FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIONS

A CHM Directed Study with the South Australian Museum | A.S. Wright
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Introduction

The South Australian Museum is in the process of updating their database system. The new system will have greater capacity and flexibility for the storage of information relating to the various collections of artefacts held by the museum. As part of the update process, additional research is needed to expand the body of knowledge stored by the database and acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the artefacts and their significance.

The purpose of this project was to record the Central American collection and assess its condition. In addition, the items were researched to obtain as much information as possible. The collection is under the care of Aphrodite Rose, Collection Manager of the Foreign Ethnology collections. Aphrodite provided much appreciated help in assisting in the location of the items as well as advice and additional information on how to proceed. The collection consists of archaeological artefacts, such as pottery sherds and stone artefacts, and ethnographic pieces which were donated to the museum by the families of the people who collected the items. The ethnographic collection contains items from private collections, and as such the pieces often have historical information associated with them; one example would be a set of carved shell jewellery pieces that were used in a wedding in 1873 on the island of Jamaica.

A full list of the items and the historical information available for each artefact is included in the analysis section of this report.
Among the archaeological collections were several artefacts collected and donated by Norman Barnett Tindale as a result of an expedition in Central America. In conjunction with U.C.L.A., he travelled to Baja, California, Mexico to examine several sites, and he kept a journal of the trip. He donated the journal to the museum as well, and this provided an additional opportunity for archival research. With the assistance of Helen Hopper, it was possible to examine the original journal and gain additional information about the places he travelled to and the artefacts he collected.

Another goal of this research is to create a display for the South Australian Museum Science Centre. The display will incorporate both Archaeological and Ethnographic items and will replace the existing display. It will provide the viewer with a brief overview of Central American history, as well as a timeline which will help them to understand where the artefacts in the collection fit into the history of Central America. Not all of the artefacts have specific dates associated with them, but those that do not can be placed within approximate date ranges. The poster created for the completion of this project will also be incorporated into the display.

As a result of this research, the database will be updated to incorporate the new information. The more comprehensive recording of the artefacts and their histories will make the value of the collection easier to assess. Finally, with the increased accuracy of the recorded information, it will be easier to determine if the artefacts in the Central American collection meet the needs of their research.

Methods
Each item in the Central American collection was located using a printout from the South Australian Museum database. Every artefact was measured using either callipers or a tape measure where appropriate. They were also weighed, but the scale used was more suitable for large objects, and as a result some of the smaller objects were too light to be weighed. Each artefact was also photographed against a black cloth using a 4.0 megapixel camera, with an IFRAO colour card and a small piece of paper with the item’s registration number written on it. The database printout also provided information regarding who donated the item and when, as well as any available background information recorded at the time of donation. The data collected was recorded on individual recording forms, and a photographic record and journal were also kept.

The camera flash presented the first challenge. It was reflected by the glossy surfaces of glazed pottery items and obsidian stone artefacts. In addition, even with adequate lighting, if the flash was turned off the image became blurry, even if the camera were sitting on a stable surface. To combat this, the camera was lifted away from the artefact and the zoom was used to bring the item into focus. This reduced the flash glare but did not eliminate it.

In the case of the obsidian artefacts, the black cloth did not provide enough contrast for the flakes, and a white background increased the effect of the glare, so a neutral background was needed and a box top provided a handy solution.

Another challenge presented by photographing the items was that in the case of stone tools, the photos did not always reveal the important features of the stone artefacts. The solution was to illustrate the items in addition to photographing them so that the features would be adequately displayed.
The standard procedure for measuring and recording stone artefacts is to place the item dorsal ridge up on the palm of the hand, with the platform facing the recorder and the termination extending out over the fingers. When in doubt as to which way was up, I recorded the item by orienting its position to the writing on its surface. The illustrations of the artefacts indicate the orientation of the artefact when it was measured.

The pottery sherds in the archaeological collection were also individually illustrated. The sherd collections had many pottery pieces associated with a single registration number, so additional pages with illustrations and measurements were added to the initial form. They were photographed front and back as a group under the appropriate registration number.

The items in the archaeological collection contained several sets of artefacts collected by N.B. Tindale on a trip into Baja California in conjunction with U.C.L.A. This presented an opportunity for further archival research on his collections, due to the fact that he also donated his journals recording the expedition.

