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Intermix: traditional pre-Columbian art meets contemporary design

Luisa Fernanda Restrepo

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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INTERMIX: TRADITIONAL PRE-COLUMBIAN ART MEETS
CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

Luisa Fernanda Restrepo Pérez
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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity is something that impacts the individual, shaping and influencing them, during their lifetime journey. Each person chooses to embrace that identity differently.

For my thesis, I investigated pre-Columbian culture and its rich history, specifically source visuals of faces as symbolic forms integrated into my visual study. Exploring: various media, elements that are expressive of national identity, image-making techniques, and my graphic design knowledge as vehicles in my work to uncover a different point of view of my own cultural heritage. The process of finding new graphic representations of traditional pre-Columbian faces, while deconstructing and reconstructing their structure and re-contextualizing into a unique contemporary visual vocabulary, was one of my main goals.

This exploration helped me better understand those images that I have carried with me since I was a child, but mostly guided me in the right direction of sharing them with my audience which has never been exposed to pre-Columbian symbols and icons. As a graphic designer, I wanted to share the beauty and rich ethnic traits of my culture. I had a story to tell and I had an obligation and responsibility to tell that story through what I know best, graphic design. I believe that exploring our identity can help us communicate our unique individuality and can be used as a source of inspiration and national pride to tell a unique story. In addition, my goal was to not only challenge myself as an artist while developing an in-depth academic body of work.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are many authors that have been interested in research about Colombia and its pre-Columbian art heritage. Importance has typically been placed on archaeological or historical investigations, leaving a lot of bibliographical material. However, there have been very few studies about pre-Columbian art and its influence within the realm of graphic design.

Throughout the years Pre-Columbian art has received a lot of attention. Young designers and artists have explored this heritage looking for inspiration to develop new aesthetics for the contemporary art world.

Jenry Vargas Benavides, professor of graphic design at the University of Costa Rica highlights in one of his studies that pre-Columbian art, its history and prehistory of the Americas is absorbed into contemporary art in different ways. A range of traditional mediums and techniques are used such as painting, sculpture, etching, drawing and mixed media, including installation, photography, collage and illustration. Artists like Gustavo Arango, for example, in some of his digital art approaches, draws on his heritage by mixing personal symbolism and pre-Columbian era to preserve the essence of traditional Pre-Columbian art by transporting it to our present.

My study begins with the Colombian era and pre-Columbian art in general and later concentrates on sculpture and painting. The works display a variety of materials such as sea shells, bones, stone, clay and gold that play an important role in the manifestation of the aesthetics of the time.

Indigenous cultures, and their rich representations of symbols, stories of daily life, social differentiation and other subjects, have created an impact on society today. In my opinion, such perfection and beauty, created with limited resources like carved stone and sharpened wood

sticks turned into tools, represents creativity at its highest level. Being Pre-Columbian,pre-Columbus, 1492 is what makes these indigenous graphic representations so fascinating to me.

While I was researching cultural identity and records of pre-Columbian indigenous cultures established on Colombian territory and their creative process, I discovered some references to representations of human facial features. From these studies, I began to ask the following questions: What could be more effective visual representations of a culture and its identity rather than representing their own people? What could a culture express or say about themselves through drawings of their own people and how they see others around them?

Searching for the answers to these questions became my reason to study pre-Columbian art. Soon these questions challenged me to find a visual strategy to interpret indigenous art and apply it to my own design work. These experimental interpretations were the bridge to connect myself with part of my heritage, part of my past and ultimately my exhibition as manifestations to make all these connections as well as the opportunity to share with my audience these investigations. As a Columbian, and now having a greater perspective on my past, I've come to realize that its necessary for me to obtain a deeper understanding of my culture, in order to have a better understanding of myself, here in the United States, today. Rather than appear as an outsider as so many others do when relating to their own culture, I want to try and avoid missing the unique and rich opportunity for self-exploration through having a greater appreciation for my culture and its history, while continuing to develop my body of my work.

