



The jaguar-spouted vessel above is from the Ica Valley, Peru, 700-800 A.D. It is one of several excellent pre-Columbian pieces in the show of the same kind of animal. The cylindrical urn at right is Mayan from the El Salvador-Honduras border area, 650-950 A.D. The seated figures are priests. The colors are warm, soft ochers and reds.



Antiquities foster understanding

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

The new show of pre-Columbian art at Donna Jacobs Gallery of Birmingham reinforces all those clichés about patience being rewarded.

Jacobs said she has been waiting for a long time to do a full show of this kind of art in her gallery which specializes in antiquities. Finally, she said, a large group of first-rate pieces became available and she went for it.

Instead of those readily available pre-Columbian broken or fragmented pieces, she opted to wait until she could show a much rarer collection of completely intact figures, bowls and artifacts.

In fact, visitors will marvel at the condition of many of the works in the show, all but one of which are ceramic. The fact that most of these were burial pieces accounts for the good condition.

Some, as Jacobs quickly pointed out, have been mended, but that doesn't interrupt the flow of line or total concept to nearly the same degree as looking at a partial figure or a badly chipped bowl would.

IN SIMPLEST terms, pre-Columbian means anything in the Americas before Columbus — Mexico, South America and Central America.

The earliest are two figures, male and female, from the Machalilla culture of Ecuador, 2700-1600 B.C. These illustrate the use of scarification as body decoration and like all of the figures in the exhibit, have a strong individual identity.

The latest piece in the show is a silver flask — Chiclayo, North Coast, Peru, 1200-1400 A.D. Since (at the outside) the show covers a 4,000-year time span, it is risky to make generalities. But, then

that's risky almost anytime, isn't it?

Because animals were so much a part of the life and culture of the pre-Columbian civilizations, as expected, a great deal of care was lavished on depicting them. In fact, the animals seem more artfully done than the people. The bodies of dogs, pumas and parrots, for instance, are rounded, well proportioned and easily recognizable.

The people, in those familiar sitting positions which many of us have come to recognize as pre-Columbian, seem less curvilinear, stiffer, often with arms and legs less well delineated.

But, then, all of us have seen small, scruffy dogs and plump hawks and parrots and none of us know just exactly what these ancient people looked like. Indeed, they might have been wide-hipped, short, ample belled, stubby armed individuals.

THAT THEY had infirmities is quite apparent. One of the warriors is obviously a hunchback. An amply proportioned woman, Chupicuaro, Guanajuato, Mexico, 800-100 B.C., with bulbous thighs is noticeably pregnant (not necessarily an infirmity). Others have skin and facial defects.

But, these lightly clothed, or not at all clothed, human figures, have great appeal for gallery visitors who often identify with the no cleavage, rather flat-busted, wide-hipped women or the stocky men intent upon their calling whether it's hunting, ball-playing (baseball) or warring.

Most of all, this splendid exhibit bridges a wide time gap. The ancients suddenly become human and understandable and our knowledge of history grows richer and more enduring.

The gallery is on the second floor, 574 N. Woodward, Birmingham. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.



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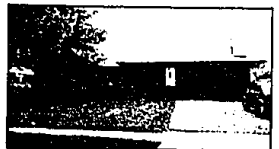
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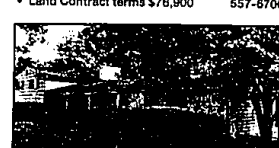
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