

## **Pre-Columbian Pottery:**

The Luther College Fine Arts Collection contains a significant number of pre-Columbian pottery pieces, both complete and reconstructed, from Central and South America. These works came to the College primarily in three ways.

Several pieces were acquired as the result of three January-Term classes that traveled from Luther College to Panama in 1969, 1970, and 1971. In 1969 the trip consisted of an archaeological excavation at Rio de Jesus, Veraguas and Cerro Gordo Provinces, under the auspices of Luther College and the National Museum of Panama. In 1970 and 1971, the classes met in Veraguas again as well as Cocolé and Chiriquí provinces. Each class consisted of approximately 15-20 students. Leaders of the classes were Luther College faculty led by Art Department member, Dean Schwarz. Pottery was both excavated and purchased for the Luther College Fine Arts Collection during these trips.

The National Museum of Panama had first selection of all pieces discovered by the classes. The remaining pieces were brought back to the United States; with some remaining in the possession of class members while others were donated to the College. The pottery acquired during these class experiences was accessioned into the Fine Arts Collection around 1984. Another 38 were transferred from the Luther College Anthropology Collection after it was determined their value rested in the artistic rather than the anthropological nature of the pieces.

Ref: Oral histories conducted with Walter Ordway ('69); Wendy Tessman Stevens ('69); Peter Deneen ('70); Mark Smeby ('70); Ted Sojka ('70); and, Douglas Eckheart (faculty). Research report prepared by David Kamm, *Examples of Ancient Panamanian Pottery from the Collection of Luther College*, September 1, 1984.

A second group of pre-Columbian pieces came to the Fine Arts Collection from the family of [Helen Elaine Talle](#). Talle's husband, [Keith Crown](#), collected 21 pieces of pre-Columbian pottery in the early 1950's during visits to Mexico. He purchased the ceramics in Acomburo, Mexico, a small village about 60 miles north of Morelia. The area contains several important sites of the Chupicuaro, a sub-group of the Tarascans who lived on the western edge of the Aztec nation. Construction of the Solis Dam in 1949 flooded much of the land and forced existing villages to relocate to a new site down-river, which they named Chupicuaro Nuevo. Many sites were hastily excavated by local families prior to the flooding. The pieces in the collection include bowls in various shapes including zoomorphic shapes as well as figures, which depict people and animals.

The term Chupicuaro refers to the culture and peoples geographically defined by the land immediately associated with the village of the same name located in the heart of present day Mexico, northwest of Mexico City, along the Lerma River. Activity flourished in the area during the late Pre-Classic and Terminal Classic periods,

roughly 300 BCE – 200 CE, during which time these pieces were made.

Ceramics from Chupicuaro are widely admired for their consistent craftsmanship. Pieces commonly display thick walls, which lent a functional durability to the wares. The clay body, or paste, is uniformly brown in color and quite coarse, and firings were done at moderate temperatures. Pottery pieces are broadly divided into black wares and red (or painted) wares, and are characterized by the standardization of vessel shapes, designs, and motifs. Clay figurines were also hand-modeled, and were typically decorated on the front only. Attention generally centered on the head in both modeling and decorating, a common feature on figurines made throughout Meso-America at that time.

Additional information about this group of pre-Columbian pottery can be found at the [Talle Collection](#) on the [Named Collections](#) page.

Ref: Anton, Ferdinand. *Pre-Columbian Art and Later Indian Tribal Arts*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1968; Franch, Jose Alcina. *Pre-Columbian Art*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1978; 1983; Fine Arts Collection files

A third significant group of 21 pre-Columbian ceramic pieces were donated to the Fine Arts Collection by the estate of Marguerite Wildenhain following her death in 1985. Wildenhain was not only an important ceramic artist, but she was also an intrepid traveler with a fascination for indigenous cultures in the Americas. She acquired the pre-Columbian pieces that came from her estate to the Fine Arts Collection during repeated trips to Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. In her book, *The Invisible Core*, Wildenhain wrote that upon first seeing Peruvian pots at a museum in Paris, 'All my background of admiration that I had had at that time for Greek and other 'classic' pots of the Mediterranean area went flying out of the museum window on contact with those strangely powerful and imaginative pots from South America.' After that, she was determined to see such pots in their 'natural habitat.'

Wildenhain was profoundly moved by her visits to South America and the pottery she found there. In some intangible ways those Peruvian pots could convey a deep feeling that transcended technical and purposeful utility, and that could move you to the quick, touch you in the deepest level of human experience, and add to your total human wisdom. It definitely was a spiritual power that had been conveyed through the most humble and common of all earthly materials: clay. 'I can only wistfully envy the totality of purpose and the concentration of their life in their work, and admire the excellence of the performance of those Peruvian people.' Memories of her South American trips, as well as the influence of the pottery she found there, can be seen in some of the pieces Wildenhain created and gave to the Luther College Fine Arts Collection.

Additional information about Marguerite Wildenhain and her several gifts of art to

Luther College can be found on the [Marguerite Wildenhain](#) and [Gerhard Marcks](#) artist pages.

Ref: Wildenhain, Marguerite. *The Invisible Core*. Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1973; Fine Arts Collection files.