

Pre-Columbian Art

Esther Pasztory



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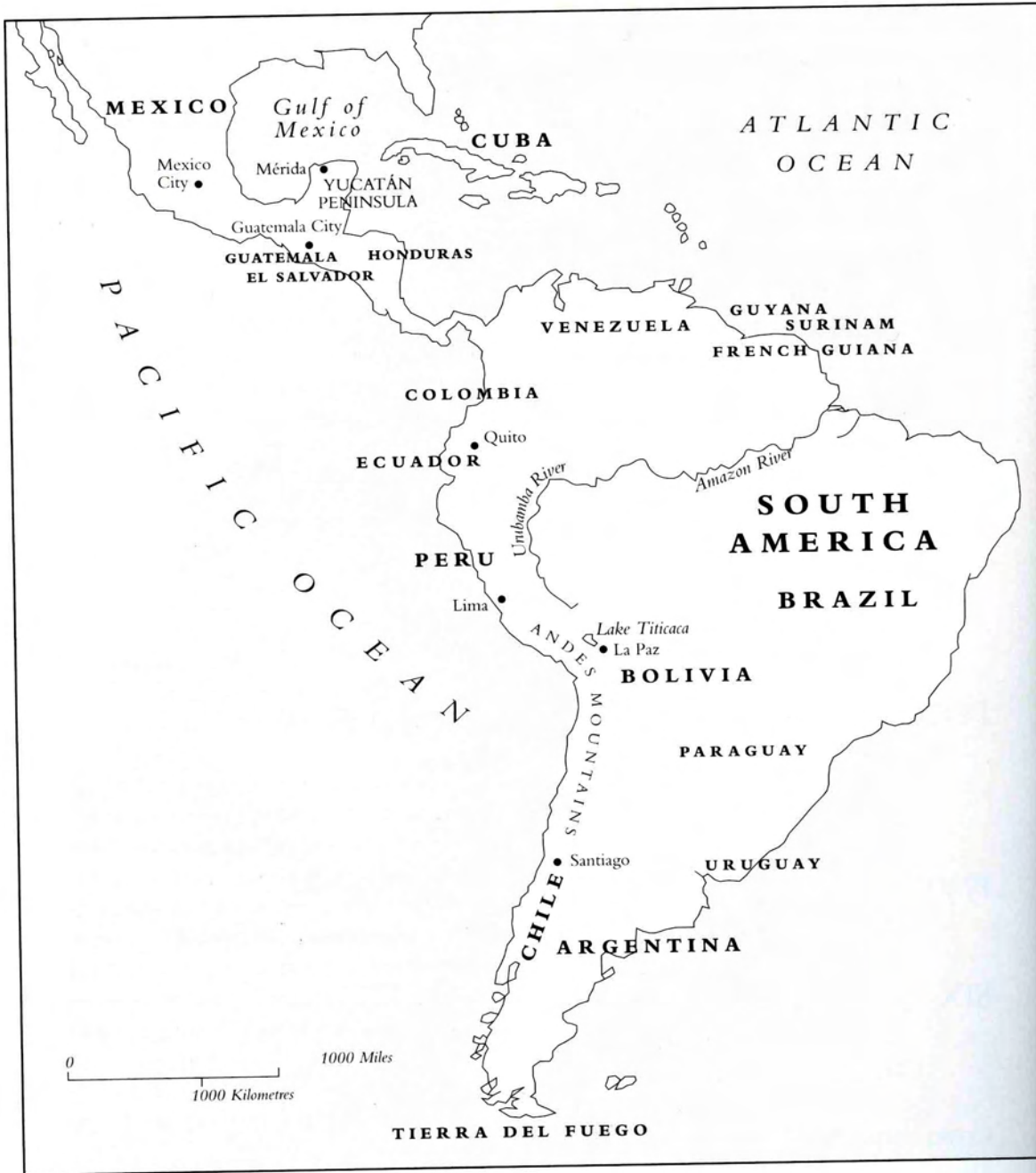
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Frontispiece Chavín-style vessel from Tembladera,
Peru, 400–200 BC, page 98 (detail)

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The Western Discovery of Pre-Columbian Art

Will I have to go like the flowers that perish?
Will nothing remain of my name?
Nothing of my fame here on earth?
At least my flowers, at least my songs!
Earth is the region of the fleeting moment.
Is it also thus in the place
where in some way one lives?
Is there joy there, is there friendship?
Or is it only here on earth
we come to know our faces?

