PRE-COLUMBIAN ARTIFACTS

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE
ART COLLECTION
2010/2015
INTRODUCTION

The selection of artifacts on view is from the small collection of Pre-Columbian material from Central and South America held in the College’s art collection. For the donors whose gifts are shown here—Jacqueline Lowe Young, Professor Belle Boone Beard, and Dr. Mary Harley—the cultural and legal era in which they acquired these artifacts was drastically different than the modern realm.

In 1970, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) brokered an international Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. The same year, Mexico and the United States signed a Treaty of Cooperation Providing for the Recovery and Return of Stolen Archaeological, Historical, and Cultural Properties, effectively prohibiting the illicit import, export, and ownership of cultural property from its country of origin. In 1972 the U.S. enacted the Law on Importation of Pre-Columbian Monumental or Architectural Sculpture or Murals. These agreements and laws mean that removing certain artifact types of artifacts from their original context without the explicit consent of the legal owner or legally recognized cultural group is illegal.

Such agreements do not affect the gifts given by Beard and Harley because they were acquired before 1970. For the Young Gift, however, many of the items’ excavation dates remain ambiguous. While most artifacts in this gift were purchased from Bloomingdale’s department store in 1969, some were purchased in 1973 and thus occupy an ethical and legal limbo.

As a result of the cultural exchanges that occurred during the World Wars, economic prosperity, and increased ease of travel, in the mid 20th century Americans began to take a fervent interest in artworks and archaeological items from other societies. In response to this demand, a market for cultural property, especially that of ancient civilizations, erupted in middle class America. Starting in 1947, Bloomingdale’s began bargaining with art and archaeology dealers in exotic locales in order to sell the items for higher prices in their stores. The dealers would hire workmen for minimal wages to excavate items from archaeological sites or would purchase family heirlooms. On occasion, dealers would commission local artisans to make replicas of artifacts and then weather them to make them appear original. The retailers and artifact dealers profited while untold numbers of artifacts were displaced and forgeries were injected into the market.

Knowing this, and respecting current professional standards and legal requirements, the College’s Art Collection staff is put in a difficult position in deciding what action to take with regard to items the source and authenticity of which may be uncertain. The objects are shown here as educational aids, both as items of intrinsic aesthetic worth and as examples of the museum profession’s evolving understanding of the role that excavations and trade have played in the development of collections.

This display is based on an exhibition, Fragmented History, developed as an Arts Management practicum by Victoria Bradley ’12 in 2010. The original exhibition was on view in Benedict Gallery in the autumn of 2010. This smaller selection was originally installed in December 2010 with the aid of Victoria Bradley ’12 and student gallery assistants Caitlin Playle ’13, Ashley Rust ’13, and Alexandra Eads ’11. The display was updated in 2015 with the assistance of Mariah Miller ’16. Photography by Nancy McDearmon.
THE DATE OF THESE ARTIFACTS

The artifacts on view are considered Pre-Columbian, a general term that refers to cultural, social, and political events in the Americas before the arrival of the European explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492 CE. If this assumption is correct, these objects are at least 500-plus years old.

Because there is no verifiable excavation data associated with these artifacts, however, it is impossible to know their exact dates or to verify completely their authenticity. In addition, sites such as Teotihuacán and Pachacámac were occupied for centuries by a variety of indigenous cultural groups, each of which built on top of the ruins of its predecessors.

Hard material such as fired clay survives the passage of time relatively well. Thus, these ceramic artifacts cannot be dated simply by a superficial examination of their condition since they retain much of their original decoration and detail.

THE ORIGIN OF THESE ARTIFACTS

Teotihuacán
Teotihuacán, Mexico, was one of the largest cities in the ancient Americas (indeed, in the world), with about 200,000 residents at its peak. It is thought to have flourished for about 600 years, between 100 BCE and the 6th century CE. It is located about 25 miles northeast of modern-day Mexico City and is one of the most visited archaeological sites in Latin America. Known for its massive pyramids, vibrant murals, and extensive remains of residential quarters, Teotihuacán is thought to have been home to a wide variety of cultural groups, among them the Nahua, Otomi, Totonac, and Maya. The United Nations designated Teotihuacán a World Heritage Site in 1987.

Colima
Colima—also the name of a modern-day Mexican state—is located on the West Coast of Central Mexico and is chiefly associated with the Toltec cultural group.

Chiriquí
Located on the West Coast of the nation of Panama, the province of Chiriquí is bordered by Costa Rica and the Pacific Ocean. Little is known about the indigenous cultures of Chiriquí—now collectively referred to as the Guaymi—before the arrival of the Spanish conquistador Gaspar Espinosa in 1519.

Pachacámac
Located 25 miles southeast of Lima, Peru, Pachacámac—established as early as 200 BCE in the Lurin River Valley—was a ceremonial site dedicated to the Incan creator god Pacha Kamaq. The site was associated with a number of cultural groups, among them the Huari, Ischma, and Inca.
THE DONORS OF THESE ARTIFACTS

Professor Belle Boone Beard
A 1924 graduate of Lynchburg College, Beard taught at Sweet Briar in the Sociology Department from 1936 to 1963. A noted researcher, Beard was instrumental in organizing the first White House Conference on Aging. The Beard Center on Aging at Lynchburg College is named for her. Professor Beard took numerous sabbaticals from Sweet Briar to pursue research in the field of gerontology and the study of centenarians. These trips took her to a variety of exotic locations around the world, including a trip to Mexico where she excavated artifacts from the archaeological site of Teotihuacán.

