

Taino Indian Art

by MELA PONS ALEGRÍA

When European explorers voyaged across the seas in search of the New World, the first American culture they met belonged to the Taino Indians of the Greater Antilles. This little known primitive society flourished from about the tenth to the fifteenth centuries after Christ. Originally centered in Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, the Taino culture spread to the nearby Virgin Islands, Jamaica and the Bahamas, and eventually reached the eastern tip of Cuba scarcely 50 years before its discovery by Columbus in 1492. Today, Taino art is recognized by archaeologists and art historians as one of the richest and earliest sources of Precolumbian expression, yet it is generally unfamiliar to nonspecialists. This important primitive art was first admired by the Europeans long before it was obscured by the discovery of the higher civilizations of Middle and South America.

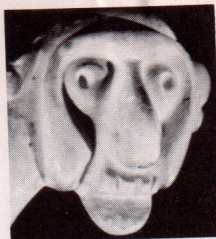
The Taino Indians were a peaceful, agricultural people who spoke a dialect of the Arawakan language, once common throughout the West Indies and Bahamas and related to others still spoken today by the South American Indians of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Paraguay and Venezuela. They developed a highly stratified aristocracy headed by the tribal chief or *cacique*, followed closely by the shaman or *bohique*, and other members of the ruling class called *nitainos* who were also warriors. The *naborias*, or common working folk, constituted the base of the social pyramid. The Taino believed in magical forces, ancestral mythological beings and spirits, which they felt controlled different aspects of nature. These supernatural powers were represented as idols and were often worshipped in human or animal-like figures called *zemis*. During tribal ceremonies, the chief or shaman would invoke their spirits to demand such benefits as health, rain or the fertility of fields and women.

Taino art in all its many expressions—music,

dance, poetic myths, or pottery and sculptured objects—fulfilled an essential function for society. It helped explain and control nature by maintaining the Taino's personal, social and cosmic harmony. Such an integrated belief system required a wide range of ceremonial or ritual objects used by the *cacique*, *bohique* or *nitainos*. The earliest expression of Taino art is the distinctive pottery made of hard, light-colored, polished clay that dates to the tenth century after Christ. Most common are large multishaped bottles, effigy bowls, a great variety of vessels, small objects for personal adornment as well as stamps and figurines. Effigy bowls were used by the shaman or the *cacique* when offering food and drink to their sacred spirits. They were also used as funerary offerings and are commonly found in burial sites. Many of these pieces are decorated with modeled abstract, animal or human shapes. Others are embellished with deeply incised, curvilinear designs, usually in the form of bands or borders.

The strong sculptural Taino style, however, is best represented by the small-to-medium-sized ritual and ceremonial objects carved from hard materials such as wood, bone, shell and stone. Hard-grained tropical woods were cut and carved with stone axes and sand-encrusted cotton or maguey strings, used as hand saws, a laborious and time consuming operation. Next the wood was hollowed out with live coals and worked with flint knives, coral rasps and files. Incised decorations were carefully carved using bone, shell or stone burins. Finally, sand and fine mineral powders were rubbed across the surface for a glossy polish.

Most striking are the crouching masculine idols known as *cohoba zemi*. These elaborately carved wooden figures are crowned with a round disc that held hallucinogenic powders called *cohoba*. The officiating shaman would inhale the powders through snuffing tubes. His subsequent visions



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Cover: Bronze Age vessel with double spiral pattern from a coastal district east of Hong Kong. The pattern, also known as "double-f" in English and kwei (dragon) in Chinese, is found in a very limited area of Kwangtung Province. Height, 31 centimeters.



