

Michael C. Carlos Museum

A Family Guide to **Animals** in the **Art of the Ancient Americas**

animals



Welcome

Welcome to the ancient American galleries at the Michael C. Carlos Museum. The works of art you will see in these galleries come from the many different cultures that long ago inhabited the regions of modern day South America, Central America, and Mexico. When these objects were made, modern countries did not exist—rather this immense region was home to the Inka, Aztec, Maya, and other great civilizations. The peoples of the ancient Americas, sometimes called Amerindians, thrived in many different environments, from the rugged Andes Mountains to the lush rain forests of Costa Rica, from the Mexican desert to the fertile lands of the Colombian river valleys. Many animals lived around them, inspiring artists to create animal images in cloth, metal, clay, and stone. In our own lives we see mostly domestic animals like cats and dogs, and maybe a few wild animals like raccoons and opossums, but the Amerindians lived around beautiful, wild,



and ferocious animals every day. They admired the ways in which each animal adapted to its natural habitat and appreciated each animal's strengths. For example, birds were admired for their ability to fly. Jaguars were admired for the amazing night vision that enabled them to hunt when their prey was fast asleep, pouncing on the unsuspecting animals with their deadly claws and teeth. These abilities—which human beings do not possess—were considered more than just useful. They had a spiritual place in the world of the ancient Americans. Religious leaders, called shamans, believed they could transform into animals and gain special knowledge from them to benefit their communities.



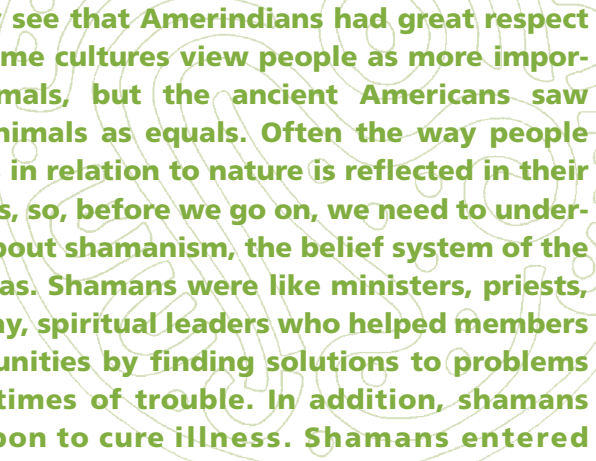


As you enter the first gallery you may be surprised at how many animals you will see. Look for a lizard, an osprey, a monkey, a condor, a spider, an owl, snakes, toads, and even a stingray.



If you look closely, you will also see some strange combinations of features, such as an image of a black toad with the ears and paws of a cat. Look for a jaguar wearing a scarf, whose eyes look more human than feline.





We can already see that Amerindians had great respect for animals. Some cultures view people as more important than animals, but the ancient Americans saw humans and animals as equals. Often the way people see themselves in relation to nature is reflected in their religious beliefs, so, before we go on, we need to understand a little about shamanism, the belief system of the ancient Americas. Shamans were like ministers, priests, and rabbis today, spiritual leaders who helped members of their communities by finding solutions to problems or helping in times of trouble. In addition, shamans were called upon to cure illness. Shamans entered trances or dream states to find out what made people sick, or what was causing their trouble. Shamans believed that they could become animals, fly, talk to spirits, and travel to the land of the dead to seek guidance. (Almost everything you see in these galleries was put into graves to accompany people in the afterlife). These beliefs shape the art of the ancient Americas.

Images of shamans reflect the importance of animals. In the center of the first gallery, look for a light-colored clay sculpture of a female shaman with her arms outstretched. Is there anything about her that reminds you of an animal? Her chest and back are painted with the spots of a jaguar and the painted design covering her mouth area resembles the long jaw of a crocodile, studded with razor-sharp teeth. The power of these two ferocious predators has become part of her power. She has transformed into her animal self. As you travel through the galleries, look for images of animals that seem part human and humans that look part animal.

