since earliest times

MORE THAN JUST LETTERS

05.2025-
03.2026

Communication
in the Americas
since earliest times

MORE THAN JUST LETTERS

Communication
in the Americas

The exhibition shows graphic and, in a broader sense, visual communication systems and their use in the Americas from the beginning to the present day. It also seeks to refute the subliminal notion that Europeans "brought" writing to the Americas.

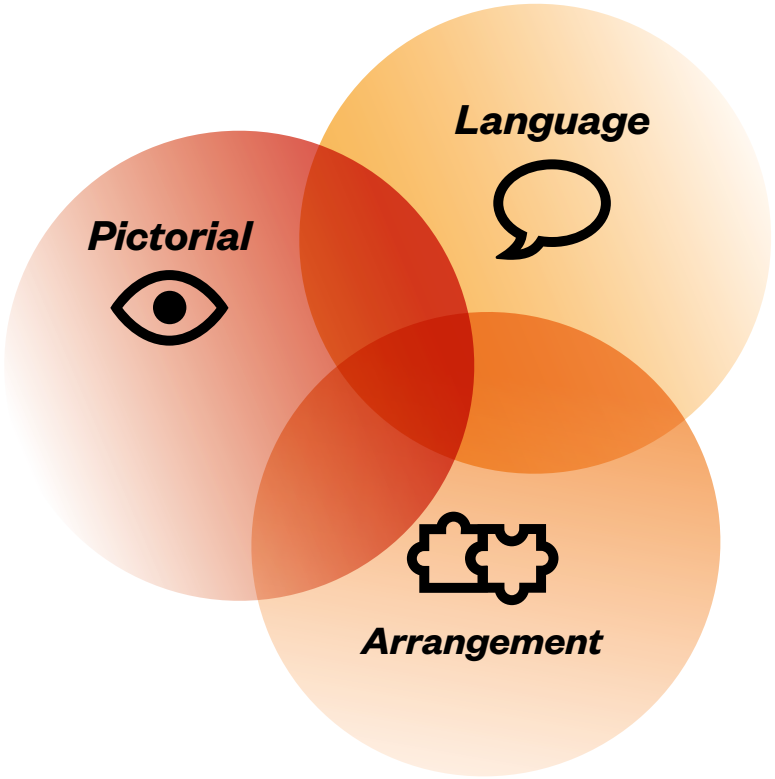
Native Americans developed numerous graphic communication systems long before the arrival of Europeans. These systems fulfilled almost all of the cultural and social functions that are associated mainly, though not exclusively, with alphabetic writing. The spectrum of systems in the Americas ranges from what can be considered images to what is conventionally understood as writing. These systems were used on a variety of supports such as ceramics, stone artifacts or buildings, but also on baskets, textiles and books made of animal skins. As means of communication, they reflect the knowledge of humankind. They serve to record history, to contact the divine or supernatural domain, or to explain how the world is structured and which beings inhabit it. They help to organize and dominate space, to count and control the economy, and they serve for aesthetic and emotional purposes, as well as for propaganda.

The objects in the exhibition are arranged according to the most important social functions that they fulfill as graphic or visual or written Indigenous mediums. However, they are often multi-functional, that is, they comply with more than one social function, so this division is not absolute. The visit of the exhibition can begin and end at any point. The booklet explains the objects according to their social function and their communication system.

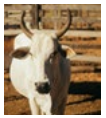
HOW IS MEANING ENCODED?

In our culture, we use other systems other than alphabetic writing to fulfill some social function, such as mathematical or chemical scripts, economic diagrams, road sign system, and so on. But we tend to sharply separate them from what we consider writing—unless we pause to consider how our modern communication tools, like cell phones or the Internet, actually work. In Indigenous American contexts, such separation does not apply and is not necessary for the communication system to be effective. It is essential, however, to comprehend the underlying mechanisms—that is, the semiotic mechanisms—used to convey meaning.

The aim of the exhibition is to show the different semiotic mechanisms in the Americas with which the meanings on or of the objects can be understood.



Meaning encoded by the pictorial elements. The usage of simplification and convention.



The evolution of the graphic form of the letter "A"


Egyptian Aleph
1900 B.C.


Proto-Sinaitic
1750 B.C.


Phoenician
1100 B.C.


Greek
720 B.C.

Reduction of the visual form in graphic design


Flightmode symbol in smartphone

Semantically meaningfull variants:


Elegant


Industrial


Cheerfull

Letters:
„e" „n" „K"

Syllabogram:
ま (japanese *ma*) **क** (hindi *ka*)

Logogram: **& ©**
Encodes meaning in a particular language.

Semogram: **% § @ £ 1**
Encodes meaning and reading in diverse languages.

Meaning through graphic arrangement encoded. Depending on its position among other signs, the number "3" has different semantic value:

"3" stands for three

"3" stands for three hundreds

3 of 4 parts (fractions)

Objects list

FUNCTION „CONTACT WITH DIVINE“

01 PARACAS/NASCA TEXTILE

Paracas/Nasca, Peru
Initial Nasca period, ca. 100 BCE

In the left panel of this textile, a stylized feline appears at the center—clearly reflecting characteristics of the Paracas style (800–200 BCE) from Peru's southern coast. The feline has a geometric head with snake-like extensions, each ending in smaller feline heads, a hallmark of Paracas visual language.

Surrounding it are four birds rendered in a more naturalistic way, associated with the later Nasca style (200 BCE–600 CE). The right panel features a hybrid figure, combining elements of a whale and a human. One extension of this figure includes an additional whale, and the overall representation follows the more realistic approach typical of Nasca art. A distinct dividing line between the two panels appears to mark a transition between the Paracas and Nasca traditions—perhaps intentionally emphasized by the artist.

Thanks to the extremely dry climate of southern Peru's coastal desert, ancient textiles like this one have been remarkably well preserved for over two thousand years. In the absence of a written script—unlike the Maya, Mixtec, or Aztec civilizations—cultures such as Paracas and Nasca relied on symbolic imagery in textiles, ceramics, and geoglyphs to communicate and convey meaning.

Paracas motifs are typically highly stylized, while the Nasca style introduced more clearly defined, figurative imagery. This textile likely dates to the transitional phase known as the Initial Nasca period when elements of both styles overlapped. Similar motifs are also known from embroidered fabrics, pottery, and large-scale geoglyphs. Although this piece has not yet undergone scientific dating, its stylistic features suggest it may indeed be pre-Hispanic. The level of detail and accuracy in representing this little-known transitional phase would make a modern forgery highly unlikely.

Markus Reindel

02 SHEEPSKIN

Andes, Bolivia
20th century

The signs painted on the sheepskin are “Andean indigenous script” (*escritura indigena andina*). While the outer side is shaved short, the inner side of the dried sheepskin shows 19 lines with signs in black and red ink. They reproduce a text that begins in the upper left corner and can be read line by line. There are at least four prayers that have not yet been clearly understood.

The lower half of the sheepskin refers to the Ten Commandments and the 14 Articles of Faith. The latter deal with Jesus' simultaneous humanity and divinity as the son of God and Mary. The abstract figurative signs do not follow the principles of an alphabet script, but are a form of phonetic spelling based on the rebus principle. They are individual words or word combinations that enable a viewer to recite Catholic doctrines in the indigenous language Aymara in an approximate phonetic manner.

So far, little is known about its origin. It is not clear whether it was developed by Spanish missionaries to teach the indigenous people the catechism and then continued to be used by the locals themselves, or whether the locals themselves primarily created the system. But even today, the locals use this “Andean indigenous script” for certain prayers. Instead of Aymara, the signs may also be based on the indigenous language Quechua, as in the case of the round clay object BASA 1252.

Alex Hohnhorst

03 MALUWANA

Apalai and Wayana, Brazil
20th century

The *maluwana* is the central piece of furniture in the dance house, both for the Apalai (*poro'topo*) and for the Wayana (*tucushipan*). It is a round wooden disc cut from the buttress roots of kapok trees and then painted.

The painting of figures and symbols establishes a direct relationship to the mythology that the Apalai and Wayana share in many aspects. The *maluwana* is understood as the materialization of the myth of their origin, which goes back to the twins *Mopo* and *Kujuli*. They built the first dance house—an act of

transforming their hostile environment into a habitable one for humans—and adorned it with a *maluwana*. By painting it, they pointed out the dangers of the cosmos being divided into three parts, and the wooden disc became a protective shield for all those who gathered under it.

Today's *maluwanas* almost always depict two *kuluwajak*, double-headed caterpillars. With their T-shaped claws, they threaten people. Fish-birds, *molukot*, turtles or roosters are also part of the iconography of the *maluwana*. The individual design of the *maluwana* is considered the artistic realization of the narrative structure of myths. These change their form with each oral performance.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

04 DANCE CLUB

Guayanas, Brazil
20th century

For the Apalai and Wayana, dance clubs are part of the equipment of men who participate in ceremonial dances. The painting on this dance club indicates that it was originally a weapon for defense against dangers from the environment—human and superhuman. This dance club shows two double-headed caterpillars, *kuluwajak*. They can kill with the T-shaped claws that protrude from their backs.

