

Museum of World Treasures

Pre-Hispanic Vocabulary List

- All entries pertain directly to artifacts or signs in our exhibits.

Pre-Hispanic- the period before the Spanish came to North America, specifically before 1492 when Columbus sailed to the Americas.

Reproduction- something made by reproducing an original; copy; duplicate.

Looting- spoils or plunder taken by pillaging; anything taken by dishonesty, force.

Mayan Periphery - external boundary of Mayan land. Also represents the peoples who lived around Mayan lands but were not Mayan.

Copan - an archaeological site in western Honduras. Formerly a city, it is estimated that Copan had at least 20,000 residents and covered 100 sq. miles.

Ulua Valley – people living here were at the center of a trade route; their civilization is one of the most recent identified, as before they were thought to be part of the Mayan culture. They in fact spoke an entirely different language and have unique artistry.

Specular Hematite – can be ground to create a reflective, mirror-like surface popular among Pre-Hispanic cultures.

Nicoya- The largest indigenous tribe encountered by the Spanish when they first entered northwestern Costa Rica in 1523

Anthropomorphic – the attribution of human traits or characteristics to anything non-human (wind, animals, etc.)

Whistles – Music was extremely popular in Pre-Hispanic cultures, and whistles and drums were the most commonly used instruments.

Harpy Eagle – Seen as a protector of the forests in Central and South American cultures. Often found on art and pottery.

Crocodile – Or cayman. These top-predators symbolized multiple things in Pre-Hispanic culture including sacrifices to the gods, gods themselves, or a cosmic symbol of life and rebirth. Often found on art and pottery.

Shaman – Often displayed in art as pottery figures that are half human, half animal. A popular combination is that of a jaguar/human hybrid. They are often represented as women.

Gran Cocle – A cultural area in modern-day Panama that is widely represented by fantastic animal pottery.

Glyphs – Mayan Glyphs are currently the only ancient Pre-Hispanic writings to be partially deciphered. This writing is most similar to modern Japanese in function.

Pseudo Glyphs – Imitations of Mayan Glyphs that do not actually make full words or phrases. These Glyphs were used by surrounding civilizations to the Mayan in order to copy their pottery styles and trade more effectively.

Nazca – a Peruvian culture known for their aqueducts, trophy heads, and pottery.

Jivaro – A language group of people who were most famous for shrunken trophy heads.

Guanine – A gold and copper alloy that was used to make coins and jewelry by Taino peoples.

Tairona – A group of people known for their incredible gold sculptures. They died out around end of the 16th century.

Lost Wax Casting - A type of jewelry and sculpture casting involving wax that was used to make a mold for the metal. Pre-Hispanics traditionally used bronze, but examples in all types of metals can be found.

Incan- The people of the Incan Empire. The Incan Empire was the largest Pre-Hispanic civilization and occupied much of the west coast of South America.

Trophy Head- A human head, usually decapitated post-mortem after a battle, which was preserved and kept for respect, keeping enemy ghosts away, or intimidation purposes.

Shrunken Head- similar to a trophy head, a shrunken dead had a particular way of preserving the head. This process resulted in a smaller, more portable head.

Reals- Spanish silver currency that was used for several centuries.

Cortez- A Spanish Conquistador that is known for conquering the Aztec Empire in 1521.

Columbus- A Portuguese born Spanish explorer who in 1492 set sail to try to discover a sea route to Asia. Instead, he landed on present day San Salvador and claimed the New World for the Spanish.

Conquistador- A group of Spanish and Portuguese minor nobility that became explorers and soldiers. They would conquer Latin and South America for their respective countries.

Missionary- A member of a church or religion that is sent to an area to convert and preach to its inhabitants. The Catholic Church would be known for sending many missionaries to Latin and South America.

Sherd- (also called a potsherd) A broken or brittle shard of pottery or ancient artifact. Will occasionally also be used for glass or metal shards as well.

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