Acoyuan, Aztec poet, c. 1490. Translation in Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969): 81-2

Christopher Columbus was disappointed with the people he met in the Caribbean on his voyage to the Americas: not sophisticated Chinese or Indians but naked “savages” (FIG. 1). He was, however, very impressed by the region’s natural bounty, so suitable for settlement, and by the tantalizing pieces of gold worn by the natives, which seemed to promise future riches. Although Columbus himself never found any great hoard of treasure, succeeding adventurers and conquerors came upon two major civilizations that had huge amounts of gold and silver. The conquest in 1519–21 of the Aztec empire in Mexico by Hernán Cortés and of the Inca empire in Peru by Francisco Pizarro in 1532–5 not only amply fulfilled the dreams of treasure in the New World but also proved what Columbus had failed to discover, the high level of the civilization of its people. Many other searches were undertaken in the Americas, from the deserts

1. Map of Mesoamerica and the Andes.

of the southwestern United States to the tropical forests of the Amazon, but, except in Colombia, no such cultures and riches were ever found again. Neither the Aztec ruler Montezuma II nor the Inca ruler Atahualpa understood that the alien visitors were intent on territorial conquest, and their attempts to appease with gifts of gold only made the Europeans even more determined. Both rulers died in the course of conquest.

Despite the universal appreciation of the work of the native craftsman, almost all the gold and silver taken from the Americas was melted down into bars and eventually used as currency in Europe. Equally, the conquerors' admiration for the temples, palaces, roads, bridges and aqueducts of the Aztec and Inca did not stop them from destroying the buildings of capital cities and erecting colonial structures in their place. Christian churches were built on the ruins of temples. Being men of practical orientation, the conquerors were most impressed with the native works of engineering, evidence that their makers had skill and knowledge superior to those of natives of the Caribbean or elsewhere in the Americas. None of this admiration stopped them from destruction.

The present Western concept of art dates from the eighteenth century. Thus the sixteenth-century conquerors were often impressed by fine craftsmanship, but their real preoccupation was with religion not art. The Aztec and Inca were regarded as heathens and all their images as devils and satanic idols. From the very beginning, those images that were not destroyed in the conquest were smashed by the missionaries. The conquistadors imposed their regime with brutal immediacy: in Mexico in 1536 a native American could be burned at the stake for owning a codex (manuscript) from his own tradition. The Aztec deity Huitzilopochtli was represented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European prints as a horned devil with European features. There seems to have been no interest, either artistic or scientific, in attempting to record the monuments or deities with any accuracy.

Instead, the Spaniards began an extensive process of making a textual record of the cultures they destroyed. With the help of native informants or by reference to such native documents as were available, histories and religious practices were painstakingly reconstructed. The Spaniards wanted to know who these people were, and in particular to understand their religion, a necessary preliminary to conversion. (Where illustrated codices existed, as in Mexico, those were reproduced in the books.) The *Florentine Codex* of Bernardino de Sahagún of Mexico and Bernabé Cobo's *History of the Inca Empire* were two of the largest under-

takings. Their authors were fond of looking for parallels between Christian ritual and mythology and interpreted behavior in terms of acts of the devil. Accordingly they frequently misinterpreted what they saw and omitted to ask questions that would have yielded correct information. Of the many descriptions of religious ritual that have survived, few show any understanding of the deeper aspects of native religious belief. They were written from a European standpoint. Nevertheless, used carefully, they are our most important sources in understanding Pre-Columbian thought and culture. Only a handful of Europeans saw the Aztec and Inca empires as functioning wholes, and then only to witness, within their lifetimes, their destruction, transformation, and relegation to the past.

