

MIXED MEDIA; A PROBLEM IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOMENCLATURE

Karen Olsen Bruhns

A recent publication on pre-Columbian gold (Jones, 1985) exemplifies several trends that are potentially damaging to both archaeology and art history. What I find most unfortunate in this publication is the attempt to relate a number of metal objects without provenience to a prehispanic ceramic group/style in the absence of any evidence that there is any such relationship.

One of the major problems in dealing with prehispanic metallurgy is that most known pieces come from looting operations. Thus, we seldom know anything about their context. Even when some information has been supposedly preserved, we know that *guaqueros* do not keep notes and often deliberately falsify information to protect their sources of income, while dealers often give currently fashionable cultural or geographic attributions to artifacts. Even when grave lots, or what are claimed to be grave lots, come on the market, they are often incomplete (or may have objects from other archaeological contexts added), and have lost all information concerning the burial. For most of the metal pieces from prehispanic America, we know, at best, the general region in which they are reported to have been found.

This situation is especially true in Colombia, where generations of enthusiastic *guaqueros* have dedicated themselves to the hunt for pre-Columbian gold. As a result of this activity, a number of general stylistic groups have been delineated for ancient Colombian metal artifacts. These groups are usually, and inaccurately, named for some sixteenth century ethnic group in the region from which the metal is supposed to have come. In each new publication, a number of pieces may change their supposed affiliation. A very large group of metal objects, generally very simple hammered or cast ornaments such as nose hangers, earrings, disk pectorals, cuffs, etc., are usually jumbled together in a miscellaneous lot at the end of the publication, if, indeed, they are discussed at all.

Much of this metalwork is reputed to come from central Colombia, from the area of the modern departments of Caldas, Riseralda, and Quindío. This region, whose ancient remains are generally called Quimbaya or Calima, is very little known archaeologically. Until 1942, when Luis Duque did some excavation in Quindío (Duque Gómez, 1943; 1963), the most detailed presentation of the ancient remains of this area was to be found in the memoirs of a *guaquero*, who briefly describes the contents of numbers of tombs he had looted (Arango Cano, 1924). In 1966, 1969, and 1970, I carried out a museum study, field reconnaissance, and excavation in Quindío and along the northern edge of the department of Valle. In the course of this work, I excavated one tomb myself and was present at the sacking of two others. Added to the tomb that Duque excavated in 1942, then, there is a total of exactly four tombs out of the thousands doubtless opened, for which any data have been reliably recorded.

My work resulted in the definition of two major ceramic complexes, which I have called Middle Cauca and Caldas (Bruhns, 1976). Two of the tombs contained ceramics of the Middle Cauca complex, one of the Caldas complex, and one contained objects in a style transitional between the two. None of the tombs contained any metal at all. On the basis of the available data, it has not been possible to associate artifacts in any other medium with these ceramic groups.

Middle Cauca and Caldas are ceramic complexes only. Moreover, the ceramic groups themselves show every evidence of having numerous regional and, probably, temporal variants.

Archaeological analysis depends, in the final analysis, upon objects in context, that is, upon associations between artifacts. In some cases artifacts made in different media can be related on the basis of very close stylistic resemblances. Such a connection has been posited for the other major ceramic group of central Colombia, the Brownware Incised Style, which bears strong resemblances to the so-called Quimbaya gold style (Bruhns, 1971). This connection, however, is still hypothetical, insofar as it has never been validated by the excavation of associated gold and ceramics. Moreover, only one component of the Incised Brownware Style, the modeled funerary urns, can be related stylistically to the gold.

In the case of the Caldas and Middle Cauca styles, we have groups of similarly decorated vessels to one or the other of which we can tentatively assign some domestic/utilitarian forms, and nothing more. There is no archaeological evidence concerning the gold objects that the people who made the pottery may also have fabricated; there are no known metal pieces from Colombia that bear decorations sufficiently similar to those borne by the pottery to say, even tentatively, that these metal pieces may be associated with the ceramics.

Naming archaeological complexes and styles is difficult, especially in situations in which there is virtually no archaeological information concerning large numbers of diverse artifacts. A frequent practice is that of naming such artifacts for a historically known ethnic group, a practice resulting in considerable confusion, which is usually resolved only after years of excavation and publication. The invention of cultures, like Pérez de Barradas' "Invasionista" group (Pérez de Barradas, 1966, pp. 183-314, láms. 175-298), to account for otherwise unassigned pieces is, of course, equally unacceptable. Nonetheless, it is considered unacceptable in some circles to admit that there are items of unknown origin and style. Thus, in the work in question, *The art of Precolumbian gold; the Jan Mitchell collection* (Jones, 1985), seven simple hammered gold ornaments are attributed to the Caldás (*sic*) style (Jones, 1985, pp. 174-184). Although the author equivocates somewhat in the descriptive text for the first item (p. 174, cat. no. 46), and inserts question marks following the attribution in all five plates, the implication is clear: these metal pieces are related to the ceramic group that was defined on the basis of archaeological fieldwork. The nature of this relationship is not specified, nor is any evidence presented to indicate a connection between any of the pieces and the culture(s) that made the Caldas ceramics, so that the pieces might have been called Middle Cauca with equal justification or lack thereof. As noted, the only two tombs containing Caldas ceramics contained no metal artifacts.

Such capricious appropriation of a name already given to a group of artifacts executed in a different medium, with no stylistic or archaeological evidence of relationship, is indefensible. The fictive "Caldás" goldworkers need to be speedily forgotten. The pieces were looted; we do not know where they came from, who made them, when they were made, or even if they were all made by people of the same culture. Fictitious attributions do not change these facts, and should be condemned out of hand as impediments to the serious study of pre-Columbian cultures and art history.

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