

E D U C A T I O N

SCHOOL GROUP SELF-GUIDE

ART OF THE AMERICAS

Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This guide will help you prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students. Use the links to the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History on the Museum's website to access descriptions of works of art and other relevant content.

Introduction

Civilization began in the Americas about 5,000 years ago in Mesoamerica (modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras) and in the Andean region of South America (Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia). In Mesoamerica, the Olmecs first began building centers around 1500 B.C. along the Gulf Coast of Mexico. They also carved large-scale stone sculptures and altars, a tradition that continued with the Maya and all later Mesoamerican societies. They had political systems controlled by ruler-priests whose power was often symbolized by the jaguar. These societies held similar beliefs in a rain and a maize deity, and they played a ritual ball game. In the Andean region, by the third millennium B.C., ancient Peruvians were creating ceremonial centers and temple complexes in regional chiefdoms and kingdoms. It was only with the rise of the Inca in the fifteenth century that this region united to form a single, vast empire stretching for 3,000 miles.

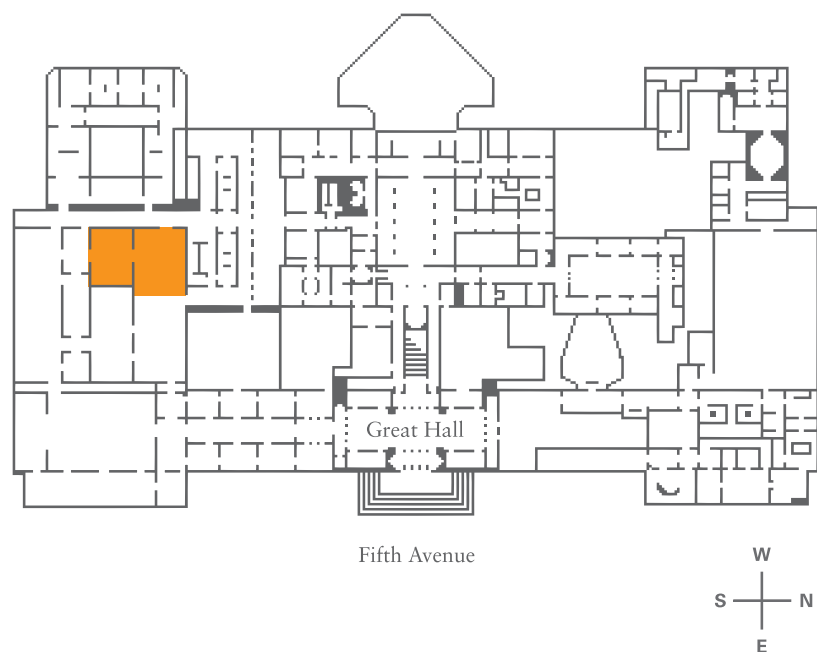
Precolumbian art was created mainly for ceremonial and ritual purposes. The powers of rulers and spiritual leaders to interact with the forces of nature and spirits of the ancestors are expressed in art by the use of certain animals as symbols, combinations of human and animal forms, and spectacular regalia, such as elaborate textiles, featherworks, and gold and jade ornaments. Many of the smaller objects in the Museum's collection come from tombs, which suggest beliefs in an afterlife. The larger sculpture comes from temples and shrines.

The Galleries

The Museum's holdings of Precolumbian art represent a large area of the two American continents that reaches from Mexico south through Peru. The collections cover a 3,500-year period that begins at about 2000 B.C. and ends with the arrival of the Spanish in the late fifteenth century A.D.

The galleries are located on the first floor in the south part of the Museum in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing. In the first of two large Precolumbian galleries are the Mesoamerican collections of stone sculpture, one rare wood sculpture, ceramics, and jades. There are also a few fine examples of ancient Taino art from the Caribbean Islands (present-day Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic).

The arts of Central America (primarily Costa Rica and Panama) and the Andean region are presented in the second gallery. Surrounding an extraordinary collection of Precolumbian metalwork in gold and silver are ceramic figurines, stone sculpture, textiles, and featherwork.



Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select five or six works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another work to view and discuss in the interim.

Please Note: Although most of the suggested works in this guide will be on view when you visit the Museum, some gallery installations may be subject to change. We recommend that you use [Search the Collections](#) online or come to the Museum to verify that the objects you want to discuss are on display prior to bringing your group.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.

Themes to Consider

Use the following links to content on the Museum's website, which will help you prepare for your visit.

Animal Symbolism

[Birds of the Andes](#)

Dualism and Symmetry

[Couples in Art](#)

[Dualism in Andean Art](#)

Questions for Discussion in the Galleries

- What does this object represent? Who or what is it?
- How was this made? What are the materials used?
- Look at the proportions in human and animal forms.
What is enlarged or altered?
- Are there forms that may be symbols or supernatural features?
- Is this object symmetrical or asymmetrical?

Suggested Works of Art to Explore

Please note that titles, dates, and other object information on the website and on gallery signage may vary as the result of ongoing research.



Mask, 10th–6th century B.C.

Mexico; Olmec

Jadeite; H. 6 3/4 x W. 6 5/16 in. (17.1 x 16.5 cm)

Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1977 (1977.187.33)

Questions: Does this face look natural? Explain. What features do you notice most? Of what in nature do they remind you?

Learn more about [Ancient American Jade](#).

Learn more about [Jade in Mesoamerica](#).



