2010

Research and Interpretive Plan for the First Permanent Exhibition of Ancient American Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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Research and Interpretive Plan for the First Permanent Exhibition of Ancient American Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

A thesis project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Richmond, Virginia
April, 2010
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Margaret Lindauer, for her direction in this project and support throughout my graduate career. Thank you, Peggy, for listening to the woes of a graduate student and never hesitating to offer your assistance. I express my gratitude to Dr. Lee Anne Hurt Chesterfield for her friendship, encouragement and allowing me to work with her the previous year and a half. Thank you to Dr. James Farmer for inspiring me to pursue the world of Pre-Columbian and Native American art and architecture through his seminars and research. I wish to thank Dr. Fredrika Jacobs for her unwavering confidence and never failing to make me believe I am a worthwhile art historian. Words cannot express the love and gratitude I have for my parents. Thank you for putting my needs before your own every day of my life. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Frank, because I never could have accomplished this without him. Thank you for your unconditional love, understanding and countless hours of proofreading.
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Abstract

RESEARCH AND INTERPRETIVE PLAN FOR THE FIRST PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF ANCIENT AMERICAN ART AT THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Amy Marie Lenhardt, Master of Arts

A thesis project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Dr. Margaret Lindauer, Associate Professor, Museum Studies Coordinator, Department of Art History

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) of Richmond, Virginia, is completing its largest expansion and reinstalling over 6000 artworks, including the Ancient American art collection, to be displayed in the museum’s first permanent gallery space for Ancient American art. In preparation for expansion, the VMFA issued its “Interpretive Plan Guiding Principles,” identifying visitor motivations for viewing the collections. As collection accessibility is central to the museum’s mission statement, all galleries are to provide visitors with the tools to engage with artworks.

This thesis project presents a comprehensive history of Pre-Columbian collecting in museums and the history of the VMFA including its Pre-Columbian collection, which will be displayed in the Ancient American Gallery. It includes a summary of research conducted on objects designated for installation. Finally, this project addresses how the
Ancient American Gallery will serve as an environment adapting to the principle experiences established by the VMFA.
Introduction

This museum thesis project began with a comprehensive review of the Pre-Columbian collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in preparation for its fifth and largest expansion and reinstallation project. Since October 2008, I have assisted Dr. Lee Anne Hurt Chesterfield, the curator of ancient American art, with gallery planning for the first permanent installation of ancient American art.¹ A majority of Pre-Columbian objects in the collection did not have previous research information in object files and had never been displayed in the museum. I spent a year researching 108 objects specifically designated for the new gallery from the 208 Pre-Columbian objects in the permanent collection. I then wrote a formal analysis and summary of this research for each artwork. The reference information compiled is critical for gallery label copy and will be added to object files.

During the course of my research, I found that the VMFA began collecting Pre-Columbian art long after other museums had amassed such collections. The written portion of the thesis project begins with a broad history of Pre-Columbian collecting since the Spanish colonization of the New World in the fifteenth century, concentrating primarily on the history of collecting in Mexico. This section describes changes in Pre-Columbian collecting over time including motivations for collecting, the establishment of museums dedicated to Pre-Columbian art and cultural patrimony ideals. As an American Association of Museums (AAM) accredited institution, the VMFA must comply with U.S. government policies regarding object accession

¹ The term “Pre-Columbian” is used in reference to the Pre-Columbian objects researched while “ancient American” is the term chosen by the museum for the gallery and its collection of both Pre-Columbian and Native American art.
and repatriation. It is imperative that these policies are well understood when planning an ancient American art exhibit, because some artifacts are no longer appropriate for display, as will be explained later in this paper.

Following the broad history of trends in collecting Pre-Columbian artifacts, a brief history of the VMFA, including the history of the Pre-Columbian collection, is presented. Finally, the VMFA exhibit planning process is described, addressing how the Ancient American gallery will adapt to the principle experiences established by the museum.
The History of Pre-Columbian Collecting

The collecting and displaying of ancient American artworks and artifacts has been a trend among museums and collectors throughout Latin America, North America and Western Europe since the fifteenth century. Upon arrival in the New World in the late fifteenth century, Spaniards collected precious metals, exotic animals and even native people, which were sent to the Spanish court.\(^2\) Not long after Spanish conquest of Latin America in the mid-sixteenth century, the Spanish conquerors declared present-day Mexico, Central America, portions of South America, the Southwestern United States and the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of North America to be “New Spain,” and established a feudal society under the Crown’s *ecomienda* labor system.\(^3\) Within this feudal society, conquerors and their descendents became *ecomenderos*, or lords over large estates, served by indigenous people cast as serfs and tributaries. As the chief authority, the Spanish Crown appointed *ecomenderos* and granted land and native labor. Each *ecomendero* was responsible for instructing indigenous laborers in the Spanish language and Christian faith, and collecting tribute in the form of precious metals, foodstuffs and labor.

Missionaries were sent to New Spain to convert the native population to Christianity and assimilate them into the new post-conquest regime. The priests gained the natives’ trust by defending them from their Spanish feudal lords, who often abused and exploited the natives. As the trust grew between priest and native, the missionaries sought better understanding of


\(^3\) *Mexico, Splendors of Thirty Centuries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), 21.
indigenous culture and used this knowledge to teach a Christian faith with Aztec characteristics. For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe, a vision of Mary, the virgin mother of Christ, embodies both Catholic and Aztec religion. While references to the Christian Virgin are apparent, the icon is also reminiscent of Aztec goddesses. Mexicans today still refer to the Virgin as *Tonantzin*, the Aztec goddess of the earth. Furthermore, according to legend, the Virgin of Guadalupe spoke *Nahuatl*, an indigenous language, rather than Spanish, strengthening the connection between Catholic and Aztec people. The missionaries documented indigenous traditions, languages and archaeological monuments, amassing the first collection of Mesoamerican historical documents over the latter part of the sixteenth century.

