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An Architectural “Model” and the Reclaiming of Indigenous Knowledge: Exploring the Meaning and Value of La Tolita-Tumaco’s Built Environment

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An Architectural “Model” and the Reclaiming of Indigenous Knowledge: Exploring the Meaning and Value of La Tolita-Tumaco’s Built Environment

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by

Kevin Torres-Spicer

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

An Architectural “Model” and the Reclaiming of Indigenous Knowledge:
Exploring the Meaning and Value of La Tolita-Tumaco’s Built Environment

by

Kevin Torres-Spicer
Master of Arts in Art History
University of California, Los Angeles, 2023
Professor Stella Elise Nair, Chair

Objects belonging to past Indigenous cultures often lack provenance information and contextual details, like the La Tolita-Tumaco culture’s “architectural model” I analyze, making it difficult to deduce what they represent, how they were used, or the purpose of their creation. These objects are frequently overlooked, dismissed, and/or continue to be hastily classified as ritualistic, ceremonial, religious, or funerary by default, solely based on their Indigenous origin, echoing colonial biases.

In this thesis, I employ Indigenous theory and methods in art history to engage and learn from the object as an extension of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture. I demonstrate how objects from past Indigenous cultures can provide crucial insights through a visual and material analysis. This research not only emphasizes the critical role of these “architectural models” in furthering our understanding of Ecuadorian art histories but also the importance of Indigenous objects and

topics research in the field of art history and also challenges conventional notions of “models” and “architecture.”

The thesis of Kevin Torres-Spicer is approved.

Thiago Sevilhano Puglieri

Glenn Wharton

Stella Elise Nair, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

Dedication

Above all, I dedicate this research to all the marginalized, underrepresented, oppressed, neglected, abused, silenced, and invisiblized, primarily Indigenous and Diaspora communities around the world, especially to those in my home country of Ecuador, who not only continue to stand their ground and fight every day for survival, recognition, the return of their ancestral lands and cultural heritage, but also a fair, equitable, and inclusive treatment within and outside academia, to those despite these circumstances safeguard, disseminate, and keep their knowledge and traditions alive.

Secondly, I dedicate this thesis to all those who have been told "no," "you can't do it," or "you do not have what it takes," I would like to say: Yes, you can do it, and you have what it takes. Also, I dedicate this thesis to all those who, like me, identify as working-class LGBTQ(IA+) immigrants, first-generation transfer students with English as their second language, or any combination of these.

Further, I would like to thank and dedicate this thesis to all who made this accomplishment possible. My family, especially my parents, for believing in me, encouraging me, and allowing me to pursue my dreams and passions despite our upbringing based on strict social expectations. My teachers at Gladstone High School in Covina, CA, for motivating me. Professor Lori Rusch from Citrus Community College for guiding and paving the path of art history for me. Dr. Karlyn Griffith for pushing me to challenge myself and continue to grow as a scholar. To my internship mentors and supervisors Lauren Weiss-Bricker, Selene Preciado, Julie Butash, Mary

MacNaughton, Donna Williams, Laura Llewellyn, Ellen Pearlstein, Chela Metzger, Amber Kerr, and Gwen Manthey for supporting me throughout the years. I also dedicate this research with immense gratitude to Mark Castro, who inspired and empowered me to pursue a graduate degree in art history. I thank my M.A. advisor, Stella Nair, for her patience, encouragement, teachings, and faith in me. I also dedicate this thesis and give special thanks to Professor Luz María De la Torre for being an outstanding mentor, supporting my potential, and inspiring me to open and decolonize academia and people's minds. I am grateful to UCLA and its Department of Art History, which kindly provided resources, like the Summer Mentored Research Fellowship (SMRF), that were crucial to completing this thesis. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado and its staff, particularly to the Executive Director Lucía Durán and to the Curator Carlos Montalvo, who opened the doors, guided me, and allowed me to conduct my research during the summer.

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Jed Surio, Eric Mazariegos, AJ Meyer, Juan Herrera, Mal Meisels, Maya Varma, Camille Neira, Emely Rauda, Diana Blanco, and Syon Vasquez for putting up with me, all the sleepless nights, the editing, the proofreading, the constant venting, and for telling me to not to give up and continue achieving my goals. Thank you. I genuinely appreciate you all. I would not have done it without you, and I would not be where I am if it was not for you. Truly, Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lastly, I dedicate this thesis and thank all the past, incoming, and future scholars interested in La Tolita-Tumaco culture and its architecture. Your contributions drive our knowledge and understanding of this culture forward. Also, to those who question, challenge, disrupt, rebel, redefine, and break the norm to change the world within and outside academia for the better while advocating, listening, involving, learning, and working with the marginalized, underrepresented, oppressed, neglected, abused, silenced, and invisiblized, particularly, Indigenous and Diaspora communities around the world, especially those in my home country of Ecuador. Thank you.

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Introduction

Behind a glass case in the middle of a second-floor museum gallery, a three-dimensional house-like ceramic object measuring 19.2 cm in height x 15.8 cm in width x 19.8 cm in depth (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.)[1] rests on a flat gray surface (fig.1). This object is said to have been produced by the La Tolita-Tumaco culture (600 BCE to 600 CE),[2] which, according to archaeologists, inhabited Ecuador's northern coast along the present-day political borders with Colombia[3] (fig. 2). This small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation shares the vitrine with three other objects (fig. 3, 4, 5) of similar appearance, seemingly arranged according to their likely provenance, as opposed to the thematic arrangement of the other cases in the museum.

At first glance, these objects possess similar components. They all have a foundation where the walls rest, an opening that provides a slight glimpse of the interior, and a triangular-shaped roof that spreads over the walls and drapes the structures, sheltering what might be inside. Nevertheless, through a closer look, they all display individual features that differentiate them from one another: one has its opening on top, another one has multiple broad superimposed layers on its roof, another has a lid-like base, and the object this research focuses on has a three-step stairway feature leading and inviting the viewer to peek inside (fig. 3, 4, 5, 6). As the viewer accepts the invitation, a smiling anthropomorphic figure sitting with extended legs on the floor and arms resting on its thighs emerges from the dark and greets the viewer (fig. 7).

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[1] "MRT-1738, Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado."

[2] Rodríguez and Pachajoa, *Salud y enfermedad en el arte prehispánico de la cultura Tumaco*, 14.

[3] Ugalde, *Iconografía de la cultura Tolita*, 14.

The small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation subject of this research is part of the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado vast collection in present-day Quito, Ecuador. The museum is housed within the oldest colonial building in the city, which had survived without significant modifications until the space was transformed to accommodate the display and storage of the museum's collection.[4] After five years of restorations, the museum opened its doors in April 2010, incorporating the name previously used to refer to the building it now occupies, "La Casa del Alabado."[5] The museum collection comprises objects attributed to cultures that inhabited Ecuador before the invasion of Europeans from three different Ecuadorian philanthropists' private collections.[6] Although the museum notes that the object with the accession number MRT-1738—the focus of this paper—once belonged to Mario Ribadeneira Traversari, no further information is shared or known about the donor.[7]

Additionally, the museum categorizes MRT-1738 as a *"maqueta"* ("model") made of fired clay containing pigments and smoke residues.[8] Consequently, in this thesis, I will refer to this object as the "Three-Step Stairway Model." According to the museum's database, there are only a limited amount of similar small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations in the collection. Of this small quantity, only four are attributed to the La Tolita-Tumaco culture. Like other La Tolita-Tumaco objects in museum collections around the world,

[4] Mora, *La Memoria de La Materia Una Historia Contada En Conreto - Casa Del Alabado - La Increíble Historia de Nuestras Obras*, 2,4.

[5] Mora, 2.

[6] Cóndor Amoguimba, "Diagnóstico de las potencialidades turísticas de los museos de María Augusta Urrutia y Casa del Alabado y su aporte al turismo del Centro Histórico de Quito," 34–35.

[7] "MRT-1738, Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado."

[8] "MRT-1738, Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado."

the Three-Step Stairway Model has no provenance information, as many of this culture's objects have been looted and sold throughout the years.

In the case of the Three-Step Stairway Model, no scientific or material analysis has been conducted to determine its approximate creation date or specific materials used in its conception. Additionally, no in-depth art historical analysis of any of the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado's "models" was performed when this thesis was written. Moreover, to the present, no sign of the language employed by La Tolita-Tumaco culture has been discovered, and no living descendants who might identify with this culture survive. These realities, combined with the limited provenance information, make it difficult to deduce what the Three-Step Stairway Model represents, how it was used, or the purpose of its creation.

For this reason, these types of objects have sparked a multiplicity of debates. Some scholars have argued that they are commemorative depictions of ceremonial structures that existed during the lifetime of their maker(s), where the objects themselves were used within these structures, while others presume their existence as imagined buildings or conceptual designs for future projects.[9] However, these assertions carry challenging implications, and no precise answers have yet been found due to the lack of architectural remains and detailed research from multiple disciplines, especially art history, that explicitly focus on these small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations. Nevertheless, the existence and enduring nature of these objects bear witness to the deliberate intentions of their maker(s).

Furthermore, numerous objects belonging to past Indigenous cultures, like the one I analyze, often lack provenance information and contextual details such as oral histories, colonial

[9] Alcina and De La Peña, "Patrones de asentamiento indígena en Esmeraldas durante los siglos XVI y XVII," 86; Schávelzon, *Arqueología y Arquitectura Del Ecuador Prehispánico*, 174.

descriptions, ethnohistorical studies, or written records. As a result, they are frequently overlooked, dismissed, and/or continue to be hastily classified as ritualistic, ceremonial, religious, or funerary by default, solely based on their Indigenous origin. In doing so, the colonial legacies that persist today, established by European invaders upon their arrival to the continent we now call America, continue to be perpetuated. The invaders disregarded Indigenous peoples, their knowledge, and traditions that went beyond giving meanings, values, functions, and uses to small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations such as the one I analyze. Instead, the invaders attempted to eradicate the objects, knowledge, and people. Therefore, in this M.A. thesis, I take a stand against this neglect, classification, and the perpetuation of colonial legacies by demonstrating a way to study these small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations using Indigenous theory and methods in art history. Indigenous theory and methods aim to achieve equity and inclusion by emphasizing the importance and respect for different worldviews through the involvement of Indigenous communities. However, in this case, I will engage and learn from the object as an extension of the Indigenous La Tolita-Tumaco culture. Although the function and use of the Three-Step Stairway Model are unknown, my research aims to provide an interpretative framework to begin to understand, approach, and theorize about these types of objects.

Additionally, I will demonstrate how objects that belonged to past Indigenous cultures, without text or explicit context, can provide critical insights into life, traditions, environments, technologies, artistic and architectural practices, knowledge, creativity, and imaginations through their visual and material composition. More importantly, I will inquire about how the maker(s) of the Three-Step Stairway Model may have given meaning and value to this object, envisioned the built environment, and engaged with their surroundings. In doing so, I argue not only for the

critical role of these small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations in furthering our understanding of Ecuadorian art histories but also for the invaluable contribution of Indigenous objects and topics to the larger field of art history and how objects, like the one I analyze, also challenge the current generally recognized understanding of the notions and concepts of "models" and "architecture."

The Three-Step Stairway "Model"

At first glance, it is possible that MRT-1738, or as I refer to in this thesis, the Three-Step Stairway Model, could portray a human-scale architectural structure. This initial impression could potentially be reinforced as the small-size three-dimensional ceramic object's form and visual appearance resemble a building's foundation and walls supporting a roof. This "model"—following scholars and the museum's categorizations—also has a rectangular shape, is freestanding, symmetrical, and made from fired clay attributed to the La Tolita-Tumaco culture,[10] which archaeologists argue inhabited the region between the Esmeraldas River in the present-day Esmeraldas province in Ecuador and the San Juan River in the present-day Valle del Cauca department in Colombia, approximately from 600 BCE to 600 CE, based on the carbon dating of attributed objects excavated in this area.[11] Notably, this culture is known by two names influenced by two landmarks found within the presumed territory of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture, La Tolita island in Ecuador and the city of Tumaco in Colombia.