The conquerors did not know that the Aztec and Inca empires were brief, late manifestations and that a variety of cultures had existed for more than two thousand years before them. Archaeology, begun in earnest only after 1900, was responsible for those discoveries. Archaeology depends a great deal on the types of things that survive. In tropical areas these are mostly of stone, bone, and pottery. In the desert there are also textiles, wooden objects, and sometimes human bodies, perhaps mummified in the dry climate. The distribution of objects is also revealing. Burial sites are sources of information about aspects of social status and the roles of men, women, children, and the elderly. Archaeologists can date objects by inference from the layer of ground from which they are excavated (stratigraphy) and by absolute measurements such as carbon-14 dating. Although they can reconstruct the overall structure of a culture remarkably well, the details of religious ritual, myth or poetry will always elude them. Wherever textual information from eye-witnesses is missing, the story has to be pieced together from images and artefacts. Art has come to play a crucial role in understanding the Pre-Columbian past, but that process raises questions. How can we interpret the art of another place and another era? Are the rituals depicted real or imaginary? Do the works of art merely reflect the cultures that generated them or did they actively help to shape them? As their overt content often eludes us, what meaning is to be found in the underlying content of their structures and forms?

In eighteenth-century European philosophy, religious issues ceased to occupy center stage and as a result art was elevated to a higher role. The term "esthetics" was coined in 1750; the philosopher Immanuel Kant gave esthetics equal status with cognitive reason and ethics. "Divinity" was now found in the creative genius of the artist and his art. Looking at art as a category of universal



2. JEAN FREDERICK DE WALDECK
The Beau Relief, 1832. Painting. Newberry Library, Chicago.

This relief, formerly located in the Maya city of Palenque, was destroyed soon after Waldeck visited the site. It epitomizes the Maya concept of beauty in art, which apparently looked to Waldeck like Neo-Classical European art. Although Waldeck's interpretation is incorrect in detail, his painting captures the spirit of Maya art.

existence and making judgments about the beautiful or the awesome, allowed for the reclassification of formerly heathen idols and devils as works of art capable of appreciation on esthetic grounds, irrespective of their religious content. Thus it became possible to valorize the arts of non-Western peoples, and indeed in the eighteenth century exotic arts, from Chinese to Maori, enjoyed a great vogue among Europeans.

It was in this new atmosphere that in 1790 an enlightened Mexican cleric saved from destruction three statues that had come to light near the cathedral of Mexico City. One of these was the famous Aztec Calendar Stone, which has been exhibited ever since. Another, the colossal statue of the goddess Coatlicue (meaning Serpent Skirt in Nahuatl), was reburied for almost another hundred years for fear of inspiring a revival of idolatry. The third was the Stone of Tizoc. These finds encouraged the practice of collecting native artefacts in Mexico.

In Europe ruins became a source of fascination with the excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the 1760s and Napoleon's military and scientific adventure in Egypt at the end of the century. There was a rush to visit, draw, and bring back fragments from the great ancient civilizations. In the New World the emphasis was on the Maya ruins recently surveyed by government agencies. Three early travelers are important in illustrating the differing interests of Europeans.

The remarkably long-lived Jean Frederick de Waldeck (1766-1876) was an artist who claimed to have studied with David and who decided to make his fortune by drawing and publishing the arts of the recently discovered Maya site of Palenque (FIG. 2). His drawings have always been scorned for being inaccurate, which they certainly are. But Waldeck's importance lies in the fact that as an artist of Neo-Classical sensibility he found Maya art harmonious with European ideals of art. In his eyes Maya art was "beautiful" and "sublime." Although Waldeck had little influence on his own time, he can now be recognized as one of the major figures in the categorization of Pre-Columbian art as "art."

John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood were the most successful travelers in search of ruins in Maya country. They recorded their experiences in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (2 vols, 1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (2 vols, 1843), illustrated by Catherwood's drawings. Although these are often picturesque and romantic in style, the monuments are correctly drawn (FIG. 3). He used a camera lucida (a drawing device by which the image of an object is made by reflection to look as if projected on the paper) to help him



3. FREDERICK CATHERWOOD
Drawing of a Copán stela
with skull altar in the front.

Though truer to life than Waldeck's painting, Catherwood's work, with its menacing jungle setting for the Copán sculptures, creates an exaggerated impression of their fearsomeness.

achieve accuracy. Stephens's text is a model of scientific rigor. He concluded that the builders of the monuments were neither the Egyptians nor the Lost Tribes of Israel but the ancestors of the contemporary Maya. During the second half of the nineteenth century explorers with cameras – Claude-Joseph-Désiré Charnay, Teobert Maler, Alfred P. Maudslay – documented the ruins and inscriptions precisely. Their works formed the rudiments of modern scientific exploration.

