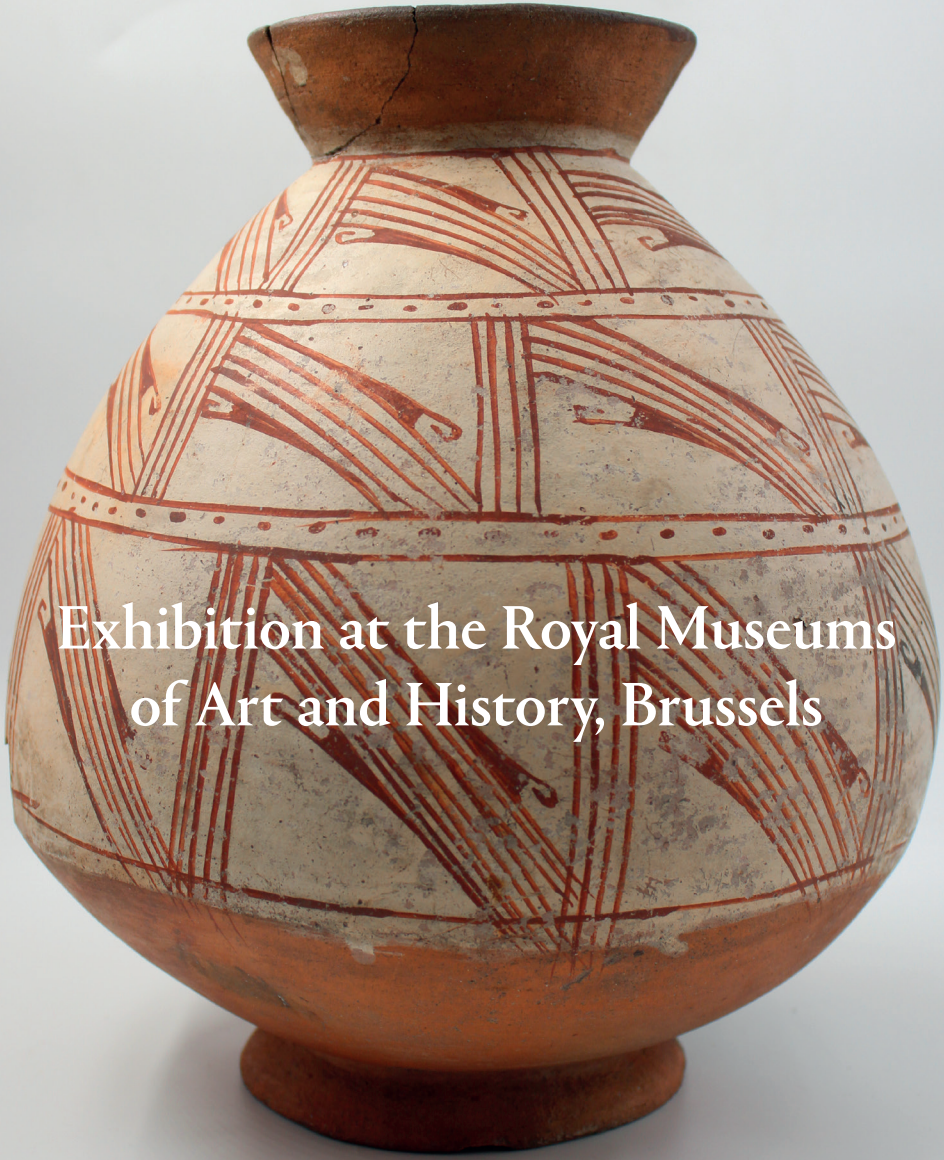
PRE-HISPANIC ECUADOR



Exhibition at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels

27.11.25 – 29.03.26

Exhibition curators: Valentine Wauters and Serge Lemaitre

10 Parc du Cinquantenaire
1000 Brussels

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Gabriela Sommerfeld

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility
Republic of Ecuador

The Government of the Republic of Ecuador expresses its sincere gratitude to the Royal Museums of Art and History of the Kingdom of Belgium for the exhibition Pre-Hispanic Ecuador, highlighting archaeological traces that stand out not only for their cultural diversity but also for their remarkable contribution to the cultural development of humanity.

More than five thousand years ago, the Mayo-Chinchipe culture provided the earliest documented evidence of human cacao consumption, establishing a millennia-old relationship with its domestication, cultivation, and dissemination. This ancient bond makes cacao an essential element of our economic and cultural history, and affirms Ecuador as the primary centre of its development.

