

## **Dr. Billie Follensbee**

### **Judith Enyeart Reynolds College of Arts and Letters Research Symposium**

#### **Time and Date of Talk:**

March 3, 2023, 12:15-1:15 p.m., Siceluff Hall 126

#### **Title of Talk:**

“Finding the Right Niche: Overlap, Ambiguity, and Meaning in Olmec Large Stone Sculpture”

#### **Speaker Biography:**

Dr. Billie Follensbee has a Ph.D. in Art History and Archaeology, and she serves as a Professor of Art History and Museum Studies. She is also Area Coordinator of the Art History and Visual Culture Program and Coordinator of the Museum Studies Program.

Dr. Follensbee has received numerous grants, fellowships, and awards, including a Dumbarton Oaks Fellowship and a Dumbarton Oaks Research Award as well as Missouri State’s Community Service Award, Faculty Award for Excellence in Service-Learning, and Foundation Award in Teaching.

Dr. Follensbee’s research specialization is the Pre-Columbian cultures of North America and Mesoamerica, and her research of the past 25 years has focused on ancient stone sculpture, on sex and gender in art and archaeology, and on experimental archaeology conducted on ancient tools and textiles. Her research is widely published, with her work appearing in the premier

journals in her field, including *Ancient Mesoamerica*, *Latin American Antiquity*, and *EXARC Journal*; most recently, her invited chapter for the *Oxford Handbook of the Olmecs*, “Sex and Gender in Olmec Art and Archaeology,” is slated for publication in 2023.

**Abstract of Talk:**

The Colossal Head is easily the most famous type of sculpture made by the ancient Gulf Coast Olmec culture of Mesoamerica, but the Olmec actually made several different important, diagnostic types of sculptures. The most abundant type of large stone sculpture made by the Olmec is an enigma: A monument that most often takes a solid, rectangular form with a wide, heavy cornice overhanging the top, and that often has a niche in the front that frames one or more high-relief figures.

Because of its form and the sacrificial practices of later Mesoamerican cultures such as the Aztec, early scholars interpreted these table-like sculptures to be altars -- but as these sculptures measure up to six feet tall, many are much too large to have served as any type of sacrificial platform. In the 1970s, archaeologist David Grove identified an Olmec-related painting in Oxtotitlan Cave that appeared to have solved this mystery: Not only does the painting appear to show a rectangular sculpture with a cornice, but the cornice illustrates motifs and imagery very similar to that depicted on several of these Olmec table-top sculptures. As the painting also shows an elaborately garbed figure seated on the top in a typical pose for a Mesoamerican ruler, Grove and most other Olmec scholars have concluded that this type of sculpture served as a throne.

Further excavations over the past four decades have continued to add to the repertoire of sculptures identified as Olmec thrones -- but these discoveries have also introduced considerable ambiguity and uncertainty into this sculptural category. Some of the sculptures designated as table-top thrones have heavy cornices, but relief sculpture around the sides rather than a frontal niche, while others do not have a solid, rectangular base but are supported by slabs, posts, or sculpted figures. Other corniced, rectangular monuments appear to be stone boxes, while still other rectangular sculptures have frontal niches that frame relief figures, but appear to have been vertically oriented, similar to the niched stelae of later Mesoamerican cultures.

This research project reconsiders the many different types of Olmec sculptures that have been designated as thrones through a study of both the overlapping and the distinctive features among their forms and imagery. The project reevaluates the functions and meanings of these sculptures and explores additional possibilities, providing new insights into our understanding of Olmec monuments and of Olmec culture.

**Interdisciplinarity:**

This research is highly interdisciplinary, combining art history and iconographic studies with archaeology and anthropology in order to explore ancient cultures of the indigenous Americas.