

Chimu (Peru)

Burial Mask (1100 - 1470 A.D.)

This object is included in the "Many Faces, Many Places" Gallery tour which is coordinated with the third grade social studies curriculum. The following discussion questions are intended for use in the classroom. Additional information is included to facilitate discussion at other grade levels.

PART I: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. WHAT CAN BE OBSERVED ABOUT THIS MASK?

This mask appears to be made of gold metal. It is symmetrical. The mask is divided into three sections, a plain central part with facial features and two decorative parts on either side. There are a number of holes which appear to have held additional attachments or decorations. The surface is slightly scratched and one of the decorations appears to have been damaged.

2. HOW WAS THIS MASK MADE?

This is a burial mask from the Chimu people of ancient Peru. The Chimu believed, like the ancient Egyptians, that there was a life after death. Therefore, when someone died, the body was mummified and buried in a special room which was filled with tools, pieces of pottery and other special objects. The body was wrapped in special cloths and sometimes topped with a wooden or cloth head that was covered with a gold mask like this one. Because the climate was so dry, the mummies and their coverings were very well-preserved. This mask is an example of the kind of artifact or object that an archaeologist might find in a burial site.

3. HOW WAS IT MADE?

The ancient Peruvian people were very skilled in metalwork. They used copper, silver and gold which were mined locally to make jewelry, vases, and to decorate objects and even sides of buildings. Often, the metalworkers combined several kinds of metal by heating furnaces to very hot temperatures (over 1000 degrees F.) and melting the different metals together. Then, they would hammer the metal to flatten it and they would heat it again. The process would be repeated several times and then special coatings made of soil and salt would be used on the mask which would result in a smooth and shiny gold surface.

4. HOW WAS IT DECORATED?

Patterns were hammered into the mask with a stone tool in a process called "embossing." On this mask, the mouth is a very straight line and the eyes are teardrop shapes, which is characteristic of the art of the Chimu people. The circular shapes at the bottom of either side of the mask are ear plugs and correspond to the large ear ornaments that were worn by the Chimu people. The holes in the mask may have been used to hold feathers or shells or even jewels. Originally, there would have been a three-dimensional gold nose which has probably fallen off over time. Many gold masks like this one have traces of paint on them. If you look closely at this one, you can see some traces of red that may have been its original paint color.

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5. WHAT SYMBOLS ARE ON THIS MASK?

At the top of the mask, on either side, are warriors with helmets. Below the helmets are the heads of pumas, and pumas are also found attached to the ear plugs. The helmet may suggest that the deceased person was a warrior or had noble status; the puma had attributes of divine or spiritual powers. Similarly, the use of gold suggests that the deceased was a member of the nobility. Gold was also a metal with a symbolic value, often being dedicated to the sun deity.

PART II: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS TO SHARE WITH CHILDREN

The Chimu people lived on the north coast of Peru by the Pacific Ocean. They were the predominant culture in this region between 800 A.D. and 1470 A.D. Before them, the Moche people lived in this region, and the Chimu absorbed much of the Moche culture, particularly their metallurgical traditions. The Chimu were conquered and absorbed by the Inca empire which was, in turn, conquered by the Spanish in 1532 A.D. The Chimu empire at its height encompassed the northernmost 1000 kilometers of the Peruvian coast, from the border of Ecuador to the outskirts of what is now Lima. The coastline is bordered by desert, which reaches to the Andes highlands, with rainforests on the eastern side of the mountains. The Chimu developed ingenious irrigation and cultivation systems in order to cope with the desert and mountainous terrains, and grew maize, beans and squash. The Chimu were also noted for their textiles and ceramics.

In this culture, the kings were considered to be deities, and they retained all their property and privileges after death. Ancestor worship formed a central part of the Chimu religion. The sun and the moon were important deities.

PART III: BOOKS, OTHER READING

Bawden, Garth and Geoffrey Conrad. The Andean Heritage. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 1982.

Disselhoff, Hans Dietrich. Daily Life in Ancient Peru. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967.

Glubok, Shirley. The Art of Ancient Peru. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Tushingham, A.D. Gold for the Gods: A Catalog to an exhibition of Pre-Inca and Inca Gold and Artifacts from Peru. Royal Ontario Museum, 1967.

Tushingham, A.D., Ursula F. Franklin and Christopher Toogood. Studies in Ancient Peruvian Metalworking: An Investigation of Objects from the Museo Oro del Peru exhibited in California in 1976-77 under the title of "Gold for Gods". Royal Ontario Museum, History, Technology and Art, Monograph 3, 1979.