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### **Citation**

Antczak, A. T., Antczak, M. M., & Guzzo Falci, C. (2019). Vibrant pasts in museum drawers: Advances in the study of late precolonial (AD 800-1500) materials collected from north-central Venezuela. *Museum History Journal*, 12(1), 52-74. doi:10.1080/19369816.2019.1609870

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To cite this article: Andrzej T. Antczak, Ma Magdalena Antczak & Catarina Guzzo Falci (2019) Vibrant pasts in museum drawers: Advances in the study of late precolonial (AD 800–1500) materials collected from north-central Venezuela, Museum History Journal, 12:1, 52-74, DOI: [10.1080/19369816.2019.1609870](https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2019.1609870)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2019.1609870>



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Published online: 13 May 2019.



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# Vibrant pasts in museum drawers: Advances in the study of late precolonial (AD 800–1500) materials collected from north-central Venezuela

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## ABSTRACT



Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, museums and private collectors across the Americas and Europe began amassing objects produced by the indigenous peoples of north-central Venezuela before the European conquest. The rich imagery displayed on decorated pottery and figurines, as well as on skilfully made body ornaments, strongly appealed to the aesthetic tastes of the museum curators and visitors of that time. With some laudable exceptions, most of the excavations that expanded these collections did not follow the archaeological practice standards of our time and did not leave behind any written reports. In consequence, these objects and associated data have remained disconnected from subsequent advances in regional archaeology. In this paper, we provide a general overview of the diverse archaeological collections from the region under study and insert them, critically, into the current understanding of north-central Venezuelan archaeology. We go on to focus on body adornments in order to show how microwear analysis of their production, along with the use wear traces they exhibit, combined with data concerning raw material procurement and depositional contexts, can shed light on the intricacies of the social life of these objects. We argue that up-to-date knowledge of regional archaeology interwoven with new interdisciplinary approaches on museum collections enables researchers to resuscitate the vibrant indigenous pasts lying in museum drawers.

## KEYWORDS

Collection studies; museum research; archaeology of north-central Venezuela; Amerindian body ornaments; biography of museum collections

## 1. Introduction

The precolonial and postcolonial history of north-central Venezuela is still relatively poorly understood even though archaeological research in this region began as early as 1887.<sup>1</sup> This has happened because the interest of many investigators since that time has been focused on the collection of objects at the expense of systematic and archaeologically

