

EAR SPOOLS



Artist Unknown (Chimu)

1150-1450 CE

South America, Peru, Andean Region

Gold

Acc: 43.4.1

G260

LABEL

Gold was symbolically associated with the sun in ancient Peru. It was valued for its sacred power, not as currency. These ear spools (earrings with large posts) were made for someone of the highest rank, as is reflected in their rich imagery. The central scene of each depicts a ruler wearing a crescent-shaped feather headdress and ear spools. He holds a *kero* (ceremonial cup) in his left hand and a feather fan in his right, while being carried on a litter (wheel-less vehicle) by similarly dressed monkey attendants. These objects are superb examples of Chimú artists' refinement of metalworking techniques. Made of a gold-copper alloy, they weigh five ounces each (about the equivalent of a smart phone). They were worn in openings in distended earlobes, stretched by introducing gradually larger earrings over time.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What does the scene depict on the face of the earrings?
2. Why do you suppose these earrings are so large?
3. What was the status of the person who wore these earrings?

KEY IDEAS

1. The Chimu resided on the north coast of Peru in a narrow strip of desert 20 to 100 miles wide between the Pacific and the Andes. Their capital, Chan Chan was a large adobe city in the Moche Valley near the present day city of Trujillo. The Chimu civilization arose about 900 AD and was conquered by the Incas in 1470 AD—just 50 years before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.



Chan Chan adobe wall



2. Chimu artisans are best known for their distinctive monochromatic pottery and fine metalworking of copper, bronze, silver, gold and *tumbago* (copper and gold). Experts believe that the capital Chan Chan housed 7000 artists and craftsmen many of who were skilled in metal working. Their workmanship was so extraordinary that when the Incas conquered the Chimu many of the goldsmiths were relocated to Cusco, the Inca capital.
3. Gold as a material was important in the work of many cultures in the region for over 3000 years. Pre-Columbian gold objects were made with reverence for gold was referred to as “ears of the sun” and silver as “tears of the moon” both of which were important deities to the people. The craftsmanship of the goldsmiths was highly valued. Their techniques developed independently and on a parallel timescale with their counterparts in the Mediterranean and Asian worlds. These independent artisans created ornamentation with a distinctive verve and style.
4. Gold working began in approximately 1500 BC utilizing placer gold washed down from the Andes to the coastal plain. Much of this gold had a high silver or copper content. Initially, the goldsmiths became adept at hammering gold into sheets to make masks imbued with faces and diadems. On the next page is a picture of funerary mask of the Lord of Ucepe, a Moche leader from approximately 500 AD whose tomb was discovered 475 miles north of Lima, Peru in the base of an eroded mud-brick pyramid. Note the gold ear spoils.



5. Sican culture (predecessors to the Chimú) on the northern Peru coast had more abundant gold resources after 750 AD once gold mining was established. Gold work had high social prestige in Sican society which appreciated the high level of artistic and technical achievement of the smiths. By this time the goldsmiths were also accomplished in soldering and annealing the gold into complex ornaments that swayed and shimmered in the sun light—unlike any other ornamentation of the time, thus giving the wearers a god-like appearance. One Sican tomb contained 328 gold objects and a mantle made up of 2000 gold squares.
6. Gold working skills ultimately migrated north to Mexico by 1000 AD. There, as well as in the southern cultures, the objects had deep religious and secular significance and were loved for the talent displayed by the artists but not as wealth or money. When the Spanish conquerors melted down these ornaments and destroyed this 3000 year artistic heritage to mint coins for the crown the Pre-Columbian cultures were astonished. (For example, the ransom paid to Pizarro for the Aztec emperor Atahualpa yielded five tons of gold that was melted into ingots and shipped to the Spanish treasury).
7. Facial ornamentation was popular in Pre-Columbian society. Lip and nose plugs were exclusively used by men, but ear spoons (funnel shaped disks made of pottery, stone, jade, shells or gold) were worn by men and women. In fact, the aristocracy became known as *orejones* or “big ears” by the



Spanish because they wore such enormous, impressive earrings. Among the ancient Peruvians, the wearing of heavily decorated, coveted ear ornaments were a special honor and highly fashionable. The ceremonial piercing of ears was held at an early age and as the individual grew the earlobes were stretched as larger and larger objects were inserted into the ears.

8. It was believed that ear spools were worn as a means of protection against evil spirits and as symbols of the wearer's status. The exceptional craftsmanship of many of the gold ear spools indicate they were worn by Chimu or Moche royalty and buried with them in their tombs. Here are some other examples of the fine gold work done by the Chimu goldsmiths:



Orejones
A Moche gold mask



**Spondylus (spiny oyster) Shell Fishing Scene. Chimu-Lambayeque Valley
1000-1470 AD Emory University**

(Obtained through trade, this bright orange shell was so highly valued that one nobleman's sole occupation was to spread crushed shells as a path for the ruler—like the proverbial red carpet).