After the archaeological items were recorded, they were temporarily moved to a new box for the new Central American display. A card was placed in each of the original boxes to record the new location of the item, and the move was also noted on each recording form.

**Historical Overview**

It is difficult to summarize the history of Central America into only a few pages. The region has a rich and colourful history, probably best known for the art of both the Aztecs and the Mayans, but which included many more people who lived outside the control of either group. They all shared a common trauma, however, in the conquest by Cortés and the
events that happened after. What follows is a brief summary of the events which shaped the region, and the information included in this summary is curtailed with an effort to focus on the artefacts in the Central American collection and to explain their significance.

Pre-Columbian Civilization

Prior to the Conquest, several civilizations ruled in Mexico and Central America. The most famous of these were the Olmec, the Maya, and the Aztecs, but many people and other civilizations lived and died outside their rule.

The Olmec flourished from 1200 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E. and were the earliest known civilization in Central America to create permanent villages and participate in agriculture. They made and used pottery and created pottery figurines. The Olmec were also skilled stone carvers; they were responsible for the giant stone heads found in many parts of Central America. Not much is known about their origins, but their influence was widespread throughout mainland Central America and down the isthmus (Meyer et al. 1979: 9).

Around the decline of Olmec influence, and before the Maya had much control over the Yucatan, Teotihuacán was built, in approximately 200 B.C.E. (Davies 1982: 67). At the time of conquest, the Aztecs called it “The Place Where Men Became Gods” (Davies 1982: 64) or “City of the Gods,” or “The Place Where Men Became Lords” (Fehrenbach 1973: 31) depending on the interpretation of the translation. The inhabitants and builders of this great city were referred to in general terms as the Teotihuacános, and not much is known about their origins. Teotihuacán is generally thought to have been a religious centre, and the influence of its religious attitudes was widespread. The people of Teotihuacán were peaceful people; no accounts associate their influence with violence until late in their
existence, which may suggest that they felt an imposing threat (Davies 1982: 95, Fehrenbach 1973: 37). Their influence lasted into the Mayan era, until it was sacked and burned around 850 A.D. (Davies 1982:106, Fehrenbach 1973: 37). What is important about this city is that it continued to be a religious centre long after its inhabitants had passed into history and no longer lived there; the Aztecs including Moctezuma II (who ruled Tenochtitlán at the time of conquest) still made regular pilgrimages to the site to worship Tlaloc, the god of rain and fertility; they buried statues and other offerings to their god at the site (Davies 1982: 71, Foster 1997: 29).

The Maya flourished from roughly 300 A.D. to 900 A.D. on the Yucatan Peninsula, though their influence stretched into Central Mexico and down the isthmus as well. The Aztecs ruled Central Mexico from around 900 A.D. until 1521, when the final battle happened at Tenochtitlán during the conquest. The societies were similar in their social structures and religious practices, although the Aztecs were more brutal in warfare. Both societies participated in blood sacrifice, though because of the conquest and the histories written by the conquistadors, the Aztecs are more famous for it.

In terms of political structure, they had one ruler who acted as a priest-king; he was considered to be “the gods’ mouthpiece,”(Davies 1982: 205). Beneath him in status were the priests, and below them came the nobles and some say, the warrior elite. Below them was the warrior class, and below the warriors were the peasants who did the farming and planting work for their king. This peasant class later became the peones of colonial New Spain; oppressed workers with few real rights (Davies 1982: 208-213).

The Conquest
In the year 1519 by the Christian calendar, Hernán Cortés arrived on the shores of Cozumel, an island just to the East of the Yucatan Peninsula (Foster 1997:50). He’d heard rumours that Spanish sailors had survived a shipwreck and were living on the mainland. He sent messengers to find them, and one responded; Jerónimo de Aguilar. Aguilar had lived among the Mayan people, who were still around at that time, though they no longer ruled the region. Aguilar learned to speak the Mayan language during the time he spent with them, and as such provided Cortés with a valuable tool (Fehrenbach 1973: 121, Foster 1997:52, Parkes 1938:42,).