The history of the Guyanas and their population was characterized by violent conflicts for a long time. During their forays, the seminomadic groups repeatedly encountered other groups that were not related to them and often spoke a different language or unfamiliar dialect. There was a high risk that these encounters would turn violent. This is also the subject of the myth of *Tuluperê*—according to which it was he who killed the Apalai and Wayana people while they were trying to reach out to one another.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

05 ZÉ PILINTRA

Umbanda, Brazil
20th century

In the Umbanda canon there are entities, related to marginalized groups, with whom communication is conducted. One entity, *Exu*, is a trickster and guardian of order and disorder. Since the 16th century, Christianity has associated Exu with the image of the devil, contributing to prejudice against Afro-Brazilian religions.

Far from this devilish depiction, for the Fon-Ioruba of Western Africa, Exu is a messenger-god. In Umbanda, he is the guardian of the paths between physical and spiritual worlds, praised in public spaces of great circulation as well as at crossroads and border lines.

One common representation of Exu is Zé Pilintra, as seen in figurine 264 of the Horst Figge collection on Umbanda. Zé Pilintra is an urban Exu, bohemian, lover of vices and night life, dressed in a suit to negate his marginal social condition. Exu Zé Pilintra is here recognizable by the trident body shape, the colors red and black, the rim hat (here a measuring cup for powdered milk), and the mustache and goatee. The open mouth of the figurine could be for a cigarette offering. This statue presents these traits in a discrete form. Thus, one can see a process of visual communication: the reduction of certain elements that, for practitioners of Umbanda, are nevertheless easily recognizable.

Leandro Matthews Cascon

06 FIGURE VESSEL

Zapotecs, Mexico
pre-Columbian

This Zapotec figure vessel of unknown origin (approx. 350–500 CE) shows a man with large jade earrings, a nose ornament and an elaborate headdress made of quetzal feathers and jade beads combined with bat heads, i.e. an animal associated with death.

The depiction shows no individual facial features. It is obviously a ruler or an elite figure who was deified after his death and worshipped. A large breastplate hangs from his chest, held by a thick cord. In the square cartouche with volutes

at the corners, dots can be seen, possibly seeds, and a plant grows out of it. The whole thing can therefore be understood as a representation of a seed field, probably a symbol of regeneration.

In other cases, the feather decorations and robes show the manifestations of the storm god (*Cocijo*), various animals or forms of the alter ego, known as *nahuales*, as well as other signs that represent the generative and regenerative power of nature. It is likely that such vessels played an important role in facilitating the deceased's entry into the afterlife; at the same time, they may have been a focal point for rituals within the tomb.

Maarten Jansen

07 KATSINA

Pueblo communities, Southwest of the United States of America
20th century

Katsinas are spiritual beings of the Pueblo communities in the southwestern United States. They embody the spirits of deceased ancestors, animals and deities. The katsinas come to people to help them and to ensure growth and fertility in the world. The Hopi therefore also refer to their katsinas as friends.

The katsina figures, called *tithu*, are images of masked dancers carved out of cottonwood. The masks are worn by men of the kiva societies during certain ceremonies. They embody spiritual beings and enable a connection between the human and supernatural worlds. In this sense, dancers and masks themselves become katsinas. After ceremonies, the *tithu* are given to girls to teach them how to respectfully interact with the spiritual world.

Since the late 19th century, a growing market for katsinas emerged with European traders, but also ethnologists and tourists. Since then, the carvings have developed into an innovative and internationally recognized art form. Nevertheless, *tithu* have deep cultural and spiritual significance for many people in contemporary Pueblo communities.

The *tithu* shown here stands upright without a pedestal, is block-like in form and measures 23 cm. It is painted black and with a colored upside-down V. It is decorated with white crosses that can be interpreted as star symbols.

Ilja Labischinski

08 CODEX BORGIA (FACSIMILE)

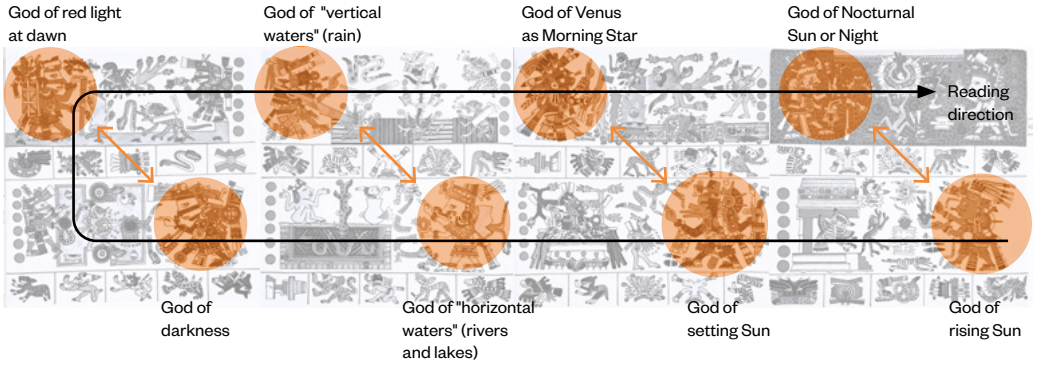
Aztecs/Nahua, Mexico
pre-Columbian

This divinatory manuscript served to determine what divine forces shaped a given day or other period of time. It most likely comes from the Cholula area in central Mexico, a region inhabited by the Nahua people. The codex, which is actually a sacred book made of 15 pieces of animal hide, probably of deer, measures more than 10 meters. It is folded like an accordion and painted on both sides. The codex bears the name of Cardinal Stefano Borgia, one of its previous owners, who gifted it to the Vatican Library, where it is located now. It was initially brought to Italy from New Spain (Mexico) by the Dominican Friar Domingo de Betanzos.

All divinatory codices are organized on the basis of a 260-day calendar, composed of 13 numbers and 20 signs for the days, such as snake, rabbit, eagle, house, and others. The section, as displayed, shows how particular gods influence “half-periods of 13 days.” Those signs can be seen below each scene. Periods of 13 days or their corresponding numbers were the central units of this calendar.

In codices, they were usually organized in boustrophedon or zigzag order, as can be seen in the order of the scheme. Additionally, here each page is a separate meaningful unit based on diagonal symmetry, showing two gods that embody reverse natural forces or phenomena, such as day and night, or horizontal waters in form of rivers and lakes versus vertical waters or rain. Finally, the name of the god is incorporated into each image.

Katarzyna Mikulska



God of the darkness, Black Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror", and his name glyphs of "smoking mirror"

Tonatiuh, the God of rising Sun, with his name glyph of sun at his back.

09 MODELED ANDEAN INDIGENOUS WRITING

Quechua, San Lucas, Bolivia
1950s

The figures modeled in clay and other signs made of organic and inorganic materials spell out the Lord's Prayer in Quechua, *Yayayku*. The signs are arranged in a spiral and the reading direction is counterclockwise from the outside to the inside.

The solid clay plate is called *llut'asqa* in Quechua and *torta* or *disco* in Spanish —cake or disk. The signs are mostly phonetic or homophonic, that is without reflecting the actual meaning in the narrower sense (rebus principle). The first and largest figure represents a priest and, in a figurative sense, "our Father" in Quechua, *yayayku*. This is followed by a piece of cloth (*p'acha*) lying on a column, which is read as *pacha*, earth; due to the elevated position, *pacha* becomes heaven, *hanaqpacha* ("upper earth"). A non-preserved arnica blossom, *suncho*, is read as *sutiki*, "your name." The small stick wrapped in colored thread represents wealth and here means qapaq *kayniki* ("your kingdom").

The use of three-dimensional "pictographs" among Quechua-speaking believers in San Lucas, Bolivia, was first documented by Catholic priest Porfirio Miranda Rivera in the 1940s. Hermann Trimborn acquired this piece for the collection from him in 1956. The "pictographs" still in use today in the highlands of Bolivia were made famous by Dick Edgar Ibarra Grasso. He had been researching them since the 1940s as *escritura indígena andina*, i.e. as "Andean indigenous writing." The Quechua researcher Roswith Hartmann devoted herself to these religious Quechua "pictographs" in the Bonn teaching and study collection.

Naomi Rattunde

FUNCTION „HISTORY"

10 CERAMIC BOWL

Maya, Mexico
Late Classic, 600–900 CE

This large bowl stands on three hollow legs filled with clay balls like rattles. The outside of the bowl is decorated with motifs reminiscent of jaguar fur. The painting on the inside has been largely eroded, probably through its use as a serving bowl at feasts at the royal court of the city of Naranjo in Guatemala.

Below the inner rim, a scroll of writing is painted in red on an off-white background. It consists of 35 blocks of hieroglyphs that can be divided into four sections. The first is a kind of "consecration formula" that appears in the same or similar form on many hundreds of ceramics: *alay k'a[h]laj u tz'ibnajal u lak yax ch'ok kelem*, "Here is presented the writing on the bowl of the first young man, the strong man." The name of the royal owner, that consists of many titles that are poorly understood today, follows. It is K'ahk' Ukalaw Chan Chaak, who ascended the throne on November 8, 755 CE, which is also known from numerous stone inscriptions in the city of Naranjo. The name of his mother, Ixik Unen Balam ("Mrs. Baby Jaguar"), follows on the bowl. She comes from the city of Tubal. Finally, the bowl names his father K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk, who ruled as king in Naranjo from 693 to about 728 CE.