Stone head zemi, the Taino representation of an ancestral spirit or sacred force, from Macorix, Dominican Republic. Height, 22 centimeters.



were considered oracular and accepted immediately as mandate. Similar hallucinogenic ceremonies are common practice even today among most tropical South American tribes. The snuffing tubes used by the shaman during the cohoba ceremony were made of wood or bone. Most consist of simple Y-shaped tubes. A more exotic form from the Dominican Republic represents a supine masculine figure made of the rib of a sea-cow or manatee. His legs are held high over his head and the spine, vertebrae and sexual organs are prominent. The U-shaped legs correspond to nostril tubes while the anus serves as the inhaler opening. This type clearly illustrates how the Taino adopted human or animal figures to fit a variety of shapes based on the object's use.

Elaborately ornamented zoomorphic spoons carved from manatee bones have been found in the Dominican Republic. They were probably ritual artifacts associated with the cohoba ceremony used to handle the sacred cohoba powders to avoid exposure to human contamination. Most interesting of the cohoba ritual paraphernalia are the stylized manatee bone or wood spatulas. They were used by emaciated shamans after prolonged fasts to provoke vomiting, thus assuring the shaman's absolute purification before he inhaled the sacred

powders. Skeletal masculine figures depicted in the ritual act of "swallowing" these spatulas often decorate Taino ceramic effigy vessels and stone carvings.

Some of the most astonishingly beautiful Taino objects are the household furnishings of the caciques and nitainos. Foremost is the typical *dujo* or stool. It is a simple four-legged bench carved in animal or human form from a solid piece of hard black wood. The squat zoomorphic design features a head between the front legs and a raised tail that serves as a back support. The most common animals represented are turtles, snakes, lizards and other reptilian forms. Human-like anthropomorphic *dujos*, on the other hand, represent supine male figures with their heads placed over the back rest and genitals prominently carved between the front legs. Some *dujos*, like the spectacular one from Hispaniola in the British Museum, have inlaid gold elements, usually eyes, mouth and shoulders. Most likely these representational *dujos* were totemic objects, symbols of mythical or ancestral spirits sacred to the Taino. The cacique or bohique on a *dujo* usually assumed the identity of the spirit it represented. Less common are the nonrepresentational stools usually decorated with incised geometric



Petroglyph of a female deity at Caguana Ceremonial Park, Utuado, Puerto Rico. In ceremonial plazas like these the Taino Indians celebrated their areytos or ritual dances as well as ceremonial ball games.

