



Lake Guatavita, showing the results of Antonio de Sepúlveda's attempt to cut through the enclosing rock and thus drain the lake. Begun in the 1580s, the project employed some 8,000 Indian laborers but was eventually abandoned. From an 1810 engraving.

EL DORADO continued from p. 7

The Legend of El Dorado

The story of this extraordinary assemblage is that of the New World before the coming of the Conquistador, and of the explorations, discoveries, and cultural/technological transmutations that were brought about by the coming of the Europeans.

In 1539, more than three decades after coming to Colombia, the Spaniards began to hear stories of a certain "golden man," or *El Dorado*, and the extraordinary rituals which included his throwing vast quantities of gold offerings into Guatavita, a sacred lake located not many miles northeast of what is today Colombia's capital city of Bogotá.

The most authoritative early account of *El Dorado* is that of the chronicler Juan Rodríguez Freyle (1636):

The first journey [the new Indian ruler] had to make was to . . . Guatavita, to make offerings and sacrifices to the demon which they worshipped as their god and lord . . . The lake was large and deep, so that a ship with high sides could sail on it, all loaded with

Indians pour molten gold down the throat of one Spanish captive while butchering another. From *History of the New World*, by Girolamo Benzoni (1541-56).



Text continued on page 24

Tolima pectoral. Made of cast gold. Height 17.7cm (7 in.). From Museo del Oro.



Artist Theodor de Bry's
conception of gold casting
in the New World.
From *Historia
Americanae* (1590).





Overleaf, p. 22: Lime flask decorated with female figures in relief. Made of cast tumbaga (copper-gold alloy). Height 28cm (11 in.). Museo de América, Madrid. From the Treasure of the Quimbayas, discovered in 1891 and given to the queen of Spain by the government of Colombia.

Page 23: Darien pectoral, made of cast gold. Height 11.6cm (4-9/16 in.). From Museo del Oro. The Darien style is now believed to have been a composite of many regional styles. Similar pectorals have also been found in Panama, Costa Rica, and Yucatan.





...men and women dressed in fine plumes, golden plaques, and crowns...

They stripped the heir to his skin, and anointed him with a sticky earth on which they placed gold dust so that he was completely covered with this metal. They placed him on the raft, on which he remained motionless, and at his feet they placed a great heap of gold and emeralds for him to offer to his god. On the raft with him went four...chiefs, decked in plumes, crowns, bracelets, pendants and ear rings all of gold...The gilded Indian then made his offering, throwing out all the pile of gold into the middle of the lake, and the [four] chiefs...did the same...After this,...the shouting began again, with pipes, flutes, and large teams of singers and dancers. With this ceremony the new ruler was received, and was recognized as lord and king. From this ceremony came the celebrated name of El Dorado, which has cost so many lives.

A few years before the publication of Freyle's account, officials reported from Bogota: *there is definite information that the lake bed contains great riches in gold, and, that although many different persons have several times tried to drain the said lake, none has succeeded. We, at our own expense and risk, with our own persons, industry, and effort, wish to drain it.*

Thus began a frustrating, disappointing series of efforts to harvest riches from the lake's bottom. "Having robbed the living Indians of most of their gold," wryly noted one historian, "it was time to attack the richest treasure of all."

About 1545 Hernán Pérez de Quesada employed a battalion of laborers to lower the lake's level by literally bailing it out. After three months of back-breaking effort the lake's level was down by three meters (about 10 feet) and Guatavita had grudgingly yielded a mere 3,000-4,000 pesos worth of gold. A generation later, Antonio de Sepúlveda attempted, with the help of 8,000 Indians, to dig through the lake's rocky rim. This brought about an additional drop of 20 meters in the lake level before the steep walls of the cut collapsed, killing many workers and bringing an end to the project. Sepúlveda's costly efforts resulted in the discovery of 12,000 pesos worth of treasure—a far cry from the millions alleged to lie beneath Guatavita's waters.