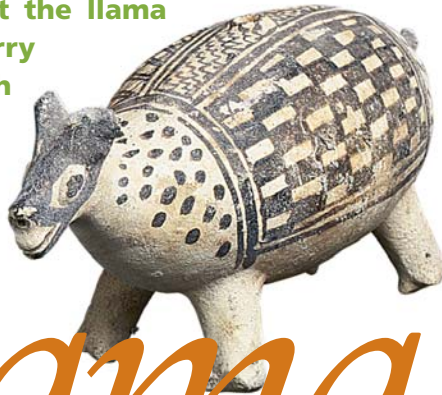




Around the corner in the next gallery, you will find an animal that was very important, especially in ancient South America: the llama (pronounced “ya ma” in Spanish). Llamas are a type of camel that was crucial to human survival in the inhospitable Andes.



The llama's cloven hooves and ability to travel long distances without water made them useful for carrying things over the mountainous terrain where the wheel would have been useless. The llama's soft hair (and the even softer hair of another camel, the alpaca) was spun into yarn to weave clothing and blankets, their meat was eaten, and their dried dung was burned for fuel. Look for an image of a llama sculpted from light colored clay with a plump body, dark spots, and a painted geometric pattern on its back. What do you think this geometric pattern represents? (Remember that the llama was used to carry goods through the mountains.)



Llama

In this gallery you will also find metal knives called *tumis* [too mees] with long handles and wide, rounded blades. How are these like knives you have used? How are they different? Look for a knife handle shaped like the leg of a condor, the largest and strongest bird in the Andes. The artist looked carefully at the leg of the bird and knew that it would be a perfect form for the knife handle. Now look for a *tumi* with a llama's head at the top of its handle. The artist who made this knife saw similarities between the llama's long neck and the shape of the knife handle. The rounded blade mimics the fat body of the llama. Another *tumi* shows a "mama llama" and her baby. Why do you suppose the artist depicted a mother and baby? The baby represents a new generation of llamas that will provide warm clothes, nourishing food, and help carrying supplies over the rugged terrain.



As you continue your journey through the galleries, you will find burial objects from ancient Panama, especially bowls on high pedestals painted with intricate designs in purple and red. What animals do you see? A crab? A turkey vulture? Look for one with an image of a praying mantis nearly hidden in its complex, colorful geometry. Once again we see an animal, this time an insect, representing the shaman. Praying mantids can stand upright and turn their heads, just like humans. They can remain motionless for hours at a time (like meditating shamans). Although they are quite small, they are excellent hunters and can eat birds, mice, and frogs that are much larger than themselves. The artist who created this plate pictured the insect in the attack position, with its arms up, ready to strike. Did you know that after mating, the female praying mantis bites off the head of the male?

Praying



gMantis

Continue through the galleries until you find a room with images of the largest cat in the world—the jaguar. The jaguar was the most feared and revered animal in the Americas. Weighing up to three hundred pounds and stretching to eight feet long from head to tail, the jaguar is a mighty predator. Their beautiful coats—inky black rosettes on a tawny background—enable jaguars to camouflage themselves well in the jungle. Hidden, they wait for just the right moment to strike at crocodiles, huge anacondas, and almost any kind of smaller animal (they will even kill human beings on occasion). Jaguars have excellent night vision—three times more powerful than that of humans. Like jaguars, shamans did their work at night and had “special” sight. Jaguars are also powerful swimmers and can climb trees, enabling them to dominate many different earthly realms. Ancient Americans believed that shamans transformed into jaguars and traveled through many different cosmic realms.

Jaguar

Find a group of black clay pots that show jaguars running and even jumping right off the rims. Made in ancient Costa Rica, these pots may depict rare, all-black jaguars. Black jaguars still have spots but they can only be seen in certain lights. Imagine how hard it would be to see a black jaguar at night! These special jaguars may have been considered the animal selves of the most powerful shamans.



Now look for a pear-shaped vessel made from light colored clay in the form of a jaguar. What identifies this as a jaguar? The sharp fangs, the strong legs, the ruff of fur around the neck? Notice how the artist has decorated areas of the vessel with jaguar spots. Look very closely and you will see that many of the “spots” look like tiny jaguars. This jaguar is shown with its front legs resting on its back ones. Can jaguars really do this? No. This is how meditating shamans were depicted—with their hands resting on their knees. Once again we see an object that is part human and part jaguar, the transforming animal-person shaman. There are other secret, almost magical, things about this pot, too. Hidden inside its mouth and legs are ceramic balls that rattle when the vessel is shaken. The sound closely mimics the low growl of the jaguar just before it leaps upon its prey. Imagine what a frightening sound that would be!



