Foreword from the new publication, *Revealing Ancestral Central America*

Edited by Rosemary A. Joyce

*Centroamericanos*—they are the backbone of the Latino communities surrounding Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian’s own backyard. They hail from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, Panama, and Costa Rica. They have a growing presence throughout the United States, yet representation of their cultural and social legacies in Latin American scholarship has remained largely marginalized by earlier focus on the political dominance, riches, and epic drama of Mesoamerican and Andean empires. Through a partnership between the Smithsonian Latino Center and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), we have seized this opportunity to connect with our local Latino communities, many of whom remain rooted in their indigenous heritage and history. Herein we honor the enduring, economically and politically stable cultural traditions of pre-Hispanic Central America through their exceptional material culture. Sharing this cultural patrimony and acknowledging its value is both our challenge and our responsibility, and we gladly take up the charge. The generation of this project occurred by accident, with a discovery at the NMAI of a vast collection of Central American archaeological objects by visiting staff researchers from the Smithsonian Latino Center. They realized that the NMAI was quietly caring for one of the largest and most significant collections of Central American archaeology in existence, with approximately 17,000 objects from the region. Astoundingly, this includes more than 10,000 intact vessels, embodying countless untold stories. The Central American Ceramics Research Project, or CACRP, is the Latino Center’s initiative to learn more about these works.

Launched in 2009, the CACRP supported the two-year study, documentation, and identification of items in the NMAI’s Central American ceramics collections. This initiative has been the catalyst for other research and projects, such as an exhibition, based on a number of the objects, examining cultural
diversity, complexity, and change across space and time; a series of public programs exploring cultural and scientific dimensions of the project; training opportunities for Central American museum staff; an interactive website; and this publication.

All of this work springs from unprecedented new scholarship related to these objects, few of which had been previously studied or publicly exhibited. The objects highlighted in this book, largely drawn from the NMAI’s Central American archaeological collection, have much to say to us today. They testify to the complexity of long-lived governments and social systems, and to the importance and sophistication of the art and science in the communities where they were made. They speak of the patience, sensitivity, and innovation of their makers. The essays that follow reveal the lives of the ancestors of the indigenous, mestizo, and afromestizo peoples of Central America. Their histories have often been lost or obscured, but through archaeology, the available records, and understandings from contemporary indigenous peoples, we can partially reconstruct and begin to glimpse the organization of their daily lives and their ideas about nature, power, and the supernatural. From the figurines depicting powerful women in the Greater Nicoya region, to the finely decorated vessels of the wealthy farming hamlets of the Ulúa Valley and the fantastical designs on Cochlé pottery, we can see that the peoples of pre-Hispanic Central America developed uniquely local identities and cultural traditions, while also engaging in vital exchanges of ideas, goods, and technologies with their neighbors in all directions. By emphasizing notions of heritage and connection to our pre-Hispanic collections, this project has the potential to engage surrounding Central American communities and introduce them to the Smithsonian’s broader panoply of cultural resources. For the newly initiated or the most devoted aficionado familiar with the history and cultures of the region, the experience of seeing our exhibition or reading this book is meant to engender new paradigms for understanding the pre-Hispanic past.

The effort to uncover this ancestral inheritance has been a multiyear labor of love. We would like to thank the brilliant and dedicated team of scholars, curators, editors, project managers, conservators, exhibition designers, web designers, educators, fundraisers, publicists, and other museum professionals who made all of this possible. We are particularly indebted to general editor Rosemary Joyce, whose exemplary efforts, coupled with the leading-edge scholarship of the contributing authors, shaped this publication. Joyce not only contributed her expertise and dedication to this project, but was an advocate for creating access to this new knowledge. We hope that you are moved by these groundbreaking explorations of the Central American past.