As a precious piece of tableware in a courtly context, the size of the bowl suggests that it may have been used to serve corn bread at banquets. The text not only names King K'ahk' Ukalaw Chan Chahk as the owner of the bowl, but also emphasizes the legitimization of his rule through his descent from a noble mother and a father who was one of the most important monarchs of the city of Naranjo. The original context of the bowl's discovery is unknown. It was excavated illegally and introduced into the art market. It is on loan from the Pelling-Zarnitz Foundation in Tübingen.

Nikolai Grube

11 CARVED GOURD

Cochas, Peru
1983

This wanka-style carved gourd, called mate *burilado* in Spanish, comes from the village of Cochas in the Mantaro Valley in the Peruvian Central Andes. The village belongs to the Huaytapallana mountain range.

The mate, engraved with 31 vignettes, tells a micro-story about a child who falls ill due to the action of a jinx (*ch'usiq*) sent by a sorcerer to harm him. The child and his father go to a healer (*layqa*) who, after making a diagnosis with coca leaves, decides to cure him using the technique of *Jubeo de Cuy*, in which the animal is rubbed over the child's body to cure his ailment, known as *chacho*. The treatment works and the child returns to his family completely cured.

The gourd was bought from the artist and author Guillermo Ventura himself by Johanna Schupp in 1983. She brought it to Borken in 1987 and bequeathed it to the BASA Museum in 2021, together with other objects from Peru.

Joaquín Molina

More information: https://doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2024.76

3D-Model: https://skfb.ly/oQyTL QR Code 3D-Model:

12 CODEX TONINDEYE (FACSIMILE)

Mixtecs
pre-Columbian

The books of the Mixtecs, like this Codex Tonindeye, also known as the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, were made of deerskin strips folded into a codex and covered with a layer of plaster. The narrative scenes were painted on this layer according to pictographic conventions.

The scenes are largely comprehensible to speakers of different languages. Experts for this pictography read the books aloud in ritual contexts, thereby (re) creating a text in a special style of oral literature. Each figure is identified by the day of his birth, his calendar name, which consists of a number from 1 to 13 in combination with one of twenty characters in a fixed order.

The page shown here depicts Apoala, the sacred place of origin of the Mixtec dynasties. On the north side of the valley grew the Tree of Origin, from which, according to other sources, the founders of the Mixtec dynasties emerged. Next to it is the year 5 Flint, day 8 Movement, a sacred date that refers to the mysterious time of origin. Below the tree, an impressive cascade plunges into the abyss, with a "jade tongue," i.e. "with a beautiful sound". In the valley, between high rocks, two rivers can be seen: on the right, the river with the feather bundle, which is called *Yuta Tnoho* in the Mixtec language, i.e. the "river that plucks out," the toponymic sign of Apoala. There, Lord 5 Wind "Rain" and his wife, Lady 9 Alligator, ruled. Behind them, her parents are seated: Lord 1 Flower and Lady 13 Flower, already deceased in old age, on another river that flows through the same valley. At the other end of the valley, on the south side, the head of a feathered snake represents the cave now known as *Yahui coo maa*. A procession of four priests proceeds through the upper part of the pictorial space: Lord 7 Serpent, Lord 4 Serpent, Lord 1 Rain and Lord 7 Rain, carrying perforators for self-sacrifice, bags of incense and various leaves.

Maarten Jansen

13 CODEX BOTURINI (FACSIMILE)

Aztecs/Nahua
early colonial period, 16th century

The Codex, made from fig-bark paper (amate paper), consists of 22 joined, folded sheets, each measuring 19.8 cm x 25.5 cm, with a total length of 5.49 meters. The section depicts three scenes from the migration narrative of the Aztecs, or Mexica, as which they referred themselves. It was only during their journey from northern Mexico to central Mexico that they developed a strong connection to their central deity, Huitzilopochtli. They regarded themselves as his chosen people, a theme reflected in the depicted scenes.

In the left third of the segment, a moment of rest is shown. Representing the entire group, five men in white cotton cloaks squat on the ground. They partake of their travel provisions, consisting of maize cakes (tamales) with sauce. To their left, on a pedestal, stands the image of the god Huitzilopochtli, recognizable by a human head emerging from a bird's beak and a cypress tree bursting loudly above their heads.

The black footprints indicate the path to the next scene on the right: six men are seated around the image of Huitzilopochtli. They converse with each other and with him, as indicated by the volutes in front of their mouths. The atmosphere is tense, and tears are shed. In the upper half, the consequences of the conversation unfold.

Here, the names of eight major houses are listed, representing those who will continue the journey. The rectangular cartouches depict stylized doorways of houses in side view, symbolizing the concept of *calpulli* ("clan"), each accompanied by eight ethnonyms. From left to right, these are the Huexotzinca, Chalca, Xochimilca, Azteca, Malinalca, Chichimeca, Tepaneca, and Matlatzinca.

The immediate scene below shows, on the left, the speaker of the Mexica addressing a representative of the others, informing him that, following the command of their tribal god Huitzilopochtli, they must separate from them. The Mexica now continue their journey alone. The speaker on the right underscores his grief through tears.

Antje Gunsenheimer

FUNCTION „AESTHETICS / SOCIAL"

14 BENCH SEAT

Apalai-Wayana, Brazil
20th century

For the Apalai and Wayana, benches are not just pieces of furniture, but a profane and ritual medium for creating or guaranteeing security for the community. Presented as a gesture of welcome to guests, they are a request to provide information about the reason for their visit. This practice of asking newcomers about their "coming from where" and "going to where" serves to assess possible dangers that could arise for the hosts from the visitors' presence.

Payés (shamans) use painted benches as places where their bodies become the *axis mundi*. As such, the *payé* penetrates the layers of the cosmos and connects them for the benefit of the people. In doing so, he is exposed to great dangers from which the painting on his bench is supposed to protect him. Above all, it is the two-headed *kuluwajak* that can be dangerous to him. At the same time, they represent all the dangers that threaten people in the environment outside the protection of their home and social community.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

15 POLYCHROME CYLINDER VESSEL

Maya, unknown origin
Late Classic, 600–900 CE

The vessel, donated to the Museum in 2012, shows a scenic representation in black and red-orange on a beige background. It depicts two monkeys and, between them, an inscription made up of three horizontally arranged blocks of hieroglyphs. Both monkeys are wearing a red loincloth, a red cloth draped around their shoulders and knotted at the front, and either a beige cocoa leaf or a piece of cloth as ear jewelry. Based on their facial features, they can be identified as spider monkeys (*Ateles geoffroyi*).

Their clothing is characteristic of Mayan depictions of monkeys as supernatural beings (way). Their loincloths identify both monkeys as males. The pose of the monkey on the right may indicate that it is reaching for one of the cocoa pods held by the other monkey. Monkeys handling cacao pods is a common motif on numerous ceramic vessels in the Maya culture. This reflects a typical behavior of monkeys that live on cacao plantations and feast on the pulp of ripe cacao pods. At the same time, they spit out the cocoa beans, thus spreading the seeds for the germination and growth of future cocoa trees. This behavior makes spider monkeys "cocoa bringers." Only the third hieroglyphic block of the damaged inscription is legible as *ba-tz'u*. In most Mayan languages, *batz'* means "howler monkey" (*Alouatta*). However, the meaning of *ba-tz'u* as "howler monkey" contradicts the representation of spider monkeys here. This may indicate that *ba-tz'u* was used in Classic Mayan as a generic term for various types of monkeys.

Elli Wagner

FUNCTION „AESTHETICS / PERSONAL“

16 FEMALE FIGURE

Llanos de Mojos, Bolivia
1200–1500 CE

This ceramic figure comes from the Llanos de Mojos, in the Bolivian Amazon, and was made between 1200 and 1500 CE. It is part of a long tradition of figurative representation that was widespread in pre-colonial Amazonian societies. The figure is 22.3 cm tall and weighs 935 g.

It represents a woman with a round belly, indicating that she is pregnant. Her friendly and smiling face, as well as the fine drawings on her body, make her a special piece. The painting shows spirals, S-shaped lines and symmetrically arranged geometric patterns. These designs were not only used to decorate the body, but often had a deeper meaning. They could provide information about a person's social position, their role in the community or their relationship to spiritual ideas. The black areas, such as the flattened skull and the buttocks, are particularly striking. These details could represent certain cultural practices, such as deliberate deformation of the head or ritual body painting.

In many indigenous cultures of the Amazon, spiral motifs represent the cycle of life and the close relationship between man and nature. It is likely that these figures were part of ceremonies or used in everyday life to pass on knowledge and traditions.

Carla Jaimes Betancourt

17 STAMPS

Manteño-Huancavilca culture, Ecuador
ca. 800–1532 CE

The stamps, made of ceramic, stone, or wood, feature a variety of geometric and figurative motifs. Representations of animals and plants in abstract forms or as anthropomorphic figures dominate which could have their roots in the spiritual and cultural worldview. They follow visual conventions in imagery, iconography and style which manifest themselves in recurring patterns, symbols and characteristic representations of animals and plants. The motifs on the stamps reflect cosmological and religious themes, such as the connection between humans, nature and the gods.

