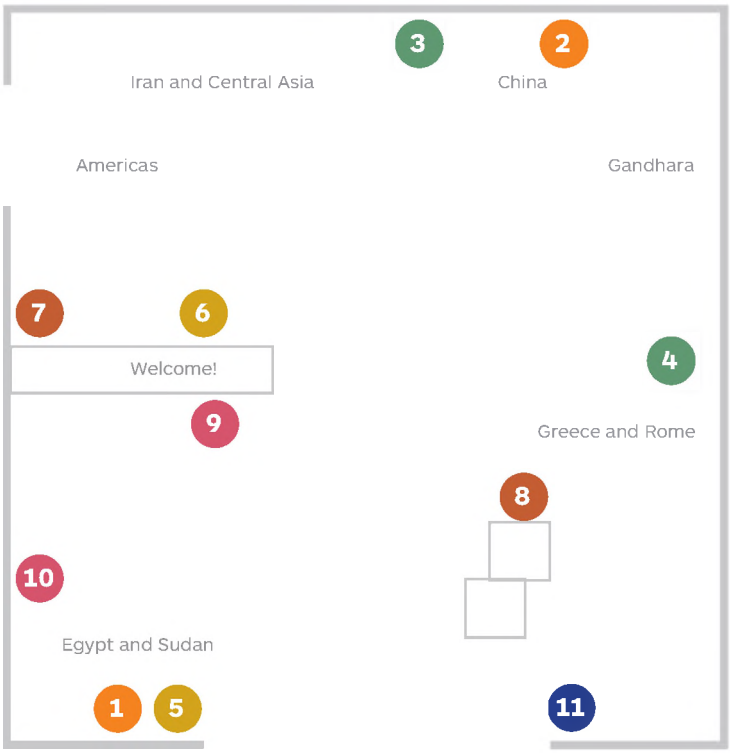
GALLERY GUIDE

ART BEFORE 700 CE

GALLERY MAP



Archery contest, Gandhara,
1st–4th century CE
Schist (2018.14.6)

INTRODUCTION

This gallery brings together art and material culture from around the globe, beginning with the earliest objects in the collection—from around 3,800 BCE until 700 CE. What is on view in this space is drawn from the Museum's permanent collection, consisting of both gifts and purchases. The gallery itself is organized along chronological and regional lines, with some thematic moments. If you wish to explore by region, the gallery map in this guide can help.

This guide will lead you through the space in a different way, sharing six themes that draw together objects from across the gallery and make connections between disparate times and places. For each theme, we illustrate examples which we invite you to find in the gallery to guide your exploration. We encourage you to find other objects on view that may also fit these themes.

Head of a Bodhisattva or celestial being, Gandhara, 2nd–3rd century CE (1931.1.O.OI)

EXCHANGE AND INTERCONNECTIONS

How did ideas and art forms move across time and place?

Art often acts as witness to the movement of people, objects, and ideas across place and time. Some objects, like coins, were made to be mobile. Others, like stone sculpture, were more rooted in place but can still bear traces of artistic exchange. The forces that prompted these exchanges were not so different from those that we still see today: commercial trade, migration, diplomacy, conflict, and shared religious beliefs. Take, for example, the small Roman bronze sculpture of the Egyptian god Isis (**1**). Brought into the wider Roman pantheon by that empire's military conquest of Egypt, it bears witness to both the political and religious results of armed conflict.

In some cases, the visual evidence of interconnections is clear in an object's form. For example, the Chinese amphora (**2**) is based on a type of storage jar from the Greek and Roman Mediterranean, brought to China along the Silk Roads. In other cases, craftspeople adapted imported styles to suit their needs. Sculptors in Gandhara (present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) incorporated Hellenistic Greek stylistic elements, which had reached the Asian region both via the Silk Roads and through the territorial conquests of Alexander the Great. They chose an imported style for the art of their indigenous Buddhism—a religion which, in turn, was exported throughout Asia.

1

2

LANDSCAPE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

How did people imagine and inhabit their landscapes?

Landscape emerges as an important theme in this gallery. Some objects directly depict the natural world, while others—in their materials, techniques, and subjects—tell us about the landscapes from which they came.

