

PRE-COLUMBIAN CULTURES

In America

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The most ancient discoveries made in America pertaining to ceramics date back to 2000 B.C., although others fix this limit to 1500 B.C.

The most accepted theory by historians considers that the most ancient people found in prehistoric America proceed from Asia, and there are no remainders found of any civilization earlier than the Neolithic.

These cultures maintained during 3000 years a geographic isolation till the Spanish conquest, so that it allowed them to develop a native art free from external influence which could have changed the development of their plastic and architectonic activities.

The civilizations prior to the Discovery made in 1492 can be located all along the American continent, from the south-west of the United States, Central America and the long fringe of the Andes, Central America and South America.

The natives never knew the potter's wheel nor did they use glazes, but they produced beautiful works in form and design. In many places and amidst Native Americans of the south-west of North America ceramic craftsmanship has been maintained up to actual times.

One usually connects Pre-Columbian art from the regions of Mexico and Central America to the two important civilizations which the Spaniards found flourishing in the XVI Century, the Aztec and the Mayan, but nevertheless one can follow the evolution that goes back to the second millennium before Christ, which compared chronologically to the Egyptian and Mesopotamic cultures, American art can be qualified as relatively young.

In Central America the Mayas, till the X Century of our era used bright pigments to decorate their ceramic, and you can see hieroglyphics, animals and the ceremonial life of the community reflected in their work. They also produced pots of an orange colour with fine walls and well fired, while the elder members drank pulque. The most valued of the Aztec earthenware was a luxury product which was copiously ornamented.

The flourishing Mayan art takes place during the VII and VIII Centuries, and outstands in architecture in the staired pyramids which were used as religious buildings.

The great Mayan culture contrasts with the cruelty of their social and religious customs. Magnificent sculptors left the stela of Copan and Quirigua and reliefs of the Cross in Palenque and the Ball-play in Chichen-Itza.

The Aztecs founded in 1325 in Mexican territory the great Tenochtitlan (today the city of Mexico), site of the Empire. Their architectonic and sculptural work is found in the ancient Tenochtitlan, a city founded by the Toltecs, where you can find the ruins of the most important pyramids, very ornamented with reliefs and carvings, and the statue of the goddess Coatlicue, three meters high, masterpiece of their art together with the famous Calendar of the Sun.

The Toltecs, who built the sacred city (A.D.600-900) of Teotihuacan, a harmonic and spiritual place, hand down exceptional sculptures, wall paintings and a perfect ceramic which distinguishes them, as well as the city of Tula around the VIII Century, which was destroyed in 1064, and marks the end of the Toltec Empire.

In the Preclassic era (1500 B.C. - A.D.200) Tlatilco shows a valuable archeological place because in

1947 a number of small statues made in clay in many tombs which bear no mythological connotation. The Olmecas have monumental sculptures, great altars as the one in La Venta, and basalt heads which are characteristic of this community, with the representation of a language in hieroglyphics replete with symbols, where some investigators believe is the origin of the Teotihuacan culture. Already in the Classic period, the Tonoteca since A.D.1200 have shown their plastic achievements which overcome the spectator by the great expressive force of their smiling masks made in ceramic, which is their most singular legacy.

The Huastecas, neighbours of the former, had good sculptors. One can point out the magnificent stone sculpture that represents the figure of a young god, Quetzalcoatl.

The Zapotecas stand out for their architecture in their legacy of Monte Alban, known as the city of the pyramids, which were used not as burial places but to support the sanctuary which was located in the height of the building made by successive terraces of 7 to 13 stories.

The Mixtecas instead were brilliant in minor arts, such as painting in manuscripts and murals, in jewelry and ceramics.

Although the art of the Andes is basically architectonic, we must point out the beautiful ceramic which show lovely heads made in terracota and curious anthropological vessels which had great diffusion, the same as the textile art which produced very rich and varied cloths, making use of the quality offered by the wool of the vicuña and the llama, animals that inhabit those heights.

