

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 511

ADVANCE FACT SHEET

Exhibition: Between Continents/Between Seas: Precolumbian Art of Costa Rica

Itinerary: National Gallery of Art
December 20, 1981 - May 9, 1982

San Antonio Museum of Art
June 21 - September 12, 1982

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
October 25, 1982 - January 16, 1983

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh
February 28 - May 22, 1983

San Diego Museum of Art
July 4 - September 25, 1983

The Detroit Institute of Arts
November 7, 1983 - January 29, 1984

Concept: The first comprehensive exhibition outside Central America of Precolumbian art in gold, jade, ceramics and stone from Costa Rica, Between Continents/Between Seas will illustrate the development of sculpture and the decorative arts in the area now known as Costa Rica from c. 500 B.C. to the mid-16th century A.D. Within Costa Rica, the meeting of two great continents and proximity of two great seas have produced regions of great botanical, zoological, and topographical variety. Recent archaeological exploration has revealed a matching cultural diversity in each of Costa Rica's three major regions. Results of this exploration have provided a basis for reconstructing the sequence of cultures and styles in each of the regions, allowing for the first time a chronological ordering of the objects from each region's abundant artistic heritage. The cultures and their arts radically changed after contact with Europeans during the mid-16th century.

Lenders: Major institutions lending objects to the exhibition include the Banco Central de Costa Rica, which houses the country's Gold Museum; the Banco Nacional de Costa Rica; the Instituto Nacional de Seguros, which houses the Museum of Jade; and the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica. Private collections contributing to the exhibition are those of Juan and Ligia Dada, Carmen de Gillen, Alfonso Jiménez-Alvarado, Maritza Castro de Laurencich, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Mannil, Daniel and Marjorie Oduber, Dr. Hernán Páez U. and Dr. Carlos Roberto Páez S., María Eugenia de Roy, and Margarita de Ruenes.

(more)

History:

The Europeans who arrived in Costa Rica at the beginning of the 16th century found groups of up to several thousand people living in "chiefdoms" with warrior-priests heading centralized hierarchies. These chiefdoms had highly developed artistic traditions and systems of religious symbols, a result of the status-reinforcing needs of each "warrior-priest" chief and his coterie. Although usually lacking the monumental architecture, writing systems and calendrics of larger, more highly structured civilizations, the chiefdoms did give rise to a succession of richly diverse styles in sculpture and the decorative arts, particularly ceramics and ritual objects and ornaments in gold and jade.

Present scholarship suggests that cultural development in Costa Rica began approximately 1000 B.C., with a few small and sedentary communities producing ceramic vessels. An increase in population and social complexity occurred in later centuries, culminating around the time of Christ in fairly large populations characterized by stratified societies with complex ritual connections to northern trade networks in Mesoamerica, an area in which modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras are located. Sophisticated sculptural ceramics, metates (grinding tables), and elegant jade ornaments were produced. The peoples in the northwest region of Costa Rica continued their links with Mesoamerica to the north, reflecting changes in its iconography and art styles and creating a buffer zone between the more northern cultures and the tropical-forest cultures of South America.

Similarly, peoples in the central and southwestern regions of Costa Rica from approximately 500 to 700 A.D. probably looked southward culturally, and indigenous groups absorbed foreign, southern peoples and traditions, producing changes reflected in architecture and in an increased use of gold and other metals instead of jade.

Contents:

With more than 300 objects in gold, jade, terracotta and volcanic stone dating from c. 500 B.C. to the middle of the 16th century, the exhibition will offer a superb assemblage of ceremonial, utilitarian and decorative works from the Precolumbian cultures and styles of Costa Rica's three major regions. Characterized by simple but elegant design, variety of media and form, and striking use of color, the examples will include:

- bright, richly incised jars and vessels often shaped to suggest animal, bird and human forms or fantastic beings combining features from each
- curved grinding tables (metates) intricately carved from volcanic stone
- elegantly sculpted jade pendants depicting various animals and deities
- ceremonial mace heads, tools and ritual implements carved in stone and jade
- large stone sculptures of warriors and other figures

(more)

- finely wrought gold pendants and other ornaments formed to portray birds, reptiles, insects, animals and supernatural creatures.

The objects will be arranged to illustrate the development of the various arts in Costa Rica's three major regions and to suggest the various influences on their aesthetic evolution.

Organizers: Conceived and coordinated by The Detroit Institute of Arts, the exhibition has been organized by a scientific committee comprised of Julie Jones, Curator of Primitive Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael Kan, Deputy Director and Curator of African, Oceanic and New World Cultures at The Detroit Institute of Arts, and Michael J. Snarskis, Director of Archaeological Research at the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica. Dodge Thompson, Executive Curator at the National Gallery of Art, is exhibition coordinator for the Gallery.

Installation: Designed by Gaillard F. Ravenel and Mark A. Leithauser of the Gallery's Installation and Design Department, with Charles B. Fromm for The Detroit Institute of Arts and in consultation with the scientific committee, the plan for installing the exhibition allows flexibility for effective presentation in the spaces of all participating institutions. At the National Gallery, the exhibition will be installed in the East Building's Concourse-level special exhibitions area.

Catalogue: A fully illustrated catalogue containing 100 color plates, essays by Dr. Snarskis and other experts in the field, and entries for each object by Dr. Snarskis will accompany the exhibition. The catalogue will be published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with The Detroit Institute of Arts. The photographs of the objects were produced especially for the catalogue by Dirk Bakker of The Detroit Institute of Arts' Photographic Department. An illustrated guide to the exhibition prepared by the National Gallery also will be available.

Support: The exhibition is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. It is indemnified by agreement with the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Film: The Detroit Institute of Arts is planning to produce a short documentary film in conjunction with the exhibition. This project will be coordinated by Dennis Bogorad, Executive Film Producer, The Detroit Institute of Arts.

END

October 2, 1981

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs, contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer) or Mary Dyer, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, area code 202, 842-6353.