

The New World's Oldest Art

TWO MAJOR SHOWS OF PRE-COLUMBIAN ART GO ON VIEW IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. BY JOHN DORFMAN



From top: Unknown artist, Mouth Mask with Feline Creature and Human Figures, Cupisnique/Chavin 800-550 B.C., Gold; Unknown artist, Strap-handles Spouted Whistling Jar, Peru 750-1200 A.D., Terracotta.

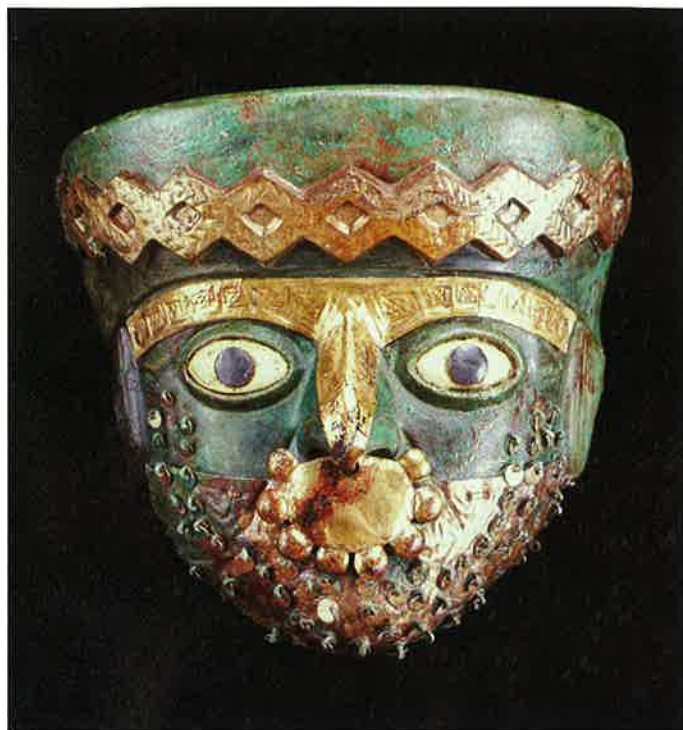


AS PART OF THE massive Southern California art initiative Pacific Standard Time LA/LA, which starts this month, two major exhibitions of Pre-Columbian art will be on view—at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, “Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas” will feature objects from all the main art-producing cultures of the region, loaned from institutions around the world, while Mingei International Museum in San Diego will offer “Art of the Americas: Mesoamerican and Pre-Columbian Art from the Mingei’s Permanent Collection.” Both shows will give viewers a sense of the depth and richness of the art created in South America, Central America, and Mexico before the Spanish invasion, as well as fulfilling Pacific Standard Time’s intention to

explore the threads that connect Southern California—and by the extension the U.S.—with the indigenous cultures south of the not-so-far-away border.

The Getty show—which runs September 16–January 28, after which it travels to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where it will run February 27–May 28—is focused on the element of luxury, a concept which had a rather different meaning in the ancient Americas than it does in modern America. Precious metals, jade, turquoise, and rare shells like the spondylus, while coveted by men for their beauty and rarity, were considered emanations of the gods, bearers of divine influence and power. The Aztecs gave this idea a sort of supernatural earthiness; they called gold and silver “divine excrement, the yellow, the

MUSEO KUNTUR WASI, MINISTERIO DE CULTURA DEL PERU, IMAGE © KUNTUR WASI MUSEUM, EX.2017/171; GIFT OF JAMES L. GREAVES, 2000-05-09



white.” And the presence of the divine was felt in materials other than gold and silver, as well. Blanca E. Maldonado, one of the 37 contributors to the in-depth catalogue that accompanies this show, writes in an essay, “Substantial linguistic, ethnohistoric, and technical data suggest that many Pre-Columbian societies shared related beliefs that centered on brilliant and iridescent natural phenomena—such as water, rainbows, sunsets, flames, and celestial bodies—and natural materials, including metals, feathers, shells, and artifacts made from them.... Among the Uto-Aztecan peoples of Mesoamerica, brilliant and iridescent materials were thought to have been associated with a sacred reality that could be invoked through ritual and song.”

