

The Art of Native America  
Art 244 Fall 2012

Common Characteristics of Pre-Columbian Native American Art:

1. Artistic traditions in South, Central and North America developed largely independent of each other and produced religious and secular artworks.
2. A number of cultures (Incan, Mayan, Aztec and Mississippian) had large cities with monumental architecture and designated areas for artistic workshops.
3. Artists developed regionally and were highly dependent on the environment and local resources available. Environments range from arctic to tropical and mountainous to desert.
4. Artists were respected individuals who were the caretakers of important sacred artworks.
5. Used gold, silver and copper for art but did not develop iron or bronze.
6. Artworks reflected a very complex relationship between the people and their gods.
7. Native American cultures make no distinction between fine and applied arts.

Common Spiritual Beliefs of Native American Cultures

1. There were two worlds, the terrestrial and the celestial, and shamans traveled between the two in order to sustain and regulate the society.
2. Spiritual leaders, including priests and shamans, used art and architecture to travel to the other world where they received messages from the ancestors and gods.
3. They often entered a trance state that helped them have great visionary powers and access to the world of the spirits.
4. Trance states were enhanced by drums, rattles, and sometimes masks representing the shaman's animal counterpart. In some societies, it was believed that shamans could take on the forms of their animal counterparts.
5. After these out of body experiences, the shaman returned with special knowledge and messages communicated to them from the ancestors and the gods.
6. Shamans used their powers to heal the sick, assist hunters or warriors, control the weather and advise the rulers how to maintain order.

Sources: *Art Beyond The West*, By Michael O'Riley, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2002  
*Art History A View of the World: Part Two* by Marilyn Stokstad and  
Michael W. Cothren, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011