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# The Influence of Chimú Metalworks on Inca Metalworks

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## ABSTRACT

One of the cornerstones of art history is the attribution of art work to an artist, culture or time period. Art historians perform this work through a number of methods, including an analysis of medium, provenance, and object history, with the goal of placing a work within a chronological sequence. However, art historical attribution becomes a challenge when studying lesser known cultures or cultures of the past whose art works have been removed from archaeological contexts without rigorous study. As a result, attributions and classifications are sometimes based on minimal information. Once published this information is often uncritically perpetuated. One such case is the metalwork that is typically attributed to the Inca when they are more likely the work of Chimú artists. Teasing out the complex relationship of Chimú art to Inca empire, and the impact of Spanish colonialism on the pre-colonial art historical record, is the topic of this article.

**Keywords:** Chimú, Inca, metalworks, art historical attribution, art historical classification

In Ancient American art history, the metal works of two cultures – the Inca and the Chimú - stand out as being significantly intertwined, raising various questions about art historical attribution and terminology. The kingdom of Chimó, located along the coast of modern day Peru, thrived from 1000 CE to 1470 CE when they were conquered by the Inca empire.<sup>1</sup> Incans maintained their empire from about 1438 CE to 1532 CE, at which time the Spanish started to invade

South America.<sup>2</sup> The Inca empire's expansionary campaign eventually awarded them the largest territory in the world at the time, with a population of almost 12 million people.<sup>3</sup> As they expanded, Inca overlords integrated various conquered cultures' knowledge of technology and artistry into their imperial culture. The Chimú cultivated the practice of masterful metallurgists,<sup>4</sup> a talent Inca rulers appreciated. Chimú artisans were therefore forcibly taken to the Inca capitol, Cuzco, to work and create art

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<sup>1</sup> Karen O'Day, "3: The Goldwork of Chimor," in *Pre-Columbian Gold: Technology, Style and Iconography*, ed. Colin McEwan (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca R. Stone, "Chapter 7: Inca," in *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 194, 196, 197.

<sup>3</sup> Stone, "Inca," 194.

<sup>4</sup> O'Day, "Goldwork", 62.

for the Inca empire.<sup>5</sup> Through a formal analysis of art works and technique, this article explores the impact of Chimú style and technique on metalworks produced by and for the Inca, thus raising questions about classification. Should these works be considered Incan, Chimú, or Chimú-Incan? The article also addresses the difficulty in defining Inca art without acknowledging where specifically within the empire it came from, using Chimú art as a main example.



Fig. 1: Chimú cotton textile (In *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca*, 3rd ed., By Rebecca Stone. London: Thames & Hudson, 2012.183.)

Chimú is the term describing the people of the kingdom of Chimór, established around 1000 CE, and conquered by the Inca in 1470 CE.<sup>6</sup> The Chimór kingdom was located along the coast of modern-day Peru and at its height spanned a territory of about 600 miles.<sup>7</sup> Chan Chan, the capital city, is considered the largest adobe brick city ever built. It comprised about six square miles of dense city center, and a few more square miles of scattered city. It was built like a labyrinth, with decorated walls up to

<sup>5</sup> Stone, "Inca," 200.

<sup>6</sup> O'Day, "Goldwork" , 62.

<sup>7</sup> André Emmerich, "IV: The Horizon of the City Builders," in *Sweat of the Sun and Tears of the*

12 meters high, and at its height housed up to 40,000 people, including 12,000 artists.<sup>8</sup>

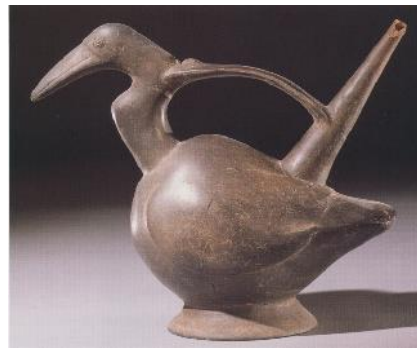


Fig. 2: Bridge - and - Spout bottle depicting a bird (In *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. By Alana C. Collins. edited by Elizabeth H. Boone. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996. 274.)