We invite you to discover the fascinating story told through the objects presented in this exhibition, which also highlight the complex and refined practices of our ancestors. Their culture sought not only to produce functional items, but also to perpetuate a singular vision of life.

From the Andean mountains to the Amazonian rivers, from the Pacific coast to the Galápagos Islands, the country resonates with the rhythm of its unique cultural diversity.

This exhibition reflects the ongoing strengthening of the friendship and cooperation between Ecuador and Belgium in the cultural, economic, social, and political spheres. It reaffirms both countries' commitment to dialogue, collaboration and the promotion of humanity's shared heritage.

Map of the three natural regions of Ecuador.

Introduction

Located in the heart of the Andes, between the Pacific Ocean and the Amazon, the region corresponding to present-day Ecuador witnessed a remarkable cultural development in the pre-Hispanic period. Long before the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, it was home to a mosaic of societies with diverse traditions, organized in networks of exchange linking the Costa (the coast), the Sierra (the highlands), and the Oriente (the Amazonian region). These populations created an exceptional material culture: finely decorated ceramics, objects crafted from stone, metal, or shell, reflecting both advanced technical skills and deep symbolic meaning.

The "Ecuador" collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History comprises 582 artifacts, including over 400 archaeological objects and approximately 150 ethnographic pieces, housed mainly in the Art & History Museum, as well as in the Musical Instruments Museum. Only about twenty items are on display in the permanent galleries. Long kept in storage without cultural or chronological attributions, these objects have recently been the focus of an in-depth study and valorization project. This project included a thorough revision of the inventory, the organization of a conference and study days, as well as archaeometric analyses using CT scans, allowing for a better understanding of objects from a region of the Andes that is often less well known.

The history of this collection begins with a bronze axe, which entered the museum between 1854 and 1864 according to various inventories. The collection gradually expanded thereafter, notably through a donation from Mr. Émile Deville, comprising approximately 300 archaeological objects and around 100 ethnographic pieces, offered to the Belgian state in 1878. This gift followed a ten-year stay in Ecuador, where Deville served as the Belgian consul in Quito. The development of a museum's collections is often linked to prominent figures; in this case, Émile Deville played a central role.

The Ecuador collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History is fully accessible online at :
www.carmentis.be.

Showcase 1 – Cacao and the Amazon (ca. 2500 BCE)

Replica of a stirrup-spout vessel, Mayo Chinchipe-Marañón culture
Contemporary production, Patricio Ormaza
Inventory number: AAM 02025.02.01
Ceramic
Provenance: gift of the Embassy of Ecuador in Belgium

The original of this vessel was discovered at the site of Santa Ana La Florida (SALF), which belongs to the Mayo Chinchipe-Marañón culture, located in the province of Zamora Chinchipe in southeastern Ecuador. The site of Santa Ana La Florida, excavated by the archaeologist Francisco Valdez and his team, lies on a river terrace of about one hectare that was artificially modified by its ancient inhabitants. In addition to architectural remains, objects made of stone, marine shell, and ceramic were uncovered there. Among these are examples of lapidary art (polished stone objects and ornaments made of turquoise and malachite).

Mayo Chinchipe-Marañón stirrup-spout vessel (credit: F. Valdez)

This vessel, reproduced here, is of major importance on several levels. During the analysis of the bottom of the container, residues of cacao (***Theobroma cacao***) were discovered. This represents the oldest known trace to date, pushing back by more than 1,500 years the domestication of this plant, previously thought to have originated in Mexico.

Its iconography also establishes the foundations of Andean ideology, which is based on the principle of duality. In this case, two anthropomorphic faces with opposing expressions emerge from an open ***Spondylus*** shell. Finally, the shape of the stirrup-spout at the top of the body represents the earliest known production of this type of handle, characteristic of pre-Hispanic cultures.

Undeniably, these archaeological remains place this site and the Amazonian region at the forefront of reflections on the beginnings of civilization in pre-Columbian America.

