

77 COSTA RICA a) Huetar Culture

Costa Rica, in the middle zone of Central America, has a cultural and historical unity with Nicaragua and Panama as yet not the object of the detailed study given other areas, especially the northern region of Central America, where the great Maya culture flourished.

Archeologists Jorge A. Lines and Doris Stone have dedicated much fruitful effort to the study of the remote past of Costa Rica but publications are not abundant, and there is still much about the people of the region, their customs, and their art that remains in obscurity. Perhaps that is precisely why Costa Rica holds such fascination for collectors and lovers of ancient American art.

In accordance with the discoveries and studies of those archeologists, Costa Rica can be considered the "epicenter" of the region from an artistic point of view. From the north through Nicaragua came the influence of the Maya and the Olmec; from the south through Panama, the accents and cultural expressions of the Chibcha and Agustin cultures of Colombia.

Once excavation is completed, one must rely on morphology, accents of expression, and techniques of execution to trace cultural links hypothetically. It is thus that art serves archaeology. Seeing the magnificent monoliths of Easter Island and analyzing their physical characteristics reminded me of certain Costa Rican Huetar figures. In spite of the fact that the statues of Easter Island were executed seven centuries later and that they are much larger than the largest Huetar figures, one can engage in a sustained hypothesis on the basis of their similarity alone. Did the Huetar make excursions through the South Pacific as did the Tiahuanacan or the Inca? Little is known, but the statues and the formal affinities remain, and the doubts may someday lead to investigation and confirmation of facts. Other

similarities can be found in certain forms and plastic solutions of the huge sculptures at San Agustin, which also served as models for other cultures throughout South America.

Costa Rica was inhabited by three important cultural groups prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. The Chorotega, which shared affinities with the Maya, had its center in the northwestern region and is perhaps the oldest of the cultural complex. Besides having developed an orange ceramic decorated with highly expressive animal figures and deities, the Chorotega used a mysterious, virtuoso technique to carve jade and stone. The green jade carvings have something of the strength and simplicity characteristic of the Olmec. Jade being a material of exceptional hardness, it is an enigma how these pieces were executed and polished by men who did not yet have metal tools. Also characteristic of the culture are the metates or tripod corn grinders often seen with the head and tail of a jaguar. The concaveness of the bowl, the richness of detail in the treatment of the stone, and the rhythm of the pieces as a whole make these utilitarian objects, which may also have been used for religious purposes, excellent examples of the extremely refined craftsmanship of the ancient sculptors.

The Huetar occupied the largest part of the territory, including the central zone and extending along most of the Caribbean coast and a large part of the Pacific coast of the country. The Huetar were primarily stone carvers. The volcanic stone almost always was left with a rough surface, polished only enough to erase the traces of the blows made with the tools. Sometimes the sculptor insinuated an adornment on the waist of the guerrero, or warrior figure, or traced hair or decoration on the head; but in spite of these refinements, essentially the stone remained rough. Although careful attention was given to correct anatomy in reproducing heads and bodies, the extremities were expressed in simple tubular shapes. The single heads, the metates decorated with small human or animal forms, the circular

metates, the large baroque altars, the guerreros, who customarily decapitated their enemy and carried his head in their hands --all are executed with sculptural principles of surprising maturity.

Although the Brunca culture (Brunka or Boruca) bears a close formal relationship with the Huetar, especially as evidenced in the work in carved volcanic stone, there are certain characteristics that differentiate them. When the ceramics are examined, especially the tripod incensarios ornamented with animals, Brunca art acquires its own stamp. The Brunca were located in the southwestern part of the country on the Pacific and received by way of Panama a direct influence of the cultures from the south - especially the Cocale and, further down, the Chibcha, Quimbaya and Agustin. The popular use of gold as ornament and as a means of plastic expression can be traced along that southern route. In quality and strength of expression and technique Brunca goldwork is easily comparable to that coming from the original sources in Colombia and Peru. The Brunca delighted in portraying animal forms both in gold and in stone, the latter being treated as a mass, and often used animals as relief or incised decoration on clay vessels.

In spite of the influences exerted upon the Costa Rican cultures from north and south, each had its own distinguishing characteristics. They had in common a rich imagination and expressive power, sure command of technique, and a skill in modelling and carving that the serious scholar of ancient American art cannot afford to overlook.

- 77A       Circular table held by four monkeys.
- 77B       Masculine figure, representing a victorious warrior, displaying both the head of the contender (a trophy) and the hatchet used.
- 77C       Tripod vessel possible used for dual purposes: heating and drinking beverages like chocolate. Its legs represent prisoners.
- 77D       Stone circular table, the edge of which is

- adorned with jaguars in several positions and relief motifs of the plumed serpent. It is considered one of the master pieces of the Huetar culture.
- 77E One of the few stone human figures, found in Costa Rica, with erotic overtones.
- 77F Zoomorphic figure holding with both hands what seems to be a yoke on its head.
- 77G Fragment of a masculine human figure with a jaguar mask and eyes which resemble those of an owl.
- 77H Feminine human figure holding with both hands a yoke on its head with a human head in one end and a serpent's head on the other.
- 77I Feminine figure in which the reproduction organs can be seen. Probably goddess of fertility.
- + 77J Metates like this, are generally called altars because of the raised edges which are not of the meso-american style. Adorning motifs refer to serpents, monkeys, jaguars, head-trophies, and lizzards, all related with the fertility cult.

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All works on exhibit at the National Museum of Costa Rica in San José.