Fig. 3: Standing human figure (In *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. By Alana C. Collins. edited by Elizabeth H. Boone. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996. 272.)

*Moon: Gold and Silver in Pre-Columbian Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), 25

<sup>8</sup> Stone, "Chapter 6: Lambayeque, Chimú, and Chancay," in *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012),175.

Chimú, like other Andean cultures, created beautiful artworks ranging from textiles (Figure 1), to ceramics (Figure 2), to wooden statues (Figure 3), of which only a small corpus of works have survived. Today, the Chimú are mainly known for their impressive capital and for their metalworking skills. Gold was the preferred medium for metalworking. It was favored due to its color symbolism, being associated with the sun and the gods.<sup>9</sup> Access to gold was restricted and reserved for the elite.<sup>10</sup> As Karen O'Day observes, Chimú nobility preferred gold over other materials as it confirmed their divine right to rule through its color symbolism and iconography.<sup>11</sup>

By sewing thousands of sequins on a tunic, Chimú seamstresses covered their fabrics with layers of gold. Architecture was also decorated with metalwork, as Emmerich has pointed out “At Chan Chan itself, according to Pedro Pizarro, the metal that sheathed the gateway to the principal temple alone was worth 90,000 castellanos. Calculated at the then prevailing value of 4.786 grams of gold per castellano, this amounts to about 950 pounds of gold, or almost half a ton.”<sup>12</sup> This evaluation shows the extent to which gold was used in the Chimú kingdom. Everyday objects such as cups, lime case stoppers, spoons, etc. were produced in gold as well.<sup>13</sup>

Chimú metalworkers skills were indeed impressive and many of the techniques employed by them are still used by goldsmiths and metalworkers today. The most



Fig. 4: Chimú effigy beaker (In *Sweat of the Sun and Tears of the Moon: Gold and Silver in Pre-Columbian Art*. By André Emmerich. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965. 31.)

prominent techniques used were cutting, soldering, encrusting, casting, hammering, sheathing, and repoussé.<sup>14</sup>

One example of the extraordinary achievements Chimú metalsmiths accomplished with simple tools was the creation of human effigy beakers out of a single sheet of gold (Figure 4). To achieve this the artist first created a wooden mold (Figure 5) by carving the design of the object into the block after which a paper-thin sheet of metal was hammered around the wooden base without breaking the sheet.<sup>15</sup> Dudley T. Easby, Jr., stated that “there are a few modern metal workers who could reproduce this feat even with modern tools, and none

<sup>9</sup> O'Day, “Goldwork,” 62.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Emmerich, “Horizon,” 30.

<sup>13</sup> Alana C. Collins, “Chimu,” in *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, ed. Elizabeth H. Boone (Washington,

D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), 243, 262, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Emmerich, “Horizon,” 29-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 29-31.

would undertake to do it with the rudimentary tools available to the Indian goldsmiths.”<sup>16</sup> This shows how truly impressive Chimú metalworkers’ skills were.



Fig. 5: Chimú wooden model for hammered cup (In *Sweat of the Sun and Tears of the Moon: Gold and Silver in Pre-Columbian Art*. By André Emmerich. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965. 31.)

Most Chimú metalwork known today comes from funerary sites and includes impressive examples of jewelry. One such set of jewelry was found inside a mummy bundle together with over 2000 individual pieces of gold, including danglers and sequins.<sup>17</sup> The set consists of a pectoral and a matching set of earrings, both of which show Chimú metalworkers’ abilities.

