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The Earliest American Arts

Dorie Reents-Budet

All human cultures make art because it is the primary visual means by which we convey our fundamental beliefs and values, transforming soul into substance. The ancient Americas is no exception; its magnificent art and architecture preserve the intellectual and spiritual grandeur of the hemisphere's first civilizations (fig. 1). From northern Mexico to Chile, rich natural resources and varied environments nurtured more than 350 distinct cultures. Today, in excess of 130 native languages and dialects are spoken in Peru, Bolivia, and Chile, while 290 enliven the cultural landscape in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Myriad ancient art styles reflect the cultural diversity of the ancient Americas, and many have provided national emblems and inspiration for later artists. For example, the shape of a nineteenth-century glazed earthenware bottle made in England mimics the characteristic spout-and-bridge-handled vessels of the Nasca people and other ancient Peruvian cultures (fig. 2). The works presented here display the technical mastery and creativity of the hemisphere's first artists in what today is Latin America. But more importantly, these artworks reveal the people who made and used them.

The ancient Americas is one of six "cradles" of civilization along with Egypt, the Near East and Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, North China, and Southeast Asia. All developed at roughly the same rate, although the Americas matured later than those of the other five regions. From Mexico to Bolivia, towns with formal civic architecture and established craft traditions appeared during the fourth millennium BCE. Social and political complexity quickly followed, culminating in large urban centers with distinctive art traditions by the end of the first millennium BCE. Anthropologists have traditionally identified six traits



fig. 1. View of the Inti Watana residential group at Písac, the estate of the Inka ruler Pachacuti (1438–71)



fig. 2. Double-spouted vessel, designed by Christopher Dresser, about 1879–82

Panel

Wari, Middle Horizon Period, 500–700 CE
Peru

This tapestry panel teems with colorful forms that repeat a seemingly simple illustration of a standing male figure and a feline or camelid (likely a llama). Closer inspection reveals this to be an account of the Andean principle of a universe animated by creative life forces. This principle lies at the heart of ancient Andean cosmology and served as the spiritual foundation of social and political hierarchy, including that of the Wari state. The Wari created the first empire-like political organization in the Andes and sponsored the production of opulent textiles, as both personal and architectural adornments, to express their civic and religious configurations.

The standing male figure is the so-called Sacrificer, one of three main Wari supernatural beings embodying the creative forces in nature and conduit to the supernatural realm. The Sacrificer's long staff is topped by a U-shaped finial, and he wears a headdress of pierced white rectangular sequins. Versions of these items made from silver have been found in elite burials at the Wari site of Espiritu Pampa in southern Peru, which suggest that those in official positions in the Wari state wielded the Sacrificer's divine powers.

Another prominent entity pictured on this tapestry is the so-called Winged Staff Bearer, who always appears in profile and flanks a frontally portrayed personage (here the Sacrificer). This rendering is unusual in Wari art for its being fully zoomorphic rather than the typical human-animal composite being. Also notable is the absence of the Winged Staff Bearer's requisite staff. Instead, the zoomorph grasps the neck of a trophy head hanging at the rear of the Sacrificer, which links visually and conceptually this crucial pair of supernaturals in Wari state ideology.



Wool (camelid) and cotton tapestry weave
(predominantly interlocking)
H. 70.5 cm (27³/₄ in.), w. 117 cm (46¹/₈ in.)
Charles Potter Kling Fund 1996.50



Jaguar effigy vessel

Guanacaste-Nicoya, Period VI, 1000–1350

Rivas region, southern Nicaragua

This bulbous jar depicts a shaman transformed into his/her jaguar spirit form during a visionary quest. The fierce shamanic spirit erupts from the jar, jutting its feline head out through a dark rayed circle, its gaping mouth with bared teeth ready to attack. Small pellets inside the hollow front legs produce a rattling sound when shaken, resembling the jaguar's low grumble as it stalks its prey. Further evoking the jaguar-shaman's combat against preternatural forces is the low-slung head like that of a hunting cat. A successful strike is implied by the blood-red slip paint encircling the mouth and paws.

The shaman is not absent, however. Her/his human form is conveyed by the vertical pose mimicking that of the trance-seeker's conventional seated position on a low, three-legged stool with hands resting on bent knees. The animal's tail serves double duty as the stool's third leg. The verticality of the arms, legs, and tail suspends the jar in space, mirroring the shaman's ascent into the realm of shamanic vision. Tiny profile jaguars adorn the black-painted limbs in contrast to human-like forms seen around the neck opening, which together echo the artwork's theme of the shaman residing within the visionary jaguar.

