

The Hand and The Body

El Museo del Oro
Bogotá, Colombia
On permanent view

By Rebekah Frank

Visiting the collection of El Museo del Oro in Bogotá, Colombia, should be on the bucket list of every metalsmith in the world. Created in 1939 and made available to the public in 1959, it is managed by the Banco de la República with a mission to protect the cultural heritage of Colombia. It is the largest collection of pre-Columbian artifacts in the world, holding more than 55,000 pieces. For the purpose of this review, the umbrella term "indigenous" is used unless a specific cultural group is referenced, in lieu of using the geopolitical term "pre-Columbian."

With such an immense collection of indigenous

objects, the experience could easily overwhelm. However, the museum's thoughtful arrangement of galleries and handling of displays builds a gradual understanding of the complexity of the objects. The museum is divided into four galleries, beginning with a look at the process of making, then moving to cultural use, followed by symbolism and ritual meanings, and ending with an immersive exhibit that symbolically returns the objects to the earth.

The first gallery, *The Working of Metal*, guides the viewer through various indigenous processes of making. Wall displays clearly explain them, beginning with a brief exploration of mining techniques, showing how nuggets of raw gold ore become the finished object. Handsets, provided free of charge, support the wall text with additional



Wall display showing placement of wearable objects.
Photo: Rebekah Frank



information. Display cases filled with objects, tools, enlarged micrographs, and simple line drawings illustrate complex processes and show how tools were used. Further displays showcase the range of metallurgy, metalsmithing techniques, variations in surface finishing, and object deterioration as the viewer moves through low-lit exhibition spaces. The text, visual illustrations, and objects work together to provide a show-and-tell narrative that neither assumes knowledge nor patronizes the viewer.

The indigenous artisans' methods are familiar to modern metalsmiths. However, the tools used by pre-Iron Age cultures are fascinating to see, given that a metalsmithing studio today is difficult to imagine without steel tools. Stone axes

and handheld hammers made from polished rocks, wooden tools with hardened tips, and even a handheld hammer made from found meteorite were used—a reminder of the ingenuity of humanity across time.

Research on the collection, illustrated through text, cartoons, and micrographs alongside the artifacts, highlights the advanced processes. For example, the Tumaco-La Tolita metalsmiths didn't use copper during the fusion process in granulation as researchers assumed, but instead heated pure gold to its fusion point. In another region, the Nariño manipulated the surface finish of *tumbaga* (an alloy of copper and gold) so it shone like gold using a natural acid solution made from wild sorrel, and created resists from tree resin.

The long hallway display that transitions the viewer from *The Working of Metal* to *People and Gold in Pre-Hispanic Colombia* includes a section on the deterioration and repair of objects. The display shows how *tumbaga* objects deteriorate through oxidation, creating a

The colorful palette of the patination in these objects stands out given the overall focus on gold and its stubborn refusal to do anything but shine over the ages.
Photo: Rebekah Frank

green patina on the surface. In addition, the meticulous repairs reaffirm the objects' value and use by the people who created them. There is power in seeing the reverence artisans took in the repairs.

In the exhibition *People and Gold in Pre-Hispanic Colombia*, the museum moves beyond material processes to cultural usage, further contextualizing the objects. For indigenous artisans, available materials, techniques, and regional preferences influenced their surface finishes, with some cultures preferring matte over shiny surfaces. In addition, friendly relationships between some groups allowed specific motifs and material treatments to move along trade routes.

Throughout the museum, human-scaled silhouettes behind frosted glass show how objects were worn. These silhouettes are placed so the viewer stands in direct relationship to the silhouette,

as in front of a mirror. Many of the wearable objects don't immediately translate for the modern eye. For example, how would one wear a nose ring the size of a dinner plate that has several hinge points? The silhouettes provide a powerful assist to the viewer in imagining these complex objects activated by the body.

The museum's emphasis on understanding the material process continues in *Cosmology and Symbolism in Metalworking Societies*, with a focus on the transformative nature of creation. The ritual objects were used by indigenous people to symbolically move between worlds. The objects, decorated with geometric designs, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic forms, assist the shamans in their communion with gods on behalf of the people.

In these indigenous ceremonies, the objects are

returned to the earth. *The Offering* is an immersive exhibit intended to convey the spiritual nature of the ritual, with the assistance of special effects. Of course, reproducing a transformative ritual is difficult within the context of a museum environment. However, the exhibit provides a space for the viewer to reflect on how the indigenous ritual's intention was thwarted, first through the incursion of European colonialism, then by private collectors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now these ritual objects are held in a national collection, accessible to the public, but one wonders if the objects would rather be returned to the earth as the shamans intended.

The last object the viewer sees before exiting the museum is the *Muisca Raft*, a gold votive sculpture representing a raft and people casting objects into a crater lake. It is an impressively detailed diorama

made of approximately 80 percent gold, shown to good effect in a darkened room. El Museo del Oro's efforts to build an understanding of the process of metalsmithing culminates in the viewer's ability to fully appreciate the intricacy, narrative power, and sheer volume of gold of this object. The *Muisca Raft* will never leave Colombia, which is yet another reason that every metalsmith should include this museum in their future travel plans.

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Rebekah Frank is a studio artist and independent writer who enjoys traveling the world in search of interesting experiences to fuel both her art and writing practices.

*The Offering Room, Museo del Oro. Banco de la República
Image courtesy of Museo del Oro.
Photo: Rebekah Frank*