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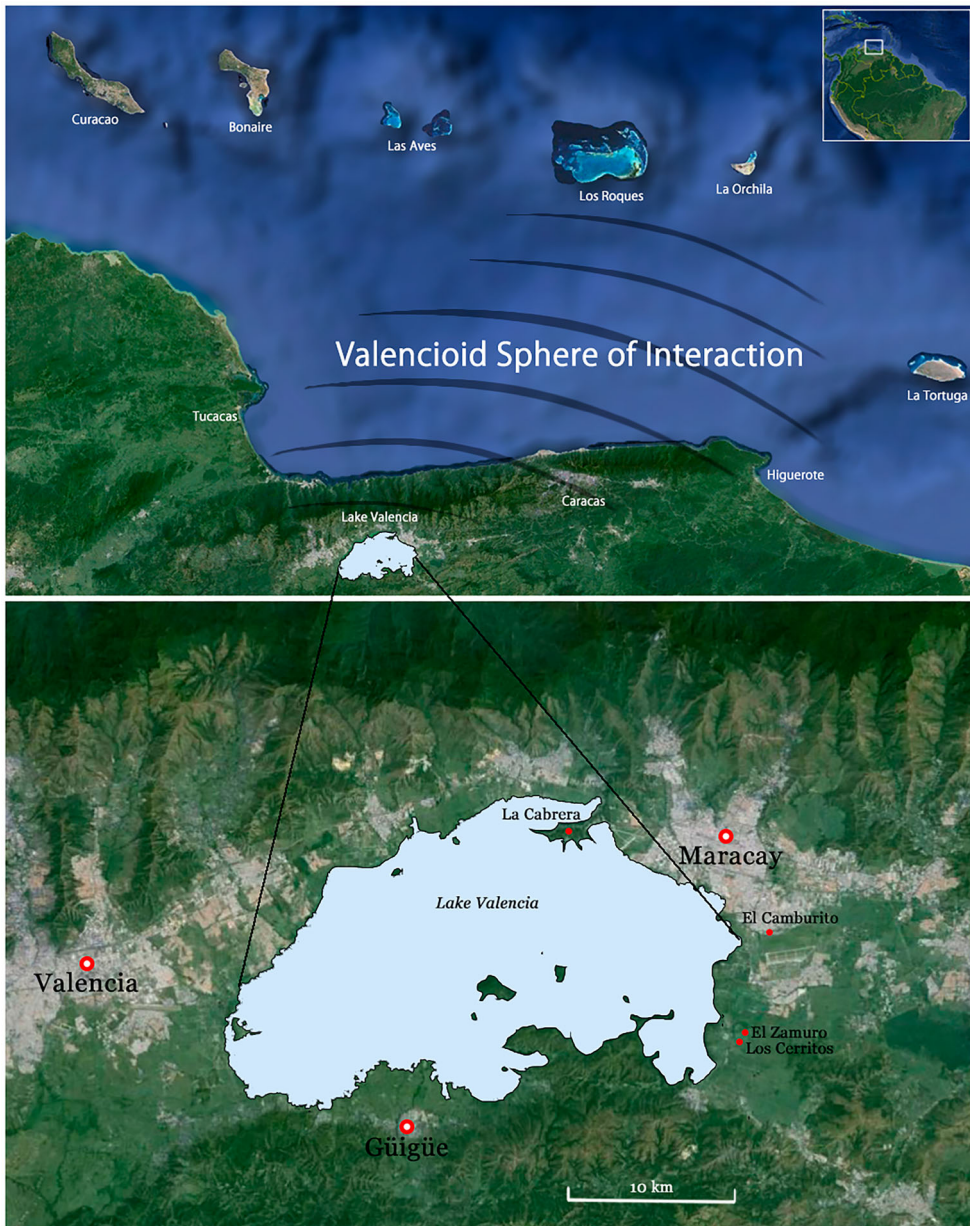
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controlled excavations. In more recent decades, this phenomenon has been accompanied by heavy modernist industrialisation and looting. From this perspective, an overview of north-central Venezuelan archaeology over the last two hundred years is needed to understand why and how archaeological objects came into museums.