Earthenware with red and black on white slip paint

H. 29.2 cm (11½ in.), w. 21.1 cm (8¼ in.), d. 24.1 cm (9½ in.)

Museum purchase with funds donated by Leigh B. and Steve Braude 2005.9

Pedestal dish

Macaracas style, Period VI-B, 800–1000

Azuero Peninsula, Panama

The exuberant Macaracas ceramic style reflects the artistic vigor of ninth-century Panama, a time of social, economic, political, and spiritual dynamism. Increasing populations, larger towns, and foreign exchange indicate plentiful food production and complex social networks, regional trade, and political growth. Macaracas painters responded with an innovative style reflecting the spirit of the times (or zeitgeist) with unreserved visual dynamism using simple lines and color. The painted compositions vibrate with visual forms that disavow the two-dimensional surface.

Here the artist masterfully portrayed the shaman's transformation from human to spirit realm, likening this unobservable transition to the agile motion of a crocodile as it slips below the water's

surface. Serrated lines fill the background to create visual agitation that shatters the flat surface into an oscillating three-dimensional space. The jagged edges replicate the shaman's pulsating trance-vision and allude to the shaman's penetrating powers and the ephemeral, water-like spirit world through which the human-crocodile glides. The solid red color of the humanoid body contrasts with the willowy lines of the head and claws, fixing the body in space while the head and appendages dematerialize into the visionary world. The spiked rays between the figure's legs point perpendicularly to those of the background, breaking the composition's hypnotic horizontal energy and invoking the multi-directionality of the shamanic journey.

Earthenware with red, purple and black on cream slip paint

H. 16.5 cm (6½ in.), diam. 25.9 cm (10¼ in.)

Promised gift of Timothy Phillips





Head effigy jar

Maya, Late Classic Period, 600–850 CE

Southern Highlands, Guatemala

Human head effigy jars, which are typical of Guatemala's Southern Highlands, are simultaneously naturalistic and emblematic. This unique example addresses the universal experience of all living things—the ever-linked duality of life and death and the unanswered question of an afterlife or a rebirth. It also likely makes reference to the shaman's experience of losing her/his physical body upon entering the supernatural realm and the eventual return to earthly form.

The artist pictorially divided the head effigy vessel into two equal halves. One side depicts a fully fleshed, living person, even portraying the person's idiosyncratic forehead wrinkles. An intense red slip paint colors the flesh, sparkling with the iron flecks of hematite. The deep red-hued skin contrasts with the cream-colored lips, which are further emphasized with an incised outline. The other half of the jar depicts the skull within, here painted a whitish color like that of bone. Curiously, both eye orbits contain eyeballs, their pupils accentuated by red pigment to enhance the piercing gaze. The "death" side also includes a fleshed ear complete with ear ornament. Together these anatomical features suggest an alternative interpretation of the jar as a reference to shamanic transformation, which is likened to the "sleep of death" by modern Maya practitioners. From this viewpoint, the jar foretells the "death" of the shaman's earthly self and loss of body as he/she enters the supernatural realm of shamanic experience. The two eyes and fleshed ears signify the shaman's need for vision and hearing to receive the mystical divinatory knowledge as well as his/her eventual return to an earthly existence.

Earthenware with specular hematite slip paint

H. 29.9 cm (9 in.)

Gift from the Collection of Shirley and Hy Zaret

2008.190a-b

Effigy pendant

Tairona, 900–1600

Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region,
Magdalena Department, Colombia

The Tairona of Colombia's North Coast fashioned a wide variety of gold alloy objects, from personal adornments to everyday tools. Metalsmiths mastered the lost-wax casting technique in which a wax model is enveloped in a material such as clay. The wax is melted away when heated, leaving a hollow mold into which the molten metal is poured.

The showy Tairona figural ornaments are often called "cacique" ("chief") pendants. They likely represent a high-ranking male figure transformed into his animal spirit form, here indicated by the leaf-nosed bat mask covering the lower half of the man's face. Two raptor-like birds perch atop his forehead, and

curvilinear emanations erupt from his head. Bats and raptors are especially common motifs in Tairona shamanic pendants, perhaps referring to the practitioner's hunt for spiritual power to combat earthly ills. The serpents emerging from his thighs may also represent shamanic strength.

Among the modern Kogi, descendants of the ancient Tairona, such transformed humans act as intermediaries between the community and the spirit world of ancestors and supernatural beings. In ancient times, these pendants may have reinforced the wearers' earthly status by an implied special connection to the supernatural realm.

Gold alloy

H. 16 cm (6¼ in.), w. 12.5 cm (4¾ in.), d. 2 cm (¾ in.)

Gift of Landon T. Clay 2000.813



Embossed disk pectoral

Coclé, 700–1520

Sitio Conte area, Panama

According to sixteenth-century Spanish sources, chieftains in Panama wore elaborate golden pectorals, the finest examples reserved for the paramount leader (*queve*) and secondary chieftains (*sacos*). Pectorals were displayed during public rituals and in battle, ending their ancient lives ornamenting the deceased. This disk features two composite animal beings facing each other. They have a lizard-like body, a long-beaked bird head topped by an iguana's spikey crest, and fearsome crocodile claws and tail. Such composite beings symbolize the transformed shaman whose special powers stem from his/her mystical association with these natural creatures. Crocodiles are particularly compelling shamanic associates because they inhabit both land and water and are formidable hunters.

