ART OF THE AMERICAS
INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO
Front cover

detail: Limestone Stela, Maya, Southern Lowlands, Mexico, Guatemala or Belize, A.D. 761. 82 x 42 in.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Purchase, Phyllis Wattis Purchase Fund, 1999.42 a-k
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Vas Prabhu, Director of Education
Harry S. Parker III, Director of Museums
ART OF THE AMERICAS

The Objects

General Introduction

The first inhabitants of the Americas arrived in North America between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago around the time of the last glacial age. Because water was formed into ice at this time, the oceans of the world were lower than at present, uncovering a land bridge about 1,000 miles wide that connected Siberia to Alaska. These first travelers came from Northern Asia across this Bering land bridge to the new world of the Americas; some groups settled in North America, while others continued their migration to Central and South America. For thousands of years, these people lived in small, somewhat nomadic groups whose existences depended on hunting animals and gathering wild plants. Over time, these groups developed agricultural methods allowing them to grow and produce food sufficient for settling and remaining in fixed communities. This newfound stability left people with more time and energy to do other than survive; ideas of government, religion, art, and architecture evolved and became complex in organization. Great civilizations flourished throughout the Americas at different times and places; the Americas collection at the de Young Museum is fortunate to be home to art objects produced by some of these civilizations. Many such ancient cultural groups no longer exist, therefore the historical objects in our collection are the best link that we in the Bay Area have to their vanished ways of life. Learning about and experiencing these objects can teach us—as present-day inhabitants of the Americas—about our collective past and help us better understand our world today.

North America - The de Young Museum’s collection of Native American art focuses primarily on California and the Northwest Coast. The works in this collection were all made within the past 150 years and demonstrate the vitality of Native American traditions.

Central America - Central America, which is also called Mesoamerica, includes Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and the western strip of Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The de Young Museum’s collection of Mesoamerican art is all ancient, dating prior to Spanish contact in the early 1500s.

South America - The South American art collection at the de Young Museum is represented by ancient art from what scholars term the Intermediate Area (parts of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama), the Northern Andes (Ecuador and Colombia), and the Central Andes (Peru). This art also dates to pre-Spanish contact.
North America

Hundreds of different native groups were well established in California and the Northwest Coast by the time the Europeans arrived in the middle and late eighteenth century. However, the Native American way of life was changed dramatically by the European conquest and settlement; the Spanish imperial government and later the American government organized extensive campaigns to remove Native Americans from their homelands. Traditional Native American culture and beliefs were suppressed. Ancient art practices that had been passed down through many generations were nearly destroyed, but never forgotten. Many of the foundations of Native American culture have been kept alive and are re-emerging today because of the determination of Native Americans to preserve their history and culture.

Feather Basket
Pomo, Sonoma County, California
1890–1910
Three-rod foundation of willow roots with weft materials of xerpa root and feathers of quail, woodpecker, bluebird, meadowlark, and mallard neck
Museum purchase
21478

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, prior to the arrival of Europeans, the area that is now California was one of the most densely populated regions on the continent. California territory was the homeland for approximately 500 cultural groups speaking over 200 different languages. In Northern California, the Native American way of life was based on gathering and hunting, with groups migrating each new season in order to take advantage of the many plant and animal species available here. Native Americans were always skilled at using whatever natural resources they found in their environments for practical and aesthetic purposes; baskets are one excellent example of Native American resourcefulness and artistry.

Baskets have been an important part of native Californian life for over 5,000 years. They are used for gathering, cooking, eating and storing food. More elaborate baskets, with feathers and shells interwoven in them, are given as gifts on important occasions. Basket makers must be trained to identify and treat the materials needed, to know the best weaving techniques for a specific use, and to artistically express reverence for the natural and the spiritual world. A basket can take two years to complete because, in addition to the painstaking task of weaving, a weaver spends months gathering the proper materials at the right time.

This gift basket was made by a member of the Pomo Indians, a group who are recognized for producing the highest quality of baskets. In a very sophisticated way, the feathers are incorporated as the weaving is done, not added on to the finished product. A basket like this might be filled with clamshell money and presented to a bride and groom, and later hung by its clamshell handle for all to admire.