Showcase 2 – The Formative Period (4000 – 200 BCE)

Female figurine, so-called "Venus"
Valdivia culture (3800–1450 BCE)
Inventory number: AAM 02012.2.236
Stone
Provenance: unknown

Ucuyaya (amulet representing an ancestor)
Cerro Narrío culture (2000 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05219
Spondylus shell
Provenance: Gualaceo, "Elvira", Cuenca

Engraved calcite fragment with a zoomorphic profile
Chaullabamba (Early Formative, 4000 – 1500 BCE)
Inventory number: AAM 04036
Calcite
Provenance: Burgay, Azogues (Cuenca Province)

Bird-shaped ornament
Cerro Narrío culture (2000 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 04041
Spondylus shell
Provenance: Chordeleg, Cuenca

Figurine head
La Tolita-Tumaco culture, Early phase (700 – 200 BCE)
Inventory number: AAM 00048.34.1
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Figurine head
La Tolita-Tumaco culture, Early phase (700 – 200 BCE)
Inventory number: AAM 00048.34.3
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Figurine head
La Tolita-Tumaco culture, Early phase (700 – 200 BCE)
Inventory number: AAM 00048.32.2
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Spout and bridge vessel decorated with a seated figure
Chorrera/Bahía culture (1300–300 BCE / 500 BCE – 600 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00073.16
Ceramic
Provenance: Manabí, Chacras (?)

The Formative Period in Ecuador spans approximately from 4000 to 200 BCE. It witnessed the emergence of the first agricultural societies and organized villages. Social structures gradually developed, alongside exchange networks that, from the beginning of this period, connected the Coast, the Highlands, and the Amazon over long distances.

Among the objects from the early Formative period, a small figurine known as the Valdivia "Venus," originating from the coast, stands out for being made of stone, a precursor to the later clay versions that appeared with the advent of pottery. The Valdivia culture represents one of the oldest ceramic traditions in Ecuador.

Small objects made from spondylus shell—whose raw material came from the coast but which have been found in the Highlands, notably at Cerro Narrío—provide evidence of long-distance exchanges between these regions even in the earliest times. From the end of the Formative period, the heads of La Tolita–Tumaco figurines prefigure the rise of an extensive statuette production, of which typically only the heads have survived. These pieces originate from the regions of La Tolita Island in northern Ecuador and Tumaco in southern Colombia, which formed a unified cultural unit in pre-Hispanic times.

The spout-and-bridge vessel, functioning as a whistling vase, is an emblematic form of this period and the following Regional Development period. Its decoration combines elements characteristic of the Chorrera and Bahía cultures. A cleverly designed whistle mechanism inside the head, with the opening visible at the back, allows the object to produce sound. This feature gives the pieces an auditory dimension, enhancing their likely symbolic and ritual significance.

Showcase 3 – Regional Development (200 BCE – 800 CE)

Head of a figurine with supernatural features
La Tolita-Tumaco Culture (600 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00089.2.3
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Pendant/mask with feline features
La Tolita-Tumaco culture (600 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00073.15
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Oval dish used as a scraper
La Tolita-Tumaco culture (600 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00089.2.27
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Pendant/mask
La Tolita-Tumaco culture (600 BCE – 400 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00049.7
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Anthropomorphic ocarina
Guangala culture (500 BCE – 500 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00073.9
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Anthropomorphic ocarina
Guangala culture (500 BCE –500 CE)
Inventory number: 1993.014
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

The Regional Development period saw the rise of coastal chiefdoms that controlled various territories. These entities also established contacts and trade networks with other regions, especially to obtain raw materials that supported the growth of metallurgy.

These chiefdoms produced a remarkable material culture, rich in symbolic meaning. Their artifacts reflect shamanic practices and various rituals, including those associated with transformation into an animal alter ego. The representations reflect a belief in a world where the human and the supernatural converge, emphasizing the central role of religious elites within society.

The production of La Tolita–Tumaco ceramic figurines, which began in the preceding period, expanded considerably. These pieces display expressive faces, sometimes combined with features of powerful animals, often felines. Two objects take the form of concave masks. Their small size and the two holes at the top suggest they were meant to be suspended, perhaps as pendants, similar to those worn around the necks of other figurines from this culture.

The plate with inclusions appears to have been used as a grater, either for food preparation or ritual purposes, with embedded particles making its surface abrasive.
Two figurines from the Guangala culture, located slightly farther south, illustrate the importance of sound. Made of polished brown clay with incised decoration, they are ocarinas (wind instruments): the hole at the top allows air to be blown in, while the others were used to modulate the sound.