Among the objects discovered at Sitio Conte in Panama, golden pectorals such as this example symbolically conveyed the special powers of the wearer. Some may be family emblems identifying the wearer's social affiliation whereas others may comprise petitions for supernatural protection. Panamanian artisans hammered gold into thin sheets and then used the repoussé technique to produce imagery by hammering the raised details from both sides. Tiny perforated holes allowed for attachment to clothing or suspension on cords.

Gold alloy

H. 21.6 cm (8½ in.), w. 23.5 cm (9¼ in.), d. 0.2 cm (1/16 in.)

Gift of Landon T. Clay 1972.940

Four-cornered hat

Wari, Middle Horizon Period, 500–800 CE
Peru

Knotted four-cornered hats were part of elite men's formal attire among the Wari culture of southern Peru and northern Bolivia. Ceramic and stone figurines show four-cornered caps worn with decorated tunics and other high-status paraphernalia. In some cases, face painting continues the lively geometric patterning of the hats. Square hats also adorned the false heads of high-status male mummy bundles.

Wari four-cornered hats were made using a labor-intensive technique reserved only for luxury objects. Knotted cotton threads form the basic structure of the hat. Along the sides and peaks, wool threads dyed

in different colors were looped into this structure as it was built up to make pile and create the geometric pattern of composite animals. The colorful loops then were cut, transforming the individual units into a smooth pile surface that covered the cotton threads holding them in place. The repeating figures on the alternating colored squares appear to be a composite creature composed of the beak and distinctive three-toed feet of a bird and the body of a long-necked llama, alpaca, or other camelid from which the wool fibers came.

Knotted cotton ground with wool (camelid) pile
H. 11.4 cm (4½ in.), w. 12.7 cm (5 in.), d. 12.7 cm (5 in.)
Mrs. Cabot's Special Fund 47.1096



Hat

Aymara, Late Horizon Period, 900–1535
Arica area, Chile, or western Bolivia

In the seventeenth century, the indigenous chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala illustrated the wide variety of headgear worn by different societies in the Inka empire, including feathered headdresses, headbands with ornaments, and short fez-like hats with ties around the chin. Similar to other clothing, headgear proclaimed the wearer's social and political affiliation, a practice that continues today among indigenous peoples in southern Peru, Bolivia, and northern Chile. Multicolored headgear was typical of the Aymara people (including the Carangas, Aullagas, and Quillacas) who came under Inka rule in the 1470s and who continue to live in the coastal plains of Bolivia and Chile. The region's dry, cold climate has preserved many ancient fiber creations.

Conical hats with small diameters were worn high on the head, which explains the need for chinstraps or ties as depicted in Guaman Poma's drawings of Aymara dress. This hat was crafted using a coiling technique in which a spiraled bundle of camelid fibers at the center top is held in place by thinner twisted threads that form the pattern. The colorful, zigzag design of stylized stepped frets is produced by alternating the red, blue, brown, and white wrappings around the bundled fibers. Rare examples of Aymara hats survive with their original feather panache (or tuft), as seen here, which is composed of a circular array of green feathers from which project long red feathers attached to a hole in the top of the hat.

Wool (camelid), feathers, cotton thread
Hat without feathers: h. 11 cm (4⅜ in.), w. 17.5 cm (6⅞ in.),
d. 17.5 cm (6⅞ in.)
Frederick Brown Fund 1996.14



Incense burner

Maya, Early Classic Period, 350–650 CE

Department of Tiquisate, Pacific Coast, Guatemala

Throughout the ancient Americas, ceremonial and administrative buildings were adorned with extravagant regalia, setting the stage for the formal activities that took place in them and along their staircases and platforms. Buildings were decorated with carved stucco and painted images, woven or painted cloth, and carved wooden elements displaying royal and sacred insignia. Magnificent incense burners, such as this Maya version, ornamented the wide staircases, the smoldering incense and modeled imagery activating sacred forces to sanctify the structures and the myriad rites of state and religion held inside the buildings.

This incense burner replicates a Maya shrine adorned with divination mirrors, a flamboyant feather headdress, and emblems of the warrior's sacred obligations of war and sacrifice. Motifs flanking the building identify the censer as a representation of the mythical Flower Mountain, a place of cosmic origin and the after-death paradise for warriors. The bust of a figure, believed to portray the mummy bundle of a deified ancestor-warrior, sits inside the shrine. This style of censer was developed at Teotihuacan in highland Mexico, which extended its imperial and economic influence to Guatemala's Pacific Coast during the third century and introduced the cult of sacred warfare and the veneration of warrior sacrifice.

Earthenware with traces of red and yellow post-fire paint

H. 43.5 cm (17 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.), w. 43.3 cm (17 in.), d. 28 cm (11 in.)

Gift of Landon T. Clay 1988.1229a-b