Nonetheless, scholars have used a combination of these two names to refer to this culture depending on which side of the present-day national borders the scholarship takes place. For

[10] "MRT-1738, Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado."

[11] Rodríguez and Pachajoa, *Salud y enfermedad en el arte prehispánico de la cultura Tumaco*, 14.

instance, “La Tolita-Tumaco” is used in Ecuador, while in Colombia, “Tumaco-La Tolita.” However, to this day, it is unknown how members of this culture self-identified due to the limited and fragmentary information uncovered thus far. Despite this, in 2003, Andrea Brezzi, an Italian Civil Engineer fascinated by this culture, merged the two names into the portmanteau “Tulato” and advocated for its use in a catalog dedicated to La Tolita-Tumaco objects.[12] However, as an Ecuadorian researcher, in this thesis, I will use the La Tolita-Tumaco combination for now, as these denominations might change in the future. Nonetheless, the Three-Step Stairway Model can be divided and analyzed into three current widely recognizable fundamental visual components of architecture: the base—or foundation, the walls, and the roof.

The “Architectural” Base

The base component of the Three-Step Stairway Model is significant as it could be considered the foundation of the three-dimensional house-like structure above. The assumed base creates a pronounced separation between this seeming architecture and the underlying surface where the entire object rests. The object's base gives the visual impression of a solid block that could also be considered to serve as a pedestal due to its rectangular shape (fig. 1, 6). The only addition to the base is a three-step feature resembling a stairway on one of its shorter ends—the assumed proper front of the object (fig. 1, 6, 8). These steps stretch from one end of the block-shaped base to the other, highlighting a large opening—the assumed entranceway of the house-like structure—above the last step. Although a small protrusion emerges from the surface of the second step, dividing it in two, the entire stairway-like feature is unobstructed. The initial step emerges from the lower section of the base, while the final becomes part of the building’s floor

[12] Brezzi et al., *Tulato, ventana a la prehistoria de América cultura Tumaco - La Tolita*.

above. The proportions of these steps differ between one another and the other features and components of the entire object (fig. 6). Hence, the Three-Step Stairway Model maker(s) presumably wanted to emphasize this stairway-like feature and thus the act of moving into and out of the house-like structure.

Notably, the elevated base component provides a critical clue to understanding the entire small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation, as it appears to portray a *tola.* Although, in Ecuador, the word *tola* is commonly used and understood throughout the country to refer to an elevated human-made earthen structure believed to have been constructed by past Indigenous peoples, for those unfamiliar with the term, *tola* could be described as a *montículo* (mound)—an example seen in the photograph by Jean-François Bouchard, and Pierre Usselmann (2003) (fig. 9). According to the archaeologist Daniel Schávelzon, *tola* means high or piled-up soil in the Cayapa language.[13] The Chachi, erroneously referred to as Cayapa in the past, live in the Esmeraldas region, where La Tolita island is located. While there is no record of a source for Schávelzon's assertion, it seems plausible that *tola* derives from the Cha'palaa or Chachi language. In this culture's language, the word *tu* means land, ground, or soil, and it seems that by adding the suffix *la*, a word becomes plural.[14] Therefore, *tula* (tu+la) could be, in fact, the Cha'palaa term for an elevated human-made earthen structure.

Consequently, the "La Tolita" name used in Ecuador to refer to this culture is possibly associated with the Chachi word *tula*. "La Tola" is an island at the mouth of the Santiago River in the north of the Esmeraldas province, commonly referred to as its diminutive, "La Tolita." This island is covered in *tolas*—the plural of *tola* following the Spanish language convention—

[13] Schávelzon, *Arqueología y Arquitectura Del Ecuador Prehispánico*, 16.

[14] Pianchiche and Mijamulachi, "Cha'palaachi-pilla - Peechuipachi-pilla."

which scholars claim was the core location of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture and functioned as a necropolis, ceremonial and cultural center as throughout the years, a wide array of human-made objects of different sizes, materials, and techniques such as ceramics, metallurgy, carved bones and stones, alongside burials have been found near or within the *tolas*.[15] Therefore, perhaps, the Cha'palaa word *"tula"* was used by the Chachi throughout time to refer to the numerous elevated human-made earthen structures on the island, thus influencing the name of the island, which in turn, prompted the culture's current name, and subsequently possibly disseminated throughout Ecuador and became widely used, maintaining its Cha'palaa meaning.

Furthermore, from 1982 to 1986, the Banco Central del Ecuador (Central Bank of Ecuador) sponsored an archaeological project on the island under the supervision of the archaeologists Francisco Valdez and Jean Françoise Bouchard.[16] While no architectural structures were discovered, Valdez excavated the flat surface on top of a *tola* and contended that technology and expertise were employed in its construction as the *tola* seems to have been erected in two distinct phases, with the last occurring after a substantial amount of time.[17] Valdez determined that the surface of the *tola* was prepared by burning the ground at a high temperature in 100 CE, based on carbon-14 analysis, to remove vegetation and solidify clay elements in the soil.[18] Therefore, perhaps the rest of the *tolas* were built in the same, if not similar, manner. Moreover, Valdez asserted that the *tolas* served as foundations for La Tolita-Tumaco buildings since, during the excavation, round openings with a diameter of 25 cm (9.84 in.) were found

[15] Ugalde, *Iconografia de la cultura Tolita*, 17,13.

[16] Valdez, *Proyecto arqueológico "La Tolita," 1983-1986*.

[17] Valdez, 23.

[18] Valdez, 23.

placed very close to one another throughout the top of the *tola*, which Valdez argued were architectural postholes.[19]

It is also important to consider that the region where La Tolita island is located, Esmeraldas, is commonly called the "Green Province" as its climate resembles the rainforest. According to the 2015 *Plan de Desarollo y Ordenamiento Territorial (Development Plan and Land Management)*[20] conducted by the Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado de la Provincia de Esmeraldas (GADPE) (Decentralized Autonomous Government of the Province of Esmeraldas), the climate is described as tropical and very humid.[21] The report notes that the temperature in Esmeraldas can exceed the average 25°C (77°F), and the relative humidity, or moisture in the air, can surpass 85%.[22] Comparably, the average yearly rainfall can vary between 500 mm and 7,000 mm (19 in. to 275 in.) depending on the season, thus contributing to the shallow water table in La Tolita island.[23] Considering all these climate conditions, the tolas were likely purposefully and intentionally constructed not only to serve as a foundation for La Tolita-Tumaco's architecture, as scholars have argued, but also as a practical solution to serve a functional purpose in response to floods due to the high precipitation levels, that, when combined with tides, likely play a role in the island's shallow water table. Thus, the climate of Esmeraldas might have also been a factor and a reason why the La Tolita-Tumaco architecture does not survive today.

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[19] Valdez, 23.

[20] All translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

[21] Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado de la Provincia de Esmeraldas, "Plan de Desarollo y Ordenamiento Territorial," 21.

[22] Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado de la Provincia de Esmeraldas, 25.

[23] Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado de la Provincia de Esmeraldas, 21; "Las Tolas - Sección Nacional Del Ecuador Del I.P.G.H."

Continuing the analysis of the Three-Step Stairway Model, attention is drawn to other characteristics of its base component, notably the remnants of various pigments. Pigments are still visible, especially on the assumed proper right and left sides, where black was seemingly used to paint designs and red was used to paint broader areas (fig. 6, 10, 11). In addition to the possibly intentional use of black and red pigments, the base also has traces of a slightly green coloration due to the application of green pigments, or it might have been caused by the decomposition of organic materials either in the ground where the object was buried or caused by surrounding elements where the object was placed or used. Similarly, the evidence of smoke-like residues, perhaps soot, possibly resulted from a combustion process due to the placement or use of the small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation by La Tolita-Tumaco culture or its subsequent custodian(s) (fig. 10, 11, 12).

Furthermore, in 2017, the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado, in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC) (National Institute of Cultural Heritage), conducted scientific pigment studies of fifteen ceramic objects in the collection to accompany the exhibition "Pigmentos & brillos en la costa del Ecuador Precolombino" (Pigments and Sheen On the Coast of Pre-Columbian Ecuador.)[24] The chosen ceramic objects were from the La Tolita-Tumaco (600 BCE to 600 CE), Jama Coaque (350 BCE-1532 CE), and Bahia (500 BCE-500 CE) cultures that inhabited the coast of Ecuador.[25] However, only five La Tolita-Tumaco objects were part of the study, and none were small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations.

[24] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, *Pigmentos & brillos en la costa del Ecuador precolombino = Pigments and sheens on the coast of pre-columbian Ecuador*, 77.

[25] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 77.

Curiously, the five La Tolita-Tumaco objects in the study have green, yellow, and white pigments like the Three-Step Stairway Model. The study noted that green was obtained from glauconite, found in coastal Esmeraldas and Guayaquil, opposing the previous belief that it was obtained from other minerals, like malachite or copper oxide from metal objects.[26] Moreover, yellow was identified as goethite, also commonly found on the coast, whereas white's composition included calcium carbonate or kaolinite, not found in the coastal regions but rather in Ecuador's southeast highlands.[27] Despite their geographical origins, these discoveries showcased the La Tolita-Tumaco culture's endeavors to acquire particular materials for the desired colors used in the assumed base of the Three-Step Stairway Model, highlighting the potential interactions, trade, or connections with other groups or cultures. Nevertheless, the walls of the house-like structure above provide further interesting insights.

Inside the Walls: "The Interior Space"

The Three-Step Stairway Model has a rectangular floor plan conforming to the shape of the base. As one faces the small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation's assumed proper front, the seemingly right and left walls of the building support the roof-like structure above (fig. 6, 8, 13). However, these walls are positioned away from the base's margins, leaving a narrow ledge around the building (fig. 1, 6, 8, 10). The big opening above the stairway feature creates an arch-like wall that could possibly be considered an entranceway. This possible entranceway seems to be deliberately concealed by a thin veil-like feature emerging from the bottom of the roof, enveloping the large opening, creating a possible antechamber or

[26] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 80.

[27] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 80.

transitional space between inside and outside (fig. 1, 6, 8, 13). As one leans to inspect the three-dimensional architectural structure's interior curiously, one notices light penetrating and illuminating the single-room space from a smaller opening resembling a window on the lower right side of the wall directly across the big opening (fig. 7, 10, 11, 12). The light inundating the building's interior allows the viewer to discern the spacious open-plan layout, as no vertical spatial divisions or configurations exist. Although the interior space appears to be empty, devoid of objects, a seemingly smiling anthropomorphic figure sits on the left side of the small opening—or assumed window—with its back against the wall, its extended lower extremities across the floor, and its upper extremities on its thighs facing the big opening—or assumed front, or entranceway—purportedly avoiding the incoming light (fig. 7). Like the three steps on the base, the proportions of this figure are larger and incongruous with the other components and features of the entire object. Perhaps this object's maker(s) likely wanted to draw attention to both the stairway-like and the human-like figure. If this was the case, perhaps the anthropomorphic figure's presence within the Three-Step Stairway Model portrays the experiential nature of the building, where architectural spaces were possibly meant to be lived and experienced by humans or human-like beings.

In his expedition's final report, Francisco Valdez argues that the small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations attributed to the La Tolita-Tumaco culture, like the Three-Step Stairway Model, portray full-scale architecture that once existed. Valdez correlates the general shape and visual appearance of the objects' ceramic walls to the significant number of post holes he found during the 1980s excavations and contends that it is highly probable that the living spaces were made of *bahareque* over a wooden structure.[28] *Bahareque*

[28] Valdez, *Proyecto arqueológico "La Tolita," 1983-1986*, 63.

refers to wood or interlaced canes covered with adobe to create a stronger building material.[29] Often, *bahareque* is also used to refer to a wattle and daub or *quincha*—a wattle of cane or bamboo—construction.[30] Valdez argues that the size of some small-sized three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations and their various external decorations, especially on their roofs, could indicate the function of the structures they portray.[31] Therefore, following Valdez's assertions, these objects, including the Three-Step Stairway Model, possibly contain valuable insights regarding La Tolita-Tumaco culture's architectural and cultural traditions.