When the Spanish first arrived in the New World they were intrigued by indigenous life. The Spanish recognized that native cultures were both spiritually and politically complex, but they also looked at those societies as a curious novelty. However, as Spaniards became increasingly familiar with indigenous cultures, native resistance led to suspicion and contempt by many Spanish. By the end of the sixteenth century, indigenous people were regarded as cannibalistic savages engaging in heathen practices such as trophy-head hunting, human sacrifice, pagan worship and ritual scarification. The Spanish Crown, under Phillip II, came to consider native religion as “devil worship” and perceived indigenous culture as a threat to social and religious order. The Crown accordingly called for the confiscation and destruction of all objects and historical testimonies (including the priests’ documentation) investigating indigenous

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4 According to Catholic tradition, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, a native peasant, outside of Mexico City in 1531. Mexican Catholics revere the Virgin’s image, referring to her as the “Empress of the Americas.”
5 *Mexico*, 22.
6 Braun, 23.
7 Braun, 23.
traditions, obliterating native ties to their ancestry as much as possible. Phillip II further prohibited any attempt to study and reproduce native material culture.\(^8\)

The seventeenth century brought many changes to Spain, which affected the preservation of indigenous history and customs in New Spain. Before his death in 1598, Phillip II diminished the power of the encomenderos in an attempt to secure royal control over New Spain. Spain itself was in the midst of war, religious turmoil and economic crisis, and Phillip was desperate to regain authority as his empire collapsed. Yet the failures of the Spanish economy and diminishing colonial trade strengthened internal markets in New Spain.\(^9\) By the seventeenth century, free labor markets for agricultural workers replaced the ecomienda system, and dam construction and irrigation projects allowed sugar, livestock, cotton, fruits and grains to be cultivated.\(^10\) The region prospered from technological advances such as alloys produced from ore mines and new agricultural tools. The Spanish had successfully subjugated the indigenous population, resulting in a period of peace that lasted well into the eighteenth century. The population of Spanish Criollos, individuals of Spanish descent born in New Spain, significantly grew as New Spain’s economy thrived.\(^11\)

With the growing number of Criollos came an increased interest in the preservation of the indigenous past.\(^12\) As Criollos came to feel more affinity with their New World homeland than the declining Spanish empire, they were compelled to become collectors and scholars of Pre-Columbian civilizations. Criollos valued the statues and monuments of New Spain as part of their homeland’s antiquity. It is important to note, however, that not all Spanish individuals in

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\(^9\) Mexico, 25.


\(^11\) Mexico, 26

\(^12\) Florescano, 83.
New Spain acquired Pre-Columbian artifacts for sentimental purposes. Spanish treasure hunters disguised as miners nearly obliterated the Huaca del Sol pyramid in Peru while looting the site in 1602 for artifacts to sell in the growing antiquities market. In many cases, gold or silver objects were melted down and recast into bars, jewelry or coins.

The Enlightenment spread from Europe to New Spain, promulgating ideals of democracy and independence. Inspired by the French and American revolutions, New Spain sought independence from its Spanish homeland. As a result, the Spanish aristocracy no longer considered historical documents and archaeological monuments records of paganism, idolatry and heathen worship. Criollo writer Francisco Xavier Clavijero was among the first to maintain that the native past was not a strange, uncivilized culture that ought to be forgotten, but rather a history that Mexican Criollos had inherited.

In 1780, Clavijero called for a museum preserving “the remains of our patria’s antiquity.” Individual Criollos, like astronomer and scientist Antonio de León y Gama, amassed collections of archeological objects, documents and monuments to form the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México. The Universidad formerly served as a university but became an institution devoted to collecting historical documents and archeological monuments. Some objects and documents housed in the museum were materials saved from earlier destruction ordered by the Spanish Crown. Others were uncovered during private Criollo explorations, and some archeological monuments were rediscovered accidentally during construction in Mexico City.

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13 Karen O. Bruhns and Nancy L. Kelker, Faking the Ancient Andes (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press Inc., 2010), 12.
14 Florescano, 83.
The founding of the museum marked a change in the history of Pre-Columbian collecting. The displayed objects and monuments were a tribute to native culture and Criollo awareness of Mexico’s indigenous past. The museum contributed to an increase in research and archeological publications and thrived between 1780 and 1810, when Spanish authorities provided Criollos financial support to continue their studies.15 In 1784, the Spanish Crown, under the rule of Charles IV and influenced by Enlightenment curiosity for the exotic, funded excavations and commissioned military engineers to uncover monuments, accumulate artworks and conduct research. Collected objects were considered not only exotic, but proof of a pre-existing civilization that, like the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece and Egypt, was spiritually and politically advanced.

In the nineteenth century, natural history, archaeology and ethnography museums were established in Mesoamerica, the United States and Europe. European involvement in collecting Pre-Columbian objects grew with the founding of museums as institutions dedicated to organization of scientific collections and the preservation of world history. Ephraim George Squier’s *Incidents of Travel in the Land of the Incas*, published in England (1877) and New York (1888) documented his experiences in Peru and included illustrations made from Squier’s photographs.16 The book is attributed to spreading the fervor for Andean Pre-Columbian objects among European and North American museums. However unlike the once popular Curiosity Cabinets that exhibited a variety of objects without any categorization or interpretation, these museums included an understanding of ancient indigenous cultures.

Among museums, collecting purposes and representation methods of Pre-Columbian materials varied. In North and Central America, Pre-Columbian collections were displayed partly

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15 Florescano, 84.
16 Bruhns and Kelker, 92.
as a tribute to perceived national and cultural identity,\textsuperscript{17} claiming a place in the context of changing historical conditions.\textsuperscript{18}

Conversely, ethnographical museums in Paris and London exhibited Pre-Columbian artifacts as part of world collections. European national museums and world fairs entertained audiences and projected the success of industrialization and colonization through Pre-Columbian and other non-western displays.\textsuperscript{19} European monarchs, marveling upon the evolution of mankind, acquired their private Pre-Columbian collections through government expeditions and military campaigns in Central and South America.

The popularity of Pre-Columbian artworks among museums and private collections, along with the growing study of Pre-Columbian cultures, resulted in an increased desire for object dispersion. This desire motivated nineteenth-century explorers and amateur archaeologists to conduct crude archaeological excavations for the benefit of academic discovery and museum collecting. No laws, official policies or professional organizations prevented explorers from conducting their own archeological digs with little excavation experience. The profitable market for Pre-Columbian objects led to looting of archaeological sites as people searched for valuable ceramics and precious metals that could be transported easily and sold in the United States and Europe.