Cortés received another stroke of good luck when the indigenous people made a peace offering to him of slaves, including several slave women. Among them was a girl named Malinalli, called Malinche by the Mayans, who had grown up in Central Mexico until she was sold to a Mayan chief. She grew up speaking Nahuatl, which was the language spoken by the Aztecs, and later learned to speak Mayan. Malinche spoke both Mayan and Nahuatl, and Aguilar spoke Mayan and Spanish, and as a result Cortés was able to communicate with the indigenous people he would eventually conquer (Fehrenbach 1973: 121, Foster 1997: 52, Parkes 1938:42,). Following rumours of a wealthy inland city, and with the assistance of Malinche and Aguilar, Cortés gathered an army of indigenous warriors as he sought out Tenochtitlán, who chafed under Aztec rule and were eager to see them brought down.

The Aztecs, led by Moctezuma II, showered Cortés with gifts even before they arrived, hoping to convince them to stay away. The gifts only increased the greed of Cortés and his men, however, and they hastened to Tenochtitlán. They coexisted peacefully for six months, until a misunderstanding with one of Cortés’ generals caused events to disintegrate into violence. The Spaniards tried to flee, but the Aztecs had collapsed the causeways
surrounding the city, and the makeshift bridges built by the Spaniards were not strong enough to hold up men in full armour and whose pockets were full of gold looted from the temples. The combined weight drug the Spaniards to the bottom of the lake, drowning many of them (Fehrenbach 1973: 142, Foster 1997: 58, Parkes 1938: 54). The Spaniards retreated to regroup and resupply. By the time they returned, the smallpox virus carried by one of Cortés’ men had ravaged the Aztecs and decimated their numbers. Cortés and his men easily defeated them (Foster 1997: 58, Parkes 1938: 56, 57).

With Cortés came Catholic priests, who tried endlessly to convert the indigenous people to the new faith. Cortés himself participated in conversion attempts;

“... and within these chambers are the statues and the figures of the idols, although, as I have said, without there are also many. The most principal of these idols, and those in whom these people put most faith and belief I commanded to be tumbled from their seats and thrown down the stairs, and I commanded that those chapels where they had been be cleansed, because all were filled with the blood that they sacrifice, and I put in them images of Our Lady and other saints . . .”

Hernán Cortés (Knight, et al. 2003: 115).

Another incident in 1511 (prior to the mainland conquest), in Cuba, involved a chief who ran from the conquistadors and refused to surrender. When he was finally caught, he faced execution. The priests explained to him that if he converted to their faith, when he died he would go to the sky (heaven), and if he did not that he would face the torments of hell:

“And thinking a while, the lord asked the holy father whether Christians went to the sky. The priest replied that they did, but only those who were good. And the cacique then said without thinking on it anymore, that he did not desire to go to the sky, but would rather go down to hell, so that he would not be where they were and would not see such cruel people.”

Bartolomé De Las Casas (Knight, et al 2003: 19).
What followed were centuries of the Indigenous people being enslaved and abused, and secretly fighting to keep their beliefs, so as not to further anger their gods, who they believed were punishing them. They suffered further injustices at the hands of the very priests who tried to convert them. The priests exhibited inappropriate behaviour, especially with indigenous women. In a petition to have one of many corrupt priests removed from service, a Mayan man writes: “This is how he abuses the women: a woman is not given confession until she comes to him; until they recompense him with the sin of fornication . . .” (Restall, et al. 2005: 168).

Bartolomé De Las Casas was a Catholic priest who recorded the massacre and abuse of the indigenous people in the West Indies, and he became a crusader on their behalf. He succeeded in abolishing the slavery of indigenous people, known as peones, through urgent letters to the King of Spain. As a result the Spaniards were forced to pay the peones for their work rather than enslaving them, but the conquistadors and colonists still found ways to exploit the workers.

Even those who were paid for their work suffered. The best pay available to indigenous workers was from the mining industry. The conditions were harsh and the work was hard. Prior to industrialization, all the work was done by hand, down shafts as deep as or deeper than 1000 metres deep, in the dark and the damp. The peones brought bundles of silver on their backs weighing 90-140 kilograms up notched logs which served as ladders during the course of twelve hour workdays (Fehrenbach 1973: 225-226, Foster 1997: 92, Meyer, et al. 1979: 174).