Find a tiny gallery filled with many small sculptures of animals. Look for toads, crabs, an armadillo, and especially a small brown flute shaped like a bat. Notice how the artist used texture to suggest the soft fur of the bat. The holes on the sides of the bat's neck tell us that this object was worn as a necklace with the bat in the upright position. But when the musician lifted the flute to play it, it was turned upside down, assuming the roosting position of the bat. As well as being very creative, ancient Americans were close observers of nature. Bats make noise that we can hear only when they are hanging upside down in their roosts! Like jaguars, bats were admired for their ability to navigate at night, the time when shamans took their journeys. Bats live in caves, which ancient Americans believed were entrances to the underworld. Making a musical instrument in the shape of a bat had great spiritual significance since music was believed to travel through the underworld, the earthly world, and the celestial world—just like the bat.



In the next large gallery you will see several volcanic stone carvings that look like little tables. These *metates* (pronounced may TAH tay) were used to grind corn into flour or *kakaw* beans into cocoa powder. This is another act of transformation—changing plants into food—and so *metates* were often carved into images of the birds, crocodiles, and jaguars that shamans could become. Look for a *metate* in the shape of a parrot. What special ability do parrots and other birds have that human beings would admire? Shamans often describe their visions as being like flying.

These *metates* are not just everyday objects, but reflect the idea that a sacred life force lives in everything, even inanimate objects. Most of the designs on the largest *metate* are carved on the underneath side, facing toward the earth, which provided the corn and the *kakaw* for grinding.

Parrot



You will also find many images of crocodiles in this gallery. Look for a seat carved in the shape of a crocodile's head. The crocodile is a very powerful animal whose strong jaws, sharp teeth, and powerful tail can be deadly. They live on land and in the water, which would have been seen by the ancient Americans as a special ability not shared by human beings. What would this crocodile seat tell us about the person who sat on it?

Look for *incensarios* (Spanish for "incense burners") in this gallery. Many are decorated with the scutes of crocodiles. To the ancient Americans the bony ridges of the animal's spine resembled the mountain ridges that rose high above them. In fact, the ancient Americans imagined the earth as a crocodile floating in the water, with much of the land hidden under the water and the mountains rising above.

Some of the incense burners are fantastical, with elaborate curls of scutes coming off their noses, imitating the curls of smoke that would pour from the *incensarios* as the shaman entered his trance state. These images do not just represent actual crocodiles, but remind us of the shaman's transformation into the powerful animal.



In the last gallery, look for a clay sculpture in the form of a standing dog. Compare the 2,000-year-old sculpture to the picture of the hairless dog still found in Mexico today. What characteristics of the actual dog has the artist depicted? The artist painted the surface of the sculpture with slip, a combination of water, minerals, and clay, and rubbed it with a smooth stone to re-create the shiny surface of the dog's hairless body. The pointed ears and the muscular body of the sculpture look much like those of the actual dog. What is different?

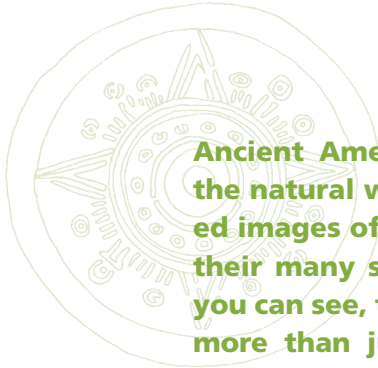
The artist had to make a hole in the hollow dog sculpture in order for moisture to escape during the firing process. Where did the artist make this firing hole? The open mouth makes the dog appear to be growling or barking. But this dog represents much more than just a noisy pet; it has a spiritual purpose, too. Dogs were thought to guide the dead from this world to the next and sculptures like this were often placed in tombs to ensure a successful passage to the underworld.