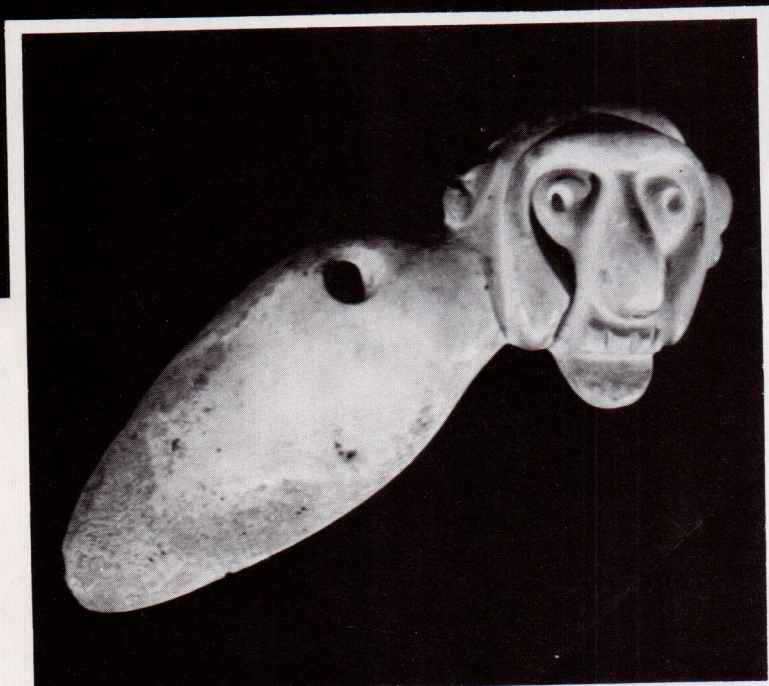
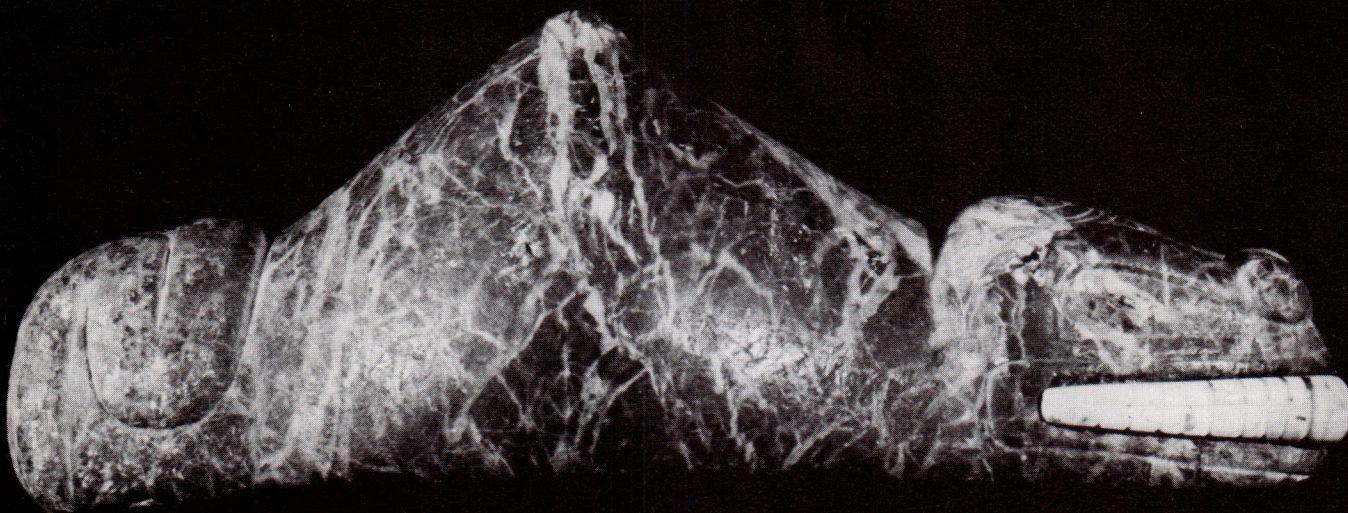
design panels. Spirals, triangles, circles or chevron motifs form bands across the seat and legs. The early chroniclers of the Spanish discovery and conquest of the West Indies during the sixteenth century declared that *dujos* were part of the caciques' most cherished treasures. They were offered as prized gifts and used only during special celebrations or *areytos*, ritual ball games, the *cohoba* ceremony or the cacique's funeral. Columbus' first envoys to the caciques of Hispaniola were even invited to sit on these revered stools.

The Tainos, like the archaic nomad inhabitants of the Antilles who lived there from 4000 B.C. to the sixteenth century after Christ, and their own ancestors, the sub-Taino Indians (A.D. 700-1000), used the abundant and durable shells left over from their meals to make many small and delicately carved utilitarian and ceremonial objects. Fish, bird, manatee and even human bones were used for a wide variety of utensils and ritual objects. Thousands of tiny discoidal or cylindrical bone beads, each laboriously worked, were strung on necklaces, bracelets or anklets. They were also sewn on the small apron-

like belts called *naguas* worn by married women. Additionally, bone was used to make ear, nose and lip ornaments as well as amulets and idols. Bone inlays even enriched wood and stone carvings. One interesting and delicately carved human bone whistle from the Luquillo Beach site of Monserrate, Puerto Rico, although found in a sub-Tainan strata, illustrates early Taino motifs.

Animal teeth, particularly the teeth of dolphin and mute dogs, were perforated and sometimes decorated with incised designs and used as beads or amulets. A recent discovery in the Dominican Republic unearthed more than 4,000 dogs' teeth. Their large number indicates that they were probably sewn on a cotton *nagua* or belt, a common practice documented by early ethnographers and historians of Antillean culture.

