



portfolio

# Dávalos

“When I was in art school, our principal medium was paper,” says artist Felipe Dávalos. “Since then, I always let part of the background paper show or keep its presence behind the image that lives on it.” Made of pulp modeled on a wood support, this head uses graphic elements that are made of paper. The eyeglasses, of polyester resin, are intended to sharpen the empty eyes. A tin can wrapped in paper sits on the head. The elaborate and active headdress is reminiscent of those seen in pre-Columbian art.

Part of a series called “Mexican Animals,” this watercolor illustration shows two ways to represent an animal image moving on paper. The background is a symbolic representation of an Aztec snake. The foreground snakes are dense in color, close to the way our eyes see them in nature.



*People to People Through a Global Communication: Paper Unites* was the title for this 1991 calendar. Artists from all over the world exchanged ideas expressed on paper. Says Dávalos, “I made the flat surface seem 3-D with characters wearing fish headdresses—a pre-Columbian motif. All the calendar pages had cutouts, integrating the works of each artist.






“Experience must be transformed into images if you want an exchange of ideas.”



BEHIND  
THE  
*Art*

MEXICO'S LOST  
CIVILIZATIONS

Join Felipe Dávalos as he re-creates  
the ancient worlds of the Olmec,  
Aztec, and Maya.

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**About the Artist**

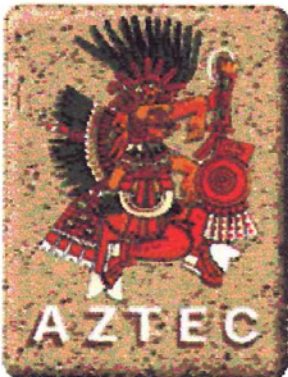
Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to fight in the *xochiyaotl*, or flower wars, leading to Aztec sacrifices . . . build a raft for a 13-ton sculpture of an Olmec head and float it along a river . . . celebrate the grand presentation of an important heir to prestigious Maya lords. . . .

Impossible? No. Nor unusual, for artists like Felipe Dávalos, who are in the business of re-creating ancient life.

Dávalos's work has been inspired and influenced by his ancestors, the pre-Columbian artists of his native Mexico, who carved statues and painted murals to broadcast important information. "The art of ancient cultures represents hundreds of years of visual communication," Dávalos says. "The people of the ancient cities are gone, but their ideas live on."

Dávalos's first job out of art school was with the Mexican newspaper *El Día*, where the internationally known graphic artist, Alberto Beltrán, was his supervisor and mentor. The two shared an interest in the ancestry of native peoples, and when Beltrán recommended Dávalos to archaeologist Michael Coe in 1967, the collaboration resulted in a comprehensive study of Olmec stone monuments as well as a life-long friendship. "Scholars still trust Felipe's work to study the ancient Olmec sculptures 30 years later," says Richard Diehl, field director for Coe on the Olmec project.

Dávalos has contributed to four articles in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC since 1980 and is currently on the staff of Sacramento Art, Inc. (SART), in California, where he uses his graphic skills to promote further study of the art of the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations of Mexico and Central America.



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Images from *In the Land of the Olmec*, Coe & Diehl, University of Texas Press, Austin.  
Photograph, above left, by José Luis Hernández.

## The Olmec

Felipe Dávalos (on left, above) studies the colossal heads at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo in 1967. Taking careful measurements and notes of each detail, Dávalos drew every monument from four sides (above, right). Most scholars believe the sculptures are portraits of important rulers of Mesoamerica's first civilization.



Great rivers helped move multiton blocks from the Los Tuxtlas Mountains near the Gulf of Mexico to the swampy plains where they are found today. In Dávalos's re-creation, workers transport a ruler's monuments to La Venta. Such hefty blocks were likely moved on sledges to riverbanks and rafted downstream along the seacoast, and then upriver.



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## The Maya



Photograph courtesy of Florida Museum of Natural History

Felipe Dávalos paints a replica of a Maya mural from Bonampak for the Florida State Museum in Gainesville, in 1976. The idea was to replicate the same intensity of color, proportion, and space as the ancient Maya had wanted a visitor to their city to experience.



The elaborate Bonampak murals illustrate a Classic Maya dynasty that flourished 1,200 years ago, in what is now the Mexican state of Chiapas. They were housed in three rooms in the red building on the right on the city's acropolis (above). New studies of the murals by a team led by Mary Miller have resulted in computer-enhanced reconstructions. See NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, February 1995



© Mary Miller

Parading along an eight-foot wall, this raucous celebration for a new heir has become one of Bonampak's most popular scenes. Struggling to meet a three-month deadline, Dávalos studied the faded originals for five weeks before painting the 85 figures plus a band of intricate glyphs—an average of three figures a day.



## The Aztec

Warriors, farmers, master builders, and poets, the Aztec honored their gods and ruled a mighty empire in Mexico from the 14th century until the Spanish conquest in 1521. Every 52 years, on a night when the stars of the Pleiades reached their zenith over Cerro de la Estrella, priests celebrated the most important milestone in the Aztec world—a new cycle in their calendar count. A fire was lighted on the chest of a distinguished captive, then his heart was cut out and thrown on the brazier. A relay of torches took the new fire to the Great Temple to be distributed throughout the land—Felipe Dávalos's re-creation is shown at right.



Click image to enlarge.

**Chalchiuhtlicue**, goddess of water from springs, streams, lakes, and seas

**Tlaloc**, he who “showered down the rain,” appears here in one of his multiple forms.

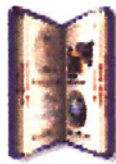
**Huitzilopochtli**, a deified earthly leader and god of war



A pantheon of gods—so intertwined that their complexities must have dazzled even the high priests—pervaded Aztec life. There were at least 1,600 deities, according to myth, but their forms were so intricate as to be countless. Artist Felipe Dávalos interpreted aspects of Aztec style for an article in NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC in December 1980, shown above.



Luxuries flowed to the great Aztec market at Tlatelolco, center of commerce for the empire. Conquistador Hernán Cortés reported a crowd of 60,000 bartering for goods—turkeys, armadillos, cotton, gourds, bolts of cloth, quills filled with gold dust, straw mats, corn, pottery, and feathers for lavish adornment.



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Image by Felipe Dávalos

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