

# Four readings of Colombian pre-Hispanic art

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This essay covers some of the most important contributions in the study of Colombian pre-Hispanic material culture and artistic expressions while proposing new ideas for incorporating the “indigenous” into narratives of Colombian art. My interest in the topic stems from years of research and teaching in Colombia, covering the pre-Hispanic and colonial eras, that is, periods prior to the country’s founding.<sup>1</sup> While disciplinary and historically contextualized studies indicate that in the region we now call Colombia there were opposing, to some extent irreconcilable or even mutually exclusive, artistic and cultural manifestations—I think above all in the attitude of the Spaniards towards indigenous culture and the many campaigns of religious persecution and destruction carried out by missionaries during the colonial era—I think that the theoretical effort to develop a shared vocabulary for material and artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Alessia Frassani and Isaías Morales Cabezas, “Hacia una historia del arte prehispánico de Colombia: una aproximación bibliográfica”, *H-ART. Revista de Historia, Teoría y Crítica de Arte*, n. 5 (2019): 213-240; Alessia Frassani, “Problemas en las investigación e interpretación del arte indígena de América”, *Revista Kaypunku* 5, n. 1 (2019): 11-16, <http://www.kaypunku.com/index.php/inicio>; “La Virgen de Chiquinquirá y la religión muisca”, *Historia y Sociedad*, n. 35 (2018): 61-86; “The fame and fortune of Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos, painter of Santafé, New Granada”, *Hispanic Research Journal* 22, n. 5 (2021): 465-494.



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expressions from the pre-Spanish colonization era to the present can have significant heuristic value in the contemporary Colombian context.

### 1. Geography // Actor-network

The idea of Colombia as a “country of regions” has been a critical part of the historical narratives around the country almost since its founding. The great Chorographic Commission project, promoted by the government of what was then known as the Republic of New Granada from 1850 to 1859, is perhaps the most striking example of this view of the country, in which the Andes, jungle, rivers and ecuatorial plains dominate the life of their inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> The development of maps, the main objective of the Commission, was complemented with prints illustrating, via scenes or snapshots, landforms, historical cities and scenes of contemporary life. As has been widely commented, the Chorographic Commission’s watercolors built a country that was, to a certain extent, imaginary.<sup>3</sup> Today, the word that might be used would be “virtual”. In fact, thanks to the digitization projects of the Bank of the Republic and the National Library, among others, one can look up, review, and scroll quickly

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<sup>2</sup> Efraín Sánchez, *Gobierno y geografía: Agustín Codazzi y la Comisión Corográfica de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic; El Áncora Editores, 1999); Nancy P. Appelbaum, *Dibujar la nación: la Comisión Corográfica en la Colombia del siglo XIX* (Bogotá: Universidad de Los Andes; Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Olga Restrepo, “Un imaginario de la nación. Lectura de láminas y descripciones de la Comisión Corográfica”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, n. 26 (1999): 30-58; Appelbaum, *Dibujar la nación*.



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through the images produced by the Commission.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the maps themselves have been replaced by the digital virtual network that allows us to select the images that we want to access subjectively, immediately and on an ad hoc basis. The map's comprehensive, objective point of view gives way to a network in which the subject that is looking and moving from point to point, between the prints themselves, is the protagonist.

In the Commission's project, goldwork and ceramic indigenous artifacts ("antiquities") and rock art (pictography and petroglyphs) depict the pre-conquest indigenous past. Of this pictorial record, I want to analyze one case, *Piedra con jeroglíficos, que se halla cerca de Aipe, provincia de Neiva* [Stone hieroglyphics, near Aipe, province of Neiva], painted by Manuel María Paz in 1857 (Figure 1). The watercolor illustrates the country of regions, according to the modern, scientific and costumbrista canon promoted by the national government in the 19th century. A man with a wide-brimmed hat and a dark ruana is next to a large rock on which shapes, lines and outlines can be very clearly seen. The caption at the bottom of the watercolor reads: "Stone hieroglyphics, near Aipe, on the left bank of the Magdalena, land of the ancient Natagaima, where it was established that there was a large fair at which the highland Chibcha gathered, bringing salt, blankets, idols, and gold ornaments,

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<sup>4</sup> The Bank of the Republic's collection includes maps from the Commission which can be viewed in the Virtual Library (<https://babel.banrepcultural.org/>) and watercolors belonging to the Miguel Urrutia Art Museum (<https://www.banrepcultural.org/coleccion-de-arte>). The National Library holds 151 Chorographic Commission prints in its Graphics Archive (<https://bibliotecanacional.gov.co/es-co/coleccion/grafica/publicacion/comision-corografica>).