Showcase 4 – Cañari Metallurgy (450–1532 CE)

Nose Ornament (Nariguera)
Cañari Culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa II Phase (300 BCE – 800 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 04935
Copper-silver alloy
Provenance: unknown

Disk-Shaped Ornament
Cañari Culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa II Phase (300 BCE – 800 CE)
Inventory Number: AAM 04932
Copper-silver alloy
Provenance: Chordeleg

Ornaments (bracelets?)
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05224 A - B
Copper alloy
Provenance: Cuenca, Inga – Pircca

Axe
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Integration period (700–1450 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05186
Copper alloy
Provenance: Cañar, province of Alausi

Axe with volute decoration
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Integration period (700–1450 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05177
Copper alloy
Provenance: Cañar, province of Alausi

Axe with owl decoration
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Integration period (700–1450 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05171
Copper alloy
Provenance: Cuenca, Cañar

Large ***tupu*** (clothing pin)
Cañari culture (100 BCE – 1532 CE), Cashaloma phase (1100–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05754
Copper alloy
Provenance: unknown

The Cañari culture, established in the central-southern highlands (mainly in the provinces of Cañar and Azuay), represents an important cultural complex. Between 450 and 1532 CE, the Cañari developed a refined metallurgy, working mainly with copper, gold, and silver, most often in the form of alloys. These objects are largely recovered from richly furnished tombs, many of which were unfortunately looted. The few surviving pieces nevertheless attest to the technical skill and wealth of these productions. The presence of metal ores in the Cañari region encouraged long-distance exchanges, particularly with the Pacific coast, which lacked these resources and relied on the highlands for their supply.

Metallurgical production was primarily focused on ceremonial and funerary objects. Some are ornaments, such as the two bracelets, the large *tupu* (used to fasten clothing), the disk (probably a clothing ornament) featuring a radiant face accompanied by characteristic birds, or the *nariguera* (nasal ornament) pierced with geometric and volute decoration.

The axes, found decorated or undecorated, may have served as tools or weapons, but their size and weight suggest a primarily ceremonial or prestige function, marking the high status of their owner. Some carry geometric or zoomorphic motifs, such as the remarkable example of an axe decorated with an owl.

According to information provided by the donor, Émile Deville (Belgian consul in Quito at the end of the 19th century), these objects would have come from regions such as Cuenca, Cañar, Alausí, Chordeleg, or from more precise locations such as the site of Inga Pirca.

Plate XXXVI from Bamps' publication (1878), annotated by Anatole Bamps under the dictation of Émile Deville (MRAH archives, file 328). This set of annotated plates is a valuable archival document that contains extensive information, including certain places of provenance.

Type caractéristique des anciennes armes de l'Equateur (Hamy)

Haches votives ou de parade

Haches en cuivre pleines, massives, lourdes.

PL. XXXVI

AAM 5181

170 mill.

Ai 4262
Inv. gen 883
N° 239.

Ancienne province de Puruhaes (province actuelle de Riobamba).

1.

Inv. gen. 872 – N° 228.

AAM 5177
Ai 4251

170 mill.

arabesques

appendices en arrondis

Cañar (prov. d'Alausi).

2.

120 mill.

Inv. gen. 874. – N° 230.

AAM 5183
Ai 4253

Ancienne province de Puruhaes, actuellement prov. de Riobamba.

3.

AAM 5170
Ai 4258

160 mill.

face antérieure ornée de gravé

Figure humaine ornée d'arrondis

Inv. gen 879. N° 235

Azogues (prov. de Cuenca).

4.

Inv. gen. 884
N° 240.

AAM 5184
Ai 4263

184 mill.

(Provenance précise inconnue.)

5.

Haches en cuivre avec de sortes de signes héraldiques (?)
(récolté dans les tombeaux)

signes considérés comme étant de sortes de signes héraldiques

Haches lunulées.

Lith. Ad. MERTENS, Bruxelles.

On trouve une fort belle hache en pierre polie avec tranchant en demi-cercle ou croissant garni d'un long manche au milieu faisant corps avec le tranchant trouvée à Cumarola (Province de Modène) et reproduite dans la revue L'homme (3e année. – N° 13. – 10 Juillet 1886, p. 392). Je ne connais aucune autre pièce européenne présentant une forme analogue à celle des haches de cuivre dont nous nous occupons ici

Showcase 5 – Cañari Ceramics (700 BCE – 1532 CE)

Trilobed bottle
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa phase (700–1100 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05144
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, Chordeleg

Trilobed bottle
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), tacalshapa phase (700–1100 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05152
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, Chordeleg

Half-moon shaped vessel
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa III phase (800–1100 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05190
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, Chordeleg

Bottle with flattened body
Cañari culture (100 BCE – 1532 CE), Cashaloma phase (1100–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05304
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Bottle with bichrome geometric decoration
Cañari culture (100 BCE – 1532 CE), Cashaloma phase (1100–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05878
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Bottle with cephalomorphic neck
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa III phase (800–1100 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05486
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, ChordelegHerkomst: Cuenca, Chordeleg.

