



Article: Faking pre-Columbian artifacts

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FAKING PRE-COLUMBIAN ARTIFACTS

Catherine Sease

Abstract

Faking artifacts in the Americas does not have as long a history as in other parts of the world. Most scholars believe that it started in the early 19th century in Mexico. Once started, however, it has developed, grown and flourished. This paper briefly discusses the history of faking Pre-Columbian artifacts. Specific examples from Central and South America illustrate the particular issues associated with faked artifacts that contributed to their manufacture or the difficulty in identifying them

Introduction

Faking is the production of copies of antiquities for the purposes of deception. In the Americas, faking is believed by most scholars to have begun in Mexico in the early 19th century (Walsh 2005). Prior to that, the cultures of the Americas were little known and not of particular interest to collectors.

Many collections of antiquities in Europe, and later in the United States, were started by scholars, aristocrats and the wealthy, who went on the Grand Tour and brought back oddities and curios from their travels. The romance of the past was rediscovered on a large scale following the uncovering of classical archaeological sites in Europe, most notably Pompeii and Herculaneum, in the 18th century. This renewed interest in the past gave rise to serious collecting on the part of aristocrats and scholars (Howard 1990). It was at this time that many important Greek and Roman sculptures and other antiquities found their way into aristocratic homes and collections throughout Europe. (Vaughn 1990).

After the industrial revolution, as wealth spread down through society, the collecting phenomenon also filtered down (Vaughn 1990). Eventually, anyone with education and taste who wanted to demonstrate these sensibilities found collecting antiquities ideally suited to this purpose. Not surprisingly, this created a demand for artifacts. Antiquities became scarcer and harder and more expensive to acquire. This forced many collectors to branch out to find new areas of antiquities. In the classical world, they turned to prehistoric artifacts, turning them into works of art. They also looked to other parts of the world, including Asia and the Americas. (Ekholm 1964; Bray et al 1975).

As interest grew, an imbalance was created between supply and demand. Demand rapidly surpassed supply and the stage was set for enterprising individuals to create fake antiquities to meet this demand. As new acquisitions were displayed in private collections or nascent museums, they piqued the interest of collectors. Avid collectors soon learned to follow the discoveries of the fledgling field of archaeology and they wanted what was being excavated and making headline news. The intense interest that developed led to a rapid rise in the commercial value of antiquities, and the emergence of the faking industry was a natural outgrowth of this

interest. The supply of genuine artifacts has never been large enough to fill demand and over the decades and centuries, the art of forgery has flourished and developed to a high level of production, sophistication and refinement. (Ekholm 1964).

Mexico

Mexico, with its rich history, was the ideal place for faking to start in the pre-Columbian world. The ancient indigenous cultures of Mexico were numerous and produced diverse artifacts in a wide variety of styles and materials. (Ekholm 1964). Many of these materials, such as jade, turquoise and gold, were considered luxury materials in Europe and the United States, increasing the value of the artifacts even further in the eyes of collectors. Added to this was Mexico's ideal situation next to the United States, a wealthy country full of collectors. (Ekholm 1964). These factors made Mexico a fertile area for forgers.

Most scholars believe the history of faking antiquities in Mexico dates back to the first decades of the 1800s (Walsh 2005). This was the period when Mexico gained its independence and the country was opened to foreigners. The opening of Mexico was greatly facilitated by the creation of the railway at this time. Once established, the railways expanded rapidly, opening up vast areas to the public that had been hitherto inaccessible, including the American west, southwest and Mexico. The exploration industry that quickly developed was soon followed by a tourist industry and visitors were anxious to bring home souvenirs of their trips to Mexico (Ekholm 1964).

This was also a time of tremendous growth in American and European museums. Particularly in the United States, fledgling institutions were attempting to amass large, synoptic and encyclopedic collections that covered as much of the world as possible. (Walsh 2005). Of particular interest were objects from the mysterious, unknown areas of the world. Exhibitions of exotic artifacts and antiquities were guaranteed to bring in large crowds of curious visitors in London and other large cities (Bray, et al. 1975).

These factors rapidly created a demand for antiquities that far outstripped supply. (Ekholm 1964). Artifacts were being freshly made and passed off as authentic as fast as they could be produced, such as some small stone figurines that came into the Yale Peabody Museum's collections in the late 19th century (Fig.1).

In the 1880s, William Henry Holmes, an early student of Mexican archaeology associated with the Smithsonian, reported on some spurious black pottery vessels from Mexico similar to those in Figs. 2 and 3. He stated that it would be very easy for "a native artisan to imitate any of the older forms of ware [ceramics]; and there is no doubt that in many cases he has done so for the purpose of deceiving" (Holmes 1886).



Figure 1. Stone figurines from Mexico. The one on the left is possibly real. The one on the right is a fake. Courtesy of Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.



Figure 2. Fake Aztec blackware vessel. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not accessioned.



Figure 3. Fake Aztec blackware vessel. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not accessioned.