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The first impression for anyone conducting archaeological research in Central America, or seeing museum collections from previous work there, is of an astonishing and pervasive richness in even the everyday objects crafted by the region’s ancestral peoples. Take as an example an assemblage recovered from a site in the Ulúa river valley in Honduras, called Farm Two by Gregory Mason, who collected the materials for the Heye Foundation. Among some 400 objects, the grouping includes jade and shell beads and an obsidian mirror, parts of distinctive costumes; spindle whorls for making thread and groundstone tools for making bark cloth; other stone tools for working wood and grinding plants, and obsidian blades and tools of the kind used to process plants and animals to prepare meals; locally made bowls with multicolored images of human figures in ceremonial costume wielding ritual implements, and jars with red geometric designs; ceramic vessels for burning resins during rituals; and a plethora of molded, fired-clay images of humans and animals, and many musical instruments, some small enough to hold in a hand, others large effigies half-life size, also used in ceremonies.

Obsidian, jade, and marine shell were imported from distances ranging from thirty to more than 250 kilometers. While most of the painted and mold-made pottery was locally crafted, some dishes came from Belize or Guatemala, some jars from the Sulaco river valley to the east. And all of this from a rural village, whose modest houses were made of poles, covered with clay, topped with thatched roofs. The materials were indicated by burned clay with pole impressions collected during excavations I co-directed in the early 1990s at the same site, now called Campo Dos (Hendon, Joyce, and Lopiparo, in press).

At scales ranging from larger-than-life stone sculptures depicting humans and supernatural beings to the intimacy of jewelry made to be worn in pierced ears, suspended from the neck, clasping the head, arms, or legs, or stitched to clothing, it is evident that people of pre-16th-century Central American societies lived in a visually rich, materially luxurious, world. Nor was this visual and material richness limited to a small, privileged group. Even in the most stratified and unequal societies in the
region, such as those of the Classic Maya (ca. AD 250–850), research in rural locations like the well-preserved village of Joya del Cerén, El Salvador, shows that farmers owned dozens of pottery vessels, many of them brightly painted or modeled into the shapes of fantastic animals (Sheets, this volume).

In societies characterized by less inequality, the products of skilled artisans were widely distributed. In the Ulúa Valley of Honduras, the wealthy families at Travesía who patronized multigenerational workshops of craftsmen producing marble vases, prized from Guatemala to Costa Rica, did not assert the kind of absolute authority claimed by Classic Maya rulers in their historical monuments (Luke, this volume). The wealthiest family at Travesía oriented its house compound to the sacred mountains and passes that established a ritual landscape, shared with the residents of all the villages in the valley. Here, we can speak of a society composed of “wealthy farmers” (Joyce, 2011), who cultivated cacao groves, hosted visitors at seasonal feasts (likely including some from distant lands who brought with them exotic objects; and supported the work of artisans—in shell, jade, textiles, fired clay, and marble—who furnished the objects of everyday life in the pole, clay, and thatch houses of even the humblest hamlets in the surrounding area. While the residents of Travesía may have had influence, prestige, and forms of authority in that area, we need to explore how that influence and authority was created from the ground up, without being blinded by preconceptions about what a society without a visible ruling class and marked inequities in wealth is like.

The challenge is to avoid framing history comparatively, with the societies of Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama seen as falling short of a standard set by the Maya of Guatemala. Many ways of talking about the area embody an assumption that centralized, highly unequal state societies are normal or inevitable developments in human history. When we use these ways of talking, we put Central America in a framework that Payson Sheets (1992) called “the pervasive pejorative.” We ask why towns in Panama and Costa Rica were organized “only” as what we call chiefdoms—towns in which wealthy families claimed the right to pass down authority through lines of kinship—as if they should have been more highly stratified states, with greater economic inequality. We talk about societies in which stability in the maximum size of towns was maintained for hundreds of years as if they failed because they did not grow to the size of unsustainable cities.