The patterns on the stamps could have been used to give bodies, textiles or ceramics a protective or spiritual meaning or to mark status and identity within the community. But their everyday use to decorate pottery and textiles is also conceivable. This suggests that the stamps were not used exclusively for decorative purposes, but also served communicative purposes.

As a visual representation of stories, values or identities, they may have fulfilled a narrative or communicative function. But they also stand for the high level of craftsmanship in the Manteño-Huancavilca culture.

Maya Saupe Morocho

FUNCTION „DISPLAY“

18 CLAY CUP

Maya, unknown origin
Late Classic, 600–900 CE

The polychrome clay cups of the Maya, frequently used at royal courts for drinking chocolate, for example, often depict scenes or rituals that took place in the palaces. This is the case here. The scene on the bowl, of which only two-thirds have survived, show high-ranking people on pedestals or benches facing someone lower down in the hierarchy. They appear to be communicating with each other through gestures.

However, the partially preserved inscription, spread over several blocks of hieroglyphs, is illegible. Signs similar to Mayan writing were used, but as they make no sense, they are referred to as "pseudo-hieroglyphs." They may have been used to confer some prestige on the owner of the clay jar, even if the execution itself was not by a skilled scribe. The Maya used the same word for both writing and painting.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

19 TOTEM POLE

Haida Gwaii Island, Canada
20th century

Models of totem poles, like this one from Haida Gwaii Island, represent the transcultural history of the American Northwest coast of Canada and tell of colonization and violence, but also of the continuity of art and cultural techniques. From the mid-19th century, totem poles were increasingly produced as models for trade with Europeans. With the increase in tourism in the region, the demand for souvenirs also increased. In this sense, the models were a commodity produced for consumption. The model here is made of black argillite, a material that only exists on Haida Gwaii. It is a fine-grained sedimentary rock that consists mainly of hardened clay particles. Thus, the material itself refers to the specific connection to the environment. The models of totem poles also have a high cultural and artistic value. They offered the opportunity to express artistic skills in a new medium. Models of totem poles are also a means of expression of specific ontological creation myths. They represent transcultural encounters and convey views on the relationships between humans, non-humans and the world. Objects of this kind are therefore also agents of ontological communication. They illustrate how Indigenous and Western worldviews encounter and influence each other in their materiality and figuration.

Ilja Labischinski

20 TABLET OF THE SUN (CAST)

Maya, Palenque, Mexico
7th century CE

The Tablet of the Sun in the Maya city of Palenque was created in 692 CE during the reign of K'inich Kan Bahlam II (635–702 CE) as part of his extensive program of inscriptions, imagery, and architecture which linked the mythological past with the political present.

The image emphasizes the divine legitimacy of the rulers of Palenque and their central role in the cosmic structure of the Maya worldview. In the center is the deity GIII, a supernatural force associated with the sun, the underworld, and war. GIII is part of Palenque's holy triad, which also includes GI, a deity associated with water and the sky, and GII, Unen K'awiil, the god of lightning and rulership. The inscription refers to the mythical birth of these gods in the distant past and links them to the royal dynasty. This establishes kingship as part of a divine order that embodies not only temporal power but also cosmic destiny.

The artistic design reinforces these connections: GIII displays jaguar-like features and fiery elements that identify him as a sun god and an underworld being. This depiction reflects the cyclical worldview of the Maya, in which light and darkness, life and death are inextricably intertwined. The Tablet of the Sun is thus both a religious artifact and a political symbol, anchoring K'inich Kan Bahlam II's reign within a mythological-historical framework. It presents the king as a mediator between gods and humans and as a guarantor of cosmic order.

Christian Prager

FUNCTION „ONTOLOGY“

21 FLASK

Maya, El Salvador
ca. 700–800 CE

This small flask is an example of how different communication systems were brought together in the smallest of spaces. Although the use of such small clay vessels is usually unclear, they are often referred to as "flasks" or "poison bottles."

A man is depicted wearing a necklace, loincloth, and headdress, suggesting a person of high rank. This image is accompanied by a text in Maya hieroglyphic writing. This presumably refers to the person depicted by the name or title *chehak*, a designation found on a very similar object from a tomb in Chalchuapa, El Salvador. The narrow sides are also decorated with other signs that are not clearly identifiable or perhaps do not make sense.

Around the bottle-shaped opening of the rectangular vessel, the roof of a Maya house can still be recognized as a wickerwork of perishable material with vertical lines underneath indicating stone blocks as a cornice. This form of representation makes the "jar" itself a real building as the Maya knew it. This is confirmed by the inscription which refers to the person depicted as "his house" (*yotot*).

Daniel Grana-Behrens

22 FIRE FAN

Wayana-Apalai, Northeast of Brazil
20th century

The fire fan features the motif known as *sikaliot(w)/xikario(a)* three times. It represents two-headed butterfly larvae feeding on cassava leaves. These are symbolized by the crossed "X" elements on the sides. This pattern most likely refers to *Tulupere*, a mythical figure central to the Wayana-Apalai.

Motifs of this kind belong to a graphic repertoire generally designated as *mirikut(w)/menuru(a)*. Although subcategories within this repertoire exist, their use is fluid and depends more on a combination of material, composition and context than on strict categorization, reflecting a dynamic visual language deeply intertwined with oral tradition.

Basketry is particularly valued for its ability to reproduce objects with *mirikut/menuru* motifs. For this reason, it is not only important in everyday and ceremonial life but has also established itself as an important source of income. Traditionally, this craft is practiced by men, who usually weave fibers from the aruma plant (*Ischnosiphon spp.*) into objects like this fire fan.

Isabel Zwach

23 BELT CHUMPI

Cochabamba, Bolivia
20th century

The woven belt, *chumpi*, is an example of the "technological alphabet" of complex Andean textiles, here of the Quechua-speaking population. In the Andes, textiles were the most important means of communication. Techniques and structures give them three-dimensionality. Central to this is their non-pictorial structure of three to eight layers of warp threads.

Such fabrics are characterized by the use of multiple colors and differentiated iconographies, which are created by the structure. The interlocking of structure, technology and design is also the reason why female weavers in the Andes—weaving was and is primarily a female activity—never talk about decoration. As a communication system, textiles were and are important for the exchange of information, ideas and goods between the inhabitants of different ecological levels, such as the highlands and the valleys. The iconographies document special products of a region or characteristic activities of its inhabitants.

In this case, communication works on the basis of counting, like an even or odd number of motifs, color contrasts or combinations, the forms of the design, like "combs" (*peinecillos*) or figures. After the Spanish conquest, the three-dimensional structure of the textiles presented the Europeans with major challenges in their attempts to understand them. But the missionary Martín de Murúa did transcribe and document a *chumpi*. His sketch of the fabric shows a coded pattern of symbols, Quechua prayers, and linguistic patterns in three vertical columns. However, it is not known how the prayers and columns are connected to the structure and iconography of the *chumpi*.

Karoline Noack

24 CERAMIC VESSEL (JONI CHOMO)

Shipibo-Konibo, Peru
20th century

The Shipibo-Konibo call large, thin-walled vessels like this one with a human face as a spout *joni chomo*. They are made using the coil technique with clay tempered with ash and ground potsherds.

The vessels are decorated with black, red and sometimes blue lines. They form a pattern against a cream-colored background. The glazing and lacquering make such vessels waterproof and they are used to store manioc beer, *masato*, which is consumed at festivals. The painted lines, called *kené*, are applied by the potters as part of a ritual involving song. For the Shipibo-Konibo, the world is permeated by such *kené* which, however, usually remain invisible. In this sense, they reflect the individual perspective of the potter and are thus considered an expression of her personal *shinan*, her spiritual and technical ability to make ceramics.

The vessel illustrates the division of the cosmic world: the neck decorated with *kené* represents the upper world, the body the everyday world and the unpainted bottom the underworld. In this form, the ceramic production of the Shipibo-Konibo combines knowledge about things—the vessel as the cosmic world—with the personal knowledge of the potters who make such vessels with the help of *kené*. The vessel, which was acquired by Bernd Fischermann in Pucallpa in 1970, has been on permanent loan to the BASA Museum since 1989.

Lars-Michael Schacht

25 TLAHUIZCALPANTECUHTLI (COPY)

Aztecs/Nahua, Mexico
ca. 1400–1500 CE

This statuette from central Mexico is most likely of Aztec origin. It is made of greenstone with inlays of coral spondylus. The figure may represent Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, the "Lord of the Dawn," or Venus as the morning star, one of the representations of Quetzalcoatl, a creator god. It is decorated with feathers for this deity and with a shining sun disk on the back, on which the sun god can be seen, i.e. the celestial body facing Venus.