Investigating this argument further is hindered by the seemingly abrupt disappearance of this culture. Based on carbon-14 analyses, the latest date scholars currently have for objects excavated within La Tolita-Tumaco's presumed habitational area is 600 CE. In the current archaeological discourse, some argue that these results suggest that the La Tolita-Tumaco culture disappeared, while others contend they decentralized and relocated almost a millennium before the arrival of European invaders.[32] However, it is essential to note that early colonial European invaders' writings register the presence of Indigenous peoples in the Esmeraldas province. For instance, in the *Relación de los primeros descubrimientos de Francisco Pizarro y Diego de Almagro (Account of the first discoveries of Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro),* commonly referred today as the *Relación Sámano-Xerez (Sámano-Xerez Account)* likely written in the first half of the 16th century,[33] describe the first European invaders' voyage south of the

[29] Cevallos Salas, "La construcción con tierra en Ecuador y la necesidad de la norma," 2.

[30] Moore, *Ancient Andean Houses*, 20.

[31] Valdez, *Proyecto arqueológico "La Tolita," 1983-1986*, 63.

[32] Ugalde, *Iconografia de la cultura Tolita*, 158.

[33] Borah, "The Cortés Codex of Vienna and Emperor Ferdinand I," 81.

equator.[34] According to this account, the Iberian captain Bartolomé Ruiz and his crew anchored in a bay and named it "Bahía de San Mateo," now known as the city of Esmeraldas, located about 96 km (59.65 mi.) south of La Tolita island, and saw "three large towns near the ocean and some Indigenous people wearing gold."[35] However, if the colonial account reports the event accurately, it is still unclear what cultures(s) or group(s) they encountered as the author does not provide further information. Perhaps some of these people were descendants of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture who joined other cultures(s) or group(s).

Notwithstanding, this lack of clarity is not unusual, as subsequent European invaders' colonial chronicles describing their arrival to the Esmeraldas province are fragmentary and inconsistent. However, in these chronicles, the Cayapas (Chachi), Malabas, Yumbos, Niguas, Campaces, Sicchos, and Colorados[36]— "Colorados" is another derogatory colonial term to refer to the Tsa'chila culture—are repeatedly mentioned as the cultures who inhabited this area. Nevertheless, out of these seven cultures, only two survive today, the Chachi and the Tsa'chila.

According to the Chachi, who live near La Tolita island, they emigrated to this area after the La Tolita-Tumaco culture "disappeared" or relocated, as it has been theorized. In Chachi oral traditions, their original settlement was in the central highlands of Ecuador, and after some time, they decided to move north and settle in the present-day Ibarra province, where they lived for a long time.[37] However, the subsequent Inca and European invasions compelled the Chachi to

[34] Porras Barrenechea, "La Relación Sámano-Xerez."

[35] Porras Barrenechea, 65.

[36] Balboa, *Descripción de la Provincia de Esmeraldas*, 15–20.

[37] Cimarrón, *Chachi*, 12.

relocate again and settle along the Rio Cayapas, just east of La Tolita island.[38] The timing of these movements is uncertain as the Chachi do not use chronological dates based on the Gregorian calendar and instead practice oral traditions. However, the earliest written mention of the Chachi in the Esmeraldas province appears in the account of the Mercedarian Friar Gaspar de Torres in 1597.[39]

As the Chachi moved from the highlands to the coast, they possibly adopted architectural practices, including the use of distinct construction materials and forms from other Indigenous groups and/or cultures that better suited and responded to the coastal environments. However, it is interesting to note that in early colonial European invaders' accounts, detailed descriptions and printed drawings of Indigenous architectural structures in coastal regions with climate conditions and vegetation comparable to the Esmeraldas province, report forms, and construction materials similar to those currently used by the Chachi—represented in renderings by Dr. Alfonso Calderon C. (fig. 14, 15)—as in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdes' 1535 *Historia general y natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano (General and Natural History of the Indies, Islands and Mainland of the Ocean Sea)* writings about the "Española" island—present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic[40] (fig. 16, 17). Therefore, it is possible that the la Tolita-Tumaco culture also shared these similitudes in architectural traditions, including forms and the use of readily available vegetation. The latter is a critical point, as it is a reminder of the

[38] Cimarrón, 12.

[39] Carrasco, *El Pueblo Chachi*, 13.

[40] Fernández de Oviedo, *Coronica de Las Indias La Hystoria General de Las Indias: Agora Nueuamente Impressa Corregida y Emendada; y Con La Conquista Del Peru. Parte I.*, Sexto Libro. Captítulo I. fo. LVIII.

complexity of architectural ideas and knowledge that can be disseminated and shared throughout time and across spaces.

Chachi architectural structures follow the same rectangular plan or form as the Three-Step Stairway Model, and different materials distinguish their function. For instance, the Chachi construct three types of buildings: special dwellings, ordinary homes, and ranches.[41] Special dwellings are built using specific materials, such as *piquigua*—a liana found in rainforests, *chonta*—the trunk of the peach palm plant, and the leaves of the *tagua*—a type of palm also known as Ecuadorian ivory—for the roof.[42] In contrast, an ordinary home is constructed with more commonly found and easy-to-work natural vegetation, while the ranches can be constructed using any type of plant material as they are usually ephemeral structures meant to last an average of two months.[43] However, all Chachi structures are close to the river—like the location of La Tolita island—have no vertical spatial configurations, and have a ladder since their floor is elevated on posts[44] (fig. 15). Therefore, it is possible that Chachi architecture might resemble the built environments of La Tolita-Tumaco culture since their form, elevation, and interior spaces are similar to the visual appearance of the small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation I analyze. Nevertheless, it is also essential to consider the role of color in the Three-Step Stairway Model's interior space.

While the Three-Step Stairway Model's interior space and anthropomorphic figure possibly portray an experiential property, color adds another layer of meaning and aesthetic expression. In

[41] Cimarrón, *Chachi*, 44.

[42] Cimarrón, 44.

[43] Cimarrón, 45.

[44] Barrett, *Los indios cayapas del Ecuador*, 13, 46.

the interior space, specks of black and red emerge sporadically from the walls, while the anthropomorphic figure has a daub of yellow on the assumed proper right side of its head (fig. 7). It is possible that the presence of these colors, alongside a small amount of green on the roof's eave-like feature above the stairway in minimal quantities are the result of the fading or degradation of deliberately painted pigments or perhaps the oxidation of one, if not more, components of such paints (fig. 8). However, it is also likely that the current visual characteristics of the pigments reflect their original appearance and perhaps constituted an artistic method where they served as the base for other colors of organic provenance, like dyes.

As described, remnants of black pigments are more abundant throughout The Three-Step Stairway Model. However, in the 2017 pigment study, black was not analyzed in any of the La Tolita-Tumaco ceramics but was examined in one of the objects of the Bahia culture, who inhabited the Manabí province, south of Esmeraldas.[45] The study notes that the black pigment of the Bahia ceramic had a calcium carbonate base obtained from marine sponges' spicules, followed by a mixture of charcoal and magnetite after its application.[46] Then, the study explains that the Bahia ceramic was fired, and lastly, hornblende—composed of iron and magnesium—was applied as a finishing layer.[47]

As the results of the study show, the Bahia culture obtained black through a process and combination of various minerals, including some derived from the ocean floor. Thus, the maker(s) of the Three-Step Stairway Model possibly executed the same, if not a similar, process

[45] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, *Pigmentos & brillos en la costa del Ecuador precolombino = Pigments and sheens on the coast of pre-columbian Ecuador*, 81.

[46] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 81.

[47] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 81.

to obtain black pigments. Assuming this was the case, the La Tolita-Tumaco engagement with their surroundings speaks to the importance and comprehension of the larger environment, its varied natural components, and their corresponding properties. It also manifests the possible intentionality of the maker(s) deliberate choices and actions to obtain black pigments, or perhaps there was a potential interaction or trade with the Bahia culture or other group(s) or culture(s). Although the interior space of the house-like structure is defined, limited, or materialized by the walls, they are almost invisible as the roof-like component overpowers the object's composition, draping over them and nearly covering them completely, perhaps intentionally portraying and conveying the interior space as exclusive, private, and intimate.

The "Roof:" More Than Just a Covering

The gable-pitched visual appearance of the roof-like component of the Three-Step Stairway Model is striking, capturing contemporary viewers' attention through its size and elaborate four-strata superimposed construction. The innermost stratum is a downward-facing pitched covering that visually resembles a thin textile, draping down and creating a veil or awning-like feature above the building's large opening and arch-like wall—or assumed entranceway. This layer, as mentioned, extends above the stairway's last step, creating a possible antechamber or transitional space between the outside and inside (fig. 1, 6, 8, 13). Above the veil or awning-like feature, a pitched layer seemingly solid gives the roof its slopping appearance (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). The latter is followed by a six-layered letter-H-shaped component over the peak, aligning so the roof's ridge meets the horizontal, or crossing, line of the letter-H shape while the endings, or vertical lines, run downwards along the sides of the roof towards the eaves on both sides (fig. 1, 6, 10, 11). Although the two vertical lines of the letter-H component seem

to be composed of the entire six layers, the horizontal line—or crossing line of the letter-H shape that runs across the roof's ridge—seems only to be the sixth layer of the letter-H-shaped component which resembles a tensile structure and leaves a small gap between the roof slopes and itself (fig. 1, 6, 10, 11).

In contrast, the last stratum of the building's roof comprises a plank-like feature that follows the ridge direction and extends beyond the building with a curve on each end, flaring outwards and upwards, giving the roof a particular saddle-like visual appearance (fig. 1, 6, 10, 11). On top of the curved plank, an anthropomorphic head with a helmet-like element gazes steadfastly toward the horizon on the assumed front edge—above the stairway—while a small protrusion divides the surface of the plank on the opposite end (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). While all the strata seem to comprise the entire roof, they all seem to have been individually created as seams and a crack on the front proper right leg of the six-layered letter-H-shaped component is visible (fig. 10). Although the visual appearance of the roof of the small size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation I analyze could be considered large, the maker(s) of this object may have intended to emphasize its importance by increasing its proportions, like the three steps on the base and the features of the anthropomorphic figure in the interior space. Alternatively, perhaps its size reflects the visual appearance of a structure that did exist or perhaps was an envisioned and/or imagined form by its maker(s). Similarly, while the Three-Step Stairway Model's roof may also be considered highly decorative and ornamental, it could be further examined by its basic form and the possible construction materials its maker(s) might have intended to portray.

The visual appearance of the Three-Step Stairway Model's gable-pitched roof resembles one of a traditional Chachi building (fig. 14-15). Upon this observation and given that the Chachi

inhabit the Esmeraldas province, east of the La Tolita island, they are one of the two Indigenous cultures that withstood the European invasion and have also preserved their architectural traditions that were possibly adopted to better suit the coastal environment upon their relocation to this region, it is possible that La Tolita-Tumaco culture might have employed comparable or similar construction methods and/or materials as the Chachi continue to do. For instance, in Chachi traditions, roofs are pitched, superimposed—like the visual appearance of the Three-Step Stairway Model—and can have a hipped or shed form[48] (fig. 14).

Superimposed pitched roofs are found around the world and have many benefits.[49] For example, the angled roof line guides the rain down and away from the structure rapidly and effectively, and superimposed layers provide extra protection against moisture.[50] However, while roofs can follow fundamental construction forms, distinct characteristics commonly depend on local knowledge, traditions, practices, and materials.[51] For instance, throughout history and in contemporary times, certain cultures, like the Karo Batak culture in North Sumatra, have built and continue to build roofs that define almost the entire building and could be considered contouring walls, thus shaping the interior space[52]—as seen in the photograph by David Beynon (2015) (fig. 18). Additionally, it is possible that due to its visual appearance and the discovered similarities with Chachi architectural traditions thus far, the Three-Step Stairway Model's roof also portrays thatching, similar to Chachi roof constructions.

