

Feasting with the Gods:

Art and Ceremony in Ancient Mesoamerica
and the Central Andes

DECEMBER 11, 2003 – JULY 19, 2004



SAM

seattle art museum

Feasting with the Gods: *Art and Ceremony in Ancient Mesoamerica and the Central Andes*

Ritual and celebratory feasting, whether on an intimate scale within the family, shared among a privileged elite, or a grand event attended by hundreds, is recognized as one of the most universal and enduring of human behaviors. In the New World, although food is principally sustenance for mortals, certain edibles were also used as gifts for ancestors and deities, and as markers of important supernatural and historic events. Belief in an afterlife occasioned rituals in which food was provided to the deceased as a means of connecting ancestors to their loved ones and keeping their spirits contented—ritual acts that continue today.

Among the elite, celebrations might include the ceremonial drinking of chocolate or beer, elaborate regalia, blood sacrifice, and the staging of dramatic enactments of mythic events. For everyone, regardless of his or her status, honorific feasting was directed toward the principal gods and goddesses associated with the earth, sky, sun, rain, water, and lightning—all primal forces for a fertile earth. Maize, manioc, potatoes, beans, squash, tomatoes, peanuts, avocados and *cacao* (chocolate) are New World staples that were domesticated as early as 3500 B.C. Large-scale exploitation of plant resources was a significant factor in the consolidation of power and authority by some of the civilizations of ancient Mexico, Central and South America.



This exhibition, drawn from the permanent collection of the Seattle Art Museum and from the distinguished collection of Assen and Christine Nicolov, presents an array of implements used in feasting rituals of the highest-ranking elite as well as ordinary folk. Painted and sculpted images of revelers, musicians, and ritualists give us an additional glimpse of their world. Representations of gods and ancestors, most often the subjects of ritual devotion, are ever-present reminders that rituals and ceremonies are transformative experiences that seek to temporarily blur the boundaries between the living and the dead, between rulers and deities, and between supernatural events and historic happenings.



The Aztecs and Incas encountered by the Spanish in the sixteenth century were inheritors of philosophies and technologies of many cultures that came before them. Some had fully developed written languages and rich artistic iconographies (symbols and images) that have survived in architecture, painting and sculptures. Tragically, Spanish conquerors destroyed many books, textual records and artworks containing historical and mythological information. Important archaeological sites were plundered as well. Beginning in the nineteenth century, scholars, archeologists and epigraphers (specialists who decipher glyphs) set out to “crack the code” of New World hieroglyphics, just as Egyptologists were doing. Subsequent scholarship in the last fifty years has yielded important breakthroughs. It is from the careful reading of texts and the analysis of images that indications are gleaned of Mesoamerican and Andean ritual and ceremonies involving feasting and food offerings.

Ancient cultures of the **West Mexico** states of Nayarit, Colima and Jalisco evolved from 300 B.C. to A.D. 200. Ritual feasts were held related to the seasons, deities, and rites for their ancestors. Burying their dead in tombs

dug in shafts below the ground, they made offerings of food and detailed ceramic sculptures—in the forms of houses, figures holding food and beverage containers, replicas of lively musicians and dancers, and life-like animals—ev-

everything to ensure the deceased's comfort in the afterlife. These tombs and their bountiful contents are indicators of a strong belief in life after death, the desire to commemorate family lineages, and a fundamental acknowledgement that all life forms are renewable.



2

The **Olmec** civilization flourished and developed from approximately 1500 B.C. to 600 B.C. in the swampy lowlands of the Gulf Coast, in what are now the Mexican states of Tabasco and Veracruz. Notable elements seen in later Mesoamerican cultures—including a calendrical system, pyramid building, portraiture, penitential blood sacrifice, and the fabrication of obsidian mirrors—are most likely of Olmec origin. Mysterious symbols etched on the surfaces of their sculptures may refer to Olmec cosmology.

Implements and jewelry made from precious blue-green jade, traded from far



3

away, were used by the hereditary elite in life and ritually positioned in their tombs at burial.