The statuette is decorated in several places with day symbols of the ritual calendar. Tlaltecuhtli, the earth goddess, is depicted on the underside. The calendar dates are specific signs combined with numbers from a numerical system. On the right hand is the sign 9 *Ehecatl* (9 Wind), and on the left one the sign 4 *Ehecatl* (4 Wind). Though the meaning of these days is still unclear, 4 *Ehecatl* is considered to be the name of Quetzalcoatl. On the top left of the paper-like headdress are 9 *Ozomatli* (9 Monkeys) and 1 *Cipactli* (1 Lizard) and on the right 10 *Calli* (10 Houses) and 1 *Ehecatl* (1 Wind). When the days are added together, they make up half of a Venusian year of 584 days.

Moreover, the day 1 *Cuauhtli* (1 Eagle) is depicted on the loincloth in a kind of cartouche. This day is also associated with women who died in childbirth and had a special place in the Aztec realm of the dead.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

26 HUIPIL BLOUSE

Ixil, Maya, Guatemala
20th century

The traditional garment of Mayan women, including the Ixil women, is a sleeveless blouse called *huipil*. These one-piece blouses are usually made of cotton. The garment shows the quetzal, a native bird with long green feathers, a deer, and human figures. Even in pre-colonial times, the quetzal was particularly important to the Maya because of its long green tail feathers and because it is rarely seen. Today, it is also the national bird of Guatemala. On the other hand, the deer is considered the protector of land and water.

The blouse shows half diamonds in the area of the head opening which, together with the circular motifs, refer to the cosmos in the Ixil world view. Between the diamond-shaped elements, the quetzal can be seen embroidered three times and the deer twice. In the lower section of the blouse, a female figure wearing a skirt can be seen between a quetzal and a deer, and a diamond-shaped element between two quetzals.

The embroidery on the blouse does not simply equal a decoration or a "pretty motif;" instead, it is the reproduction of specific ideas that identify the Ixil. The huipil is a motif worn on the body, combining the Ixil's knowledge of the world in a communicative way.

Camila Contreras Jiles

27 MOLA

Gunadule, Panama
20th century

A *mola* is an embroidered piece of fabric that forms the lower rectangular and therefore larger part of a blouse on the front and back. They are made separately from the sleeves and neckline before being sewn together to form a blouse. Blouses of this type are mainly worn by Gunadule women in Panama. Blouses in the style of the mola can also be found in Colombia as well.

There is no clear picture of the origin, motifs and their meaning, although the Gunadule have been well researched in terms of cultural anthropology. Mola or blouses of this type are often worn in everyday life today. Its origins probably lie at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, at a time when the Gunadule were also fighting hard for their autonomy when the Panama Canal was built. From this time onward, the first mola found their way into museums.

Colors and motifs are thus considered an “invented tradition” and an expression of one's own identity through clothing. A third of the motifs are plants or animals, such as here in the form of a bat. Another third are geometric or spatial motifs, such as Panama as a country itself, and the final third are dedicated to mythology and events in the human life cycle.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

28 GLASS BEAD APRON

Tiriyó, Brazil or Suriname
20th century

This glass bead apron (*queyu*) of the Tiriyó in Brazil or Suriname is a loincloth for women woven from glass beads and cotton. It has the shape of a rectangle. The upper and side edges consist of several woven bands.

Glass bead aprons like this one usually have a loop at the upper edge into which the cords for tying it around the waist can be hung. The interwoven glass beads also serve as decoration, for example in the form of tassel bundles. The choice of colors is of great importance. It has symbolic power and represents their cosmovision. Red, as the most frequently used color for the beads, decorations and as warp threads as seen here, stands for vitality and femininity among the Desana in Brazil, as well as for a woman's ability to become pregnant and give birth. The patterns that are woven on the beaded aprons are largely the same as those used in pottery, body painting and other weaving.

However, it is not always possible to determine the origin of the patterns and the associated names and stories in retrospect. Tiriyó *queyus* are often divided into three sections. The top and bottom sections differ in pattern, while the middle remains free of patterns. According to the indigenous people, who were asked about their patterns as early as 1918, the upper pattern is a variation of the “bamboo” pattern and the lower one is a sloth.

Lucía Loth

FUNCTION „STILL TO DECIPHER“

29 PADDLE

Canelos Kichwa, Ecuador
1950s

The paddle, called *kawina*, comes from the Canelos Kichwa people of Tambo Unión, near the Puyo River in eastern Ecuador. Written in red is the name of a lubricating oil for outboard motors (“Mobiloil A SAE 30”) and the instruction that only this oil may be used (“sola”). Of the five other red symbols, only one can be recognized as a human figure. Why they adorn the paddle and what they represent is not clear.

According to a Kichwa dictionary, there is a connection between traveling by canoe and one's dreams. Thus, the figures on the paddle could represent dreams associated with canoeing or ideas that originate from such dreams. The signs seem to be rather reduced representations of things and not necessarily abstractions in the proper sense. This would also correspond to what is known from the Amazon region. There, things speak for themselves in their own way in such forms.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

30 MESSAGE POST

Ayoréode, Bolivia
1960s

The Ayoréode used a message pole (*ujuyaque*) marked with abstract signs to identify a person who left to hunt in the forest or to gather fruit and honey. The signs on the tree trunk reflected a person's affiliation with different social groups. If the person did not return, they could be identified and found by the combination of signs.

Seven mythological ancestral groups (*cucherane*) are known, each of which has its own mark. These signs were not only assigned to humans, but also to plants and animals with which they shared certain characteristics and a relationship from mythical times. Up to five affiliations are mentioned on the message pole.

The stake was stuck into the ground at a certain angle to indicate the distance at which the person was to be found. An upright stake stood for a long distance, one close to the ground for a short distance. How exactly the signs were to be interpreted and how the distance and direction for the Ayoréode were specifically measured has not yet been conclusively clarified.

Alex Hohnhorst

31 PETROGLYPH STONE

Guanacaste, Costa Rica
1st millennium CE

The rock art of the province of Guanacaste is located in the southernmost zone of contact between Mesoamerica and the archaeological cultures of Central America. In addition to a few rock paintings, petroglyphs have been preserved here, most of which are located in the Cordillera de Guanacaste, on plateaus and in coastal alluvial areas.

Although the majority of the stones show mainly non-figurative motifs (dots, lines, circles, spirals, crosses), there are also figurative images (monkeys, lizards, birds, mountain pigs, tapirs), which can be recognized on the ceramics of the region and can thus be chronologically classified. A small number of motifs also appear to imitate Mesoamerican deities, glyphs and numerals.

While most of the depictions were demonstrably created in the Bagaces period (500–800 CE), the production of the oldest images dates back to the beginning of ceramic production (2000 BCE). As most of the rock art sites in the region are located outside settlement zones, their function appears to be closely linked to the use of ritual landscapes. However, due to the strong cultural transformation of large areas of land, it is often difficult to reconstruct the specific references to cultural and natural landscapes of many pictographs in the present day.

Martin Künne

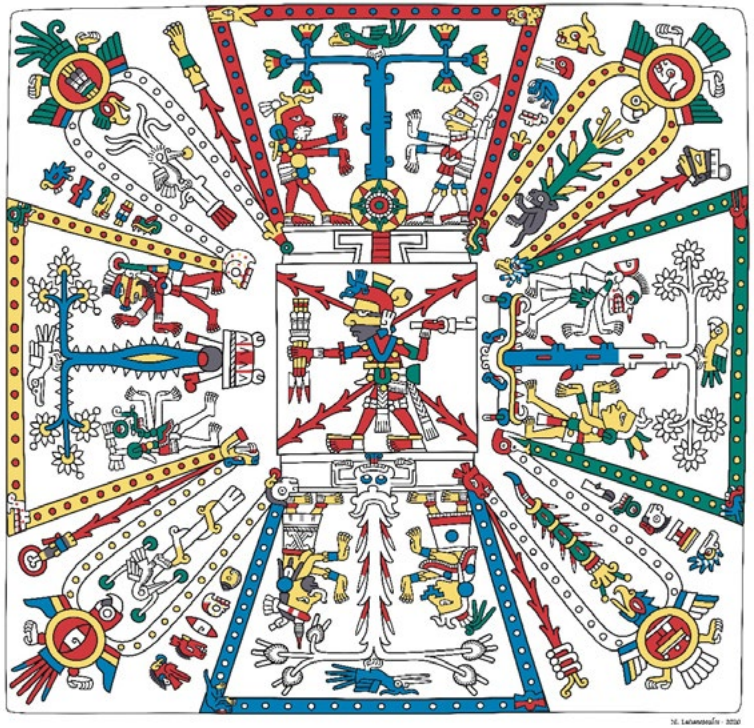
32 CODEX FEJÉRVÁRY-MAYER (FACSIMILE)

Aztecs/Nahua/Mixtecs, Mexico
pre-Columbian

This divinatory manuscript is a sacred book that served to determine what divine forces shaped a given day or other period of time. It most likely comes from the border of the regions inhabited by the Nahua and Mixtecs, that is, the Tehuacan Valley in the eastern part of central Mexico. The codex is made of 4 pieces of animal hide, most probably of deer, measures almost 4 meters, is folded like an accordion, and is painted on both sides. Named after its two European owners, it is currently in the custody of the Liverpool Museum.