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[48] Cimarrón, *Chachi*, 44.

[49] Schunck, *Roof Construction Manual*, 10.

[50] Schunck, 10,33.

[51] Schunck, 33, 40.

[52] Waterson, *The Living House*, 5–8; Schunck, *Roof Construction Manual*, 30.

Like pitched roofs, different cultures throughout time and space have employed and continue to employ thatching as a construction technique. For instance, in the Andes, the Aymara and the Inca cultures have a long history of thatching, like the Shona culture in Zimbabwe[53]—as seen in the photographs by Paz Arando (2016), Emmanuel Dyan (2010) and Adventure Life (fig. 19-21). This technique involves using and layering readily available and renewable plant materials like grasses or palms as tiles, providing many benefits, such as insulation against extreme temperatures,[54] like the heat and humidity characteristic of the Esmeraldas province. In the case of the Chachi, the *tagua* palm, also called *peine*, is the exclusively preferred construction material for their thatched roofs.[55] The Chachi collect the *tagua* leaves, bundle them into fours, and allow them to dry for up to three months[56] since rotting is possible if the leaves are used while green.[57] After they are dried, the bundled leaves are tied with their underside facing up using *piquigua*—a liana found in rainforests—to a cane structure that gives the roof its pitched form[58] (fig. 14-15). A Chachi hipped roof comprises around fifty-seven to sixty rows of bundled leaves on each side that overlap on top, covering the roof's peak, where in combination with an external ridge-like structure seemingly made of canes, that appears to be suspended above the roof's peak supported by sparsely placed single upright canes throughout its length

[53] Nair, Archila, and Hastorf, "THE LOST HALF OF ANDEAN ARCHITECTURE," 222; Conway and Roenisch, *Understanding Architecture*, 61.

[54] Hall, *Thatching*, 1–2.

[55] Cimarrón, *Chachi*, 44.

[56] Cimarrón, 44.

[57] Barrett, *Los indios cayapas del Ecuador*, 54.

[58] Barrett, 54.

prevent leaks[59] (fig. 14). Considering the Chachi roof construction, the Three-Step Stairway Model's last two strata—the six-layered letter-H-shaped and the plank-like component—possibly portray a functional and practical feature similar to the Chachi external ridge-like structure (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). Alternatively, they may portray a ventilation device as the last layer of the H-shaped feature leaves a gap between the roof slopes and itself (fig. 1,6, 10-11). At the same time, the seemingly anthropomorphic head on top of the plank-like component also possibly portrays a marker of sorts, perhaps of ranks or status or for protection like the modeled buffalo heads placed on the roofs' ridges of the Karo Batak culture's architecture,[60] (fig. 18) or as Valdez argues could indicate the function of the building the small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations portray.[61]

Consistent with the rest of the Three-Step Stairway Model's surface, pigment remnants on the roof are another characteristic that captures a viewer's attention. Red and orange-like colors are the most prevalent, while black is present in small quantities (fig. 1, 6, 10-11). Red pigments of three La Tolita-Tumaco objects were analyzed in the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado's 2017 scientific study. Although the study discovered that hematite, plagioclase, quartz, and other clays composed the red pigments in all three objects, one contained an additional goethite and kaolinite component.[62] The study also revealed that these pigments were ground, likely to create a paste since evenly sized particles were observed under the

[59] Barrett, 57.

[60] Waterson, *The Living House*, 5–8.

[61] Valdez, *Proyecto arqueológico "La Tolita," 1983-1986*, 63.

[62] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, *Pigmentos & brillos en la costa del Ecuador precolombino = Pigments and sheens on the coast of pre-columbian Ecuador*, 79.

microscope.[63] While the study's results did not specify the specific provenance of the pigments, the minerals used were likely locally sourced as the soils in the Esmeraldas province are rich in red clays.[64] Therefore, the maker(s) of the objects engaged with their surroundings, understood mineral properties and devised application techniques to obtain the desired polychromatic visual appearance of the roof and the entire object.

Nevertheless, the deep visual and material analysis of the Three-Step Stairway Model has revealed some critical insights into life, traditions, environments, technologies, artistic and architectural practices, knowledge, creativity, and imaginations of the maker(s) of the object and thus possibly also of La Tolita-Tumaco culture. For instance, the object possibly portrays architectural traditions—including forms, construction materials, techniques, and spatial configurations—possibly used by La Tolita-Tumaco culture and other contemporaneous peoples, but also current cultures in the Esmeraldas province (fig. 14-17). Similarly, the presence of the anthropomorphic figure within the Three-Step Stairway Model also possibly suggests the experiential nature of architectural structures (fig. 7), likely revealing insights into the life and traditions of the La Tolita-Tumaco culture.

Likewise, the size and form of the roof, alongside the seemingly ornamental features, including color, could be considered decorative. However, they could also portray conceptual and/or practical elements that serve a specific function. For instance, the size and form of the roof seem to define the interior space and, like the component similar to the Chachi external ridge-like structure, also protects the inner area from the elements. In contrast, the

[63] Cartagena, Sánchez-Polo, and Papworth, 82.

[64] Alcina and Garcia Palacios, “Materias Primas y Tecnología en Esmeraldas,” 311; Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado de la Provincia de Esmeraldas, “Plan de Desarollo y Ordenamiento Territorial,” 10.

anthropomorphic head on the last stratum of the roof might serve as a literal marker or a marker of a protective and/or symbolic nature showcasing technologies, traditions, and artistic practices (fig. 14, 18). Similarly, the base of the Three-Step Stairway Model likely portrays a *tola*, a practical solution to serve a functional purpose in response to the environmental conditions of the Esmeraldas province, demonstrating creativity and engineering knowledge. However, is the Three-Step Stairway Model a "model"?

What are "Models"?

The creation of small-sized three-dimensional architectural representations, or "models"—as we might consider them today—has occurred and continues to occur across time and space. Despite this, scholars often refer to and consider the earliest "true models" to be from the Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty (2055-1650 BCE)[65] (fig. 22). The subjective use and current meanings of the word "model" as a noun or verb are perhaps the reason for the latter assertions, as evidence of "older" three-dimensional architectural representations exists.[66] For instance, a small-size three-dimensional building-like object was found in the Balkan foothills of Căscioarele, Romania, attributed to the Gumelniţa culture dating to 4600–3900 BCE[67]—seen in the photograph by the National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, Romania (fig. 23).

Nevertheless, the word "model" has become a standard term to refer to these small-size three-dimensional architectural representations by scholars and the public. For example, the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado's collection database and wall labels list the

[65] Pardo et al., *Modelando el mundo*, 17; Brejzek and Wallen, *The Model as Performance*, 24.

[66] Mindrup, *The Architectural Model*, 14; Pillsbury et al., *Design for Eternity*, 11–12.

[67] Mindrup, *The Architectural Model*, 14; Herrero Marcos, *Modelos y maquetas la vida a escala*, 8.

object I analyzed as a "*maqueta"* or "model" in English.[68] However, according to scholars, the word "model," to refer to small-size three-dimensional architectural representations, originates from the Italian word *modello,* derived from the Latin word *modulus*, meaning "to measure or measure."[69] Despite this, as people adopted the word *modulus* and moved across geographies, its orthography and meaning changed.[70] For instance, different scholars mention that *modulus* changed to *modell* in present-day Germany, while in present-day France, the word became *molde or modele,*[71] and in present-day England, *mould*.[72] Despite this evidence, there does not seem to be a consensus on the meaning of each word derived from *modulus* upon its adoption and subsequent orthographical change, as different sources mention different meanings for each of the orthographic variations, such as "mold, mold for producing things, a small representation of an object, scale, or small scale."[73] Nevertheless, all the words derived from the Latin *modulus* ultimately underwent a semantic shift to the meaning of the Italian word *modello*, which is now used to refer to small-size three-dimensional architectural representations like the Three-Step Stairway Model.

During the "Renaissance," the time period continuously disputed to be from the 14th to the 17th century, the Latin word *modulus* orthography changed to *modello* in present-day Italy.[74]

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[68] "MRT-1738, Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado."

[69] Healy, *The Model and Its Architecture*, 19; Brejzek and Wallen, *The Model as Performance*, 13; Smith, *Architectural Model as Machine*, 62.

[70] Healy, *The Model and Its Architecture*, 19.

[71] Healy, 19; Smith, *Architectural Model as Machine*, 61.

[72] Healy, *The Model and Its Architecture*, 19.

[73] Evans, "The Ontology of the Fashion Model," 58; Healy, *The Model and Its Architecture*, 19.

[74] Brejzek and Wallen, *The Model as Performance*, 13.

According to some scholars, the rediscovery of Vitruvius's texts and the Italian interest in Greek culture prompted the use and subsequent orthographical change from *modulus* to *modello*, where its meaning became associated with "form."[75] According to Architect Matthew Mindrup, the word *modello* was first used to refer to small-size three-dimensional architectural representations in a payment receipt to Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti in 1481 for their conceptual architectural "models" of the main dome of the Duomo di Firenze (Florence Cathedral,)[76]—seen in the photograph by the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy (fig. 24)—showcasing the word's subsequent change in orthography and semantics that remains today.

Nonetheless, in Spanish, architectural "models" are known and referred to as "*maquetas"* (maquettes) as the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado categorizes the Three-Step Stairway Model. According to the *Diccionario critico etimológico castellano e hispánico (Spanish and Hispanic Critical Etymological Dictionary)*, *"maqueta"* is derived from the French word *maquette* which originates from the Italian term *macchietta,* meaning "a sketch of a drawing."[77] On the other hand, *macchietta* is the diminutive of *macchia,* meaning "stain," derived from the Latin *macula*, which has the same meaning.[78] According to the Curator Natalia Menéndez, *macchietta* was the term used between Italian artists during the peak of the *Comedia dell'Arte*—a period where impromptu comedy took over Italy approximately between the 17th

[75] Healy, *The Model and Its Architecture*, 19.

[76] Mindrup, *The Architectural Model*, 89.

[77] Corominas and Pascual, *Diccionario critico etimológico castellano e hispánico. 3*, 798.

[78] Corominas and Pascual, 798.

and 18th centuries[79]—to refer to a small-size sketch of a work.[80] However, there does not seem to be a determined date when the word *"maqueta"* was introduced to the Spanish vocabulary to refer to small-size three-dimensional architectural representations.[81]

Despite this, the word *"maqueta"* or "model" has also been adopted in the continent we now call America to refer to small-sized three-dimensional architectural representations. Since European invaders attempted to eradicate any form of Indigenous knowledge as a conquest and evangelization strategy upon their arrival,[82] our understanding of the terminology Indigenous peoples used to refer to small-sized three-dimensional architectural representations is scarce, especially in South America, as the use of oral traditions seems to have been the primary communication vehicle of knowledge known thus far. Although the Indigenous terminology used to refer to small-size three-dimensional architectural representations in America is uncertain, scholars have been able to construe their possible purpose of creation in some instances. For example, in a small-size three-dimensional stone house-like representation excavated in Copan, Honduras, the Mayan word *waybill*, meaning "sleeping chamber," was etched on its surface[83] (fig. 25). Therefore, scholars argue that the object might portray the Mayan architectural "sleeping chamber" structure,[84] or perhaps it was a "sleeping chamber" for someone or something.

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[79] Jordan, "In Search of Pantalone and the Origins of the Commedia Dell'Arte," 207.

[80] Menéndez, "Maquetas - Exposición: El Valor de La Mano. Dossier de Prensa.," 7.

[81] Menéndez, 7.

[82] Salazar, "The Looting of Archaeological Patrimony in Ecuador," 99.

[83] Pillsbury et al., *Design for Eternity*, 33.

[84] Pillsbury et al., 33.