Paired Figures, 1st century B.C.–A.D. 2nd century

Mexico; Nayarit

Ceramic; H. 16 1/4 x W. 12 1/4 x D. 5 1/2 in. (41.3 x 31.1 x 14 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase,

Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1966 (1978.412.156)

Questions: What is unusual about this pair? How are they adorned? What are they holding? How do the figures relate to each other?



Eagle Relief, 10th–13th century

Mexico; Toltec

Andesite/dacite, paint; H. 27 1/2 x W. 30 1/2 in. (69.8 x 77.5 cm)

Gift of Frederic E. Church, 1893 (93.27.2)

Questions: Can you identify this bird? What is it doing? What do you think it represents?



Cihuateotl, 15th–early 16th century

Mexico; Aztec

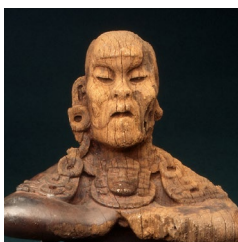
Stone; H. 26 x W. 17 1/4 x D. 17 in. (66 x 43.8 x 43.2 cm)

Museum Purchase, 1900 (00.5.30)

Questions: Describe this figure's posture. What kind of being is this? Explain. What features are human? What features are animal-like? Why make offerings to this fierce creature?

Learn more about [Aztec Stone Sculpture](#).

Learn more about [Tenochtitlan](#).



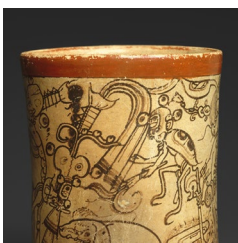
Mirror-Bearer, 6th century

Mexico or Guatemala; Maya

Wood, red hematite; H. 14 1/8 x W. 9 x D. 9 in. (35.9 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1063)

Questions: How is this figure adorned? What do this figure's pose and expression suggest? What has happened to the wood?



Vessel with Mythological Scene, 8th century

Guatemala; Maya

Ceramic; H. 5 1/2 x Diam. 4 1/2 in. (14 x 11.4 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1968 (1978.412.206)

Questions: How has the painter of this vessel expressed movement? What are the most prominent images on this scene? What is the primary figure wearing?



Relief with Enthroned Ruler, 8th century

Mexico or Guatemala; Maya

Limestone, paint; H. 35 x W. 34 1/2 x D. 2 3/4 in. (88.9 x 87.6 x 7 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1047)

Questions: Who is the most important figure in this scene? How can you tell? Can you find the Maya writing here? What colors of the original paint remain?



Bird Pendant, 1st–5th century

Costa Rica; Atlantic Watershed

Jadeite; H. 2 5/8 x W. 3/4 x D. 1 7/8 in. (6.7 x 1.9 x 4.7 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1138)

Questions: What animal does this object represent? How do you suppose it was worn? What purpose could it have served? What is special about jade?

Learn more about [Jade in Costa Rica](#).



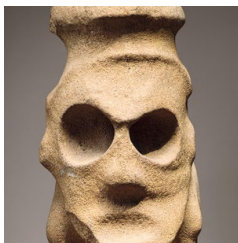
Double-Eagle Pendant, 1st–5th century

Panama; Initial style

Gold; H. 4 3/8 x W. 6 1/4 x D. 1 1/8 in. (11.1 x 15.9 x 2.8 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.538)

Questions: What is significant about gold? How was this ornament worn? In addition to eagles, what sorts of birds could be represented in this object?



Deity Figure (Zemi), 13th–15th century

Dominican Republic; Taino

Sandstone; H. 26 31/32 in. (68.6 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1209)

Questions: What do you think this figure represents? Of what does it remind you? Describe the figure's posture and expression.



Seated figure, 1st century B.C.–A.D. 1st century

Columbia or Ecuador; Tolita or Tumaco

Ceramic; H. 25 x W. 14 1/2 x D. 13 in. (63.5 x 36.8 x 33 cm)

Gift of Gertrud A. Mellon, 1982 (1982.231)

Questions: What is the most striking aspect of this figure? How does his face differ from the rest of his body? What does he seem to be doing?



Feline-Head Bottle, 6th–4th century B.C.

Peru; Tembladera

Ceramic, postfired paint; H. 12 3/4 x W. 8 1/16 x Diam. 5 1/4 in. (32.4 x 20.5 x 13.3 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967 (1978.412.203)

Questions: Are there animals on this ancient bottle? What are they, and how many are there? How might this bottle have been used?



Pair of Earflares, 3rd–7th century

Peru; Moche

Gold, turquoise, sodalite, shell; Diam. 3 3/16 in. (8 cm)

Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 (66.196.40-.41)

Questions: Note the costumes of the two running figures on the front of these ear ornaments. Also note their faces. Do you think they are human? What might they signify? How do you suppose these ornaments were worn? How do you know a ruler must have worn these ear ornaments?



Funerary Mask, 10th–11th century

Peru; Sicán (Lambayeque)

Gold, cinnabar, copper overlays; H. 11 1/2 x W. 19 1/2 in. (29.2 x 49.5 cm)

Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1974, 1977 (1974.271.35)

Questions: Do you think this face represents a human or a deity? Explain. Why cover gold surfaces with red paint? Can you find the five copper decorations?



Panpiper Vessel, 14th–15th century

Peru; Chimú

Silver, malachite; H. 8 1/4 x W. 4 1/4 x D. 2 3/4 in. (21 x 10.8 x 7 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1969 (1978.412.219)

Questions: What is this silver figure doing? Notice the garment he is wearing. Why did the silversmith emphasize his head? Why were this figure and other silver vessels placed in a royal tomb?

Learn more about [Music in the Ancient Andes](#).

Resources

These and many more resources are available in Nolen Library in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

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