

## Russian Art Andrew Spira



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.

