Pre-Columbian Artifacts

Sweet Briar College Art Collection
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from the Sweet Briar College Art Collection

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.

This display is based on an exhibition, Fragmented History, and accompanying educational texts and labels researched and curated by Victoria Bradley ’12 in 2010. The original exhibition was on view in Benedict Gallery October 7-December 5, 2010. This selection was 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.
Suggested Reading


1. **Standing votive figure, Teotihuacán, Mexico**
   
   clay
   
   Teotihuacán was a massive cultural, political, and residential center and as such is thought to have had a large population of artisans and craftsmen. Small votive figures such as this have been found at the site in abundance. Probably used in domestic situations, they may have been tokens used to invoke the protection or favor of the gods.
   
   Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology emerita
   
   P-C.003

2. **Dog Vessel, Colima, Mexico**
   
   painted clay
   
   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.
   
   Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Young (Jacqueline Lowe ’53)
   
   P-C.012

3. **Decorated vessel, Chiriquí, Panama**
   
   painted clay
   
   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.
   
   presumed gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology emerita
   
   P-C.009

4. **Stirrup-spout Jar, Pachacámac, Peru**
   
   clay
   
   Scholars believe such distinctive ceremonial drinking vessels 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.
   
   Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology emerita
   
   P-C.008

5. **Shards, Pachacámac, Peru**
   
   painted clay
   
   These are fragments, or shards, of broken bowls or jars, as 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.
   
   Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology emerita
   
   P-C.006
6. **Small pedestal bowl, Central Mexico**
painted clay
This humble bowl, perhaps for domestic use, is decorated with a simple spiral painted with
different colored clay slips.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard W. Young (Jacqueline Lowe ’53)
P-C.014

7. **Shard, Teotihuacán, Mexico**
painted clay
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.
Gift of Dr. Belle Boone Beard, professor of sociology emerita
P-C.024

8. **Armadillo pendant, Teotihuacán, Mexico**
clay
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.
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D.
P-C.007.4

9. **Votive head, Teotihuacán, Mexico**
clay
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.
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D.
P-C.007.16

10. **Fragment of wall fresco, Mayan Culture, Teotihuacán, Mexico**
painted plaster
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.
Gift of Mary Harley, M.D.
P-C. 007.17
The Date of these Artifacts

The artifacts on view are thought to be 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 AD. 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
Founded around 200 BC, Teotihuacán, Mexico, was one of the largest cities in the ancient Americas, with about 200,000 citizens at its peak. It flourished between the 2nd century BC and the 8th century AD. It is located about 25 miles northeast of modern-day Mexico City and is one of the most visited archaeological sites in Mexico. 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 throughout its long occupation, among them the Nahua, Otomi, Totonac, and Maya. It was designated a UNESCO 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 BC 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 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.
Memorialized today on the Sweet Briar campus by the Mary F. Harley Student Health and Counseling Center, Harley was also an adventuresome traveler in her retirement years. Leaving her position at Sweet Briar in 1936. Harley traveled around the globe teaching about personal hygiene and physiognomy and taking part in amateur archaeological excavations.

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 class gift in 2003-2004. While she has been an enthusiastic collector of ancient arts after graduating from Sweet Briar, Young was also a member of the arts community as a student on campus. She was a member of Friends of Art and Paint & Patches and in 1953 she earned a diploma with a major in art.

KL 12/8/2010 adapted from original work by Victoria Bradley ’12.