Bottle with cephalomorphic neck
Cañari culture (700 BCE – 1532 CE), Tacalshapa III phase (800–1100 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05545
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, Chordeleg

Cañari ceramics are distinguished by their wide variety of shapes, combined with relatively simple decoration. They are divided into two main traditions: Tacalshapa and Cashaloma.

The Tacalshapa tradition (700 BCE – 1100 CE) is characterized by pieces that are generally monochrome or bichrome, decorated with simple geometric motifs or three-dimensional ornamentation. Representative forms include trilobed vessels, half-moon shaped vessels, and globular bottles with cephalomorphic necks. The latter, typical of this tradition, feature on the neck a face with a prominent nose, circled eyes, and pierced earlobes. The rim of the neck forms the headdress. Small hands are regularly indicated on the top of the vessel's body. Potters also mastered the technique of negative painting, although its use remained rare, probably influenced by the northern highland regions.

The Cashaloma tradition is more limited. It is concentrated in the Cañar region between approximately 1100 and 1532 CE. This production likely coexisted with that of Tacalshapa and illustrates the local specificity of Cañari ceramic. Decoration most often plays on the contrast of geometric patterns or color blocks in orange-red and cream.

Showcase 6 – The Northern Highlands (300 BCE – 1500 CE)

Cephalomorphic-neck bottle
Puruhá Culture (300 – 1500 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05156
Ceramic
Provenance: Riobamba

Pedestal cup
Puruhá Culture (300 – 1500 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05205
Ceramic
Provenance: no information

Quadruped-shaped vessel
Puruhá Culture (300 – 1500 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05208
Ceramic
Provenance: Quito, Machachi

Vessel with geometric pattern
Panzaleo / Cosanga-Píllaro Culture
(300 BCE – 1500 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05294
Ceramic
Provenance: no information

The Puruhá of the North-Central Highlands and the Panzaleo/Cosanga-Píllaro of the Northern Highlands produced material culture of great interest. Although they share common technical know-how and a similar repertoire of forms, they are notably distinguished by the quality of their craftsmanship.

Panzaleo/Cosanga-Píllaro ceramics are fine, with a clay body that often has a shimmering appearance due to the presence of mica (a silicate mineral) in the composition. In contrast, the orangish to brownish Puruhá ceramics are generally thicker and coarser. The Panzaleo/Cosanga-Píllaro, skilled traders, widely distributed their wares throughout the Sierra and even into parts of the ceja de montaña, whereas Puruhá ceramics remained more regional, intended primarily for local use.

Panzaleo/Cosanga-Píllaro vessels feature red-line decoration (horizontal, diagonal, or wavy) on a cream slip background. These characteristic geometric patterns cover the entire surface of the vessel's body. Three-dimensional anthropomorphic or zoomorphic representations are also found, as in the case of the feline-shaped vessel.

Among the characteristic forms of the Puruhá tradition are high-pedestal cups and globular anthropomorphic bottles, whose necks bear facial features and whose bodies are decorated with arms supporting the head and slightly raised legs. These pieces call to mind the cephalomorphic-neck bottles produced further south in Cañari territory.

Showcase 7 – Northern Ocarinas (900–1700 CE)

Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style (900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.020
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style (900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.011
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style (900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.008
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style (900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.015
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