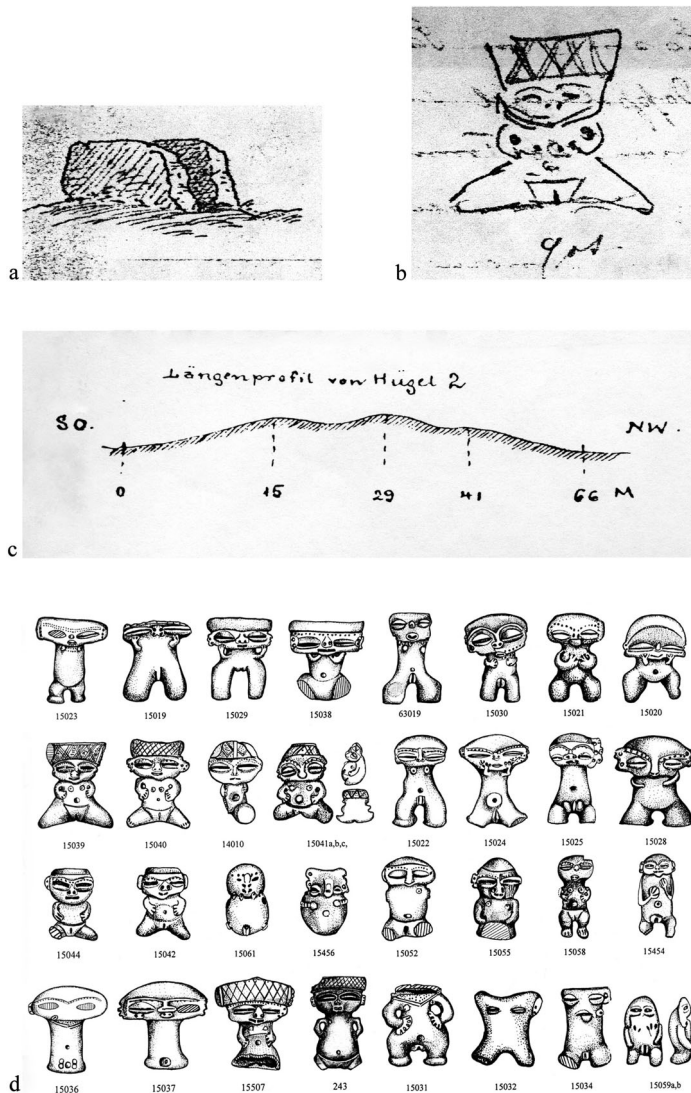
Objects from the precolonial past of this region attained international notoriety in the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1889 where they were presented amongst the latest findings of archaeology in those times.<sup>2</sup> Since then, thousands of objects produced and used by the indigenous peoples in this region between AD 800 and 1500 were systematically (or in fact in the main unsystematically) dug up and dispersed among several public and private collections on both sides of the Atlantic. But our understanding of who the creators and users of these objects were – objects that attracted so much attention across the globe – is still very fragmentary. In broad brush strokes, we know that during the few centuries before the European Conquest, the indigenous populations of north-central Venezuela underwent very dynamic socionatural transformations. By AD 800, purported Cariban-speaking migrants from the Middle Orinoco (the Arauquinoid culture) either had absorbed or had been absorbed by the indigenous population of Arawakan-speaking background (the Barranroid culture) who had dwelt in north-central Venezuela since ca AD 200.<sup>3</sup> The Barranroid were heirs of barely known ancestors whose cultural history goes back to the Late Pleistocene-Early Holocene (13,000–10,500 BP).<sup>4</sup> All these groups settled mainly in the inland Lake Valencia Basin which features the largest permanent land-locked freshwater reservoir in lowland South America north of the Amazon.<sup>5</sup> We know very little about the sociocultural circumstances in which the Arauquinoid/Barranroid mélange gave birth to the Valencioid culture.<sup>6</sup> During the final centuries before 1500, the Valencioid peoples dispersed from the Lake Valencia Basin to the Caribbean coast and beyond to the oceanic islands of Los Roques and La Orchila. Through mobility, intermarriage and exchange, they created the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction (Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> The above is a relatively clear-cut historical-cultural sequence which, however, lacks explanatory power in terms of preceding intersocietal interactions, mainly because the excavations that unearthed the respective objects and features were often performed far below the standards of the archaeology of our time. Therefore, we still cannot explain in socially meaningful and chronologically ordered terms why north-central Venezuela has traditionally been considered as a cross-roads of population movements and influences flowing from and to the Andean west, the Caribbean north, and the Tropical Lowland south.<sup>8</sup>

The remains of indigenous precolonial activities are still visible in the local landscape, especially in the Lake Valencia Basin. These include megalithic structures, petroglyphs and geoglyphs, earthen mounds, burial grounds, remains of dwellings, and thousands of tools and body adornments manufactured in pottery, stone, bone, shell, jet, wood, and imported metal. The archaeological hallmark of the region is thousands of pottery figurines depicting humans, animals and hybrid creatures (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>9</sup> The National Museum (*Museo Nacional*) was inaugurated in Caracas in 1875, but ethnographic and archaeological objects were not exhibited there until the end of the century.<sup>10</sup> Over time, standards improved for excavations performed in the region although such excavations were largely focused on the recovery of artefacts in order to increase museum collections. Still, they did help establish typologies and chronology as well as describe mounded platforms and burials.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Rafael Requena performed extensive



**Figure 1.** Valencioid Sphere of Interaction in late precolonial north-central Venezuela (AD 800–1500) with the indication of archaeological sites mentioned in the text (drawing by O. Antczak).

excavations in the Lake Valencia Basin which, despite perpetuating the above-mentioned drawback, yielded hundreds of findings remarkable for their state of good preservation and occidentally perceived aesthetic value.<sup>12</sup> His well-illustrated book from 1932 and the Prehistory Museum (*Museo de Prehistoria*), launched in Maracay in 1933, presented the archaeological objects as things to be ‘admired’ by a wide public.<sup>13</sup> In 1936 Requena, a former close collaborator of the overthrown Venezuelan dictator Juan



**Figure 2.** Selection of illustrations from Alfredo Jahn's unpublished manuscript (1903) and collection in the EMB (not to scale; published with the permission of EMB); (a) two stone slabs between which a human pottery figurine illustrated beside was recovered; (b) a drawing of Mound 2 profile, El Zamuro; (c) diverse human pottery figurines in EMB collection, heights between 8 and 23 cm, eastern shores of Lake Valencia (drawings by Ma.M. Antczak). EMB – Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany.

