CHAPTER SIX

RECLAIMING TLATILCO’S FIGURINES FROM BIASED ANALYSIS

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In 1953 the great Mexican artist Diego Rivera unveiled a mosaic mural for the façade of the Teatro de los Insurgentes in southern Mexico City, The Theatre in Mexico, a Popular History.1 On the upper right corner a dance group moves freely in uncluttered space. The ensemble is composed of three svelte women holding hands, their long braids flying in the air as a result of their lively movements (Fig. 6.1). From hips to toes they sport skin-tight decorated trousers or leotards that approach body-painted designs in appearance. For the average modern observer, the trio is reminiscent of a women’s chorus line, a form of entertainment popularized in Mexico by 1930s Hollywood movies. For a specialist in the preclassic period (2500 BCE–250 CE) of Mesoamerican art history, the dancers are clearly modeled after the small solid 8 to 15 cm. high clay female figurines unearthed mainly at Tlatilco during the 1940s.

Rivera and his friend Miguel Covarrubias were two of the many Mexican artists and collectors who first saw and bought these pieces from the workers at the brick factory set, half-knowingly, over the pre-Hispanic site of Tlatilco in the suburbs of Mexico City. Due to their high aesthetic quality, their diminutive size, and the uncontrolled looting of the privately owned lot, hundreds of whole figurines and thousands of fragments soon found their way into innumerable personal collections in Mexico, the United States, and Europe.2

For the Insurgentes dance ensemble, Rivera borrowed the bodily features of the Tlatilco Type D1 figurines along with the extended arms, earplugs, and long braids of a pair of sculptures apparently

1 El teatro en México, una historia popular. Mosaic, 12.85 × 42.79 m., Teatro de los Insurgentes, 1951–1953, México, D. F. For this mural see Rochfort (1993) 175–79.
2 Covarrubias (1943) 40–41; and Covarrubias (1957) 24.
Fig. 6.1  Diego Rivera. *The Theatre in Mexico, a Popular History*. Mosaic, 12.85 × 42.79 m., 1951–1953, Teatro de los Insurgentes, Mexico City. Detail. Drawing by the author at the site.