INTERVIEWS

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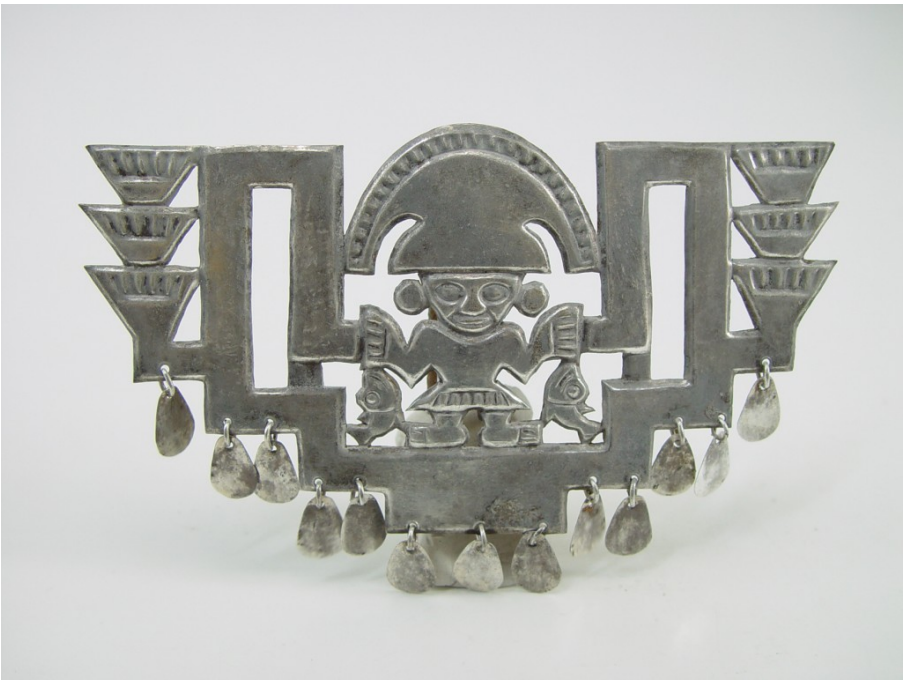
A Dazzling Display of Peruvian Silver in Canada

written by **James Wiener**



This fall the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), in Vancouver, Canada, dazzles visitors with the sparkle and brilliance of Peruvian silver. *Luminescence: The Silver of Perú*, on display until December 16, 2012, explores the impact of this precious metal across the centuries, underscoring its impact on art, culture, and religion. While widely known as a source of gold for Spanish *conquistadores*, Peru has long been the site of intensive silver mining and production for millennia. Today, Peru remains the world's largest producer of silver.

In this interview, James Blake Wiener of the Ancient History Encyclopedia speaks with Dr. Anthony Shelton, Director and Curator of the Museum of Anthropology, about silver's enduring presence in Peruvian culture in addition to the challenges of creating exhibition that encompasses the artistic spectrum.

JW: Dr. Anthony Shelton, thank you so much for allowing me to interview you on behalf of the Ancient History Encyclopedia. Your interview is our first to encompass a Peruvian topic, the first to cover an exhibition in Canada, and the first I have conducted with an anthropologist. Needless to say, I am very excited to have caught up with you in order to discuss an exhibition that transcends barriers and illuminates the nuances of a culture!

I wanted to begin by asking you how this exhibition came into being and what was its genesis? If I am not mistaken, it took nearly three years for you and the Museum of Anthropology to organize and assemble all the items in *Luminescence: The Silver of Perú*. Is this the type of show that you have always wanted to curate?