Independence, Industrial Mexico, and the Revolution
The Spaniards began to colonize what they called “New Spain.” The newcomers were referred to as *peninsulares*, and they were born in Spain. People who were born in Mexico, if they were of pure Spanish blood and not mixed were called *creoles*. The taint of being born in Mexico lessened their status to such an extent that pregnant women often sailed home to Spain to give birth. The tension between the *peninsulares* and the *creoles* eventually came to a head over political rights. The *peninsulares* and the *creoles* both shared lives of comfort, but the *creoles* were kept out of government. The resulting struggle ended in Mexican independence in 1821 (Foster 1997: 115).

During the battles of the upper classes, the needs of the indigenous and lower classes were neglected and all but forgotten. After a string of rulers, wars, and attempted reforms, change began with Benito Juárez. He initiated reforms on church power and began to build railroads to facilitate trade and move Mexico towards industrialization until he died of a heart attack (Foster 1997: 140-141). This industrialization process was continued and accelerated under the next ruler; Profirio Díaz. Industrialization projects under Díaz made industries like mining much easier and much less dependent on the suffering of the *peones*, while still keeping people employed (Foster 1997: 147). Unfortunately, in the midst of his industrial boom he relied heavily on foreign capital to make it happen, and the result was that much of Mexico was controlled by foreign interests, including mineral rights. He also neglected the indigenous population, who were largely landless and starving since they had no land to farm to feed their families, and were largely denied the opportunity to enter into sharecropping situations. Focus on European immigration began to take jobs from the *peones* (Foster 1997: 145-160). All of these issues eventually came to a head in 1910 with the Mexican Revolution. Díaz was overthrown, and the next election put Emiliano Zapata...
into power. He made monumental changes for the indigenous population, including the redistribution of land and the elimination of systems such as debt peonage, which exploited the indigenous workers. He also established a minimum wage and made many other changes which influence Mexico to this day.

While this history focuses on Mexico, these same issues of independence and industrialization affected the other countries of Central America in much the same way. Their history is shared throughout the many stages.

**Results and Discussion**

The results section of this report will cover the description of each item and the available historical information. Where there were several items or collections donated by a single person, they have been grouped together. Measurements have not been included in the summary, but are available on the recording forms for each item, which are included in the enclosed disk.

**The Archaeological Collection**

The archaeological collection consists of items which were found as part of various expeditions and archaeological excavations. As such, they consist of fragments and pieces of what were once whole objects. For this project, each of the items has been photographed and measured, as well as weighed. The artefacts in this collection were also drawn by hand due to the fact that the photographs did not always capture the important features of the item. In the case of the more complex cores, illustrating the item also
became an important methodology which helped to aid the memory of the researcher, especially in the case of one core which had platforms on every face of the object.

A13226: This item is what is commonly referred to as a stone hatchet, or an axe head made of stone, possibly granite. It is missing two small chips near the chopping edge of the painted side. The item was made by grinding the stone until an edge was formed, and would have been hafted. It was found in the West Indies, in the area that is now Puerto Rico. It was acquired via exchange from the Smithsonian Institute and registered in 1926.

A29606: This object is an obsidian proximal blade flake, which has been transversely broken, which means that it has an intact platform (which is single and focalized) and point of percussion, but no termination. The dorsal ridge is flattened. It has tiny, uniform chips along both edges, which may be indicative of use rather than damage.

A29607: Similar to A29606, this artefact is also an obsidian blade flake, but this item is a medial transversely broken flake, which means that the flake is missing both termination and platform. Like A29606, the dorsal ridge is flattened, and it also has tiny uniform chips along both cutting edges. Both items were found near Cerre de Navajas, which is a known obsidian mine. Bent (1885: 136) wrote that when Cortes came to Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, he witnessed the Aztecs using obsidian blades like these to shave each other, and that they chipped the blades off on the spot for the purpose, using a bone wedge. Both items were received via exchange from the Instituto di Studi Superiori, in Firenze, Italy with the help of E.H. Gigholy in 1896.
Figure 1: Drawings of A29606, A29607, and A37265 respectively.

A37265: This artefact is a unidirectional obsidian blade core; all the blades were struck from a single platform. It was found near the Mexico City pyramids. It was purchased in 1992 from Charles Fenner, and incorporated into a display with the previous two artefacts.

A44547: This artefact is another obsidian proximal blade flake, with an intact platform and missing the termination of the flake, and once again is transversely broken. The dorsal ridge of the artefact is once again flattened. Both edges appear to be retouched. This artefact was found near the pyramid of Cholula in Mexico. It was donated to the museum by Brady T. Cyrus, and the first date that it was recorded was 22/9/1992, so it had to have been acquired prior to that date.