About the same time, the French explorer Desiré Charnay made several collecting trips to Mexico. Like Holmes, he was aware of the faking industry and stated that it was centered in Tlatelolco, a suburb of Mexico City, and had begun around 1820 (Walsh 2005). At the rate that fakes were being manufactured and disseminated throughout to the world, Charnay felt that all private collections were ‘infested’ with them (Charnay 1887). Certainly by the turn of the 20th century, there is good evidence that a trade in false antiquities flourished and by the 1920 and 1930s forged material was consistently filtered through the United States to Europe.

Faking was able to flourish in part because virtually nothing was known about the prehistory of Mexico at this time (Ekholm 1964; Walsh 2005). Collectors in the 19th and early 20th century were acquiring artifacts without any certain cultural or historical knowledge of what they were buying. The iconography, carving styles, methods of manufacture or materials were unknown to them; not only to them, but to the experts as well (Ekholm 1964). Because little or no archaeological work or serious study had taken place, there was no knowledge base with which to compare the fakes being produced. The experts did not know what normal was and therefore did not know what artifacts should look like. As a result, fakers had complete license to make whatever they thought they could pass off as an antiquity (Fig. 4). Eugene Boban, another early French explorer and dealer in Mexico, said that the majority of these early fakes were not

molded or copies but were “pure fantasy, and are a type of bizarre caricature whose inspiration escapes us but whose principal purpose is to trick the public” (Walsh 2005).



Figure 4. Fake Aztec ceramic figures. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not accessioned.

Ironically, many of these “fantasy” pieces have been in respected museums throughout the world for decades, if not a century or more, and are now considered to be masterpieces because of their individuality (Walsh 2005). The fact that they are unique and anomalous without any counterparts did not seem to have overly concerned these institutions. One ironic twist of their status in museums was that the critical eye of many archaeologists and art historians was trained on these fakes, probably further hindering the identification of fakes. This is not to say that all fantastical artifacts are fakes.

As serious archaeological exploration began to focus on the Americas, experts were more concerned with developing chronologies (Ekholm 1964), a necessary first step in studying an ancient culture. Even by the mid-20th century, the archaeologist Gordon Ekholm admitted that scholars “haven’t gotten around to the full and proper study of the extraordinary varieties of art objects that are found” (Ekholm 1964). Although he was talking of Mexico, this was true as well of scholarship throughout the Americas. As a result, the experts themselves did not understand well the range of variation within the different categories of artifacts, for example, Aztec sculpture or Olmec ceramics. They also neglected to study and document the materials and technology used by ancient American craftsmen which would have helped later in the effort to identify fakes.

Central and South America

Faking does not seem to have as long a history in the rest of Central and South America as it does in Mexico. This is probably due to these areas being located farther away from the United States and Europe and the fact that they were opened up to tourists and collectors later than Mexico. Even so, they have not escaped. The same pattern as we have seen in Mexico occurred in the rest of the Americas. Collectors moved in in the wake of missionaries, colonists and explorers and created a demand initially for archaeological objects, in particular, for Andean artifacts, but later for ethnographic objects as well. Ceramic, gold, shell and wooden artifacts from the Andes have been extensively faked in the 20th century (Ekholm 1964. (Fig. 5) Towards the end of the century, gold objects from Costa Rica and Panama became of particular interest to collectors and hence to fakers (Ekholm 1964).



Figure 5. Fake Incan bronze figurines from Peru. Courtesy Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Types of fakes

Over the years, the most sought after material, and therefore the most faked, came from Mexico, including Olmec, Maya and Aztec artifacts, and from Peru, including material from the Chavin and Moche cultures. Pottery is by far the most commonly faked material and forgeries today are very sophisticated. Zapotec vessels (Fig. 6) are often forgeries so well executed that they require thermoluminescence and neutron activation dating to reveal their modern manufacture. (Bowman 1990). Moche vessels, in particular, are in great demand today and portrait vessels, due to their strong appeal, were known to be faked early on in 19th century (Jones 1990).



Figure 6. Fake Zapotec urn from Mexico. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not accessioned.

Obsidian, readily available in Mexico, was commonly used by indigenous peoples to make tools and ornaments of various kinds. It is not surprising, therefore, that artifacts in obsidian have been commonly and extensively faked (Fig. 7). In fact, according to Ekholm, it is almost axiomatic that all large objects of obsidian should be viewed with suspicion (Ekholm 1964). This is also true of objects made of rock crystal. Most of the obsidian forgeries appear to date to the early 20th century as do those made of rock crystal.

Stone masks, especially those in the Teotihuacan style, are numerous and commonly faked (Fig. 8). Their relative simplicity makes them easy marks for fakers. In particular, the lack of iconographic detail makes them less likely to be questioned and until fairly recently there was no body of indisputable examples that could be used for comparison. As late as 1964, none had been excavated and therefore did not have a solid provenance (Ekholm 1964).



Figure 7. Fake obsidian mask from Teotihuacan, Mexico. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.



Figure 8. Teotihuacan serpentine mask probably made in the 19th century. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Mummy masks are probably the most sought after antiquities from Peru and they too were faked as early as the 19th century. To make them seem more authentic, the fakes were decorated with genuinely old feathers and bits of textile.