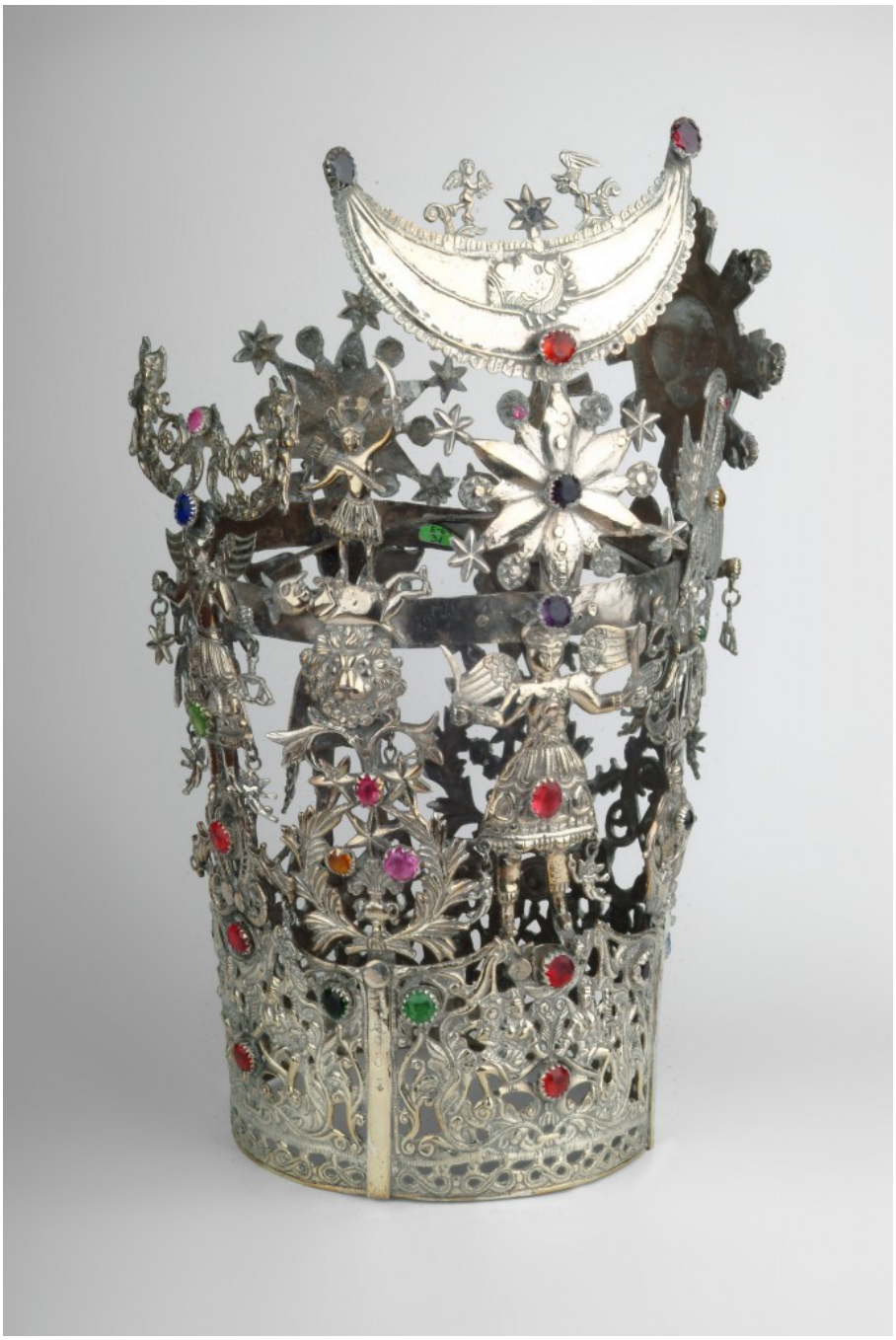
AS: The UBC Museum of Anthropology (MOA) was invited by the Patronata Plata del Peru and Pan-American Silver Corp. in 2010, to curate an exhibition on Peruvian silverwork. Two thoughts immediately came to mind; the first was that any such exhibition would need to be at least of an equal standard to the various Peruvian gold exhibits that during the last few years have been touring major world museums; and secondly, the exhibition would need an innovative and unique approach to provide new perspectives on the historical and cultural significance of Andean silver. As I have said many times, I am not content with the preference of many museums and galleries to stick to safe and well-tried and tested exhibition genres, and UBC MOA, as a teaching and research institution, as well as a public museum, with a mandate to experiment critically and develop new genres of exhibitions, seemed to me an ideal vehicle to research, develop and present a more original interpretive strategy on silver. I must also admit that these kinds of challenges, to experiment and develop new genres of museum exhibitions capable of challenging preconceived ideas about aspects of the world, are a passion for me.