After 1769 Native Americans were removed from their homelands by the American government and were no longer able to use traditional methods for gathering food. This displacement and change of environment lead to massive psychological and physical decline. The making of feather baskets continued for a time because money could be earned by selling the baskets to European patrons; that market declined after the 1920s, however, so the number of weavers dwindled, and the art form was almost lost. A revitalization began in the 1970s and continues today due to the efforts of California Native Americans to revive their culture.
Cradle
Atsugewi, Hot Springs Valley, California
Ca. 1870–1900
Reed frame, buckskin, glass beads, hazel shoots, willow shoots, and cotton
Gift of Mrs. A. G. Boggs
46896

This is a baby cradle, also known as a papoose. The plant fibers used are so strong that this hundred-year-old cradle could still hold a baby today. A Californian Indian baby would have been wrapped in a blanket and placed inside the cradle, which was padded with soft materials like fibrous bark. A mother carried her baby this way until the child could walk. Traditionally, the cradle was woven by the baby’s grandmother. This one is decorated with abalone shells and blue beads that are probably from Europe.

Totem Pole
Tsimshian or Northwestern style, Prince Rupert area, British Columbia
Late 19th century
Cedar and paint
Gift of Captain Gustave Niebaum through the Alaska Commercial Company
8947

Native Americans of the Northwest Coast live today in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and Canada, areas which are very rich in natural resources. For hundreds of years the Native American people of the Northwest Coast spent the summer and fall months harvesting and gathering food. Each family had specific inherited rights, such as hunting or fishing in a particular place. During the harsh winter months, they moved inland from the coast to permanent winter homes where extended families lived in large wooden houses. Since food had been preserved and stored for the winter, there was time to develop and perform rituals and ceremonies, and to make the objects used in these ceremonies. Each family had its own songs, dances, and ceremonies that could only be performed by family members and that often described the family’s history and origin.

“Totem pole” is a name given by Europeans to a carved wooden pillar made by the Native Americans of the Northwest Coast. Anthropologists use the word totem to refer to a symbolic relationship existing between natural phenomena and humans, usually animals, but also plants or celestial bodies. According to ancient Native American traditions, humans, animals, and supernatural creatures interact and even change from one to the other. Totem poles depict a family’s crest, its meaning known only to family members. These crests often take the form of animal images that relate the story of the family’s origin, history, and privileges. From top to bottom, this totem pole contains a bald eagle, a killer whale, a bear holding a human in its paws, and a fish. The center of this pole, featuring a large bear holding a small man upside down, is a curious sight and promises an interesting story. We have no direct or documented interpretation, but one undocumented tale is available. In this account, a man was in love with, and went to live with, a bear’s daughter, although he was always torn between his human family and his bear family. Eventually the man left the bear community, not to return, and the bear father used all the creatures of land and sea to find the man. The man (upside down in the bear father’s paws) powerfully displays the bear’s displeasure.
Totem poles are carved from cedar trees, which can grow as tall as 200 feet. Styles vary among the many cultural groups of the Northwest Coast, but we know this pole was carved by a member of the Tsimshian group in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Today poles like this are still made; they may be hand-carved as in the past, or carved in the modern way using electric saws and drills. Contemporary totem poles may look exactly like those made hundreds of years ago, conceived as a tribute to a family's history and faithful to traditional style. However, contemporary poles are also made by artists in completely new styles, using steel, glass, and a variety of metals and synthetic materials.

The paint in an older pole like this one is made from pigment found in nature. Black comes from lignite or charcoal, red from ocher, green and blue from copper, and yellow from pollen. The pigment was put in a cedar bark pouch with salmon eggs, the pouch was then chewed by the artist like gum. The mixture of the oil from the salmon eggs, the pigment, and the artist's saliva made paint.

**Feast Bowl**
Kwakwakawakw (Kwakiutl) Quatsino Sound, British Columbia
Late 19th century
Wood, paint, horn, and glass
Gift of Mr. John L. Bardwell
5751

This large wooden bowl is called a feast bowl. It is used during a potlatch, a very important gift-giving ceremony in which a chief demonstrates his wealth and prosperity by giving gifts to all of his family, many neighboring families, and other cultural groups on the Northwest Coast. A potlatch is usually given to celebrate a special event like a birth or a wedding, and a traditional potlatch can last several days or even weeks. A bowl this large would be required because there would be so many guests attending the celebration; the bowl would be filled with whale oil and the oil used as a dip for dried fish.