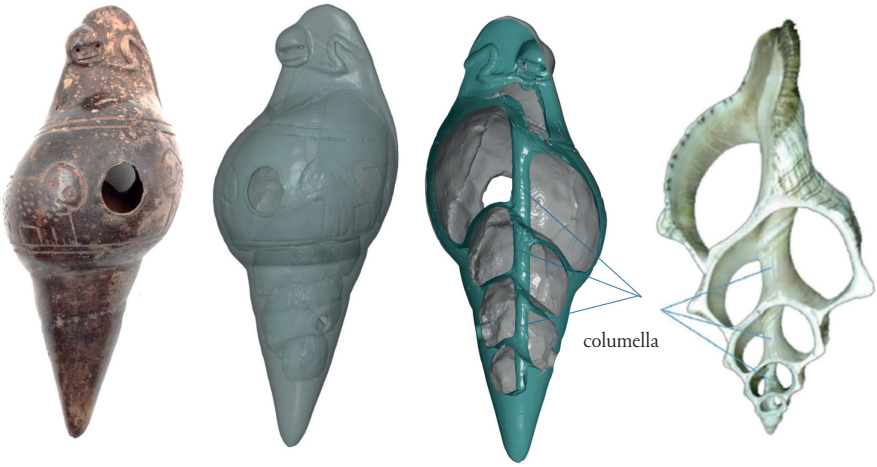
Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style
(900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.009
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Shell-shaped ocarina
Carchi-Nariño culture, Piartal or Tuza style
(900–1700 CE)
Inventory number: 1990.019
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

The Carchi-Nariño complex is located in the Andean highlands, covering the Carchi department in northern Ecuador and the Nariño department in southern Colombia.

The collections of the Royal Museums of Art and History include twenty ceramic wind instruments (ocarinas) attributed to this culture. These objects are remarkable in several respects. They faithfully imitate the natural form of marine mollusk shells (mainly from the ***Fasciolariidae*** family), rendered in ceramic but designed to function as aerophones. Their iconography is rich and repetitive, featuring motifs typical of the region, such as the monkey. The decorative techniques are also noteworthy, including incised and painted designs in red-on-cream tones or in negative painting. The imitation of marine shells also attests to contact and exchange with coastal areas, suggesting an extensive trade network.

These pieces have been the subject of a recent study combining formal, stylistic, and iconographic analyses with archaeometric examinations using micro CT scanning. The results revealed that, beyond replicating the external appearance of marine mollusk shells, the internal structure was also faithfully reproduced, with the forms coiling around a central axis that mirrors the columella of these species. These objects thus represent true technical achievements, involving the superposition of clay layers and, consequently, complex modeling and firing constraints.



a) Ocarina MIM 1990.008,
b) 3D reconstruction by CT scan,
c) Vertical section by CT scan
d) Section of a natural shell (Butto 2023 : fig.12).

Showcase 8 – Manteño (800–1532 CE)

Tripod vessel with wide rim Manteño culture (800–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 00091.1.1
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown.

The Manteño culture flourished on the central–northern coast of Ecuador during the Integration Period (800–1532 CE). Its social organization was characterized by a system of chiefdoms — territorial entities governed by powerful leaders known as *caciques*. In contrast to the preceding Regional Development Period, when religious figures and shamanic practices held prominence and were richly depicted in the iconography, the Integration Period witnessed a shift toward more secular and politically centralized authority embodied by these caciques. This maritime culture developed extensive trade networks and thriving commercial activities while ensuring access to resources from different ecological zones. The discovery of sumptuous tombs belonging to merchant lineages attests to the wealth of certain individuals.

These social and economic changes are reflected in the material culture, notably in the evolving representations of the human figure: they became more realistic while retaining a hieratic, non-individualized quality.

Ceramic technology also underwent significant innovations. Manteño potters frequently practiced firing in a reducing atmosphere, producing lustrous black ceramics comparable to those of their contemporaries, the Chimú of Peru. The tripod vessel with a wide rim is an emblematic example of the production of this period. Its broad rim recalls the large headdress that almost invariably adorns the faces of dignitaries in their depictions as incense burners, as if this vessel were a simplified version of it.

Exhibition space 9 – Manteño (800–1532 CE)

U-shaped seat supported by a crouching male figure
Manteño culture (800–1520 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05509
Volcanic rock
Provenance: Manabí, Hoja Mountains

Among the most distinctive artifacts of the Manteño culture are the U-shaped seats, which reflect complex social and ceremonial practices. Carved from carefully shaped blocks of local volcanic stone, they share a consistent form: a base depicting a crouching male figure, or more rarely an animal, supporting a U-shaped seat with high armrests.

These seats were likely reserved for members of the elite, probably ***caciques***, signaling their high status and symbolizing their authority. Several examples have been found on hilltops or within architectural structures, such as at the site of Los Cerros de Hojas–Jaboncillo, near Portoviejo (Manabí).