The pectoral (Figure 6-7) is made of a single sheet of thinly hammered gold, filled with repoussé designs including Andean crosses, squares, and diamond shapes, which at the center form a feline face. Small danglers in the shape of the Andean cross

are attached throughout the pectoral. The eyes and the nose of the feline are 3-dimensional works which protrude from the 2-dimensional base. They are made of gold and other materials and end in small birds (Figure 7). The base shape of the eyes are round whereas the nose forms a square. The protrusions and danglers are secured to the base of the pectoral with spread-clips on the backside. The bird and the feline depict two important aspects of Andean civilization: the sky/heaven and the earth/rainforest. This together with the use of gold shows the importance of the wearer of this pectoral.

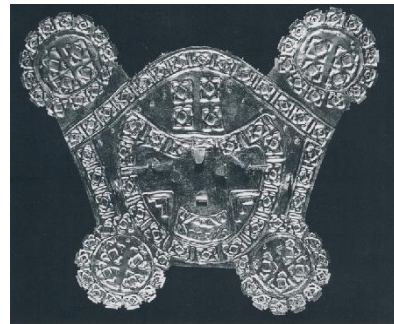


Fig. 6-7: Pectoral (In *Andean Art at Dumbar-ton Oaks*. By Alana C. Collins, edited by Elizabeth H. Boone. Washington, D.C.: Dumbar-ton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996. 226. 229.)

<sup>16</sup> Emmerich, "Horizon," 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 30.



The matching set of earrings (Figure 8-9) repeats design elements of the pectoral and adds a trapezoidal element at the bottom of the circle, with the top curved so as to fit next to the main disk, on which with small rings zigzag bands made of thin gold are attached. The zigzag bands end in small mask-like faces each with a ring through their mouth on which an Andean cross dangle is attached.



Fig. 8-9 Pair of ear ornaments (In *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*. By Alana C. Collins. edited by Elizabeth H. Boone. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996. 232.)

This set exemplifies the virtuosity of Chimú metallurgists. It's highly detailed and elaborate design is the hallmark of this culture. Geometrical shapes such as circle, cylinder, square, diamond and rectangle were

important in the designs, as were the added elements like danglers and other 3-dimensional elements.

Inca artists incorporated many of these elements into their artworks. Geometric patterns in particular were utilized, as well as certain Chimú motifs such as bird imagery. However, Inca artists streamlined the designs and they adopted as their own, so they could be easily duplicated and recognized throughout the vast Inca empire.

We now turn to a consideration of metalworks created under Inca patronage beginning with brief background information on the Inca empire. There is no common consensus on the true origins of the Incan empire. Through a combination of Inca myth, Spanish chronicles, and historical evidence, it is estimated that the first Inca migrated to Cuzco after leaving Lake Titicaca in search of a more agreeable environment for farming. This is reflected in the most popular Incan origin myth of the first Incas, Manco Cápac and Mama Ocllo. They travelled to Cuzco and defeated the locals and the neighboring city of Chanca, with the help of an army that miraculously sprung up out of rocks in the valley. It was the defeat of the Chanca people in 1438 that brought the Incan leader, Pachakuti, to power and established the Inca as a true empire.<sup>18</sup> After conquering the inhabitants of the Cuzco region and defeating the Chanca, the Inca began a complex expansionary campaign that included military action, rebellion, and peaceful annexation.<sup>19</sup> They eventually claimed the largest territory in the world, which contained almost 12 million people.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca R. Stone, "Chapter 7: Inca," in *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 196,197.

<sup>19</sup> Paloma Carcedo de Mufarech, *Inca: Origins and Mysteries of the Civilization of Gold*, Venice: Marsilio, 2010, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, "Inca", 194.