Vicente Gomez, went into exile and his museum collapsed.<sup>14</sup> Some objects were then sent to the National Science Museum (*Museo de Ciencias Naturales*) in Caracas; others went to Requena's descendants. At least one specimen ended up in the collection of the Rhode Island Museum Works of Art Fund in New York.<sup>15</sup> However, in the early 1930s, Requena had also invited three North American archaeologists, Wendell C. Bennett, Cornelius Osgood, and Alfred Kidder to excavate in the region.<sup>16</sup> Their reports remain a sound source of primary archaeological reference up to the present day, although



**Figure 3.** Selection of north-central Venezuelan materials (AD 800–1500) from diverse museum collections (photographs by Ma.M. & A. Antczak published with the permissions of the respective museums); (a) pottery adorno with round shell inlaid eyes, h 4.8 cm, No 41.0/1904, Las Matas, AMNH; (b and c) two pottery adornos with quartz inlays imitating teeth: a1, h 4.9 cm, No LMM,P1/F2-59, Las Matas, MAHT; a2, width 4.4 cm, No 41.0/2403, Las Matas, AMNH; (d) pottery turtle-like red-slipped figurine, h 5.5 cm, No 1991, Los Cerritos, FMCN ('old' Rafael Requena collection No 40); (e) pottery figurine depicting a dog or an feline-like 'mother' with a cub on its shoulders, h 7 cm, El Zamuro, EMB, No VA 15193; (f) pottery head of human-bird with a nose ring, h 8.9 cm, No 1752, Las Matas, FMCN; (g) anthropo-zoomorphic depiction of a male being (a pendant?), h 9 cm, No 41.0/2580, Las Matas, AMNH; (h) human-like wooden carving (a pendant?), h 8 cm, No 4/8733, Las Matas, NMAI; (i) anthropo-zoomorphic vessel with bared teeth, one of the earliest north-central Venezuela objects in European collections, dated to ca 1820s, h cm, No VA 244, Lake Valencia Basin, EMB. AMNH – American Museum of Natural History, New York NY, USA; EMB – Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany; FMCN – Fundación Museo de Ciencias Naturales, Caracas, Venezuela; MAHT – Museo de Antropología, Historia y Tradición (Fundación Lisandro Alvarado), Maracay, Venezuela; NMAI – National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA.

includibly strong links between these archaeological undertakings and the geopolitics of their day have been pointed out.<sup>17</sup>

In 1964, the artificial earthen mounds of Lake Valencia, created by indigenous precolonial peoples, were declared a National Historic Monument.<sup>18</sup> About this same time, two regional institutes (*Institutos de Antropología e Historia de los Estados Aragua y Carabobo*), a foundation (*Fundación Lisandro Alvarado*), and four museums (*Museo de Antropología* in Maracay, *Museo de Arte e Historia Casa de los Celis*, *Museo Arqueológico Parque Recreacional Sur* in Valencia (later to come under the patronage of the *Fundación para la Cultura de la Ciudad de Valencia*), and *Museo de Arte e Historia* in Puerto Cabello) were also created. Since then and lasting into the 1990s, large-scale excavations were carried out in the area under the direction of Henriqueta Peñalver Gómez.<sup>19</sup> The above-mentioned museums came to hold thousands of remains yielded by these excavations.<sup>20</sup> Since the late 1990s, in Vigirima, the largest complex of petroglyphs in this region has been developed as an archaeological park (*Parque Arqueológico Piedra Pintada*). In 2006, a stopover on Dos Mosquises Island in Los Roques Archipelago was inaugurated featuring a permanent exhibition dedicated to this exceptional place in Caribbean archaeology (*Paradero de Reflexión e Información: Dos Mosquises Isla 'Sagrada' de Venezuela Prehispánica*). Unfortunately, despite all these vigorous efforts and special protection measures, the surroundings of Lake Valencia remain among the most heavily anthropogenically affected and looted regions in the country. This has contributed to the creation and enlargement of a number of private collections, the majority of which remain unknown to archaeologists.