Beads, amulets, vomit spatulas, three-pointed idols and small masks are among the objects fashioned from shell. Beautiful necklaces bearing amulets made from hundreds of laboriously carved *strombus gigas* shell fragments or incised *oliva* shells, testify to their importance in Taino society.



(Above, left) This three-pointed stone zemi with inlaid shell teeth represents a reptile. Height, 20 centimeters. (Above, right) Simple wooden dujo or ceremonial stool with decorative panels used during special occasions by the Taino Indians. (Left) An expressive human face decorates the handle of this ritual shell spatula from Puerto Rico. Length, 10 centimeters.

Miniature multicolored shell beads in interesting geometric designs cover one particular woven cotton belt decorated with a small expressive mirrored mask. A similar belt sewn with bone beads was described enthusiastically by Father las Casas who traveled to the Taino West Indies in 1502. It featured "a belt with a mask instead of bag, with two great ears, nose and tongue of hammered gold...(and) was made of tiny fish bone beads combining red and white bead-like embroidery, so well sewn in cotton thread and so beautifully that it was a pleasure to behold." The Taino Indians did not weave the cotton cloth of these belts on looms, but pieced together thin plaited or woven bands with very small, almost invisible stitches. Materials were then richly embellished with stamped designs, ornamental braids or feathers. The finishing touches included animal teeth, seeds and bone or

shell beads and even small perforated stone amulets.

The many ceremonial sculptures and objects carved from hard native stones are among the finest Taino achievements. Granite, basalt and serpentine were used to make the highly polished petaloid axes now displayed in the University of Puerto Rico Museum. Carved from blue-green calcite, a color considered sacred by most American Indian cultures, they were polished to a beautiful sheen and must have been reserved for ceremonial occasions. Hard basaltic stone daggers found in most of the Greater Antilles are more enigmatic. They are conventional dagger forms with human figures on their handles, but what stone weapons would have been used for is perplexing.

Three-pointed stone sculptures representing



sacred spirits or zemis are the most common Taino carved stone objects. Simple pyramidal zemis are the oldest and most abundant forms of Taino idols, probably dating from the sub-Taino period. They appear as plain, miniature cones fashioned from shell, coral or stone. As this form gradually evolved, the central point or cone was inclined slightly forward; it separated the anterior and posterior projections creating the three distinct points that characterize Taino zemis. Three-pointed stone zemis were often given animal or human features. Heads were carved on the anterior projection while frog-like legs were carved or incised on the posterior one. Shorter, more triangular and usually smaller three-pointed stone zemis with a face carved on the central cone were also common. The back part of the central cone often had naturalistic representations of ribs, vertebrae and legs or complex geometric designs. In still other three-pointed stone zemis, the animal or human face is carved directly on the central cone and looks upward. Stone heads like the well-known Macorix head from the de Hostos collection in the University of Puerto Rico Museum seem to have evolved from this type. The bottoms or bases of three-pointed stones are generally ovoid, unpolished and slightly concave. They may have been attached to some other object such as ceremonial batons or the stone belts believed to form part of the ball game paraphernalia. Semicircular stone zemis, either plain or with incised or carved elements, are another variation of the basic form. These zemis have semi-circular instead of connoi-

dal centers but still exhibit plain anterior and posterior projections. Another intriguing art form—stone masks with the typical Taino features of large expressive eyes, prominent noses and grimacing mouths—are common throughout the Greater Antilles. They are believed to be symbolic survivals of actual masks, probably used before the arrival of the Europeans, during initiations or other sacred rites.

