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## A New Approach to Pre-Columbian Pottery

### Introduction to the Volume

DEAN E. ARNOLD, YUMI PARK HUNTINGTON,  
AND JOHANNA MINICH

The discovery that heat could convert objects made of clay into a durable product began a creative process that transformed the technological and artistic evolution of humanity since about 10,000 B.C.E. (Aikens 1995: 11). Ceramics, the result of this process, have become one of the most universal and versatile artifacts created by the peoples of the world. Given such ubiquity, ceramics have provided scholars with a vast storehouse of information about ancient societies.

It is difficult to appreciate the significance of ceramics today, when so many objects formerly made of clay are fabricated in metal or plastic. Nevertheless, their durability resulted in an abundance of ceramic objects left behind by ancient cultures. This trove has continued to provide a resource for those who seek to understand the characteristics of ancient societies, from social and political structures and economic relationships, to aesthetic values and religious beliefs. Using ceramics, scholars also have formulated chronologies, identified different ethnicities, and deciphered the role of symbols among ancient peoples.

During the last 50 years, many innovations have occurred in the study of pre-Columbian ceramics including new physical science techniques, databases of high-resolution photographs from museum collections, new strategies in archaeological fieldwork, ethnographic studies (now called ceramic

or pottery ethnoarchaeology), and advances in theory. These developments have improved understanding of how ancient people incorporated ceramic production and use into their lives, and how and why they used particular motifs, shapes, and designs to convey messages of symbolic importance. Further, the study of ceramic traditions through time has offered new opportunities to interpret patterns of cultural continuity and change, both in the past (Feinman [chap. 11], Bey [chap. 10], Hirshman [chap. 12], this volume) and in the present (for example, Arnold 2008, 2015; Thieme 2009; Williams 2014), and how ceramics reflect the organization of production. Addressing everything from identifying production locations and fabrication technology, to describing artistic techniques, symbolic imagery, daily use, and religious symbolism, these approaches have answered numerous questions about why ceramic objects were produced, transported, and used in the ways that they were.

Archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians all use ceramics in their common goal of learning about ancient peoples, but because of their different histories and theoretical approaches, these disciplines have not dialogued very much with one another. Even though they share an interest in using pottery to understand the past, and use overlapping approaches to analyze it, they may describe their methods differently. To facilitate dialogue and foster this common interest, this volume provides an opportunity for scholars in all three disciplines to learn from one another in their pursuit of the pre-Columbian past.

Consisting of chapters contributed by archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians, this book is sequentially organized around four kinds of methodologies for studying pre-Columbian ceramics. Until now, few publications have attempted to combine these disciplines in a single volume to illustrate how such diversity can provide a more comprehensive approach to the study of ceramics in antiquity. This volume thus illustrates how diverse approaches can enlighten those who use ceramics to address themes such as technological change, group identity, gendered ideologies, political organization, economic relationships, social networks, and religious practices using methodologies such as formal analysis, semiotics, iconography, iconology, and compositional analysis. This book is also singular in encompassing pre-Columbian ceramics from across Ancient America, rather than focusing on a single region, culture, or period of time.

Contributors to this volume bring their own terminologies and methodologies to their analyses, but this variety enriches understanding of the people who made and used ceramic objects. Hopefully, the multidisciplinary nature of this work and its broad approach will provide a model for the study of ceramics in other regions as well.

## **Ethics, Cultural Heritage, and Authenticity**

Ancient ceramics provide a record of how people lived at various times and places. Through these tangible objects, scholars can grasp how ancient people expressed themselves, organized their lives, and worshipped. Conveying values and traditions of the past to the present day, ceramics represent a key form of cultural heritage that must be meticulously preserved. Among the various disciplines represented in this book, art historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists all have slightly different ways of determining the authenticity and preserving the integrity of pre-Columbian ceramic traditions. First and foremost, scholars must be careful only to study objects that were actually created or used by the cultures they wish to understand, rather than use items that have been misidentified, modern copies, or forgeries. Because of the value of historical objects in the antiquities market, many scholars also believe they have a responsibility to prevent artifacts from becoming commercialized and therefore decontextualized through sale and distribution. Such practices can lead to the looting of archaeological sites and illicitly exporting ceramics that not only make scholarship more difficult, but rob indigenous peoples of their cultural heritage. Through all of these ethical and practical concerns, it remains vital to maintain the object's connection to its past.

Art historians, in addressing broad questions of style and symbolism, use a set of tools to study ceramic objects with little information about their specific historical circumstances. They may study objects in museum or private collections that have passed through the commercial market, leaving no record of their excavation site or cultural context. To judge their authenticity, art historians attribute objects to specific times and places largely through stylistic analysis and provenance—the records of how objects came to reside in certain collections. Despite not always having clear excavation records for the objects they study, art historians are deeply concerned about their authenticity and attributions of their cultural integrity.