The above synopsis of the history of archaeological research in north-central Venezuela and of the development of resulting museums serves as backdrop to this paper. We now proceed to focus on the main public collections of the region's archaeology in Venezuela and beyond. We recognise that the collections held in non-Venezuelan museums may currently, and in the future, be subjected to international legal claims and scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> Be that as it may, our goal in this paper is to examine how these 'older' collections can be recontextualised into the new interdisciplinary investigations which have been carried out in recent decades in the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction. We also provide an example of specific analysis of body ornaments in order to demonstrate that 'old' collections can indeed shed valuable new light on the precolonial social history of indigenous peoples in north-central Venezuela and its surrounding regions. The paper concludes by presenting avenues for future research.

## 2. Current whereabouts of the Valencia cultural artefacts

In Venezuela, thousands of indigenous objects from the north-central region are deposited in diverse institutions in Caracas such as *Universidad Central de Venezuela*, *Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional*, *Fundación La Salle de Ciencias Naturales*, *Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural*, and *Universidad Simón Bolívar*.<sup>22</sup> The largest collection in Caracas, *Museo de Ciencias Naturales*, holds hundreds of objects. Some of these come from 'old' collections assembled under the direction of Adolfo Ernst, founder of this museum in 1871.<sup>23</sup> Others derive from the later collections of Luis Oramas, Mario Briceño Iragorry, Rafael Requena, and José M. Cruxent among which still more figures. All the archaeological materials systematically excavated by Andrzej and Magdalena Antczak in the Los Roques Archipelago and from other Venezuelan islands are held and curated in the *Unidad de Estudios*

*Arqueológicos* at *Universidad Simón Bolívar*.<sup>24</sup> This research unit elaborated a pioneering digital inventory of its archaeological collections (containing 1,700 entries accompanied by digital photographs) in the early 2000s. The creation of this inventory was funded by the New York Conservation Fund and it was delivered to the Venezuelan *Instituto del Patrimonio Nacional*. Materials obtained in the excavations carried out by Andrej Šykora in Palmasola (on the north-western outskirts of the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction [Figure 1]) are also curated at this same place.<sup>25</sup> Outside Caracas, the largest archaeological collections from the region are held in the above-mentioned museums in Maracay and Valencia.

Beyond Venezuela but still in South America, Mario del Castillo sold more than 200 objects from the Valencia region to the recently destroyed *Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*, Brazil.<sup>26</sup> Del Castillo was Requena's field director; the objects most probably came from the latter's excavations mentioned above. Thousands of north-central Venezuela objects are held in museums throughout the United States of America. The three largest collections draw from the excavations carried out by Wendell Bennett, Alfred Kidder II, and Cornelius Osgood in the 1930s. Bennett's collection is held in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Like the National Museum of the American Indian in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., the American Museum of Natural History holds several other collections of finds that come from unsystematic digs. Some of those finds were formerly at the Heye Foundation in New York City (e.g. the collections of C.F. Witzke and Luis H. Martínez [collection Martínez/Rodríguez] from the eastern shore of Lake Valencia). Kidder's materials are in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while Osgood's collection is in the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Other U.S.-based museums, as for example the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, may also hold collections of individual objects from north-central Venezuela.

In Europe, the oldest and largest collections of archaeological objects from north-central Venezuela are held in the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Berlin (formerly *Museum für Völkerkunde*) and in the *Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac* in Paris.<sup>27</sup> Many of the objects in the latter institution were deposited there by the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* and were previously held in the *Musée de l'Homme (Amérique)*.<sup>28</sup> Smaller collections reside in the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Hamburg, Germany, *Musée Ville de Genève* in Switzerland, University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, The National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen,<sup>29</sup> and in the *Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche* in Faenza, Italy. The majority of these collections were acquired during the first decades of the twentieth century. It is likely that other European museums also hold archaeological objects from north-central Venezuela.