The Kwakwakawakw (Kwakiutl) have a very distinctive style of carving in three dimensions. This carver seems to have made a mountain goat with horns who holds a human, but the nose is similar to a pig, and the face resembles a human. Composite forms like those used on this feast bowl sometimes combine different animals in order to emphasize and bring together particular traits or qualities. The carvings may also illustrate a family story, which only the family knows.

The glass eyes, obtained from European traders, are another example of new materials incorporated into a very old traditional style. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Canadian government banned the potlatch ceremony in order to assert authority and control over Native American life and customs; the government confiscated many of the objects used during the potlatch celebration. The ban lasted for seventy years, and it took twenty more years for the confiscated items to be returned. During the time of the ban, the making of traditional ritual objects declined. Fortunately, in the 1970s Native Americans and their supporters won a reversal on the ban. Since that time there has been a renaissance in Native American art on the Northwest Coast, and potlatch ceremonial items are again being made.
Mesoamerica

Central Mexico was a center of high civilization for over 3,000 years, from 1500 B.C. until the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. Mesoamerica was occupied by people who were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse, but who were nonetheless united by many shared beliefs and practices. Although Mesoamerica had contact with parts of North and South America, its inhabitants remained culturally separate with independent traditions of their own.

Mask
Olmec, Arroyo Pesquero, Veracruz, Mexico
1200–800 B.C.
Serpentine and red pigment
Museum purchase, Salinger Bequest Fund
72.43

Over 3,000 years separate us from Mesoamerica's oldest civilization, the Olmecs. Olmec civilization dates from approximately 1500 B.C. to 100 B.C. and was centered in the fertile lands along the Gulf of Mexico. The Olmecs built huge pyramids, carved gigantic stone portraits of their rulers, traded with other regions of Mesoamerica, and created precious objects of jade and green stone like this serpentine mask. All types of green stone were highly valued by the Olmec. It is believed that green represented crop fertility and water. The exquisite carving on this mask becomes even more amazing when we consider that metal cutting tools were unknown in ancient Mesoamerica; all of the carving and polishing of precious stone was accomplished with cords and sand or pulverized rock. This process demanded great skill, phenomenal effort, and months of arduous labor.

Although the exact ethnic identity of the Olmec people is still unknown to scholars, most Olmec depictions of the human face share similar features, which include almond-shaped eyes, a downturned mouth, and a wide nose. The function of masks such as this is still not clear. It may have served a function in a funeral or perhaps was used to honor ancestors. Smaller greenstone masks may have been worn as headdress or chest ornaments.

Maguey Ritual Figure Mural
Tlatuilapaaco, Teotihuacán, Mexico
A.D. 600–750
Volcanic ash and mud backing, lime coating, and red pigments
Bequest of Harald J. Wagner
1985.104.4

Teotihuacán, in Central Mexico, which dates from A.D. 1 to A.D. 750, was the largest and most important city in ancient Mesoamerica. In A.D. 600 it was the sixth largest city in the world. Teotihuacán boasted a ceremonial center dominated by temple complexes and huge pyramids. At the height of its power and success, Teotihuacán housed a population of 150,000, a number comparable to the population of ancient Athens. Teotihuacán covered the same area as the walled city of Rome, which flourished about the same time.
A unique feature of Teotihuacán was that the entire population was housed in state-sponsored adobe apartments; it was the first city in the Americas to build permanent housing for its inhabitants. Archaeological evidence has been found for over 2,000 apartment compounds, which would have been occupied by fifty to one hundred people each. The one-story rooms were built around central courtyards that provided fresh air and natural light for the family groups, and the walls of the courtyards were decorated with beautiful murals. Art in ancient Mesoamerica was not only decorative, but also functional. The rulers of Teotihuacán must have sought to make the gods and religion more visible to people in their homes.

The colors most commonly used in Teotihuacán murals are close to each other in value and not of high contrast. As a result, the murals require scrutiny and often require a line drawing such as this to make out what is represented. The most frequent representations are rows of richly dressed male figures in profile performing ceremonies; bubbles representing what appear to be prayers or chants emerge from their mouths, while libations are poured from their hands. A powerful, state-sponsored religion apparently permeated most aspects of Teotihuacán life. On this mural, the figure in profile holds a bag of incense as a stream of liquid containing red dots and flowers pours from his hand onto the earth. Sharp, thorn-edged maguey cactus leaves are set vertically into bundles. These cactus bundles may represent abstract symbols for agricultural fields or for the bloody thorns used in self-sacrifice (also called bloodletting). It appears that throughout ancient Mesoamerica bloodletting and agricultural fertility were closely linked. Above the figure is a double-headed serpent, possibly representing an earth monster who must be fed human blood in order to revitalize the earth.