A49937: Found in the West Indies in Jamaica, this item is another axe head or hatchet. In this case, it is referred to as a “celt stone,” which seems to be simply a local way of referring to the hatchet shape from the information available. It is made from a coarse-grained stone, possibly granite, and has a minor chip on the back near the cutting edge, with the back being the side that does not have writing on it. Again, this item would have been hafted. A. Harlan donated the item to the Sheffield City Museum in 1947, and it was received by the South Australian Museum on exchange in 1955.
A49938: This item is similar to A49937 in shape, but not in material. It is another “celt stone” but it is made from a much more brittle stone, which appears to be slate. It is damaged on all edges. It was also found in the West Indies, but the location is more specific: it was found in Indian Walk, Tobago. It is listed on the database sheet as being part of Jamaica, but the Island of Tobago is located just off the coast of Venezuela on the other side of the island of Trinidad. It was also acquired from the Sheffield City Museum in 1955 on exchange, but has no additional donation information.

A52371: This artefact is a pottery figurine of a woman, with legs spread, and arms folded in front of her. Her hands have individually carved fingers. She has horizontally elongated eyes, with either eyebrows or eyelashes indicated with short vertical lines. Her head is also horizontally elongated, with carved ears consisting of two holes within the round shape of the ear. She has a largish round indent for a belly button and a small protrusion on the left side of her body (her left) which looks as though it is meant to represent a breast. The breast on her right side is missing, as well as her right ear and detail on her right eye, such as her eyelashes or eyebrow, and her nose is broken. Unlike many fertility idols, her belly is only slightly rounded; she does not appear to be obviously pregnant. She bears lines between her legs suggesting her gender, and her legs appear to have either been simplified or broken off, or perhaps both since the ends of her legs appear to be broken. Many figures of this nature have simple pointed legs rather than calves and feet. The figure is as heavy as stone, but where her nose is broken it appears that she is made of pottery. It is possible that the item was made from stone covered in clay and fired. It was purchased from Mrs. D.R. Bengerin 1959, and she believed the specimen to be Mayan. The elongated and protruding eyes tend to be associated with Teotihuacán, and with Aztec sculpture. In the
photo below, note that the formation of the ears in each case is the same, as well as the elongated protruding eyes, between the collection sculpture and the sculpture of the Aztec god Tlaloc from the Teotihuacán site museum. This figurine is most likely Aztec.

![Photos 1 and 2: Front of A52731 and a photo of a pottery representation of the god Tlaloc from Teotihuacán (Seaman 2010).](image)

**A53081-87:** These collections of items were collected by Norman Barnett Tindale between the 30th of March and the 4th of April 1959 during a trip into Baja Mexico in conjunction with U.C.L.A. and members of the Paipai tribe. They started out from Santa Monica, and drove south across the Mexican border and into Baja, doing a bit of sightseeing along the way (Tindale 1959). He reported that all of the collections were assessed as part of a post 1100 A.D. culture, but did not elaborate on the dating methods used in the journal he donated along with the artefacts. He also made note of the fact that some of the items were “representative chippings” which implies that they are not the entire collection of artefacts collected. To properly assess the site or cultures using the artefacts, a future researcher is encouraged to contact U.C.L.A. and gain access to the rest of the items collected during the trip.
The maps below compare the hand drawn map in Tindale’s journal of the trip to a map of Baja, with some of the landmarks circled in red.

Images 2 and 3: A map of Baja California courtesy of photobucket.com and a hand drawn map from Tindale’s journal of his journey into Baja.

A53081: This is a collection of 33 pottery sherds found in Cerro Colorado. The pieces were unglazed, wheel-turned pieces of varying thicknesses, and three of them have a sooty residue that may suggest that the original vessels they were a part of were used in cooking. Seven of the pieces had gold flecks included in the clay, and three had tiny quartz inclusions, which is suggestive of granite outcrops in the area. The site was described as “an ancient campsite” beside a permanent stream about three feet wide (Tindale 1959: 123).

