



## **Making the Invisible Visible: A Brief Exploration of the Human Psyche through Pre-Columbian Art**

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The first time I encountered a wide range of pre-Columbian art was during a trip to Machu Picchu, Peru. What I saw at that moment was mind-blowing.

### **I. Cuzco: A City Built on Top of Another City**

When you land in Cuzco, your first impression is that of a charming Spanish colonial city. You quickly find the main square and the Cathedral, recognizing the typical structure of cities built by the Spanish conquerors. However, very soon, the presence of indigenous culture begins to capture your attention.

The contrast between the European traits and the distinctive Peruvian traits is striking. Gradually, you notice differences not only in appearance but also in attitude and demeanor. Alongside the confident manner of most foreigners, you see the cautious and shy behavior of the locals. Their expressions to my mind reveal a kind of sadness or loneliness.

As you walk through the city, you discover Cuzco's history: the main buildings, symbols of the Spanish Crown's power, were constructed over the ruins of ancient Inca structures. The ruins reveal a traumatic history of violence and destruction brought by the Spanish conquerors. This history explains the sad expressions on the faces of the descendants of the conquered Incas. It is the same expression we recognize in our patients and others who have been traumatized. Despite the years that have passed, they still bear the stigma of the clash between the Europeans and their ancestors.

From a psychological perspective, our perception of reality is deeply influenced by our personal history. The Ego complex can eclipse our awareness of the Self, and our

Objective Psyche can be obscured by our prejudices and rational frameworks built through previous experiences. Similarly, our patriarchal and European education has limited our ability to experience other dimensions of reality.

## **II. The Evolution of Human Consciousness**

Following Eric Neumann, human consciousness evolves phylogenetically, mirroring the development of our Psyche. This explains why it is difficult to imagine how we organized our experiences in earlier stages of development. It also helps us understand why it is so challenging to appreciate how our distant ancestors related to their surroundings and interpreted reality in ways so different from ours.

My invitation is to reverse this path and try to rescue our ancestors' ways of viewing reality, thereby uncovering other aspects of our Psyche, including the field of our Objective Psyche.

The Objective Psyche encompasses the Collective Unconscious, the deepest and most ancient part of our psyche, where Archetypes dwell in a supra-personal matrix. This matrix contains primordial types and universal images that have existed since ancient times.

One of the greatest documents expressing the objective psyche and ways to relate to it is Jung's *Red Book*. Jung differentiates the spirit of the depths from the spirit of the times and invites us to confront rational certainties, bringing images into our conscious awareness. His discoveries help us recognize the dynamics related to the Ego and those related to the more universal and collective aspects of the psyche.

Despite obstacles, the objective psyche expresses itself in various ways that we can identify in our dreams, art, and other creative expressions, and in the manifestations of mediums or prophets.

In Western culture, perhaps it is in the field of art where we find the most frequent manifestations of the objective psyche. Most eminent artists' work results from processes in which they lose their sense of self and become instruments in the service of the creative process.

Today, we know a lot about proportions and harmony and their relation to "manifestations of the Divine." This understanding is not only found in art and nature but also in mathematics and physics. Top physicists often surrender to a Higher principle organizing nature, which some call God.

We can understand this Higher principle as a basic primordial pattern from which everything in the Universe has evolved, present everywhere in a visible or invisible way, acting as a regulator of all different structures and imprinting them with a pattern of harmony.

One of Jung's major contributions was recognizing this Higher principle operating in us as the Self. The identification of the Self, its dynamics, and its relations with the outer world as a balancing function in our psyche has become fundamental for understanding reality and the mystery of consciousness.

There is an invisible connection between different layers of what we humans call reality, states, and fields of consciousness we can reach.

For some cultures, particularly those deemed “tribal,” rituals allow their “spirit” to communicate, and for those who understand the message, mostly the shamans, these rituals provide important and direct learning about Nature. They believe their knowledge about diseases and health, complex substance use, life and death mysteries, rituals, and mythology have been transmitted by the spirits of Nature. Psychologically, we can say they open doors to unknown forces of the collective unconscious and the archaic wisdom of the Self.

Studying their medicines, mythology, understanding of life and Nature’s dynamics, their ways of living, building homes, and maintaining order and balance in their lives, we find coherence and depth in these cultures, often isolated in the heart of the forest.

These experiences and the questions they raise are subjects upon which I invite you to reflect:

- Are we immersed in a universal matrix that governs the different patterns and their dynamics?
- Is our Psyche a device allowing us to connect with other dimensions of the Universe?
- Is creativity just the manifestation of “invisible patterns or images” captured by our psyche, or is it the result of a complex process through which our psyche needs to express itself?

### **III. Pre-Columbian Art: Three Pieces, Three Different Stages?**

In what we know as “tribal art”—utilitarian or ritual objects adorned with beautiful decorations—we find many bizarre motifs representing universal symbols related to archetypes.

Thanks to research by anthropologists, we have learned of ancient rituals and myths to be the first manifestations of our ancient cultures trying to understand Nature's mysteries and control its dynamics.

Latin America, with its complex geography, is home to many isolated cultures. From North to South, we find remarkable cultures like the Aztecs (in Mexico), the Mayans (spread between southern Mexico and northern Central America), the Chibchas (around the Colombian Andes), and the Incas (between Ecuador and northern Chile). Jungles and high mountain ranges acted as obstacles, maintaining these cultures in an endogamic socio-cultural dynamic.

Despite their isolation, these cultures shared similar symbols and motifs explaining their cosmogony and creation myths. They believed in an evolutionary understanding of life emerging from chaos into more complex structures, with different layers or fields affecting daily human life:

- (1) An underworld layer with chthonic deities helping humans connect with primordial principles of balance and fertilization, represented by animals like snakes, lizards, and alligators.