The ruler, or Sapa Inca, ruled from the capital in Cuzco. They maintained their dominance through a system of taxation, sacrifice, and a disbursement of goods from the capital. Inca overlords also allowed local rulers to retain a certain level of control and local authority. This allowed the conquered territories to keep certain artistic traditions, which resulted in vast diversity within what has come to be identified as Incan art. The Inca empire only lasted about 100 years. Its power was diminished through the invasion of the Spanish in 1532.<sup>21</sup>

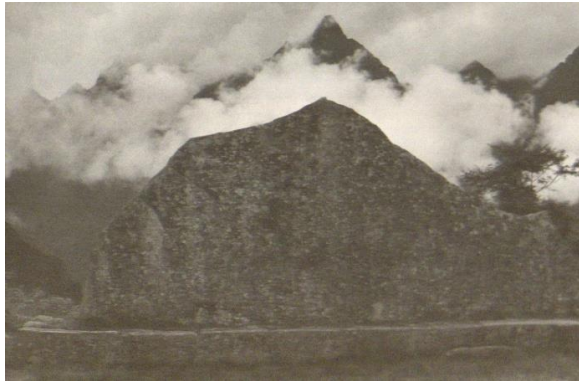


Fig. 10: Sacred Rock at Machu Picchu (In *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca*, 3rd ed., By Rebecca Stone. London: Thames & Hudson, 2012. 203)

Artistically, the Inca are most known for their impressive stoneworks and architecture. For example, there is the symbolic *Sacred Rock* at Machu Picchu (Figure 10), and the notable architecture of the important religious structure, the Qorikancha. Inca elites also placed a great importance on textiles, and pottery, as did many other South American cultures. Incan patrons favored a

style that remained very geometric, abstract, and pattern-focused.



Fig. 11: Urpu, (*Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfm?MnuID=2&GalID=10>)

Figure 11 shows an *urpu* jar, used to carry water, food, and most commonly, corn beer. This jar has an alternating geometric pattern, that here, appear in vertical bands, similar to what can be seen in the textiles.<sup>22</sup>

Incan ceramics and textiles are much more readily found than Incan gold or silverworks. When the Spaniards invaded, they acquired as much of the Inca's gold and silver works as possible to melt down for coins.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this means that very little metalwork created for patrons Inca remains. Gold was important in both the Incan and Spanish cultures in very different ways. To the Inca, gold was not a currency. However, it was only reserved for the elite and ruling class, because of its association with the sun god Inti.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Carcedo de Mufarech, "Inca", 52-58.

<sup>22</sup> "Inca Culture." *Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016.

<http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfm?MnuID=2&GalID=10>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

The Inca, in their quest for expansion conquered the Chimú in AD 1470. Since Chimú were known for their masterful metalworks, a talent the Inca rulers appreciated, Chimú metallurgists were forcefully taken to Cuzco to work and create art.<sup>25</sup> Their influence can be seen in works attributed to the Incan empire. For example, the Incan face beaker in Figure 12 is incredibly similar to the Chimú effigy beaker in Figure 4.



Fig. 12: Face Beaker (*Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfmMnuID=2&GalID=10>)

Both were created using the same hammering technique which supports the idea that it was possibly created by a Chimú artisan for their new Incan patron. These two pieces are equally similar in the treatment of style and proportion. The face shapes depicted on these beakers are almost identical. The eyes are heavily stylized; both feature prominent beak-like noses, sharp jaw-lines, and double lines or raised circular decoration at the hair line. The vessels take a similar form as well, being cylindrical with flared lips. Because

<sup>25</sup> Stone, “Inca”, 200.

we know that Chimú artisans created art for the Inca, the question of attribution arises. Should this face beaker, labeled Inca, be considered Chimú-Inca in scholarship to allow for a more transparent understanding of the Incan art process and better reflect the complex multi-ethnic culture of the Inca empire itself?

Chimú artists were also abducted to help build the religious center, the Qorikancha.<sup>26</sup> The influence of their metallurgists can be seen in the gardens made of precious metal plants and food placed near the Qorikancha (Figure 13).



