

Eroticism in the pre-Hispanic cultures

Catlett collection, 21 anthropomorphous clay figurines from the La Tolita, Jama - Coaque or Bahía de Ecuador cultures

The topic of erotism and sexuality and its artistic representations has always generated great interest in all periods of history. And not surprisingly, since sexuality as well as religiousness, cultural creativity and the ability to organize in society are some of the main forces that drive and direct the human experience and the survival of our species on this planet.

Erotic and sexual figurines are as old as art itself. Representations of the human genitals have been found in paintings and rock engravings of the paleolithic period, presumably as symbols of fertility. The Egyptians as well as the Greeks painted scenes of sexual activities on their ceramics and their temple walls. Ruins in Pompeii and Herculaneum have paintings and mosaics of scenes with high erotic and sexual content.

The most complex and expressive erotic representations in ceramics were found in the area comprised by Peru, Ecuador and the southern part of Colombia. The creative Mochicas artisans from the northern coast of Peru, as well as those from La Tolita and the Jama-Coaque cultures from the Ecuadorian coastal area and the southern part of Colombia, produced thousands of these impressive pieces that were utilized mainly as peace and funeral offerings.

The valuable Catlett Collection of erotic figurines donated to the Museo de Las Americas, is mainly representative of the La Tolita culture, according to archaeologist Osvaldo Garcia Goyco expertise, acquired during his study of this culture in 1997. This indigenous culture found in the island of La Tolita, is considered an important ceremonial site that flourished between 500 years BC and 500 years AD.

For a very long time, these pieces, when discovered, were either hidden or destroyed as they were considered a threat to the prevalent family and religious values of the time. Even during most of the 20th century they were considered by most galleries and museums as offensive, sinful and transgressive of mainstream cultural norms. However, they were acquired by important art collectors around the world and shown discreetly and privately by them.

With the advent of the 21st century, these artistic manifestations have gained growing acceptance as anthropological, cultural and artistic expressions of the societies that produced them. In Europe as well as in Latin America, antique collections of erotic art are being reappraised and exhibited to a public that has received them with interest, curiosity and maturity.

Miguel Rodriguez Lopez
Archaeologist