This main male figure is magnificently dressed, suggesting that he is of very high status. He wears a headdress bordered with the highly prized long green tail feathers of the quetzal bird and a conch shell necklace, both strong indicators of long distance trade. This figure probably represents a member of the ruling elite of Teotihuacán; one distinctive feature of this civilization is that Teotihuacán was probably ruled by a group of individuals who chose to remain anonymous in their art, whereas in other Mesoamerican cultures rulers were represented by their distinct physical features.

Feathered Serpent and Flowering Trees Mural
Techinantitla, Teotihuacán, Mexico
A.D. 600–750
Volcanic ash and mud backing, lime coating, and red, green, yellow, and blue pigments
Bequest of Harald J. Wagner
1985.104.1a-d

This mural of a serpent with green feathers is, unfortunately, in a fragmented state; its poor condition is due to the work of looters who cruelly removed it from its original location. In this image a stream of water flows from a serpent’s mouth down to a row of trees below. Within the blue stream of water are flowers and eyes. The eyes are probably the eyes of a great Teotihuacán female deity and symbolize the divine nature of water for an agriculturally based society. Serpents are common representations in ancient Mesoamerican art; the serpent, with its ability to shed its skin and transform itself from an old creature into a young one, represented renewal.

At the base of each tree are different glyphs. There is no doubt that these glyphs represent a form of picture writing, even though they have not yet been deciphered by scholars. So far only about one hundred glyphs have been found at Teotihuacán. Very little writing appears in the art that has survived to this day. Because Teotihuacán was a city of such complexity in so many areas, we assume its inhabitants had a writing system, but one used primarily on perishable materials and, subsequently, lost to future generations.
Incense Burner Lid
Teotihuacán-style, Tiquisate-Escuintla, Guatemala
A.D. 300–700
Earthenware, yellow and white pigment
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Larry Otts
1981.51.7

Teotihuacán was central Mexico's most prosperous economy and existed as a crossroads for Mesoamerican traders with commercial and diplomatic relations throughout Mesoamerica. This lid to an incense burner was made in a Teotihuacán style, yet it was found in Guatemala at a site that was once a major outpost of Teotihuacán. Incense burning was and continues to be a part of the religious ceremonies of many cultures. This incense burner depicts a masked face, almost covered by large nose and ear ornaments. Each Teotihuacán-style incense burner had a distinctive design, and no two were made exactly alike.

The Maya

The ancient Maya lived in the eastern third of Mesoamerica. Hundreds of Maya cities, both large and small, dotted southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. These Maya cities were culturally, socially, and economically linked, but politically separate. At the height of their civilization, it is estimated that there were two million Maya people. The Maya entered upon their greatest period of wealth and influence from A.D. 250 to 900. In the eighth and ninth centuries, this prosperity ended. The southern Maya cities were abandoned and monuments, buildings, and luxury items were no longer created. The Maya never ceased to exist, but elite Maya activities did not continue. Scholars are unsure what happened. Most of the Maya population moved north, but by 1450 the northern sites also were abandoned. By the time of the Spanish conquest, most Maya lived in small groups in the countryside instead of elaborate cities. Today there are more than two million Maya living in Mesoamerica, and they are one of the largest surviving native American cultures.

Limestone Stela
Maya, Southern Lowlands, Mexico, Guatemala, or Belize
A.D. 761
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Purchase,
Phyllis Wattis Purchase Fund
1999.42a-k

One of the hallmarks of elite Maya activity is the production of dated stelae. Stelae are freestanding monumental stone carvings that record Maya history. They usually contain a portrait of a ruler with glyphic text. The Fine Arts Museums' stela is eight feet tall and portrays a female ruler with an elaborate jade beaded dress and feathered headdress. Among the Maya, kingship generally passed from father to son, but on rare occasions women could become rulers. There are four glyphic statements on the stela, two of which are incomplete. The text bears two Maya dates that correlate to A.D. 761 and
A.D. 760. The first date seems to be the dedication of the stela, while the significance of the other date is unclear. This royal woman's identity remains unknown, although the glyphs mention two different Maya cities in Guatemala that might have been her home.