The Chinese hill censer (**3**) and Roman painting fragment of a shrine (**4**) both depict landscapes that are simultaneously naturalistic and fantastical. The Chinese hill censer's cone-shaped lid is carved into undulating mountains associated with mythical beings called Immortals. In the Roman painting, we see a glimpse of a shrine in the hazy distance, shaded by trees and surrounded by water. While probably imagined by the artist, it nevertheless conjures up the Mediterranean landscape where it was painted.

Elements of the natural world, including flora and fauna, proliferate throughout this gallery. Flower and plant forms grace the surfaces of Greek vessels, while Gandharan reliefs display camels, elephants, and other animals. In the Moche and Nasca art of Peru, we see cats, fish, shells, and hummingbirds all painted and molded in lively detail.

3

4

LABOR AND ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

Who made these objects and what technologies did they use?

The names of the craftspeople who made the objects in this gallery remain largely unknown to us, as do the details and circumstances of their lives. Most of what we know about these individuals has been gleaned from the objects they made and the contexts in which they were found.

During this early time period, artisans from many different cultures developed technical skills to produce a range of aesthetic forms, including ceramics, metalwork, stone carving, textiles, and glass. Comparing ceramics across continents offers interesting insights into different production methods and technologies. Nubian black-topped pottery (**5**) was shaped by hand into refined forms and then fired with a specialized method that intentionally created the striking black rim. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, adapted wheel throwing technology to create their black- and red-figure vases, while the Moche of Peru were experts in mold-made ceramics, like the one illustrated below (**6**).

In the pre-industrialized world, there was a wide variety of production modes, including working in extended families, collaborating in commercial workshops, and working for elite households. One thread connecting the objects displayed here from across Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas is that skilled workers were essential in producing the goods and materials associated with the development of complex societies.

5

6

DIVINITIES AND DEVOTION

How do different religious practices and ideas appear in art and material culture?

Artworks in this gallery depict figures from a wide variety of global religions and can tell us much about ancient belief systems. Some, such as the Gandharan Buddhist artworks, shed light on the early history of religions that are still practiced today. On the other hand, some objects on view reflect an ancient worldview about which we know very little because their associated religions are no longer widely practiced (and in some cases were actively suppressed). Figures known as "Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings," or AMBs, by contemporary scholars appear on countless Nasca ceramics unearthed in Peru. In this example (**7**), the AMB is identifiable by its combination of human and feline attributes and many adornments. The AMBs' place in Nasca religion and ceremony has long been the subject of debate.

Whether belonging to religions that are still practiced or not, most of these objects demonstrate the centrality of religion to everyday life and the melding of sacred and secular. In many cases, religion overlapped significantly with structures of power. A sculpture of the head of the Roman empress Faustina the Elder (**8**), for instance, sheds light on the unique religious beliefs of ancient Romans; Faustina was elevated by her husband to the status of a goddess upon her death.

7

8

How did people mark death and commemorate life?

Many of the objects in this gallery are connected to customs surrounding death. Their variety highlights the diversity of these cultures; their ubiquity speaks to the universal human desire to mark the deaths and commemorate the lives of those we care about.

Some objects memorialized the dead in the world of the living. Inscriptions related the names and deeds of the deceased, while images like the Palmyrene funerary bust (**9**) used visual cues like clothing and accessories to convey an individual's status to people visiting their burial place. Other objects provided for the dead in the afterlife. Entombing the dead with figures of supernatural beings to shepherd or serve their spirit, like Egyptian shabtis, ensured a soul safe passage to the afterlife.

Both everyday and luxury goods, like the Chinese vessels in this gallery, were included in burials, meant to provide material comfort to the deceased. Sometimes objects performed both protective and comforting roles. For example, the inscriptions on the block statue of the scribe Amunwashu (**10**) commemorated his role and status in Egyptian society. The inscriptions also urged people who passed by the sculpture in the temple to read the incantations and thereby provide Amunwashu's spirit with sustenance. In these ways and more, the living ensured that the dead were remembered in this world and cared for in the next.

