Basic Detail Report

Spectacled Bear Effigy Jar

Date

ca. 1300-1470

Medium

Blackware

Description

This burnished blackware Chimú vessel is formed in the shape of a standing spectacled bear, with large round eyes and front paws with six digits each raised to shoulder height. The straight spout is chipped at the rim and the creature's left hind foot has broken off and been repaired; otherwise the vessel is in excellent condition. This creature has a long, thin, monkeylike tail curling to the right, with similarly thin hind legs and feet. A similar vessel is illustrated on the frontispiece of "The Cult of the Feline" (1972), edited by Elizabeth P. Benson, Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, DC. Spectacled bears (Tremarctos ornatus), also known as andean bears or ucumari, are the second largest mammal and the largest carnivore in South America. Zoomorphic (animal) motifs were commonly employed on a wide range of pre-Columbian artifacts, including pottery, textiles, and metalwork. Pre-Colombian works of art depict both wild and domesticated animals, creatures commonly encountered in everyday life, and creatures found rarely--or not at all--in the natural world. Aspects of many different animals can be found in pre-Colombian art, often mixed with human attributes in what may appear to us to be startling and fantastic combinations. Blackware is a generic term used to describe the dark-colored ceramics fired in a reducing atmosphere, that is, without oxygen. A reducing atmosphere is produced in several different ways, but usually involves smothering the fire just enough to remove excess oxygen while still allowing it to burn hot enough to successfully fire the pottery. Unlike ceramics fired in an oxidizing atmosphere with plenty of oxygen, which may be various shades ranging from creamy buff to orange or red depending on the color of the clays used, ceramics fired in a reducing atmosphere will be gray or black in color. The process used to produce blackware is also called smudge-firing. Burnishing is the process of producing ceramics with a shiny surface without using a glaze. To produce burnished surfaces, potters must wait until the ceramics are nearly dry, and then must rub the surface to align the surface clay particles with a smooth object, usually a round, flat-sided stone. Sometimes only certain areas of a pot or a figure are burnished, since the contrast between glossy burnished surfaces and matte unburnished areas can produce a variety of decorative effects. The function of pre-Columbian ceramic vessels is not easy to ascertain. On the one hand, the vessels in the Johnson Museum's collection are lovely pieces of art, often with detailed imagery which makes their appearance of interest apart from any mundane functionality. On the other hand, these

lovely vessels were still created as vessels rather than as figures, so presumably their functional aspect was important to the maker. Because these pieces of pottery were deposited in graves, the question also arises as to whether or not similar items were used on a daily basis. Were these vessels made for the dead, fancy grave goods with specific religious or mythical imagery, or were they treasured possessions used in life? Many of the ceramics found in the Johnson Museum are highly decorated, but it should be remembered that in any archaeological site, these fancy vessels are only a small fraction of all the pottery found. Although the vast majority of pottery made in the past was functional ware used to cook, store, or serve foods, more elaborate pieces served the additional purpose of conveying social information. Just as your grandmother might have kept her fancy china on display in a cabinet to show it off to friends and family, it appears that pre-Columbian people may have similarly had special items for display in their homes. According to the earliest chroniclers after the Spanish conquest, people put pottery on display in their homes which reflected what they did to make a living; for example, fishermen displayed pots with sharks in their homes, while hunters displayed pots with deer and other land animals. Recent analyses of residues from Peruvian bottles and jars suggest that most of these vessels were used to serve corn (maize) beer or chicha. Chicha was both an everyday beverage, made in households for family consumption, and an essential element in ritual and social interactions. Beer was usually made from corn or maize (Zea mays), although it can be made from other starchy plants such as manioc (Manihot esculenta). Beer is traditionally made by spitting into a mixture of water and grain, where the enzyme amylase (found in human saliva) converts the starches in the grain to sugars, which are then converted to alcohol by fermentation. Beer was usually drunk from wooden or ceramic cups (queros or keros in the Andes), but it was brewed in larger, open-necked vessels known as ollas, and it may have been served in bottles. The Chimú empire, or Kingdom of Chimor, was established in the tenth century in the Moche Valley on the north coast of present-day Peru. By 1400 AD, the Chimú ruled an empire 800 miles long, encompassing the fertile, agriculturally productive irrigated coastal valleys stretching from Tumbez to Chillón. The imperial capital of Chan Chan, located near the modern city of Trujillo, covered 20 square kilometers, housed a population of 50,000 to 100,000 people, and included pyramids, residences, markets, workshops, reservoirs, storehouses, gardens, and cemeteries. Chimú architecture is made of adobe decorated with geometrically patterned mosaics or molded bas-reliefs of stylized animals, birds, and mythological figures. Chimú artisans used similar decorative elements in their pottery, metal ornaments, and finely detailed textiles, many of which are embellished with ornate featherwork. Chimú pottery was mass-produced in molds by craft specialists and is typically highly burnished blackware, with a wide variety of decorative motifs including birds, fish, animals, fruits and vegetables, and people. The most common shape was the stirrup-spout bottle, which often has a small monkey figure located on the spout. After the Inca conquest of Chimor in 1470, during the reign of Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui, Chimú vessels tend to have broad, flaring spouts similar to those on Inca aryballoid jars. Chimú-Inca vessels often have shapes similar to the Inca aryballos or urpu, but are made of typically Chimú blackware and are decorated in characteristically Chimú style. Suggestions for further reading about Chimú: Cabello, Paz and Cruz Martínez (1992): "Catálogo de la Colección Arqueológica Noperuana del Museo Casa de Colondel Cabildo Insular de la Gomera." Viceconsejeria de Cultura y Deportes Gobierno de Canarias: Tenerife. Short, pamphlet-length Spanish language text includes Sicán and Chimú objects. Cornejo B., Luis E. and Carole Sinclaire A. (Eds.) (2005): "Chimú: Laberintos de un Traje Sagrado/Labyrinths of a Sacred Costume," Museo

Chileno de Arte Precolombino : Santiago. Text in both Spanish and English; excellent review of Chimú textiles. Martínez, Cruz (1986): "Cerámica Prehispánica Norperuana: Estudio de al Cerámica Chimú de la Colección del Museo de América de Madrid." BAR International Series 323: Oxford. Text in Spanish; many vessels illustrated in black-and-white; compendium of Chimú ceramics with Sicán vessels mixed in. Moseley, Michael E. and Alana Cordy-Collins, Eds. (1990): "The Northern Dynasties: Kingship and Statecraft in Chimor: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks 12th and 13th October 1985". Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: Washington, DC.

Dimensions

8 x 3 3/4 x 4 3/4 inches (20.3 x 9.5 x 12.1 cm)