

“Ritual Beauty: Art of the Ancient Americas” aims to provide a better understanding of the aesthetic, social, political, and religious life of the pre-Columbian world in which these exceptional objects were created.



Ritual Beauty:
ART of the
Ancient Americas

THE I. MICHAEL KASSER COLLECTION
CURATED BY JOANNE STUHR

The University of Arizona Museum of Art
December 4, 2008 - February 8, 2009

The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color catalog that documents and contributes new scholarship on the objects in the I. Michael Kasser Collection from eminent experts in the field: Peter T. Furst, Margaret Young Sánchez, and Marta Turok.

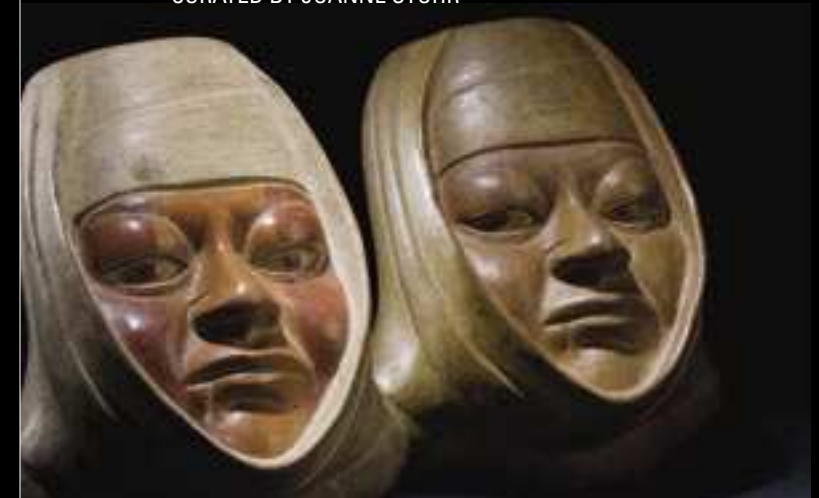
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Featuring approximately 170 extraordinary objects of pre-Columbian origin, *Ritual Beauty: Art of the Ancient Americas* includes ancient vessels, effigy jars, textiles and adornments, clay figures, stone sculptures, and implements fashioned from copper, silver and gold — all offering a window on the aesthetic worlds of Mesoamerica and the Andean region prior to European contact.



Joanne Stuhr, curator of the exhibition and the I. Michael Kasser Collection, writes: “As general, worldwide awareness shifts from the inward view to a greater, global understanding of our interconnectedness and commonality, appreciation for other cultures and the art they produce has expanded. Such awareness has fostered a passion for the art of Latin America, both present and past. Clearly, this includes the ancient arts of the Americas, prior to contact with Europeans in the early 1500s.

The areas known today as Mexico, Central America and South America were, for thousands of years, home to culturally, scientifically, technically, and politically advanced societies. Distinct civilizations, linked by marked cultural traits, thrived at various times and geographical locations. While lacking the innovations of hardened metal tools or the wheel (except in miniature), these cultures were highly sophisticated in most other arenas. Among their many developments we may include intricate hieroglyphic writing used to record history and genealogy, advanced social practices and ceremonies, and an accurate calendar system with 365 days (delete “interlocking”). From a very early date, cultures north to south had a progressive understanding of astronomy, and, later, advanced mathematics including the concept of zero before it was known in Europe. Complex political and religious systems were developed, monumental architecture was constructed and domestic agriculture and horticulture were widespread.

Medical advances included the practice of surgery, again before it was commonly practiced in Europe. At the time of encounter, Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was the largest city in the world.



These cultures were also very advanced in the area of artistic creation. Art was a direct outgrowth of the society in which it was created and reflects the social ideals, worldview, cosmology, practical needs, and natural environment of the people by and for whom it was created. Many of the vessels, effigy jars, textiles, and adornments that remain today were found in tombs as offerings for the dead, for use in the afterlife. However, clay figures, stone sculptures, and implements fashioned from copper, silver and gold have also been found in fields, temples, and dwellings which suggests practical, secular applications as well as ritual and religious use.”

In his essay for the catalog published to accompany the exhibition, anthropologist Peter T. Furst notes that “what we call ‘pre-Columbian art,’ was to its creators— master sculptors, painters, weavers, and architects— not ‘art’ in the western sense but a function of religion, shamanism, ritual, ceremony, protection against personal or collective calamity, and the maintenance of the vital relationship between the living, the deceased, and the ancestors, real and mythological, all the way back to the beginning of time. Although clearly each society had its aesthetics and its sense of what was beautiful and perfect, to make art as decoration or [as] a mark of wealth and status would have been incomprehensible.”

Ritual Beauty: Art of the Ancient Americas “aims to provide a better understanding of the aesthetic, social, political, and religious life of the pre-Columbian world in which these exceptional objects were created. With this exhibition, we have an occasion to study, appreciate, and enjoy the artistic achievements of these rich cultures through their material past.”



“The I. Michael Kasser Collection is remarkable,” says Charles A. Guerin, Executive Director of The University of Arizona Museum of Art, because “the objects... allow us a glimpse into a unique period in the history of the Americas. They celebrate the enormous creativity of unknown artists who could never have imagined their creative efforts displayed in such an environment. The exhibition and the collection itself serve as an inspiration to all collectors, at every level, to persevere in their collecting and to pursue excellence in that endeavor.”

The exhibition also stands as a testament to the eclectic passions of collecting. Says Guerin: “By collecting the outstanding creative achievements of important artists (known or unknown), museums and private collectors are preserving our artistic and cultural heritage. By exhibiting those collections, we are advancing public understanding of the rich cultural and artistic legacy that is part of the human experience. This exhibition accomplishes that objective, and we are most appreciative of the Kassers’ willingness to share this impressive collection with our community.”