The work I undertook with colleagues in Peru and at MOA on the *Luminescence* project was extremely exciting and rewarding in two ways; it contributed to re-thinking some of the broader issues on the purposes and intellectual direction of museums and the relationship between museums and the exhibitions they curate, as well as providing an opportunity to better understand the world of pre-Columbian America. My interpretive approach to Andean silver was

markedly influenced by work I had done while a curator at the British Museum in the 1980s. There, my first major gallery exhibition was on tin mining in Bolivia and associated rituals and beliefs around Supay, the supernatural 'owner' of the earth's mineral riches. While at the British Museum, I also undertook research on Aztec (1428-1521 CE) and Mixtec (c. 900-1521 CE) turquoise mosaics which lead me to focus on the symbolic meaning of raw minerals, rocks, and shell, their acquisition and their social circulation and cultural associations, rather than just the iconography of worked artifacts and their related histories. I adopted this earlier approach on what I call 'material symbols' to Andean silver.

JW: The exhibition has received praise and attention from the Canadian and international press. I wanted to get your own thoughts, however, on what you believe is this exhibition's importance to both Canada and Peru? Additionally, what makes this groundbreaking exhibition so different from others?

AS: Instead of presenting Peruvian silver historically, by examining the development of metallurgical techniques or the implications of its production process and use on the nature of hierarchical societies, or aesthetically, as ancient treasures for example, *Luminescence* focuses on the metal's reflective qualities and the significance and importance of light in pre-Columbian and successive Andean civilizations and societies. I first noticed the popularity of reflective materials and surfaces in contemporary Peruvian culture. Rhinestone encrustations, mirrors, and the silver and gold thread used in embroidery on dance costumes used in Carnival or Saint's day celebrations; gowns made to adorn sacred images, and silver, gold and shiny plastic and paper decorations, and the profusion of reflective surfaces and the lighting effects in church decoration, all drew my attention.



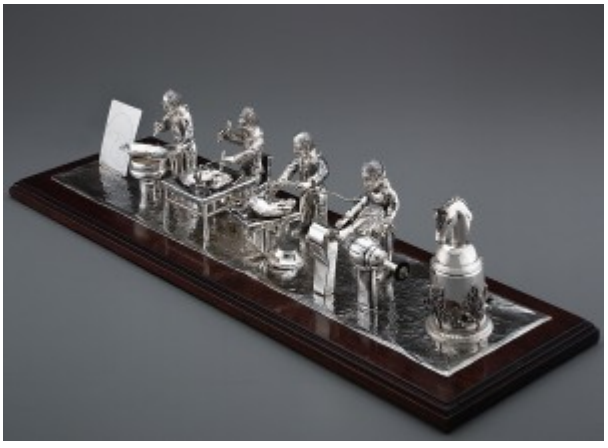
With this in mind, I reread historical sources on pre-Columbian civilizations, linguistic studies of Quechua and Aymara language terms, 20th century ethnographies, while also carefully examining colonial painting techniques, in search of a better understanding of the way Andean civilizations understood light, materials and metallic luminescence. The exhibition begins with a spectacular section on pre-Columbian silverwork from the Nazca (c. 400 BCE-600 CE) period through to the Inca (1438-1533 CE). This part of the gallery in which, as elsewhere, each exhibit is sensitively mounted, displays silver objects against white backgrounds, each work picked out by carefully focused lighting devices to make them shine and glow. I must add that without the work of our designers and lighting wizards, David Cunningham and Skooker Broom, the exhibition would have been far less effective!

