

Las Muñecas Antiguas *Peruvian Mummy Dolls*

Among the intriguing treasures of ancient Peru are *Las Muñecas Antiguas*, little *mummy dolls*, found wrapped within burials of Peruvian mummies. Examples of these burials and the so-called *mummy dolls* discovered in ancient burials can be seen in the Lima Gold Museum and other museums in Peru.

Among pre-Columbian Peruvians, the custom of including articles that were important to the deceased was a common burial tradition. Discovered with many interments are tool kits used by spinners and weavers, fishing kits, weapons, and other objects. The relationship of the deceased and these practical funerary goods is obvious. These accoutrements of daily life, as well as superb weavings, jewelry, and other personal treasures, were believed to have utility in a hereafter. But the relationship of the *Muñecas* to the deceased is not as apparent.

A first conclusion that these dolls were beloved toys of the deceased is easily challenged by a lack of variety of *Muñecas* discovered. Furthermore although *Muñecas* have been discovered in children's burials, most have been found in adult burials. A fundamental problem is distinguishing between copies of originals and creations of twentieth century artisans.

Nevertheless, the leitmotif is motherhood and children. The most common *Muñeca* is a mother and child where the mother is holding the child or carrying it papoose-style. Another *Muñeca* is actually a group of figures, usually three: a woman in labor being assisted by two midwives. Another typical *Muñeca* grouping is three or more infants, probably females. Most puzzling is a boat grouping of two or more children. Why are they in a boat? The boat appears to be of reed construction like those presently found and used along the Pacific Coast and on Lake Titicaca.

Typical authentic *Chancay Muñecas* are superficially similar to *Muñecas* available to the traveler at the numberless Indian markets. The framework is constructed of twigs and dried reeds. Features of the face are defined by embroidery on a finely woven cloth. A comparison of three or four reveals individual personalities. The mother's forehead is wrapped in a band, and the head is covered with a shawl of netting cloth. Her long dress consists of a striped textile over which is an attractive apron. Cradled in her thread wrapped arms is her baby that is similarly dressed.

An incredible variety of the fabrics, ranging from relatively coarse netting material to



finely woven and often brightly colored textiles, are used. All of the dyes were natural, and the colors have survived the challenge of time.

It would require the work of experts to authenticate the provenance of the bits and pieces of textiles that become *Muñecas Antiguas*. Among the hundreds of dolls examined, with the exception of the yarn used in the embroidery, all of the textiles would have been woven on backstrap looms. These bits and pieces of textiles are gleanings from the pillaged and plundered pre-Columbian cemeteries.

Rising from the placid depths of the highest navigable lake in the world, the Island of the Sun, on Lake Titicaca, was celebrated by the ancients as the holiest region of the cosmos, and travelers fortunate enough to visit the island discover the continuing influence of the island's sacred mysteries of the. Llama sacrifices are still offered to *Pachamama*, the Earth Mother. Were the children in the boats sacrificial offerings? Evidence of child sacrifice by the ancients is overwhelming.

Located on the far end of the island are the mysterious *Chincana* ruins now identified as the *labyrinth*. *Chincana* is a popular destination for archaeological buffs and new-age pilgrims. A *Kallawaya shaman* assists pilgrims by cleansing and purifying their soul with shamanic rituals. The small museum on the Island of the Sun has on display sacrificial offerings recovered by Jacques Cousteau, offerings that were made to the spirits of the lake and to *Pachamama* by the ancients. Did Cousteau discover human remains in the lake? Evidence in the *Isla del Sol* museum includes many stone boxes that probably contained offerings to the lake or to *Pachamama*, but arguing against human sacrifice, no recovered human remains on display.

The Region

Stretching from the northernmost part of the Pacific coastal area of Peru and far to the south and the northern regions of Chile is a desert region unsurpassed by any other desert on the globe for total aridity. This is the Atacama Desert, parts of which have not been rain-watered within the memory of humankind - not even the fabled *el niño* has penetrated the regions south of Lima with rainfall.

The aridity of the region posed special problems for the earliest inhabitants. However these early arrivals turned to the sea to harvest the rich resources created by the Humboldt Current. Later the fast flowing water resources of rivers descending from the Andes Mountains were channeled into ingenious irrigation systems, that included networks of underground tunnels - an amazing engineering marvel.

We may create our own scenario explaining the evolution of funerary practices, but recognition of the region's aridity in preventing organic decay probably occurred very early. A combination of planetary winds, the Humboldt Current and the Andes Mountain

Range created a desert that by any standards became the host to the longest cemetery on earth.

The ancient peoples of the region appear to have had a deep reverence for the dead. It wasn't until the arrival of the Spanish, and their insatiable lust for gold, that the systematic despoliation of sites and graves began. These sacrileges, although prohibited by law, continue to the present day. Grave robbers - *huacaros* (grave robbers) - ply their ghoulish work at night. Striking quickly, their sharp spades slice through the friable sands. These thieves are not archaeologists or even collectors. A broken pot or a damaged weaving is inconsequential. Whatever they find is intended for quick sale.

Tombs similar to this illustration were prepared to receive one or more deceased pre-Columbians.

The dismal scene at any unguarded cemetery is one of holes and pits. Bones are strewn over the area, broken bits of pottery -- many beautifully glazed or painted, and scrapes of burial shrouds flapping in the breeze and clinging to bushes and trees. It is from such cemeteries that textile remnants are salvaged for recycling as *Muñecas*.



Artistic Tradition

Among the greatest legacies of the pre-Columbian of Peru and the Andes was their skill in spinning and weaving, which figuratively provided a canvas for preserving their considerable imagination and artistic creativity. Much of our understanding of pre-Incan art is derived from archaeological exploration and unfortunately grave-robbing. A richly interred corpse was dressed in life's finery, bedecked with gold and silver jewelry and wrapped in spectacularly woven tapestries. A simple cloth covering protected the burial, which was then placed in a bell shaped tomb. (See illustration page 3.) Many royal burials were placed in tombs.

National law and international treaties now protect Peru's antiquities, and traders, smugglers, *huacaros*, and even innocent collectors are dealt with severely - especially tourists. Nevertheless most archaeological sites, especially seldom visited sites, are frequented by purveyors of antiquities. Many are fakes, but some are original. The curious buyer is advised to ignore such *opportunities* because: 1) the unsuspecting buyer may be setup for extortion or arrest. 2) You'll be one sad puppy when you're detained at the airport and then hauled away by the police and locked away in a penitentiary suite forever! 3) It's wrong because it encourages rape and pillage of the historic past.

But souvenirs, especially authentic *treasures*, are always an attraction. Careful copies of

ancient ceramics are reasonably priced. Peruvian textiles for display or wear are exceptional bargains, and copies of other treasures - gold masks - are to be found. But by far the most interesting items are the *Muñecas Antiguas*. Many of the earliest burials were found in the Chancay area. A cottage industry producing *Muñecas Antiguas* has arisen in Chancay. The scraps and pieces of ancient textiles collected from pillaged and robbed gravesites are recycled in Chancay as *Muñecas Antiguas* - echoes of a very ancient past.

Genuine fake and legal antiquities. If that empty mantel requires something just right, you might need a genuine fake mummy doll that was individually crafted in Peru much as were such dolls that have survived for centuries in the dry climate of the Atacama. Call Andrea at the Pontious Gallery for information 630-620-0090.

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