Interview with Andrew Hamilton, Ph.D., Associate Curator of Arts of the Americas, Art Institute of Chicago

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Breanna Reiss: My name is Breanna Reiss, and I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Art of the Ancient Americas in the Department of Art at the University of New Mexico. I am interviewing Andrew Hamilton, who is Associate Curator of Arts of the Americas at the Art Institute of Chicago. Andrew, thank you for joining me today. Could you begin by telling me a little bit about your background, where you studied, where you grew up, and how you wound up working in the world of Pre-Hispanic art history?

Andrew, thank you for joining me today. Could you begin by telling me a little bit about your background, where you studied, where you grew up, and how you wound up working in the world of Pre-Hispanic art history?

Andrew Hamilton: Thank you for inviting me. I grew up in Kansas and took an art history course in high school, AP Art History. I hated art history, initially, because we just looked at slides, which didn't capture the real-world applicability of art or its impact.

When I went to Yale for undergrad, I experimented with a lot of different majors, but it was Mary Miller, the professor of Pre-Columbian art, who drew me to the field. At that point, I came to understand art history in a different way because of the campus museums and the collections, which made it more real to me, something whose relevance I could see. At Yale, I also had the opportunity to travel and visit the countries of origin for so many of the works and things that we were studying. That experience showed me why this mattered. So, it was really Mary at Yale that set me on this path.

After Yale, I ended up going to Harvard for a Ph.D. and I worked with Pre-Hispanic and Colonial Latin American art historian, Tom Cummins. Although as an undergraduate, I had worked with Mary, who is a renowned Mayanist, I was really interested in Andean topics, so I went to Harvard to work with Tom, who is a renowned Andeanist and Inca specialist.

Through that experience, I came to work more in the period between the Pre-Columbian and Colonial periods. It really fascinated me to look at objects and understand them, and then to compare those objects to texts and see how colonial texts and the actual artifacts may tell different stories. So, I came to work on the Incas, and that sort of brings me somewhat to the present in terms of intellectual formation.

I came to the Art Institute in 2019 after a number of post-docs, and was really grateful for the opportunity to work with the objects that drive my work and to really see why they matter and what their relevance is on a daily basis here, with so many people coming into our galleries.

BR: Getting to work with Tom Cummins is impressive. I study the Moche, mostly, but also Jama-Coaque and coastal Ecuador, which was the focus of my master's work.

So, you started working at the Art Institute right before the pandemic. Looking at your time there, what's the most exciting thing about working at that museum? What are some of the strengths of the collections you work with and how do people respond to them?

AH: What has drawn me in at the Art Institute is twofold. First, I help steward around 2,000 objects. Of those objects, probably around 3/4 are Andean. The bulk of the collection is Indigenous and largely comes from two collections: the Gaffron Collection and the Nathan Cummings Collection. The Gaffron Collection was the founding collection of the department. It was acquired in 1955 and the department was formed in 1957. There's a huge number of works that really would benefit from a lot more research. It's very exciting to work with the collection.

I help oversee the entire hemisphere of the Americas over a period of 5000 years. My portfolio is broad and covers the Ancient Americas, Colonial Latin America, and contemporary art, as well. Interestingly, some of the most rewarding work that I've done since coming to the Art Institute is working with contemporary Native artists. Working with many contemporary Native artists has been really rewarding: bringing their work into the collection, seeing the way their work relates to more historical and archeological pieces in the collection, and really showing the long continuity and relevance of Indigenous art in the Americas and its continued impact today. That's been really rewarding, as has been building those relationships with the artists and learning about new artists, their work, and their careers.

BR: The faculty advisor for *Hemisphere*, Professor of Spanish Colonial Art, Ray Hernández-Durán mentioned that you have spent time in New Mexico visiting the Pueblos, which is great. We need more of that in the museum world. Do you have anything else to say regarding those connections and the continuity that you're seeing between contemporary and Pre-Hispanic arts?

AH: I think in academia there is this sort of schism between Native American art and Pre-Columbian art that is not helpful and is clearly derived from colonialism. Some of it has to do with the languages of scholarship and the nationalism of cultural patrimony. When really thinking about the Indigenous Americas, I'm glad that my position allows me to, both, see and approach the Americas holistically and

build those long arcs, chronologically and geographically, through the collection and the presentation of works in the galleries.

It's nice to be able to make those connections but it is also impossible to be the authority on all of those artistic and cultural traditions. I see my role and this great opportunity to keep learning, finding experts in all of these different artistic traditions, whether scholars, cultural leaders, etc., and learning from them about the collection and its stewardship.