A53802: This is a small collection of three unglazed, wheel-turned pottery sherds collected at a granite ridge North of Santa Catarina (which is marked on his hand drawn map with an arrow)(Tindale 1959, p. 123). One of the sherds includes a piece of the rim of the vessel.
A53083: Tindale described this artefact as a hammer stone. It is a granite pebble, and it is
damaged on left and right edges of the stone horizontally oriented to the writing, which
would be consistent with the item being used to hammer stones in the process of tool
making. It was found at the Santa Catalina Mission site, along with the following artefacts to
A53086.

A53084: This is a collection of nine artefacts of different types, referred to by Tindale as
“chippings.” Six of the nine are cores, and the other three appear to be flakes. One of the
flakes is a rather large blade flake, which means that it is longer than it is wide. It appears to
be made of slate. None of the cores or stone artefacts were fully measured or recorded
prior to this project, so the information gathered about each item has greatly added to what
was known about the pieces. All of the pieces were illustrated to clarify the individual
features of each item, due to the fact that photographing them did not always highlight the
important aspects.

Photos 3-6: A blade flake and three of the cores from the A53084 collection.

A53085: This artefact is made from light coloured granite pebble, with smooth ground edges
that Tindale labelled as a “hammerstone.” There are chips in the right and left edges,
oriented to the writing on the item, and also on the back, which would suggest that the item
was indeed used as a hammer.
A53086: Tindale labelled this artefact as another hammer stone, but it is ground smooth on all edges, and is ground to a flat spot on one side, which would suggest that the items was actually used as a grindstone rather than a hammer stone. All sides of the stone are ground smooth, and there are no obvious chips or damaged areas which would suggest that the stone had ever been used as a hammer.

A53087: This item was also listed as a hammer stone by Tindale, but on closer examination it looks much more like a core. It was found in the Rancho Viejo flat of Baja California. Tindale, in his journal, referred to the item as both a core and a crude chopper (p. 121 and 120, respectively). The reference to a crude chopper was most likely a comment on the shape of the artefact, in that the item has the shape of a scraper when viewed from the top, but does not have an actual scraper edge.

Photos 7 and 8: Front and back images of A53087, a quartzite core.

A60535: These artefacts are a collection of twelve handle pieces from various pots found near the compound pyramid of Calixtahuaca in Mexico. Three of the pieces had remnants of red glaze left on them, and the rest were unglazed. One of the pieces was sooty, suggesting it had been used in cooking. The handles were collected in November of 1968, and donated to the museum in 1970 by N.S. Pledge, along with the following three sets of pottery artefacts (A60535-38).
A60536: This is a collection of seven sherds of pottery, which show evidence of being wheel-turned and also of being used in cooking. One of the sherds looks as though it is a piece of the neck of a jar, in that it contains a piece of the rim, and its shape suggests that it was part of the neck. All but one of the remaining six artefacts were either the base of a handle (2) or a piece of the handle itself (3).

A60537: This collection of thirteen sherds all showed evidence of wheel-turning. Four of the items included a piece of the rim, eight of the items had remnants of glaze, and interestingly, four of the items were decorated. One of the sherds had wheel turned lines and a pattern of dots painted into the glaze, two others had two different colours of glaze, and the fourth had a pattern of crossed lines pressed into the clay. It is possible that the items were grouped together on the basis of these features, but included with them are four pieces which show no decoration or glaze at all, and have no remarkable features, with no explanation of why they were included in the collection.

A60538: Collected at the same site, these six obsidian pieces are all transversely broken blade flakes. Some of the items have edge damage that does not appear uniform enough to be retouch. Only one had an intact platform, and three showed rings of percussion. Interestingly, four of the flakes had dorsal ridges, which seems to be contrary to the normal procedure. Only two of the items had the flattened dorsal ridge that the other obsidian blade flakes in the Central American collection had. These artefacts were also donated by N.S. Pledge in 1970.

The Ethnographic Collection
The items in this collection were donated by the people who collected them, and often have histories associated with them. Where possible, more information has been added to the body of information already in the database. Only photographs were collected of the items in the ethnographic collection because the photos adequately recorded the features of the items. The artefacts are all whole representations of the history they were a part of, as opposed to the fragments found in archaeological excavations, and as such can help researchers to understand what they find in excavations.

