

Pre-Columbian Gold Eternal Allure

Leaving the classical eloquence of the National Theater at street level to descend, literally, into the stark 1970s' modernity of the Central Bank's pre-Columbian Gold Museum sees two contrasting yet compatible faces of San Jose. The determination to create the museum of priceless antiquities in the heart of the city meant digging down, with the structure evolving as an inverted pyramid beneath the Plaza de la Cultura. Inaugurated in 1985, the softly lit neutral-tone spaces showcasing the country's gold artefacts suggest a vault-like impregnably saved from oppressiveness by interior gardens and the indulgently expansive spiral staircase that sweeps the eye down three floors to the heart of the collection, the pieces are exquisite.

Reaching Costa Rica around 500 A.D., the art of gold crafting initially reflected early designs imported from the south: Colombia and Peru. By adapting styles from their native jade, stone and ceramic working, gold metallurgists established a dynamically progressive style that was only ultimately interrupted with the European invasion. Pendants with articulated extensions gleaming human form pendants with movable bird mask heads are unique to Costa Rica, as are the tiny square plaques dangling like some ancient mobiles before half obscured shamanic figures. These early people knew the value of gold. Pieces were crafted mostly for trade between high ranking healers and chieftains, engraved with deep symbolism anthropologists are still struggling to decipher.

The beautifully proportioned and often humorously contrived artefacts indicate a complex, highly skilled, hierarchical society capable of producing exquisitely carved, repoussé pectorals for warriors and intricate symbols of prestige and rank for clan shamans. The alligator, harpy eagle or morphed land with water creatures unified the two environments vital to their existence. And how can one resist the minute herd of golden peccaries that must have adorned some.