The narrative of political hierarchy classifies all Central American societies except the Maya as “chiefdoms” or “tribes,” seen as steps on a never-completed trajectory to becoming “states.” This implies that political organization is always the main coordinating principle in human society. In Central America we need to examine how towns and villages were bound together by ties of kinship, shifting alliances, material exchanges, and participation in common practices mediating relations with the sacred and the supernatural through
To avoid narratives that privilege the development of political stratification and economic inequality as normal and inevitable, we should think of pre-Hispanic Central America—including Guatemala—as a chain of societies connected through intentional human action leading to travel, exchange, and participation by visitors in social events. When Maya nobles living at Uaxactun and San Jose used Ulúa marble vessels in their households, they treated them as prized luxuries, products of exclusive and competitive networks of relations with families in the towns in the Ulúa Valley where they were produced. They did not observe either a boundary that would have led them to reject such foreign goods, or an absolute distinction in status that would have made these products of less-centralized societies less prized. Indeed, there is evidence that in Central America, products of skilled artisans located at a distance metaphorically stood for claims of knowledge from the most distant realms—those of the ancestors and supernatural beings (Helms, 1998).

How can we talk about such a diverse network in a unified way, in terms that might be manifest in material remains? This book explores four crosscutting themes to understand Central America as a network of villages, towns, and cities: dwelling, connecting, authority, spirituality.

**Dwelling** refers to the practices of everyday life, including the way people related to plants, animals, and landscape in their locality. Houses and towns, where archaeologists have recognized and explored the grain of everyday life, are the natural places for exploring dwelling. Dwelling also includes those practices through which the living took care of the dead. These practices are responsible for a large part of the materiality of the past in Central America. Understanding dwelling depends on teasing out from artifacts the stories they can tell about how people got on day to day: how they produced the tools they used to work the land, to hunt and fish, and to create the objects used in ceremonies as well as in daily existence. In Central America, products and tools of dwelling often form a spectrum from skilled but plain to the extraordinary intricacies of high capability. Dwelling allows us to see these things not through the art/artifact dichotomy, but beyond that: to understand that the lives of many people in Central America took place surrounded by objects of beauty.

**Connecting** is a way of thinking of networks as actively created by human action. Everywhere in the region there are things that originated elsewhere. We can talk of trade or exchange, as well as other scales of connecting, such as familial alliances, traveling artisans, religious pilgrims, and the like, where exotic objects are signs of the ways people moved across a very wide space, and gathered knowledge that was valued when they returned home. Connecting makes Central America active in its relations to societies in Mexico and northern South America, so that when we look at Plumbate pots from El Salvador and Honduras, we emphasize the unique forms and designs that show that makers (believed to be located in Soconusco) were catering to the taste of Central Americans, who were not passive consumers forced to take whatever came down the road (Joyce, 1986). Connecting also means we attend to the presence in distant places of items from Central America, like a cache of Honduran Las Vegas polychrome pots (originally identified as Nicoya polychrome) found in a house at Tula, Hidalgo (Diehl, Lomas, and Wynn, 1974), or Panamanian gold objects recovered from the cenote at Chichén Itzá.
(Coggins, 1984). Connecting takes small Central American towns and makes them part of a large and extensive chain.

Authority gives us a way of talking about Central American social life that introduces differences recognizable in material ways without subsuming them under political hierarchies. It allows us to notice that in most of the region, some people have greater wealth, and may have objects of distinctive materials, quality, and even form. But it makes us ask what kinds of authority people had, which opens the door to including people whose authority was based on connections with the sacred, as well as those whose authority was based on kinship, not just authority based on coercive or persuasive power. It is a way to ask the question whether, where, and when we see violence as a basis for claims of authority. It makes it possible to talk about the authority of women and men, and the relative authority of elders and juniors. An Ulúa marble vase is an object of authority; so are the carved stone benches of Nicaragua and Costa Rica; so also are the polychrome cylinders of Maya noble houses. In each case, the nature of authority and the degree to which it is concentrated in a few hands needs to be established.