BR: That's an important observation, i.e. the relationship between nationalism and cultural patrimony. We definitely struggle with some issues due to the way we've created these divides and that's a lot of what this issue of the journal is aiming to address. This edition focuses on how we in the Americas regard ideas related to such things as semasiography and semiotics, and how to communicate. For example, you have the Maya with their logographic writing that is also phonetic. There are examples where we find that imagery is a visual language, in its own right, and has elements of Narrative.

I would be interested to hear your thoughts, if you're willing to talk about it, because I know this goes into your new book. What is your opinion on Andean textiles as a form of communication?

AH: My new book, *The Royal Inca Tunic: A Biography of an Andean Masterpiece* is looking at the royal Inca tunic at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., an object whose history and scholarship has been so shaped by a search for a writing system within it. (Figure 1) The idea that the tocapus were a kind of logographic writing system really gets born out of the way in which the tunic presents reduced-scale checkerboard tunics throughout it, so a tunic within a tunic. That was how I first came to the object in my first book on scale. As I was working on that book, *Scale & the Incas*, I realized that I had so much more to say about this object. I guess my answer is sort of verging on a couple of the questions that I know you're thinking of asking me.

On the one hand, the tunic does become a communication device through scaled relationships, and it is presenting, in my reading of the garment, a reduced-scale embodiment of empire on the body of the Sapa Inca. Working with what we know about the checkerboard tunics, they seem to have dressed what would have been something like a royal guard for the emperor. Wherever he was being carried while wearing this garment, whether carried on a litter or just being present, presumably people wearing the reference to other tunics would have been adjacent to him. In that sort of sphere, I think the tunic is communicating something very powerful through the sartorial effect of the garment.

On the flip side, as you mentioned about Maya writing, where the goal is to find

communication in other parts of the Americas, there are many ways in which *tocapus* can be formally reminiscent of Maya glyphs. On the Inca tunic, the tocapus are squarish and arranged in a specific order or formation. They've got many intricate internal parts. It's possible to see how the dream of such forms being a type of glyphic writing system unfurled. When you really boil down the arguments made about how *tocapus* might be some form of writing, it's like seeing images in clouds. Everyone has had a different interpretation of what they thought a certain pattern looked like.

In some ways, that very reductive way of thinking about language and communication, that it must be writing, is what I think overshadows our ability to look with greater nuance at an object like the tunic. Because we had a very scripted, pre-formed understanding of, a.) what we thought cultural achievement looks like, and b). what we think writing looks like or should look like, we're trying to fit Inca culture into a preconceived notion and by doing so, we miss so many other important aspects suggestive of what actually were the Incas' great cultural achievements.

Figure 1. Inca, *All-Tocapu Tunic*, c. 1450-1540 CE, 90.2 cm x 77.15 cm (35 ½ in x 30 3/8 in), alpaca fiber and cotton. (Image courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. Photography by Neil Greentree.)

BR: I agree with you. I can't wait to read your next book. It's similar to my Moche research on the decorated beans. (Figure 2) There's a lot of talk about them functioning as a language system but I think we need more nuance and to look at this question from a broader perspective in terms of how the peoples of the Andes and the coast of Peru may have looked at communication and how those forms may not necessarily fit with our ideas about writing.

Figure 2. Moche, *Vessel Depicting Bean Warriors and Painted Beans*, c. 100 BCE – 500 CE, 25.9 cm x 13.2 cm (10 3/16 x 5 3/16 in), ceramic and pigment. (Image courtesy of the Kate S. Buckingham Endowment at The Art Institute of Chicago.)

AH: Another key point of my research on the tunic is that we look at so many objects through photographs. These images become emblazoned in our mind in the sort of glamor shot that gets published and republished. So much is lost in that way of approaching objects.

This circles back to what I was saying earlier about coming to care about art history through objects and the study of objects. As you're looking at the tunic, you can really see the different hands of the two makers that created it in ways that help you see that they're not actually even creating the designs in the same way as they work on the tunic. The way they create contributes to the *tocapus'* inconsistency. They simplify some and they screw up things in the same place each time. Really looking at an object and what an object can tell us is something that's very important for overturning our preconceived ideas. You really have to listen to the object so that it guides your scholarship.

BR: It's a really important point that so much gets lost in translation of what actually went into the materiality of the object itself and the hands making it. I think that, especially with the textiles, it is such an important and understudied facet of the art form and, also, the work we do.

