**Inca Art Forms**

**Submitted by**[**Staff writer**](http://www.discover-peru.org/author/makimbo/)**|**

Inca art was practical. The Incas were an artistic people who used materials available to them in nature and blended them creating many artistic forms in utilitarian ways. Much of their artistic expression was used in everyday life and had a [religious meaning](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-religion/).  Because they did not know science they had to attach powers to natural phenomena worshiping natural resources such as water streams or rocks, animals and almost anything related to nature and the best way to worship was to incorporate their best artistic creations in their offerings to the gods. A good example of art in a tradition that has endured the passing of the years is the [Inti Raymi](http://www.discover-peru.org/inti-raymi/) or celebration of the Sun. In this celebration Inca descendants produce the most elaborate costumes in rich cotton textile and offer gifts to the Sun such as food and jewelry.

The Sun or Inti was the most important god in the [Inca empire](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-empire/) and since gold shone like the sun it was the metal that was used the most in religious ceremonies. Therefore they made vases and plates to serve food to the gods, jewelry for the nobility,  knifes known as [Tumis](http://www.discover-peru.org/tumi-knife-culture/) for sacrificing animals and performing surgery, they decorated their temples with sheets of gold and made altars of solid gold.

Inca art was inherited from [cultures that predated the Inca Empire](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca/) by thousands of years. They took what they thought was important and useful from them and perfected it adapting forms of art to their own needs and likes. The Inca people were skillful craftsmen who worked in [ayllus](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-society/) producing work for the empire. There were *ayllus* that specialized in certain type of art such as [pottery making](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-pottery/) or [weaving](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-textile-and-clothing/). Their production would be taken to all parts of the empire and distributed, like a [centralized economy](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-economy-society/). There were well specialized artisans working on art pieces such as jewelry and clothing for the nobility and the Sapa Inca. Such workers or artists were the *acllas* who were the Chosen Women, picked among the most beautiful young females in the empire.

Inca art gives us an understanding of how [the Incas](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) lived as they did not leave written records of their history. Everything we know about their lives have been passed on in oral form from generation to generation and from the interpretations of artifacts discovered by archeologist. Andean countries such as Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador have inherited these forms of art which is imbedded in [their culture](http://www.discover-peru.org/culture-peru/) and can be seen in their current arts and crafts usually sold in craft markets.

**Inca Architecture**

**Submitted by**[**Staff writer**](http://www.discover-peru.org/author/makimbo/)**|**

It is commonly questioned as to how the [Incas](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) were able to develop such an exquisite architecture without the use of the wheel and modern tools. Their buildings have withstood five centuries in an earthquake prone zone and provided the foundations of many current buildings.

Inca architecture was inherited from[pre-Inca civilizations](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca/). Archeological studies show that the [Incas](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) reproduced and updated many buildings, especially those in the [Middle Horizon period](http://www.discover-peru.org/wari-tiwanaku-lambayequ/). In newly conquered territories the Incas built administrative centers using pre-existing buildings and adding new elements, such as in the Sanctuary of Pachacamac located south of [Lima](http://www.discover-peru.org/lima/). The [Tiawanaku culture](http://www.discover-peru.org/wari-tiwanaku-lambayequ/) had the greatest influence in Inca architecture, the use of stone in their buildings was a legacy that the Incas continued. Tiawanaku flourished in the Altiplano of Peru and Bolivia and its development was centered around [Lake Titicaca](http://www.discover-peru.org/lake-titicaca/) in the present department of [Puno](http://www.discover-peru.org/puno-peru/), [Peru](http://www.discover-peru.org/).

One of the reasons Inca architecture was successful was the organization of [its society](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-architecture/) and labor. Through [ayllus and mita](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-economy-society/) labor or tribute they were able to organize their manpower in extraordinary numbers necessary to build such labor intensive monuments.  The strongest males were chosen and it was an honor to be part of the team as they were building temples dedicated to [Inca Gods.](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-religion/)

**Inca Architecture technique**

[The Incas](http://www.discover-peru.org/who-were-the-incas-where-did-the-incas-come-from/) were certainly skilled stonemasons. They used granite or limestone to build their cities, these materials were available locally. To cut the rocks they used stones, metal tools made of bronze or copper, pieces of wood and water. Using the natural fracture lines of the stones they used tools to crack them open introducing pieces of wood and then pouring water so that the wood would expand, as the crack becomes bigger they would insert a bigger piece of wood and repeat the process until the piece was completely separated. Next they needed to shape the stones which could have been rectangular or polygonal, which they did by carving and then polish them with sand. Each stone was carved to such precision as they had to fit perfectly with each other.

