

**Gold of the Gods:  
Treasures of the Americas and the Search for El Dorado**

Chloë Sayer

10.00 a.m. SESSION 1

South America and the Search for El Dorado

The Spanish Conquest of the Americas was driven by the search for gold and glory. Many of the golden treasures that the Spaniards found were melted down for bullion. Those that survive are works of sacred art — the technically sophisticated creations of important cultures.

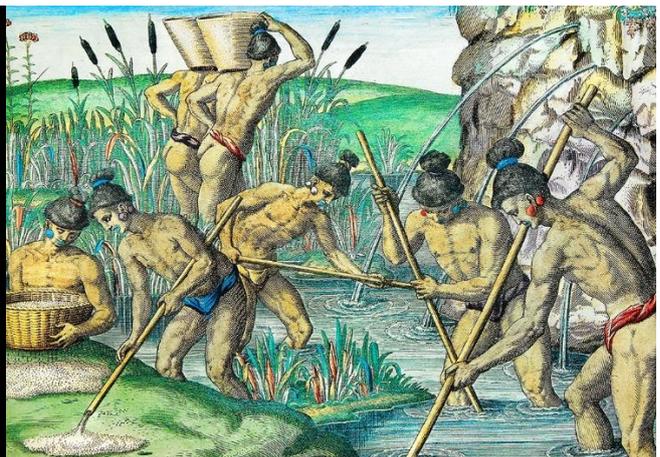
The ancient goldsmiths of Peru and Colombia produced some of the most spectacular treasures of South America. Adept at casting and hammering, they transformed this sacred metal into elaborate pendants and breastplates, ear-ornaments, musical instruments, flasks, human figures, funerary masks, and lifelike representations of birds and animals. Colour tones went from pale yellow to deepest red. These ritual objects were often destined for temples, burial sites, and places of offering. For most societies in South America, gold had a spiritual importance: its brilliance evoked the Sun — the golden disk that nourished the Earth.



Europeans, by contrast, saw gold as a commodity — the ultimate sign of wealth. Gold was the magnet that lured Spanish conquistadors deep into the heart of Peru and Colombia. The dream of El Dorado led many Europeans to risk their lives searching for 'the Golden One', initially thought to be a city of gold. Later tales referred to a person rather than a place: a king who each day covered his naked body with powdered gold and traversed a lake on a golden raft. The legend of El Dorado kept European explorers fascinated for over two centuries.

11.00 a.m. – 11.30 a.m

Coffee Break



11.30 a.m. – 12.30 a.m.

SESSION 2 - Mexico: Land of Gold

The Mixtecs were one of the major civilisations of pre-Hispanic Mexico. Greatly admired by their contemporaries, they were the foremost goldsmiths of North and Central America. Carvers of bone and stone, they also painted pictorial manuscripts of great beauty. These sacred screen-fold books offer invaluable information about religious ceremonies and court life.



**The Inca Ruler Atahualpa in his golden finery**

In 1519 Hernán Cortés and a small fighting force landed on the coast of Veracruz and clashed with the warlike Aztecs. Tenochtitlan, the shimmering Aztec capital, had an estimated population of 250,000 inhabitants. Built on a lake, it lay at the heart of a vast empire. Aztec creativity found expression in monumental stone sculptures, fine ceramics, featherwork and exquisite turquoise mosaics. The Aztecs were also great goldsmiths. Cortés sent Aztec goldwork to Europe, where it was admired by Albrecht Dürer. Profoundly moved, he wrote: "Also did I see the things from the New Golden Land. In all the days of my life, I have seen nothing which so rejoiced my heart as these things..."

Today the descendants of these great Mexican and South American cultures carry on many of the traditions of their ancestors. Ancient languages are still spoken. Craft skills are passed down from generation to generation. Christian teachings have fused with older beliefs and practices.

12.30 a.m. – 13.00 a.m.

[Questions , Answers & Close](#)

**Chloë Sayer**

**Author, Researcher, Lecturer**

Chloë Sayer is a freelance specialist in the art and culture of Latin America. She is a Research Associate with the Department for World Cultures at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and has made ethnographic collections for the British Museum in Mexico and Belize. She has worked on television documentaries about Mexico and Peru for the BBC and Channel 4 and has curated several exhibitions.

Her many books include MEXICAN TEXTILES (British Museum Press, 1990), THE ARTS AND CRAFTS OF MEXICO (Thames & Hudson, 1990), FOCUS ON AZTECS AND INCAS (Watts Books, 1995), THE INCAS (Wayland, 1998), FIESTA: DAYS OF THE DEAD AND OTHER MEXICAN FESTIVALS (British Museum Press, 2009), and MEXICO: CLOTHING & CULTURE (Royal Ontario Museum, 2015)

Chloë Sayer has been a lecturer with NADFAS since 2004. She has lectured for galleries, museums and cultural institutions in Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Mexico. She has toured Australia, giving lectures for ADFAS.