The Mexican government attempted to keep and preserve archaeological patrimony\textsuperscript{20} by establishing the Museo Nacional Mexicano in 1831.\textsuperscript{21} The institution was divided into several

\textsuperscript{17}A nation refers to a body of people who share a real or imagined common history, culture, language or ethnic origin. National Identity is the collective identity of a nation state through shared history. It is the depiction of a country as a whole, encompassing its culture, traditions, language, and politics. Culture refers to the customs, languages, and values that may define social groups based on nationality, ethnicity, region or common interests. Cultural Identity is important for an individual or a group’s sense of self and how they relate to others. Individuals may share a similar national identity while having differing cultural identities.

\textsuperscript{18}Braun, 32.

\textsuperscript{19}Braun, 23.

\textsuperscript{20}Archaeological property legally entitled to the rightful party, in this case the host country.
departments: natural history, archaeology, history, anthropology and ethnography. The museum devoted itself to conducting research and distributing information. Mexico also created laws protecting archaeological patrimony in 1897, when the government stated “archaeological patrimony lay in the nation and placed its custody in the hands of both federal and state governments.”

By 1906, the Mexican government signed agreements with Columbia University, Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, along with the United States and Prussian governments, to form a center within the Museo Nacional called the Escuela Internacional de Arqueología y Etnografía Americanas. Fraz Boas, director of the Escuela Internacional and former professor of anthropology at Columbia University and the Royal Ethnological Museum of Prussia, established these international relationships. The Escuela Internacional facilitated international intellectual communication and fostered a relationship between Mexico and Pre-Columbian scholars (then called “Americanists”) around the world.

In the early twentieth century, the division between professional and amateur archaeology became more distinct, although some Pre-Columbian scholars with little to no archaeological experience still conducted excavations and surveys. One such example was Hiram Bingham III’s rediscovery of the Inca settlement, Machu Picchu, in 1911. Although Bingham was a Pre-Columbian scholar, he was not a trained archaeologist. He conducted several excavations of the site throughout the following years and left with many objects.

Pre-Columbian anthropology and archaeology methodologies advanced due in part to the contributions of Manuel Gamio, former student of the Museo Nacional and the first Mexican to

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21 Florescano, 89.
22 Florescano, 92.
23 Florescano, 92.
study anthropology abroad. Gamio confronted the Mexican government about the needs of the indigenous population. He proposed that Pre-Columbian work be valued within the context of its own historical and cultural background, and that contemporary indigenous people be central to object and cultural interpretation.

Gaimo was appointed director of the Departamento de Antropología, a new agency under the Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento in 1917. Gamio worked to revamp Pre-Columbian anthropology and the study of archaeological monuments, and is credited as the founder of Mesoamerican scientific archaeology. As a result of Gamio’s dedication, the study of ancient Mesoamerican cultures was revalued as part of Mexico’s national identity and legislation was created to protect property recognized as national patrimony.

The period between 1910 and 1950 was a turning point in Pre-Columbian collecting, preservation and display in Latin America. The 1930’s showed a developing appreciation of ancient American objects as aesthetic works of art in addition to archaeological and anthropological evidence. Modernist artists like Henry Moore were inspired by Pre-Columbian forms and incorporated motifs into artworks, influencing the value of Pre-Columbian objects as art forms. Robert Bliss, Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Paris in 1912, was a forerunner in Pre-Columbian collecting in the United States. Bliss acquired objects from Mexico and South America and displayed them in his Dumbarton Oaks estate in Washington D.C. In 1940, Bliss donated his estate, collections and research library to Harvard University. Since then, the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection has dedicated itself to Pre-Columbian

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25 Florescano, 97.
26 Florescano, 98.
28 Benson, 20.
scholarship, hosting annual conferences, issuing publications and providing research fellowships. The institution is also dedicated to Byzantine studies and the history of landscape architecture.

Protective legislation, institutions, schools and professionals generated interest in conserving and communicating past histories of ancient Pre-Columbian civilizations during the first half of the twentieth-century. The Colombian government established the Museo del Oro in Bogotá in 1939 to preserve the country’s Pre-Columbian gold, silver and other precious metals. As an affiliate to the Columbian Department of the Treasury, the museum purchased metal artifacts at a higher price than their scrap market value, making the Museo the ideal buyer for resourceful looters who would otherwise sell metal artifacts to jewelers and metal dealers interested only in the raw material.

Colombia’s enthusiasm to protect Pre-Columbian objects gradually spread across the international scene, raising concerns for artifact (of Pre-Columbian nature or otherwise) pillaging and smuggling to an international level. The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was established in 1954. It laid the groundwork for later United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) policies. The convention convened in the wake of monument destruction and art theft by Nazi forces during World War II. The convention asserted “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world.”

The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites built upon the ideals from the Hague Convention in 1964 and added that monuments do not

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29 Bruhns and Kelker, 57.
belong to their host countries alone, but to the entire world as common heritage. As objects of universal value, they are entitled to universal protection.31

While the two previous conventions affirmed that protecting monuments and artifacts is an international responsibility, the first successful attempt to halt relic looting and illegal traffic was in 1970, when UNESCO held its Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, focusing international attention on the problem.32 The convention set forth limitations on object importation by museums and dealers and also called for the protection of cultural property.

Since the UNESCO convention, other countries have taken greater action to preserve cultural heritage. The United States passed the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) in 1979, which significantly increased the penalties for looting and vandalizing archaeological sites on public and Native American lands, and placed protection and management responsibilities on the Department of the Interior.33

While these new policies have improved the preservation of ancient American artifacts and archaeological sites, they have spurred an increase in forged artifacts, because the actual objects are more difficult to acquire. Skilled artisans have created counterfeit objects since western European and United States museums and collectors began collecting objects. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen an increase in the number and quality of forgeries produced, making it more difficult for curators and dealers to discern the real from the fraudulent.