In the next two sections of the exhibition, colonial and 19th century Independence period silver, paintings, sculpture and indigenous textiles and regalia are displayed against deep blue walls and backgrounds, while the final section of the exhibit, on contemporary silver, works are displayed in a white cube. Well-focused lighting and subtle variations were crucial throughout all sections of the exhibition and are an important element in its success. The pre-Columbian association of luminosity with divinity or supernatural beings and religiously charged objects, goes through many different transformations and meanings, but can be seen to be a basic cornerstone of an original Andean way of understanding and representing the world which has endured for at least 2,500 years. I would hope the exhibition and the catalogue essays suggest new avenues of

research on Andean aesthetics, in pre-Columbian, colonial and contemporary popular culture, and in the process lead to a better understanding of these complex "pluri-cultural" nations. Exhibitions on Latin America and on abstract themes–such as light–are seldom attempted in most museums, despite, in the case of Canada, the country's growing Latin American population. MOA and our partners wanted to pay homage to the unique and considerable cultural and artistic achievements of the Andean civilizations, which have contributed to our shared humanity.

JW: With nearly 3,000 years of mining in Peru, it is not surprising that silver has cast such a powerful spell on the collective imagination of the Peruvian people. The ancient peoples of Peru revered gold and silver, but silver was associated with mystery, femininity, and the celestial powers of the moon. Nevertheless, silver was associated with the Inca god of death, Supay. Could you tell our users a little bit more about this deity and why your exhibition begins and ends with his ominous presence?

AS: It has been said by my colleague, Dr. Nuno Porto, that the exhibition might be read in two ways depending on whether the visitor begins at the gallery's main entrance or enters via the back exit. On entering the major entrance to the Audain Gallery, the exhibition begins with a selection of pre-Columbian silverwork including Chimu silver tunics, crowns, diadems and headdresses, symbolic instruments, jewelry and containers used for offerings and symbolic exchanges of drinks. It juxtaposes Inca (1438-1533 CE) and Chimu (c. 1100-1450 CE) ideas around the relation between silver and its lunar associations, in addition to expressions of authority and power. It proceeds to demonstrate the persistence of luminescence throughout the colonial period and particularly during the **Andean Baroque** by focusing on Catholic images and church decoration and pinpoints a major re-articulation of styles and themes beginning from Independence, in 1821, to the end of the twentieth century.



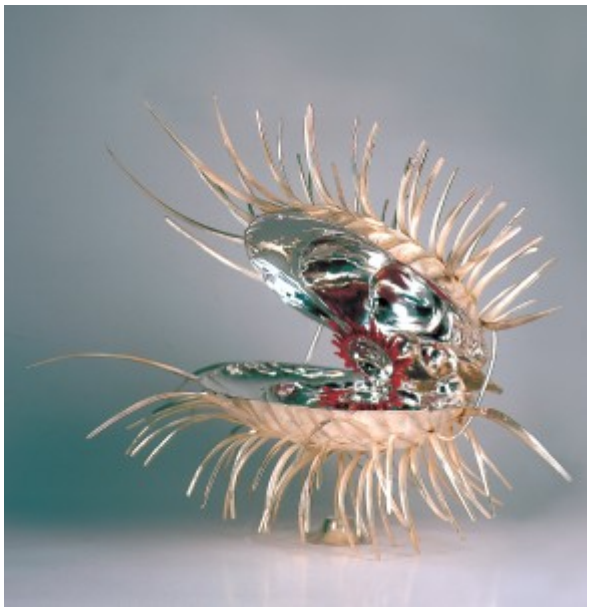
During this period motives were refocused away from European themes to the indigenous flora and fauna of the American continent–pomanders, for example, took on the exotic shapes of pineapples, armadillos, and a native species of deer. At the same time there was a romanticization of the Inca period and new regalia was made and decorated with silver to symbolize local governmental authorities, religious devotions–such as altars, processional *tableaux vivants*, and Milagros–and ceremonial dance staffs, crowns, musical instruments, and whips, which reused images from the

past. The final section of the exhibition suggests that past cultural expressions, shown elsewhere in the gallery, continue to haunt the work of current artists; Jorge Alfredo Pérez Gutiérrez's surrealist inspired "Anatomy of an Angel" (2009) echoes the 17th and 18th century silver angels shown elsewhere in the gallery, while Richard Mamani and Hugo Champi's "Madre Spondylus" (2002), recount Moche (c. 100-800 CE) and Chimu (1100-1450 CE) marine and lunar symbolism, where the clam was held to be an important sea deity. Read in this way, the exhibition provides a "broad history of ideas" approach to different concepts around luminescence at specific historical periods.