The woman's body is encircled by a huge snake called a vision serpent that was often part of an elaborate bloodletting ritual. The Maya elite let blood on important occasions in the life of the community and the individual, because bloodletting rituals were believed to be a way to contact the gods and the ancestral dead. Blood was considered the living force of the universe. Bloodletting lancets, which are regularly found in Maya burials, were used to pierce tongue and earlobes. Strips of paper, splattered with sacrificial blood, were burned, and the rising smoke was pictured as a serpent; it was called a vision serpent because the Maya believed that they could see their gods in this smoke. Physiologically, when massive blood loss occurs, endorphins are released leading to ecstatic states and visions. On this stela the face of a Maya god emerges from the vision serpent's mouth. This quest for contact with the gods was a central ritual act of the ancient Maya.

Female Dignitary, Jaina
Maya, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico
A.D. 600-900
Earthenware and blue pigment
Museum purchase, Leon A. Salinger Bequest Fund
and Proceeds from Museum Society Auction
78.39

This ceramic figure is from Jaina, a small island in the Gulf of Mexico. From A.D. 600 to A.D. 900, Jaina was used exclusively as a burial ground for Maya nobility. Maya nobility included those who owned private lands or held political office, such as the ruling family, administrators, high-ranking warriors, wealthy farmers, successful merchants, and priests. The many tombs of Jaina contain ceramic figures that may be portraits of the actual occupants of the tombs and provide us with information about the appearance of the Maya ruling class. This figure has designs on the lower half of her face; they may represent scarification, tattooing, body paint, or balls of putty applied for decoration. The Maya elite wore jade and quetzal feathers. This woman has large jade earrings, the remnants of a necklace, and a bracelet. The Maya also practiced cosmetic orthodontia, and teeth inlaid with jade have been found on the skeletal remains of Maya elite. The basic clothing item for women was the huipil, a loose, untailed blouse/dress, made from two pieces of cloth. Remnants of blue still decorate this woman's huipil. Cloth was very valuable because it all had to be woven by hand. It took an expert weaver approximately 180 hours to weave a long huipil. A wealthy woman would decorate her huipil with embroidery, which was another time-consuming task that required great skill.

Polychrome Beaker
Maya, Petén, Guatemala
A.D. 600
Earthenware and orange, white, black, red, and blue slip
Museum purchase, Salinger Fund
78.41

Beautifully painted pottery was a common offering in the graves of Maya elite. While few murals or books survive, thousands of painted vessels attest to the richness of the Maya painting tradition. On this vessel the artist—usually a highly trained member of the upper levels of society—has painted two
seated dignitaries facing a ruler on an elevated platform. Both dignitaries are depicted with long flat foreheads, a facial characteristic considered to be a sign of beauty. To develop this profile, children’s heads were sometimes bound at birth.

The glyphs on this vessel were probably painted by a different hand. Well-educated scribes specialized in painting glyphic texts. The Maya developed one of the most complicated writing systems in the world, though it wasn’t until the 1960s that scholars began to be able to decipher Maya writing; today approximately fifty to eighty percent of the glyphs can be read. The glyphs along the side of this vessel name the actual leader and reveal that this beaker was intended to hold cacao (chocolate). Cacao was the drink of nobility on ceremonial and social occasions; it was consumed unsweetened, flavored with nuts and herbs.

Rubbing of the Scene from the Great Ballcourt at Chichén Itzá
by Merle Greene Robertson
Rice paper with ink
Gift of Merle Greene Robertson

This drawing represents a carving from the archeological site of Chichén Itzá, a large Maya center that flourished in the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico after A.D. 800. This scene, depicting two ball players, was carved into the high wall of a ball court. One of the elements that linked the disparate groups of Mesoamerica was the playing of a ball game. Unfortunately, we know little of the rules of the games during ancient times. We do know that players were allowed to use only their knees, hips, and shoulders. Hands, forearms, or feet were not allowed to touch the ball, and the ball was not allowed to touch the ground. Stone ball courts are usually found in the ceremonial district of most Mesoamerican sites. Their central location indicates the important role they played in the ceremonial life of the elite.

On this carving, a kneeling ball player on the right has been beheaded by the figure on the left who holds the decapitated head and a sacrificial knife. Blood, in the form of six serpents and one plant stem, spurts from the neck of the victim on the right. The ball in the center is decorated with a skull. From imagery such as this, scholars have concluded that death and human sacrifice were frequently the outcome of the ball game. Scholars believe that war captives, weakened by deprivation, may have been forced to participate.

