone sculptures from the Mezcala region in the state of Guerrero south of Mexico City have appealed to many ever since they became known in the late 19th and early 20th century and were included in major exhibitions of art from the ancient Americas such as the pioneering exhibition Before Cortes – Sculpture of Middle America, organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1970.

The stone sculptures range in size from 5 to 40 cm in height and include among other forms human figures, seated or standing—the largest group—, masks, some animal forms and a sizable group of objects in the shape of small houses or temples. The works are made of a variety of hard, dense metamorphic rock. In the absence of metal tools in the Americas prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the early 16th century, the works were created using stone tools such as stone hammers, chisels and drills, and different types of abrasives.

## TEMPLES



The enigmatic temples and architectural models were carved from hard, often dense stones in grey, creamy alabaster and varied shades of green. The structures measure as little as 3 cm up to 30 cm.

The evocative models can include pillars on raised or low platforms, with stairs, peopled with figures fixedly standing within columns or mysteriously recumbent on lintels or so schematized to become metaphors of architecture. Their reductive simplicity causes them to appear both ancient and modern.

For Professor Prigogine, whose Mezcala architectural collection is second to none, it was the interstices in these colonnaded structures, 'Houses for the Hereafter', which evoked the symbolic passages through which the soul of the deceased could pass through to the afterlife. The collection has alone 37 temples to offer, highlighted by lot 93, the larger, green temple to the right of the picture (estimate: Euro 30,000-50.000).

## OLMEC STONE CELT



Green stone axe heads, commonly known as "celts," were some of the most important works of art traded across ancient Mesoamerica and Central America. Created from jadeite mined in southern Guatemala, or using local green stones from highland Mexico, celts were first created by the Olmec peoples of the Gulf Coast after 1000 B.C. The Olmec seem to have conceived of green celts as sprouts of maize and thus "planted" celts in dedicatory offerings, as in the caches at La Venta (in the modern state of Tabasco) thus animating ceremonial spaces while perpetuating agricultural fertility.

Such ceremonial axes de-contextualized from their original utilitarian usage were traded, exchanged and collected as heirlooms in many regions of ancient Mesoamerica. The Prigogine collection will offer 16 celts with ranging estimates from Euro 1,200 to Euro 12,000.



### AZTEC STONE SNAKE

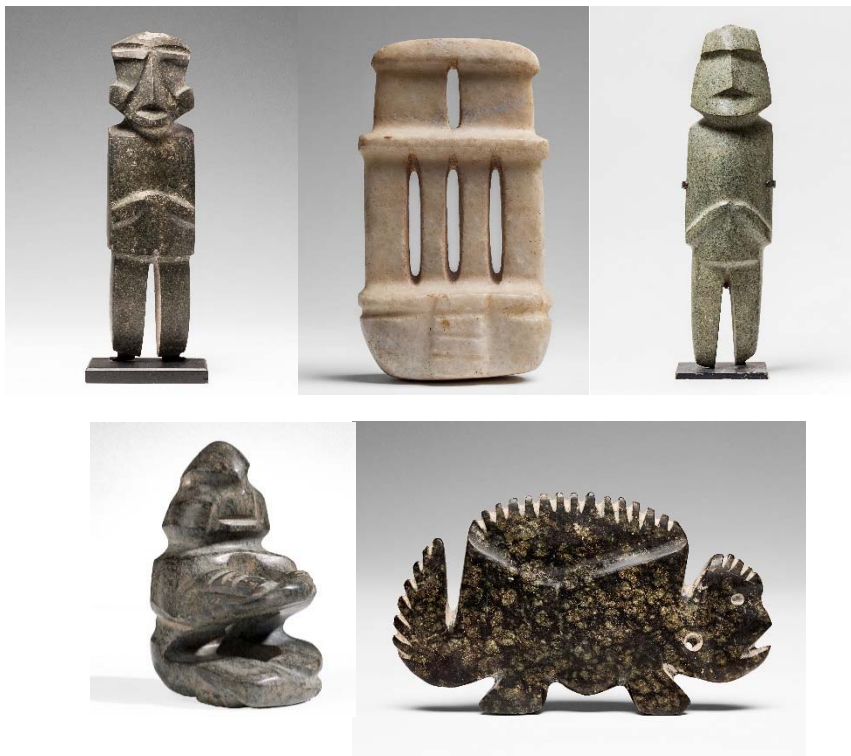
Images of serpents, large and small, tightly coiled or feathered appear commonly in Aztec art. This serpent is exceptional for the emphasis of the verticality which adds a force and elegance to this key ophidian in the ancient Mesoamerica pantheon. The serpent has multiple meanings, that vary according to context and attributes. It represents the double animal of one of the most important divinities of the Mexica pantheon, Quetzalcoatl, the “quetzal serpent” or “Plumed Serpent”. Supremely benevolent, chaste, peaceful, creator of humanity and of the second Sun, inventor of the arts and of the calendar, he is also the God of the Wind (estimate: Euro 130,000-180,000).

### CHONTAL PORPHYRY MASK



The representation of faces through masks, face-panels and heads is a defining characteristic of the Chontal style. The Chontal produced far more masks and heads than in the classic Mezcala corpus of sculpture. The relative abundance of such masks and the attention given to even stylized traits is an indication of their importance in the Chontal belief system. Carlo Gay hypothesized that the Chontal masks evolved into the famed mask carving tradition of the Teotihuacan civilization. The rendition of the human visage would go on to become a primary focus of lapidary art for later Mesoamerican civilizations. This particular mask is 12cm high and dates from 300-100 B.C (Estimate Euro 8,000-12,000).

### Further Auction Highlights Include:



- Mezcala Stone Figure, ca. 300-100B.C., estimate: Euro 40,000-60,000
- Mezcala two-story stone architectural model, ca. 300-100 B.C., estimate: Euro 20,000-40,000
- Mezcala Stone Figure, ca. 300-100B.C., estimate: Euro 50,000-70,000
- Mezcala Stone Figure, ca. 300-100B.C., estimate: Euro 30,000-50,000
- Mezcala Iguana Effigy, ca. 300-100 B.C., estimate: Euro 4,500-6,500



Ilya Prigogine's legacy includes more than 1000 papers and 20 monographs and he also received 50 honorary degrees, numerous medals and prizes, accumulating in the 1977 Chemistry Nobel Prize for his work in the field of Thermodynamics, and in particular that orderly and stable systems can arise from more disordered systems. His theories have had application in areas as diverse as the study of traffic congestion; cosmology; insect communities; and the multiplication of cancer cells. In 1979, together with Isabelle Stengers, he published *Order out of Chaos*, which traced the scientific and philosophical ancestry of these ideas from Aristotle onwards, and called for a new dialogue between science and humanities – the book became a best-seller. Prigogine divided his time between Brussels – where he was a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles as of 195 and director of the International Solvay Institutes as of 1959 and Austin, Texas where he was Professor for Physics and Chemical Engineering from 1967 onwards.

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#### **Notes to Editors:**

The term “Pre-Columbian art” encompasses the entire oeuvre of the peoples who inhabited contemporary Mexico to Patagonia over the time span of 5000 years. The most commonly recognized civilizations are the Inca of the Andes and the Maya of modern day Mexico and Guatemala along with the later Aztec. Yet, these only hint, at the diversity and breath of the many cultures which extended from the desert of modern New Mexico to the tip of modern Chile.

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*\*Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and are reported net of applicable fees.*

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*Images available on request*

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