One of the most ancient objects in the exhibition certainly had ritual use. *Mouth Mask with Feline Creature and Human Figures* dates from 800–550 B.C. and comes from a tomb in the Kuntur Wasi site in Peru. Made of 79 percent gold and 21 percent silver, it was intended to hang from the wearer’s nose and cover his mouth. The main figure is a wild cat, probably a jaguar, which was sacred to many Pre-Columbian civilizations from earliest times onward and was the

focus of shamanistic rites in which humans would undergo transformation into felines. The jaguar here has a double-headed serpent across its forehead and is grasping two human figures in its paws. Seven tiny feline heads are attached to the mask’s edges, dangling like pendant earrings.

Another noteworthy gold object also comes from Peru, but from a much later time period, 640–680 A.D., and is a product of the Moche culture, known for its excellence in goldsmithing. *Earspool Depicting a Warrior* was excavated in 1987 at Sipán, now considered the richest archaeological site in the New World that was never plundered by looters. Made of gold, turquoise, and wood and measuring less than four inches across, it is an intricate, miniature masterpiece. The warrior figure inside the turquoise circle carries a shield and a club and wears

Clockwise from top left: Unknown artist, Burial Mask, Moche 525-550, Copper, gold, gilt copper, shell, stone; Unknown artist, Shield, Mixteca (Mixtec), 1400-1500, Turquoise, wood, stone, tree pitch/gum; Unknown artist, Nose Ornament, Moche about 400, Gold, silver.





Clockwise from top left: Unknown artist, Brownware, North Coast Peru 300-400; Unknown artist, Octopus Frontlet, Moche 300-600, Gold, chrysocolla, shells; Unknown artist, Wall Hanging, Wari 600-900, Feathers, cotton, camelid fiber.



rattles on his hips; he wears a necklace of owl-head-shaped beads. Amazingly, all of these little ornaments can be removed from the object. This earspool was found right near the skull of the Lord of Sipán, and the little warrior's accouterments closely resemble those of the real-life warrior with whom he was buried.

Luxury materials in the ancient Americas were not confined to "all that glitters"; textiles also were prized. *Royal Tunic* (circa 1530 A.D.), from what is now Peru, Bolivia, or Ecuador, is the only known surviving example of a royal Inca tunic. Its patterns, in red, golden-yellow, black, and green, match depictions of royal garments in illustrated manuscripts of the early Spanish colonial period. It is so finely woven that it feels like silk, and many weavers

would have had to collaborate on it, a process which could have taken years. In Inca society, luxury, in both its religious and materialistic aspects, was the prerogative of class—sumptuary laws dictated that only a ruler could wear a garment composed, as this one is, entirely of *tocapus*, emblems embodying state power.

The objects in the Mingei exhibition, by contrast, are mostly ceramics, not a luxury material per se but still highly prized. The Mingei's Pre-Columbian collection, numbering some 200 ceramics, was mostly acquired in 2000 from a single source, the collector James L. Greaves. Curator Christine Hietbrink explains that in the ancient Americas, even functional objects were often also ceremonial. "The majority of our ceramics were for ceremonial use,"

she says. "Outside communities would come to your community, attend a feast, and take some objects home with them. One of the reasons why these feasting vessels survive is that they ended up being funerary goods; people would be buried with their possessions." She adds, "Quite a bit of material was for shamanic use,



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either used by shamans or referencing shamanistic transformation.” For example, a stirrup-spout effigy jar from the North Coast of Peru, circa 300–400 A.D., is in the form of a seal’s head. Its soulful eyes and mouth look almost human. Another stirrup-spout effigy jar, from the Moche culture (circa 200–300/500 A.D.), is in the form of a frog, while another from the North Coast of Peru (circa 550–750 A.D.) is described only as representing a “fanged deity.”

Some of the objects are very functional in nature. An orange polychrome Maya

vase (*uk’ib’*) from the Eastern Petén in what is now Guatemala (680–720 A.D.) was clearly intended for drinking the chocolate beverage the Maya made from cacao beans; if any clarification were necessary, the lozenge-shaped decorations covering the jar are simple graphic representations of cacao beans. And for a culinary use very familiar to modern people all over the Americas, a slip-painted terracotta vessel from what is now Panama (circa 700–1100 A.D.) is described by the Mingei as a “Polychrome Chip and Dip Vessel.”

Clockwise from top left: Unknown artist, Polychrome Chip and Dip Vessel, Panama 700–1100, Slip painted terracotta; Unknown artist, Royal Belt Ornament, Maya about 400–500, Jade; Unknown artist, Sheet Gold Pectoral Ornament, Coclé, Gold; Unknown artist, Tabard with Lizard-like Creatures, Nasca 400–700, Feathers on cotton.



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