

Process and Purpose

Votive Figure (Tunjo), Unidentified Muisca Artist

A Muisca artist from the Cordillera region of present-day Colombia crafted this male figure out of gold and copper alloy. Measuring only 3 ¾ inches, the figure has equally sized oval eyes, an open mouth, and elongated circular ears adorned with earrings. He wears a hat with a delicately spun rim, what appear to be mouth ornaments below the lower lip, and the hint of a geometric neckpiece. Thin golden hands curl around two long objects, one of which is a weapon (perhaps a spear or dart thrower) and the other may be a serrated staff or a maize stalk. Small details and blemishes break up the surface of his flat and almost rectangular body.

Gold *tunjos*, such as the BMA's Votive Figure, were potent symbols of power and distinction in South American societies. For the Muisca civilization (600–1600), *tunjos* made of gold and other precious metals played an important role during initiations of leaders and were a means of connecting with the otherworldly.

After a leader in Muisca society died, the newly elected chief of the community would cover his own bare body with gold dust as part of the initiation process. He would embark on a raft on a sacred lake carrying *tunjos*, gold objects, and precious stones. As part of the ritual, the new leader would sink the offerings in the lake's deep depths.

Tunjos were also used by the polytheistic Muisca as means of communicating with the supernatural. These votives were placed near natural landmarks that were believed to be gateways to different worlds.

The texture on the surface of this *tunjo* is a direct result of the process by which it was created and speaks to the significance of its material transformation. Muisca artists used harvested beeswax to begin the multi-step process of lost-wax casting. It is thought that the Muisca believed that the beeswax itself was a highly significant material, associated with both fertility and transformation.

What the modern eye might consider imperfections in the casting process, Muisca artists did not. The value of *tunjos* was not dependent on a smooth or polished finish. Instead, the imagery and the important, possibly sacred, lost-wax process itself were crucial in connecting with the otherworldly.



Unidentified Muisca Artist. *Votive Figure (Tunjo)*. 15th century. Colombia. Gold-copper alloy (*tumbaga*). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Bequest of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1960.30.88

Challenges for students

- The acts of making the *tunjo* and giving it as an offering were more important to the Muisca than its refined finish. For many, art is not about perfection, but about the act of creation. Challenge students to experience freedom from perfection by creating drawings using one or more of these unconventional methods:
 - Draw using their non-dominant hand.
 - Draw without lifting the pencil from the page.
 - Tape paper to the underside of a desk, lie underneath it, and draw while lying on their backs.
 - Attach a pencil to a long ruler or stick, step back from the paper, and draw.Encourage students to make up new challenges for their classmates.
- The BMA *tunjo* has many fine details that were made with beeswax before the object was cast in metal. Ask students to look closely at the elements on the face, hat, and body outline, and consider how the artist made them. Using clay or natural beeswax, challenge students to use multiple details as they craft artworks of their own imaginations. Explore coiling, layering of forms, and carving during the molding process.

To learn more about lost-wax casting visit artbma.org/golden-raft

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