Considering the last point, the object I analyzed does not possess "context"—as the term is currently and widely understood. Thus, objects with similar visual appearance belonging to past Indigenous peoples are often considered "small-size three-dimensional architectural representations" or "models" portraying imagined or preexisting structures and also assumed to have ritualistic, ceremonial, religious, or funerary purposes mainly due to their Indigenous provenance as Indigenous' ontologies are perceived only to encompass such traditions. Despite this, objects of similar visual appearance to the one I analyzed can be considered tangible communication objects that transcend time, space, and cultures, providing a framework for understanding the past. The existence and enduring nature of these objects speak to the life, knowledge, intent, traditions, environments, technologies, artistic and architectural practices, creativity, imaginations, and skills of the peoples to whom they belong and/or of their maker(s), as I have demonstrated in my analysis.

Rethinking the Three-Step Stairway Model: Is it a Model?

Determining the use, function, or purpose of the creation of the Three-Step Stairway Model is difficult. This difficulty arises due to La Tolita-Tumaco culture's small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations, like the one I analyzed, lack provenance information. Moreover, there has not been a scientific or material analysis to determine the approximate date of the creation and the specific construction materials of the Three-Step Stairway Model. Furthermore, it is unclear what it represents, how it was used, or its function since, to the present, no sign of a language employed by La Tolita-Tumaco culture has been discovered, and no living descendants who might identify with this culture survive. Additionally, no extant architecture exists, nor remnants have been found.

In addition, to this day, there is only one recorded instance where a small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation like the Three-Step Stairway Model was excavated during an archaeological project in Ecuador. In 1954, Clifford Evans, a Smithsonian Associate Curator of Archaeology, and Betty Meggers, an Associate Researcher, performed an archaeological study on the coast.[85] One of the chosen excavation sites was "La Compañia" near the present-day city of Babahoyo in the Los Rios province, where Evans and Meggers reported that a small-size three-dimensional house-like ceramic object with a gable roof was found.[86] However, their reports do not contribute to uncovering the possible use, function, and, thus, the purpose of the creation of similar small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations, as they do not provide any further information regarding the exact location or placement of the object upon its discovery.

Furthermore, looting is another contributing factor to the lack of provenance information on La Tolita-Tumaco objects. Indigenous objects in Ecuador have been continuously looted throughout time. However, in La Tolita island specifically, the earliest mention of looting is from 1577, where Pedro Arevalo, a Spanish invader captain who visited the area, witnessed the extraction of gold figurines from the land and surrounding bodies of water, as Anthropologist Ernesto Salazar explains.[87] Later, in 1775, Fray Juan Santa de Gertrudis, a Franciscan friar, wrote that the tolas on the island were full of gold and ceramic objects, and people wore the jewelry found.[88] Throughout the years, the looting of the island continued and expanded into the 20th

[85] Evans, *Informe preliminar sobre las investigaciones arqueológicas realizadas en la cuenca del Guayas, Ecuador / Clifford Evans, Betty J. Meggers.*, 4.

[86] Evans, 5.

[87] Salazar, "The Looting of Archaeological Patrimony in Ecuador," 100.

[88] Salazar, 100.

century, when William Farabee, an anthropologist who became a curator of the University of Pennsylvania's Museum, purchased an urn filled with gold objects for the museum immediately as they were being unearthed.[89] After, in 1923, the island became legal mining grounds at the hands of the Italian Donato Yannuzzelli, where workers reported that "the amount of gold and ceramic materials being removed daily was outrageous."[90] The constant looting throughout the years makes it almost impossible to trace the history and, thus, the use, function, or purpose of the creation of La Tolita-Tumaco objects, especially small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations like the Three-Step Stairway Model.

Conceivably, these objects may not be renderings of contemporaneous La Tolita-Tumaco structures. If this was the case, disregarding the immediate assumption that they are ritualistic, ceremonial, religious, or funerary, as is often the case with Indigenous objects, then some questions arise: why were they created? What was their function and use? Where could they have been placed and/or displayed? Perhaps these are the materialized results of artistic and architectural imaginations, envisioning contemporaneous or alternative architectural possibilities, as some have assumed. Alternatively, perhaps, they were toys, as many small-sized objects, especially of Indigenous origins, are thought to be,[91] or perhaps oil lamps, such as Inca *canopas*—carved stone figurines of Andean camelids—were presumed to be due to the cavities on their back (fig. 26),[92] or perhaps birdhouses, as many of these small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations have an interior space. Concerning their placement, perhaps

[89] Salazar, 102.

[90] Rivera Fellner, "Identidad y Patrimonio Arqueológico," 8.

[91] Hamilton, *Scale & the Incas*, 5.

[92] Hamilton, 9.

they were positioned and/or displayed in the workspace of their maker(s) or outdoors for others to interact with, human and non-human alike, or perhaps they were markers that communicated a message, like territory boundaries, signs of a nearby inhabited area, or "ancestor" or "soul" houses, as many other similar objects have been assumed to be.[93] However, their use and display possibly corresponded with their function and/or perhaps the purpose of their creation.

Interestingly, all of the La Tolita-Tumaco small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations in the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado collection have smoke residue on the exterior and some in the interior (fig. 1-4). This residue could have been caused during the La Tolita-Tumaco time or after, in the hands of their subsequent custodian(s). Therefore, they were possibly placed near a fire as commemorative objects or served as decorative elements near food preparation areas or near the hearth of La Tolita-Tumaco structures, or the fireplaces of their custodian(s), or perhaps a structure fire occurred where they were placed, again, during the La Tolita-Tumaco time or later. Nevertheless, the smoke residues are evidence that they were all, in fact, in or near a fire.

Alternatively, the remnants of colors throughout the Three-Step Stairway Model may also give some insights into its use, display, or placement. For instance, the lateral sides seem to preserve a more significant amount of pigments (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). Therefore, it is likely that either the application of paint by the maker(s) was more substantial in these areas to accentuate them as they would have been seen in this direction as opposed to the assumed front, or the object was displayed or positioned in a manner or in a place where the assumed front and back were exposed to the elements causing the pigments or possible layers of dyes in this areas to fade or degrade. Similarly, their current visual appearance might have been intentional and

[93] Pillsbury et al., *Design for Eternity*, 6.

purposeful, resembling how they once looked. Furthermore, the elevated nature of the object created by the base required a stairway to reach the house-like structure, which the maker(s) of this object likely used to indicate the action of entering and exiting the building (fig. 1, 6, 8, 13). However, the stairway and the possible entranceway, or large opening, along the majority of the roof's details, such as the anthropomorphic head on top of the plank-like component and the carving showcasing the six layers of the letter-H-shaped component, are only seen in the assumed front of the object (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). Therefore, it is possible that this seemingly intentional, purposeful, and deliberate placement choice likely conveys directionality, emphasizing its possible significance to the La Tolita-Tumaco culture.

Nevertheless, the form and visual attributes of the Three-Step Stairway Model prompt other possible considerations regarding its use, function, and/or creation. For instance, the surface of the Three-Step Model showcases the object's material composition in a visually consistent manner and, thus, the likely process and methods of its creation. The maker(s) likely used their hands to obtain its smooth surface appearance, as no immediate signs of brush or other tool marks are apparent (fig. 1, 6, 10-13). Seemingly, once the object was assembled, it was fired, as unfired ceramics do not have strong structural integrity, and therefore, it would not have survived the elements and the passage of time.

Likewise, another concurrent aspect of the Three-Step Stairway Model is its size. Art Historian Andrew Hamilton explains that scale "plays a primary role in the ways viewers engage with and subsequently interpret objects."[94] Thus, scale seems to have played a crucial role in the La Tolita-Tumaco culture since, while this culture created a range of objects of different sizes, small-size objects made of metals—predominantly gold and platinum—bone, shell, wood,

[94] Hamilton, *Scale & the Incas*, 5.

antlers, and ceramic possess extensive, intricate details[95]—as seen in the photograph by the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, Santiago de Chile, Chile (fig. 27) and photographs by the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado (fig. 28-30). However, the Three-Step Stairway Model and the other small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations in the Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado are not as intricate (fig. 1-4). Following Hamilton's argument, perhaps the maker(s) intentionally, purposefully, and deliberately chose to omit intricate details to control the viewer's perspective and perception.

Alternatively, the Three-Step Stairway Model could likely be the three-dimensional representation of a structure that did exist. Key evidence is found on the stairway portion of the object. Here, the stairway is divided by what can be considered at first glance a protuberance on the second step, seemingly placed to divide the feature in two (fig. 1, 6, 8). However, upon close examination, the protuberance seems to be a partially fragmented segment and not a deliberate addition. The missing fragment likely portrayed an indispensable post meant to give shape to the awning and support the roof of a La Tolita-Tumaco building to avoid its collapse. However, the Three-Step Stairway Model's construction material is clay, so it would not have been necessary to include this feature as the awning shape could have been modeled with the maker(s) hands, and the roof would not need to be supported as it would not have collapsed. Therefore, there is a high possibility of the Three-Step Stairway Model being a rendering of an actual building that did exist. Therefore, it could be considered a "small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation" or "model."

Further evidence supporting this interpretation can also be found throughout the object. For instance, the object is made of clay, and Francisco Valdez argued for the possibility of La

[95] Valdez, *Proyecto arqueológico "La Tolita," 1983-1986*, 69.

Tolita-Tumaco architecture's construction materials being *bahareque*—wood or interlaced canes covered with adobe to create a more robust building material.[96] Perhaps the maker(s) of the model intended to portray *bahareque* by using clay as its medium. Likewise, the presence of the fractured pole correlates with Valdez's discovery of presumed postholes on the surface of the excavated tola during his 1980 archaeological project on La Tolita island.[97] Additionally, as it has been argued throughout this research, the construction of *tolas* by La Tolita-Tumaco culture was a remarkable engineering ingenuity and reality as they continue to exist. Therefore, the model's pedestal-like base (fig. 1, 6, 10-13) is highly likely the portrayal of a tola in the effort to commemorate this technology into perpetuity.

Furthermore, the visual appearance of the interior space and the roof of the Three-Step Stairway Model also provide evidence to support this theory since they seem to resemble other extant Indigenous architectural practices in the region. The ceramic object resembles the Chachi open space layout and the layered thatched gable-roof convention (fig. 1, 6, 10-15). However, the object's visual appearance lacks various construction details, such as roof purlins, rafters, ties, posts, joints, and construction materials' textures. Therefore, as its visual appearance seems slightly reduced to core widely recognizable architectural elemental forms, its function was likely conceptual or commemorative.

Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned qualities indicate the maker(s) skilled artistry and intentionality in achieving the object's distinct visual appearance and physical qualities. Ultimately, the visual and material analysis has provided new and valuable insights and possibilities into life, traditions, environments, technologies, artistic and architectural practices,

[96] Valdez, 63.

[97] Valdez, 63.

knowledge, creativity, and imaginations of the object's maker(s) and La Tolita-Tumaco culture. In addition, the analysis performed has also challenged the way architectural models are conceived, approached, and thus defined and has also demonstrated how Indigenous objects, more specifically, objects without given "context," have a story to tell.

La Tolita-Tumaco Full-Scale Architecture

Scholarship on the built environment has mainly focused on "monumental" large-scale tangible and enduring structures, often in situ, and has been approached as inanimate. Architecture's construction may serve diverse intentions, functions, and purposes driven by various ambitions, objectives, and/or priorities. However, built environments can exist in various stages of materialization. They can also remain imagined or conceptualized for potential realization or, in the end, not brought into existence. At the same time, countless constructions built in the past do not survive the elements or passage of time, intentionally or unintentionally. Although some built environments might be considered to have disappeared from the physical realm, it could be argued that their existence does not cease, as they can survive in various formats, such as memory, oral or written histories, replicas, models, plans, drawings, and/or photographs, amongst others. Therefore, while no definitive physical evidence of La Tolita-Tumaco culture's architecture has been discovered, small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations are the only crucial source of information about their possible visual appearance, forms, construction materials, and techniques if they accurately represent the architecture of the time.