9

10

THIS COLLECTION

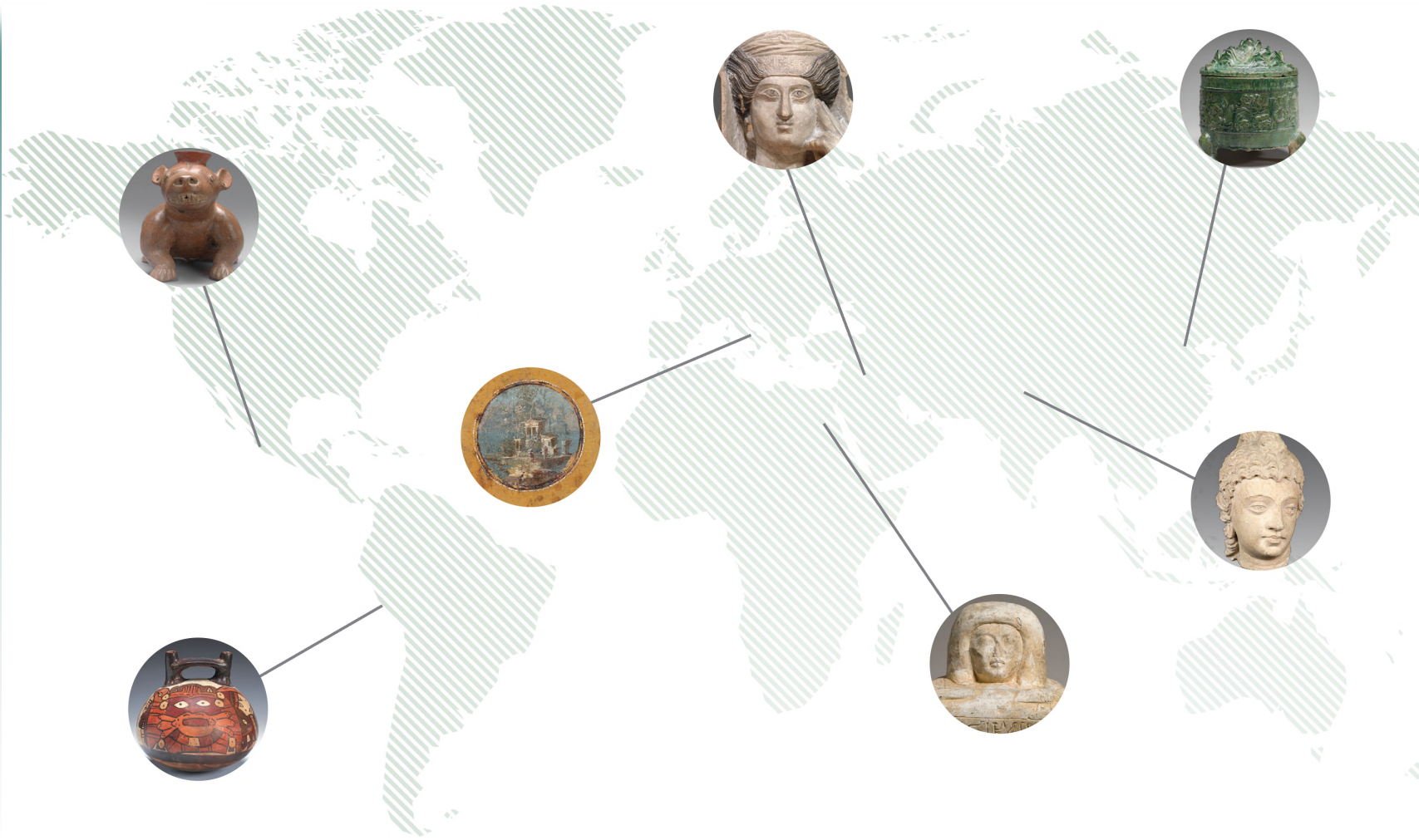
Why are these objects in the Museum's collection and how did they get here?

