

## The Energy of Pre-Columbian Art

By Fayez Barakat

MGM GRAND THE COLLECTOR AUTUMN 1992

When I opened a gallery devoted to ancient art in the heart of the most modern city in the world, I knew I was facing a challenge. Los Angeles is the metropolis of the future and the Barakat Gallery focuses on the treasures of the past. In the Holy Land, where my family has done business for generations, artifacts have a context that people understand – they seem a logical part of the landscape, footnotes to the history of the place. In Los Angeles, I was warned, the precious relics of the past would lose their meaning amidst all the neon and asphalt. What I understood when I came here, and what the continued success of the Barakat Gallery has proven, is that fine antiquities radiate a tangible aura of experience – something I call Energy – that makes them beautiful and meaningful in any setting. Energy is the intrinsic magnetism that accumulates around an object through the ages. It has to do with where the object has been, who made it, who used it, who touched it or admired it as we can still do today. A certain sensitivity is needed to perceive Energy, but if an individual possesses the gift, then an artifact becomes a link, a pathway directly back to an earlier time, to other lives, maybe not completely known or understood, but definitely real. I had always been attracted to Biblical and Classical antiquities for this reason, but nothing in my previous experience prepared me for the surprising, exotic, intimate, and sometimes barbaric world that Pre-Columbian art reveals.

It was inevitable for me to fall under the powerful spell of Meso-American antiquities. West Coast collectors assembling important holdings of Pre-Columbian art for decades, and there was great potential to build a truly remarkable collection from what was still in private hands. But when I first came to Beverly Hills, the art of the New World was exactly that for me – new. Pre-Columbian was terra incognita, an unexplored part of the fascinating realm of the past. I felt like a conquistador standing on the edge of an unknown continent – awestruck, excited, and determined to discover its farthest boundaries. As I was exposed more and more to Pre-Columbian pieces of high quality, my enthusiasm began to increase without limits. I responded to the incredible Energy of the art, to its vitality, its mystery, to its strength, even to its humor.

Assembling a major representative group of Pre-Columbian art works became first a passion with me, then an obsession. The result of ten years of scholarship, acquisition and appreciation has resulted in an extreme sensitivity to Pre-Columbian art, not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also in terms of an artwork's authenticity. After years of experiencing literally thousands of Pre-Columbian artifacts, one gradually acquires not only scientific knowledge but also a kind of sixth sense about an object. It is this unique combination that allows an artifact to speak to a person. I would like to share a few of the insights that I have acquired over the years, points that may help you as a potential collector of Pre-Columbian art as you begin examining these ancient artifacts to discern their authenticity and relative value.

When Pre-Columbian ceramics have been in the ground for centuries, the organic material and chemicals in the earth surrounding the object react with it, creating varying degrees of patination on the surface of the artifact. The pottery unearthed in Meso-America, in general, interacts with manganese dioxide in the soil and the result is a distinctive finish on the artifact. Therefore, not only are remnants of the soil on a ceramic piece a clue to its authenticity, but also the surface finish.

Pre-Columbian jade and stonework also have specific characteristics that distinguish them as genuine. One of these is the absence of tool marks on the surface of the artifact. Generally a small, carved jade or stone object was a valuable possession in Pre-Columbian times, not only used repeatedly in ritual but also passed down from generation to generation. This constant handling of the object results in a smooth, fine finish, the tool marks of the carver long worn away from the artifact's polished surface. Larger stone sculptures may also be void of tool marks, the result again of centuries of weathering. When examining large stone artworks, pay close attention to the finish on the engraved surface as well as other areas of the sculpture, for the patination should be the same, evidence of that the stone was carved in antiquity.

When we experience ancient Pre-Columbian goldwork, it is important to remember that the majority of artifacts were created by the lost wax method. This technique results in gold artworks that are extremely smooth on the surface. Contrasted with this are modern gold artworks that, under magnification, reveal markings from abrasives and files used in creating the piece. Ancient Pre-Columbian goldwork also has a purity, depending on the country of origin, that distinguishes it from modern works of art.

Along with the use of our scrutinizing observations and acquired sensitivities to authenticate Pre-Columbian artifacts, there are also scientific methods for estimating the date of an object. Laboratories are able to perform carbon 14 dating methods on artifacts that contain organic matter, while ceramics may be subject to thermoluminescence testing to estimate a date.

One final note. As you begin to examine each work of Pre-Columbian art, pay close attention to its Energy, for the legacy held within every genuine Pre-Columbian work of art will slowly begin to reveal itself. It will speak to you through all of your senses. I know, for they have spoken to me.

FAYEZ BARAKAT