Carrying Coca: 1,500 Years of Andean Chuspas

On View April 11–August 3, 2014

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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.

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.
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.
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).

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.

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.

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.

For press information and images, please e-mail press@bgc.bard.edu or call 212.501.3074.