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Reading Geometry: Iconography and Ideology of the Inca Coca Bag

Without a system of writing, the Incas (c. AD 1476-1534) presided over an empire of orality and performance that stretched along the Andes Mountains from southern Ecuador to northern Chile. In this world, visual immediacy and the thematic richness of visual objects assumed important roles in conveying social identity and imperial legitimacy. The Incas relied heavily on visual signals to impart information and organize their civilization. Textiles, among other crafted objects, were made to perform as visual emblems displaying ideas about imperial ideology and the authority embodied by individuals.

This paper explores the capability of textiles to carry embedded meaning through the study of specimens of the Inca coca bag at the Dallas Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Widespread throughout the Inca Empire and now housed in museum collections around the world, members of the Inca elite wore these elaborately woven bags to carry the leaves of the coca plant, a significant medicinal herb and sacrificial item. Although these textile containers served a mundane purpose, they were also symbolic- with the ability to impart ideas about Inca state ideology, the ritualism of Inca rulership, sacrifice, and commodity goods gained through long-distance trade.

Attending to the iconography of the coca bag and exploring the object's relationship to the social practice surrounding its use it will be possible to apprehend the message conveyed by this textile construction. Understanding the iconography of the coca bag will be guided by the object's relationship to its wearer and the culture of performance in which it was enacted. Through the use of documentary sources from the Colonial Period and contemporary anthropological studies, this paper explores how the coca bag acted and was enacted as a body ornament with the capability to communicate imperial ideas which secured its wearer as a *cuzco*, a center of imperial power within the provinces of the Inca Empire.