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receiving in exchange the gold dust brought by the neighboring indians.” The information provided in the print was probably recorded by Codazzi in the very town of Aipe, though the source is not clear.<sup>5</sup> It is true that networks of exchanges and trade routes are a key focus of study for Colombian archeologists and historians.<sup>6</sup> Similarities have also been noted between the shapes etched on the Aipe rock and goldwork objects of the Tolima style, which were spread throughout Magdalena Medio (Figure 2). Ana María Falchetti, among others, mentions the Aipe rock in her study of the distribution of the so-called “heart-shaped pectorals”, a type of body ornament common among all of Colombia’s indigenous cultures from the seventh century to the 16th century.<sup>7</sup>

In Colombian archeology, the identification of archeological regions and civilizations, pinpointed and set out on the national map, has been a constant since the first studies of the 19th century.<sup>8</sup> The goldworking regions that to this

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<sup>5</sup> Efraín Sánchez talks about “non-traditional sources of information” and “knowledge of common origin” regarding the descriptive information in some of the prints. Sánchez, *Gobierno y geografía*, 469-470. According to José María Gutiérrez de Alba, a Spanish writer who travelled through Colombia between 1870 and 1884, the information on the print was part of a “popular belief” held in the country, and accepted by Codazzi, about the etchings as “a history or a record of the transactions at that market”. José María Gutiérrez de Alba, “Curiosidades arqueológicas de Colombia. La piedra labrada de Aipe”, *La Ilustración Artística* XIII, n. 672 (1894): 735. In the 16th century, Fray Pedro de Simón was the first to mention the importance of markets and trade with peoples of the Magdalena Medio lowlands by the highland Muisca. Fray Pedro de Simón, *Noticias históricas de las conquistas de Tierra Firme en la Indias Occidentales* (Bogotá: Medardo Rivas, 1891), n. 4a, chap. IX.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Carl H. Langebaek, *Mercados, poblamiento e integración étnica entre los Muiscas* (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic, 1987); Carl H. Langebaek and Felipe Cárdenas, eds., *Caciques, intercambio y poder* (Bogotá: Universidad de Los Andes, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Ana María Falchetti, “Pectorales acorazonados”, *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 2 (1978): 28-34.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Emilio Piazzini Suárez, “Arqueografías: una aproximación crítica a las cartografías arqueológicas de Colombia”, *Boletín de Antropología* 27, n. 44 (2012): 13-49; Daniel García Roldan, “Concepciones de la geografía y la cartografía en las ‘ciencias del hombre’ y los museos arqueológicos



day are discussed in the narrative structure and catalogues of the Gold Museum were first established by José Pérez de Barradas in his studies about the Bank of the Republic's collection, carried out in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>9</sup> Using information from tomb robbers, the Spanish archeologist defined the Calima, Quimbaya, Tolima and Muisca styles, also identifying their possible origin and geographic distribution. The following studies by Clemencia Plazas and Ana María Falchetti have delved into the stylistic and iconographic features of the country's different goldworking traditions.<sup>10</sup> In addition, studies such as Falchetti's about the heart-shaped pectorals, as well as those related to the discovery of the Malagana site in the area of Palmira in Cauca Valley, suggest the possibility of learning more about the distribution of pottery and goldworking traditions beyond geographical borders.<sup>11</sup> The presence of objects stylistically linked to Tolima, Calima or Malagana traditions outside of their place of origin and mixed with other objects also of different origins indicates that one need not understand the

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en Bogotá (Colombia), 1938-1945", *HISTORELo. Revista de Historia Regional y Local* 10, n. 19 (2018): 81-120.

<sup>9</sup> José Pérez de Barradas, *Orfebrería prehispánica de Colombia*, 6 vols. (Bogotá, Madrid: Jura, Fournier, 1954-1966); Clara Isabel Botero, ed., *Museo del Oro: Patrimonio milenario de Colombia* (Bogotá: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Clemencia Plazas de Nieto and Ana María Falchetti, "La orfebrería prehispánica de Colombia", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 3 (1978): 1-53; "Patrones culturales en la orfebrería prehispánica de Colombia", in Clemencia Plazas de Nieto, ed., *Metalurgia de América precolombina. 45° Congreso Internacional de Americanistas* [In English, *Precolumbian American metallurgy: 45th International Congress of Americanists*] (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic, 1986), 201-227; "Tradición metalúrgica del suroccidente colombiano", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 14 (1984): 1-32; Ana María Falchetti, "Orfebrería prehispánica en el Altiplano Central colombiano", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 25 (1990): 3-41.

<sup>11</sup> Falchetti, "Pectorales acorazonados"; Warwick Bray, "Malagana and the goldworking tradition of southwest Colombia", in Colin McEwan, ed., *Precolumbian gold: Technology, style and iconography* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 94-111.



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styles as relating to distinct cultures or societies set in their own individual geographical regions. The Aipe rock suggests that the objects that we identify as belonging to a goldworking tradition are the product of exchange and successive creations and recreations in different places and over generations. However, it is not a matter of tracking distribution in terms of geographic range, but rather of identifying networks and actors in accordance with Bruno Latour's definition.<sup>12</sup> A map does not account for the subjective view and experience that agents and producers had of the territory in which they lived and moved around. Just as ants and birds do not need a map to move, as a group or individually, across the ground and through the sky, the actors in the network create a set of functional relationships, in a way that is conscious but not external, abstract, and absolute, for the very network in which they operate. The focus I am suggesting is thus never intended to disregard the specific conditions of the object and the circumstances of its production and distribution. In this sense, the Chorographic Commission's illustrations offer a counterpoint to the extensive cartography of the Colombian territory. It can also be added that erratic rocks marked with rock paintings served in the pre-Hispanic era as a meeting point for exchange, as did plazas and markets in the colonial and modern eras (Figure 3). Each of the Chorographic Commission's prints thus offers a point of view of the other images without ever providing a comprehensive overview.

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<sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reensamblar lo social: Una introducción a la teoría del actor-red* [In English, *Reassembling the social: An introduction to act-network-theory*] (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Manantial, 2008).