Both ball players wear protective gear around their waists that look similar to wide belts. This piece of ball player equipment is called a yoke, and was used to deflect the heavy rubber ball.
Yoke (Yugo)
Veracruz, Gulf Coast, Mexico
A.D. 550-950
Diorite
Bequest of Bruno Adriani
1971.51

The solid rubber ball used in ancient times could weigh up to seven pounds. If the ball hit a player’s unprotected body parts, it could break bones or rupture organs. This stone yoke is probably a replica of the actual paraphernalia used in the ballgame. The actual yokes worn by the ballplayers were probably made of perishable materials, most likely quilted cotton, reed fibers, or leather. Stone yokes such as this may have been buried with important ball players or used as trophies.

Scratching Dog
Colima, West Mexico
200 B.C.-A.D. 500
Earthenware and red slip
Lent by the Land Collection
T92.1666.9

The art of West Mexico is different from much of the art in other regions of Mesoamerica. In ancient West Mexico there was no carving from stone or jade, and there were no glyphs or pyramids. The people of ancient West Mexico were organized into small chiefdoms and towns rather than major urban centers ruled by a large upper class. A high mountain range isolated West Mexico from the rest of Mesoamerica. The most abundant and important of West Mexican art objects are ceramic sculptures; the West Mexican ceramics at the de Young Museum all date to between 200 B.C. and A.D. 500 and were all buried with the dead in shaft tombs. Due to excessive looting in the area, little else is known about their function.

Much of West Mexican art is playful and seems to represent scenes from everyday life; dogs are a common subject. This figure represents a special type of fat, hairless dog that was cultivated for eating. Dogs were also companions for the dead.

Mask
Aztec, Central Mexico
Ca. A.D. 1400
Alabaster
Museum purchase, the Fine Arts Museums Art Trust Fund
1990.31

The Aztecs were the last great Mesoamerican civilization before the Spanish Conquest in 1521. The Aztecs rose to power in central Mexico 500 years after the decline of Teotihuacan and 300 years after the Maya people stopped producing stone architecture and art. In the year 1345, the Aztecs built their capital city, which they called Tenochtitlan. Within a short time they were the most powerful group of people in Mesoamerica. Their huge empire, which stretched from the Pacific coast in the west to the Gulf of Mexico in the east, and as far south as Guatemala, was built on military expansion and heavy tribute from conquered lands.
This alabaster mask was probably never actually worn due to its weight and the fact that there are no eye holes. The ear holes no doubt once attached large jade earrings, and the recession of inlays of other precious materials are evident on the face. Masks such as this may have been placed on wooden gods or burial bundles, or they may have been used as temple offerings. The patterning on the stone is due to the corrosive effects of water running over this object while it was buried.

The Spanish troops led by Hernán Cortés came to the new world in search of slaves and gold, and first landed in Mesoamerica in the Yucatán peninsula. Although the Aztecs did possess gold and silver, the value of these metals did not compare to that of jade. The Spanish troops arrived in Tenochtitlan in 1519, and within two years they had taken over this Aztec city and destroyed it. Over the ruins of the Tenochtitlan, they built what is today Mexico City. Across Mesoamerica, the native peoples were defeated through war, slavery, and sickness. Although this land of great civilizations was changed irrevocably during Spain’s colonial occupation, many aspects of indigenous culture survive in Mesoamerica to this day.

South America

Artistic traditions in South America span more than 3,000 years, with the earliest forms of sophisticated art dating to 2500 B.C. Although South America comprises a multitude of countries with distinct languages and cultures, the populations of this continent were united by the environmental conditions under which they lived. The Andes mountain range linked ancient civilizations in South America, from Columbia and Ecuador in the north, through Peru on the central coast, to Chile and Bolivia in the South. South Americans developed strategies to adapt to life in the Andes, the world’s longest and second highest mountain chain, as well as to other extreme elements of their varied environment, including the world’s driest coastal desert and largest and densest tropical jungle.

Since none of these ecological zones could alone provide for the needs of its indigenous populations, South Americans developed sophisticated trading relationships. Because of this, notions of reciprocity, duality, and the environment became crucial elements in the world view and ways of life for ancient South American civilizations.