The magnificent city of **Teotihuacan**, northeast of present-day Mexico City, prospered for nearly six hundred years (1–700), and was resplendent with its large expanses of public architecture, adorned with imposing sculpture and richly colored murals. Painted ceramic vessels, ceramic censers, small-scale ceramic figurines in lively poses, as well as stone masks and musical instruments, all attest to a society where ritual played a key role. It is thought that religious beliefs and political values went hand-in-hand and that a collective of civic officers and priests ruled together, enacting rituals of warfare and sacrifice in honor of an earth goddess and a storm god. Mural paintings at Teotihuacan celebrate the fertile bounty of nature, replicating a lush Garden of Eden.

Maya architecture, painting, sculpture, and ornament are replete with images of humans and supernaturals engaged in ritual behaviors. The elaborate and fascinating pictorial iconography of Maya cultures, that reached their florescence in parts of Mexico and Central America between the years 250 to 900, has long engaged scholars. Besides building large urban centers connected to one another by roads, the Maya perfected an elaborate writing system, recorded astronomical observations, and developed calendars to chart the passage of time, using lunar and solar cycles and other perceivable natural phenomena as reckoning.

Religious ritual seems to have been the visible foundation of a worldview that centered on



powerful Maya rulers. Exquisitely painted ceramic vases that were found in burials depict Maya rulers in the company of gods or in the guises of gods, acting out historical and mythological events or occupied with the courtly arts of writing and painting. These densely organized “ceramic canvases” suggest that ritual behaviors can suspend—if only temporarily—the boundary between the mortal and supernatural worlds.



The lives of the elite, as well as those of commoners, were defined by the need to recount their own histories, maintain balance with the supernatural sphere, and properly prepare the dead for transition to an afterlife.

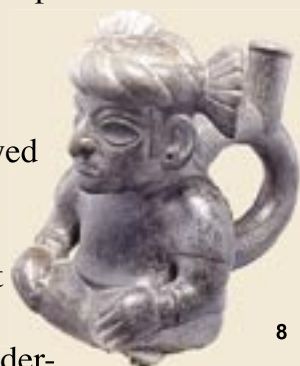
The center of **Aztec** culture, Tenochtitlán, in the heart of what is now Mexico City, was a sophisticated hub of towering administrative and ceremonial structures, monumental sculpture, markets, and living quarters for a population of approximately sixty thousand people. When the “Mexica” (as the Aztecs called themselves) migrated from the north in the middle of the fourteenth century, they brought with them their own cult gods—most prominently the sun deity Huitzilopochtli, for whom ritual sacrifices were extracted—and linked these deities to Tlaloc, a deeply revered and ancient god of agriculture and war.



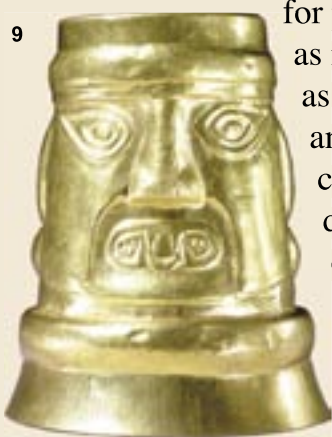
Sculptures of priests in the service of the gods, dressed in ritual garments, were placed in shrines used for prayer and sacrificial offerings in order to maintain balance and harmony.

On the north coast of Peru, just south of the equator, the **Moché** people developed their unique culture during the years roughly spanning 50 to 800. Images of fish and sea life occur frequently—as realistic representations, as mythic monsters, and as narrative elements. Effigies of edible food were placed in burials for the nourishment of the dead. The most prestigious ceramic vessel form was the stirrup-spout vessel that embodied human and animal features. A more rare example is the *florero*, or flaring bowl shape, with fluidly painted scenes—realistic or anthropomorphized—decorating its broad rim.

In pre-Hispanic Peru, acts of generosity and reciprocity played a central role in daily life. Due to the importance of serving food and drink as a component in both political and religious activities, artists devoted considerable time and effort to the production of vessels. *Keros*, cylindrical cups that are wider at the rim, were used to consume *chicha*, or maize beer. Made of wood, terracotta, silver and gold—the choice of medium corresponding to the social rank of the user—these ritual drinking vessels were essential in the maintenance of social and political relations in the Andes region. While there continued to be a need for *keros* in the colonial period, the decorative form changed from geometric patterning to pictorial representations, featuring narrative depictions of life and ritual.