Some of the most unusual stone art, however, comes from engravings on rocks, called petroglyphs, and rock paintings in caves, known as pictographs. Although petroglyphs have been found throughout the Lesser and Greater Antilles, Taino petroglyphs are sometimes difficult to separate from those of previous cultures. Those that have been identified as Taino, however, appear only in the Greater Antilles. Petroglyphs were incised on great river boulders, the walls of caves, and the large stones lining the traditional Taino ceremonial ballcourts. Sometimes they merely decorate solitary rocks in open fields. Petroglyphs were probably designed to commemorate important events, mark sacred grounds or important territories, and honor the gods. Their symbols consist of abstract animal or human forms. One fine example of a female zemi is carved on one of the great boulders of the main court at the Ceremonial Center, Caguana, Puerto Rico. She is depicted in a ritual crouching pose and wears an elaborate headband and enormous circular earring. This zemi must have represented an important personage or spirit, possibly



Taino pottery effigy bowl in the form of a bat from the Dominican Republic.

Atabeira, the Taino goddess of fertility or the goddess of the very mountain in which she resides. Conventional representations of frogs, birds, lizards and bats—popular motifs on other ritual objects—also appear on rocks or cave walls. Abstract motifs vary from simple figures to complex and even labyrinthine designs. Some motifs can be traced through time. A basket motif appears in both the Borbón Cave in the Dominican Republic and the Indian Cave in Arecibo, Puerto Rico. This same design is still used today by the Piaroa and Guajibo Indians of the upper Orinoco River to decorate their baskets.

Taino pictographs were scarce until recently as more persistent explorations and better methods of investigation have led to the discovery of many pictograph sites throughout the Greater Antilles. In Puerto Rico they have been found in caves in Utuado, Juana Diaz, Morovis and Mona Island, while in the Dominican Republic wall paintings are known in the Railroad Cave of Samana, Borbón Cave to the south as well as many others. Some of the most interesting pictographs have very simple compositions: a bird carrying a crab in its beak, a series of hunting and fishing scenes and birds in decreasing sizes which may represent an early attempt at perspective.

Both Taino pictographs and petroglyphs have a similar style and generally use the same motifs. Humans are represented as swaddled baby-like or shrouded funerary figures, squatting match stick forms, and simple or ornamental face-masks with headbands and earrings. Animals, which appear in more or less naturalistic forms, include lizards, frogs, bats, snakes and birds. Very delicate birds in graceful poses occur frequently in both Puerto Rican and Dominican pictographs. In both types of rock art isolated symbols or figures usually appear with no attempt at composition. In sacred contexts, the incisions or drawings are sometimes superimposed on each other as in European Palaeolithic

cave art. Black is almost always used although some traces of red, white and ocher also have been discovered. Pigments probably came from mineral and vegetable sources, judging from the kaolin, hematite and wood charcoal found in some of the caves.

Perhaps nothing represents the flowering of Taino culture as well as their monumental constructions. The great ceremonial centers with imposing round or square ballcourts called *bateyes* are jewels of rudimentary engineering. Ceremonial ball games and *areytos*, ritual dances, were held in these courts. The Tainos used a large solid rubber ball impelled by striking with the hips, shoulders or head during the game. Both ball and game were known as "batey." The same game played in more elaborate courts was discovered later by the Spanish conquerors in Mexico and Central America. Tons of earth were displaced to level the ground, and enormous boulders were transferred from considerable distances to construct the Taino ballcourts. Skillfully paved paths lead to ballcourt complexes. Megalithic stones were erected along the long sides of rectangular courts or along the circumference of round ones. These large stones were often carved with religious symbols and representations.

The rich paraphernalia associated with the ball game includes the heavy stone "elbows" and rings called "collars" because of their resemblance to horses' harnesses. These intriguing objects were never described in the Spanish documents and have seldom been found *in situ*. Modern investigators now agree that they both represent ceremonial ball game belts which were originally made from vegetable fibers or bent tree branches. During earlier times, elbow-like stone fragments were probably combined with cotton, straw weaving or a bent branch to form the belt. During their final stage, all of the ritual belts were carved from the more per-

manent native hard stones.

