

The Animals of Central America

Because they lived surrounded by the natural world, early Central Americans were keen observers of the nature around them, especially animals. They greatly admired certain animal characteristics—such as the jaguar’s strength and hunting skill, the ocelot’s speed and cunning, and the eagle’s power—and hoped that they, and especially their leaders, could adopt these valued traits. We see so many ceramics decorated with images of animals because animals were so important to Central American past civilizations. There are many animals in the exhibition. Try and find as many as you can.



Make A Connection: See the giant centipede painted on the ceramic pot in the Greater Coclé region? Have you ever seen a centipede? Share with your family and friends what qualities you think the centipedes and humans share that allow them to survive.



Fun Fact: How do you think the centipede got its name? (Hint: Centi means 100 and pede means foot.) How many legs do you think a centipede actually has? Some centipedes have only 15 pairs of legs. Some have as many as 171 pairs. Centipedes can run fast and steer around obstacles—good skills for escaping attackers and catching food to eat.



Find and Discuss: Can you find the animals listed below? (Hint: Many of these animals are displayed in the icon wall at the entrance of the exhibition.) What is it about these animals that might have made them important for ancient people?

Mammals: jaguar, monkey, ocelot, tapir

Birds: cormorant, harpy eagle, king vulture, spectacled owl

Reptiles and amphibians: crocodile, turtle

Fish and other animals: stingray, centipede



Greater Coclé funerary urn with human centipede design, AD 800–1200
Rio Tabasará, Chiriquí Province, Panama
Pottery, paint
MAI purchase from Philip L. Dade, 1961 (22/9300). Photo by NMAI Move Team, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian



Stingray



Jaguar



Centipede



Cormorant



Ocelot



Monkey



King Vulture



Crocodile



Harpy Eagle



Music, Song, and Dance

Music, song, and dance were important in the lives of people in the past, and they continue to be important for modern civilizations. Listen for music as you walk through the exhibition.



Make A Connection: Do you or someone you know play an Instrument? Is it similar to any instrument you see here? How is it different?



Fun Fact: The white whistles painted in black and red from the Greater Chiriquí region were made between AD 800 and 1500.



Find and Discuss: Find the clay flute. (Hint: You can start your search in the Greater Chiriquí region.) Can you hear it? Follow the sound. What does the flute look like? Does it sound like the animal it represents? Try to imitate the sounds you hear. Can you find more flutes and other musical instruments (such as bells and rattles) in the exhibition? (Hint: One flute is in the shape of a very important animal, the jaguar [a very big cat], and another is in the shape of a king vulture [a huge bird]). Can you find ceramics showing dancers and musicians?



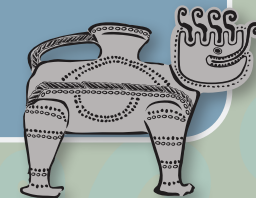
Classic period Maya whistle representing a seated woman, AD 600–900
Quiché Department, Guatemala
Pottery, paint
MAI purchase from Julia M. Rodezno, 1923 (12/3599). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian



Pipil bells, AD 1200–1500
Quemistlan Bell Cave, Río Chamelecón valley, Honduras
Copper
Collected in 1910 by Andrew H. Blackiston; purchased by George Heye in 1914 (4/312, 4/354). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

Key Words:

- **Music:** Sounds made by people singing or playing instruments such as flutes or drums.
- **Sound:** Sounds come from vibrations. These vibrations create sound waves that move through air or water before reaching our ears.
- **Rhythm:** a repeated movement or sound pattern.



When you have come to the end of the exhibition, think about all the things you have seen. What is your favorite object? Why is it your favorite? Describe it to your family and friends. Tell us a story of this favorite object in a 140-character tweet, using the Twitter hashtag #CACeramics

For additional resources about Central American ceramics, like a downloadable coloring book or the online 3-D simulated Base Camp, visit the exhibition's website at latino.si.edu/exhibitions/centralamericarevealed.htm. Make sure to visit the imagiNATIONS Activity Center on the 3rd level of the National Museum of the American Indian for more family fun!

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Cerámica de los Ancestros

CENTRAL AMERICA'S PAST REVEALED

A Gallery Guide for Young People and Their Families



Greater Nicoya ocelot-effigy vessel, AD 1000–1350
Filadelfia, Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica
Pottery, clay slip, paint
MAI exchange with Dr. Jorge A. Lines, 1934 (18/6317). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

Welcome to *Cerámica de los Ancestros: Central America's Past Revealed!*

This guide includes Fun Facts, Make-A-Connection, Find-and-Discuss activities, and Key Words. Use them all to make the most of your and your family's visit to the exhibition.