31 Mulvaney, 89.
33 Messenger, 292.
The crystal skulls acquired by the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution are an infamous example of counterfeited Pre-Columbian objects. Anthropologist Jane MacLaren Walsh of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) examined the Smithsonian’s skull (Figure 1) in 1996. When Walsh examined the skull with a scanning electron microscopy, she discovered marks left by modern tools, proving the skull was created during the twentieth century. The skulls have since gained popularity as pop culture icons among the public due to the 2008 adventure film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* which focuses on lore associated with the skulls. Because forged objects like the skulls may gain notoriety, it is important that museums establish the real from the fake.

Due to a history of destruction, exploitation, looting and forgeries, the survival of ancient American objects and their respective civilizations have been at risk since colonization. Changing values and economic and political policies have had a considerable effect on institutions with collections of Pre-Columbian art. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) will face many of these issues as it develops its permanent installation of ancient American objects.

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The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: Its History and Collections

The VMFA Pre-Columbian collection was initiated in the late 1950’s, when interest in Pre-Columbian collecting was already over 400 years old. By the turn of the twentieth century, twenty-five major U.S. cities had established art museums, many of which included collections of Pre-Columbian artifacts. Another forty-three art museums opened in thirty-eight cities between 1900 and 1940. Virginia opened its largest art museum (the VMFA) during this increase of U.S. art museums.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is an encyclopedic art museum located in Richmond, Virginia. Its permanent collection currently numbers at approximately 20,000 objects, ranging from ancient Egypt to the mid-twentieth century, including painting, sculpture, works on paper and decorative arts of furniture, silver, glass and ceramics.35

The VMFA was first conceived in 1919 when Judge John Barton Payne, a prominent Virginia-born politician, donated fifty-one European paintings to the commonwealth.36 Additional monetary donations from private donors prompted Payne to propose a plan for a public institution to house Virginia’s art collections. The museum was created in 1934 by an act of the Commonwealth General Assembly to establish a public museum for Virginia’s art collections. The VMFA opened in 1936 as the first state-owned museum in the U.S.

In the years following, the museum acquired several significant foundational collections that are long-standing exhibits within the museum today. Among these are the Lillian Thomas Pratt Collection of jeweled objects by Peter Carl Fabergé, donated in 1947; the donation from the estate of Ailsa Mellon Bruce of 450 European decorative objects, given in 1970; American decorative art and contemporary art given by Sydney and Frances Lewis throughout the late 1970’s and 1980’s; a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English silver given by Jerome and Rita Gans in 1997; and a collection of notable French and British works, including five paintings by George Stubbs and drawings by artists ranging from Edgar Degas to Paul Cézanne, given by Paul Mellon in 1999.

Aside from donated art, the museum’s permanent collection is comprised of works purchased through funding established by several benefactors. These include the Sydney and Frances Lewis Fund for modern art, the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow General Fund and the Harwood and Louise Cochrane Fund for American art.

The museum’s growing collections led the VMFA to expand four times between 1936 and 2003, adding gallery space with each expansion. In 2003, the VMFA announced its plan for a fifth expansion, a $150-million building project that will open to the public on May 1st, 2010. This is the museum’s largest expansion, including a five-level, glass and stone wing with galleries for permanent and temporary exhibitions, adding 165,000 square feet to the museum’s pre-existing 380,000 square feet (Figure 2).

The Pre-Columbian Collection

Among the museum’s permanent collections is a group of 208 Pre-Columbian artworks. Although the museum received four limestone head fragments from Mexico in 1948, active collecting did not begin until 1955. The establishment of the nearby Dumbarton Oaks institution

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in Washington D.C. most likely also influenced the museum’s desire to acquire Pre-Columbian artworks.

The collection was initiated in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s under the leadership of Leslie Cheek, former director of the VMFA, and Pinkney Near, former curator of the entire permanent collection. The VMFA became an encyclopedic museum in 1954, when collecting areas were first organized by culture. The following year, the Portland Museum of Art deaccessioned a portion of its Native American collection. With an idea for exhibiting the objects at the VMFA, Cheek purchased the collection. The exhibit, “Native Arts of the Pacific Northwest Coast,” included the Portland collection and objects from the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). The history of the VMFA Pre-Columbian collection begins with the museum’s relationship with the AMNH.

Near collaborated with Junius Bird, a former curator of South American Archaeology at the AMNH, and Gordon Ekholm, curator of anthropology at the AMNH and an authority on Pre-Columbian archaeology of Mexico and Central America. The VMFA acquired (through fund purchases and gifts) seventy-five objects representing twenty ancient cultures in Mexico, Central and South America (Appendix A). The Pre-Columbian collection grew with four gold adornments, a stone chisel and a clay figure from Panama and Costa Rica, given by Ms. Alice Dodge in 1968. In 1974, the museum was given twenty Peruvian ceramics, textiles and stone objects by Dr. Juan de Dios Martinez.

The Pre-Columbian collection remained in storage until 1975, when sixty objects, the majority of the Pre-Columbian collection, were displayed (some being exhibited for the first time) at the Virginia Museum’s Downtown Gallery. The Downtown Gallery was located in the First and Merchant’s Bank (now Bank of America) at 12th and Main St., from 1974 – 1976. The museum sought to place art in local locations, as well as around the state, to reach a broader community. At any given time, artworks could be displayed to showcase a sample of the VMFA collections to those conducting business in the building. After the one-month installation, the collection spent two years on tour in a VMFA Artmobile (Figures 3 and 4), an idea conceived by former director Leslie Cheek in 1953. An “Artmobile” was a freight truck with art objects attached to the trailer’s interior walls. The vehicle could then transport this “gallery” to any area of the commonwealth. As a state institution, the VMFA was (and still is) expected to serve citizens throughout the commonwealth. The Artmobile fulfilled this standard by bringing art to Virginians who did not ordinarily visit the Museum.

The late 1970’s marked an active period in the museum’s Pre-Columbian permanent collection. The VMFA presented Pre-Columbian artistic and cultural achievements of ancient Peru when it established a new Ancient American gallery in 1977. The gallery displayed fifty of the 106 Pre-Columbian objects from the museum’s existing collection in addition to sixty-five ancient South American objects loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Sandford G. Etherington of South Woodstock, Vermont. The gallery was supplemented with information panels, maps and audio-visual presentations discussing object origins. In conjunction with the gallery’s opening, the

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42 “Ancient American Gallery,” 1977, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Object Files, Etherington Collection, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. All subsequent information on the Etherington Collection has been gathered from this source.
The museum hosted a lecture by Dr. Michael Coe, former professor of anthropology at Yale University and foremost Mayanist scholar. Coe is a significant contributor to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican scholarship, particularly in Mayan archaeology and anthropology.