However, the visitor entering by the exit, follows a corridor whose walls are covered by projections of the **Diablada** and other dances, above which are hung fourteen horned Carnival masks representing Supay, the diabolical owner of the earth's mineral riches, still acknowledged through offerings and respected by miners all over the southern Andes. Seen from this perspective the exhibition provides an introduction to the culture of insecurity that characterizes the miners' past and present lives, a sociology if you like, which retraces the boom and bust periods of mining and recounts visual stories of resistance to colonial rule.

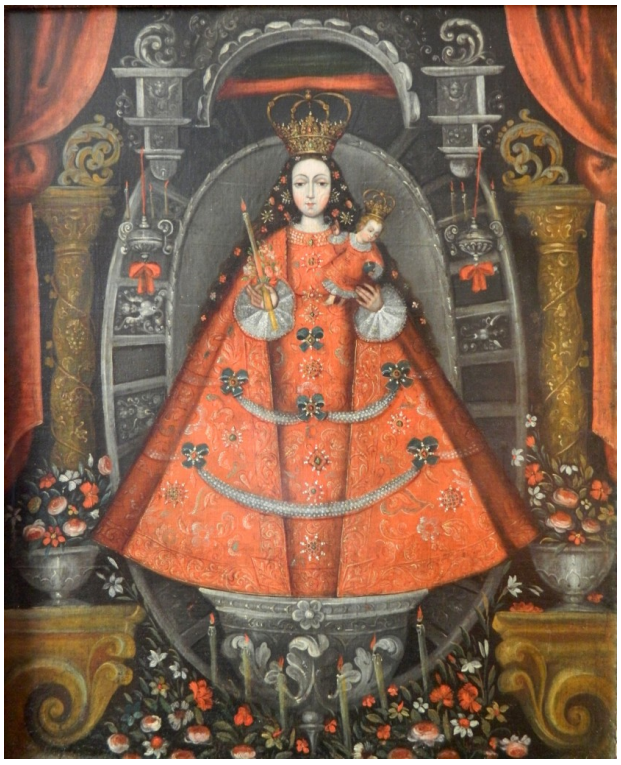
Supay, in pre-Hispanic thought, was a terrestrial deity who the Spanish associated with the Devil. In the early sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries based in the town of Juli on Lake Titicaca introduced a dramatic dance enactment intended to visualize the "Seven Deadly Sins," which associated each of them with a "denizen" or inhabitant of Hell. Not surprisingly, Supay was conceptually fused with the Devil. While the drama was intended by the missionaries to be a warning and a lesson of the dangers of idolatry and non-Christian values and beliefs, it inadvertently kept alive the indigenous memory of Supay. These parallel but related belief systems coexist even in the present. Altars with carved images of Supay, sometimes seated next to his wife, were erected at the entrance to mine shafts and tunnels, where miners would make offerings to solicit his help in finding rich veins of metal and protecting to them while they worked deep underground. If Supay was offended he could hide mineral deposits or have snakes remove them from one mountain to another, sending sickness or death to the miner.

The exhibition includes a large photograph of a mural depicting Hell from the Church of St. John (San Juan), in Huari. Painted by Tadeo Escalante in 1802, the mural was intended as a graphic moral lesson of the consequences of transgression from the Christian faith. However, if looked at closely, the triumphant Devil in the top centre of the painting, not surprisingly perhaps, bears close resemblance to Supay. Moreover, the myriad of souls undergoing punishment for their evil lives are not the darker skinned indigenous populations, mestizos or creoles who the warning was probably intended for, but white Europeans including one dressed



as a bishop! For comparison, next to the scene from Huari, is a small textile woven by Damian Flores, from the Quechua village of Candelaria, Bolivia, which the Museum purchased earlier this year. In the centre of the weaving is a depiction of Supay with knife like limbs, surrounded by monstrous beings and serpents who were said to have once inhabited the mountain of Potosi, where some of the richest silver mines in the world were at one time located. The association between metals and Supay remains strong in the consciousness of many Andean communities dependent on mining and beliefs, and practices around him are an essential part of the story about silver in the Andes.