In addition to the details and possibilities discussed, archaeological excavations have unintentionally brought forth possible valuable information regarding La Tolita-Tumaco

architecture. For instance, a Columbia University archaeology professor, Marshall Saville, excavated one of the *tolas* on La Tolita island in 1910.[98] In his reports, he describes the *tolas'* measurements ranging from 1.22 m to 6.10 m (4 ft. to 20 ft.) in height and 6.10 m to 45.72 m (20 ft. to 150ft.) in diameter.[99] Saville mentions that thousands of gold and ceramic objects could be unearthed in tolas anywhere on the island, approximately 1.52 m (5 ft.) below a layer of mud and decayed vegetable deposits.[100] Since this region's weather is tropical, and the precipitation and humidity levels are high, like the Chachi, La Tolita-Tumaco architecture was likely constructed with materials that addressed these conditions. Therefore, it could be argued that the vegetable deposits mentioned by Saville could be the remnants of architectural structures the Three-Step Stairway Model and other similar small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations portray.

Furthermore, if the vegetable remains in Saville's reports are, in fact, remnants of La Tolita-Tumaco's architecture, then their structures were ephemeral and relatively small, according to Saville's measurements. If this was the case, the deliberate choice of materials suggests that these structures were perhaps meant to decay. It is also important to consider the Three-Step Stairway Model maker(s)' intentional use of clay as its construction material since the object had to be fired to ensure its durability. However, no evidence of a specific site dedicated to ceramic firing has yet been discovered.[101] Scholars presume that La Tolita-Tumaco

[98] Saville, "'Archeological Researches on the Coast of Esmeraldas, Ecuador'. Mit Einem Textbilde," 340.

[99] Saville, 340.

[100] Saville, 340.

[101] Montañés, *Las "figurillas" de Esmeraldas*, 17.

ceramics were created on an open fire,[102] emphasizing the resourcefulness and determination of La Tolita-Tumaco's ceramic maker(s) in bringing their creations to existence, but also their understanding of the effects of the elements and the passage of time. Therefore, La Tolita-Tumaco culture's construction and reconstruction of buildings that existed during that time might have been performative and cyclical. For this reason, this culture likely considered these performative actions more important than the ephemerality of their structures, opposing and challenging the current notion of "architecture" and how it must be permanent or durable, and the bigger or more "monumental," the better it is.

Comparatively, the Chachi, who continue to inhabit the nearby area where La Tolita-Tumaco culture once lived, erect their architecture with the community's help. The Chachi construct, maintain, and reconstruct their built environments through *mingas*, or collective work.[103] According to a Chachi commentary, the *mingas* "occur frequently," often culminating in a celebration to acknowledge their accomplishments, where the beneficiary prepares and provides the food.[104] Therefore, it could be argued that the Chachi value collective work and the coming together of the community, sharing food, and celebrating one another, more if not the same as architectural structures themselves. Possibly, La Tolita-Tumaco culture shared similar perspectives and/or placed similar or different values and meanings to architecture, collective work, and celebratory activities.

Furthermore, scholars have argued that the positioning of the *tolas* indicates a deliberate strategic placement. In the 1920s, the archaeologist Max Uhle conducted a project on La Tolita

[102] Montañés, 17.

[103] Carrasco, *El Pueblo Chachi*, 80.

[104] Carrasco, 80.

island and observed a possible intentional orientation and organization of the *tolas*, where they formed courtyards based on his measurements using a compass.[105] A possible interpretation of this hypothesis could be that perhaps the island was considered a single built environment by the La Tolita-Tumaco culture, where the individual *tolas*—and the architectures on top—served as its spatial configurations, as in the community of Susques in northern Argentina, where single places, or structures, conform one space, or built environment.[106] If the individual *tolas*—and the architectures on top—served as the island's spatial configurations, perhaps the La Tolita-Tumaco culture might have valued the outside instead of the confinement of a building. This perspective might explain the absence of spatial configurations in the architectural models, and perhaps the La Tolita-Tumaco culture had unrestricted access to all the islands' architecture, potentially implying a lack of distinct ownership concepts.

Another consideration regarding La Tolita-Tumaco culture's human-scale architecture, if the Three-Step Stairway Model accurately represents the architecture of the time, is the sensorial aspect as part of their experiential nature. For instance, a possible visual experience could have occurred upon entering the dark interior space of the structure caused by the roof. This environmental transition—light to dark/outside to inside—would have triggered pupil dilation to adapt to the low light levels, indicating the possible reason for the addition of the small opening or assumed window (fig. 7, 10-12) on the wall across the assumed entranceway, as it would have ameliorated this transition, or perhaps the interior spaces were purposefully and intentionally dark to serve a functional and practical purpose. If this was the case, someone might have been able to see outside without a problem, whereas someone from the outside might not have been

[105] Uhle, "Estudios esmeraldeños," 237.

[106] Tomasi, "The House as a Moving Story," 704,706.

able to discern the interior space or the being watching from the inside, similar to architecture in Cameroon as explained by Art Historian Mark Dike De Lancey, serving as a defense and security strategy.[107] Likewise, the darkness of the interior space could have also triggered a tactile experience where the body perceived the lower temperature as the result of the shade created by the roof. Thus, a person escaping the high temperatures and humidity characteristic of the Esmeraldas province might have experienced relief and/or satisfaction by entering the building, transforming the structure's meaning and value by perhaps considering it a sanctuary or oasis of sorts.

Similarly, La Tolita-Tumaco culture's architecture would have comprised an auditory experience. If local vegetation and other organic materials were used to construct their built environments, sound would have permeated, inundated the interior, and traveled through the structure, specifically the roof. Therefore, there would have been no distinction between the outside and inside worlds. Likewise, La Tolita-Tumaco culture's architecture would have engaged with a human's chemosensory systems, taste, and smell.[108] In this specific context, since these senses are considered to be connected to one another, the lower temperature caused by the roof's shade in combination with the humidity of the Esmeraldas province would have created a concentrated earthy smell in the interior space and the cool earthy dampness would have also possibly been perceived in the taste buds. If this was the case, perhaps the choice to use natural materials went beyond their impermanent qualities and implicated a connection with nature and the environment where built environments could be felt, seen, heard, tasted, and smelled, challenging the current generally recognized understanding of the notions and concepts of

[107] Dike DeLancey, "Expressing Status: Permanence and Impermanence in the Architecture of Northern Cameroon."

[108] Mollo et al., "Taste and Smell," 72; Eberhard, *Brain Landscape*, 7.

"architecture." Likewise, La Tolita-Tumaco culture's architecture could have also been considered an extension or embodiment of nature itself, and perhaps these concepts also form part of La Tolita-Tumaco's worldviews.

Moreover, materiality is also often overlooked and/or dismissed in architectural research. As mentioned, scholarship on the built environment approaches it as inanimate. However, as I have demonstrated in this research, La Tolita-Tumaco culture engaged with nature and the environment, not only in creating the Three-Step Stairway Model, as evident in its material composition, but also in the possible construction and decorative materials used in their full-scale architecture. Therefore, perhaps the materials had agency, where nature and all its components were considered sentient, like the Inca considered rocks to be.[109] Ultimately, different approaches to architecture, including size construction and decorative materials, should not be disregarded, neglected, omitted, or overlooked. Often, our temporal biases, predetermined thought processes, and notions cloud our ability to consider different cultural traditions and worldviews, especially when it pertains to Indigenous cultures, where nature and the environment are approached differently and where permanence, monumentality, gender, power structures, religion, and the concept of architecture itself might not exist or might have different meanings and values than our conventional understandings. Therefore, we should be aware of our biases and aspire to approach diverse perspectives, beliefs, and concepts with an open mind.

Conclusion

La Tolita-Tumaco's architectural models, or small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations like the one I analyzed, have not been approached in the same

[109] Dean, *A Culture of Stone*, 5.

capacity as other objects or topics. The lack of provenance information has made it difficult to study any La Tolita-Tumaco objects, and previous studies on this culture have mainly focused on metallurgy or ceramics portraying humans or anthropomorphic figures, primarily from an archaeological perspective. Furthermore, until now, research in Latin America has centered around present-day Mexico and Peru, overlooking other regions. Likewise, Indigenous objects and topics have often been approached through theories and methods that marginalize the perspectives of the cultures who created these objects. Moreover, while art history has recently begun to consider Indigenous objects, perspectives, and topics, architecture and three-dimensional architectural representations continue to be omitted. I ask myself: Why does this behavior persist?

Our thought processes and notions have been conditioned, thus obstructing our ability to see past what we have been trained to understand. For instance, the sole focus on La Tolita-Tumaco's metallurgy and human or human-like figures indicates our value and importance on these materials and representations. In contrast, it is widely known that many Indigenous cultures value other materials, such as feathers, salt, and seeds, in the same manner we value certain "precious" metals. Similarly, the constant focus and centering of humans creates a humancentrism and limits our ability to consider other worldviews, where the "inanimate," non-human, or the intangible are also sentient beings and given the same treatment and consideration as humans.

Furthermore, the exclusive scholarly focus on Latin America centers on Mexico and Peru, encouraging the continuation and perpetuation of colonial rationale. European invaders deliberately focused their attention and effort on areas that displayed signs of what they considered worthy, like long-lasting monumental architecture, urbanization, and "precious"

metals. Any other region(s) or culture(s) that did not meet these criteria or possessed such worthy objects or materials were perceived as inferior and undeserving. Seemingly, scholarship has followed these colonial notions where regions and cultures in the "peripheries" of these "centers" have been marginalized, overlooked, and neglected. My research attempts to challenge the perpetuation of these enduring colonial legacies and demonstrate that what has been considered "peripheries" have much to contribute in terms of art, knowledge, traditions, technologies, artistic and architectural practices, creativity, and imaginations to enrich scholarship and foster a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable understanding of the world.

Comparatively, although art history neglect and marginalization of Indigenous topics and objects have begun to take a slow turn after many years, the neglect and marginalization of architecture, architectural representations, and related topics continue. Through my experience, this neglect derives from the notion that Indigenous tangible cultural heritage and architecture are not art but rather craft. However, what is art? And according to whom? As explored in this research, the conceptualization and materialization of a building and an architectural model involve more than having the ability to shape clay with one's hands or putting materials together without reason. In the case of La Tolita-Tumaco models, the understanding of nature, its components, light and shadow, proportions, the properties of materials and pigments, and the ability to possibly depict a building seemingly to scale, speak to the artistic and architectural imagination and skills of the maker(s). Therefore, architecture, architectural representations, Indigenous topics, and objects belong within the art history canon, as they should have.

My research has also demonstrated that objects without contextual information or written histories can provide a wealth of information. Indigenous cultures throughout the world have created objects through artistic practices and traditions to serve as communication devices. The

act of creation, bringing something into existence, follows a process. As information designer Elzbieta Kazmierczak explains, designs are interfaces of materialized concepts that a designer created to communicate meaning or intent to a receiver.[110] In this concept, data—deliberate values, qualities, or symbols—comprise the design, and the gathering and organization of data by the receiver convey the embedded information, meaning, or intent.[111]

For this reason, Kazmierczak argues that designs are not just static objects but triggers meant to engage with a receiver, thus prompting a reaction.[112] Therefore, while the original intent or function of objects without provenance or "contextual" information is not explicit, they continue to serve as triggers, as Kazmierczak explains. Through methodologies like the ones I have employed in this research, it is possible to approach these types of objects with these sets of circumstances instead of neglecting them completely or hastily classifying them as ritualistic, ceremonial, religious, or funerary by default, solely based on their origin. These approaches fall under Indigenous theory and methods, where the culture and, in this case, the objects—as an extension of the culture—are centered so their stories can be heard, thus highlighting the underrepresentation of Indigenous and Diasporic scholars and topics in academia. In doing so, I aim to deviate from solely relying on theories and methodologies developed long ago by specific people for specific types of objects in specific regions.