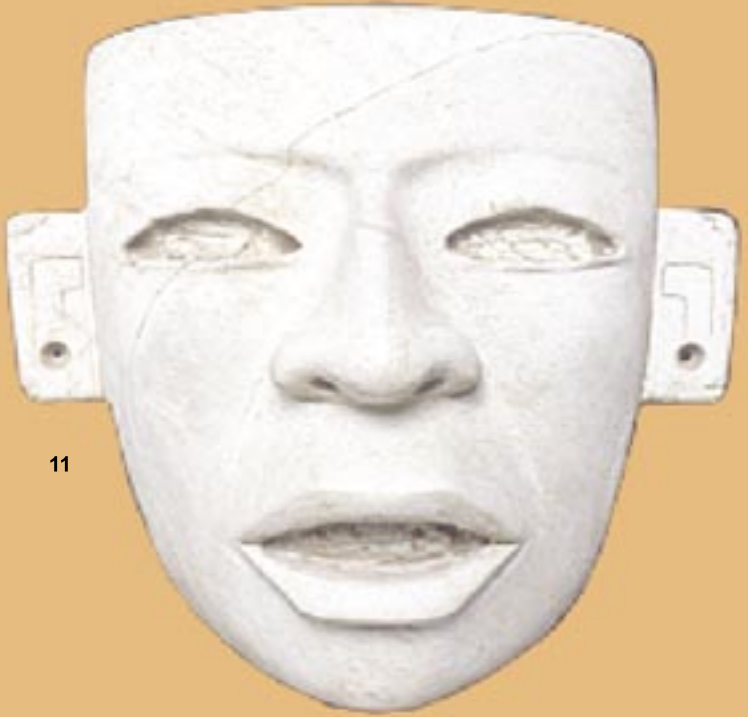
The **Chimu** (ca. 1000–1400) and the **Inca** (1450–1532), like many ancient Peruvian cultures, complemented their belief in reciprocal feasting by including pairs of eating and drinking vessels in their burials for celebratory use by the deceased. The large Chimu gold beaker was most likely used in ritual drinking of *chicha* throughout the lives of prominent individuals and in funerary rituals before interment with the deceased. The ancient Peruvians obtained gold primarily from river deposits, and worked the precious metal into creations



for personal adornment, such as nose and ear ornaments, as well as ritual beakers and rattles. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish melted down thousands of pounds of the gold they confiscated in the Americas, in order to finance continued exploration and expansion for the Spanish crown.

Although there is much of the ancient cultures that will never be known, current research conducted with international collaboration promises to uncover new keys to understanding the art and culture of these complex societies, and to illuminate the relationships they have to living communities.





11

- cover** *Cylinder vase*, Maya, probably Naranjo, Guatemala; Late Classic, ca. 600–900; ceramic; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 1 *The Scribe Plate*, Maya, Nakbé Region, Guatemala; Late Classic, ca. 600–900; ceramic; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 2 *Dance group*, Colima, West Mexico; Late Pre-Classic, 300 B.C.–A.D. 200; ceramic; Seattle Art Museum, Gift of John H. Hauberg, 82.167
- 3 *Bowl*, Olmec, Guerrero Region, Mexico; Early Pre-Classic, ca. 1200–900 B.C.; stone; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 4 *Pair of drinking cups*, Maya, probably Naranjo, Guatemala; Late Classic, ca. 600–900; ceramic; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 5 *Scepter of rulership*, Maya; Late Classic, ca. 600–900; slate; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 6 *Figure with rattle*, Maya, Jaina, Mexico; Late Classic, ca. 600–900; ceramic; Seattle Art Museum, Gift of John H. Hauberg, 99.75
- 7 *Priest with Tlaloc effigy*, Aztec, Tenancingo, Mexico; Late Post-Classic, 1400–1521; stone; Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 52.150
- 8 *Stirrup-spout vessel*, Moche, Peru; ca. 200–800 B.C.; ceramic; Seattle Art Museum, Gift of John H. Hauberg, 99.84
- 9 *Gold vessel*, Chimú, Peru; ca. 1000–1400; gold; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 10 *Spoon pendant*, Olmec, Mexico; Middle Pre-Classic, ca. 900–400 B.C.; jade; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov
- 11 *Mask*, Teotihuacan, Mexico; ca. 100–600; stone; Loan from Assen and Christine Nicolov



Pacific Ocean



Pacific Ocean

*Map of MEXICO,
CENTRAL AMERICA, and
SOUTH AMERICA (Central Andes)*