

A bewitching look at ancient American art

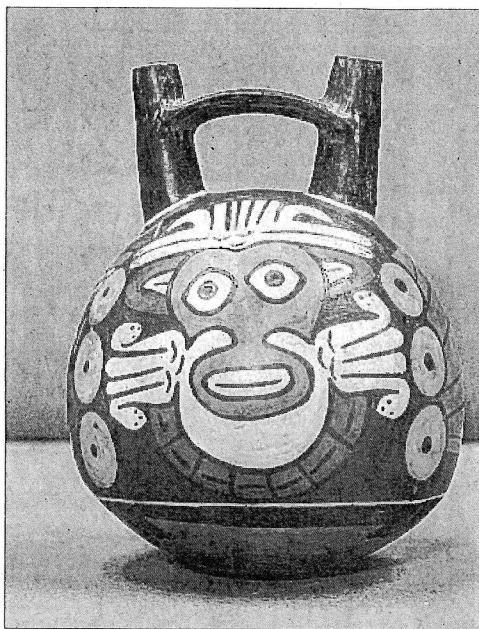
Exhibit at Carlos Museum focuses on shaman beliefs.

By Felicia Feaster
For the AJC

A fascinating exhibition about altered states, “For I Am the Black Jaguar: Shamanic Visionary Experience in Ancient American Art,” at Emory University’s Michael C. Carlos Museum brings together 116 objects related to this ancient religious practice.

Most of the objects are drawn from Emory University’s renowned collection of ancient art. And if you thought those Egyptians with their phantasmagorical burial rites were something, you haven’t seen anything until you’ve appraised the way people of the ancient Americas created vessels showing wild-eyed men flying through space, or sculptures of a woman transformed into a whale shark.

The exhibit is organized by Emory art history professor and curator of Art of the Americas Rebecca Rollins Stone, who is deeply interested in the connections between the human and the natural world seen in the shaman belief system.



Many of the ancient objects in “For I Am the Black Jaguar” illustrate scenes of altered consciousness brought on in shaman rituals, like this ceramic vessel circa 1-650 AD depicting a flying human figure. PHOTO COURTESY OF BRUCE WHITE/MICHAEL C. CARLOS MUSEUM

Shamans in ancient – and contemporary – Central and South America used rituals including incense burning, music and also mind-altering substances to connect to a deeper understanding of the spiritual world and bring that wisdom back to

their communities to heal and advise.

The utterly bewitching dimension to “For I Am the Black Jaguar” is how this ancient religion created elaborately detailed and coded tapestries, sculpture, jewelry and drinking vessels to

ART REVIEW

“For I Am the Black Jaguar: Shamanic Visionary Experience in Ancient American Art”

Through Jan. 5, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays; noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. \$8, adults; \$6, students, seniors and children 6-17; free, children 5 and younger and for Emory students, faculty and staff. Emory University’s Michael C. Carlos Museum, 571 South Kilgo Circle, Atlanta. 404-727-4282, www.carlos.emory.edu.
Bottom line: A truly transportive glimpse into the shaman belief system of the ancient Americas.

illustrate its beliefs.

If Western religions have depicted religious themes in stained glass windows or altar statuary, shaman culture expressed its own belief system in vessels which depicted humans transforming into ocelots, jaguars or crocodiles.

Such animals were seen in the shaman belief system as conduits to a higher consciousness.

And as the most stealth and majestic animal, jaguars were revered above

all, and endlessly depicted in these ancient objects.

That intertwined connection between the human and animal realm is an unusual concept for Westerners who tend to create a hierarchy in which human beings exist apart from, and with dominion over nature. “There is no dominion,” in shaman belief said Stone, “it is sharing states of being.”

The objects are engrossing not only because of what they show of this imagery-rich belief system, but for their strange beauty.

A 300 AD Peruvian “Portrait of a Puma” ceramic vessel depicts this spirit animal with a reverence normally reserved for human portraiture.

In another Peruvian “Elderly Male Effigy Vessel,” the object depicts an elderly seated shaman offering telltale signs of his melding with an animal form. Bulging eyeballs and hairy brows and whiskers show how he, in the shaman trance ritual, is transforming into an animal.

The shaman visual culture also captured the experience of undergoing out of body states.

A side gallery displays objects that depict visionary experiences of flying,

spinning, or of a world turned upside down. A ceramic vessel circa 1-650 AD “Double Spout and Bridge Vessel with Flying Shaman,” features a wild-eyed human figure flying through space – a common trance experience.

Another gallery room shows, in both symbolic and literal ways, the various means practitioners of this belief system used to achieve their altered states.

Ancient clay rattles and flutes helped shamans enter a trance state. But there were also caapi vines, spiny oysters, peyote, guarea fruit and other “entheogenic” (vision-producing) substances to pave the way. Jewelry depicting spiny oysters and clay pots decorated with the peyote plant were the objects that celebrated that gateway – for the shamans – to their divine.

Instead of fixating on the “hallucinogenic” aspects of shamanism that so fixate Westerners, curator Stone would prefer that viewers pay attention to their exquisite wrought detail. “This show is meant to get you to look more closely at objects,” noted Stone. This exhibition makes a powerful case for both the artistry and the insights of this ancient belief system.