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## Title of Object

Vessel (Jaguar Effigy Jar)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Country:** Costa Rica

**Date of Object:** 1100-1200 CE

**File Created:** 4/20/2016

**Accession Number:** 46.3.6

**Author of File:** Debora Lynch-Rothstein

**Material/Medium:** clay, pigment

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Art of the Americas

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 6/2/2016

**Culture:** Guanacaste

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## Tour Topics

Group 1 tour, Animals/birds, ancient culture, Mesoamerican, ceramics, food and drink, funerary/afterlife, gods/goddesses, mythology, nature, power, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take a moment to look at this vessel from a few different angles. What do you see that's interesting?
2. Now that we've identified a jaguar on this vessel, how does the artist depict the features of this wild cat on the surface of this vessel? What are some of the details that seem realistic and which are more abstract?
3. After talking about this object, the jaguar and the importance of the jaguar to ancient Mesoamerican cultures, is he a friend or foe and why?
4. If you were to create an effigy for yourself, what animal would you represent and why?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1. Large, clay, jaguar effigy vessels with bold designs in red and black were highly desired in ancient Costa Rica. They've been found in tombs and with other tomb artifacts. These vessels served as containers for liquids or other materials. Effigy vessels also have certain symbolic purposes which were considered magical, religious, and/or ceremonial.
2. This depiction of the jaguar is one of a sun-devouring feline god. The jaguar was the god of the underworld in Mesoamerican mythology and is symbolic of darkness and the night sun. It rules over the celestial forces of day and night.
3. It's believed that objects like this, depicting fierce predators, transferred their strength to the deceased. The placement of the jaguar markings and imagery on this vessel, suggests that the vessel represents a person and his jaguar alter ego.
4. This tripod ceramic vessel is handmade without a wheel and probably low fired, outdoors. Handles and legs were added. The handles represent the jaguar's front legs while the two front pot legs represent its back legs. The third pot leg is the tail of the jaguar. The legs of these vessels are usually hollow, with clay balls inserted to make them rattle. Notice the slits where the balls would have been enclosed. The vessel's red and black designs not only depict the designs of a jaguar coat but also depict celestial elements such as the sun and stars.
5. There are design elements and imagery on this vessel that are difficult to identify; motif and glyphs around the top, various horizontal and stepped lines, and profile like faces on the body. There was a pre-contact Mexican influence on Costa Rica imagery on ceramics and it changes from 1000-1250 CE. While it's difficult to identify some of the designs on this vessel, other vessels of the time and place had similar images and they were; identified to be images of a feathered serpent and profile head like designs that could be jaguars. These jaguar silhouettes often represented stars that were revealed and signaled approaching darkness.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. The representation of jaguars in Mesoamerican cultures has a long history with iconographic examples dating back to at least 900-300 BCE. Technically Costa Rica is not considered Mesoamerica, it is considered by some researchers that to be "on the frontier or peripheral". The Guanacaste-Nicoya art/artifacts share many traits with Mesoamerican art; including polychrome ceramics.
2. For the ancient Mesoamerican cultures who resided in the tropical jungles, the jaguar was well known and became incorporated into their lives. The jaguar's formidable size, reputation as a predator, and its evolved capacities to survive in the jungle, made it an animal that was revered and incorporated into their mythology. It was seen as an embodiment of aggression, strength, and power.
3. The pre-contact people of Costa Rica living in the Guanacaste-Nicoya area (NW Costa Rica) are known as an "archaeological culture," meaning that we know of the culture from archaeological remains, such as the jaguar effigy jar, so the vessel is currently labeled to be from the Guanacaste culture. However, the Chorotega people (also known as the Matambú) are descendants of the archaeological Guanacaste culture and continue to live in the Guanacaste-Nicoya area today. They carry on the tradition of making polychrome ceramics. Chorotegas translates to "The Fleeing People", who fled to Costa Rica in 500 CE

from S Mexico to escape slavery. They were thought to be related to the Maya people. Parts of their Mexican (Mayan) culture is evident in their language and rituals, including human sacrifices. Integration of the jaguar into the sacred and secular realms of the Maya is evident in archaeological records. For the Maya, day time and night time represented two different worlds. The living and the earth are associated with the day. The spirit world and the ancestors are associated with the night. The jaguar is said to possess the transient ability of moving between worlds because of its comfort both in the trees and water, the ability to hunt as well at night as the day, and the habit of sleeping in caves, places often associated with deceased ancestors. As the jaguar is at home in the night time, the jaguar is believed to be part of the underworld. The Maya believed that at death, their ancestors entered the underworld.

6. All major Mesoamerican cultures prominently featured a jaguar god, and for many the jaguar was an important part of shamanism. During trances Costa Rican shamans are believed to symbolically transform themselves into jaguars in order to move between natural and supernatural realms. From a MFA Boston's jaguar effigy jar label: "Pear-shaped pottery vessel portraying a shaman transformed into his/her jaguar alter ego during a visionary quest. The fierce spirit erupts from the jar, jutting its feline head out through a dark rayed circle, with gaping mouth and teeth bared ready to attack. Small pellets inside the hollow front legs produce a rattling sound when the vessel is moved, recalling the low grumble of the jaguar as it stalks its prey. The shaman's human form is conveyed by the jaguar's vertical attack pose which mimics that of the trance-seeker's conventional position seated on a low stool and with hands resting on the knees."

7. The jaguar pelt was also associated with the ruling Mayan class as a symbol of their power and authority. It was also associated with warriors and hunters.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Jaguar effigy jars are a classic form of ancient Costa Rican art. Shaped into the representation of a sun-devouring feline god, the vessel is covered with colorful painted designs that refer not only to the jaguar, but also to celestial elements such as the sun and stars. The legs of these jars were usually hollow, with clay balls inserted to make them rattle.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1. A comparison of Iconography from NW Costa Rica & Central Mexico, Amy Schott-UW-LAC-Journal of Undergraduate research X11 (2009)
2. Jade in Ancient Costa Rica, Mark Miller Graham
3. Brooklyn Museum, jaguar effigy vessel:  
[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/61727/Jaguar\\_Effigy\\_Vessel](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/61727/Jaguar_Effigy_Vessel)  
and MFA Boston: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/jaguar-effigy-vessel-454155>
4. Wikipedia: Jaguars-mesoamerica, Indigenous Peoples of Costa Rica