

PRE-COLUMBIAN TREASURES



THE ALLURING ART OF THE ANCIENT AMERICAS

By Fayeze Barakat
Photography Courtesy Barakat Gallery, Beverly Hills, CA



From the pyramids of Teotihuacan outside modern Mexico City to Machu Picchu perched high atop the Andes in Peru, the glories of the great Pre-Columbian civilizations of the ancient Americas continue to fascinate our imaginations. However, many smaller cultures flourished in the shadows of these powerful civilizations. While no monumental ruins speak of their past, unearthed archeological treasures serve as a testament to the existence of these cultures, as well as to their sophisticated artistic achievements. From intricate, highly refined jewelry created from precious materials such as gold and shells, to more common, utilitarian terracotta vessels, Pre-Columbian art is a vibrant, vivid reminder of these forgotten peoples and the land to which they were intimately linked.

While gold was a readily available resource in Mesoamerica and northwestern South America, it was still highly prized by the ancient cultures that inhabited these lands for its luminous properties and natural malleability. Ancient artists transformed the ore into magnificent pendants, earrings, and nose rings that were

thought to imbue the wearer with the powers of the sun. Much of the imagery of these pendants reflects mythologies about transmogrifying shamans as well as indigenous fauna.

Jade likewise was carved into amulets and ceremonial implements. The Maya considered jade the most precious of all stone substances. Prized for its durability and

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color, jade symbolized water, vegetation, lightning, and rain. Its symbolic beauty imbued every figure and ornament with supernatural power and importance. The delicately engraved celt (on the previous page) served as a ceremonial axe head, and may have once played a central role in rites performed atop the jungle temples of the ancient Maya.

The region that comprises the modern nation of Costa Rica was, in antiquity, the crossroads between the great civilizations centered in Mexico and those situated in Peru. Although the Pre-Columbian peoples who inhabited this land were highly influenced by the art and ideas of their neighbors, they developed a unique style of art. Ancient artists of the Costa Rican region are today famed for their mastery of carving basalt, a brittle volcanic stone that shatters like glass. The gorgeous sculpture below depicts a jaguar carrying a bowl on its

back, held in place by the curved tail. The stylized diamond pattern imitating the jaguar's coat has been replicated along the outside of the bowl. The creature stands with eyes wide open and fangs exposed. Offerings would have been placed inside the bowl by supplicants hoping to curry the favor of the gods or the deceased.

Many diverse Pre-Columbian societies shared a belief in the ability of a shaman to transform himself into a variety of creatures while embarking upon mystical, drug-induced journeys. In the two terracotta sculptures from Costa Rica (on page 32) we see a seated shaman in his human form, with tattooed decorations covering his face and limbs, as well as a shaman who has transformed himself into a saurian diety. His upright posture, conforming to the shape of the vessel, reveals that this alligator is really a man, as do the hands and inscribed arms.



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