Andean exploration proceeded much more slowly. The great site of Machu Picchu was discovered only in 1911 by Hiram Bingham of Yale University. Some of the most fascinating architectural ruins in the eastern slope of the Andes, for example Pajatén, had to wait until the 1950s to be discovered,

photographed, and published by explorers such as Gene Savoy. These sites are still remote and difficult of access.

In terms of its influence on Western art, Pre-Columbian art never had a single great moment equivalent to the “discovery” of African art around 1905. Generally, it was current European styles that determined which aspects of Pre-Columbian art were picked up. The more realistic and “classical”-looking styles, such as those of the Maya and the Moche, came to be appreciated earliest and remain popular favorites. The French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), who was born in and spent a part of his childhood in Peru, made self-portrait jugs in imitation of Moche portrait vessels.

The more angular and stylized traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes were of interest to Modernist artists during the first half of the twentieth century. The British sculptor Henry Moore (1898–1986) and the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) were directly inspired by Mesoamerican art and archi-



4. HENRY MOORE
Reclining Figure, 1934.
Henry Moore Foundation.

Henry Moore liked Mexican sculpture because of its “truth to the material,” “power,” and variety.

ecture. Moore imitated the *chac mool* sculptures (reclining figures used as ritual furniture or altars; FIG. 4) and Wright was inspired by the mosaic architectural decor of the Yucatán.

Recently, the prominence of Minimalism and Conceptual art has brought the art of the Andes to the artistic fore. Though they lack many of the big anthropomorphic monuments of Mesoamerica, the Andes have a vast road system and the famous mysterious lines made on the surface of the desert of the Nazca plateau, many of which are visible only from airplanes. Fascination with them is coincident with the “earth art” of artists such as Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson and Conceptual artists such as Barry Le Va and Sol La Witt. Against this background, Westerners can now appreciate Andean art not simply as “beautiful” but as concept and system. New movements in Western art are likely to bring our attention to hitherto neglected aspects of Pre-Columbian art.

The growth in appreciation of Pre-Columbian art has regrettably been accompanied by an increase in looting. In the beginning, looters were drawn to gold and silver because of the preciousness of the material alone. Pre-Columbian works were being looted for the art market, particularly favorite styles such as Maya pottery or Andean north coast ceramics. Looting brings to light many fantastic objects but it destroys forever their archaeological context and what may be learnt of their origin and significance. Since the nineteenth century the confusion of the historical record has been compounded further by the creation of fakes. Some of the illustrations in this book depict objects the precise origin of which has been lost in the course of changes of hands between discoverers, museums, and private collectors.





Mesoamerica and the Andes

There were two major foci of civilization in the New World – Mesoamerica and the Andes – and it is their later cultures – respectively the Aztec and Inca – that are best known. Mesoamerica consisted of central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, and western El Salvador. The Andean cultural area essentially covered present-day Peru and western Bolivia. Like the states of Europe in their time, the polities of Mesoamerica and the Andes were interconnected by trade, war and marriage alliances. Although they shared similar social and political ideas and even religious practices, they usually remained separate rather than merging into one large state, and they retained important regional differences. As it happened, the Aztec and the Inca empires both existed at the time of European conquest. The Inca empire, about 3,000 miles (4,828 km) long, was the largest in America.

Mesoamerica and the Andes were in many ways diametrically opposite in art and culture. The major aim of this book will be to describe and compare these two very different cultural traditions within their historical and social context. Interestingly, each area had one important culture whose art “went against the grain” of the tradition of its own area. This raises questions about the nature of “tradition” and how artistic innovation takes place within it.

If you look in any museum or any book on Mesoamerica, or at any site, you will find faces staring at you, people engaged in various activities or enacting mysterious rituals (FIG. 5). Some of the faces look almost like portraits. The Western viewer establishes an immediate bond with these human figures. Mesoamerican architectural sites are inhabited by such sculpted figures.