Although ceramics and stone are the most common materials faked, artifacts of bone, shell and various metals including copper, silver and gold, are also forgeries.

Examples

When one looks at artifacts from Mexico, it is easy to see how some are easier to fake than others. Chupicuaro figurine heads from Western Mexico (Fig. 9) are incredibly plastic in style, freely and individually fashioned out of clay. It would be relatively easy, even by someone not overly gifted artistically, to make a figurine in the style of these heads that could be passed off as an authentic one.



Figure 9. Genuine Chupicuaro figurine heads from Central Mexico. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Similarly, portrait vessels from the Mochica culture (Fig. 10) might be slightly easier to fake than other more stylized pottery vessels because of their very nature. As portraits, they depict individual characteristics and facial traits, as can be seen in these examples, making it more difficult to distinguish authentic from fake.

It would be much harder to fake a more stylized figurine, for example, a Teotihuacan warrior figure (Fig. 11) or an Aztec deity (Fig. 12). The details of the warrior's headdress, clothing and accouterments must agree with the known iconography of the appropriate culture and time period. Similarly, deities had their special attributes and proscribed methods of presentation. Faking such figurines requires considerable knowledge on the part of the faker and provides more grounds on which to slip up. On the other hand, these details, or lack of them, can make it easier for an educated eye to detect fakes.



Figure 10. Genuine Mochica portrait vessel from the North Coast of Peru. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.



Figure 11. Genuine Teotihuacan figurine fragment wearing a warrior's headdress. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.



Figure 12. Genuine Figurine of the Aztec goddess Xochiquetzal from Central Mexico. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

As with anything, the issue of fakes is not black and white. There are degrees of faking that blur the picture. With pre-Columbian antiquities, what you see is not necessarily what you get. This is especially true with South American artifacts where heavy restoration makes it difficult to identify fakes. Many genuine artifacts are found in such a poor state of preservation that they have little or no market value. A fresh coat of paint and possibly the addition of some missing elements, however, can bring old pieces back to life and enable them to command decent prices. This is a form of partial faking.

In some instances, the pieces are genuine but broken when found. The handiwork of a gifted restorer can make clay figurines or vessels, for example, appear intact with the breaks skillfully hidden under layers of added plaster, paint and dirt. In other instances, ceramic vessels are found intact, but the painted surfaces are badly damaged or missing altogether, perhaps due to the action of water-soluble salts (Fig. 13). Skilled repainting of the design, perhaps followed by some distressing of the paint layer, can make the vessel appear as though it were straight out of the ground.



Figure 13. A genuine early Nazca vessel from Peru. The painted decoration has been badly damaged by water-soluble salts. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Both of these techniques are what we in archaeological conservation call faking, but what is really being faked is the fact that the piece is not in as good condition as it might at first seem.

Pastiches are also common and they represent a higher degree of faking. Two or more incomplete vessels can be cobbled together using bits and pieces from each to create a whole vessel. Since all the sherds used are genuinely old, scientific dating techniques are less likely to identify the piece as a fake.

Yet another category is the complete replication of an artifact. A wide variety of techniques have been utilized to make modern artifacts look old, including adding dirt and all manner of accretions to make the surface look worn and old. The frog vessel in Fig.14 is a modern creation covered with thick, unsightly accretions to make it look genuinely old. Another technique is to attach genuinely old bits and pieces to pots or mummy masks. For example, fragments of old textiles and feathers were adhered to pots or metal artifacts to make them appear old. Ceramic vessels have long been considered the most important artifacts from these areas. Textiles, especially fragments, when found at sites, generally were tossed aside and left exposed to the elements. Not infrequently, they were used as packing material for the more valuable ceramics. As a result, bits and pieces of genuine textile fragments were readily available.



Figure 14. Fake Ancon frog from Peru. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Not accessioned.

Another problem in identifying fakes involves the use of molds. Many cultural groups throughout the Americas used molds to mass produce ceramic vessels (Fig. 15) and figurines. For example, many Peruvian stirrup spouted jars and portrait vessels were molded (Donnen 1992). These molds were frequently placed in graves in antiquity where they were found centuries later when the graves were looted. In the 19th century, enterprising forgers realized that by using old molds they could produce vessels that were perfect in style. All that was needed was to age the clay surfaces by distressing them in various ways, adding accretions or pieces of textiles to make them look convincingly old. Often artifacts were buried long enough to become stained or develop rootlet marks on their surfaces to make them look ancient.



Figure 15. A genuine mold from Guatemala with a modern cast. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University.

Conclusion

Clearly the issue of fakes in pre-Columbian archaeology is a large topic and this paper can only skim the surface. In the last decades of the 20th century, experts began to systematically look at old and large collections of pre-Columbian antiquities in the United States and Europe to determine which pieces are fakes. Over the years, these fakes have confused and distorted our understanding of pre-Columbian art and culture and it will take a considerable effort, as well as a great deal of time, to unravel the genuine from the forgeries. This will undoubtedly involve a collaboration of archaeologists, art historians, conservators and conservation scientists, each bringing their own particular expertise to bear on the problem. It should be an interesting time for those of us who work in institutions with large collections of pre-Columbian material.

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