## 2. Identity // Multiplicity

Maps, borders, and demarcated areas are related not just to the idea of the nation-state, but also to the concept of the “cultural area” commonly used in archeology since the early 20th century. In the Americanist discipline, Alfred Kroeber proposed the concept of the “cultural area” for the study made up of the cultural traits of social groups in specific geographical spaces.<sup>13</sup> Kroeber was a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York, where the German anthropologist proposed new approaches for American anthropology, moving away from the comparative and evolutionary schemas that dominated in the United States at the end of the 19th century. In spite of this, Boas’ ideas are rooted in 19th-century ideologies about progress and the nation-state. According to the cultural area criterion, the archeological civilizations of Colombia ideally identify groups that share a language, socio-political structure, and religion, among other determining cultural elements. The Muisca who inhabited the central highlands when the Spaniards arrived are perhaps the most representative case of historical and discursive construction of an indigenous nation to give identity to a strategic region for Colombia in the first few decades

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<sup>13</sup> Rosemary A. Joyce, “Central America: time for a paradigm shift”, in Colin McEwan and John W. Hoopes, eds., *Central American and Colombian art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2020), 37-38.



following Independence.<sup>14</sup> Today, John Hoopes and Óscar Fonseca, archeologists who have worked in Costa Rica and in the Colombian Caribbean, have proposed the definition of a Chibcha cultural area that would include archeological and present-day cultures under a single language family.<sup>15</sup> Beyond language, the authors assign overwhelming importance to certain artifacts ("art"), imbued with an ideology common among the Chibcha. While the iconographic significance could change over time and be redefined, the monopoly over the use and interpretation of certain symbols was always in the hands of the dominant elites, or the chiefs. Based on this interpretative model I am interested in highlighting the idea of art as the carrier of an ideological (iconographic) message or of social representations that have come to define a group's social identity.

I want to contrast this concept of identity against that of multiplicity. Multiplicity understands each specific artistic expression as the result, always

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<sup>14</sup> Vicente Restrepo, *Los chibchas antes de la conquista española* (Bogotá: La Luz, 1895); Óscar Guarín Martínez, "De bárbaros a civilizados: la invención de los muisca en el siglo XIX", in Ana María Gómez Londoño, ed., *Muisca: representaciones, cartografías y etnopolíticas de la memoria* (Bogotá: Pontifical Xavierian University, 2005), 228-246; Verónica Uribe Hanabergh, "El Álbum de Antigüedades Neogranadinas de Liborio Zerda", *Boletín de Historia y Antigüedades* 104, n. 864 (2016): 73-116.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Hoopes and Óscar Fonseca, "Goldwork and Chibchan identity: endogenous change and diffuse unity in the Isthmo-Colombian area", in Jeffrey Quilter and John W. Hoopes, eds., *Gold and power in ancient Costa Rica, Panamá, and Colombia* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2003), 49-90; John W. Hoopes, "Atravesando fronteras y explorando la iconografía sagrada de los antiguos chibchas en Centroamérica meridional y Colombia septentrional", *Revista de Arqueología del Área Intermedia* 6 (2004): 129-166.



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partial and circumstantial, of the dynamic between repetition and difference.<sup>16</sup> Constructing an interpretative discourse based on these concepts allows one to eliminate the necessity of wondering about the ideology that supposedly motivates and drives artistic creation in order to focus on the art itself. Ultimately, it is a matter of leaving behind transcendental ideas such as substance, essence, and possibility in favor of an open and dynamic focus on the multiple, contingent, and virtual, following the guidelines of French philosopher Deleuze.

The so-called “Calima lime dippers” are a category of goldwork that is believed to have been used to extract lime from a lime container (*poporo*) for chewing coca leaves. The cultural designation of Calima origin comes from the first studies by Pérez de Barradas, who identified the region of origin of most of the lime dippers to be in the province of Restrepo, north of the city of Cali.<sup>17</sup> Later studies have placed the height of Calima goldwork production in the Yotoco period in the first to seventh centuries C.E.<sup>18</sup> The lime dippers are characterized by their finial, which, despite its rather small dimensions, often displays very complex shapes and iconographies, in the large majority of cases obtained through the sophisticated use of lost-wax casting. By consulting digital archives and printed catalogues, I have located six pieces whose finials all have the same

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<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Diferencia y repetición* [In English, *Difference and Repetition*] (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2002). The original text in French is from 1968.

<sup>17</sup> Pérez de Barradas, *Orfebrería prehispánica de Colombia (estilo Calima)*, vols. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Leonor Herrera, Mariane Cardale de Schrimpff and Warwick Bray, “El hombre y su medio ambiente en Calima (altos ríos Calima y río Grande, Cordillera Occidental)”, *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 24 (1982-1983): 393-394.



shape: an eagle sitting atop an animal, probably a monkey. Among the pieces of the famous Quimbaya Treasure of the Museum of America in Madrid, the origin of one of the pieces can be identified with the area of Filandia in Quindío (Figure 4).<sup>19</sup> The Field Museum in Chicago holds a lime dipper that also belonged to Vicente Restrepo's collection, displayed in the US city during the World's Columbian Exposition held in 1893 and later sold to the museum (Figure 5).<sup>20</sup> Also from Restrepo's collection is another Calima lime dipper of a similar iconography catalogued at the Schütte collection currently at the Overseas Museum in Bremen, Germany.<sup>21</sup> The Ethnological Museum of Berlin at the Humboldt Forum has a piece that was acquired in 1883, but whose origin is unknown (Figure 6).<sup>22</sup> The Gold Museum's collections contains two pieces, one from Ansermanuevo, in the north of the Cauca Valley department and the other from Restrepo (Figures 7 and 8). Finally, another piece of unknown origin is found at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Figure 9).