JW: As you amassed and prioritized these spectacular treasures from public and private collections, was there an object or set of objects, which best epitomized the exhibition's focus? If so, could you please elaborate? With 140 objects ranging from ancient tunics and colonial oil paintings to modern works of art, I would imagine that it would be difficult to select only one!



AS: Because of my earlier interests, at first I could not help but focus on the pre-Columbian periods, particularly the Chimu civilization (c. 1100-1450 CE), which was eventually conquered and absorbed together with their highly developed metallurgical traditions into the Inca Empire. The two silver tunics are perhaps the most spectacular surviving expression of the reflective qualities of silver known. However, Chimu nose ornaments contain another fragment of this ideology. The central figure wears a crescent shaped helmet and carries fish in each hand, clearly expressing the relationship between the moon and the tides and its effects on the rich fisheries and the impact of *El Niño* and *La Niña* on agricultural production. The power and agency of the Moon deity is therefore clearly embodied by the priest or other authority that once owned this piece. The crescent moon is evoked again in the shape of some of the gorgeous silver pectorals,

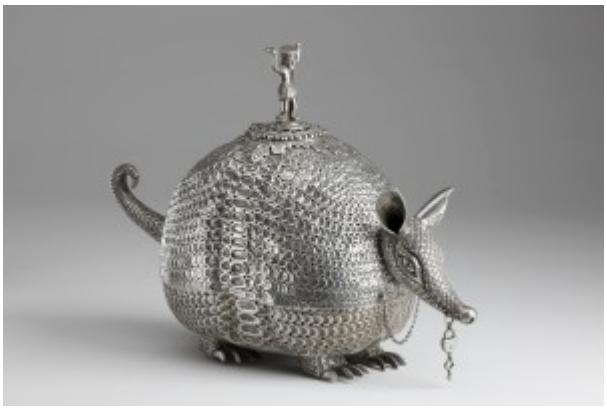
which are also displayed, one of which has decoration of the sea diving birds. Sea birds are reiterated again on the designs of silver diadems and bowls, as well as, in one case, the octopus. This lunar-marine based ideology was different from that of the Inca, and was important to acknowledge.

The survival of a light-based aesthetic in the Cuzco School of painting was for me the most exciting revelation that emerged from the research on the exhibition. The use of silver, gold foil, the depictions of pearls and the luminescent qualities in the richly made lace, which looks so much like silver filigree, clearly demonstrate a strong aesthetic sensibility based on the continuing appreciation of light, and particularly the association between luminescence and divinity. There was surprise from some lenders at our request to incorporate paintings into the exhibition, but they were crucial to tracing the transmission and manifestation of luminescent aesthetics into the colonial period. If I had to select one piece, which was especially remarkable, not an easy task, it would be the wonderfully executed necklace from which hang nine silver hummingbirds. Although the hummingbirds were made during the pre-Hispanic period, they were attached to the necklace after the Spanish Invasion and therefore mark a pivotal point in the violent tilting of the pre-Columbian world into a global economy.

JW: At the moment, it seems that Peru and Peruvian culture is *en vogue*. Running concurrent with your exhibition is one on the ancient Wari civilization at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the United States and another featuring priceless treasures from the city of Chavín de Huantar at the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, Switzerland.

What do you hope visitors to Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology take away with them once they have left the exhibition?

AS: Revelation! An appreciation of the persistence of earlier historical periods on later epochs; the inventiveness and ingenuity of human thought in assembling, transferring and reassembling varied elements, compositions, styles, and themes with different meanings for distinct goals at different times and in different regions; the legacy of the creative fulcrum resulting from the piling up of historical and different cultural references, even the survival of forms now empty of all meaning whatsoever, not only in the worlds in which we live, but in those that preceded us and which were successively appropriated; the opportunity to marvel at exquisite craftsmanship and encounter the wonder of unfamiliar artistic and technological achievements in silver working, painting, the creation of ceremonial regalia, religious and folk art, and performative traditions. Moreover, I hope that visitors have had the possibility to gain an understanding of the beguiling ingenuity behind the successive manipulations of these objects, activities and



categories for different political, religious or social projects, at determinate periods of history.