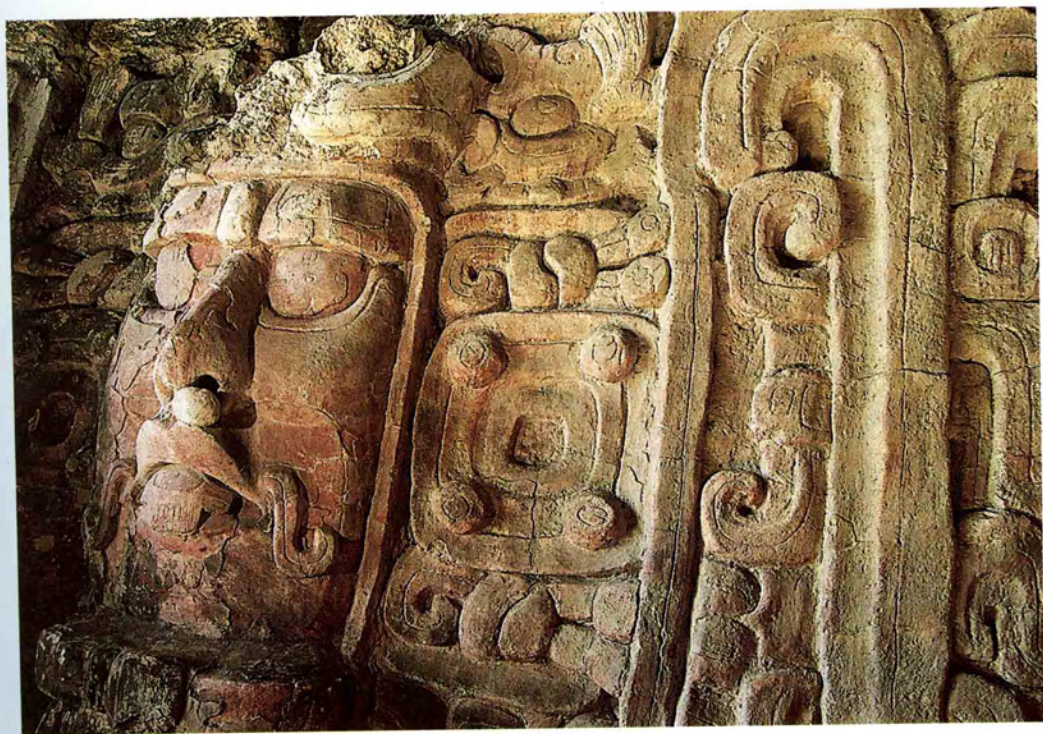
5. Olmec colossal head from La Venta, c. 1000 BC. Basalt, height 9'4" (2.85 m). Museo-Parque La Venta, Mexico.



6. Sicán mask, c. AD 850–1000. Hammered gold, paint, 11½ x 19½" (29.2 x 49.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

By contrast, the architecture of the Andes yields a paucity of human images. Instead, wildly extraordinary, conventionalized, and stylized figures are found on textiles, gold, and pottery (FIG. 6). If there are faces, they are enigmatic and masklike, or actual masks attached to funeral bundles. The art of Mesoamerica seems to deal with the world of people, while the art of the Andes deals with the interrelationships of the cosmos. It is not surprising that the more naturalistic and narrative Mesoamerican arts found favor among Westerners before the more abstract Andean ones.

The architecture reveals other differences. In Mesoamerica most structures were built from a rubble core faced with a retaining wall of stone (FIG. 7). This is mostly how the restored ruins can be seen today. Originally, however, these stones were covered with a smooth, thick layer of plaster and painted all over in one color or even with murals. In some instances deity faces were sculpted out of plaster and added as decoration. Because of the coating of plaster and the color, the structural features of Mesoamerican architecture were not usually visible. Architecture was treated as a form of sculpture or as a decorated stage set. Mesoamerican



builders appear to have been more interested in dramatic appearances than in revealing inner structures.

In stark contrast, Peruvian architecture tended not to use rubble cores. Walls were of solidly constructed masonry, revealing a love of precise joinery and a pleasure in different-sized and colored stones such as are evident in many examples (FIG. 8). Plaster was used, but the stonework was often visible. Andeans appear to have been interested in the essence of materials – whether stone,



7. Maya pyramid at Kohunlich, Mexico, c. AD 800 (detail). Rubble core covered with masonry retaining wall and limestone plaster coating, ornamented with large plaster faces, set on top of a 197' (60 m) hill, and rising another 49' (15 m) above it.

The construction of this building is characteristic of Mesoamerica and suggests a preoccupation with external appearances.

8. Masonry wall at the Inca city of Machu Picchu, Peru. c. AD 1450 (detail). Granite.

Most Andean walls are unornamented solid masonry and not a knife-blade can be inserted between the stones. The stone had symbolic value.





