

# Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean *Chuspas*

On View April 11–August 3, 2014



20  
YEARS

Bard  
Graduate  
Center, Decorative  
Arts, Design  
History, Material  
Culture

Grace Goodell, detail. Men  
and boys in a market, Bolivia,  
1968. Courtesy of the Division  
of Anthropology, American  
Museum of Natural History.

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*No Indian is without his chuspa or coca-bag, made of llama-cloth, dyed red and blue in patterns, with woolen tassels hanging from it. He carries it over one shoulder, suspended at his side.*

—Sir Clements Markham,  
*Travels in Peru and India*, 1862

## Background

*Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean Chuspas* considers how two components of Andean life—coca leaves and hand-woven textiles—are brought together in the small bag called a *chuspa* and examines this traditional object in changing cultural and economic contexts. Curated by Nicola Sharratt, this groundbreaking exhibition highlights the tension between tradition and innovation surrounding these socially important woven objects by presenting *chuspas* not as representations of a static, indigenous heritage but as the embodiment of social and economic change. In their actual and symbolic connection with coca, *chuspas* are unique among Andean textiles, essential to cultural practice, social relationships, ritual activity, and political negotiation. By investigating how these striking textiles are made, what they look like, who wears them, and when and how they are used, Sharratt reveals for the first time in an exhibition how the history of *chuspas* is a consequence not only of variations in Andean textile traditions but also of the story of the sacred and contested substance they carry.

Nicola Sharratt is the BGC–American Museum of Natural History postdoctoral fellow in museum anthropology and a research associate at the Field Museum in Chicago. She directs an archaeological program in southern Peru, and her publications focus on the collapse of ancient South American states and empires, geochemical analyses of archaeological artifacts, and Andean craft production in the past and present.



Martín Chambi. “Campesino con chuspa” (“peasant with a coca bag”), photographed near Cuzco, Peru, 1934. Martín Chambi Family Archives.

## The Exhibition

By contextualizing *chuspas* in space and time, *Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean Chuspas* not only presents these textiles as traditional woven forms but also considers them as objects central to cultural practice. This fascinating exhibition features thirty-three coca bags, fiber samples, looms, and spinning implements alongside stunning documentary photographs taken during important twentieth-century expeditions to Peru and Bolivia—all drawn together to explore how essential to social relationships, ritual activity, and political negotiation. Juxtaposing *chuspas* from the South American textile collections of the American Museum of Natural History that were made more than 1,500 years ago with bags produced as recently as 2013, *Carrying Coca* presents a story of tradition and transformation.

Bag, Chancay, central coast of Peru, AD 1000–1476. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 41.2/8974



The exhibition displays both archaeological and ethnographic *chuspas*—many of which have never before been exhibited. The archaeological pieces represent approximately 1,000 years of the pre-Hispanic past, beginning with the Nazca culture, which flourished on the coast of southern Peru as early as 100 B.C. The ethnographic *chuspas* demonstrate the ongoing production and use of a particular form of textile directly related to the cultural practice of coca chewing. Collected in the twentieth century from communities scattered across the Peruvian and Bolivian highlands, these pieces reveal the diversity and dynamism of Andean textiles.

The basic appearance of *chuspas* produced in the twenty-first century is strikingly similar to those recovered by archaeologists from pre-Hispanic burials. The range of materials and variety of techniques used to produce these bags indicate the impact of environment and local and global economies on materials and the development of weaving technologies. A diverse selection of exemplary pre-Hispanic coca bags from the Nazca Valley and Chancay, Peru, as well as twentieth-century bags from the Island of Taquile and the Department of Q'ero, present the differences in decoration and illustrate how individual communities craft their own traditional forms. In addition, bags produced today for tourist consumers demonstrate how the portability and utility of *chuspas* make these objects particularly suited to the thriving souvenir trade in the modern Andes.

As carriers of coca leaves, *chuspas* are much more than aesthetically pleasing and technically sophisticated pieces of art. For millennia, coca (*Erythroxylum spp.*) has occupied an essential and unparalleled place in the daily lives, social customs, and ritual practice of Andean communities. A mild stimulant, chewing coca leaves suppresses hunger, relieves the effects of altitude sickness, and acts as a curative for various ailments. Yet the cultural significance of coca equals its adaptive functions. By sharing coca, friends and relatives become entwined in ongoing bonds of reciprocity, as the act of chewing coca symbolizes and mediates social relationships. However, worldwide reactions to the plant and legislation of its uses have affected Andean traditions surrounding coca leaves since the Spanish conquest of the Andes in the sixteenth century and continue to do so even today. Now, as in the past, coca is a substance that is produced, consumed, and understood in multiple ways.

*Carrying Coca* will also include a digital media interactive that explores the historical and cultural networks of coca from the pre-Hispanic period to the present. Through this dynamic interactive and the stunning textiles and weaving technology on view, Sharratt illustrates the complex historical record—of coca and *chuspas*—as one of social depth, economic and political change, colonialism, and global interaction.



Grace Goodell. Coca bag, being woven in Oruro, Bolivia, 1968. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.



Bag with carrying strap. Island of Taquile, Peru, accessioned in 1955. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 40.0/8870.

## Publication

A fully illustrated catalogue by curator Nicola Sharratt accompanies the exhibition. Featuring previously unpublished examples of archaeological, historic, and contemporary *chuspas* from Peru and Bolivia, *Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean Chuspas* explores how both textiles and coca have been vital components of daily life, ritual practice, and social relationships for thousands of years. With more than eighty illustrations, this book also demonstrates how both products are central components in recent global interactions, albeit in very different ways—with textiles increasingly consumed as tourist souvenirs, and coca recognized as a maligned symbol of international anti-drug campaigns. Distributed by Yale University Press, the catalogue will be available at the BGC Gallery and through the website ([bgc.bard.edu](http://bgc.bard.edu)).

## Focus Gallery

The Focus Gallery presents small-scale exhibitions that are part of an academically innovative project that also includes graduate seminars, public programming, and publications both in print and online. Envisaged as a laboratory, Focus Gallery projects promote experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media and reflect the BGC's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

## Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212-501-3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu).

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m.

For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [bgc.bard.edu](http://bgc.bard.edu).

For press information and images, please e-mail [press@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:press@bgc.bard.edu) or call 212.501.3074.