The Etheringtons gifted the previously loaned sixty-five works, plus another twenty-two Peruvian objects, to the museum in several installments from 1979 until 1984. The Etherington Collection is comprised of textiles, metalwork and ceramics. It includes objects from eleven ancient South American cultures, representing the 3,000 year period from the Chavin culture of 1500 B.C. until the Spanish Conquest of the Incan Empire after 1500 A.D. The collection includes bottles, various vessels, dippers, masks, pitchers, ornaments, ceremonial knives, figurines, dolls and textile fragments. Prominent items from the Etherington collection include a Moche stirrup-spout bottle (Figure 5) decorated with “bean warrior” imagery. These partially human warriors are a common motif found on Moche ceramics, demonstrating the lima bean’s value in ritual purposes. A silver Chimu beaker (Figure 6) in the form of a hunchbacked man exemplifies the skill of Chimu metalworkers and symbolizes the status of hunchbacks as spiritual men.

While the Ancient American gallery was open, Richard Woodward, Curator of African Art, who also oversaw the Pre-Columbian collection, made additional purchases for the collection. These include a Mayan Funerary Vessel (Figure 7), which may have been used for drinking chocolate, or atole (a porridge-like drink made from corn), a Mayan Jade Mosaic Mask (Figure 8) that might have commemorated a deceased ruler and an Olmec Baby figurine (Figure 9), an infantile portrayal typical in Olmec art.

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43 Chavin, Paracas, Recuay, Vicus, Nazca, Tiahuanaco, Viru, Moche, Lambayeque, Chimu, Chancay.
In 1979, Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand P. Abela gave eleven Peruvian ceramics to the museum. Another eleven West Mexican ceramics were given in 1980 by Dr. and Mrs. Simon Russi. The most recent acquisition to the Pre-Columbian collection was in 2009. Fred Brandt donated three Colima figures to the museum, totaling the collection at 208 objects.44

The Ancient American gallery remained open until the fall of 1986, when the museum began renovating older sections of the building. The Pre-Columbian collection was placed in storage and what was formerly the Ancient American gallery became the gallery for African art.45 The plan to reinstall the entire Pre-Columbian collection at a later date was never realized.

In 1994, fifty Pre-Columbian artworks, about one-fourth of the museum’s permanent collection, were exhibited in “Art of the Ancient Americas: Body and Soul Transformed,” a temporary exhibit guest-curated by Dr. James Farmer, associate professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University.46 The exhibit examined how Pre-Columbian civilizations perceived the human body and soul. The show included Mesoamerican and South American ceramic vessels, gold jewelry, and textiles (Figure 10). These objects are representative of shamans, sacred rituals and the deceased, and the spiritual associations between the artworks and the supernatural world. The exhibit remained on display for five years, which was an unusually long time for a temporary exhibit.

The museum’s Pre-Columbian collection has remained in storage since “Art of the Ancient Americas.” Some objects have been loaned to other museums and galleries for temporary shows. In 1996, a West Mexican figurine from the permanent collection was displayed in University of Richmond’s Mildred Crowder Pickels Gallery as part of its “Seeing

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44 Due to the number of objects in the VMFA Pre-Columbian collection, this section only referenced significant purchases and gifts.
45 Richard Woodward to Mr. and Mrs. Sandford G. Etherington, June 20, 1986, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Object Files, Etherington Collection, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.
Across Cultures: Objects from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,” show. From 2004 through 2005 a Maya Funerary Vessel was featured in the National Gallery of Art and Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco exhibition, “Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya,” which was displayed in both Washington D.C. and San Francisco. Finally, from 2005 until 2007, four Pre-Columbian objects from the VMFA permanent collection were featured in the museum’s “Look Here!” exhibit, organized by the curatorial staff. The exhibit featured objects from each collection belonging to the museum and traveled statewide to promote art and the museum. The VMFA has not installed any long-term displays of its Pre-Columbian artworks in the past fifteen years.

Under the direction of Dr. Lee Anne Hurt Chesterfield, Curator of Ancient American Art at the VMFA, the museum’s Pre-Columbian works will be installed in the new, permanent gallery during summer 2010. The gallery will feature 135 Pre-Columbian objects from the museum’s permanent collection, along with objects from three loans: The Nooter\textsuperscript{47} Collection, which consists of 150 North American Indian ceramics, baskets and rugs ranging from the Pacific Northwest coast to the U.S. Southwest tribes; the Lipman\textsuperscript{48} Loan of two West Mexican ceramics; and the Goode\textsuperscript{49} loan of one Olmec and one Teotihuacan mask. Research for these loan collections was beyond the scope of this thesis project, thus the collections are not described in this report.

\textsuperscript{47} Robert and Nancy Nooter reside in Washington D.C and collect African, Pre-Columbian and Native American artworks. The couple originally befriended the museum through Richard Woodward, curator of African art.

\textsuperscript{48} Mrs. Eric Lipman of Richmond collected Pre-Columbian art in the 1950’s. She and her late husband have been friends of the museum for sixty years.

\textsuperscript{49} Susan Goode is a member of the museum’s board of trustees. Her husband collects Pre-Columbian art and the couple resides in Norfolk.
Exhibit Planning

History of Exhibit Planning to Date

The Ancient American gallery is located on the second floor of the new museum wing. The gallery is rectangular in shape and runs east to west along the north end of the building (Figure 11). Currently 135 Pre-Columbian objects from the Museum’s permanent collection have been selected for display in the 2,500 square foot gallery space.

The gallery space will be organized by region, with North American Indian artworks installed at the west end of the gallery. South, Central and Mesoamerican objects will follow the North American Indian artworks running eastward along the gallery. Objects within those regions will be grouped by culture. For example, Mesoamerican objects will be divided into Mexica (Aztec), Mayan, Colima, Nayarit, Olmec, Veracruz and Remojadas cultures. Within each culture, objects will be separated by category such as textiles, adornments and ceramics. Some objects will be arranged by themes, such as war or music.

Specific works from the permanent collection will be exhibit focal points because of their rarity and the exemplary artistic skill used in their creation. Among the highlighted objects, the gold Moche Jaguar (Figure 12) is one of only seven known works of its kind and is a testimony to the Moche metalworkers’ artistic abilities. The VMFA jaguar contains a pebble, indicating its use as a ceremonial rattle. The delicate and colorful Nazca feathered Tabard (Figure 13) demonstrates the pomp and elegance displayed by a ruler or priest, and the skill required to create the intricately woven feather pattern. These pieces, along with the other selected objects,
will be accompanied with textual information (which VMFA staff members call “chat labels”) as well as general object labels (or “dog tags”), which offer basic information such as date, culture and medium. The text labels will describe the work’s formal attributes helping the viewer understand what he or she is seeing and call to attention details that might otherwise go unnoticed. The label will further explain what purpose the object may have served when it was created. Once the VMFA re-opens in May 2010, the museum will make available to the public an online collection database featuring the highlighted objects. The remaining artworks will be exhibited with object labels listing only the object’s name, date, medium, origin, credit line and accession number.

General text panels will also be featured in the gallery. Some panels will cover broad topics like religion, music and production processes while others will explain more specific aspects unique to certain cultures, such as the shaft tombs of west Mexico\(^{50}\) and the Mesoamerican ballgame.\(^{51}\) Objects may be organized by these concepts, with one general label discussing them as a group rather than each object having its own text.

**Scope of Collection**

When plans for the new gallery had just begun, the Pre-Columbian collection was assessed and a “scope of collections,” as referenced by the American Association of Museums (AAM), was formulated.\(^{52}\) The scope of collections is a review of the museum’s collection. It is a comprehensive survey which also identifies objects that do not coincide with the exhibit or are an asset to the museum’s collection. The scope also reveals what areas of the collection could be

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\(^{50}\) Refers to the shaft tomb tradition of West Mexico that lasted from roughly 300 BC until 400 AD. The shaft is dug vertically at least 9 feet into the earth and branches into 1 or more horizontal chambers, the base of the shaft opens into one or two (occasionally more) horizontal chambers containing burial remains.

\(^{51}\) The ballgame was a sport-like ritual enacted in Mesoamerica for over 3000 years. While the rules of the game are unknown, the game involved a rubber ball used in a stone court similar to a football field. Unlike a sport, the ballgame was a ritual with symbolic references and involved human sacrificing and decapitation.

expanded. An inspection of the Pre-Columbian collection showed that several objects needed conservation work; many had not been displayed for over a decade; and even more had never been exhibited at the museum. A majority of the Pre-Columbian objects had little information besides acquisition history in their object files, and all objects needed research.

In the AAM Guide to Collections Planning, the scope of collections provides a rational and analytical approach to planning exhibits meeting museum and audience the needs.\textsuperscript{53} Like the AAM scope description, once the Pre-Columbian artworks were examined and research was complete, it was easy to see what pieces were unfit for display because of conservation and aesthetic issues or a lack of available information regarding the object.\textsuperscript{54} While AAM suggests that museums might consider disposing of these “misfits,” the museum is not considering deaccession at this time.

Over the course of the collection’s assessment, it was obvious that certain cultures or aspects of Pre-Columbian history are underrepresented in the museum’s collection. The Pre-Columbian collection needs objects, particularly masks, from the Central American Teotihuacan and Olmec cultures. Because the Mesoamerican ballgame was a significant part of Mayan culture, ritually played in the southwestern U.S. and throughout all of Meso and Central America, Mayan painted ceramic vessels with ballcourt imagery and ballgame accoutrements are needed as well. The museum lacks sculptured Moche portrait vessels from ancient Peru. These vessels, with their highly realistic depictions of Moche elite, are among the most recognizable Moche ceramics. While this is not a problem that can be solved immediately, the museum can consider these inadequacies when deliberating future purchases.

\textsuperscript{53} American Association of Museums, 19.
\textsuperscript{54} American Association of Museums, 19.
Research Conducted

In October 2008, I began a VMFA internship with Dr. Chesterfield and assisted her by researching prospective loan objects and compiling information about Pre-Columbian collections in notable museums—tasks necessary during the preliminary stages of gallery planning. I soon realized that the museum’s future expansion and the work required for the Ancient American gallery would provide an opportunity to turn my internship work into a Museum Thesis Project. During the latter half of the fall 2008 semester I researched objects from the permanent collection considered for display and continued this work until the fall 2009 semester. A majority of these objects had little to no previous research information in object files, and any existing information had not been updated in over fifteen years. The purpose of my research was to compile new reference information for label copy and to add to object files.

Prior to my arrival at the VMFA, Dr. Chesterfield divided the 208 Pre-Columbian objects in the museum’s collection into levels of importance based on the object’s significance within its culture and aesthetic value. Objects to be displayed in the permanent exhibition were selected from the “A” list, which at present consists of 130 precious metals, colorful ceramics and fine textiles. These objects were chosen because they held an important role within their respective cultures, have aesthetic value and are not proven forgeries. For example, the museum’s Maya Funerary Vessel (Figure 7) is on the “A” list because it was used by a high-ranking official and was a symbol of status and power among the Mayans. Its glyphs and imagery illustrate mythological events and figures and are a valuable source of information about Mayan society. From a practical perspective, the rich polychrome images are visually striking and the vase is an

55 The “A” list is a static document that changes as exhibit planning develops, thus it is not included in this report. The information included in this thesis is based on the spring 2010 draft of Dr. Chesterfield’s “A” list. The final documentation of “A” list information will be the gallery labels and design plan.
authentic Pre-Columbian artwork. These attributes make it both a beautiful artwork and a historically important piece that gives insight into the ancient Mayan world.

Conversely, another Mayan vase (Figure 14) in the collection is not on the “A” list because research indicates that the vase was not regarded as highly as the Funerary Vessel. This vase’s unpainted appearance is also less likely to interest viewers and was therefore omitted from the “A” list.