Apart from public collections, artefacts are held by dozens of private collectors in Venezuela and elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> The items preferred by collectors belong to the category of representational or figurative material culture. This includes figurines, anthropo- and zoomorphic pottery *adornos*, pottery pipes, and body ornaments. Tools and adornments made of stone, bone, shell, wood, jet and metal are significantly less numerous than pottery (both entire objects and potsherds) in all public collections researched by the authors. Zooarchaeological remains are rarely present, especially in those collections that come from unsystematic excavations.

To summarise, a considerable quantity of precolonial materials from the north-central region is held in museums and private collections in and outside Venezuela. These collections mainly consist of figurative objects that overwhelm the more ‘mundane’ material culture. However, both categories are largely lacking documentation of their provenience and data related to their archaeological contexts.

### 3. The state of the art in north-central Venezuela archaeology

This section reviews the advances in north-central Venezuelan archaeology that have been made in recent decades. We select certain mainstream investigations reported in scholarly writings, however, we also include institutional reports, university theses, public articles, and website information, as well as some books of varying scholarly quality.<sup>31</sup> This review reveals how little museum objects have been considered as relevant for ongoing academic research.

The most important long-term (and ongoing) research that has incorporated Venezuelan and foreign museum collections (the later deriving from the mainland portion of north-central Venezuela) is the *Archaeology of the Islands of Venezuela* project conducted by this paper’s first two authors since 1982.<sup>32</sup> Since that time, the oceanic islands of the Los Roques Archipelago and the La Orchila island group have been systematically investigated.<sup>33</sup> This has led to the identification of dozens indigenous island campsites and their integration into the subsequently defined Valencioid Sphere of Interaction.<sup>34</sup> Systematic excavations in selected sites revealed taskscaes dedicated to the processing of marine resources, mainly queen conch (*Lobatus gigas*).<sup>35</sup> They also provided microcontextual information related to complex *in situ* ritualism.<sup>36</sup> Stylistic and physical–chemical analysis of hundreds of both insular and mainland figurines proved the mainland origin of them all.<sup>37</sup> The analysis also resulted in the incorporation of dozens of stylistically similar figurines from various museum collections.<sup>38</sup> The specific study of Valencioid body adornments has also been performed.<sup>39</sup> These systematic excavations also resulted in the analysis of mammal,<sup>40</sup> fish,<sup>41</sup> turtle,<sup>42</sup> and bird<sup>43</sup> remains, as well as crustacean (including crabs, lobsters, and barnacles) and echinoderm remains (mainly sea urchins).<sup>44</sup> These analyses also permitted a subsequent judicious incorporation of certain animal remains contained in museum collections. Mineralogical and techno-functional analysis of lithics from Los Roques and the continental sites of the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction allowed comparative analysis of stone implements and adornments contained in museum collections.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, a series of Venezuelan students’ undergraduate and Master’s degree theses have provided new insights into precolonial life in the mainland portion of the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction. These theses treat the examination of Barranoid collections from the coastal site of El Palito;<sup>46</sup> the excavation of the pre-Valencioid site in Palmasola which disclosed the possible origin of the producers of Ocumaroid pottery and their links to the previous Tocuyanoid and Saladoid traditions;<sup>47</sup> the archaeological surveys and excavations of the Patanemo coastal bay;<sup>48</sup> and the surroundings of the city of Caracas.<sup>49</sup> Caves in the mountainous area of north-central Venezuela have also been investigated.<sup>50</sup> New data has been extracted from the analysis of human remains held in foreign museum collections.<sup>51</sup> The study of regional petroglyphs has also gained momentum,<sup>52</sup> and so has that of geoglyphs.<sup>53</sup> The archaeological signatures of Cariban speakers from the Middle Orinoco penetration to north-central Venezuela, as well as where they encountered

Barrançoid autochthons, have also been critically updated from an interdisciplinary perspective incorporating landscape engineering and historical ecology. Those vantage points have been enriched by linguistic and genetic perspectives, among others.<sup>54</sup> And, finally, the entire Valencioid archaeological series originally defined by Cruxent and Rouse in 1958 has been reformulated.<sup>55</sup>