Feather Tunic
Nasca, South Coast Peru
A.D. 300–600
Cotton and feathers
Gift of The Museum Auxiliary
1996.48

The Nasca culture lived along the arid southern coast of Peru from about 50 B.C. until A.D. 600. This coastal positioning enabled Nasca fishermen to trade their catch for a variety of luxury goods, including precious feathers from the Amazonian jungle. An elaborate network of trading posts connected the coastal deserts with the Andean Highlands and Amazonian regions. This network of trade was ultimately perfected by the Inka (or Inca) empire, which encompassed the Nasca regions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Spanish chroniclers wrote that the Inka king could have fresh fish delivered nightly to his capital city of Cuzco, situated in the Andean highlands.
This ornamental tunic was created by weaving hundreds of prized Amazonian feathers onto a fabric backing, and it was worn like a poncho or cape. Tremendous resources would have been necessary for an individual to acquire such an elaborate article of clothing, and this tunic was probably owned by a Peruvian king or other elite male of the highest status. Royal regalia would also have included a gold crown, mouth mask, and jewelry, mosaic earspools, and a scepter.

The designs on this tunic demonstrate repeated stepped-fret and wave patterns frequently employed by Nasca artisans in ceramics, textiles, and the large-scale earthen drawings called the Nasca Lines by which the designs are most well known. Carved into the ground, the Nasca Lines depict precisely drawn, stylized versions of animals, plants, and fantastical patterns up to thirteen miles in length. The purpose of these monuments remains unknown, but similar designs seen throughout Nasca art have been interpreted as representations of natural elements of the sea and desert environments in which the culture lived.

Elaborate textiles were often used in the ceremonial burials of wealthy or elite individuals. Dozens of textiles were sometimes wrapped around mummies prior to their interment, testifying to an individual's power and status. This feather textile was found in an elite burial in the coastal region settled by the Nasca. Because there is little or no humidity in this area, this textile has been remarkably preserved for over fourteen hundred years.

Seated pair
Moche, North Coast Peru
100 B.C.–A.D. 700
Earthenware and red slip
Lent by the Land Collection
T92.166.48

The Moche culture was located on the north coast of Peru, and was the first identifiable state in the Andes. The ancient Moche capital of Cerro Blanco held an advantageous location with respect to the sea, mountains, and both the north-south and east-west trade routes. It served as the administrative and religious center of the Moche empire, unifying and controlling distinct groups of people, artistic styles, belief systems, and ritual practices in this region from approximately 0–A.D. 750.

Cerro Blanco was comprised of two main ceremonial structures built entirely of adobe bricks: the Huaca del Sol (Temple of the Sun) and the Huaca de la Luna (Temple of the Moon). Both temples typify the architectural style favored by Moche builders, including U-shaped construction and a stepped, pyramidal architectural design that imitated natural formations. The temples of Cerro Blanco were some of the largest solid adobe buildings in the Americas. The grand scale of these buildings—as tall as 165 feet—recalls the contemporaneous Nasca Lines and seems to indicate that monumental projects may have been a widespread characteristic of this period in the Andes. The creation of such architectural and artistic works would have required control over vast resources and people.
Each temple was constructed from millions of molded adobe bricks, created by labor groups using separate makers' marks to represent their individual group identities. Similarly, ceramic vessels such as these examples were mass produced through the revolutionary use of press molds. The process of replication and mass production reinforced identification with the state while at the same time promoting social cohesion. This combination of personalism and corporate effort were unique to the Moche state, and may have been the key to the longevity and success of their culture.

Stirrup-spout bottles such as these two examples appear to have been the most common type of ceramic vessel created by the Moche, particularly for elite use. The practical and symbolic advantages of this shape outweigh the technical challenges involved in the creation of these vessels. They are well adapted to desert environments as the small opening prevents most evaporation from within, and the ergonomic spout is easy to carry either by hand or suspended from a belt or strap. The stirrup-spout design also recalls the significance of duality in earlier Andean artistic styles, and may have reinforced Moche rule through identification with older, powerful political and religious traditions.

The Moche are unusual within the Andean traditions in that their style and ideology were disseminated via ceramics rather than by textiles. Moche ceramics frequently represent significant plants, animals, and ritual activities, as well as humans with important roles, status, or esteemed traits. Images of humans are conveyed both through generic images of both sexes and recognizable portraits of elite males. Such distinct portraiture is unique to Moche ceramics; no other ancient American individuals are as individually distinguishable.