In conclusion, it is also important to note that this research and the mentioned descriptions and arguments regarding the ceramic object I analyzed, and other visually similar ones, are based on the current understandings of the concepts "maquetas," "models," and

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[110] Kazmierczak, "Design as Meaning Making," 46.

[111] Kazmierczak, 46.

[112] Kazmierczak, 47.

"architecture," which have been shaped, influenced, and imposed by what has been commonly referred to as "Western" knowledge. Considering and becoming aware of one's current positionalities is crucial, as La Tolita-Tumaco culture's understanding of these concepts is unknown and might have been entirely different, similar, or perhaps the same. Moreover, I have chosen to refer to objects, like the one I analyzed, as "small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representations" to avoid imposing the term "maqueta" or "model" since their use, function, or purpose behind their creation is unknown. However, scholars like Art Historian Carolyn Dean, for instance, have reconsidered the word and concept of "representation" within an Indigenous context in the Andes. Dean argues that stones—considered the construction material of Inca buildings and adoration figures—were not "representative," a proxy of sorts, as European invaders and subsequent scholars have assumed, but rather "presentational," where they were embodiments in and of themselves.[113] Hence, it is not only crucial to question the temporal bias inherent in our interpretations of these terms but rather a further and deeper examination, reconsideration, reconceptualization, and reinterpretation of the very fabric of our inherent reality and question the origin of its construct, thus acknowledging the potential limitations of our current knowledge and understandings. Therefore, to provide a more nuanced understanding of our world and reality, it is indispensable that multiple perspectives and voices are included to move forward.

[113] Dean, *A Culture of Stone*, 40–41.

Figures

Figure 1. Angled view of assumed “proper front” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 2. Map highlighting the La Tolita- Tumaco culture's currently assumed territory. Image by Username: Breogan2008, *Historical territory of Tumaco-La Tolita culture*, Wikimedia Commons, accessed February 8, 2023, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorio_da_cultura_Tumaco-La_Tolita.jpg.

Figure 3. Angled view of another La Tolita-Tumaco object that shares the vitrine with the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1737*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 13 cm x 19.9 cm (5.12in. x 7.83 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 4. Angled view of another La Tolita-Tumaco object that shares the vitrine with the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-0106*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 33.8 cm x 18.8 cm (13.31 in. x 7.40 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 5. Angled view of another La Tolita-Tumaco object that shares the vitrine with the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta, KV-145*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 24 cm x 13.8 cm (9.45 in. x 5. 43in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 6. Angled view of assumed “proper front” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 7. Detailed view of anthropomorphic figure within the interior space of the house-like structure of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 8. Detailed view of the assumed "proper front" of the Three-Step Stairway Model, *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 9. Example of tolas in the Tumaco region which are also found in La Tolita island, in *Trois millénaires de civilisation entre Colombie et Equateur: la région de Tumaco La Tolita,* by Jean-François Bouchard, and Pierre Usselmann. Paris, France: CNRS, 2003.

Figure 10. Angled view of assumed “posterior” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photographed by the author.

Figure 11. Angled view of assumed “posterior” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photographed by the author.

Figure 12. View of assumed “posterior” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photographed by the author.

Figure 13. View of assumed “proper front” of the Three-Step Stairway Model. *Maqueta MRT-1738*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 19.2 cm x 15.8 cm x 19.8 cm (7.55 in. x 6.22 in. x 7.79 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photographed by the author.

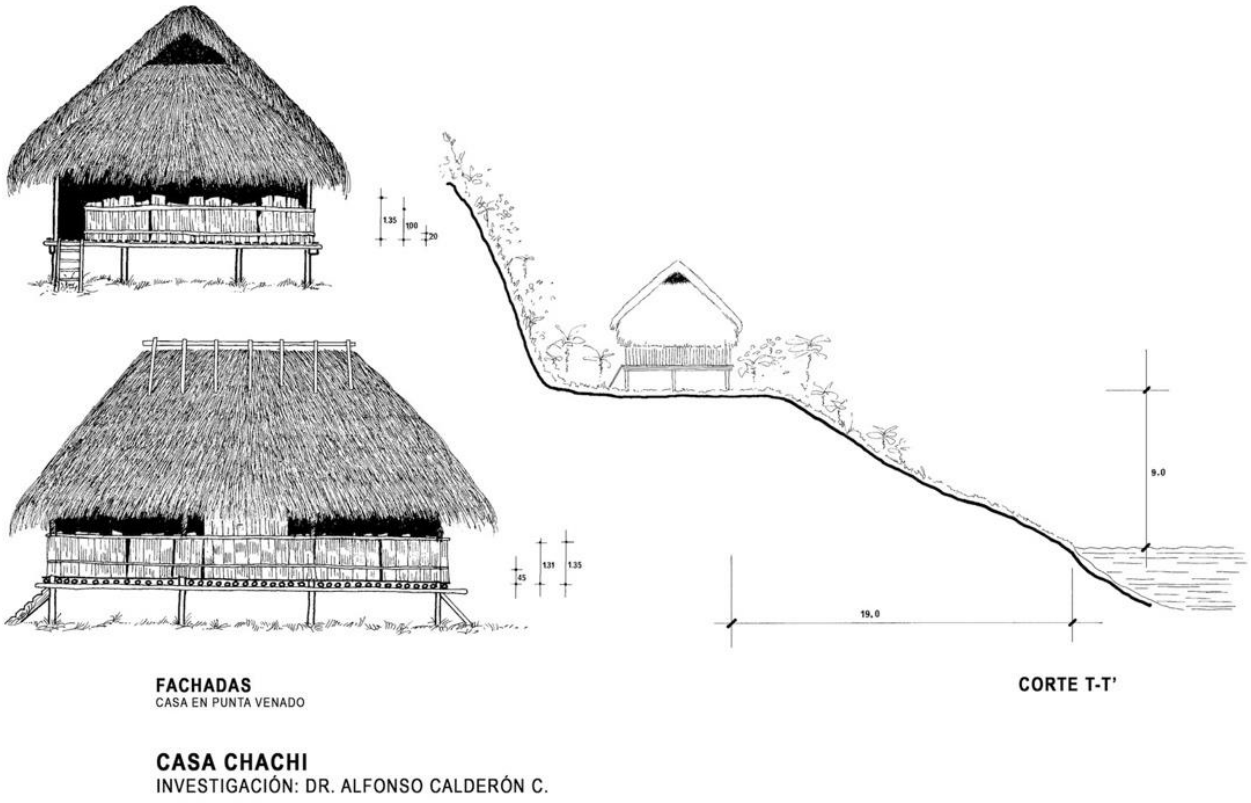

Figure 14. Rendering of a traditional Chachi architectural construction. Image by Dr. Alfonso Calderon C., *Casa Chachi,* Calderón Cueva Iturralde Arquitectos, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www.mariocueva.com/casa-junto-al-ro-nambillo.

Figure 15. Rendering of a traditional Chachi architectural construction. Image by Dr. Alfonso Calderon C., *Casa Chachi,* Calderón Cueva Iturralde Arquitectos, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www.mariocueva.com/casa-junto-al-ro-nambillo.

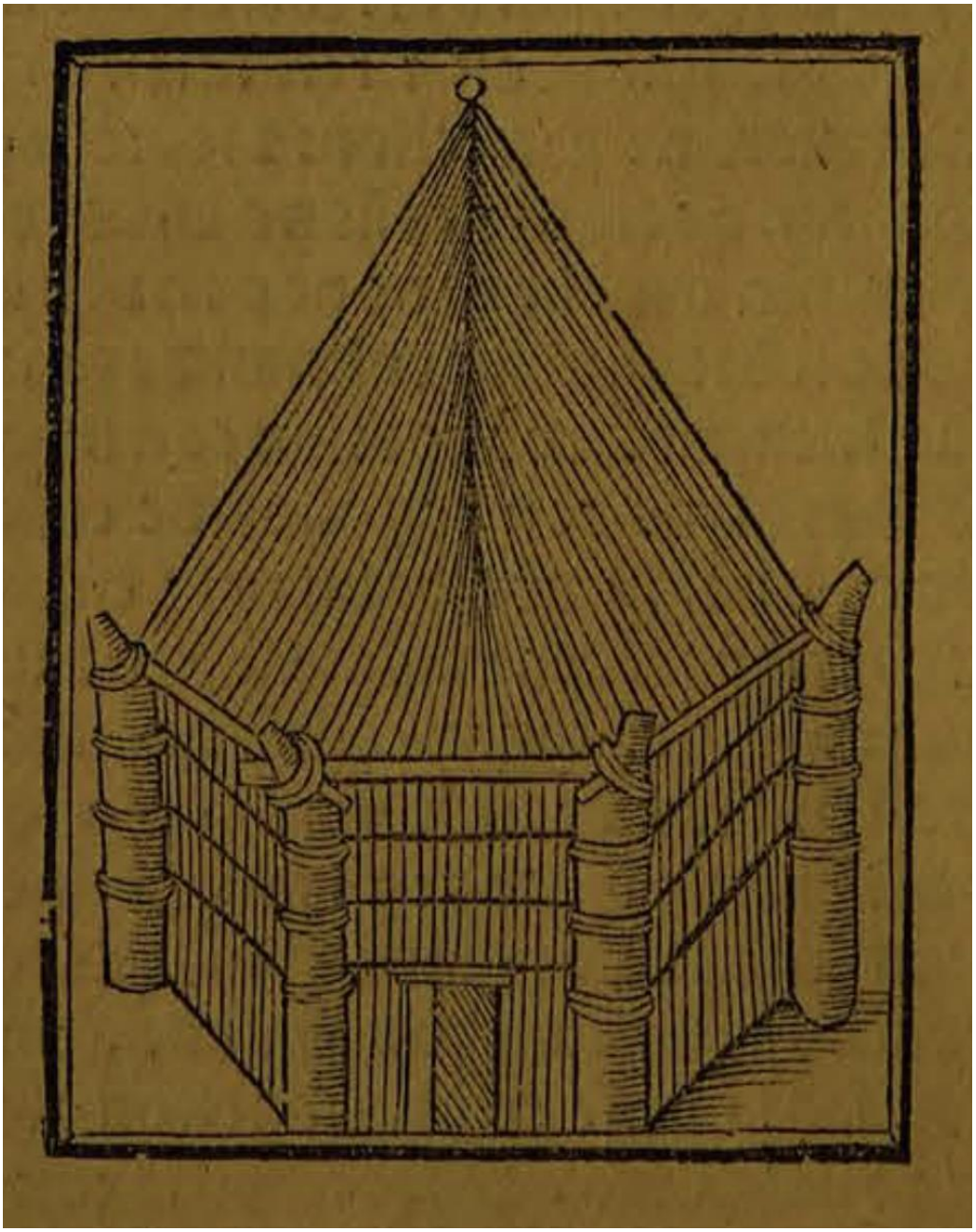

Figure 16. Print of “Espanola” island Indigenous architecture, in *Coronica de Las Indias La Hystoria General de Las Indias: Agora Nueuamente Impressa Corregida y Emendada; y Con La Conquista Del Peru*, by Fernández de Oviedo, Parte I., Sexto Libro. Captítulo I. fo. LVIII, verso. Salamanca, España: en casa de Juan de Junta, 1547. Accessed, February 22, 2023. Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2020. https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/nd/ark:/59851/bmc0986129.