The two animals that make up the piece are presented very differently. The eagle, which could be identified as a harpy eagle due to the two feathers that lift up and fan open on the head when the animal feels threatened, is always

<sup>19</sup> Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos, "Iconografía y función del ajuar funerario del Tesoro Quimbaya. Contexto arqueológico para una interpretación sobre el conjunto conservado en el Museo de América", in Alicia Perea, Ana Verde Casanova and Andrés Gutiérrez Usillos, eds., *El Tesoro Quimbaya* (Madrid: Museum of America, General Sub-directorate of Documentation and Publications, 2016), 133.

<sup>20</sup> Clara Isabel Botero, *El redescubrimiento del pasado prehispánico de Colombia: viajeros, arqueólogos y coleccionistas, 1820-1945* (Bogotá: Universidad de Los Andes, 2006), 135.

<sup>21</sup> Eike de Vries, "Der Goldschatz im Überseemuseum Bremen. Inventur und Sammlungsgeschichte", *Paideuma* 53 (2007): 181-198.

<sup>22</sup> The object is erroneously identified as Muisca in the catalogue entry.



depicted facing forward and with a rounded shape.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, its prey may be very different, changing from a naturalistic, rounded shape to other almost completely abstract, two-dimensional, and profiled shapes. How was this multilayered image of an eagle with its prey created? Was there a common archetypal model? I think it is interesting to think of the shapes as fluid and linked, not arising out of a fixed, pre-existing idea or shared ideology. From piece to piece, the eagle-monkey combination continues to be defined over and over with each iteration. The objects ideally form a network, a dynamic map without fixed points. Without a doubt, the most changeable element is the monkey or hunted animal. Maybe due to its liminal condition as prey (alive/dead), its co-presence with the dominant predator is subject to extremely obvious changes in status based on shape and appearance.

In his book *Mimesis and alterity*, Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig offers another coupling that underscores Deleuze's of repetition and difference, directing his reflections toward the ethnography of the Colombo-Panamanian Darién.<sup>24</sup> According to the author, the mimetic power of the images in wood used by the traditional Cuna doctors shows that "in one way or another, one can protect oneself from the evil spirits by depicting them" (Figure 10).<sup>25</sup> The objectification of the spirit in its material fetish grants the doctor a special ability,

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<sup>23</sup> Gutiérrez Usillos, "Iconografía y función", 133.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and alterity. A particular history of the senses* (London: Routledge, 1993). Translation to Spanish: *Mimesis y alteridad. Una historia particular de los sentidos* (Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and alterity*, 12-13.



to trap and control the powers of the depicted being. However, mimesis is also an unfinished, imperfect act, iconic but arbitrary, as evidenced by the plain, simple wood carvings. The mimetic act produces an image that is familiar but altered, foreign to the original. These reflections align with what is mentioned above regarding the eagle-monkey image on the finials of the Calima lime dippers. While one can recognize over and over that the same image keeps repeating, it never appears exactly the same twice. Taussig, however, suggests going beyond the objects to involve the subjects, or rather those who with their own interpretation, guided by the “mimetic impulse”, identify with the object they are admiring. What potters, goldworkers, etc. express through their hands “one way or another” comes to be a self-image of the being as another. Identification and differentiation, mimesis, and alterity, are posited as indispensable opposites of the cognitive and creative process.

The Emberá women of Chocó are the most important producers of everyday and ceremonial ceramics in their communities (Figure 11).<sup>26</sup> Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe tells us that for the Emberá-Chamí ceramicists, even the simplest everyday pots, the *u*, are described as feminine (*u uera*) or masculine (*u mukira*), the former having more pronounced bellies than the latter.<sup>27</sup> Chicha is

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<sup>26</sup> Erland Nordenskiöld, *Indianerna pa Panamanäset* (Stockholm: Åhlén & Åkerlund, 1928); Henry Wassén, “Notes on the southern groups of Chocó Indians in Colombia”, *Ethnological Studies* 1 (1935): 56-59; Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, “Notas etnográficas sobre los indios del Chocó”, *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 9 (1960): 95-98.

<sup>27</sup> Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe, *Semejante a los dioses: cerámica y cestería embera-chamí* (Bogotá: National University of Colombia, 1987), 60-61.



fermented in jugs called *chokó*, identified as feminine because they have a similar shape to the *u vera* (Figure 12). *Chokó* jugs are characterized by the use of sculpting, cuts and pinching to define the face and other anthropomorphic details. The close connection between the woman and the chicha jug is also evident in its use, as, according to Vasco Uribe's reporting, there is only one chicha jug in each dwelling and its keeper is a woman.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, upon marrying, a woman receives the jug that she will care for in their future life in their home. In Nordenskiöld's photo, a woman carries the chicha jug on her shoulders. The woman and the jug carry out similar roles: just as the pottery preserves the chicha, the woman preserves her pottery.