Showcase 10 – The Inca Empire (1440–1532 CE)

Puku , or shallow plate, with geometric decoration
Inca culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05472
Ceramic
Provenance: Latacunga

Maize cob
Inca culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05727
Stone
Provenance: Pichincha, Cayambe

Pedestal vessel with strap handle
Inca culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05105
Ceramic
Provenance: Unknown

Kero (beaker)
Inca culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory number: AAM 05266
Ceramic
Provenance: Latacunga

Emperor Topa Inca Yupanqui and his army invaded the region corresponding to present-day Ecuador in the mid-15th century. Although this area lay far from the heart of the Empire — whose capital, Cuzco, was located in the Andes, in the south of Peru — it nevertheless played a strategic role: Emperor Huayna Capac, born in Tomebamba, a city situated in the heart of Cañari territory, probably made it the second capital of his Empire. According to written sources, the Inca conquest of Cañari territory was far from easy, as the Cañaris fiercely resisted the invaders.
Inca domination had a significant impact on material culture and, of course, on ceramic production. The long-standing local traditions continued, but new forms from the Inca repertoire also appeared. Some potters — particularly the Cañaris —adopted these forms, whether by choice or coercion, while often maintaining their ancestral technical know-how.

Some pieces closely replicate the Inca style, while others adopt a hybrid style, more or less faithful to the Cuzco models. Studying these productions allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms of power and domination, survival strategies and the political maneuvering of local artisans under the new authority.

Among the objects typical of the Inca formal repertoire found in Ecuadoris the *puku*, a shallow plate with a strap-handle, decorated with characteristic geometric motifs (crosshatching, alternating bands of solid colors, etc.). There is also the pedestal vessel with a strap-handle, as well as the ***kero*** — the emblematic ceremonial beaker of Inca tableware — used for drinking fermented beverages such as chicha. These are complemented by small stone objects, such as the emblematic maize cobs.

These objects reproduce the formal, decorative, and iconographic codes of the imperial style. Their discovery in Ecuador, far from the heart of the Empire, raises questions. They may have been either locally produced by specialized artisans capable of replicating these objects and participating in the political game of Inca integration, or manufactured in Cuzco and sent to the provinces, for example as gifts that functioned both as marks of high honor and as reminders of the subordinate status of their recipients.

Showcase II – Inca Urpus (1450–1532 CE)

Aryballos or ***urpu***
Inca Culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory Number: AAM 05461
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

Aryballos or ***urpu***
Inca Culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory Number: AAM 05475
Ceramic
Provenance: Cuenca, Quinjeo

Aryballos or ***urpu***
Inca Culture (1450–1532 CE)
Inventory Number: AAM 05313
Ceramic
Provenance: unknown

The most emblematic ceramic form in the Inca repertoire —the aryballos, or ***urpu*** in Quechua—perfectly illustrates ceramic production during the Inca period. Its features—pointed base, lateral handles, puma head in relief on the body, and flared neck—are typically Inca. Yet variations in its manufacture reveal the hybrid nature of post-conquest production and its relationship with imperial power.

These typically Inca vessels were introduced in the provinces, as evidenced by their discovery in the region of Ecuador, reflecting intercultural contacts between the Empire and subjugated populations. They represent three distinct styles typical of Inca production.

The first *urpu* reproduces all the elements of the Imperial Inca style produced in Cuzco. Although it is fragmentary, its large size, the quality and fineness of the clay, the colors of its decoration, its characteristic Inca motifs (vertical banding, crosshatch patterns, fern motifs, etc.), and its coiling technique make it an outstanding example of Inca craftsmanship. Only technical analysis could confirm whether it was produced in Cuzco in the Imperial Inca style, or locally in the provinces following the same style. Its fragmentary state is also noteworthy: the break is clean, and the edges appear to have been deliberately smoothed. This modification may reflect either an intention to alter its form into an open vessel (though the pointed base seems unsuitable for carrying liquids), or it may have been broken but was considered important enough to be repaired so it could remain in use.

The second example is a small ***urpu*** retaining the classic Inca shape, carefully executed, with typical color codes (red, orange, cream and black) and characteristic motifs (stepped geometric patterns, puma head in relief, solid color band on the back, etc.). This aryballos may have been produced either in Cuzco in the Imperial Inca style and transported to the provinces, or locally, faithfully imitating the imperial style in a provincial version.

The third vessel is of provincial Inca style. It reproduces, rather roughly and freely, the general form of an ***urpu***, but its small size, the dark coloration of its clay (due to a reducing firing), and the absence of Inca decorative motifs reveal its provincial production in a hybrid style quite distant from the original models.

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