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9. Codex Borgia, from Mexico, 1421–1521 (detail). Mineral and vegetable pigments on animal skin, whole page 10.6 x 10.4" (27 x 26.5 cm). Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome.

A handful of manuscripts were sent back to Europe by Cortés as curiosities in the sixteenth century. A few have survived. This one was owned in the eighteenth century by Cardinal Stefano Borgia and passed down through the family. The scene shows a section of the divinatory calendar. The rain god Tlaloc presides over the seventh week with a stream of water flowing from him. The day signs of the calendar are in sections on the top. A priest probably interpreted good and bad omens from the combinations of the signs for a given day.

yarn or metal – rather than in their external appearance. Although gold was sometimes painted, as in masks, its essence remained trapped inside. Similarly, fine masonry existed under plaster. Andeans appear to have been fascinated by structure and left it visible.

Perhaps the most striking differences between the Andes and Mesoamerica have to do with the manner of recording information. Mesoamericans had books – ritual calendars, histories, tribute lists, maps, and astronomical computations (FIG. 9). These too were based on images, with the addition of glyphs some of which were also derived from images, sometimes of phonetic value. There were many writing systems, but the image was at the basis of most and related quite naturally to the rest of the art. In the Andes there was no writing system based on images. Information was kept on the quipu, a mnemonic device of knotted string (FIG. 10). Information was kept in a decimal mathematical form, which depended on the position, shape, color, and order of the knots on the string. The principle behind the quipu is spatial and involves the visualization of abstract networks. While a Mesoamerican codex can be appreciated visually without knowledge of its meaning, a quipu affords much the same visual experience as a string mop. Perhaps it can be enjoyed as a piece of conceptual art – intellectually, certainly, rather than esthetically.

Such differences are also evident in many aspects of culture. The political systems of the Aztec and Inca especially have been frequently compared. The Inca empire has often been called totalitarian because it was centrally organized, with production and distribution overseen by the state and the lack of a market system. The emphasis appears to have been on efficient organization. The Mesoamerican Aztec empire, on the other hand, was a tribute empire in which the central power coerced goods from conquered territories at the cost of constant war. Markets and money formed the bases of exchange. Dramatic interaction seems to have been valued more than efficiency.

Swimming against the tide in the Andes were the Moche, who developed an art with portraits, narrative scenes, and the glorification of conflict that would have sat more comfortably in a Mesoamerican context. Their counterparts in Mesoamerica, Teotihuacan, developed an abstract, impersonal style without a recognized writing system that would have been more at home in the Andes. These two instances indicate that, however powerful a cultural tradition may be, it is possible to strike out in a new direction and to create “experiments in living.”

Despite the differences, Mesoamerica and the Andes share a surprising number of similarities, many as a result of a shared

history. When the large Paleolithic mammals that had been hunted in the Americas died out about 8000 BC, people turned to smaller animals that could be domesticated and to discovery and cultivation of plant foods. Beans, cotton, gourds, peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, and maize were among the wide variety of foods that were eventually grown for food. The only large animal that could be domesticated was in the Andes – the llama. Too small for a man to ride, it was an excellent animal for carrying goods over long distances. Settled life began about the same time in both areas. By 3000 BC there were permanent settlements and pottery was common. The earliest cultures that erected monumental architecture and created works of art on a large scale also more or less coincided, between about 1500 and 1000 BC. In both areas these early cultures were followed by a period of regional diversity, in which art played a very important role in the first millennium AD. The role of art in society seems to have declined somewhat in the last five hundred years of history before the conquest, whether in type, quality, or quantity, although there were important exceptions. The latest empires, the Aztec and the Inca, did not attain great power until about AD 1450, and it took them less than a hundred years to build and carve the astonishing monuments that are still standing today. Both were empires built on conquest, with great weaknesses in their internal organization that made them easy prey for Europeans. While there is little demonstrable historical connection between the Andes and Mesoamerica, it is striking that in general their development should be so similar. Clearly some ideas were transmitted slowly across the mountains of Central America and Ecuador or by sea-going raft. Nevertheless, in view of the large distance between the two areas, they necessarily developed for the most part quite independently.



10. Inca quipu, c. AD 1500 (detail). Yarn. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología y Historia, Lima.

The Inca quipu worked on a decimal principle, its colored knots being used to record information in a mathematical form. Although the content is often supposed to be confined to economic or demographic data, it has been suggested that histories and poems were recorded as well.