Join us as we share the lives of the ancestors of Central American peoples. Enjoy!



Smithsonian Institution

Where is Central America?

The exhibition focuses on the seven regions of Central America that represent different Native cultures. These regions are found in the present-day countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. As you go through the exhibition you will explore different Central American environments. Central American peoples were connected to each other and to more distant communities by trading goods and sharing ideas.



Make A Connection: Look at this map of the region. Can you see where the main regions were located before and where the capitals are located today? Test your knowledge by trying to find the capital cities and circling them in your map as you travel through the exhibit.



Fun Fact: Traders from the Mayan region brought jade all the way down to the Greater Nicoya region. Can you trace the path of the jade in your map?



Find and Discuss: Find the jade objects in the exhibit! Look for the snake pendant from the Greater Nicoya region. Describe the pendant. Why do you think jade was so popular?



Greater Nicoya snake pendant, 300 BC-AD 500. Nicoya, Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica. Jadeite, MAI purchase from Enrique Vargas Alfaro, 1966 (23/7284). Photo by NMAI Move Team, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

Key Words:

- **Geography:** the physical features of a region or place on the earth.
- **Trading:** exchanging items or buying or selling goods.
- **Pre-Hispanic:** the time before the Spanish arrival in the Western Hemisphere.

A Window into the Past

The clay, stone, shell, gold and jade objects you will see here give us clues about what life was like for Central America's ancestors. They show us how people in the past related to their families and communities and how they connected to the natural world around them.

Ceramics are especially good at telling us stories about past cultures, because they last longer than softer materials such as cloth and wood. The images on ceramics also show us how what people in ancient civilizations wore, what they ate, and how they celebrated important festivities. Some ceramics show real people and animals.



Make A Connection: How are ceramics made? Potters (also called ceramists) dig up a kind of wet earth, called clay, which they clean and process. Then they shape it into different forms (such as bowls or flutes), paint it, and bake it with fire. Sometimes potters add a glaze to create a smooth and shiny surface on their pots. The final object is called pottery or ceramics. Have you ever made pottery in art class? Have you used other materials to make objects?



Fun Facts: The oldest ceramic in the exhibition is about 3,000 years old and comes from the Ulúa region.



Find and Discuss: Check out the video in the exhibition's second room (at the front of the Greater Chiriquí section of the exhibit). Listen to young researchers from Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Panama tell you how they are uncovering their countries' past and what this means to them. Do you know what archaeology and anthropology are?

Key Words:

- **Anthropology:** the scientific study of humankind. People who study anthropology learn about the origins and development of people, their societies, and customs.
- **Archaeology:** the study of past human civilizations by examining objects such as pottery, tools, and buildings (called "material culture") that they have left behind. An archaeologist looks for and studies the material culture of old civilizations.
- **Clay:** a sticky earth that can be shaped when wet. When dried and baked it can be used to make ceramics, pottery, and even bricks.
- **Ceramics:** objects made of baked clay.
- **Glaze:** a shiny coating on pottery.



Greater Nicoya vessel in the form of a jaguar, AD 400-1350. Costa Rica. Pottery. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler, 1966 (23/7234). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian



Shapes, Patterns, and Day-To-Day Life

While some ceramics and other objects in this exhibition were used for ceremonies, many more were used for eating, collecting water, decorating rooms, and playing music at home.



Make A Connection: Do you have any ceramics in your home that you use every day? What do they look like? How do you use them? How are they different from the ceramics you see here?



Fun Fact: Stone spheres, like the one found in the Greater Chiriquí section of the exhibition, marked the houses of the most important people in the community, such as chiefs. What would you place in front of your home to make it stand out from the rest?



Find and Discuss: Find the objects pictured here to the right. (Hint: They can be found in the Ulúa River section of the exhibition). One was made in 2012 and the other one is very old, from AD 650 to 750. What shapes and patterns do you see on these ceramics? Are they similar? Different? How?



Ulúa River vessel, AD 650-750. Comayagua, Comayagua Department, Honduras. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Gift of Edgar O. Smith, 1972 (24/7035). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian



Lenca vessel, 2012. Honduras. Pottery, clay slip, paint. NMAI purchase from Chimole LLC, 2012. (26/8929). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

Keywords:

- **Pattern:** an arrangement of shapes, lines, letters, numbers, or colors that can be repeated.
- **Sphere:** a round, solid figure (a ball) in which every point on the surface is at an equal distance from the center.



Greater Coclé plate with monkey design, AD 700-850. Rio Coclé del Sur, Coclé Province, Panama. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase from Philip L. Dade, 1961 (22/9446). Photo by Ernest Amoroso, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian