



Muisca raft in the Gold Museum in Bogotá

Gold embodied a profound meaning in the cosmogony of pre-Columbian societies as a sacred metal, a recipient the Sun's energy, a life-giving star, and the source of fertility.

Gold objects were not considered symbols of material wealth; they highlighted prestige and served as religious offerings.

The Muisca Raft

This marvelous piece, an outstanding example of a votive figure (offering), is 19.5 cm long, 10.1 cm wide, and 10.2 cm high. It was made during the late period of the Muisca culture, sometime between 1200 and 1500 BC.

The Muisca Raft was cast as a single piece using the lost-wax casting technique with a clay mold. The metal is a high grade gold (more than 80%) with native silver and copper alloy.

The Muisca raft was cast as an only piece in a clay mold by means of the lost wax technique. It was made of high-grade gold (over 80%) with an alloy of native silver and copper.

The figure standing in the center of the piece is believed to be the cacique. Twelve minor figures surround it. Some of them carry staffs; the two at the front wear jaguar masks and carry shaman maracas in their hands. The smallest figures, located at the edges of the rafts, are oarsmen.

The Discovery of the Muisca Raft

Three peasants found the raft among numerous gold objects in a cave in the municipality of

Pasca, south of Bogotá, among numerous gold objects in 1856. The raft had been placed in a clay container in the shape of a shaman in a thinking pose, with his hand on his chin.

When the rumor of the finding circulated through Pasca, the local priest understood the importance of this heritage and embarked upon its defense to protect it from being exported or smelted.



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The Gold Museum acquired the Muisca raft, and since then it has been on exhibition in its Bogotá seat. The visit to the Museum ends with a ritual act that transports visitors to the times of the legendary El Dorado.

The most legendary piece of the Museum has never left the country, not even on one of the almost 200 temporary itinerant exhibitions with which the Museum shows this Colombian heritage to the marveled eyes of the world.

The Legend of El Dorado

The legend concerns the nomination of a new cacique, or Indian chief, associated to the lord of Guatavita (although the raft was not found in Guatavita) and the famous El Dorado ceremony. According to what chroniclers tell us, when the Muisca cacique passed away, his nephew was acknowledged as the new chief by his people during a ceremony that included sailing on a raft and offering gold pieces and emeralds that were thrown into the lake.

Indigenous chieftains once sat in this raft, adorned with feathers, crowns, bracelets, jewelry, gold pendants and carrying their offerings. Before taking on his duties, the young chief was shut up in a cave. On the day of the ceremony, four braziers were placed at the edge of the lake. An Indian incense called *moque*, resins, and others perfumes were burnt in the braziers for the smoke to hide the light of day. Simultaneously, priests undressed the chief and anointed him with a viscous mixture of soil and gold powder.

Then, the cacique would get on the raft with large amounts of gold and emeralds at his feet.

Other chiefs, decked with feathers, crowns, armlets, pendants, and earrings and carrying their offerings, sat on the raft. As soon as the raft left the edge, a music of whistles, trumpets, flutes, and songs would play until the raft reached the center of the lake. Immediately, a flag was raised as a sign of silence. The chief would throw himself into the water with his offerings. The raft would then return to the edge for the party in honor of the new heir who was now recognized as chief and prince.

Additional information: [Bogotá Gold Museum website](#) .

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