Spirituality captures the domain we normally talk about as “ritual.” Spirituality allows us to talk about the broader principles that in many parts of Central America probably organized dwelling, connecting, and authority: the role of landscape, distance, and certain materials as charged with extraordinary power, the place in existence of ancestors and supernatural beings. It makes sense of the abundance of products of skilled craft production, such as ceramic figurines and musical instruments, that were primarily of use in ceremonies, including ceremonies of dwelling.

When and Where Do We See Dwelling, Connecting, Authority and Spirituality?

Space precludes providing an in-depth discussion of the historical development of pre-Hispanic Central America. The articles that follow instead look at specific locales where we are especially well-situated to see evidence of Central American social networks, in the vivid and engaging objects left behind. Most of the examples date to what in Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras are called the Classic (AD 250–850/950) and Postclassic (AD 850/950–1521) periods, and in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama either Periods V (AD 500–1000) and VI (AD 1000–1500), or the Early (AD 500–800), Middle (AD 800–1350), and Late (AD 1350–ca. 1530) Polychrome periods.

The actual evidence for human occupation of the landscape in Central America is much earlier (Neff et al., 2006). There are traces of some early mobile peoples in different sites dating by 9000 BC, and throughout the region, mobile foragers left their mark between 9000 and 2000 BC, altering the landscape by selectively encouraging plants they preferred, and altering the plants by their selection of variants for cultivation. These early people laid the groundwork for their descendants to congregate in the first villages we can detect. Before 1500 BC, from Guatemala to Panama, at least some villages
invested time, energy, and skill in making fired-clay containers, greatly increasing the visibility of sites for archaeologists. Nonetheless, such early sites remain underrepresented. Some are deeply buried by active tropical rivers. Others lie beneath later settlements, evidence of the ability of Central American peoples to maintain themselves in place over long periods of time. Many have probably been lost to alterations of the landscape, as rivers changed their courses, as settlements located on ridges and terraces erode downslope, and as modern occupants plow, bulldoze, and pave over the evidence of the lives of earlier residents.

The greater visibility of more recent periods also owes, at least in part, to the aesthetic preferences of Europeans who began collecting antiquities from Central America at least as early as the 18th century. Multicolored painted pottery, stone sculpture recognizably representing human and animal subjects, and human effigies in molded and painted clay attracted the attention of collectors and fueled site destruction in many Central American countries.

While the ancestral peoples of Central America prized many different materials, including jade, marble, and a variety of metal alloys, for their rarest durable goods, recovery of gold-alloy objects, primarily from graves in Panama and Costa Rica, inspired particular enthusiasm among collectors. In early archaeological accounts, many sites are described simply as cemeteries, because graves were the contexts recognized by the collectors from which came complete objects.

Except in the Maya zone extending from Guatemala to western Honduras and El Salvador, residential buildings were usually much less visible and more slowly recognized by early antiquarians and later archaeologists. When archaeologists turned to the new approach of settlement survey in the 1950s, they realized that the discarded trash of Central America settlements was often very visible, both around traditional sites of collecting from burials, and in other places on the landscape. Often the architecture of Central American villages employed clay and poles as the main construction materials. When stone was used, it might be carefully selected river cobbles, with little or no modification.

The features created in the Central American architectural tradition could be impressive: massive pavements, roads and paths that extend for miles, and high platforms with ramps or stairs, at times clearly oriented to features on the landscape or points seasonally marked by sunrise and sunset. While written texts are known only from sites in the Maya zone, the visual arts of other areas employ rich symbolic “languages” that link together humans, non-human animals, landscape features, and supernatural forces, including ancestors.

As research continues in each country, what becomes increasingly clear is how extensive Central American networks actually were. Outstanding works of art force us to acknowledge that links existed from the Nicoya peninsula of Costa Rica to the Ulúa Valley in Honduras, and from there to Belize and Guatemala. The dazzling objects in collections established by archaeologists and museums are making visible what we should have known all along: between the apparently small, apparently isolated villages of Central America there existed enduring ties composed of social relations, respect for beliefs about the
place of humans in the cosmos, and shared appreciation for items of beauty and the materials from which they could be made.

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