Dog

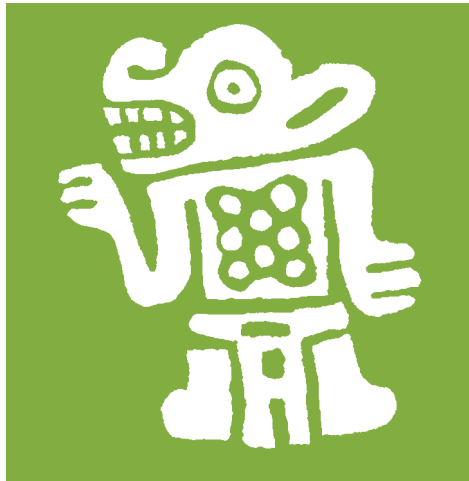
Finally, look for a small but charming image of a jaguar and an old man sitting back-to-back on the lid of an incense burner. Both sit with their hands/paws resting on their knees. Do you remember what that means? The old man and the jaguar sit in exactly the same position showing that they are two aspects of the same being. But unlike other images of meditating shamans we have seen, one leg of each figure is bent and the other dangles down. Only Maya royalty were depicted in this position known as “the posture of royal ease.” Thus, the shaman, who was also a jaguar, may have been the ruler, too. Sometimes religious and political leaders were one and the same. Here the artist has blended all these things together making the complicated idea easy to see.



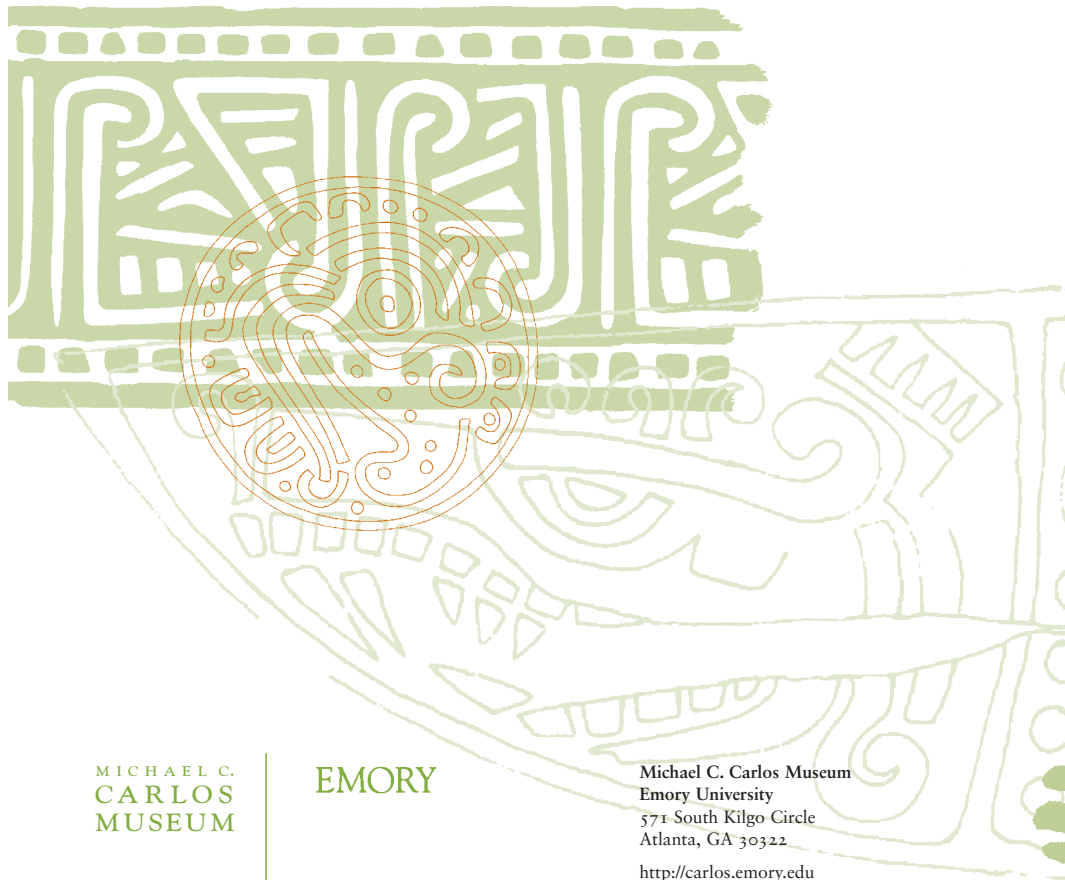


Ancient American artists observed the natural world closely and created images of animals that reflected their many special abilities. But as you can see, these images represent more than just how animals look and act. They give us insight into the spiritual beliefs of the people who lived in this region of the world before the arrival of the Spanish, and help us to understand how they saw themselves and the world around them.





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