Turning to the eve of European contact with north-central Venezuela indigenous peoples, we must mention research into the circulation networks of *guanín*, a metal alloy originating in present-day Colombia,<sup>56</sup> as well as the possible late precolonial expansion of Valencioid peoples to the east.<sup>57</sup> In addition, extensive analysis of documentary sources enabled the reconstruction of the ethnic history of all north-central Venezuela indigenous peoples.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to mention the experimental canoeing that has taken place over the 135 km of deep open sea which separate the Los Roques Archipelago from the South American mainland. Notions of this voyaging, until recently, were limited to estimates based on ethnohistoric and ethnographic examples.<sup>59</sup> The maritime crossing was achieved in 2016 by a group of Venezuelan voyagers led by David Bottome who replicated precolonial navigation by using an indigenous canoe propelled by paddles. The group made the crossing in 29 h, providing yet further support for such precolonial voyages.<sup>60</sup>

This review cannot overlook the presence of north-central Venezuela archaeological objects in two large 'Prehispanic art' exhibitions organised in Caracas accompanied by profusely illustrated catalogues.<sup>61</sup> Also, dozens of Los Roques archaeological objects were exposed between 1983 and 1988 in La Rinconada Museum in Caracas in an temporary exhibition.<sup>62</sup> However, these temporary exhibits cannot obscure the harsh reality of the lack of a permanent archaeology museum in Caracas, the capital city of the nation.

As we have seen above, only a few scholarly contributions have creatively incorporated museum objects into the more securely constructed frames of reference that have stemmed from ongoing research. Most scholarly efforts in the field and in labs do not incorporate museum materials and other data dispersed across the globe. Thousands of objects and data points are being ignored, marginalised, or disincorporated. We discuss some possible causes of this state of affairs in the next section.

#### 4. Ebbs and flows of the recontextualisation process

'Old' museum collections from north-central Venezuela may be *recontextualised* when they meet some basic requirements of academic scrutiny.<sup>63</sup> This realisation come from our examination of several museum collections containing archaeological materials from north-central Venezuela on both sides of the Atlantic. These collections did not always succeed in meeting these requirements. Some may be composed of morphologically variable objects making up a casual ensemble of opportunistically acquired items. Specific objects may come from unsystematic and unprofessional digging or from simple looting. In order to recontextualise such objects, in addition to making sure they are not modern forgeries, we had to ascertain whether they once circulated within clearly delimited temporal-spatial frames and could be ascribed to the bearers of archaeologically-defined past cultures. By reviewing documentary data accompanying the objects (inventories, excavation reports, drawings, correspondence, etc.), we ascertained whether some of these objects did indeed pertain to the Valencia culture and that they were in fact

produced/used somewhere between AD 800 and 1500. This data is surprisingly rich but poorly studied and even more rarely involved in present-day ongoing scientific research. The best example here are the collections recovered during the excavations of Kidder, Bennett and Osgood in 1930s.<sup>64</sup> Closer scrutiny of these collections revealed that the objects are accompanied by the parameters of the excavation, the specific number of the mound (artificial earth platform) where the excavation took place, and the depth at which they were found. Such objects may be readily incorporated into the recent research carried out in north-central Venezuela and the results of cutting-edge analyses performed on these items can also be successfully integrated into larger research projects addressing indigenous mobility and exchange on macroregional scale.

However, the recontextualisation of museum collections is too often hampered by limited access to some of these collections. Although digital inventories including images are made available by many foreign public collections, access on the part of individual researchers desiring to closely examine specific objects often depends on the researchers' ability to secure necessary funding to convert their research plans into reality. Obtaining such funding is in most cases beyond the possibilities of today's Venezuelan researchers and students. However, if we keep in mind that museums do not possess collections for the sake of possession alone,<sup>65</sup> opportunities may arise even in the midst of straitened circumstances: namely, the opportunities to shift focus from the objects themselves to the forging of new networks and relationships<sup>66</sup> with specialists in the nations that provided the contents of their collections in the first place.<sup>67</sup> In this scenario, museums have the opportunity to infuse their holdings with new interpretive vitality through robust contacts with such specialists. Meanwhile, as mentioned before, private collections remain clearly a very different case. In Venezuela and elsewhere they are – with few notable exceptions – unapproachable.