When comparing the modern pottery of the Emberá to its pre-Columbian counterparts is it clear that indigenous ceramicists have given expression to their other in pottery since ancient times (Figures 13 and 14). Archeologists use the term "anthropomorphic pottery" to refer to containers with partial human forms, but the definition is based on a decoupling of form and function that does not exist in the material, social and even emotional production of indigenous pottery.<sup>29</sup> The status of these ceramics seems in reality to be suspended between being pottery and being human. Both sides or points of view are equally

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Daniela Castellanos, "Vasijas envidiosas de Aguabuena: un ensayo etnográfico sobre la vida del mundo material", in Luis Alberto Suárez Guava, ed., *Cosas vivas: antropología de objetos, sustancias y potencias* (Bogotá: Pontifical Xavierian University, 2019), 51-70; Laura Holguín, "De lo 'floriado' a lo marchito: el sistema del enrollamiento y la voluntad del barro en Aguabuena, Colombia", in Luis Alberto Suárez Guava, ed., *Cosas vivas: antropología de objetos, sustancias y potencias* (Bogotá: Pontifical Xavierian University, 2019), 267-288.



important and converge in the shape and materials of the pottery. It is not a matter of attributing an objective or intrinsic container function to the pottery and a subjective or extrinsic decorative function to the anthropomorphic elements. The jug is a living subject with its own personality even when it does not display human features. At the same time, arms that squeeze the belly and touch the body/container or in turn hold a basin in their hands demonstrate the awareness of liminal status by the pottery/person.

### 3. *Evolution // Fold*

The concept of evolution in Americanist anthropology has had a dominant role since the founding of the discipline. Evolutionary studies from sociobiology to processual archeology have taken care to classify the continent's societies according to degrees of social complexity, applying comparative methods to the analysis of technological development, subsistence regime, population density and settlement patterns.<sup>30</sup> The most important representative of the processualist trend in Colombia is Robert Drennan, professor at the University of Pittsburgh, where he has studied an entire generation of Colombian archeologists and, among them, Carl Langebaek, currently the most influential archeologist in the country.<sup>31</sup> The term most commonly adopted to define pre-Hispanic societies is

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Trigger, *A history of archaeological thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 387-417.

<sup>31</sup> Robert D. Drennan, "Chiefdoms of southwestern Colombia", in Helaine Isbell and William Silverman, eds., *The handbook of South American archaeology* (New York: Springer, 2008), 381-403;



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"cacicazgo". The word derives from "cacique", which means master or chief in the language of the Taíno, the first people with which the Spaniards came into contact in the Caribbean in the late 15th century. Since then, any indigenous socio-political entity or class system has been designated as *cacicazgo*, regardless of its geographic location on the continent. Processual archeology concerned with the development of social complexity adopted the term to indicate the intermediate link between egalitarian societies, such as that of the hunter-gatherers, and states or empires, such as the Aztecs and the Incas in the Americas.

Following the analysis of Marshall Sahlins, it can be argued that the anthropological and archeological study of social complexity has in large part normalized terms originating out of the European capitalist economy, such as "market", "competition" and "productivity", to approach economic and sociocultural systems developed in a non-European context and in a pre-industrial era.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the Americas, this means that while the *cacicazgos* left behind the "primitive communism" of the egalitarian societies, they also failed to establish an elite capable of controlling the means of production and accumulating excess wealth. So, scholars like Drennan and Langebaek suggest that power in the Colombian *cacicazgos* lay with their ability to manipulate

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Carl H. Langebaek, *Regional archaeology in the Muisca territory: a study of the Fúquene and Susa Valleys*, University of Pittsburgh Memoirs in Latin American Archaeology 9 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Marshall Sahlins, "La sociedad opulenta primitiva", in *Economía de la edad de la piedra* (Madrid: Akal, 1983), 1-9.



ideological symbols.<sup>33</sup> Similar to the interpretation of Hoopes and Fonseca mentioned above, art, defined as a cultural expression at once material and symbolic, plays a privileged part in the indigenous societies of Colombia: that of encoding symbols of prestige.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the cultural area model, however, in processual archeology it is power and not culture that is the true protagonist, and its accumulation or public exercise is the main role of art.

It is no coincidence, then, that Drennan's studies about the development of *cacicazgos* in Colombia have centered on the southwestern region and the archeological cultures of San Agustín and Tierradentro, where the country's best-known examples of "prehistoric monumental art" are found.<sup>35</sup> The San Agustín stone sculpture is associated with burials in vast areas around cemeteries. Very few examples are in their original location, due to the different uses the area has been given following their initial creation. In any case, the monumentality of the sculptures, a key element for demonstrating the chief's power, is undermined by certain recurring shapes. The anthropomorphic figures, generally a man, whose imposing head boasts big eyes, nose, and animal fangs, are flat (Figures 15-17). While from the front the symmetry and roundness of the lines suggest a body that is solid and present in the space, from the side the image of the threatening

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<sup>33</sup> Carl H. Langebaek, "Arte precolombino-culturas", in *Gran Enciclopedia de Colombia*, vol. 6 (Bogotá: Círculo de Lectores, 1993), 30.

<sup>34</sup> Hoopes and Fonseca, "Goldwork and Chibchan identity".

