



ORGANIZACION DE LOS ESTADOS AMERICANOS
ORGANIZAÇÃO DOS ESTADOS AMERICANOS
ORGANISATION DES ETATS AMERICAINS
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO - VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 184 PRE - COLUMBIAN ART FROM THE MUSEUM OF THE CENTRAL BANK

The new world deserves its name, for man has been living on it for a relatively short time. This simple reason appears sufficient to justify its name more than all the discoveries of the 15th century. In fact, Columbus only encountered those who, from the East, had invaded some twenty thousand years before the vast stretches that we today call America.

Their evolution was slow and, only two or three thousand years ago, some groups began to raise themselves; finally to achieve a cultural stage comparable, in more than one way, to that of the West. Certain tribes attached themselves to the soil. They tilled the earth, cultivated and improved food plants such as maize, potatoes, and beans, textile plants such as agave and cotton, domesticated animals, raised bees, constructed homes, pyramids, and temples, sculptured in stone, modelled in clay, cast in metal, kept their bookkeeping by an ingenious method of knots, and even appeared to have fixed their rituals with the aid of drawings and signs.

Because Europe was beginning to recognize the artistic value of those objects that had survived from time before history, the relatively young countries of Latin America were encouraged in their efforts to explore their own pasts. In Mexico alone, more than twelve thousand medium and large sized ancient settlements have been studied; in Peru and Bolivia about half that number have been studied.

Like the languages of the New World, so too its art reveals an extraordinary diversity of aspects, forms and techniques. In the age that concerns us here, intellectual and cultural development was centered in Mexico, Guatemala, and some parts of neighboring regions, along with the central Andes of Peru and Bolivia. The full development of the lands in between, those called the Lands of Gold, was cut short by the Spanish conquest.

Reality for ancient Mexico lay in the myths it lived by. This is just as true of the other Indian cultures. Most religious systems are concerned with good and evil, not those of the early peoples of America. Their gods were conceived as embodiments of cosmic forces. There was no separation of good and evil. In ancient America, fortune and misfortune were dealt out by the same gods. Those gods were of a difficult temper, like nature itself in the tropics, of whose changing moods they are the reflection.

Art in the Americas was not "free" as we understand the term. It had specific functions and duties which is why art for art's sake, in the European sense, was simply unknown in pre-Hispanic cultures, except for a few minor instances in the later period.

The artist was no more than a nameless servant of society. His work was all produced for religious purposes. In ancient America, "art" was invented to lend emphasis to the prayers of the living. For such reasons, the artist strove after an impression rather than beauty.



Sculpture is less restricted than painting. It stands free, awakening a more catholic response. It transcends times and continents.

The pre - Columbian sculptor shows great feeling for his material. Limestone was common. The Aztec carver frequently used trachyte, serpentine, and other rugged stones.

Realism is frequently submerged in esoteric symbolism but, in many cases, truly sculptural talent shines through, making immediate contact with us. Ease and subtlety of pose and balance of movement are often so humanly expressed that alien elements can be disregarded and the sculpture enjoyed without a discordant note.

In ancient America, gold was used only rarely for trade; it was looked upon as a sacred element symbolic of great power and a close alliance with the Sun God. Gold was also used for ornaments in important burials.

Although the working of copper was well developed among the Tarascans of Mexico and the late northern coast cultures of Peru, and there was considerably high quality silversmithing, also in Peru and among the Mixtec of Mexico, gold was the only metal consistently worked throughout pre - Columbian Latin America.

There is some controversy as to whether gold was worked first in Colombia or Peru but the earliest known pieces were made about 400 B.C. by Chavin craftsmen in the Northern Highlands and coastal areas of Peru. The earliest method involved the crude shaping of the nugget. Cold hammering and grinding were the only methods used and the objects produced were of poor quality and have not survived in large numbers.

The discovery of the annealing process solved this particular difficulty and gave the ancient goldsmith considerable freedom in working the metal. The process requires the application of a precise amount of heat to bring the gold to a soft but not molten state. The artist could stretch and hammer a piece of annealed gold almost indefinitely and could also decorate it with repoussé designs.

The actual melting of gold and casting was the next significant development. Various molds were used. The first were simple open molds made of stone. Two piece clay molds were then developed and apparently used mostly for the casting of knives and axeblades.

Finally, the sophisticated method of lost wax casting was discovered. This technique required the original model to be made of beeswax or resin with a low melting point into which the various details of the sculpture were modelled. The wax sculpture was covered with a coating of powdered charcoal and then with a layer of clay. When the entire model was heated, the wax melted, poured out of a channel that had been left in the clay (thereby becoming "lost"), the impression of the original wax sculpture remained. The mold was then filled with molten gold which took the form of the original wax model. After the gold cooled, the mold was broken and the gold sculpture that remained had only to be burnished and smoothed.

Decorative techniques included incising, stamping and scratching and inlaying with various materials such as turquoise, quartz, pyrite, amber, emerald, silver and serpentine. Repoussé and chasing were commonly employed.

Gold workers were accorded high social positions because of their artistry. Mixtec smiths, the most talented of all ancient American metalworkers, were so highly regarded that they were not permitted to do any type of work except metalwork.

The Mochica civilization of the north coast of Peru developed on a narrow shelf of land poised between the Andes on the east and the Pacific on

the west. Situated at a vital juncture of the loose confederation of communities are the two most famous architectural structures of the Mochica, the Pyramid of the Sun and the massive Pyramid of the Moon with its complex murals of mythic or historic battle scenes. The Early Mochica period ranges from 400 B.C. to 100 A.D. The Middle Mochica period ranges from 100 A.D. to 500 A.D. and the Late Mochica period ranges from 500 A.D. to 700 A.D.

The following slides reflect the diversity of the artisans' environment, language, technological and social developments over the millennium 1000 B.C. to 1500 A.D.

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- SET 184 ECUADOR Pre-Columbian Art from the Museum of the Central Bank
- 184 A A Small mask or ceramic head from the La Tolita (circa 400 B.C. - 510 A.D.) resembling the Jama-Coaque Phase. The eyes are not perforated, but the ears have perforations along the outer edge for ornamentation.
- 184 B Detail of a zoomorphic bottle from the Chorrera culture circa 1840 - 540 B.C..
- 184 C Semi-zoomorphic hollow pottery figure from La Tolita (circa 400 B.C. to 510 A.D.). This figure may represent humans masquerading as gods. The fanged monster repeats a Jama-Coaque Phase theme. The outstretched hand is characteristic of this type of figurine.
- 184 D Gold and platinum ear spool. The Tolita culture was the first culture in the world to work platinum. Artisans welded and drew enough gold into platinum to create a workable alloy. Each artisan had his own metal working kit and developed the skill and manual dexterity to craft metal objects in a culture that did not have advanced metallurgical techniques or artisans. The relief work has been hammered.
- 184 E A gold mask representing the sun.
- 184 F A redware figurine from Guangala, Ecuador (circa 500 B.C. to 500 A.D.) Such figurines display an advanced style of modelling. The fine burnished redware is scored by incised parallel lines in rectangular patterns near the joints of the body.
- 184 G A small mask in gold.
- 184 H Funery mask in gold and platinum.
- 184 I A Figurine from the Jama-Coaque Phase (circa 400 B.C. - 510 A.D.) This figurine represents a chief adorned for a ceremony with trinkets of shells, gold and turquoise.
- 184 J Bottle with an ornithomorphic motif from the Chorrera culture (circa 1840-540 B.C.). In Chorrera pottery volumes are frequently superposed creating complex shapes.