Archaeologists believe that a lot of planning took place before carving and placing the stones together. It was not so much a process of trial and error in fitting the stones but careful measuring and planning.

To transport the finished stones workers had to build up roads and ramps to the construction site. It is amazing how they transported 100 metric-ton stone some as far as 35 kilometers. Researchers believe that 1,800 men were required to drag such a big block using inclined planes, thick ropes, gravity and muscle power. It is also believed that they used wet clay or gravel to reduce friction. For instance the largest stone at Ollantaytambo weighs around 140,000 kilograms.

The building method used by Inca architecture was straightforward. They laid the larger stones first to build a strong foundation then they built up ramps around them to facilitate the placement of the smaller stones until they finished the wall.

**Inca buildings**

The most famous Inca architectural heritage is [Machu Picchu](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/machu-picchu-inca-culture-civilization/), it is considered the best example of its architecture. Other ruins include the Fortress of Sasahuaman, Coricancha Temple and Ollantaytambo among others.

The most repeated construction in Inca architecture is the rectangular shaped building with wooden beams and thatch as roof, this basic design was used in almost all buildings. Inca planners used this design to build their cities and towns. Four or more of these buildings were built around a central plaza forming a kancha, several kancha would make blocks. Many cities in Peru are built around this layout.

In the heart of [Cusco](http://www.discover-peru.org/cusco/) in a plaza called Huacapata the most important religious building, Coricancha or Temple of the Sun, was built. It was the religious center of the empire and was reserved for the Sapa Inca, his immediate family, priests and the chosen women to worship. Although it was meant to be a center for pilgrimage, people were not allowed to go inside.

Coricancha was a magnificent building, an architectural marvel. Its walls were covered with sheets of gold and silver. Gold was a sacred metal thought to be the sweat of the sun and the tears of the moon. Archaeologists think that Coricancha was serviced by a staff of four thousand. High priests and priestesses or acllas served the gods. These women were chosen for their beauty and worked in a secluded convent called the Accllahuaci. They served by cooking food for the gods, weaving fine clothes for the Sapa Inca and making daily offerings to the gods. Unfortunately the original temple was modified by the Spanish who built a church using the original walls of the temple. The gold and silver sheets covering the walls and all other objects were appropriated by the Spanish.

The Fortress of Sacsahuaman is an impressive construction that stood on the highest point of a steep-sided hill overlooking the city. The Inca’s engineering skills were tested in the building of this magnificent structure. Its zigzag walls were made of enormous stone blocks that weighed 90 to 120 tons each.

Similar walls but not as elaborate architectural achievement have been found in [Easter Island](http://http/www.chileculture.org/easter-island/), it is believed that migration to the Polynesian island was responsible for transferring the skill.

### [Inca art – Inca textile and clothing](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-textile-and-clothing/)

Ancient Andean weaving developed by [pre-Inca civilizations](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca/) and inherited and perfected by the Incas is considered as one of the greatest textile in the world and is compared to finest textile developed by the ancient Egyptians.The Incas used cotton, the wool of [alpacas, llamas](http://www.discover-peru.org/relatives-of-the-camel/) and the superior and rare wool of [vicuñas and guanacos](http://www.discover-peru.org/relatives-of-the-camel/). Clothing made of the wool of vicuñas and guanacos was exclusively for the Inca and the nobility.

In ancient Inca culture the development of the textile industry and trade had an important role in society and politics. Even though the Incas did not parallel the artistic development of some of its predecessors they did develop mass production which allowed its redistribution throughout the empire. [**More about Inca textile and clothing**](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-textile-and-clothing/)

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**Inca Pottery**

During the [Inca Empire](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) the production of pottery in the [Andes](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/geography/andes-mountain-range/) was an art already developed in the region for thousands of years. The best example of pottery produced before the days of the [Inca Empire](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) is found in the ceramic produced by the[Moche or Mochica culture](http://www.discover-peru.org/nasca-mochica-or-moche/) that thrived from 100 to 700 AD in the northern [Peruvian coast](http://www.discover-peru.org/peru-geography-coast/). The Moche produced large amounts of pottery aided by the use of molds to create large quantities of specific shapes. Their color pallet was mostly limited to red, black and white. They used anthropomorphic figures and animal faces and bodies to shape their ceramic. They were the only [pre-Inca culture](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca/) to incorporate realistic facial expressions and emotions in their pottery work, a characteristic that the Inca pottery  did not employ.