Being an artist and graphic designer has provided me with the tools and unique lens to capture and communicate what I want to say in a unique yet personal way. I truly believe that incorporating symbolic forms of my culture into my designs has helped me and will hopefully provide others the opportunity to recognize the historical graphic representations of pre-Columbian culture. I think it is important that people understand who they really are and who they may become in the future.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW

Colombian Art before Columbus

The investigations of the Pre-Columbian and pre-Hispanic era (before 1492) of Colombia has very important results in the area of archaeology. “ There is evidence that at least five thousand years before Christ, ceramic production existed on Colombia’s Caribbean coast”¹ Research shows that incised, printed or painted ceramic; zoomorphic (with animal characteristic), anthropomorphic (with human characteristics) and sometimes geometric graphic manifestations that were applied to ceramics with very few colors. Later, larger artifacts, figures, seals, spindles and other devices were introduced “The Caribbean coast was the scene where ceramic art was originated in America”²

Gold and clay were introduced during the time when the social and political structure changed, since the materials were scarce and unavailable. Only the privileged in Pre-Columbian civilization had access to gold. This resulted in artifacts classified by three types of value: 1.) Value of usage (how they work and their utilization), 2.) Value of exchange (trading value, like money) and 3.) Value as symbol (what they represent as power or prestige), reassuring that whoever owned their own the pieces had the power and the prestige to own the luxury items.³ Each example would be representative of a group’s own style, community, and culture enabling others to make comparisons that would distinguish one culture from the other.

More than Art? Artistic Artifacts vs. Creative Design

Representations of pre-Columbian art have been studied primarily by researchers in social anthropology (the comparative study of human societies and cultures and their development) interested in their historical context and sometimes the important creative design process inherent in the pieces. As a designer, I have interpreted the creative process in pre-Columbian art; through the formal elements of design: shape, size, texture, material, etc.. Though these are the characteristics that make an artifact more valuable than others. Their creators have not been recognized as a people possessing design oriented intentions. In my opinion, it is the creative and well-organized thinking that gives value to the art works, not necessarily the complexity or difficulty regarding the design process and production, but the analysis and problem solving skills developed along the way.

One of the first authors to talk about design process relating to pre-Columbian art was Miguel Triana (1859-1931), who concluded that a series of symbols painted over stone could be a prototype of writing, not an alphabet itself but possibly a graphic system. Again, not necessarily letterforms, but a method of communication as a way to tell stories or leave messages for others to decipher. The idea of mixing some of these concepts within the design was part of Luis Alberto Acuña's (1902-1992) legacy, a pioneer on indigenous inspired typography, who dedicated his life to pre-Columbian art. His interest in indigenous art forms inspired sculptures, tapestries, and collections of illustrations.

Years later, David Consuegra (1939-2004) was recognized in Colombia for his contribution to brands inspired and created from pre-Columbian designs. Brands are marks, names, symbols, and designs that represent something, someone, such as a place or a service. Anything you want to differentiate needs a brand or its own unique mark that will represent what the service, person, place, etc., is and what the owner wants other people to think about it.

Consuegra was well known for his strong opinions about the compromise from designers to their culture's uniqueness and the poor interest from the schools to teach pre-Columbian history, artistic expressions and folklore.

It is my opinion that in order to be truthful to our roots and heritage, it is necessary to appreciate, explore and be proud of our own unique culture and empower our creativity as artists and designers.

The designer and artist Antonio Grass (b.1937) is an important figure in the conservation of pre-Columbian art in contemporary design. His paintings, research, and publications helped to launch pre-Columbian symbols as a national brand. His designs are featured on coins and several publications that have awarded him much recognition.

Indigenous Cultures

CALIMA

According to Antonia Grass, the Calima culture appeared along the Calima River, near the present day towns of Restrepo and Darien. They were an indigenous culture of sedentary potters dedicated to work the land, hunt and fish.

As part of their legacy they produced ceramics with emphasis on the figure, especially heads. Symbols and design elements were depicted in body tattoos. Rectangles, ovals and concentric circles, were part of their preference. However, they are more recognized for their intricate and over the top gold pieces such as pendants, nose pieces, breast plates as well as gold pieces that reveal references to the jaguar as their mythical animal.

Their thick and unpainted ceramic production techniques were impressive but it was their gold that best represented their incredible craft.⁴

Fig 1
Diadem with anthropomorphic figure



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 15

Fig 2
Heart shaped pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 20

QUIMBAYA

Grass mentions that the Quimbaya culture lived in the middle of the country, between two main rivers, the Cauca river and the Magdalena river.

They were miners, incredible weavers, fine ceramicists and incredible goldsmiths. They created the most humanized, sophisticated and elegant gold work of the pre-Hispanic America due to their impeccable execution and refined technology.

The most frequent motif in their pieces were anthropomorphic designs representing men and women sitting, with closed eyes and placid expressions.⁵

Fig 3
Anthropomorphic lime container.



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 57

Fig 4
Anthropomorphic pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 59

SAN AGUSTIN

This indigenous culture was located in the South of Colombia with three rivers and three mountain chains around them. This culture was a more social/open culture. They had connections and communications with other cultures, influencing their work and influencing the work of others.

They created extraordinary carved sarcophagus out of stone, showing the faces of the dead and sculptors of different figures that represented images of their gods. These works are challenging in their weight, balance and structure.

Recognized as master stone sculptors their large structures reveal symbolic and solemn sacred tributes to death turning the region where they stand into one of the most important touristic and archaeological places in Colombia.

Ferocious and aggressive characteristics are representative of their beliefs about felines and jaguars.⁶

Fig 5
Anthropomorphic statue.



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 26

Fig 6
Monumental tomb



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 27

TAIRONA

This highly developed culture was located at the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, north of Colombia and included architects, engineers, artists, goldsmiths, ceramicists, farmers and amazing textile designers. They are considered one of the most advanced cultures in America, famous for their stone-paved paths, terraces, bridges and irrigation and drainage channels.

The Taironas developed a very characteristic artistic style; their gold often represented men with attributes of flying animals, for example, bats as symbols of darkness, together with some interesting geometric decorations.⁷

Fig 7
Pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 66

Fig 8
Pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 71

TOLIMA

The Tolima culture located in the hot mid-Magdalena valley and on the top of the central and eastern ranges in northern Huila and Tolima provinces. The pre-Columbian inhabitants of these areas are known for their gold pendants depicting simplified human figures.

Their face representations reach one of the most refined styles of pre-Columbian art in Colombia. This indigenous culture is considered one of the most intellectual, sophisticated and organized designers of their time. They created the best mix between art and myth, combining zoomorphic and anthropomorphic characteristics that were represented through clean geometric and soft lines.⁸

Fig. 9
Pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001)

Fig. 10
Pectoral



Source: Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001)

CHAPTER 3

INVESTIGATION AND METHODOLOGY

The investigation for this project is named Intermix: Traditional pre-Columbian Art Meets Contemporary Design, It begins with the idea of assembling elements of my heritage and providing a visual outlet through my own imagery and graphic design sensibilities.

The idea germinated when I decided that for my final project, I wanted to have a representation of documenting the process of my three years spent on my MFA, bringing back some previous thoughts and inspiration used in different semesters and developing those ideas and explorations in to a larger scale and context.

Working with what I was passionate about was integral to my development as an artist and designer. The constraints of the commercial world which had hindered my creativity, made me realize I wanted to further explore my artistic side; no more clients, products or briefs. I needed the time to hear myself and discover what I was capable of as an artist and designer. Learning how to create and solve my own problems, exploring my love for illustration, paper craft, pattern making, culture, and history, fused into my graphic design.

Paper craft is one of my personal sources of inspiration. I am constantly amazed at how many things can be created with a sheet of paper. From origami, cut outs, to large structures created from paper, I have investigated and developed a unique style that is inspired by intricate detail giving new attributes to my work.

Through my research and exploring my process, I created an intricate system through pattern and repetition. Geometric movement such as rotation, reflection, shifting and scale, enabled me to generate new visual compositions inspired by the dialog between the contemporary and the pre-Columbian art.

How many different patterns could one create with the same image repeated in different

ways? The answer is almost always infinite and the process is always serendipitous and open to chance. It is an intuitive “hide and seek” process through which one discovers and learns how to experiment with positive and negative space, symmetry and continuity.

Through the process of research and pattern-making I found mandalas. Mandalas are concentric structures that balance visual elements, symbolizing unity and harmony. Their meaning is determined by the individual artist. For me mandalas relate to beginnings, from smaller to bigger details that develop around a point or main idea. Mandalas absorb all of your attention. As you fall into them, you begin to feel lighter, and intuitive creative thoughts come to the surface. What started as a simple interest for geometric beauty soon turned into an exercise and a good source of meditation that helps me connect to my culture, expanding my conscience, developing my patience, waking up my senses and helping me relax.

Pre- Columbian art has always been a part of my inspiration. Being from a country with such a rich heritage has inspired me to investigate more about indigenous cultures and incorporate their legacy into my own creative work which has enabled me to discover some parallels in my own work. My obsession for craft, and intricate detail was one of the main reasons why I appreciate the Pre-Columbian aesthetic. Working with limited resources fused with creative solutions can develop into a fruitful and wide-ranging body of work.

To talk about a unique identity, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of civilizations, and it is important to look back and observe the legacy of your own people. In order to develop new dynamic compositions, I reinterpreted pre-Columbian graphics by deconstructing and reconstructing them in different ways in order to look for validation of the universality of Pre-Columbian design.

1. Santiago Londoño Vélez and Benjamín Villegas Jiménez, *Colombian art: 3,500 years of history*. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2001), 11.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Antonio Grass, *The faces of the past*, trans. Debra McKinney (Bogotá: Litografía Arco, 1982), 240, 241, 270, 271.

5. Ibid., 240, 263, 264.

6. Ibid., 241, 290.

7. Ibid., 240, 254, 255.

8. Ibid., 242, 304, 305.

CHAPTER 4

PROCESS

After gathering the content and developing research for the pre-Columbian indigenous cultures, the process started with scanning pictures and drawings from several books to create an archive. Furthermore, I had taken the pictures and edited them digitally, stylizing the forms to their minimal possible representation, reducing their forms and curate these graphics as a way of utilizing them for my future pieces. Each image was classified into a specific indigenous group and once the images were classified and infused with a strong figure ground relationship, I started to develop a series of patterns using rotation, reflection, shifting and scale as tools to develop intricate symmetrical compositions into a unique series of symbols. Additionally, I utilized between five and six faces per culture with four or five variations of variation per face, creating around a 100 patterns in total. Before actually completing my 100 patterns I explored the use of color. These color studies varied from high contrast, but I soon discovered that the images were already inherently intricately detailed on their own and soon discovered that the use of color was taking away from the composition. Color added another layer for my audience to process. You could see either images or color, but not both and the main idea of this project was to extract the existing pre-Colombian symbolism from the images to maintain some qualities of the original source material. I specifically chose to preserve as much of original look as possible using the contrast of black and white as my only source of color. The patterns were tiled together and displayed in a large format installation.

Thinking of what to do with my patterns and where to use them, I had the idea of using them inside of mandalas. As I mentioned previously in my paper, mandalas have been part of my investigation as well as patterns and I see them as the next step in my process based on pattern making. I realized that from my previous working explorations of mandalas I could use some of their structure principles as frames to create different patterns with even more intricate

characteristics. The process of designing the mandalas started by creating concentric geometrical frames, to be used as the bone structure and later be layered with my initial patterns. After designing several of these mandalas within that criteria, I soon realized that the design was not very successful. The framing/bone structure was conflicting with my patterns and the scale of my patterns was so constant through the design that they were not contrasting effectively. My mandalas needed to be readdressed and simplified. The faces were losing strength and they needed to be clear and graphic. While deconstructing and reconstructing my mandalas I noticed that the symbols were finally strong enough to stand on their own. The structure needed to disappear and allow the faces to reflect the geometry by the way they were layered in the composition. Reflecting on how to bring back a more effective and clear structure to my mandalas, I analyzed each face and its structure, highlighting their geometry, and using clockwise rotations in angles of 45°, 90°, 180°, and 360°. The plan for these rotations was always facing in the same direction and coming from the center out.

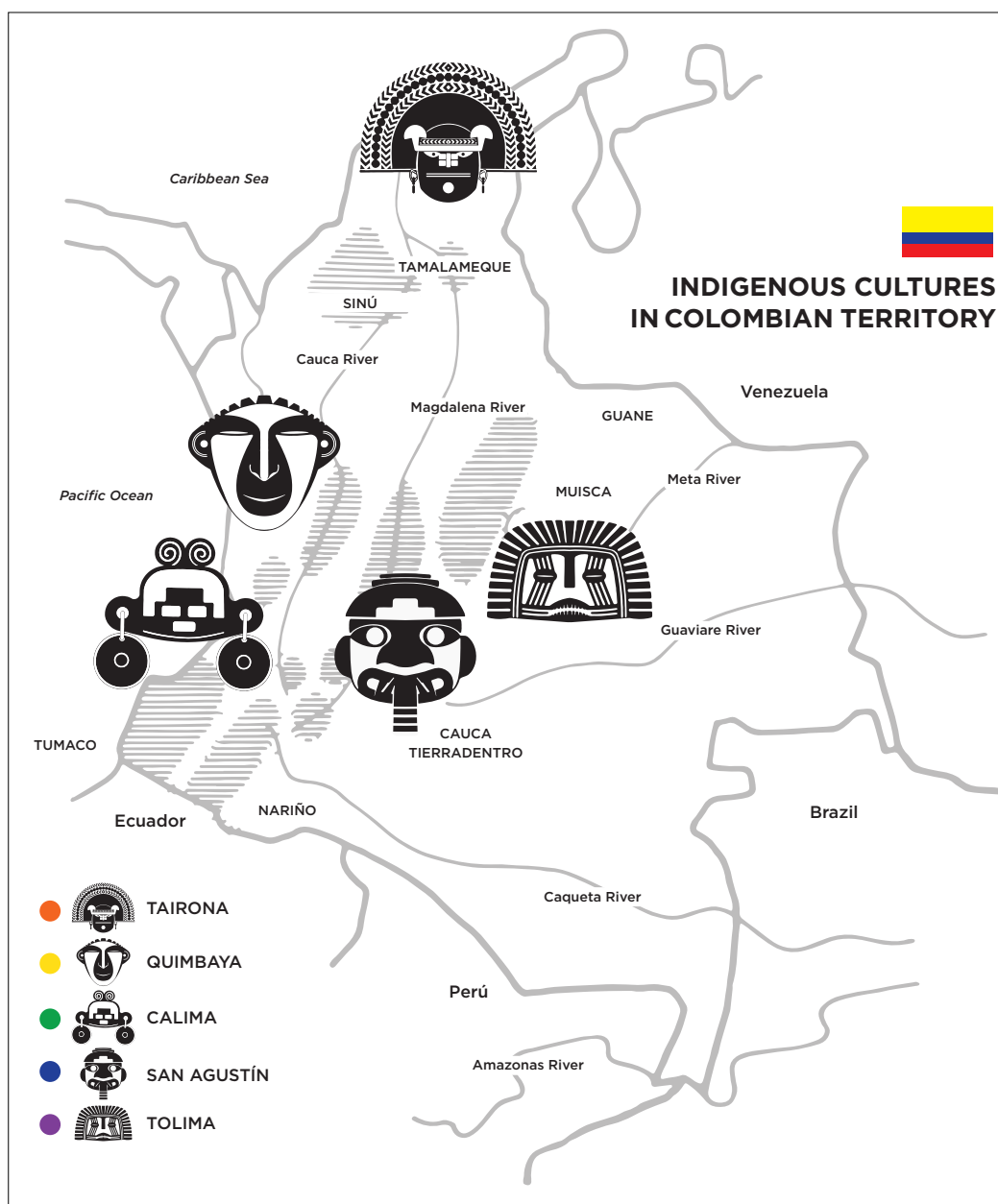
In addition to the mandalas, I created a series of totems. For the totems the main purpose was to show in a larger scale the details of the faces. Furthermore, I wanted to introduce symbolism and pay tribute to my ancestors through designing large-scale totems representing each indigenous culture and utilizing the faces from all my designs. The patterns in the background of the totem banners are taken from the actual faces to balance the contrast of the foreground images against the white background.

To clarify the purpose of the works, I created an info graphic map. The map was designed to help viewers have a better understanding of the geographical location of where these indigenous cultures lived. The process of this piece started by gathering all the information needed, then conducting research and stylizing the Colombian map. The map displays the main rivers of the country and highlights the culture locations by using a representative face from each culture and representing them as icons.

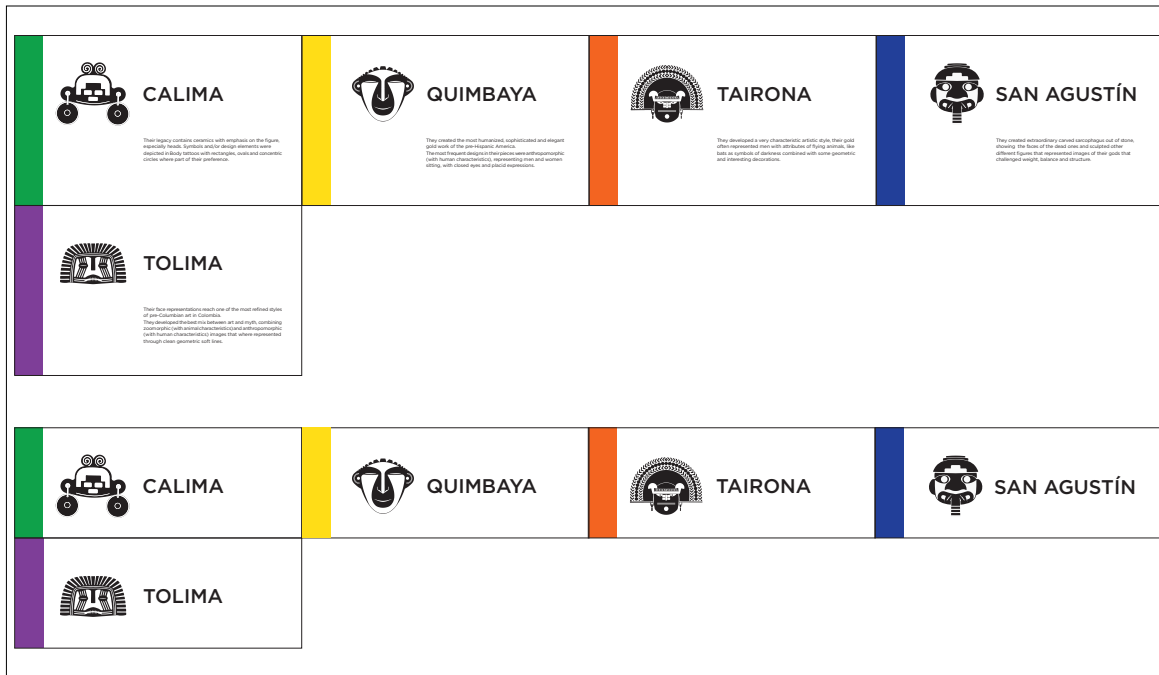
The last piece that I designed as part of the larger series of works, is an illuminated sculpture representing the concept of day and night. Using materials such as paper and wood I created a standing structure. The design production started with the creation of vector illustration files that later would be used with a laser cutter. Mat board was the main material and cut out with a special backing paper to diffuse the light, which was then held up by a structure of wood sticks. These materials were utilized to be represent the concept of day and night.

CHAPTER 5

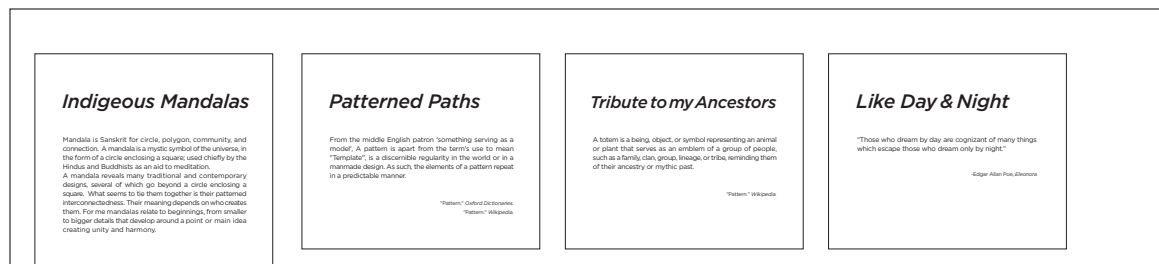
FINAL EXHIBITION



Geographical location map with colored key.



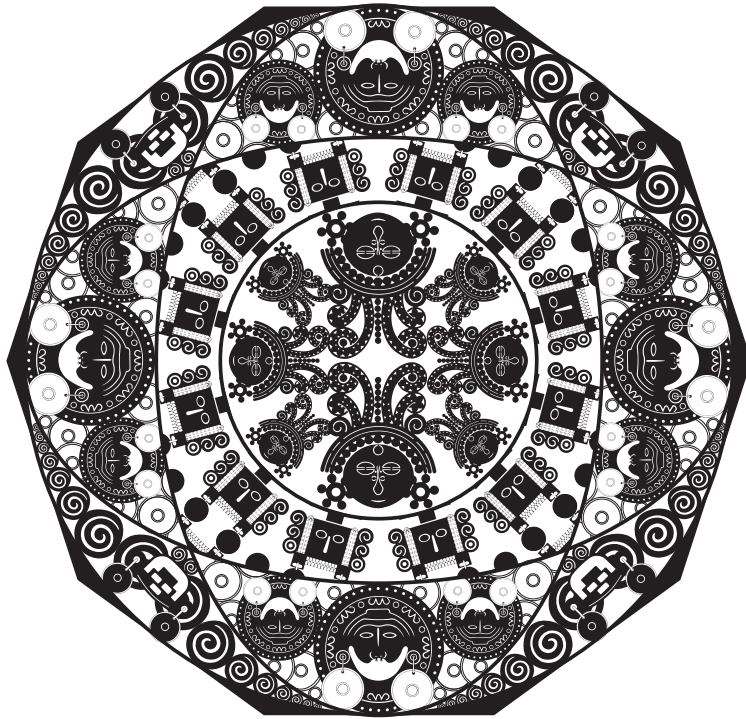
Identification name tags, color coordinated according to tribe and key on the map.

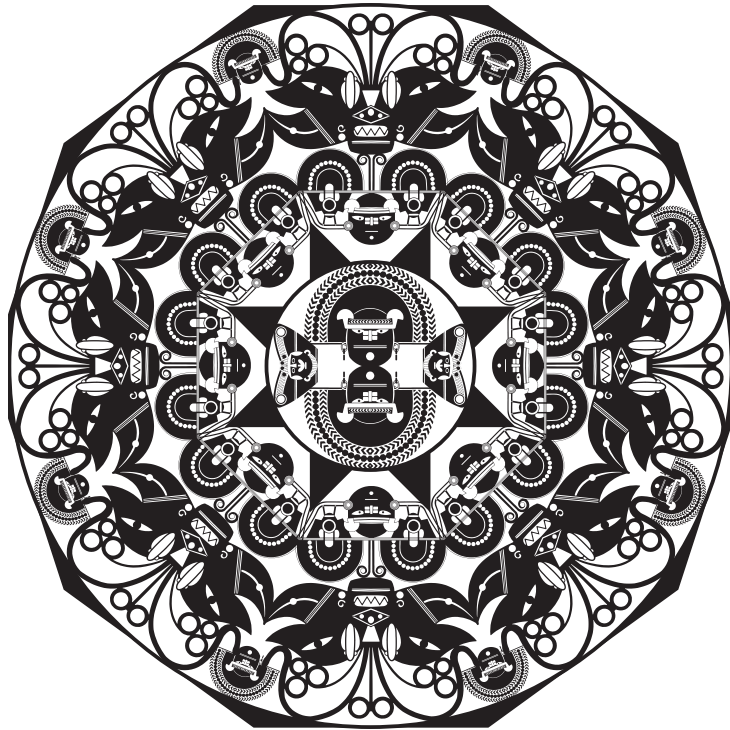
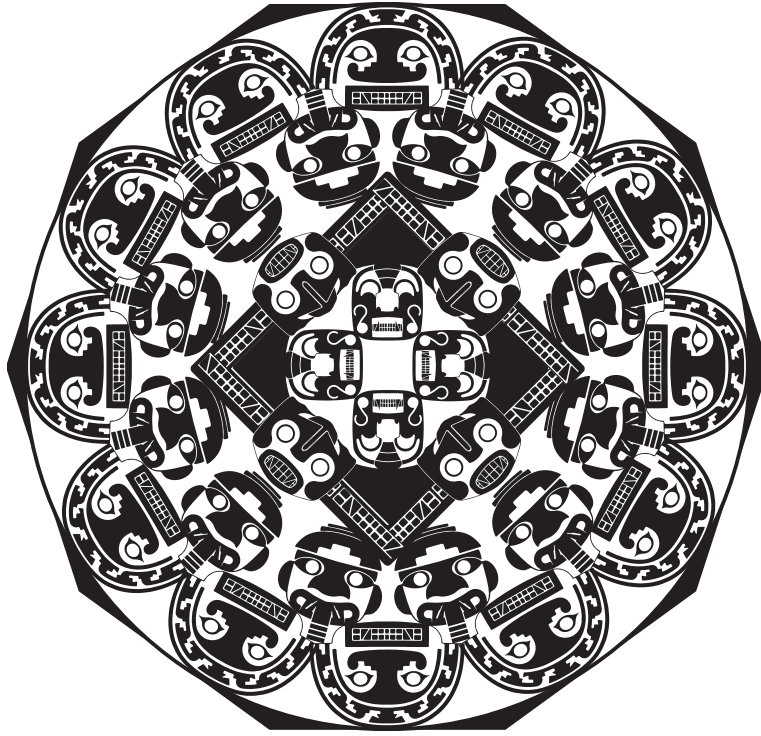


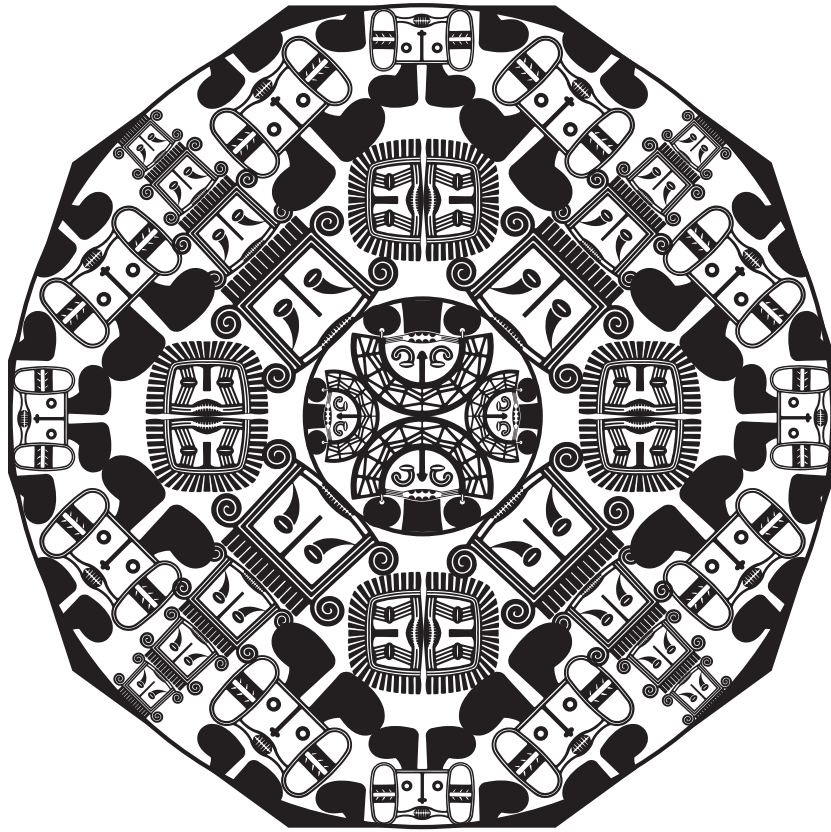
Description and explanation tags.



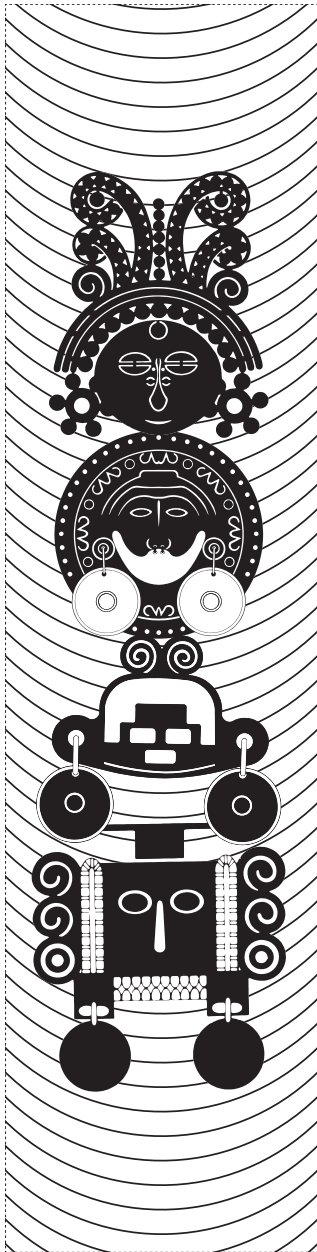
Illuminated sculpture







Mandalas



Totems



CHAPTER 6

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Through this investigation I discovered the versatility of the pre-Columbian faces transforming these symbolic images into powerful tools to develop new graphic design aesthetics. These Pre-Columbian cultures represented important points of the social organization with the help of graphics, that later were used through different techniques such as painting, sculpture, etching, drawing and gold craft.

The Pre-Columbian style allows its symbols to be applied as single independent units or as a part of a pattern or compositions helping these body of work be the mix between my cultural heritage and the knowledge acquired through my 3 years as a graduate student.

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VITA

Luisa Fernanda Restrepo, a native of Bogota, Colombia, received her bachelor's degree at the Colegiatura Colombiana de Diseño in 2004. Thereafter, studied at New Orleans, Louisiana for a year; went back to Colombia and worked for one of the largest fashion companies of the country, GEF, as a graphic designer. As her interest in paper craft, illustration and fashion grew, she made the decision to enter graduate school in the Department of Art and Design at Louisiana State University. She will receive her master's degree in December 2013 and plans to find a job that lets her use everything she learned at LSU.