# BY ANCIENT HANDS

Art objects, tools and textiles from the pre-Columbian Americas come to Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

**BY LAURA HOLLAND**

Peruvian, Nasca
*Vessel with anthropomorphic being*
Ceramic, ca. 300-700 CE
Gift of Sarah A. Nunneley (Class of 1963)
2009.14.2

Sometimes the questions we choose to ask reveal as much as the answers. Socrates, devoted to the dialectic of Question and Answer, would probably agree. More current confirmation comes from an exhibition at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum that investigates ancient American art through inquiries posed by anthropology and art history.

Curated by thirty-one college students and their teachers, the exhibition began as an academic collaboration in the fall of 2010 and an "excavation" into Mount Holyoke College's collection of pre-Columbian objects. The scope of the course was expanded beyond the classroom to include museum staff and focus on items from the collections of Smith and Amherst College; the final project became a beautifully installed display in spring semester 2011, "Transported and Translated: Arts of the Ancient Americas," that investigates the historical context and stylistic elements of ancient American objects through a series of questions.

The two professors' disparate interests in pre-Columbian pottery sparked their collaboration. With an inclination towards archaeology, Five College assistant professor of anthropology Elizabeth Klarich concentrates on the cultures of the Peruvian Highlands some 2,000 years ago. Smith College professor of art history Dana Leibsohn has a particular interest in West Mexican ceramics and sculpture. Their complementary approaches converged as their parallel classes joined together.

"An archaeologist is interested in the very basic questions when looking at an object," says Klarich. "Where did it come from? How was it used? Who made it? What does it mean? An art historian may focus on the artistic elements, asking, instead, what does the imagery tell us?"

As Leibsohn adds, "The students were interested in issues of how we know what we know about objects from the past, and asking this question from the perspectives of different disciplines."

Peruvian, Chimù-Inca
*Double-chambered whistling bottle with bird*
Burnished black ceramic, ca. 1470-1530
Gift of Sarah A. Nunneley (Class of 1963) 2009.14.3

About half the exhibition explores how we look at objects in the past. Another half examines ancient artifacts in the present: trends in collecting, the impact of 1970 UNESCO conventions, and how ancient objects re-appear, re-contextualized, today.

Peruvian, Moche. *Portrait head vessel.* Ceramic, ca. 200-500 CE
Gift of Sarah A. Nunneley (Class of 1963) 2009.14

The art and artifacts—ceramics, stone sculpture, textiles, and facsimiles of ancient books, or codices—come from diverse cultures of Mesoamerica and the Andean region of South America, spanning from 300 BCE to the Spanish Conquest in the early sixteenth century.

With such rich diversity, how to choose? "Always a challenge," acknowledges Leibsohn. "On the one hand, you have very high-end, gorgeous sculpted works. On the other, there are pieces that are maybe not so gorgeous but are really interesting in terms of what they reveal about ancient culture. The art historical challenge is, what can you learn from the objects that are not what a connoisseur would call 'high art'?" The study and selection process entailed some art historical-archaeological debates in which the teachers "played out the pros and cons" and let the students decide. However, as Klarich explains, "I was adamant that we needed to include different media to see how the same images appeared in different materials."

Peruvian, Lambayeque
*Double spout and bridge bottle*
Ceramic, ca. 900-1400 CE
Gift of Dr. Elizabeth Rosner Richman and Hershel Richman 1996.9.5

Peruvian, Moche. *Stirrup-spouted vessel in form of feline*
Ceramic, ca. 300-600 CE. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James F. Mathias
(Barbara V. Lord, Class of 1934) 1975.15.14

The exhibition shows similar imagery transported across cultures and translated into various media. For example, three Nasca pots from Peru, circa 325-440 CE, depict a figure known as Anthropomorphic Mythical Being (or AMB) that combines human and feline characteristics. Added to a cat's face with almond-shaped eyes and stylized whiskers are design elements: a flowing tail, shell necklaces and a severed human head—a gruesome, yet fascinating, detail that spurs more questions regarding this combination of human and animal forms.

"Were these part of some ritual practice?" asks Klarich. "Do they represent a notion of transformation? Do they depict deities? Or do they show costumes?"

The feline motif also defines a jaguar-shaped vessel of burnished black ceramic from the Moche culture, circa 300-600 CE. And while jaguars frequently appear in Moche artifacts, that particular big cat is not native to the north coast of Peru, where the Moche culture centered. So does this suggest travel or trade with other cultures that had jungle terrain hospitable to jaguars? More cats march across a brilliantly colored fragment of cotton with wool embroidery, circa 100 BCE, from Peru, possibly Paracas culture.

Of course, textile fragments raise further questions. Klarich points out that while many textiles were worn every day, the ones in most collections come from burial contexts, because those are the only ones that have been protected and preserved. Andean mummy bundles contain multiple layers of textiles, some beautifully decorated and intricately produced. "Thousands of hours of labor went into those textiles," says Klarich. "Who was the wearer of such precious textiles? Who was the maker? What was the role of the person who wore something that required such a tremendous amount of labor?"

One of the most mundane and at the same time awe-inspiring objects is a Peruvian Chancay sewing basket dating from 1100-1500 CE. Made of woven reeds, it contains cotton thread, wool, a knitting needle made from a thorn, spindle whorls and stone weights. Archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians can develop inferences about its meaning by comparing the basket to ancient woven pieces, depictions of weaving and sewing on painted vessels, and modern-day Peruvian weaving techniques—while we can all share a sense of wonder at the hands that held this basket and worked with these tools so long ago.

Then there are questions about the meaning of authenticity in ancient artifacts. As Leibsohn asks, "What does it mean to be 'authentic'?" Three ceramic portrait heads help ponder this question. One Peruvian Moche portrait head vessel, from 200-500 CE, presents an impeccable pedigree—or provenance. Renowned expert on Andean prehistory Christopher Donnan recently identified the pot as portraying a known individual dubbed "Cut Lip" who appears on nearly fifty pieces in various other collections. A burnished red ceramic head, however, offers an ambiguous reconstruction of an original Moche piece from 500-700 CE with parts from another pot and some plaster replacing original clay. And the third head is a twenty-first century piece aimed at the tourist trade that, however, may be made out of clay dug from the same sources as ancient Moche pots, colored by similar organic materials, and cast from an antique mold using traditional techniques. In this instance, the present reaches back to the past, for a kind of authenticity.

## "WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE 'AUTHENTIC'?"

But the past also reaches into the present, raising questions

about what these ancient objects mean today. "What is their legacy?" asks Leibsohn. How do they reappear in the present-day world? One example is the image of an Aztec calendar stone stamped on a recently minted Mexican coin. But a more complex legacy is the way nationalist politics claim continuity with ancient culture by reclaiming indigenous sites and symbols.

As described in wall text and depicted in photographs, Peru's first indigenous president, Alejandro Toledo, held his inauguration in 2001 at the historical site of Machu Picchu, not Lima (a city established by the Spanish), and used the Andean cross, or chacana, as a symbol for his political party. Bolivian president Evo Morales' inauguration in 2006 asserted a similar continuity with indigenous culture, in a ceremony at the pre-Columbian archaeological site Tivanaku, incorporating textiles based on ancient patterns and designs. As Klarich notes, "Ancient objects are constantly having new lives—as collected objects and as displayed objects." P

"Transported and Translated: Arts of the Ancient Americas," Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Mass., through June 12, 2011

Mexican, Nayarit. *Female figure*
Burnished red ceramic, ca. 250 BCE-250 CE
Gift of Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock (Class of 1947)
2001.8.11