<sup>35</sup> Konrad T. Preuss, *Arte monumental prehistórico: excavaciones hechas en el Alto Magdalena y San Agustín (Colombia), comparación arqueológica con las manifestaciones artísticas de las demás civilizaciones americanas* (Bogotá: Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History, 2013). The original edition in German is from 1929.



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character disappears completely. This way of depicting animals, men or supernatural beings suggests that they live on another plane and their appearance, and perhaps their power, is not imposed on their surroundings but rather appears and disappears depending on the position and point of view of the person looking at it.<sup>36</sup> When comparing the San Agustín sculptures with the Calima lime dippers, it is clear that there are several similarities in shape and iconography that have been previously highlighted in the work regarding the regional development of the southwest.<sup>37</sup> The Augustinian images and the lime dippers have in common the combination of rounded, three-dimensional figures with abstract, flat profiles, as well as the topic of hunting or predation, but I think that scale is a fundamental element that differentiates them. The lime dippers demand careful examination, which creates an intensity that, in my view, contrasts with the evanescence of the so-called monumental sculpture of San Agustín.

Recently, Langebaek has questioned his own positions regarding social complexity, economic production and dominant ideology in pre-Hispanic Colombia.<sup>38</sup> In the light of archeological data around access to consumer and luxury goods, housing and physical health in a highland Muisca village, Langebaek and his team confirm that a privileged elite cannot be definitively

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Weismantel, "Encounters with dragons: the stones of Chavín", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, n. 65/66 (2014): 37-54.

<sup>37</sup> Plazas and Falchetti, "Tradición metalúrgica del suroccidente colombiano"; Bray, "Malagana and the goldworking tradition of Southwest Colombia".

<sup>38</sup> Carl H. Langebaek, *Antes de Colombia: los primeros 14.000 años* (Bogotá: Debate, 2021), 364-392.



distinguished from the rest of the population.<sup>39</sup> The Universidad de Los Andes archeologist concludes that we cannot talk about power solely in terms of domination and accumulation. In this context, it would seem that the applicability of the term “sociocultural evolution”, with all of its teleological, progressive, and cumulative implications, should also be questioned.

The notion of the fold that Deleuze used to define baroque thinking offers a conceptual alternative to evolution, favoring the processes and development of the object-subjects in a constant ebb and flow, overlaps and connections, in contrast to the unilateral movement of evolution.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of the applicability of the concept of the fold in indigenous art is the technique of lost-wax casting. María Alicia Uribe’s recent works in collaboration with Marcos Martinón in the laboratories of University College London have made it possible to delve into the cultural aspects of this goldworking technique.<sup>41</sup> The technique for casting and alloying silver and gold (*tumbaga*) was probably developed on the north coast of what is now Peru during the second millennium B.C.E., along with the hammering that was used for metallurgical production.

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<sup>39</sup> Carl H. Langebaek, *et al.*, “Vivir y morir en Tibanica: reflexiones sobre el poder y el espacio en una aldea muisca tardía de la sabana de Bogotá”, *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 51, n. 2 (2015): 173-207.

<sup>40</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *El pliegue. Leibniz y el Barroco* [In English, *The fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*] (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 1989).

<sup>41</sup> Marcos Martinón Torres and María Alicia Uribe Villegas, “Technology and culture in the invention of lost-wax casting in South America: an archaeometric and ethnoarchaeological perspective”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 25, n. 1 (2015): 377-390; “Los orfebres, las ofrendas y el oro entre los Muisca. Resultados de una investigación arqueometalúrgica en las figuras votivas de metal”, in Adolfo Meisel Roca, María Alicia Uribe Villegas and Carl H. Langebaek, eds., *Economías prehispánicas de Colombia* (Bogotá: Bank of the Republic, Luis Ángel Arango Library, 2021), 127-170.



Lost-wax casting was, on the other hand, the technique used prominently by the goldworking communities of the northern Andes. While adequate data is not available, it is believed that this technique was developed in the Caribbean plains along the San Jorge river at some point before the fifth century C.E., when it began to spread to the rest of the northern Andes and the Isthmus.<sup>42</sup>

Based on archeometric analysis and previous ethnographic data, Uribe and Martínón highlight the importance of the cultural values of the lost-wax technique, especially those associated with the wax used to create the figures.<sup>43</sup> The apparent sloppiness of the casting work characteristic of Muisca offerings shows that the goldworkers put emphasis on the creation of the image in wax on top of the metal object. When the wax figurine was covered in dust and clay to create the mold and the liquid *tumbaga* was poured in, errors often occurred that could not be corrected later. It is common, for example, for Muisca goldwork pieces to show deposits of extra *tumbaga* that came out of the funnels of the mold (Figures 18 and 19). Muisca goldworkers also created their pieces in a single casting with no subsequent assembly and without affecting the shine of the surface through oxidation. These technical qualities seem to indicate that there was in fact an intention by the goldworkers to leave signs of the production process on the pieces. Before reaching its finished state, the figurine went

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<sup>42</sup> Martínón Torres and Uribe Villegas, "Technology and culture", 379.

<sup>43</sup> Ann Osborn, *El vuelo de las tijeretas* (Bogotá: Fundación de Investigaciones Arqueológicas Nacionales, Bank of the Republic, 1985); Ana María Falchetti, "La ofrenda y la semilla: notas sobre el simbolismo del oro entre los Uwa", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 43 (1997): 3-37.



through various incarnations: from the wax figure to its molding in the clay and then the gold alloy. The change from one stage to another implied the total destruction or disappearance of the previous version. Even so, the *tunjo* carries traces of its previous life.