A4955: This artefact is a carved wooden spear thrower, which would have been called an *atlatl* by the Mexica people, who made and used them, and who we know as the Aztecs of Tenochtitlán, which is now Mexico City (British Museum website). It was used, as the name suggests, to throw small spears and darts with greater force towards a foe. The atlatls held by other museums, such as the British Museum, are largely ceremonial objects, decorated with gold foil, so the fact that this item is plain wood may suggest that it was actually made to use rather than to be a part of ceremonial life, and is thus a rare specimen. They would have been used in the period between roughly 900 A.D. and 1521 A.D. when the Aztecs flourished. Two other astonishing *atlatls* once resided in the Musio Nazionale d’Antropologia ed Etnologia del R. Instituto di Studi Superiori in Florence Italy, which were thought to have been a part of the collection of items sent back by Cortes to Charles V, and which was later presented to Pope Clement VII (Bushnell 1905: 220). Bushnell wrote that the surface was originally covered in gold flake and that at the time his article was written in 1905 some of the gold was still attached to the objects. In addition, Bushnell mentioned
Photos 9 and 10: Atlatls, the first courtesy of the British Museum, and the second is artefact A4955 of the Central American Ethnography collection.

another *atlatl* possessed by an Italian museum, which was also richly carved and covered in gold. At the time of the article it resided in the Kircheriana museum in Rome (Bushnell 1905: 220). He made mention of the atlatl in the British Museum (photo above) and another in the Berlin Museum, though only to mention that it is of a different type than the ones that the Italian museums held (Bushnell 1905: 221).

Photo 11 and 12: Two *atlatls* held by the Musio Nazionale d' Antropologia ed Etnologia del R. Instituto di Studi Superiori in Florence Italy (Bushnell 1905: 219).
**A39341-44 and A39490-92:** This is a collection of bowls donated by Mrs. E. Angas Johnson in 1948. According to the database information on the items, they were obtained by William Brandt, who was the brother of Mrs. Johnson, and who managed a silver mine in Mexico around 1910, during the time of the Mexican Revolution and the age of industrialized mining. The items were all made by *peones* according to Mrs. Johnson.

39341-42: These are two small wheel turned, white glazed bowls, with bases. The first has orange and green decorations in the glaze and the second has brown and green decorations. They are about the size of a small modern soup bowl. The rim of A39341 is slightly uneven and both items are chipped in several places and worn, especially along the rim and inside the bowl. Not much else is known about these bowls.

A39343-44 and 39490-92: These small pottery pieces are all wheel turned, glazed white and decorated, and they all have bases which are more pronounced than the bowls in the previous section. They are much smaller, more like the size of a teacup, but without the handle. According to Mullen, in a presentation she did for the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, the small glazed bowls were used for the drinking of chocolate, which was considered to be an elite or upper class activity prior to the conquest (Mullen, 2004: 41) and was even a favourite of Moctezuma II when spiked with vanilla which was reportedly collected from as far away as Veracruz (Foster 1997: 9).
Photos 13-15: Small Glazed pottery bowls used for drinking chocolate.

A39487-89: These three items are all wheel-turned pottery pitchers. The interior surface of each pitcher is glazed as well as the top half of the exterior surface. All three artefacts appear to have been made from the joining of two pieces (not including the addition of a handle). All three items have a band of brown and yellow decorations. A39488 includes a paper, hand-written note inside that reads: “Made by Mexican peons. Won’t hold water. Now very rare. Mrs. Johnson’s brother Bill Brandt was in charge of a silver mine in Mexico in 1910 40 years ago.” As the note suggests, these items were also donated by Mrs. E. A. Johnson.

A39345-46: These two items are listed in the database as lacquered pottery bowls. They are not made of pottery, but rather from the husk of a gourd, dried and cut for the purpose. They are too small to be of use in eating, as some gourd bowls are, and that makes these gourd bowls special. They are votive gourd bowls, which are used in prayer to the old gods (Kindl 2000: 37, Mountjoy, 1982: 121, Parsons, 1933: 617). The person making the prayer would paint on the surface of the gourd bowl, in the image of the object of their desire. If they wanted a bountiful crop, they might paint ears of corn or plants on the bowl. If the person wished to pray to a specific god, they would paint the effigy of the god on the exterior of the bowl (Kindl 2000: 38). These two bowls are interesting because they are painted with flowers. These bowls represent the struggle between the old religion and the
new; they no longer bear an effigy of an old god, but they still exist. The votive bowls were associated with the Huichol people in what is now Central Mexico, and because they are lacquered, that can be narrowed more specifically to the Huichol tribe that lived in Olinalá, Guerrero, Mexico (Mullen, 2000: 22) south of the area that is now San Luis Potosí. They preferred to use the seed of the chia plant to make oil that, when combined with mineral dyes, would create a glossy lacquer. These bowls were donated along with the pottery bowl collections by Mrs. E. A. Johnson in 1948 and were also originally obtained by William Brandt.