The first page contains a cosmographic diagram. Here the world is divided into four cosmic directions, oriented towards the east. Each direction is shown as a trapezoid with its edge painted in a different color—red, yellow, blue, and green. In each direction, there is a tree and two gods on either side. In the middle, that is, in the fifth central direction—the center—is the ancient god of fire called Xiuhtecutli. All the nine gods form a small, 9-day calendrical cycle of nine divine entities that one could compare to the origin of the weekday names in European languages that are also gods' names (like in English, Wednesday is named after the Norse god (w)Odin, and Thursday after Thor). Importantly, the most important of Mesoamerican calendrical cycles of 260 days is also inscribed in this diagram, in fact twice, meaning that the time was intimately related to the space.

Katarzyna Mikulska



Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, Plate 1, copy by Nicolas Latsanopoulos ©. All rights reserved, reproduced with permission.

33 MAPA DE CUAUHTINCHAN NO. 2 (COPY)

Aztecs/Nahua, Mexico
mid-16th century

This large-format map, made of fig bast paper (*amatl*) and measuring 206 cm in length and 109-112 cm in height, is not a map in the usual sense. It comes from Cuauhtinchan in central Mexico and shows the history of the place and its creation on the basis of events in space and time.

From the mythical place of origin, a cave with seven chambers, as can be seen in the top left, footprints lead along a path through a landscape of places, volcanoes (green with snow) and rivers (blue), accompanied by calendar dates. The footprints mark the chronological sequence of the migration history of the people who founded Cuauhtinchan. The path leads to Cholollan, a place with a large palace (in the middle of the map), also known for its pyramid-shaped platform on which the Spanish built a church. This is present-day Cholula.

Cuauhtinchan itself is to the right of it. The local landmark is a mountain with a cave that houses an eagle and a jaguar, the two animals that make up the emblem of the place. Seven houses or dynasties controlled the destiny of the place. They are located within the red line. To the right in eastern direction, the neighboring domains in the form of houses, temples and persons, as well as the associated footprints and calendar dates, are shown as further events.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

FUNCTION „RITUAL PRAGMATICS“

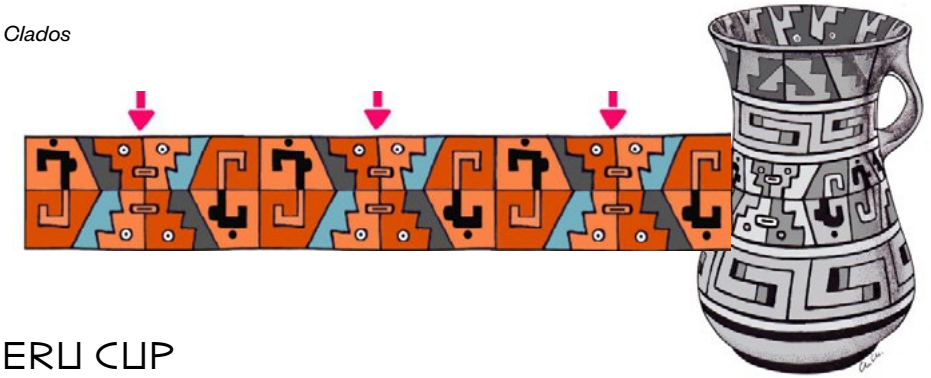
34 CHALLADOR CUP

Chochabamba, Bolivia
500–1000 CE

This narrow-based cup, a *challador*, was used for ritual purposes to pour corn beer (*chicha*), quinoa beer (*ch'ua*) or other beers made from local staples onto the earth in a practice called *challar*. Unlike other cups of this type, the sacrificial drink was only poured out here. It did not flow out through additional perforations at the base and side walls.

The vessel is painted with a wide ornamental band and shows two rows of framed graphic units, which are marked by a diagonal line. Their dividing lines connect two elements. One represents half of a human face without the mouth, which is considered a head trophy. The other is a stepped motif that functions as a wave. In a continuous series, the paired half-faces result in complete frontal faces with eyes. The series of framed graphic units directly references the fluid contents of the vessel. The head trophies are used attributively and serve as markers to contextualize the vessel's contents in terms of war and sacrificial acts. Both bands of framed graphic units are arranged in mirror image, creating the impression of an abstract diamond pattern.

Christiane Clados



35 KERU CUP

Inca, Peru
colonial period

Kerus are ceremonial drinking vessels from the Andes region. In pre-Hispanic and colonial times, a fermented corn drink called *chicha* was consumed from them on ritual and political occasions or offered as a sacrifice. Made of wood, ceramic, silver or gold, they were typically made in pairs, since drinking together was considered an important part of social and political rituals, as it manifested reciprocity.

The shape of the cup is inspired by silver goblets in churches. During the Inca period, such vessels were often decorated with complex graphic units and their contents—known as *tokapus*—rather than with figurative representations such as those seen here. It was only with the Spanish conquest that historical and Christian motifs found their way onto such cups, whereas traditional representations and the use of precious metals were prohibited. It shows a sacrificial procession of two priestesses wearing headscarves that fall well below their backs, and three other male participants holding a lance and a keru.

The scene shows the group walking to the altar and laying down sacrificial offerings. The band with triangles suggests a snake's body and symbolizes the earth. Plants such as Chiwanway (*Zephiranthes tubiflora*) and Nucchus (*Salvia oppositiflora*) can also be found here which appear at the foot of the cup. The headscarves of the priestesses are adorned with a zigzag-shaped sign (*Kenko*), which stands for the flow of water and liquid, suggesting a sacrifice in a fertility ritual.

Christiane Clados

FUNCTION „ECONOMY“

36 QUIPU (MINIATUR REPLICA)

Taquile, Puno, Peru
20th century

This miniature quipu is a contemporary testament to centuries of record-keeping tradition of many Andean cultures, the Incas among them. *Quipu* (also spelled *khipu* in English) literally means “knot,” but it refers to the whole system of recording data, for sure numerical, but possibly also of other kinds (e.g., calendrical, narratives or letters). Interestingly, quipus are still in use for ritual and authoritative purposes.

A quipu is made of spun and twisted cords made of cotton or wool fibers. These cords were attached usually to a thick main cord or seldom to a wooden stick like in the exposed object. There are numerical quipus recording quantities of goods guarded at storage houses, llamas or alpacas in herds, people living in villages and provinces, warriors in garrisons or brigades, and so on.

The Andean cultures used a decimal counting system (like our own), and they recorded numbers through knots using a positional system similar to our own. Hence, knots at the lowest position on the cord encode single unities, the knots on a second position from the bottom—tens, the knots on the third position—hundreds, and so on. But these are not the only variables.

The other ways to encode the information is the position of cords on the main one, the color of the cords, the direction of the cords’ twist, and the direction of the knot’s tie. Altogether a quipu was and is a highly complex encoding information system. As quipus were or are made of perishable material, many of them have been lost due to deterioration. The understanding of other quipus than numerical one’s featuring non-numerical information is still in process.

Katarzyna Mikulska

Pendand cords with knots are grouped in categories along the main cord. The order of the cords matters and is fixed. E.g.: in category of potatoes, the cords might stand for:

1. Huamantanga potato
2. Purple Peruvian Potato
3. Blue Peruvian Potato, etc.

The color, the combination of colors, and the splicing of threads encodes information.

Color changing (brown to beige):

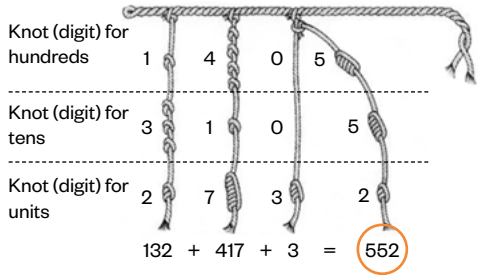
Mottled (green to beige)

Striped (red & orange)

Quipu (1300 d.C. – 1532 d.C.)
Photos from Museo Larco – Lima, Peru

The Incas used the decimal-positional system as we do in our culture:

Knots stand for for digits:



Additional cord, here for summing up

37 CODEX MENDOZA (FACSIMILE)

Aztecs/Nahua, Mexico
mid-16th century

This manuscript in European book style was commissioned in the mid-16th century by Viceroy Mendoza, governor of the Spanish colony of New Spain, now Mexico. The codex is divided into three thematic sections: history, economy (taxes), and "everyday life." It is written in both Nahua (Aztec) and Latin alphabetical writing.

This page from the economic section lists the cities of a province in the form of place names on the left and the tribute or taxes they had to pay to the Aztecs and other ruling groups that formed an alliance on the right. Both the place names and the form of the tribute and the amount of the tax are written in a logo-syllabic system. This means that the signs are either syllabic or word signs, as shown on the wall in the explanation below.

The listed tribute is of various types. The large rectangular elements, both colored and white, represent cotton cloaks. They served as both clothing and currency. Next to them are four different uniforms for warriors with headgear and shields for defense. The tributes at the bottom are wooden chests filled with corn and black beans, and a jar of honey. The number or quantity of the tribute is indicated as follows: each vertical white flag represents the number 20 (as in the warrior costumes) and each pine-like element represents the number 400 (as in the cotton cloaks). The Spaniards explained the indigenous signs with the help of their language in alphabetical writing, which also made possible the first attempts to decipher the Aztec script, also called Nahua script, more than a century ago.

