

# Lesson Plan: Ancient Gold Working

Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

**Suggested Grade Level:** 3-5

**Estimated Time:** One class period

## Introduction

Gold was plentiful in the Americas when the Spanish colonists arrived in the early 16th century. For over 30,000 years, gold objects, including jewelry, utensils, masks, and sculptures, were made in abundance by the native Indian civilizations. Goldsmiths invented a variety of techniques and styles of metallurgy, most notably in the Andean region, Central America, and Mesoamerica, where there was an abundance of gold and other metals.

In most early American societies, gold held sacred connotations because it was associated with the heavens, most especially the sun. Many gold objects had ritual or [votive](#votive) functions, including honoring the gods or accompanying the dead in tombs, although some pieces, such as vessels, deep bowls, and tweezers, served mainly domestic functions. Gold jewelry was frequently used as an emblem of office, reflecting the rank and duty of important individuals such as priests, warriors, and rulers.

## Lesson Objectives

- Become familiar with traditional design elements and functions of Central and South American gold objects
- Begin to understand the techniques of metalworking, especially repoussé

## Key Terms

- repoussé
- metallurgy
- Moche
- Chimú
- *tumi*

## **Instructional Materials**

- Lightweight cardboard
- Gold tempera paint or gold foil
- Scissors
- Glue
- Cotton string
- Pencils
- Paper

## **Procedures**

Students will create a sculpture inspired by the masks, pendants, or human/animal forms found in ancient Indian art of the Americas.

- Have students cut the basic shape of their proposed sculpture out of heavy paper. Explain that this shape will be used as a model for the final design. Encourage students to fashion a three-dimensional design. For human and animal figures, the legs and feet can be folded so that the object can stand alone.
- After students have determined the basic shape of their object, ask them to use their paper patterns to trace the design onto cardboard and cut out this design.
- Encourage students to add surface details to their sculpture by pasting cut pieces of cardboard or string onto the body. For example, round cardboard disks can be added for eyes and twisted string can form abstract designs. The raised components will illustrate the repoussé technique, in which raised metal defines the detail.
- Once everything is glued into place, students can paint over their objects with gold tempera or cover them with gold foil.

## **Evaluation**

Base evaluation on students' creativity and comprehension of the process and significance of ancient American metalworking.

### ***Follow-Up:***

- Ask students to draw a scene in which their object is being used. For example, they may choose to depict someone wearing the mask or jewelry; a room where the sculpture would have been located; or a ceremony in which their object would have been used.
- Have each student discuss the function and design of his or her work.

## **Glossary**

### **Andean region** (*n*)

territory defined by the Andes Mountains in western South America. It is common to describe as Andean those people who developed complex societies in this vast region, especially those of coastal and upland Peru and Bolivia. The term may also be extended to include the ancient people who lived in present-day Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and the northern highlands of Chile and Argentina.

### **Chimú** (*n*)

an extinct American Indian kingdom that flourished on the northern coast of Peru after the ninth century A.D. until the Inca conquest in the late fifteenth century. Distinctive Chimú art, including pottery, gold pieces, and textiles, helps date this Andean civilization.

The Chimú capital of Chan Chan, located on the northern seacoast of Peru, remains one of the world's grandest archaeological sites, with miles of streets, great walls, reservoirs, and pyramid temples, all constructed out of sun-baked, adobe bricks. At the city's height, the population of Chan Chan is estimated to have numbered in the many thousands. The Inca conquerors of Chimú absorbed much of its old high culture into their own imperial society, including elements of Chimú political organization, irrigation systems, and road engineering.

### **Mesoamerica** (*n*)

geographical area between North and Central America comprised of the modern nations of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador as well as the ancient cultures of the Olmec, Teotihuacanos, Maya, and Aztec. The term is used to define the cultural and historical context of the people who have inhabited this area for millennia.

### **metallurgy** (*n*)

the technique or science of working with metals. It is widely agreed that metallurgy developed first in the Andes and diffused outward from there.

### **Moche** (*n*)

the dominant society from the first to the eighth century A.D on the northern coast of present-day Peru. The name comes from the archaeological site known as Moche and located in the river valley of the same name. Two giant structures known as the Temple of the Sun (Huaca del Sol) and the Temple of the Moon (Huaca de la Luna) define the site. Dozens of other Moche pyramid-platform sites exist in the coastal valleys of northern Peru. Although many have been looted, others remain unexcavated.

Like other ancient American cultures, the Moche survived off of agriculture. They guided rivers flowing down from the high Andes into a system of irrigation canals, which allowed for the growth of maize, potatoes, lima beans, and other staple crops. This system of agriculture supported a dense population.

The Moche produced sophisticated art, including mold-made pottery admired for its highly naturalistic forms. These vessels—especially the fine-quality water jars with characteristic stirrup spouts—bear portrait heads of individuals, animals, plants, buildings, and fantastic beings representing supernatural forces. Painted scenes on some vessels provide visual descriptions of the complex ceremonies and daily activities of the Moche.

**repoussé** (*n*)

the process of "pushing out" a design from thin sheets of metal. To practice this technique, ancient American goldsmiths frequently worked with molds and used tools made from bone or deer antlers

**tumi** (*n*)

a Chimù, Lambayeque, or Incan ceremonial knife with a characteristic half-moon-shaped blade

**votive** (*adj*)

offered to a god, often in gratitude or devotion

**Illinois Learning Standards**

Social Studies: 18

Fine Arts: 25-27