While researching, I studied publications within Pre-Columbian art and archaeology fields. I began with work written by established Pre-Columbian scholars like Michael Coe, Richard Townsend and Elizabeth Benson. Contributions from these individuals were not only reliable given their background experience, but also useful because each scholar included in-depth descriptions of production processes, notable characteristics and cultural meaning—information I specifically sought while researching. Because Pre-Columbian scholarship has seen much change and expanded in the last thirty years, I primarily used sources published within this time frame.

Next I referred to museum catalogues and publications showcasing Pre-Columbian collections or exhibitions. These helped me find objects comparable to those in the VMFA’s collection and gain additional sources.

My final research step was investigating object files for pre-existing documents such as correspondences, curatorial reports and news articles documenting the object’s history prior to and since acquisition by the VMFA. Unfortunately, I found that most object files were lacking in provenance and dealer purchase information. The documents in question may have been subsequently lost or discarded by museum employees, or never accompanied the objects upon acquisition at all.
When I concluded object research, I had amassed information on 108 Pre-Columbian artworks from Dr. Chesterfield’s “A” list. For each work I completed a written report including a formal analysis noting defining characteristics, object history and the significance of the object within the context of Pre-Columbian culture. The compiled research includes a list of relevant bibliographic sources and has been used for label copy. Appendices B and C show the research compiled for a Peruvian bowl and the trophy head label copy written based on this research.

Interpretive Plan

In 2008, the VMFA issued its “Interpretive Plan Guiding Principles,” identifying four motivations for visiting VMFA exhibitions: aesthetic pleasure and intellectual stimulation; insight into other times and cultures as well as our own; meaningful social interaction and lively discourse; and personal reflection and quiet contemplation.\(^\text{56}\) The museum believes that exhibit interpretation and presentation must provide visitors with the tools to engage with the artworks. As stated in the Interpretive Plan Guiding Principles, “accessibility (physical, cultural, and pedagogical) to our collections and special exhibitions is central to our mission as an institution of higher learning.”\(^\text{57}\)

At present, each curator within the museum’s collections staff is planning exhibits in preparation for collection reinstallation. Under the Guiding Principles established by the VMFA, all galleries should adapt to each of the four experiences sought by museum visitors.

The Ancient American gallery seeks to provide the types of experiences defined by the museum. To begin, aesthetic value is a key point in art museum collecting and many art museum exhibits are object-based rather than formulated around a theme or idea. Because aesthetic pleasure and visual impact is a priority within art museums, artworks are often displayed for their


aesthetic value rather than to support a message, as found in anthropology, community or history museums. The visitor reaction upon viewing a displayed artwork is the first and most influential experience an art exhibition may provoke. The initial reaction to that visual experience, whether it is interest, admiration, dislike or indifference, determines the next series of experiences the visitor will have. The patron may continue viewing the exhibition, read a text panel, ask a question or leave the gallery entirely.

When asked to describe the ideal art museum visit or visualize an aesthetically pleasing art exhibition, the typical museum visitor may envision Impressionist paintings or Classical sculpture—art types generally accepted as having universal aesthetic appeal. Ceramic figures from West Mexican shaft tombs and Peruvian vessels decorated with trophy heads probably would not come to mind. In the museum’s Guiding Principles, aesthetic pleasure and intellectual stimulation are grouped as one experience type. While aesthetic pleasure might not seem necessary to stimulate intellectual activity, aesthetic value certainly does. A museum visitor need not perceive a Mexican hacha (Figure 15), a ceremonial marker, as an object of great beauty in order to capture his or her attention, but visual interest is necessary to intrigue the visitor. Therefore it was important to consider the aesthetic value of the Pre-Columbian collection in order to create an exhibit that will be aesthetically provoking, if not pleasing, and intellectually stimulating.

While many Pre-Columbian works served a religious or ritual purpose, these objects were also intended to be aesthetically remarkable. Research has shown that objects used by the elite for religious or ritual means are the most visually striking works discussed in Pre-Columbian scholarship. Maya funerary vases, West Mexican ceramics and Moche stirrup vessels are a few examples of visually appealing objects designated for installation. Peruvian metalworks,
including silver and gold beakers and bronze \textit{tumi} knife blades will also be prominent features in the gallery attracting a high level of interest.

The bright color schemes, detailed designs and rich mediums used in these artworks are eye-catching, but a closer look reveals the impressive techniques used in object production. Production processes will be a focal point in gallery text panels, fostering object appreciation and intellectual interest.

Throughout the visual inspection and research of the Pre-Columbian collection, some pieces were found unfit for installation because of their poor condition. Badly fractured ceramics, deteriorated paint designs and inadequately repaired objects were major issues encountered during object surveys and conservator examinations. These pieces, although valuable artifacts, would not generate the same public interest as their better-preserved counterparts. Furthermore, some artworks, like the Vicus bottle (Figure 16), were eliminated from the “A” list because they were not the best representation of their respective cultures and the overall absence of scholarly work available regarding those objects. Whether this information deficiency is a product of the objects’ appearance or merely an area where Pre-Columbian research has room to grow, an object that lacks both visual appeal and documented history will not be an asset in the gallery.

Aside from initial aesthetic pleasure and intellectual stimulation, a museum visitor might also seek insight into other times and cultures as well as his or her own. “Although much can be said regarding the politics of cultural representation in museums, it remains true that anthropologists and museologists have been motivated by the conviction that the presentation of
people’s material cultural in museums contributes to cross-cultural awareness and understanding.”

As stated previously, the Pre-Columbian collection will be divided into regions and culture within each region. Naturally, these cultures differ greatly from each other and even more so from contemporary culture in the United States. The objects themselves as well as accompanying text panels will provide insight into their representative cultures. Comprehensive maps and timelines will aide visitors in understanding the context in which each work was made. Enlarged photographs depicting ancient Pre-Columbian architecture will allow the viewer to envision objects within their original settings, further contextualizing the collection. Rather than merely looking at an object within a glass vitrine, the viewer can imagine the object as part of a temple or archaeological site.