Katarzyna Mikulska

List of the town names charged with the tribute written with Nahua (Aztec) writing

Metepec ("Hill of Agave")
metl 'agave' + **tepetl** 'hill'

Logogram **ME**(tl):
"Agave"

Logogram **TEPE**(tl):
"Hill"

Zoquitzinco ("Small Place of Mud")
zoquitl 'mud, clay' + ***tzinco*** '(at) the little'

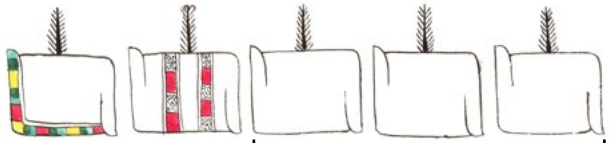
Logogram **ZOQUI**(tl):
"mud, clay"

(bi)Syllabogram **TZINCO**:
As in rebus principle, the buttocks, *tzin(tli)*, stands for *tzinco* 'at the little'

List of the tributes that the province had to pay written in semograms (signs encoding meaning)

Flag for number
20

Feather for number
400



400 cotton cloaks with colorful edge

400 cotton cloaks with stripes

3 x 400 white cotton cloaks

20 warrior outfit (lowest rank) + 20 shields

1 wooden box filled with corn

1 wooden box filled with black beans

Codex Mendoza, folio 33r
Photo of the original MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1, guarded in Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Cultures and regions in the Americas

APALAI

Today's Apalai are the result of the fusion of at least three groups: the Apama, Pirixiyana and Arakaju who migrated to Guayana several centuries ago from regions south of the Amazon. They live in about 20 villages along the Rio Paru do Leste in the Brazilian part of Guayana. Some Apalai have also migrated to Suriname or French Guiana through intermarriage. The Apalai still live mainly from subsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering.

Historically, the material culture of the Apalai has many parallels with other Carib-speaking groups in their area. These include the woven baskets and everyday objects, as well as the feather ornaments for festive occasions. In terms of individual design, however, the material culture differs significantly from that of their neighbors, such as the Wayana or Tiriyó/Trio. Particularly noteworthy are the maluwana and polychrome painted pottery. The latter is used as a ritual drinking vessel, the complex pattern of which is only visible after it has been emptied. The maluwana, on the other hand, is a polychrome painted wooden disc placed in the conical roof of the ceremonial hut, called the poro'topo.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

AYMARA

Aymara is the name for an indigenous population group and their language which is mainly spoken in the highlands of Peru and Bolivia. However, Aymara also live in small areas in Chile and Argentina. After Quechua, Aymara is the most widely spoken indigenous language in the Andes. Their agriculture is characterized by the cultivation of potatoes which also reached Europe from here, as well as quinoa and the keeping of llamas and alpacas as farm animals. In pre-colonial times, they lived in regional rural communities that were governed politically and administratively (mallkus). The Incas had already integrated the Aymara into their political system before the Spanish conquered the Andean region.

Alex Hohnhorst

AYORÉODE

The Ayoréode are an indigenous group who lived in the Gran Chaco, a forest and savannah region in northern Paraguay and eastern Bolivia, until the middle of the 20th century. Due to missionization and modernity with its changes, many now make their home in the cities of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Zamucó and Filadelfia. Only the Totobiegosode family group continues to live in seclusion as gatherers and hunters and thus semi-nomadically, as all Ayoréode once did.

They once used their own communication systems, such as sign poles, which they have now swapped for communication technologies such as radio and cell phones. The Ayoréode are known for their knowledge of bees. Honey, beeswax and the care of beehives formed a cornerstone of their culture and their former food supply.

Alex Hohnhorst

AZTECS (NAHUA)

The Aztecs, who also called themselves Mexica, were not always the glorious lords and warriors that the conquistadors later perceived them to be in Mexico at the beginning of the 16th century. For many generations, they were landless people who lived from hunting and gathering on the move, occasionally settling down, but always moving on.

From the early colonial descriptions, it is clear that the migration from their place of origin, Aztlan, the exact location of which is unknown, took place around the 11th century. After numerous stopovers, they arrived in the Valley of Mexico around 1325. There, in the middle of a large lakeland, they founded a settlement on a barren island which they called Tenochtitlan and which is now the center of Mexico City. They expanded their sphere of power through mercenary activities until 1423, and later from 1427 onward through clever coalitions with neighboring city-states and conquests. The result was a hegemonic empire that extended from central Mexico to the Gulf Coast in the east, into present-day Chiapas in the south and to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the southwest around 1519.

Antje Gunsenheimer

CANELOS KICHWA (PASTAZA RUNA)

The Kichwa are different groups with a common language. In eastern Ecuador, in the province of Pastaza, live the Canelos, a name that goes back to the former Catholic mission station on the Puyo River. In their language, Kichwa, they call themselves Runa, “human being.” They live in a tropical climate at an altitude of 300 to 1000 meters above sea level in various communities with no more than 150 inhabitants. Their language is a variant of Quechua which the Incas brought with them in the 15th century during their conquest, just as the Spanish conquistadors brought Spanish a century later.

Daniel Grana-Behrens & Naomi Rattunde

GUANACASTE

The rock art of the province of Guanacaste in Costa Rica lies in the southernmost contact area of Mesoamerica with the archaeological cultures of Central America. In addition to a few rock paintings, petroglyphs have been preserved here, mostly in the Cordillera de Guanacaste, on plateaus and in alluvial areas near the coast.

Most of the stones show non-figurative motifs such as dots, lines, circles, spirals and crosses. However, there are also figurative images such as monkeys, lizards, birds, mountain pigs or tapirs. Since they can be found on ceramics from the region, the rock art can thus be partially chronologically classified. A small number of motifs appear to imitate Mesoamerican deities, glyphs and numerals.

Most of the images were created during the Bagaces period (500–800 CE), but the oldest images probably date back to the beginning of ceramic production (2000 BCE). Most of the rock art sites in the region are located outside of settlement zones, so their function seems to be closely linked to the use of ritually defined landscapes.

Martin Künne

THE GUAYANAS AS A REGION

The Guayanas are located in the northeastern part of South America. They form a geographical area separated from the rest of the continent by the interconnected river systems of the Orinoco, Cassiquiare, Rio Negro and Amazon. In terms of climate, botany and zoology, however, the Guayanas are part of the greater Amazon region.

Geologically, the region differs from the rest of the Amazon basin. This is because it is a mountain range that has been largely eroded, making it very old. Some remnants of this mountain range rise almost vertically from the lowlands as high table mountains. They are called Tepui, a word from Carib-languages, meaning rock or stone.

Much of the population that has lived there for several millennia belongs to the Caribs. These include the Apalai, Wayana and Tiriyó/Trio. One of the largest continuous areas of rain forest in South America stretches across the Guayanas. This is interrupted only by savannahs along the watershed that runs across the Guayana Shield.

Numerous rivers and streams flow on both sides of the watershed to the Amazon or the Atlantic Ocean, which is why Guayana is also called the "land of many waters." This water feeds the tropical rain forest and is a source of food for the indigenous people who live there. To this day, fishing, hunting, gathering and horticulture are central to their diet.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

GUNADULE (DULE)

In Panama, the indigenous people who live in the Guna Yala district on the Atlantic coast and in the San Blas archipelago call themselves Gunadule or Dule. They reject the name Kuna by which they are also known. They are currently being relocated from the archipelago to the mainland due to rising sea levels. The Gunadule are known for their blouses, called mola, but also for pictography that documents their mythology.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

HAIDA

The Haida are an indigenous nation on the Haida Gwaii archipelago, formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia in Canada. The islands are home to ancient rain forests, a breathtaking coastal landscape and diverse wildlife. The Haida are best known for their monumental totem poles and complex carving skills. Their history is closely linked to the colonization of North America.

The practice of their culture and traditions was violently suppressed for a long time. The carving of monumental totem poles was also forbidden for a long time. This is also one reason why models of totem poles came onto the market in the 20th century.

Ilja Labischinski

INCA

Between the 15th and early 16th century, the Incas controlled a territory in the Andes stretching from present-day Ecuador to Chile. The conquered territories were connected by roads. Due to the lack of suitable animals, specially trained runners took over the transportation and transmission of messages.

The starting point of their history is Cuzco, next to which Machu Picchu is still well known today. Government and society were based on a form of genealogy supported by ancestor worship. The Incas were weakened by internal power struggles for control between two brothers when the Spanish invaded and colonized in 1533.

The Incas developed a system of knots, called quipu, to record all kinds of property, tribute and, presumably, historical data. Their language, Quechua, is still spoken today by the majority of the indigenous population.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

LLANOS DE MOJOS

Llanos de Mojos is a region in the Beni department in Bolivia. Between 1200 and 1500 CE, complex societies existed there with highly developed systems of landscape and water management. They are characterized by a great deal of linguistic and cultural diversity which was later threatened by colonial processes and Jesuit missions.