Fig. 13: Silver and Gold Corn Stalk (*In Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca*, 3rd ed., By Rebecca Stone. London: Thames & Hudson, 2012. 236)

<sup>26</sup> “Inca Culture”



This silver corn-cob was created by beating a sheet of metal over an actual corn-cob, much like the Chimú technique of hammering over a wooden mold seen with the beakers. Because of the conquistadors' melting the Incan metalworks, it is mostly miniatures like these that remain. Other miniatures like the gold female figure in Figure 14 survived because it was placed in a grave. Small human figures like these were made to symbolize people who would accompany the deceased.



Fig. 14: Female Figure (*Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfmMnuID=2&GalID=10>)

These figurines are hollow. They are made of sheets of hammered metal soldered together as opposed to being cast, perhaps because of Chimú influence.<sup>27</sup> They were often dressed in elaborate textiles and miniature accessories. These gold offerings to the gods

<sup>27</sup> Penny Dransart, "The Figurines", in *Elemental Meanings: Symbolic Expression in Inka*

or for the dead were especially important because gold never tarnishes or rots like silver and textiles. Miniature gold and silver animals, like the llama figurine in Figure 15, were also created for the sacred metal gardens and as grave goods. Llamas were a very important motif in Incan art because of the prominent role they played in Incan culture. Their meat, fur, and transportation all played a big role in Inca daily life. The llama demonstrates that the Inca learned to roll sheets of metal into tubular shapes and smolder them together, much like the Chimú. However, it also shows that they did not employ the same stylistic intricacies that the Chimú did in their metalworks.



Fig. 15: Llama (*Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfmMnuID=2&GalID=10>)

*Miniature Figurines* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1995), 4, 5.

The Incan cup in the form of a bird (Figure 16) is an example of a bird motif commonly seen in Chimú art. A long-necked bird is arching its neck upwards as if it is drinking, which is appropriate for a ritual drinking vessel. This shows a more complicated methodology employed by the Incan artisans who made it. Here, the metal has been not only hammered, but also rolled, and soldered together.<sup>28</sup> It shows an example of Incan art that is more geometric in style compared with Chimú art. Here, there are very few details, the image is composed of geometric shapes with rudimentary details.



Fig. 16: Bird cup (*Gold and the Incas: Lost Worlds of Peru*, 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/INCAS/Default.cfmMnuID=2&GalID=10>)

This focus on abstraction was crucial, because it allowed for a method of standardization of Incan art that could circulate throughout the many diverse ethnic conquered territories and still serve to represent the empire itself. This standardization of art was an important aspect of retaining power and control.<sup>29</sup> Yet, it is interesting to note the figurative nature of Incan metalworks in contrast to the purely abstract and geometric designs of their textiles and pottery. Perhaps

the figurative motifs present in the metalworks are directly influenced by the artisans from the different cultures, especially Chimú, now creating art for the new Inca empire.

Because of the vastness of the Incan territory and because the conquered were allowed to keep a certain amount of their original culture, it is difficult to assert a piece of Incan artwork as truly Incan without acknowledging where within the empire it came from. For example, pieces made by Chimú artisans or pieces found in Cuzco are not acknowledged to be of “Chimú culture,” but are mainly attributed to the Incan empire in scholarship and publications. This question of an authentic Incan style is especially hard to traverse when it comes to metalworks because there are so few Incan metalworks left by the Spanish to examine and compare. Furthermore, it seems as though the Inca were so effective in their rule, or were made so popular through their interactions with the Spanish that “Inca” has become an almost generic umbrella term or buzzword to discuss and classify South American artwork.

The Inca ruled their large empire effectively for about one hundred years. In so doing, they managed to build on the art and artistic skills of the metallurgists and artists from not only Chan Chan, but from their other conquered territories as well. An abstracted and more standardized version of the conquered cultures’ art emerged through Incan rule. However, because the Inca empire was so large and full of so many already established cultures with their own artistic traditions, the line defining what “Incan” art is, is especially hard to find.

<sup>28</sup> Inca Culture”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

3rd ed., 194-242. London: Thames & Hudson. 2012.

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