

Peru's Golden Treasures

By Robert A. Feldman

ON FEBRUARY 16, the special exhibition "Peru's Golden Treasures" will open its doors, presenting more than 220 pieces of ancient Peruvian metalwork from the collection of the Museo Oro del Peru. These will be supplemented by more than 50 pieces from the collections of Field Museum and Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

Through this exhibit we hope to provide a glimpse of life in ancient Peru. It is a small slice, cut chiefly from the world of the nobility, but it does yield an interesting bit of the flavor of the most spectacular native society to be encountered by the Spanish explorers of the 16th century.

"Peru's Golden Treasures" is an unusual exhibit. While the conquistadores found vast quantities of gold in Peru, almost none survives today in its original form. In their frenzied efforts to get gold, the conquerors literally tore apart temples and tombs; when they could find no more already wrought, they forced the Indians to mine more. It is almost a miracle that there are any Peruvian gold artifacts left for us to admire. Indeed, it is only because the artifacts have become more valuable than their metal that modern looters—the ones responsible for uncovering most of the tombs even today—don't melt them down for bullion.

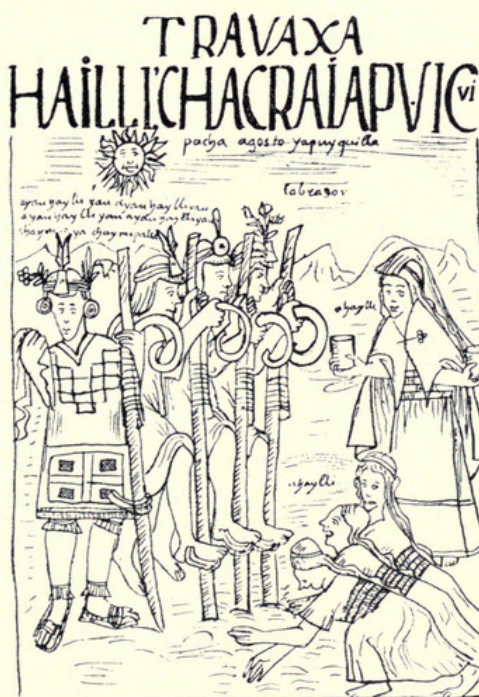
What remains shows the mastery over the medium that Peruvian craftsmen possessed. Most Peruvian metalwork was based on the use of hammered sheets which were bent, cut, soldered, embossed, or otherwise worked into often complex patterns. Elaborate castings were made using the lost-wax method; two or more metals could be cast onto each other, or onto hammered pieces. Alloys low in gold were gilded to look like the pure metal. Gold was contrasted with inlays of turquoise, jet, mother-of-pearl, or red *Spondylus* shell, or used with wood, tropical feathers, or multi-colored paint. Gold, silver, or copper bangles were sewn to clothing; large sheets relieved the monotony of stone or adobe walls in palaces and shrines.

While metal was used widely, the type depended on the status of the user. Copper and bronze served the commoner, but gold was reserved for the nobility. A copper fishhook or needle saw much actual use, while their golden counterparts' uses were more symbolic, as with the silver shovels often used in modern ground-breaking ceremonies. In a similar way, the golden vessels and beakers in this exhibit could have held *chicha* for a nobleman as he opened a public feast or toasted the mummified remains of his dead ancestors, while the commoners who followed him in drinking used cups of pottery.

The objects in this exhibit are works of beauty, providing a reflection of the artistic conceptions of their makers. Yet these artifacts, however beautiful, come to us lifeless, stripped by the tomb-robbers of whatever they might have told us about the death and life of their ancient owners. How old were these Peruvians when they died, what else did they have with them in the grave, what reflection of their lives could have been found if their tombs had not been plundered? These things we will never know.

SLOWLY, ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND HISTORIANS are sifting through the rubble and records left from the conquest, finding lost fragments that can be pieced together to give a picture of the past. In this issue of the *Bulletin* we present a report by Harvard University anthropologist Geoffrey W. Conrad on the progress of this work, and offer some illumination on the lives and deaths of the ancient Peruvians. The artifacts shown on the cover and on pages 4, 5, 8, 9, 20, 24, and 25 are among the treasures exhibited in hall 26 February 16 through May 21. □

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Illustrations from *Nueva Cronica Y Buen Gobierno*, by Felipe Guaman Pola de Ayala, published ca. 1615, and showing (1. to r.) Inca emperor

Atahualpa receiving Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish conqueror; ceremony inaugurating the growing season; a burial.



*Bird-shaped vessel.
Eyes of turquoise.
Height 15.2 Possibly
Chimu. Height 15.2
cm.*



*Left and below: ceremonial knives, or tumi. Chimu; 27.7
and 33.6 cm, respectively, not to scale.*





Pair of highly detailed ear ornaments. In center of disc is bird with eyes of turquoise. Moche. Length 28.8 and 28.5 cm. Detail below.





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