



# **Gold of Ancient America**

*Art of Colombia*

**Rebecca Hinson**

# Gold of Ancient America

## *Art of Colombia*

Rebecca Hinson



Dedicated to Angela María González  
Copyright © 2019 by Rebecca Ann Hinson  
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019949614  
Edited by Richard Lederer & John Robuck  
History Consultants: Stuart Schwartz & Rebecca Stone  
Rebecca Hinson Publishing  
Lake Worth Beach, Florida  
Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 978-1-947623-25-5

**ARTISTS** Cover, 6, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 20, 21, Metropolitan Museum of Art; 1, Wikimedia Commons: Addicted04; 3, Pedro Szekely; 4, Tiziano Vecelli (Titian); 5, 18, Mario Roberto Durán Ortiz; 7, 13, 17, 19, 23, 24, El Museo del Oro, Bogotá; 8, Turista Perene; 10, James St. John; 22, Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

**SOURCES** Leon Auerbach, *El Dorado: The Gold of Ancient Colombia*; Roberto Lleras Pérez, *The Art of Gold: The Legacy of Pre-Hispanic Colombia*; Elisenda Vila Llonch, *Beyond El Dorado: power and gold in ancient Colombia*; Antonio Panesso, *El Dorado*.



More than 2,000 years ago, indigenous societies of ancient Colombia crafted a vast array of complex gold objects for use in spiritual rituals, personal adornment, and tasks of daily life. Chiefdoms believed animals, people, plants, land, water, and sky all had spirits. They trusted the transformative power of gold to connect this natural world with the divine, keeping the universe in balance.



Spectators sang, played instruments, burned incense, and danced as a raft floated to the center of Lake Guatavita. Aboard, a naked Muisca *cacique* (chieftain), covered in gold dust, radiated like a sunbeam. He and four others threw gold and emeralds into the lake as offerings to gods. According to accounts by Spanish explorers, the legend of El Dorado—a golden kingdom in the New World—arose.



Over 150 years, explorers took more than 81 tons of gold from Spanish territories in America. This treasure supported the first global empire of the world, ruled by King Charles V of Spain, who was the Catholic head of the Holy Roman Empire. For late medieval Europe, gold was a symbol of wealth and power; but, for the ancient indigenous societies of what is now Colombia, gold was valued for its transformative power.



By wearing a gold animal ornament during rituals, shamans (spiritual leaders) believed their spirits transformed into that animal (like the bird-man here) and travelled to other dimensions of the cosmos. To begin the ritual, shamans chanted, danced, and chewed lime, coca leaves, and other plants, inducing a trance. During this half-conscious state, they experienced a sensation of travel, often by



flight to a supernatural world where they acquired knowledge, such as cures for diseases. To avoid droughts or other disasters, they negotiated with ancestors and other spirits to keep the cosmos in order. Upon their return, shamans (like the bat-man here) shared what they experienced with their community. Caciques depended on the guidance of shamans in many matters, such as when to make war.



Artisans also made gold objects of adornment like nose ornaments, necklaces, diadems (headdress ornaments), pectorals (chest pendants), wrist and leg bands, spear-throwers, and earrings. Found in all regions of Colombia, nose ornaments were the most common gold jewelry. Artisans also made tools like chisels, needles, fishhooks, and polishers, which were used in daily life.





Elaborate lime *poporos* (flasks) and dippers (as seen here), large gold body ornaments, musical instruments, spoons, and bowls were made for caciques, shamans, and respected elders. When a leader died, the objects he used during his lifetime were placed with his body in a tomb. Gold, ceramics, and other possessions were thought to give him power and identity as an ancestor (semi-divine



supernatural figure) and ensure his wellbeing for eternity. Additional goldworks were crafted specifically for burial. This large Calima funerary mask would have been placed at the feet or atop the face of the wrapped corpse of a high-status person, to aid his travel from the natural world to the spiritual realm. In some tombs, multiple masks were discovered stacked one on top of the other.



Workers collected alluvial gold pebbles from sands and gravels of riverbeds and mined gold from thin veins of metal in hard rock (seen here). Since the Muisca lacked gold in their area, they traded emeralds, cotton, and salt for gold from neighboring chiefdoms. Gold in its purest form is difficult to work with, as its melting point is 1063 degrees Celsius. Artisans often combined fine gold with copper because



it lowered the metal's melting point. An alloy (mixture) of 82 percent gold with 18 percent copper has a melting point of 800 degrees Celsius. To make base gold, artisans added 40 percent or more copper. To create an alloy called *tumbaga* (as in the lobster-man seen here), they added 70 percent or more copper. Tumbaga produced fine details more easily and was harder and stronger than pure gold.