Luminescence and the discussions it has provoked in its final weeks of life, have suggested a follow-up exhibition that might view the Andes as a kaleidoscope of interweaving and shifting cultural forms and identities that express themselves through all the senses, sight, taste, smell, touch and hearing; an exhibition, which might prefigure a wider global creolization–an infinitely more vigorous and optimistic view of globalization than the one that warns of cultural homogenization and domination–and the attendant ills of standardization, regulation, growth of protocols, and the creep of spectacle intended to dull our senses.

It seems to me, that museums increasingly take their identity from the exhibitions they curate or host. These creative products of museum work need to be more carefully reviewed and interrogated, not only to evaluate their public reception or to refine the procedures and logistics in order to optimize their implementation–we do this anyway–but intellectually to ascertain their implications for their institution's development in the future. *Luminescence* has accomplished this interrogation; it has drawn our attention to the complexity and prevalence of creolization and suggested the focus on creolization as a provocative term to help develop new exhibition models. It has moved me at least, and I hope others, in the way we think about public programs and museums in ways that I could not have anticipated in the three years it took to develop this project.

JW: I thank you so much for your time, consideration, and creativity, Dr. Shelton! Yours is a gorgeous exhibition that enriches our understanding of material and cultural history. We look forward to your next show in near future and thank you for sharing your expertise.

AS: Thank you so much, James!

Museum of Anthropology–Photographic Credits of *Luminescence: The Silver of Perú*:

Photo 1: Pre-Columbian Body Ornament, Larco Museum, Peru.

Photo 2: Silver Dance Crown, Vivian and Jaime Liébana Collection, Lima, Peru.

Photo 3: Angel Guillen, *Artesanos orfebres (Silversmiths)*, 1998, Patronato Plata del Peru Collection, Peru.

Photo 4: Richard Mamani, Hugo Champi, *Madre spondylus*, 2002, Patronato Plata del Peru Collection, Peru.

Photo 5: La Virgin de Copacabana, Barbosa-Stern Collection, Peru.

Photo 6: Silver Armadillo Incense Burner c. 1820, Barbosa-Stern Collection, Peru.

*Luminescence: The Silver of Perú will soon move to the **University of Toronto Art Centre**, in Toronto, Canada, and remain on display from January 15 until March 9, 2013. The Luminescence: The Silver of Perú exhibition catalogue is approximately 100 pages and includes color images with descriptions in English and Spanish. Edited by Anthony Shelton with special contributors included; Anthony Shelton, Geoff Burns, Roque Benavides, Carole Fraresso, Ulla Holmquist and Carlos Elera. It can be purchased at the **MOA Shop** for $29.95 CAD.*

Dr. Anthony Shelton has 24 years of teaching, curatorial, and management experience. He earned his PhD at Oxford University and has since then worked extensively in Europe and North America. He has taught museology at the Universities of East Anglia and Sussex, and University College London. Shelton held curatorial and management positions: the British Museum (curator); Royal Pavillion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton (curator and manager); and the Horniman Museum in London (curator and manager). At Sussex he developed an MA program in museology, and at Brighton and the Horniman he promoted interdisciplinary activities with both academic and local communities. He is currently a professor at the University of British Columbia and the Director of the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada.

James Blake Wiener is a Director and the Public Relations Manager of the Ancient History Encyclopedia, providing a continuous listing of must-read articles, exciting museum exhibitions, and interviews with experts in the field. Trained as a historian and researcher, and previously a professor of history, James is also a freelance writer who is keenly interested in cross-cultural exchange. Committed to fostering increased awareness of the ancient world, James welcomes you to the Ancient History Encyclopedia and hopes that you find his news releases and interviews to be "illuminating."

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by James Wiener

James Blake Wiener is the Communications Director at Ancient History Encyclopedia. Trained as a historian and researcher, and previously a professor, James is chiefly interested in cross-cultural exchange, world history, and international relations. Aside from his work at AHE, James is an avid Arabist, devotee of romance languages (French, Portuguese, and Spanish), reggaetoñero, and fan of ice hockey.

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