One characteristic of Inca pottery is that it did not portray the human form, unlike other cultures that thrived before them, instead they used geometric patterns and shapes and heads of animals. The production and the use of pottery during the [Inca Civilization](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) had two purposes, utilitarian and ceremonial.

Ceremonial pottery also known as *huaco* was of the best quality material and the most elaborate, it was made specifically for ceremonial purposes or rituals only, such as in burial grounds containing drinks and food that the dead would need for its journey. The finest pottery and ceramic was produced for religious ceremonies, they would contain the food offered to the [Inca gods](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-religion/) such as Inti or Sun.

Utilitarian pottery was produced for everyday use and was usually thicker and less elaborate. The most common Inca vessel was the [stirrup spout](http://www.discover-peru.org/pottery-mochica/) which is a bottle shaped vase intended for holding liquids with a long neck that forms the spout which usually serves as a handle. Inca effigy jars were also a popular utilitarian ceramic that was made in large quantities since they were casted from a mold, whereas the stirrup spouts were handmade and welded into the vessel.

**Inca Jewelry**

Most of the Inca gold jewelry and artifacts was looted by the [Spanish conquerors](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/conquest-and-colony/), melted and taken away to Spain. The largest part of the pieces shown in museums have been found by archaeologist in burial grounds. They show us to a great extent the meaning and use of jewelry in the[Inca civilization.](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/)

Metalwork was a skill inherited from [pre-Inca civilizations](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca/), the[Incas](http://www.discover-peru.org/category/history/history-inca-culture-civilization/) were not experts in metalwork but many conquered territories had skilled goldsmiths who were transferred to [Cusco](http://www.discover-peru.org/cusco/) and to other important cities in the empire. For instance Ichmas and [Chimus](http://www.discover-peru.org/chimu-chanchan-chincha/) produced earrings, bracelets, necklaces, rings, ritual Tumis and ceremonial artifacts. There were highly specialized goldsmiths working for the elite, according to cronist Cieza de Leon, most of them were brought from [Lambayeque](http://www.discover-peru.org/wari-tiwanaku-lambayequ/) in the coast to work in the capital, [Cusco](http://www.discover-peru.org/cusco/). During the [Inca Empire](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-jewelry/) gold was an abundant metal used to make artifacts and jewelry. The Incas believed that the gold shone like the sun and so to honor their main god, the Inti, they wore it and decorated their temples with it.

Gold jewelry was a measure of social status and to the proximity to god. The Sapa Inca, members of the royal family, priests and government authorities would wear jewelry on a daily basis. Commoners would wear it only in special occasions such as in religious ceremonies and special celebrations.

There were specialized Inca jewelry artists who used different types of material to create special pieces of jewelry. Among the most used materials are gold, silver, copper, wood, seeds, feathers, seashells, gemstones, fine textile and other material suitable for making jewelry.

The Sapa Inca and the nobility decorated their everyday dresses and sandals with gemstones and gold pieces. They wore gold earrings and the heavier the better, as their elongated the earlobes signified high status or nobility in society. Necklaces were popular among men and women alike, some of these pieces were very heavy as they contained a lot of gold. Bangles and bracelets were popular among women who decorated them with seeds, alpaca fibers, shells or gemstones.
The Nose ring made of Inca gold was an important piece of jewelry for the Sapa Inca who wore it during religious ceremonies and special celebrations. The ring was attached to the nose by pressure, there was no piercing. Another impressive piece of jewelry was the Sapa Inca gold crown known as the Mascipacha.

Shin and chest protectors were used by warriors as part of their armor. The use of copper or gold would identify the status of the warrior.

### [Inca Art – Inca Music](http://www.discover-peru.org/andean-inca-music/)

The Incas had two types of musical instruments, wind and percussion. String musical instruments were introduced by the Spanish and adapted to their music repertoire. Music reached all corners of the empire and all [social classes.](http://www.discover-peru.org/inca-society/) The Incas used one word “taqui” to describe dance, music and singing, though this word in Quechua means “song”. Their music was pentatonic; they based their music in the combination of  five notes re, fa, sol, la and do.