Another example of the fold in the Muisca context is provided by the ceramic jars used for offerings (*ofrendatarios*). It is common for these to have a human shape, seated with folded legs and arms (Figure 20). In other cases, the jars are simpler, rounded and elongated without further decoration. In the hollow interior there were *tunjos* (which in turn commonly take the shape of a person sitting with folded arms and legs) as well as gemstones, shell necklaces, woven fabric, and yarns. Recently, at the Divino Niño site near Sopó, two *ofrendatarios* have been found whose external shape seems to be unidentified (Figure 21). Inside, however, there is a seated figure, which was also accompanied by various *tunjos* placed on top of a cushion of plant fiber.<sup>44</sup> In this case, then, the seated man is not the container, but rather the contents. The reversal of the interior and exterior tests the limits between object and subject. Through changes in material, the subject creates themselves over and over again. The process is not cumulative but rather takes place through substitutions: the contents replace the container,

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<sup>44</sup> Roberto Lleras Pérez, *et al.*, “Un campo de ofrendas muisca. Los hallazgos de los sitios Divino Niño y Lejanías del Valle, Sopó”, in Luisa Vetter Parodi and Roberto Lleras Pérez, eds., *Los metales en nuestra historia* (Lima: French Institute of Andean Studies; Colombian Academy of History, 2021), 317.



the interior replaces the exterior, just as we saw in the case of lost-wax production.

#### 4. Excess // Abundance

The last contrast I want to present is not just related to those above, but rather in a way it combines them. The attitude of the Spanish invaders and, following independence, of the creoles and “white men” towards the indigenous population and its lands can only be described in terms of excess: violence, exploitation, persecution, and denial of rights. No one has been able to express the horror of this history like Michael Taussig, who visited Colombia for the first time in the 1970s, when he traveled to Cauca Valley as a doctor during the armed conflict between guerrilla groups and paramilitaries.<sup>45</sup> With his books *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*, *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man: a study in terror and healing* and *My cocaine museum*, Taussig has influenced anthropologists far beyond the borders of Colombia.<sup>46</sup> *My cocaine museum* in particular offers a sharp criticism of the omission and invisibility of the violence related to mineral extraction in the galleries of the Gold Museum in Bogotá.

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Taussig and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Ayahuasca and Shamanism: Michael Taussig interviewed by Peter Lamborn Wilson* (Brooklyn, NY: Exit 18, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Michael Taussig, *El diablo y el fetichismo de la mercancía en Sudamérica* [In English, *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*] (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1993); *Chamanismo, colonialismo y el hombre salvaje: un estudio sobre el terror y la curación* [In English, *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man: a study in terror and healing*] (Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2012); *Mi museo de la cocaína* [In English, *My cocaine museum*] (Popayán: Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2013).



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Cocaine becomes the modern fetish for talking about the destruction of the conquest, colonization and slavery that is rarely included in official accounts about the country's pre- and post-Columbian art. In his earlier text about shamanism in Putumayo, the fetish was rubber, which was what led Peru, Colombia and the Anglo-Canadian Peruvian Amazon Company to commit political genocides in the late 19th century and early 20th.<sup>47</sup> Tomb robbery—the pre-Columbian gold rush—is part of this same excess intended to accumulate wealth through destruction. While the pillaging began with the arrival of the Spaniards and was initially linked to campaigns of religious persecution, in the 19th century, as we saw in the first section, indigenous assets began to be collected to form part of the newborn nation. Economic interests were developed inextricably with the “extirpation of idolatry” in the colonial era and, later, the “collection of antiquities”. A recent article written by the director of the Gold Museum and one of its curator-researchers proves that the goldwork now held by the Bank of the Republic is a conclusive record of the ups and downs of the economic interests that have existed in the country.<sup>48</sup> Between 1941 and 1967, the majority of the pieces in the Museum were Quimbaya, due to the institution's acquisition of Antioquian collections. During this time, 14,000 more pieces were added, the majority of them goldwork.<sup>49</sup> Although, it was in the

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<sup>47</sup> Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism and the wild man*.

<sup>48</sup> María Alicia Uribe Villegas and Héctor García Botero, “Una historia del coleccionismo y la investigación en el Museo del Oro (Banco de la República, Bogotá, D. C., Colombia)”, *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 60 (2021): 5-117.

<sup>49</sup> Uribe Villegas and García Botero, “Una historia del coleccionismo”, 33.



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1970s and 80s, with the unchecked colonization of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta for the illegal cultivation of coca and marijuana, when the Museum received the astonishing figure of almost 35,000 pieces, the majority of them Tayrona.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the relentless pillaging of the Malagana estate in Palmira, Cauca Valley in 1992-1993 shows that the looting of tombs and indigenous lands continues to occur and is in some way supported by public policies of indiscriminate mineral extraction in rural and natural areas in the country.<sup>51</sup> It is in this concerning context that Fernando Arias' 2012 work, *Agua que no has de beber (edición oro)*, [Water you don't have to drink (gold edition)] is understood (Figure 22). The title refers to a popular saying that warns not to meddle in others' affairs because one runs the risk of causing trouble. Gold, water, and the mountains are resources that do not belong to man, but that given our greed and ignorance we end up misusing and destroying, with uncertain yet staggering lasting consequences.