The regions highlighted in this gallery represent the changing interests of those who formed the collection, rather than a comprehensive view of early cultures. Fittingly, ancient objects were among the earliest to enter the Museum's collection. A strong interest in classical art and archaeology among faculty in the early 1900s led to many gifts and purchases of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian art, providing the foundation for the collection. Mount Holyoke art history professor Louise Fitz Randolph (1851–1932), for example, purchased the Etruscan cup illustrated below (**11**) on one of her trips to Rome.

In this early period, there were few restrictions on how or if objects should leave their countries of origin. Ancient sites were often looted and objects sold both locally and abroad. In 1970, a UNESCO convention created worldwide restrictions on the removal of cultural property and provided pathways for countries to legally request the return of stolen art. The Museum is committed to engaging with this process, which is called repatriation.

Museum collecting has always been intertwined with colonialism, power, and money, and the pathways objects take to reach museums are rarely ideal. In 2012, for instance, the Museum accepted a gift of Asian ceramics from the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation—objects which are now indelibly connected to that family's role in the US opioid epidemic. Creating space for these complicated conversations in our galleries is essential as we look towards the future and continue to learn and evolve. We hope that illuminating the provenance of the objects in this gallery will encourage broader conversations about the complicated nature of collecting and displaying ancient art.

WORLD MAP



Why are there no Native American objects in this gallery? The Museum's collection only has a few Native American artifacts from this period and we do not currently have permission from related Tribes to show them, which is a requirement under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

You might notice other regions, cultures, and time periods are not represented in this gallery. The Museum's collection of art before 700 CE was shaped by gifts and purchases made between the late 19th century and today and reflects the changing interests of generations of MHC faculty, museum curators, and donors. To learn more, see "This Collection" in this guide.

GLOSSARY

Acquisition Funds–endowed funds for the Museum to purchase works of art; these funds were established by private individuals over the last century and cannot be used for other purposes
Anthropomorphic–having a human form
BCE–before the Common Era. Secular alternative to the traditional BC (Before Christ)
CE–Common Era. Secular alternative to the traditional AD (Anno Domini: the year of our Lord)
Classical–traditionally used to refer to the period from roughly 500 BCE to 400 CE when ancient Greek and then ancient Roman culture dominated the Mediterranean; now sometimes used to refer to periods in other cultures that scholars consider the most typical or exemplary of their traditional artforms
Earthenware–an orange, porous clay used extensively in pottery production across the globe
Hellenistic–the culture, history, and art of Greece and the kingdoms that formed out of the empire of Alexander the Great, from roughly 323–31 BCE
Material culture–items made or modified by humans, including objects that are used, lived in, displayed, and experienced, such as tools, pottery, houses, furniture, etc.
Provenance–the history of an object, from its creation to its current location
UNESCO–the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; an agency focused on international cooperation in education, arts, sciences, and culture
Silk Roads–a network of land and sea trade routes connecting Mediterranean, East African, and Asian cultures, active from roughly the 2nd century BCE until the 15th century CE

Seated dog vessel, Colima, Mexico, 250 BCE–250 CE (1975.15.23)

IMAGE CAPTIONS

1. *Bust of Isis*, Italy, 2nd century CE (1965.10.C.G)

2. *Amphora with dragon-shaped handles*, China, probably 7th century CE (1964.3.J.SII)

3. *Hill censer with lid*, China, early 1st–3rd century CE (2012.40.9a-b)

4. *Painting fragment depicting a shrine*, Pompeii, Roman Empire, mid-1st century CE (1958.4.C.PI)

5. *Black-topped jar*, Nubia or Egypt, 3600–3200 BCE (1909.3080.AES)

6. *Stirrup-spouted vessel with anthropomorphic fish and sea lions*, Peru, 500–700 CE (1975.15.16)

7. *Double-spout and bridge vessel with anthropomorphic mythical being*, Peru, 325-440 CE (1975.15.12)

8. *Portrait of Faustina the Elder*, Latium, Roman Empire, second half of the 2nd century CE (1997.15)

9. *Fragment of a stele with head of a woman*, Attica, Greece, 4th century BCE (1915.2.B.OII)

10. *Stela of Sebek-Hotep*, Egypt, 1782-1650 BCE (1956.36.A.G)

11. *Kantharos (drinking cup)*, Etruria, 625–550 BCE (1910.50.C.A)