Mary Harley, M.D.
Harley came to the College in 1906. Memorialized today by the Mary F. Harley Student Health and Counseling Center, she was an adventuresome traveler in her retirement years. After leaving her position as campus physician at Sweet Briar in 1935, Harley traveled around the globe teaching about hygiene and physiognomy and taking part in amateur archaeological excavations.

Bernice Drake Lill
Mrs. Lill served as registrar of Sweet Briar College 1928-1957.

Jacqueline “Jackie” Lowe Young
Young, a member of the Class of 1953, donated a wide range of artifacts to Sweet Briar College as a part of her 50th Reunion class gift in 2003-2004. Young was a member of the arts community as a student on campus and after graduation was an enthusiastic collector of ancient art and artifacts.
1. Votive standing figure in relief, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 3 x 2 ½ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.029
Teotihuacán was a massive religious, cultural, political, and residential center and flourished for about six centuries, from approximately the first century BCE to the mid 6th century CE. The site’s still-mysterious builders and the structure of their society have intrigued and baffled generations of archeologists. It is, however, clearly apparent from the archeological record that Teotihuacán was home to a large, well-established population of artisans and craftsmen. Small votive figures and heads such as the variety on display here have been found at the site in astonishing abundance. Most are solid clay and many appear to have been made by pressing the clay into molds. Some have applied elements—such as earrings or a headdress—and some are polychromed. Archaeologists have found the vast majority of these objects in the ruins of domestic buildings, though they also appear in burials, and have speculated that they were tokens to invoke the protection or favor of deities.

2. Votive head, Mexico (presumably Teotihuacán)
clay, 1 ¼ x 1 15/16 x 1 ½ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.005.d
Unlike many of the votive heads found at Teotihuacán, this small example is nearly a sphere and it has a delicate but clearly defined neck. Some Teotihuacán figures were articulated like dolls and this head may have originally been attached to such a form.

3. Votive head, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 1 ½ x 1 x ¾ inches
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D., College physician 1906-1935
PC.007.012
This example, showing a face with a feathered headdress and large round earrings, retains a bit of color in the head band.

4. Votive head, Mexico (presumably Teotihuacán)
clay, 1 ¾ x 1 ½ x 1 inches
This Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.005.i
This votive head appears to represent an animal; perhaps, judging by the flattened snout-like nose and barred fangs, a jaguar.

5. Votive head, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 1 ¾ x 2 inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.026
6. Votive head, Mexico (presumably Teotihuacán)
clay, 1 ¼ x 1 ½ inches
Gift of Mrs. Bernice Drake Lill, College registrar 1928-1957
ACG.1980.020.a

7. Votive head, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 2 ½ x 2 ½ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.028
This classic Meso-American head features an elaborate headdress and large earrings.

8. Dog Vessel, Colima, Mexico
polychromed clay, 6 x 9 x 5 ½ inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Young (Jacqueline Lowe ’53)
PC.012
In the Colima culture dogs were believed to assist the dead in their journey to the underworld. Hairless dogs, forerunners of the modern Chihuahua, were eaten at feasts.

9. Votive pendant, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 2 ¼ x 1 15/16 inches
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D., College physician 1906-1935
PC.007.004
The small hole punched in this representation of an armadillo suggests that it was used as a necklace pendant. In addition to its decorative use it may have had some symbolic meaning for the wearer.

10. Votive head, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 1 x 1 ¼ x 1 inches
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D., College physician 1906-1935
PC.007.016
This small votive head, suggestive of a dog resembling the modern-day Chihuahua, may have had a special meaning. These small, hairless canines were thought to accompany the dead on their journey to the underworld.

11. Votive standing figure, Teotihuacán, Mexico
clay, 5 x 3 x 1 ¾ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.003
This figure holds what looks like an ear of corn in its left hand. The figure appears to be hollow and seems to have some small hard object inside that rattles when the object is shaken gently in the hand.
12. Bowl, Central Mexico
polychromed clay, 2 x 2 7/8 inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Young (Jacqueline Lowe ’53)
PC.014
This humble footed bowl, perhaps for domestic use, is decorated with a simple spiral painted with different colored clay slips.

13. Wall fresco fragment, Mayan Culture, Teotihuacán, Mexico
painted plaster, 1 3/8 x 1 ¾ x ¾ inches
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D., College physician 1906-1935
PC.007.017
Teotihuacán is known for its wealth of painted murals. A small section of a dot pattern, red on white, can be seen in this fragment.

14. Shards, Pachacámac, Peru
polychromed clay, 3 ¾ x 3 and 2 ¼ x 1 ½ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.006.a and PC.006.b
These are fragments, or shards, of broken bowls or jars. This is evidenced by the curve of the clay wall and the finished lip seen in one sample. Both are painted with a variety of different colored clay slips—ranging from red, to white, to shades of brown. One shard reveals complicated geometric patterns while the other is more restrained, highlighted with simple bands.

15. Jar (fragment), Pachacámac, Peru
clay, 5 x 3 7/8 x 3 ¾ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.008
Scholars believe such distinctive ceremonial drinking vessels—called stirrup-spout jars—were cast using a mold and then attached to a hand-built spout. Stirrup-spout jars in the form of animals are also found along the West Coast of Peru.

16. Jar, Chiriquí, Panama
polychromed clay, 3 ¾ x 4 ¾ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.009
Geometric patterns used to decorate pottery of the ancient Americas are known to have represented cycles of time. The painted design on this bowl may simply be decorative or it may have a deeper meaning.
17.
Shard, Teotihuacán, Mexico
polychromed clay, 2 x 2 ¾ x 1 ½ inches
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology 1932-1963
PC.024
This is a decorative handle in the shape of a bird’s head from a round bowl or jar. The turned shoulder and finished rim of the vessel can be seen, as well as the white and black clay slip used to paint it.

SUGGESTED READING