In South America the Mochica people from the north of the Andes created jars which had the shape of human heads. Although they used molds to form the heads, each one was finished individually and had the appearance of a portrait. Some of these jars show people with recognizable illness. The Mochicas also made flutes, trumpets, horns and other musical instruments, always made in ceramic, as well as whistling jars which were often made in the shape of birds.

The Nazca culture, south of the Andes, contemporary to the Mochica culture, was known for its painted earthenware, intensely decorated, usually with the use of five different colours.

The conquest of Mexico by Hernan Cortés in 1519 and the surrender of the Mayas in 1546 will transform the artistic panorama in Central America by combining the European, gothic and renaissance orders with the Pre-Columbian traditions into what later will be called Colonial Art. The regional differences that characterize this colonial art we can summarize in two artistic zones: Central America where the core of the influence of the Aztecan and Mayan civilizations, and the Andean region where the Incan culture ruled before the Discovery.

In the XVIII Century in Mexico the ornamentation and the baroque presence are completely developed by the work of the architect Lorenzo Rodriguez, author of the chapel Del Sagrario in the Cathedral of Puebla. This was the region which kept the most important production of ceramic in those times, something which made the most of by the colonial constructors, who took advantages of the style using ceramic ornaments on the front of their buildings, as we see in La Casa de Alfeñique, a representative example of this kind of ornamentation.

The Nazca culture, (100 B.C. - A.D.700) is a continuation of what we identify as the Paraca culture. The region it occupied is situated on the south coast of Peru, and it holds the same habitat and maintains a great part of that ancient cultural tradition.

Ceramics: the color of the symbols in the Nazca culture plays a leading role in the constitution of the plastic message. The artist has no interest in reproducing scenery, the drawings do not signify by what they describe but for the place they occupy in space. It is a style in which the composition transmits relations between ideas more than between things. This process in the composition is more verbal than visual and is common to several styles in the region of the Andes. In the first stages of this style the themes represented tend to reproduce models of the real world, animals, vegetables, fish and birds, either painted or modeled.

In the late stages instead a mythical iconography develops, in which are shown an ample variety

of masked creatures, half human but with feline qualities. (Donald Proulx, 1991) These beings were called feline or human-fantastic. Seler was the investigator who enumerated the motives, and identified them as devils. According to his point of view the feline figure was a divine provider of food, the feline devil represented the ghosts of the dead, and other figures were the devils of vegetation. Other investigators see in these images metaphorical associations related to rituals of magic (Kubler, 1986)

Pre-Columbian art in Argentina

The ancient cultures that grew in Argentine soil reach us now as a token of what is definitely past. We can only recover them according to the measure of the messages brought to us by their work. This served as an expression to a series of similar people and cultures, little known to us some time ago. Even though they can be used as an inspiring source for contemporary artists, one cannot repeat the creative experience that motivated them in the past. (Rex González)

The archeologist Alberto Rex González divides the indigenous cultures in Argentine territory in different geographic areas which are valid for aspects of the different styles.

- 1 Pampa - Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego
- 2 North-West
- 3 West-Center
- 4 Chaco-Santiagoño
- 5 Central Sierras
- 6 Chaco and Coast

The first, Pampa - Patagonia, presents a low cultural level with small development of techniques and a simple social and political organization. It produced cave paintings, specially in the province of Santa Cruz, that represent guanacos, ñandúes and hunting scenes.

Instead, the North -West of the Argentine reached the highest level between the native tribes of the country, and with its varied natural sources, the density of population and the technological advances, offered greater possibilities of progress, and its artistic expression grew parallel to this situation. Geographically it covers the provinces of Jujuy, Salta, Catamarca and La Rioja. The Diaguitas were the most developed group which inhabited this region. The techniques they used were advanced and the pottery of the highest quality, modelled and painted using up to three colours in different styles.

The other areas are an impoverished variety of the North-Western cultures.

The region of the Central West covers from the center of the province of San Juan up to the province of Mendoza. Here the pottery is grey, and it is painted in one or two colours, it is hardly modelled and is embellished by engraving drawings on the surface.