The female figure shown here comes from the village of San Joaquín on the Machupo River in the northeast of the Llanos de Mojos. Pablo Seng from San Joaquín handed this figure over to the ethnologist Heinz Kelm in Santa Cruz de la Sierra almost 70 years ago who brought it to Bonn. To this day, it conveys a vivid picture of the cultural complexity and artistic forms of expression of the pre-colonial societies of the Llanos de Mojos.

Carla Jaimes Betancourt

MANTEÑO-HUANCAVILCA CULTURE

The Manteño-Huancavilca culture developed on the Pacific coast of Ecuador in the present-day provinces of Manabí, Guayas and Santa Elena from around the 8th century until the Spanish conquest in 1532. The main economic activities were agriculture, fishing and trade.

The Spondylus shell played a central role as an important commodity and a form of currency in the maritime economy, but also as an important sacrificial offering in religious practices and as a status symbol within the community. Political power and religious authority shaped the society.

The Manteño-Huancavilca culture left behind ceremonial centres in the form of platform mounds, elaborate ceramics and metal objects, reflecting their craftsmanship in religious beliefs and everyday objects. They were one of the last cultures to resist the Spanish conquistadors.

Maya Saupe Morocho

MAYA

In pre-Hispanic times, the Maya established city-states with their own kingdoms in what is now Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. They used their hieroglyphic writing to record their own history, mythology and religion. Today's Maya survived Spanish colonial rule by preserving their languages and traditions. They are once again proud of their identity. Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú has long been a prominent face of this.

Daniel Grana-Behrens

MIXTECS

The Mixtecs live in the south of present-day Mexico. In their own language they are called Nuu Savi," "nation of the rain;" in the 16th century, Nuu Dzavui. Their pre-colonial culture is famous for pictographic books telling the history of the dynasties that ruled the various domains in the region between the 10th and 16th centuries CE.

Maarten Jansen

PARACAS / NASCA

Paracas and Nasca represent two distinct cultural traditions from the southern coast of Peru. The Paracas culture, part of the so-called Formative Period, developed between 800 and 200 BCE. It thrived primarily in the river oases of the extremely arid coastal desert but also extended into the western slopes of the Andes between the Chincha Valley and the Nasca region.

Artistic representations from the Paracas culture show clear influences from the Chavín culture which was centered in the highlands of central Peru. The subsequent Nasca culture (200 BCE–600 CE) is especially known for its polychrome painted ceramics, richly embroidered multicolored textiles, and the famous geoglyphs—known today as the Nasca Lines.

During the Nasca period, settlement activity in the river oases reached its peak, supported by extensive irrigation systems. However, significant climatic changes led to the abandonment of many settlements around 600 CE, marking the decline of the Nasca culture.

Markus Reindel

PUEBLO COMMUNITIES

A collective term for various indigenous communities and cultures in the southwestern United States. The term "pueblo" ("community") was introduced by Spanish colonizers to describe the characteristic multi-story adobe buildings. Despite many cultural similarities, the pueblo communities have functioned as independent political units to this day, with their own language.

In the 17th century, the region was first colonized by force by the Spanish. From the 19th century, the Pueblo communities were under the influence of the US government. Despite colonization, the Pueblo communities have preserved their cultural identity and artistic craftsmanship to this day.

Ilja Labischinski

QUECHUA

Quechua is the most widespread indigenous language or language family or group of language varieties in South America. The large area of distribution from southern Colombia across large parts of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia to the north of Argentina and Chile is historically rooted in the expansion of the Inca state.

The Incas established Quechua as the lingua franca in the areas under their control which led to replacement or abandonment of other indigenous languages. Most speakers of Runa Simi (from *runa*: human; *simi*: mouth, language), as they call their language, still live in the highlands and inter-Andean valleys of Peru, including the Wanka, and Bolivia. The majority of those who identify with the Quechua nation in Bolivia live in the departments of Potosí, Cochabamba and Chuquisaca.

Naomi Rattunde

SHIPIBO-KONIBO

The Shipibo-Konibo include about 40,000 people of the Shipibo, Konibo and Shetebo. Their actual settlement area along the Río Ucayali in the Peruvian Amazon region includes about 100 villages, although many of them now also live in Lima, Pucallpa and other major cities in Peru.

The Shipibo-Konibo are known for their ceramic products which are made exclusively by women and are also sold to tourists today. They continue the tradition of the cumancaya ceramics from the Río Ucayali which date back more than 1200 years.

Lars-Michael Schacht

TIRIYÓ/TRIO

The Tiriyó (Portuguese) or Trio (Dutch) call themselves Tarëno and live on both sides of the Brazilian-Surinamese border. Historically, the Tarëno evolved from several small groups such as the Aramixo, Aramayana, Maraxo, Okomoyana, Puropu, Puruyana and Sakyta. Until the mid-20th century, they lived largely autonomously, scattered throughout the Guayanese territory in small settlements of no more than 30 people. Like the Apalai and Wayana, they live largely from subsistence agriculture, including crop cultivation, hunting, gathering and fishing.

The material culture of the Tiriyó/Trio is similar to that of their neighbors. However, it is less elaborate than that of the Apalai or Wayana. For example, the Tiriyó/Trio make bicolored baskets, mats and fans, but these are usually decorated only with geometric designs, while figurative designs are rare. For everyday use, women made undecorated pottery, mainly for cooking.

Today, these have been completely replaced by metal utensils and are no longer produced. Instead, women became masters of beadwork, creating elaborately decorated dance aprons, bracelets, belts and necklaces. Today, this craft is more alive than ever before because the required resources, the beads, are available in larger quantities.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

UMBANDA

Brazil was a main destination of the transatlantic slave trade. In contexts of extreme adversity, it was essential to create strategies to maintain religious practices, and enslaved individuals formed networks of sociality and solidarity which transposed ethnic differences and resulted in what are today called Afro-Brazilian religions.

Umbanda is an Afro-Brazilian religion from early 20th century, a syncretism between religions of African origin (such as Candomblé), Christianism (Catholicism, Kardecist Spiritism) and indigenous traditions and beliefs. Umbanda incorporates the African divinities Orixás and their associated forces but supernatural communication is usually done with spirits who, imbued with 'the qualities of their respective Orixá', have the power of helping the living.

Leandro Matthews Cascon

WANKA

The Wanka culture, originally from the central highlands of Peru, flourished in the present-day departments of Junín and Huancavelica before the Inca expansion. Their society was organized into chiefdoms and characterized by an agro-pastoral economy based on the cultivation of potatoes, quinoa and corn, as well as the raising of camelids. Skilled builders, the Wanka developed impressive urban centers such as Tunanmarca, with stone buildings adapted to the rugged Andean geography. As warriors and traders, the Wanka maintained a strong regional identity and participated in strategic alliances with various peoples.

Their relationship with the Incas was conflicted: at first they resisted their expansion, but were finally subdued by Pachacútec in the 15th century. Subsequently, many Wanka allied themselves with the Spanish to overthrow Inca rule. Today, the Wanka identity remains strong in the Mantaro Valley and lives on in the objects, music, dances and celebrations of the region, as well as in the oral traditions that have passed down their history and wisdom from generation to generation.

Joaquín Molina

WAYANA

Like the Apalai and the Tiriyó/Trio, the Wayana are a Carib-speaking group formed by the amalgamation of many groups, including the Upurui, Kukuyana, Opagwana and Kumarawana. They live in western French Guiana and southern Suriname, where they share villages with the Tiriyó/Trio and use their language in daily life.

In Brazil, the Wayana live with the Apalai on the Rio Paru do Leste. There they are sometimes called Wayana-Apalai or Apalai-Wayana and speak Apalai. Recently, there has been a growing desire among the younger population to emphasize their Wayana identity in everyday life by using their own language.

The material culture of the Wayana shows many parallels to that of the Apalai. It is based on both mutual adoption and exchange of objects. For example, the Wayana acquired polychrome ceramic vessels from the Apalai, while they themselves specialized in the production of baskets and other wickerwork which they decorated with intricate patterns.

As with the Apalai, the tucushipan, the communal meeting and dance house, contains a maluwana. The close relationship with the Apalai and their eventful history is preserved in the myths of tuluperê, a serpentine monster that devoured Wayana and/or Apalai who tried to visit each other. Only after the monster was defeated they could visit each other safely, and this marked the beginning of a close socio-cultural exchange. After the monster was killed, its skin was flayed and the patterns that the Wayana and Apalai still use today as designs could be seen on the inside. While the Apalai initially used these patterns for their ceramics, the Wayana became masters of basketry and decorated their work with the patterns of the tuluperê's skin.

Beatrix Hoffmann-Ihde

ZAPOTECS

The Zapotec people (Beni Zaa) are located in the south of the present-day Mexican Republic. In the classical period (around 200-800 CE) the culture of Monte Albán flourished in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, with its own visual art and graphic communication. Like the Mayans, they developed a registry in the form of signs placed in vertical columns but the system has not been deciphered.

A diagnostic element of the classical Zapotec culture was the art of ceramics, in particular the production of effigy vessels that were placed in the tombs at the feet of the deceased. Typically, these are anthropomorphic figures placed on cylindrical tubes, representing men or women, frequently in a seated position, sometimes in combination with zoomorphic features and/or attributes that seem to correspond to deities.

Maarten Jansen

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