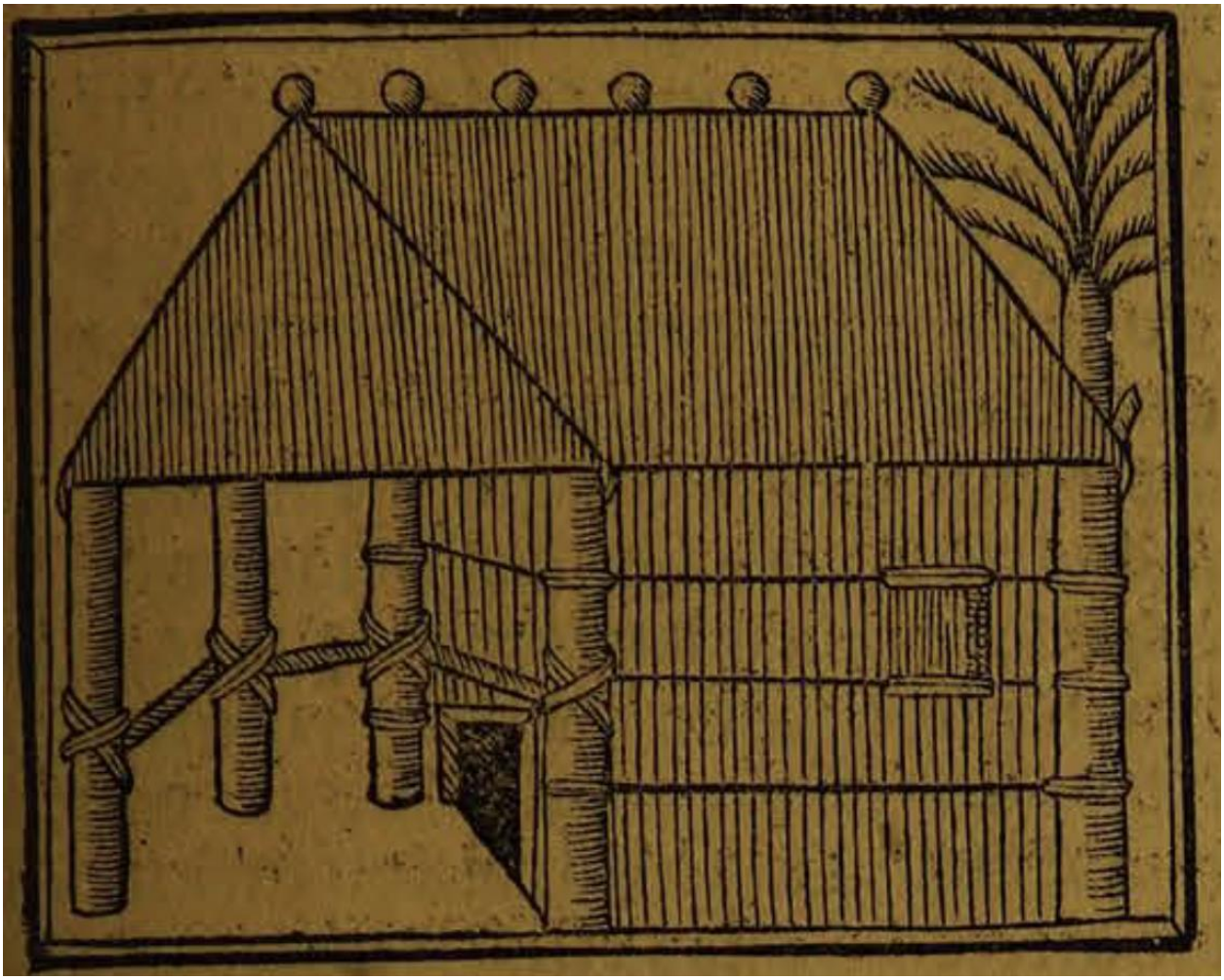

Figure 17. Print of "Espanola" island Indigenous architecture, in *Coronica de Las Indias La Hystoria General de Las Indias: Agora Nueuamente Impressa Corregida y Emendada; y Con La Conquista Del Peru*, by Fernández de Oviedo, Parte I., Sexto Libro. Captítulo I. fo. LIX, recto. Salamanca, España: en casa de Juan de Junta, 1547. Accessed, February 22, 2023. Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2020. https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/nd/ark:/59851/bmc0986129.

Figure 18. Example of Karo Batak architecture. Photograph by David Beynon, 2015, *Rumah Adat Karo (traditional Karo house), Desa Dokan, north sumatra, Indonesia*, in " 'Tropical' Architecture in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Tropicality, Modernity and Identity." *Fabrications The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, by David Beynon, 266. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2017.1295502.

Figure 19. Example of a thatched roof on present-day Aymara architecture, Bolivia-Peru border. Photograph by Paz Arando, 2016, *brown brick house*, Unsplash, accessed June 11, 2023, https://unsplash.com/photos/fpw2EF6W_NY.

Figure 20. Photograph of an Inca thatched roof reconstruction in Machu Picchu, Peru. Photograph by Emmanuel Dyan, 2010, *Machu Picchu, Inca Trail (Fourth Day), Peru,* Flickr, accessed June 13, 2023, https://www.flickr.com/photos/emmanueldyan/4289678266.

Figure 21. Example of a Shona thatched roof in Zimbabwe. Photograph by Adventure Life, accessed June 13, 2023, https://www.adventure-life.com/zimbabwe/hwange-national-park/ngamo-plains/tours/village-visits.

Figure 22. View from above of an Egyptian small-size three-dimensional architectural representation. *Model of a Granary with Scribes, accession number: 20.3.11*, Middle Kingdom, 12th Dynasty Egypt, early reign of Amenemhat I, ca. 1981–1975 B.C.E., From Egypt, Upper Egypt, Thebes, Southern Asasif, Tomb of Meketre (TT 280, MMA 1101), serdab, MMA excavations (1920), wood, plaster, paint, linen, grain, 36.5 cm x 56 cm x 74.9 cm (14.37 in. x 22.06 in. x 29.5 in.), Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, United States. Accessed, June 13, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545281.

Figure 23. Angled view of a possible small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation of a Gumelniţa culture construction. *Căscioarele sanctuary model*, Eneolithic, 4600–3900 B.C.E., Gumelniţa culture, Călăraşi county, Căscioarele, Romania, National History Museum of Romania, Bucharest, Romania. Accessed, June 13, 2023, https://www.mnir.ro/colectia-de-ceramica/.

Figure 24. Photograph of Filippo Brunelleschi's dome and side chapels' conceptual models for the Florence Cathedral. Italian, ca. 1418–1446, wood, 100 cm x 90 cm (39.37 in. x 35.43 in.), Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Accessed, June 13, 2023, https://duomo.firenze.it/en/opera-magazine/post/4436/the-dome-s-construction-work-begins-on-august-7th-1420.

Figure 25. Angled view of a possible small-size three-dimensional ceramic architectural representation of a Maya construction. *House form, Maya elite household monument, accession numbers: 92-49-20/C20 & 92-49-20/C20*, Maya, 550–900 CE, Copán, Honduras, stone (rhyolite), 40 cm x. 37 cm (15.75 in. x 14.56 in.), 54.432 kg (120 lb.), Peabody Museum Expedition (1891-1892), President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, New Haven, Connecticut, United States. Accessed, June 13, 2023, https://collections.peabody.harvard.edu/objects/details/291201?ctx=edb6f6794772a584dee8cf7420a923e9ef70e4d2&idx=0.

Figure 26. Angled view of an Inca Canopa. *Votive Container (Canopa), accession number: 1994.35.759*, Inca, 15th-16th century, Peru, stone, 6.7 cm (2.64 in.), Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, United States. Accessed, June 13, 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/317592.

Figure 27. Detail of intricate metallurgical techniques of a small-size gold and platinum object, La Tolita-Tumaco object, in *Artes y joyas del antiguo Ecuador: cultura La Tolita. Exposición del 9 de agosto al 2 de octubre de 1988*, by José. Berenguer R., and José Luis Martínez Cereceda, Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino. Santiago de Chile, Chile: Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, 1988.

Figure 28. Detailed view of intricate details of a small-size La Tolita-Tumaco object. *Cuchara*, 600 CE-600 BCE, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, bone, 4.5 cm (1.77 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Figure 29. Detailed view of intricate details of a small-size La Tolita-Tumaco object. *Nariguera,* La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, gold and platinum, 2 cm diameter (0.78 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

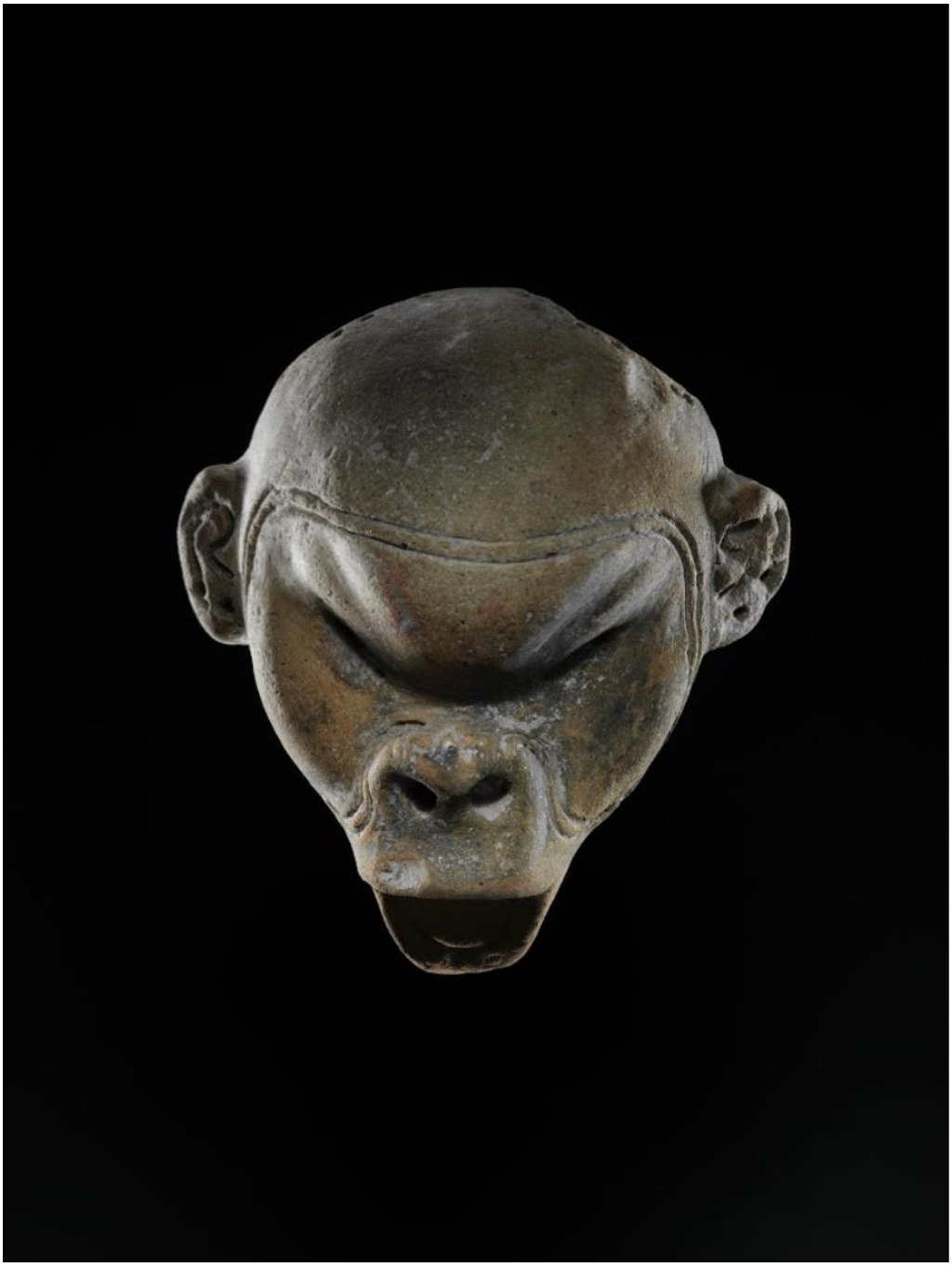

Figure 30. Detailed view of intricate details of a small-size La Tolita-Tumaco object. *Trophy head*, La Tolita-Tumaco, 600 BCE-600 CE, La Tolita, Esmeraldas, Ecuador, ceramic, 10.6 cm x 7.7 cm (4.17 in. x 3.03 in.), Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa Del Alabado, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

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