In the Chaco-Santiagoño region the decoration of the pottery is polichrome, highly developed and modelled with zoomorphic figures.

The Central Sierras pertain to Córdoba and San Luis, where pottery is scarce and has a primitive decoration of engraved marks and painted geometrical drawings. Cave painting is frequent, specially in Cerro Colorado where can be found hundreds in caves and hidden rocks.

In the Coast the principal manner of expression was through pottery, with modelled heads of animals and less frequently, human heads.

Cultures of the North-West of the Argentine

The cultures of the Early Period:

The Tafi culture existed since before the Christian age to the year A.D 600. There are monoliths and carved trails that represent the image of the jaguar, while other works show great superimposed human faces that sometimes combine human characteristics with those of serpents. Together with the simple zoomorphic sculptures we can find others that are more complex where man is combined with felines.

Condorhuasi is one of the most interesting cultures of the north-west of the Argentine and has peculiar unmistakable characteristics.

It covers a large region, from the north of the province of Catamarca to the province of La Rioja, and from the west of Catamarca to Santiago del Estero. It is gifted with pottery types of a great richness of forms and technical resources. Their ceramic has a bright red background on which are drawn geometrical motifs in black surrounded by white colour. This ceramic was produced mostly for burials and rituals. Another more rustic type was decorated with simple designs that were engraved and left unpainted.

The polichrome ceramic represents sitting robust people with painted or tattooed faces. Sometimes the human figure is distorted with projecting bulbs or other variants with fantastic forms of birds or beasts. The faces show a rare zoological mixture of human beings and unreal creatures who have monstrous noses, protruding eyes and fat bodies.

Sometimes on one end they have a human image and in the other end there is an animal one. Or sometimes a human figure is riding on an animal. The mixture of human and animal traits must allude to the forces of nature. These forces are surely related to religious or mythical ideas of which we have lost the significance.

The Candelaria culture has its center to the south-east of the province of Salta, its origin can be situated before the Christian era and it continues to approximately the year

A.D 1000. The importance of the llama for the settlers is reflected in the representations. The technique in pottery achieved great burial vessels with thin walls resistant to damage. Some jars are provided with a "bridge handle", little used to the south of the Andes.

La Ciénaga culture was situated in the provinces of Catamarca and La Rioja, a region which now has desertic moors, but in other times was apt for cultivation and was affected later by changes in the climate.

The rich decoration in the pottery implies a special craftsmanship.

The black or grey-black ceramic was decorated with geometrical incisions that formed rhombus and triangles. The incorporation of new religious ideas and a change in life brought about a new culture, that of the Aguada. In the San Francisco Tradition ceramic pipes with human figures modelled over the vertical and cylindrical part have been found.

The most abundant remains of the Aguada culture are its ceramic vessels. We also find small solid human figures made with yellowish or reddish clay. They are mostly naked images that are characterized by having oblique eyes and complicated hairdressing. The masculine figure predominates, and little emphasis is given to sexual organs. Our knowledge of the Aguada culture derives mostly on the discovery made in tombs preserved in their graveyards. The quantity and quality varied according to the social status of the deceased.

In the decoration, fantastic figures are common, such as the figure of a feline provided with a human head, or the variant where the tail of the feline ends in a monstrous head or where the principal image ends in the elongated figure of a snake.

The decoration and the style of the Aguada reflect a complex symbolism where there are repeated images which had undoubtedly a ceremonial use.

Reaching the Late Period this culture disappeared. The disintegration of the image and the use of its elements as units for decoration seem to evidence that the original figures had lost their significance.

The Santa Maria culture was found to the north of the province of Catamarca and it extended to the Calchaquí valley and to the east it reached the province of Tucuman and the south of Salta.

In pottery the pieces of two or three colours are characteristic, and so are the urns used to bury infants and children.

It was a brave people that confronted the Spaniards to defend their liberty.



Ceramic Jar



Earthenware



Ceramic Jar



Ceramic Jar



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