Select object labels will include a formal analysis—explaining what the visitor is viewing, as well as the significance of that object within its culture—discussing why the object appears the way it does. Aesthetic value may have been a preliminary factor determining what objects would be installed, but cultural value will be a factor in object interpretation. It is imperative to include the artwork’s cultural significance because it constitutes the object’s social, spiritual, symbolic and historical value. Furthermore, many objects that have lost their cultural value have regained it when they are recognized and re-united with their information.

The general text panels serve to draw parallels between Pre-Columbian life and contemporary culture. By addressing topics like food, music, religion, social structure, ritual and

60 Keene, 168.
other fundamentals of everyday life, the collection will form a relationship with the museum visitor, because most of these concepts apply to the average individual as well.

The third encounter the VMFA deems central to visitor experience is meaningful social interaction and lively discourse. A major function of art museums is the acquisition of new knowledge, which can take various forms, but the educational function consists in expressing knowledge—of the past, present and future—generated by scholars within the museum.\footnote{Wilcomb E. Washburn, “The Museum’s Responsibility in Adult Education,” \textit{Curator} 7, no. 1 (1964): 33.} Group contemplation and discussion require that visitors enter into a relationship with the objects and with each other.\footnote{Marcia Mueller Eaton, “The Role of art in Sustaining Communities,” in \textit{Diversity and Community: An Interdisciplinary Reader}, ed. Philip Alperson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 2002), 256.} The relationship between the individual and the object will be established through the general panels. Curatorial lectures, educational programs and trained docents will foster additional interaction between the collection and individuals. Collection publications have already and will continue to be included in \textit{The Councillor}, a VMFA newsletter issued three times a year to members of the museum council.

Pre-Columbian scholarship is a growing field, meaning there is room for the collection (and the exhibit) to change and expand. Once the gallery is installed and opens for public view, the Ancient American department can focus its efforts toward furthering object research, planning temporary exhibitions and expanding the collection, all of which promote scholarly inquiry both in and outside of the museum.

The final experience the museum seeks is personal reflection and quiet contemplation. Although this experience is more difficult to produce through a collection of artworks alone, the physical size and location of the Ancient American gallery will create this experience. A 2500 square-foot space may seem large on its own, but in comparison to the rest of the museum, it is a space suitable for a small collection. Benches will be placed in the gallery, allowing patrons to
rest and enjoy themselves. The gallery has two large picture windows overlooking the entry plaza and a portion of the sculpture garden, providing an additional source for viewing pleasure and contemplation.

The gallery location in proximity to the rest of the museum may also offer a space for visitors seeking solitude. The gallery is located at the northernmost end of the new wing, well away from the Mellon, Lewis, and European galleries, which are situated at the heart of the main gallery level and feature the museum’s signature collections. While the ancient American collection will certainly garner attention from museum visitors, it can be expected that the gallery will be less crowded and noisy than the museum’s premier galleries.
Conclusion

Creating the first permanent exhibit of the VMFA ancient American collection required extensive new research not previously conducted since earlier temporary exhibits. The research has proved helpful in label writing and can serve as the groundwork for any future object research. Objects not included in the installation may also receive more attention, including further research to determine authenticity, conservation needs or provenance.

Aside from object research, Dr. Chesterfield has used the history of the Pre-Columbian collection in lectures and can consult it for future reference. Additionally, the Interpretive Plan can also be referenced to justify the gallery design and organization under the VMFA Interpretive Principles.

As the gallery fosters new appreciation of the collection, it is possible that the collection may receive additional funding to bring in new objects. From this point onward, efforts can be made to increase awareness of the Pre-Columbian collection and expand the collection, so that it might never again be removed from display and wholly relegated to collection storage.
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*Bottle with Modeled Feline Head*
Appendices
Appendix A

Cultures Represented by Objects Acquired under Pinkney Near, Junius Bird and Gordon Ekholm

Mexico
- Aztec
- Cholula
- Colima
- Maya
- Mezcala
- Nayarit
- Remojadas
- Veracruz
- Zapotec

Central America
- Costa Rica
- Panama

South America
- Chancay
- Chimu
- Colombia
- Ica
- Inca
- Moche
- Nazca
- Paracas
- Tiahuanaco
Appendix B
Example of Object Research

59.28.14
Title: Bowl
Date: 200-600
Culture: Peruvian, Nazca

Polychromed orangeware bowl painted in red, orange white and black. A succession of trophy heads lines the rim of the bowl. The orange heads are in profile view with the bridge of the nose and mouth facing upward toward the mouth of the bowl, while long black hair streams downward from the head. The heads are painted on a cream background with red bands along the base and rim of the bowl.

Early Nazca (1-300 AD) ceramics were simple in form, well made, highly fired, and ornamented with three or more clear slip colors. In the beginning the prevailing type of decoration was a single conventionalized yet naturalistic motif, repeated against a white or dark background.63

Trophy head taking: The taking of human trophy heads for ritual purposes was an integral part of Nazca religion. Numerous vessels show decapitation occurring during battle scenes.64 The Nazca later preserved the heads and utilized them as ritual or ceremonial objects.65 Ceramic vessels often depict the “enemy” through the use of varying paint color or facial markings.66 Although it is easy to identify these images as decapitated human trophy heads, the archeological discovery of burials of these heads at Nazca sites confirms this interpretation.

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64 Proulx, 196.
66 Proulx, 196.
Appendix C

Trophy Head General Label Copy

Trophy Heads

The taking of human trophy heads for ritual purposes was an integral part of many ancient Andean religions. Decapitation scenes and disembodied heads are common themes in artworks and architectural decoration. Once taken in battle, heads were preserved and used in rituals and ceremonies. Although it is not difficult to identify these representations as severed human heads, the archeological discovery of caches of heads at Nazca sites confirms this interpretation.
Vita

Amy Marie Lenhardt was born on June 26, 1985, in St. Louis, Missouri. She graduated from Waterloo High School in Waterloo, Illinois in 2003. Amy attended Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois and majored in Art with minors in German and English Literature. She graduated cum laude in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Upon graduation, Amy moved to Richmond, Virginia to attend graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), where she will receive a Master’s Degree in Art History. While in graduate school Amy has taught undergraduate art history courses at VCU, participated in the Art History Graduate Student Association and interned at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). Since October 2009 she has been employed at the VMFA as the Reinstallation Database Manager while the museum completes its current expansion project.