Stone collars usually have solid ovoid or thin elliptical shapes. They measure from 36 to 45 centimeters and weigh from 28 to 40 kilograms. In some collars, a series of relief bands and knobs clearly indicates that the shape corresponded to the original wooden branch form now translated into stone. Toward one end on either side of a boss, stone collars usually have two marked panels: one is decorated while the other plain panel has an ovoid depression in the center. The decoration on the ornamental panel depicts traditional geometric motifs or a typical representation of the human figure ingeniously distorted to fit the size and curvature of the decorative field. Taino artists were master carvers who produced a wide variety of objects ranging from miniature beads and amulets to monolithic or monoxylous carvings on zemis, dujos, stone elbows and collars. No matter what size or material was used, the design emphasized the simple elegant planes characteristic of monumental sculpture.

The aboriginal Taino culture of the Greater Antilles disappeared soon after the European conquest, halting a brilliant and sophisticated culture. Unable to defend themselves and vulnerable to new diseases, the Taino Indians rapidly became extinct. Yet despite their early disappearance from the islands, some vestiges of their art persists. In rural areas, country craftspeople still weave hammocks from cotton or maguey fibers, fashion elaborate pottery, and carve wood figures using the same techniques as their aboriginal ancestors. The persistence of these crafts as well as the use of native gourds, *corozo* palm seeds, fibers and other seeds clearly continues the traditions of the masterful Taino culture.

FOR FURTHER READING on Taino art and culture: Ricardo Alegria, "The Ball Game Played by the Aborigines of the Antilles," *American Antiquity*, Volume 16:4 1951; José Juan Arrom, *Mitología y artes prehispánicas de las Antillas*, (S. XX, Mexico 1975), an original linguistic approach to Prehispanic art and mythology; Eugenio Fernández Méndez, *Art and Mythology of the Taino Indians of the Greater West Indies (El Cemi*, San Juan, Puerto Rico 1972), uses Mesoamerican mythology to interpret Taino art; Jesse Walters Fewkes, *The Aborigines of Puerto Rico and Neighboring Islands* (Extract from the Twenty-First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, D.C. 1907), an authoritative, useful and profusely illustrated study including Antillean art objects; Irving Rouse, *Scientific Survey of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands* (The New York Academy of Sciences, New York 1952); "The West Indies," *South American Indians*, edited by Julian H. Steward, Volume 4 (Cooper Square Publishers, New York 1963), Rouse, the foremost Antillean archaeologist describes different aboriginal cultures, establishes their chronology, and defines the various ceramic styles.

On early Spanish explorations in the Greater Antilles: Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias* (Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, Madrid 1957), the foremost defender of the Indians in early colonial days describes their artistic treasures.



Typical cohoba zemi figurine used by the Taino shaman during hallucinogenic rituals. "Cohoba" powder was placed on the disc on the idol's head.

The Archaeology of Hong Kong

by WILLIAM MEACHAM

Most people are surprised to learn that Hong Kong, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, has a thriving archaeological program. From its origins some 6,000 years ago, human occupation of the Hong Kong area seems to have continued virtually without interruption to the present. Over a hundred Neolithic and Bronze Age sites are known to exist in the present area of Hong Kong. Just exactly when these ancient sites were inhabited, however, has been the subject of considerable controversy. Over the years, the earliest date for settlement has been pushed far back from the time of the Ch'in-Han expansion into south China which occurred during 250-111 B.C. On the basis of geological data, an approximate date of 4000 B.C. was suggested several years ago for the first human penetration of the present coastal areas of south China. Recent radiocarbon tests have confirmed that people were present in these regions by the fifth millennium B.C.

Archaeological discoveries from Hong Kong and south China are now recognized to be an integral part of the total reconstruction of the Neolithic and Bronze periods in East Asia. Traditionally, however, most research has concentrated on the Central Plains area of northern China, the probable birthplace of early Chinese civilization. Important discoveries of early agricultural sites and Bronze Age artifacts in Southeast Asia during the 1960's increasingly brought that region to the attention of prehistorians. Within the last five years, south China has yielded similar striking new evidence of