- (2) A visible world layer with daily struggles related to life and death, where humans grow, strengthen, and gain knowledge, represented by animals like jaguars, pumas, or tigers.
- (3) A spiritual layer represented by the sky and mountain peaks, where deities connect humans with transcendence, life, death, and survival, represented by animals like condors, eagles, or bats.

I will present three Pre-Columbian art pieces to illustrate this. These pieces were found in different settlements corresponding to three different clans or tribes of the Chibcha culture: the Tolitas, the Quimbayas, and the Taironas.

**First Piece:**







A pottery piece from a Tolita's (Ecuador) tomb site, dating between 400 BC and 600 AD. Dimensions: 9.5 x 14 x 8 inches.

This complex piece depicts a bizarre animal with a turtle-like shell, a snake spiraling inward, and a human-like head with animalistic features. It has a tail and 4 limbs, 2 of them (the back ones) in a strangely defensive position which seems like a physiological impossibility.

The head is complex, with a sort of ceremonial crown and although it has a human structure and seems partially human, its ears and mouth are not.

The mouth is partially open and with clear teeth and fangs (these latter ones correspond to a carnivorous animal maybe a feline). It has a snake gripped in its mouth between its clenched teeth that also has its eyes wide open.

We can find similar kinds of bizarre mythological creatures in many cultures representing sorts of non-differentiated natural forces that we can refer to as primordial chaos. In most cosmogonies, we find that at the beginning there was chaos from which differentiation starts, a condition that Eric Neumann identified as the initial feature in the Uroboric stage of the evolutionary process of human consciousness.

In this piece, we find different elements that speak of a primordial stage: the spiral, the combination in a non-synthetic way of fundamental deities: the snake and the jaguar, the defensive attitude, the non-physiological position and the snake going into the “mysterious” hole which is at the center of the piece, a sort of navel.

I would like to amplify the wide-open eyes with the work of Reichel-Dolmatoff, a renowned Columbian anthropologist, who points out that we can identify two types of gaze in pre-Columbian art: the natural gaze and the hallucinatory gaze. This hallucinatory gaze is what is recognizable as the wide-open eyes typical of shamanic states or “flights” induced by entheogens.

Finally, another interesting feature of this piece of art is that it has the same length between its paws so, if we connect invisible dots located in each one of them, we could draw a square that frames the circular shell that constitutes the rest of the body.



**Second Piece:**

A tumbaga (copper and gold alloy) and emeralds piece from a late-period Quimbaya's (Colombia) tomb site, sealed around 900 AD. Height: 5.5 inches.



It is the figure of a shaman in a ceremonial sacrifice. We can identify his ritual adornments: the feather crown, the necklace and bracelets with the image of the sun, and an emerald knife.

His position is one of reverence. He seems to be ready to sacrifice a big serpent whose head he is holding in his left hand.

Our attention is drawn to the traits of his face: his mouth is partially open and we can see his teeth and fangs in a kind of fierce expression, not human but feline-like; his eyes are wide open in a trance-like expression. He is in the midst of ritual.

Again, referencing Neumann's developmental structure, we could place this image under the rubric of the Hero's Myth, the stage in which we have to deal with irrational forces (represented by the snake) that we have to defeat.

The field in which this combat is carried out is a non-rational, transcendent one, where we have to align our instincts (represented by the feline traits) with supra-personal intuitions and knowledge (represented by the bird features). This combat has an initiatory ritual function, it is a *rite de passage*, represented by the sacrifice.

Besides the beauty and symbolic complexity of this piece, it is an exemplar of a complex metallurgical process of which the Quimbaya clan were experts of. A metallurgical process that was ahead of their time.

**Third Piece:**



A tumbaga gold disc from a Tairona's (Colombia) tomb site, sealed around 1100 AD.

Diameter: 12 inches.

The disc features embossed motifs in a double quaternary pattern, from the center to the periphery we can identify four monkeys who are spinning around the center of the disc in a counterclock direction; the space above the monkeys is occupied by four patterns that are typical Tairona patterns. Anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff has associated these patterns with the constellation of Orion. If we divided the plate in four, we would find in each quarter the same combination of motifs in the same balanced proportion: a monkey and representation of Orion's constellation.

The Tairona's adored the sun as a god and, for them, gold was a representation of this deity. They decorated their homes with this kind of disc or plates in such a way as to have the sunlight reflected and illuminating their homes. They also had sophisticated knowledge of astronomy, and Orion's constellation was an important one in their cosmogony because they could see it for most of the year during their nights. In a way, we could say that this piece integrates motifs of the day and its deities with others of the night.

This example of a balanced distribution of motifs that are repeated in a regular basis on a circular surface, suggests a mandala: symbolizing wholeness and integration. If we continue associating these pre-Columbian pieces of art with the stages of the development of consciousness proposed by Neumann, we can place this piece at the end of the Transformation Myth, representing the integration of the contents of the Universe (inner and outer) in a balanced dynamic in opposition to the opposite pole of primordial Chaos.

The monkeys could be representative of a joyful and playful way of living and their movement around the center of the disc, are reminiscent of the Hindu Wheel of Fortune and the Tarot: the eternal movement of life.

## **Conclusion**

Following Jung's invitation to reflect on the significance of a Collective Unconscious layer in the human psyche, observing "tribal" or non-Western cultures and material culture allows us to explore understandings of reality that differ from those shaped by our western education and development.

As a collective, we have been immersed in an Ego-centered culture, separating us from our objective/transpersonal psyche and its richness. Reconnecting with this objective psyche might help us touch the "It" recognized as the Soul from ancient times, representing a compass for our place in the Universe.

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