Although the Moche used molds to replicate images and shapes in their ceramics, they individualized their artworks through the addition of applique, modeling, and frechand painted decorations. These readable ceramics rely upon modeling of clay features, as well as a limited color scheme of white, red, and occasionally yellow. Both the modeling of the faces on these two vessels and the repeated wave and stepped designs on the figures' clothing demonstrate these artistic additions. Because of such individualized touches, Moche artworks depict a greater variety and higher degree of legibility in images than any other Andean style.

This pair of Moche ceramic vessels depicts participants in what is probably a funerary ritual. Although their images are generic rather than portraits of specific individuals, both figures are dressed in elaborate headwear and mantles that designate their high status. One figure is seated in a cross-legged position and holds a drum. Frequently musicians are associated with death and ritual ceremony in Moche iconography. The other figure wears a tall, conical hat and rests his crossed arms upon his knees, a gesture seen in graphic sacrificial scenes on other Moche ceramic vessels. The mirrored, cross-limbed positions of these paired figures may relate to the importance of duality as well as the ritualized nature of the ceremony in which they seem to be participating. Their closed-eyed expressions may further indicate a state of transition or heightened experience, and lends them a powerful grace.

In approximately 600 A.D., a major El Niño (weather pattern) occurred, destroying the adobe structures at Cerro Blanco with torrential rains and flooding. The temples were rebuilt only to be immediately buried by a landslide. This series of disasters resulted in the widespread loss of religious faith and the city was abandoned. Without the administrative center of Cerro Blanco to hold the state together, Moche civilization collapsed. The North Coast of Peru would not be united again for several centuries.
Earring or Nose Ornament
Sinú, Colombia
A.D. 1000–1500
Gold
Museum purchase, Board of Trustees
53490.2a and b

The Sinú and Atrato rivers flow towards the North Coast of Colombia into the Caribbean Sea. The valley between these two rivers was inhabited by the Sinú culture from A.D. 1000 to 1550. By the sixteenth century, the Sinú River province was one of the most populous and prosperous areas of Colombia and home to one of four main Colombian centers of metallurgy. The Sinú, Chibcha, and Quimbaya River provinces and the Calima River basin each had their own particular gold-working techniques and distinctive styles.

This gold earring is characteristic of the Sinú style, which at first glance appears to employ the process of gold filigree. In fact, this delicate ornament was created by Sinú metalsmiths utilizing the lost-wax casting method. This process involved the use of fine, wire-like threads of wax, which were twisted, looped, and then attached to each other to create a model of the ornament. The wax model was then coated with a clay substance; after the clay dried and hardened, the model was heated and the melted wax was poured out. The empty clay chamber then served as a mold for molten gold or other metals, which were cast in a single operation. The technique was used by Sinú artisans to produce intricate designs like those seen on this earring, referred to as "false filigree." The process was also used to create small hollow objects such as bells, birds, or beads. A modified version of the lost-wax process is still used by modern jewelers, substituting plaster for the clay molds used thousands of years ago.

Spanish chronicles indicate that Sinú gold work was traded over a vast area, and was crucial to the burial ritual and afterlife of the Sinú culture. Archaeological evidence confirms these writings, as Sinú ornaments have been found across Colombia and as far as Panama and Costa Rica. Excavations of Sinú burial sites have also uncovered offerings of many gold artworks—including breastplates, bracelets, crowns, beads, bells, and nose and ear ornaments in the "false filigree" style—as well as cloth, shells, ceramics, and volcanic glass. Burial offerings such as these probably indicated the elite status, wealth, or ritual significance of those interred.

While some of these Sinú artworks have been excavated by trained teams of archaeologists, tomb-robbers have also brought thousands of Sinú gold objects onto the art market illegally. Without the archaeological history of these artworks, valuable information about the Sinú culture remains unknown.

In the early sixteenth century the ancient Andean world was also destroyed by the invasion of the Spanish. In 1532, Spanish troops under the command of Francisco Pizarro captured and killed the last Inka emperor. The indigenous cultures of South America were decimated by European diseases and colonial oppression. Despite the profound changes of the past 500 years, Andean people have maintained a strong and vital continuity with their independent past.

Female Dignitary, Jaina
Maya, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico
A.D. 600–900
Earthenware and blue pigment
Museum purchase, Leon A. Salinger Bequest Fund
and Proceeds from Museum Society Auction
78.39