The appalling destruction that the rules of the economy seem to impose on contemporary society can be contrasted with the concept of abundance that recurs in anthropological literature about "societies against the State". In a piercing essay on the work of Pierre Clastres, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, one of

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> The first newspaper stories were published in early 1993, but it seems the pillaging began towards the end of the previous year. "Saquean cementerio indígena", *El País*, January 23, 1993: A2; "Desalojan a gUAQUEROS", *El Tiempo*, March 10, 1993, <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-69509> (visited on November 27, 2022); Álvaro Botiva Contreras and Eduardo Forero Lloreda, "Malagana: gUAQUERÍA vs arqueología", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 31 (1992): 125.



the most influential anthropologists of the last few decades, proposes a new reading of the work by the French ethnologist, who first coined the phrase “societies against the State” to refer to the Guaraní people of Paraguay.<sup>52</sup> Clastres’ work, read in the light of Deleuze and Félix Guattari, offers a conceptual tool for questioning rampant capitalist exploitation as well as the domination and political silencing and social coercion promoted by the State. Resistance to the accumulation of wealth, centralization of power and abuse of human and natural resources is, to Clastres—and in Viveiros de Castro’s reading—an eminently political decision, because it demonstrates the irreducible ability of the human being to think in terms of difference and alterity.<sup>53</sup> Clastres thoroughly agreed with Sahlins that hunter-gatherer societies and small-scale agricultural societies lived in abundance because they spent a few hours out of the day to satisfy their subsistence needs, thus dedicating the majority of their time to social activities such as ceremonies and celebrations. Abundance thus arises out of the non-accumulation of reserves in favor of generosity and reciprocity.<sup>54</sup>

The Tree of Abundance is a well-known story with various versions among several Amazonian peoples (Figure 23).<sup>55</sup> It tells how the forest was created in a

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<sup>52</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The untimely, again”, introduction to Pierre Clastres, *Archaeology of violence* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 9-51; Pierre Clastres, *La sociedad contra el Estado* (Barcelona: Virus Editorial, 2010). The original edition in French is from 1974.

<sup>53</sup> Viveiros de Castro, “The untimely, again”, 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> Sahlins, “La sociedad opulenta primitiva”; Pierre Clastres, “Edad de la piedra, edad de la abundancia”, in *La economía de la abundancia en la sociedad indivisa* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Anthropos, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> <https://colecciones.icanh.gov.co/articulos/arbolAbun.php>



place that was previously dry and deserted. The only thing that grew in the land was a huge tree, a tree that could grow every kind of fruit. At the top was an enormous jug filled with water. In order to be able to enjoy the abundance and plenitude that the tree provided, humans and animals had to fell the tree which, once fallen, flooded the land and created the Amazon river.<sup>56</sup> According to the Emberá-Wounaan of Chocó, gold came from a huge tree that had to be nourished in order to grow.<sup>57</sup> It also fed off the animals that passed by, whose bones, once eaten, turned into gold. Finally, according to Reichel-Dolmatoff's analysis, the symbolism of the gold and the *tumbaga* among Amazonian peoples is closely linked to fertility (Figure 24).<sup>58</sup> Reichel's interpretation highlights the sexual aspect of procreation, but the concept of fertility can also be understood not just in the biological sense, but rather in the relational sense, as has been attempted throughout this essay, proposing terms such as multiplicity, the fold and abundance. In the village of Gachantivá, near Villa de Leyva in Boyacá, the burial of a boy of approximately eleven years of age included an offering of forty copper *tunjos* in a painted cup (Figure 25).<sup>59</sup> One of the figurines is still fastened

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<sup>56</sup> Fernando Urbina, Blanca de Corredor, María Cecilia López and Tomás Román, "La metamorfosis de Yüida Buinaima. Versiones de los uitotos y muinanes sobre el origen mítico y la hechura del maguaré", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 46 (2000): 40-76.

<sup>57</sup> Diego Arango Ruiz, "Quinientos años después... Testimonio de las comunidades indígenas y de la organización regional embera waunana del Chocó, OREWA", in Pablo Leyva, ed., *Colombia Pacífico*, vol. 2 (Bogotá: Fondo FEN-Colombia, 1993), 776-803; Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe, "El oro y la plata entre los embera y waunana", *Gold Museum Newsletter*, n. 48 (2001): 1-37.

<sup>58</sup> Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, "Things of beauty replete with meaning: metals and crystals in Colombian Indian cosmology", in *Sweat of the sun, tears of the moon: gold and emerald treasures in Colombia* (Los Angeles: Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, 1981), 17-33.

<sup>59</sup> *Historias de ofrendas muisca* (Bogotá: Gold Museum, 2013).



with a thread, which makes it possible to set the burial in the colonial era. The boy's fetal position could indicate his rebirth in the afterlife, where, it seems, the boy arrived with a message of plenitude: a cup filled with several copper figures.

The four contrasts discussed in this essay have been presented as a critical proposal in response to the difficulty of pooling knowledge derived from different disciplines that look into Colombian indigenous cultures. At the same time, the theoretical focus is meant to frame the history and knowledge of indigenous peoples and studies about indigenous heritage within the broader picture of the history of Colombian art.



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