

THE PERUVIAN MUMMIES IN CUBA

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Cuba's tropical, humid, climate is an impediment to both natural mummification and preservation of previously mummified remains. Despite this there are intact mummies from pre-Columbian South America on the island. Each one bears an interesting story that the *Cuban Mummy Project* (founded in 2015) is aiming to reveal. Besides their individual stories, the acquisition history of each mummy is also fascinating, shedding insights on how 19th century collections were only complete, once they possessed a mummy from Ancient Peru, and how mummies helped to promote science in Cuba.

FIRST, GET AN EXPERT IN, THEN DO IT YOURSELF: PROMOTING SCIENCE BY PUBLIC UNWRAPPING

In 1976 the first Peruvian mummy was unwrapped in Cuba, in the Bellas Artes Museum in Havana. Under the guidance of the famous Peruvian archaeologist, Dr. Lumbreras, a team of Cuban and international experts attended the process, as the event was intended to teach Cuban experts, and lay people, about pre-Columbian burial rituals. After a long episode of constant exhibitions of this mummy all over Cuba, its whereabouts became long unknown. The *Cuban Mummy Project* was able to detect its current location and as the mummy had suffered from the journeys inside Cuba, preventative conservation work will be undertaken in order to preserve the mummy for the future.

Only three years after the first public unwrapping of an Andean mummy, in 1979, a second Peruvian mummy was unwrapped. This took place in the town of Trinidad, giving the mummy the name it has today; «Momia de Trinidad». This time, the unwrapping was done without foreign assistance, but again under presence of a huge audience who remember that «event» until today. Due to the limited technical options available at the time, further studies of the burial goods, such as the textiles and botanical remains, were postponed and are carried out recently, some 40 years later, under the auspices of the *Cuban Mummy Project*.

CHANCAY-TRINIDAD-SANTIAGO: THE DIPLOMATIC CARGO

The Museum of Sancti Spíritus preserves the aforementioned “Mummy from Trinidad”. The individual was excavated by Antonio Núñez Jiménez in the coastal area of what is today Central Peru. Not only an archaeologist, but the Cuban Ambassador to Peru in that time, he brought the mummy to Cuba, to enrich the collection of pre-Columbian funerary rituals and anthropology in his homeland by this specimen.

Despite being mostly skeletonized today, the mummy has preserved tattoos on each hand. When it was unwrapped, it did already lack its head, though the burial bundle was intact when opened. Therefore it was labelled the «warrior» by the first team of scientists investigating the individual in 1979. More details are to be discovered through current investigations.

PARACAS OR NOT PARACAS? DETERMINING A CULTURE BY THE MOST FAMOUS EXCAVATION

Sometimes, mummies wait in a museum to be investigated and their acquisition history is known, like in the case of one male and one female mummy in the Bacardí-Museum in Santiago de Cuba. However their initial, cultural, provenance is much more difficult to determine (Fig. 1). The two pre-Hispanic mummies were sold in 1925, by a Spanish merchant in Panamá. In the same year, the famous Paracas cemetery was excavated in Southern Peru, where mummy bundles were found in great abundance. So in 1973, at the time of their investigation, that coincidence led the investigator, Cuban anthropologist Rivero de la Calle, to assume that the mummies must have come from that cemetery, and since that time both mummies are labelled as the “Paracas mummies”. But their body position, light skin colour, lack of hair and other aspects dictate a provenance to the Chachapoya culture in Northern Peru. This result is somewhat confirmed by the type of trepanation the male mummy has, which absolutely rules out Paracas.



Fig. 1. Two Andean mummies are on display at the Bacardí-Museum in Santiago de Cuba. (Photo: Oscar Callard).

It remains interesting to see what the application of modern research methods can determine further.

THE PERUVIAN MINER THAT NEVER SAW PERU

Until 2015 the Anthropological Museum Montané of the University of Havana possessed a «Peruvian mummy» (Fig. 2). There is no record about the provenance, but since most ancient mummies in Cuba came from Peru, it was supposed this mummified male individual had been brought from there as well. His profession was deduced from his irregular burial position: supine on his back, that was thought to have been caused by an accident in a mine, that prevented any «proper burial» in the classical squatted position of pre-Columbian mummies.

The first macroscopic investigation by the IECIM's team, led not only to a cooperation with the Anthropological Museum Montané and the creation of the Cuban Mummy Project but, even better, it revealed that this mummy is definitely not from Ancient Peru!

Further investigation, like an aDNA analysis and historical research confirmed the suspicion and are bound to reveal interesting new facts about his origin and cause of death.



Fig. 2. The Museo Montané at the University of Havana, Cuba, exhibits the Mummy of “the Peruvian Miner”. (Photo: Armando Rangel).

SHRUNKEN HEADS: DIFFERENT PHASES OF A LONG LASTING RITUAL & OF TRADE

Head-shrinking, practiced by the Amazonian Jívaro tribes of Southern Ecuador and Northern Peru, has fascinated many researchers and collectors. Thus, unsurprisingly, such specimens can be found in Cuban collections too.

The earliest example in Cuba dates from around 1870-1880 and is now on display in the anthropological collection of the Museo Montané in Havana. It clearly demonstrates the second phase of the complete ritual when the cactus spines, used to close the mouth during the shrinking process, were replaced by strings (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. There are two shrunken heads in Cuba. The older one is exhibited in the Museo Montané at the University of Havana. (Photo: Anna-Maria Begerock).

The more recent specimen, exhibited at the Emilio Bacardí Museum in Santiago de Cuba, was probably made around 1930-1950. It bears cactus spines in the mouth but has colourful Toucan feathers in its ears as well as a feathered crown; decorations that are indicative of a late date and which were supposedly added to sell the specimen at a higher price (Fig. 4). If both specimens were made from human heads, is still to be investigated.



Fig. 4. The younger one of the two shrunken heads can be visited at the Bacardí-Museum in Santiago de Cuba. (Photo: Daniel Moeller).

“EL BRILLO DE LAS MOMIAS” (THE MUMMIES’ SHINE)

These mummies are an interpretation of the ancestor cult in South America by the Cuban artist Nancy Torres. Her three-dimensional compositions reflect the brutal profanation of once highly venerated ancestors, by the Spanish conquistadors – ripping open their bellies to get access to the assumed treasures inside the bundles.

Additionally, her artwork reflects the Cuban longing for an indigenous element of the Latin American culture, after the destruction in the Spanish conquest.

The complete exhibition was shown in Havana in 2016 and is now an itinerary exhibition in Peru. One of her mummies remained in Havana and will be exhibited in the Ethnological Museum after its reconstruction (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The artist Nancy Torres creates her own Peruvian Mummies. They were all on display in Havana in 2015. While the other mummies continue travelling the world, this one was bestowed to the Ethnological Museum in the Cuban capital. (Photo: Peter Jacobs).

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