**A39615-17**: These three items were made for and used in the wedding in Jamaica in 1873 of Mrs. Blair, mother of S.A. Blair who donated the collection to the museum in 1949. All three items are made of bits of shell, carved, and with the use of wire fashioned into flowers and leaves.

A39615: This artefact is a cross, with a base suggesting it was meant to be placed upright, and enclosed with it is a bright blue velvet altar cloth.

A39616: This is a hair ornament, although it looks like a necklace. It was worn in the hair like a tiara.
A39617: This piece is a very small bracelet, made to match the hair piece.

Photos 18-19: Shell Ornaments worn and used in a wedding in Jamaica.

A43870: This is an unusual hat made from palm fibre. It was made in Colon, Panama, and was donated to the museum in 1952 by T. Harvey Johnston. It is small enough at the brim to be a child sized specimen, but no other information was available on the item.

A53378-79: These are two large dishes made of wheel-turned pottery and glazed. Both bear white designs in the glaze; one is in the shape of a deer and the other is in the shape of a bird. Both are stamped “made in Mexico” on the bottom. They were both donated to the museum in 1960 by L.M. Nilsson.

A66556-57: These items are two very long necklaces made of seeds. They were created in the West Indies, but no more specific information is available. They were acquired from L.A. Elliot in 1978, but the database does not show whether they were donated or purchased.

A75079-80: These items are called “molas” and they represent the front and back panel of the traditional blouse of the Cuna (also spelled Kuna) women of the San Blas Islands just off the coast of Panama. Cuna women still wear their traditional dress to the modern time even though the men dress in modern ways, so the Cuna has become a symbol of tradition and rebellion against modernisation and globalisation. They are made using a reverse appliqué technique, meaning that they sew several layers together, then cut through the
layers and sew them into place in the shape of a design, folding each layer back a little farther so that a person can see the colour of each of the layers and the amount of work that went into a *mola* (Hirschfeld 1977: 107). As such, the quality of a *mola* depends on the number of layers within it, the fineness of the stitching and whether it was sewn by hand or machine sewn, the addition of embroidery, as well as whether or not the item is authentic; in other words, whether it was made to be used or made for trade (Chaves, et al. 1973: 19-20, Panart.com). A75079 has five layers, and A75080 has eight, which would suggest that both are fairly high quality. In addition, the edges of the *molas* are uneven, which suggests that they were made to be used, as the edges of those made to sell to tourists are often trimmed to look more appealing. The thread used to sew the *molas* is also matched to the colour of the fabric and the items were sewn by hand. With all of this taken into consideration, it seems that these *molas* are of a fairly high quality.

Photos 20-21: Two *molas* from Panama donated in 2000 by Mrs. E. Reich.

**Conclusions**

While they do represent many of the countries in Central America, the items in the collection do not represent all of the countries in Central America. Part of the goal of this
project was to identify gaps in the collection and make recommendations for the completion of the collection. It would be nice to see items from other countries in this collection, such as Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and more from the islands of the West Indies. It would also be prudent to add more Mayan and Aztec items, since both of those civilizations made important progress in the history of Central America.

Additional research would also bring to light more of the unique histories of the items. For this project, research was done on each of the items, but was focused on the items that had ample history available due to time restraints and the quantity of objects to be studied. Many of the items could be studied in more detail, by contacting museums and archaeologists in Mexico and other regions of Central America to find similar items. In addition, as regards the items donated by N.B. Tindale, the pieces in this collection are “representative chippings” to use his words, and are part of a larger collection of artefacts collected on the expedition. Further research could be done to assess the complete collection and also the dating methods used.

The items in this collection are representative of the major changes that happened within Mexico and Central America from 1100 A.D. to the present. Many of the items are rare and possibly unique among the collections held by many museums worldwide. They are currently in good condition, and in good care. As part of the new display, the items will bring to light the rich and colourful history of Central America, and they are a valuable piece of the legacy of Central America.
References