Little more was done about draining Guatavita until the 1820s, when work was resumed in deepening the cut begun more than two centuries earlier by Sepúlveda. But this, too, came to an end as landslides along the steep canal walls persisted. In 1899 interest was again revived in exposing the lake bottom. This time the scheme was to construct a tunnel under the lake and come up through its floor. The plan worked—for a time. The water quickly ran out,

revealing a bottom of slime and mud, several feet thick. In a few days, under the equatorial sun, the mud baked to the consistency of brick. The dried mud also sealed up the sluices and the tunnel, and soon the lake again filled with water to its former level.

In 1911 a group of investors calling themselves Contractors Ltd. hoped to work a steam shovel to the lake's center. "There will be no doubt when it is reached," they assured prospective shareholders, "for gold dust and nuggets will certainly be found." But the firm's £15,000 capital was hardly enough to see the project through and the enterprise terminated in bankruptcy.

Following Contractors Ltd.'s demise in 1929, other expeditions tried their luck, using every mechanical means from drags to airlifts. With each, Guatavita continued to yield a tantalizingly few objects of gold, but the lake's center remained essentially untouched. The final chapter in this 400-year quest was the establishment by the Colombian government in 1965 of legal protection for Guatavita as part of the nation's cultural and historical heritage.

Will the full story of El Dorado and the Guatavita treasure ever be known or, like the treasure of Mexico's Sierra Madre, North America's Lost Dutchman Mine, and other troves, real and fanciful, around the world, will it merely persist as an ambiguous half-fact, half-legend to intrigue the imagination?

Though the tale of El Dorado and Guatavita will stir the pulse of anyone adventurous, the substantive story of Colombia's golden treasures and the one of principal interest to historians and archeologists, is that of existing artworks, the greatest number of which (26,000) are today part of the collection of Bogota's Museo del Oro. It is this collection—gathered from every part of Colombia's gold-working regions—that provides the bulk of the 500 pieces coming to Field Museum.

Though confined to a strip of the Cordillera about the size of the state of California, Colombia's gold-producing tribes were separate and distinct groups, to the degree that their languages were, in most cases, mutually unintelligible. Their customs, religious practices, and—as we may expect—art forms and styles were also highly individual.

Notable among these styles were the

Available at the Museum Shop is the strikingly beautiful Gold of El Dorado, jointly published by the American Museum of Natural History and Harry N. Abrams. The 11 1/2-by-16-inch volume carries 28 four-color illustrations of artifacts to be seen in the show. \$9.95, with 10% discount for Members.

Tairona of the far northern coastal region; Sinú, midway between present-day Panama and Venezuela; Quimbaya and Muisca, of the central Cordillera; Calima, Tolima, Popayán, Tierradentro, and San Agustín, somewhat further south; and Tumaco and Nariño, whose regions extend into Ecuador.

The visitor to "Gold of El Dorado: The Heritage of Colombia" will have the opportunity to study at close hand the intricate goldwork of the native Colombian tribes, to marvel at their sophisticated artistry, and the technologically advanced methods that were employed to produce them.

The presentation of the exhibit at Field Museum is under the direction of Michael Moseley, associate curator of Middle and South American archeology and ethnology, assisted by Robert Feldman, research archeologist. The exhibit designer is David Edquist. The U.S. tour is sponsored by Chemical Bank, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, and has been organized by the American Museum of Natural History. Further support for presentation of the exhibit at Field Museum has been provided by a grant from the Robert R. McCormick Charitable Trust. □

*Jaguar of cast gold,
in the Sinú style.
From Museo del Oro.
Length 12.1cm (4 3/4 in.).*





Diadem. Made of cut and hammered gold; Early Calima style. Height 27cm (10⁵/₈ in.). From Museo del Oro. The Early Calima style, coinciding with the time of Christ, is typified by large hammered ornaments.



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