AH: Something that I find so fascinating about textiles, and one of the reasons why I'm drawn to studying them, is that their creation is so sequential. You lay down a thread, you lay another thread on top of that, then another cut on top of that; you can know exactly the order in which the maker did it. 58

It's not the same thing as looking at strokes made by a paint brush on a canvas. You cannot necessarily put in the exact order every brushstroke sequentially but with a textile, you really can to a large extent and thus understand how the work developed. You can see cause and effect, and the butterfly effect of a decision made early on that has ramifications later.

Because it's all made from threads, once the thread is broken, it will always be broken. You can't mend it in a way that won't allow a scholar to later come along and see that mend. A textile really does record the traces of its own making in history in a way that I think can be very fruitful for an art historian who is looking closely at it.

BR: I had never thought much about textiles like that but it's a similar reason why I love studying ancient ceramics, given how you can follow what the maker did and how it came to fruition. One can see where somebody decided to add something at the last minute or perhaps, even after firing. That's fascinating. I know you spoke about it a little bit but that there are certainly some interesting places in the Andes where you see scale being communicated and using communication and scale together in a way that reveals bits of ideology and such. Is there anything that comes to mind from your book or otherwise that you might like to speak about?

AH: One of the things I was struck by in in studying scale within the context of Inca culture is that it is nonverbal. It is something that can communicate in a very immediate way. The scale or relationship between two objects is like that, it represents that as a similar sort of structure to word and idea; this word instantiates that thing over here.

When you see it, you know it. But it does it in a way that's not using a linguistic faculty. In an empire like the Incas', which would have been multilingual, it actually makes a lot of sense as to why it might have come to be relied upon more to communicate. I ended the book with my admitting being struck by these similar ways of using scaled relationships even in the present moment. I make a point about the Super Bowl commercials, when you really are pressed for time; similarly, making a commentary or conveying an idea through scale is a very fast, effective way of doing it. I think that that's something that is enduring. Scaled relationships are still used in that way.

Going back to the way we often come to study art history through slides or images rather than from the objects themselves, photography and the representation of objects through images is something that, actually, obliterates scale more often than not. You have to be really, really careful about how you preserve scalar knowledge within an image or within a representation because it's inherently rescaled. So again, it's just something that direct object study makes more apparent.

BR: I agree entirely. I think the miniatures that you see crop up in the Inca Empire as offerings are fascinating. I did not know this until last summer when I visited some of the museums on the coast. These kinds of objects are showing up in the mountains of Cerro Reque and in the surrounding areas, too. People were explaining them to me and saying, "well, that was an offering, and it does have a direct relationship with the thing that's being offered. We're offering this smaller miniature version of it, which can stand in for the whole." I think that was very well said. How that relationship develops in the Andes is fascinating.

AH: When I was starting to write my dissertation, I thought that I was going to study scale writ large. But then as I was looking at it culture by culture, it became clear that every culture was doing it in slightly different ways so that there was an Inca approach to it that was seemingly very different on the surface from, like, a Paracas approach or a Moche approach. I think that there's a lot of room for further studies that identify scale as an issue and understand the challenges of studying it, and then try and see it in other Andean cultures because the Incas are the end of that development and they're doing it in a really sophisticated way but they didn't invent it. It's a way of making references and making connections that their predecessors were using at great length for long periods of time. I'm keen to see whether my own future research or another scholar's future research changes what

we are learning about those different cultural differences in the Andes.

BR: I think scale would be an interesting way to see those differences, as well as looking at things like communication. I just wonder how, given that these cultures have so many languages, especially in the Inca period, which they use to speak to one another and how they deal with that divide. In the Americas, generally, and here in New Mexico, I know a lot of the Pueblos don't speak the same languages. It's fascinating to think about long term trade and how they dealt with those divides. Is there anything that you'd like to add about what we've talked about, your time at the Art Institute, or the Inca?

AH: Well, the current book is going through copyediting right now and hopefully, we'll have advance copies in the beginning of 2024. It's with Princeton University Press and should come out Spring 2024. So that's exciting.

BR: Thank you for making time to meet with me and participating in this interview. You're doing such important work so good luck with all of your projects.

BREANNA REISS is a Ph.D candidate who studies pre-Hispanic ceramics, primarily from coastal Ecuador and Peru, with a focus on their iconography and elements of their composition. She also received her M.A. from UNM where in partnership with the Earth and Planetary Sciences Department, she examined the chemical composition of rare blue and blue-green post- fire ceramic figurine colorants from Ecuador. Her dissertation explores the intersections between ancient Moche semasiography related to plant motifs and the ethnobotanical uses of these identifiable plant species. Along with teaching introductory art history courses, she has received numerous fellowships with UNM's Center for Southwest Research and the Digital Initiatives and Scholarly Communication Department.