Queries concerning role(s) that precolonial objects which are today in museum holdings might have played amongst past indigenous societies cannot be fully addressed without considering the processes of their deposition in the archaeological context. Objects in museums can be dated, their morphologies and chemical properties scrutinised, actualistic observations can be made and experiments can be performed, and the results of these analyses can be compared to the morphologically 'similar' objects recovered from systematic excavations. As valuable as they may be, these methods and techniques cannot substitute the information about the archaeological context from which the museum object was retrieved, including its three-dimensional location in the soil matrix, its measurable spatial associations with other objects and features, as well as the interpretations of the depositional processes, or 'how it got there'.<sup>68</sup>

Except for a few previously mentioned cases of systematic excavations, other known contextual data on north-central Venezuelan archaeological objects is almost exclusively related to burials. However, we are sceptical about the possibility of inferring broader social meanings from individually unique funerary contexts that are reported from north-central Venezuela and in the Caribbean, in general.<sup>69</sup> Some data related to non-funerary contexts can, sometimes, be found in the documentary information which accompanied the objects to their current collections. It is through examination of labels, inventories, photographs, drawings, diaries, correspondence, and other museum archival resources we could reveal information that proved to be pivotal for the reconstruction of the social contexts of the objects and their social lives in the indigenous societies of the

past. Absent contextual data troubles intentions to recontextualise museum objects on a sound basis in order to incorporate them into ongoing investigations. However, we should remember that even when contextual data is available, the archaeological context from which objects were retrieved is only one of the contexts in which the object might have performed during its social life. The data related to the final deposition of the object would elicit the range of social or symbolic meanings associated with its final function/meaning (e.g. [Figure 2\(a and b\)](#)), and not with any prior role the object may have played, for example, within broader social strategies or political projects.<sup>70</sup> The entire range of roles that any object now held in a museum collection might have played in its past sociocultural life is dependent on the diversity of contexts in which it could perform throughout its entire biography.<sup>71</sup> In sum, this discussion shows how difficult, provisional and subjected to reinterpretations<sup>72</sup> it is to incorporate museum objects, especially those which lack contextual and depositional data, into some of the ongoing investigations about the social roles they might have performed in the past.

## 5. Reconstructing the cultural biographies of bodily ornaments from museum collections

We recently studied bodily ornaments from north-central Venezuela housed at the *Ethnologisches Museum* in Berlin. The artefacts belong to a collection excavated by Alfredo Jahn and sent to the German museum in the first few years of the twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> Our research aimed to reconstruct the successive life stages of the pre-colonial cultural biographies of bodily ornaments from sites on the eastern shore of Lake Valencia. The selected method, microwear analysis, allows for the identification and characterisation of traces present on the surface of beads and pendants, especially those related to their sequences of production and their use as individual components in complex ornaments, such as necklaces, bracelets, belts, and many other types.<sup>74</sup> The importance of the adornment of the body among Valencioid peoples is suggested not only by the sheer abundance of ornaments in diverse raw materials recovered from archaeological sites in the Valencia Lake Basin, but also by the detailed depiction of multiple ornament types on pottery figurines shaped as human beings.<sup>75</sup> A biographical approach provides us with insights on the social performance of these artefacts in past societies, by addressing 1) the selection, acquisition, and circulation of materials with desirable characteristics from specific places, 2) the technical procedures chosen by a community to transform them into ornaments, 3) the ways they have been used to adorn the human body, and 4) how and where they have been deposited leading to their integration into the archaeological record.

The studied sample includes most ornaments currently present in the museum's collection, namely 61 ornaments of marine shells, rocks, minerals, and clay ([Table 1](#)). The detailed results and broader contextualisation of the collection and sample have been published elsewhere.<sup>76</sup> Here we demonstrate how such a study sheds new light on artefacts that have been held in a museum for over a century. The analysis involved careful examination of the surface of each studied artefact under a stereomicroscope (model Leica M80, mag.: 7,5–64x) and a metallographic microscope (model Leica DM6000 m, mag.: 50–500x). The combined use of the microscopes allowed us to recognise the state of preservation (post-depositional and post-excavation surface modifications), the techniques,

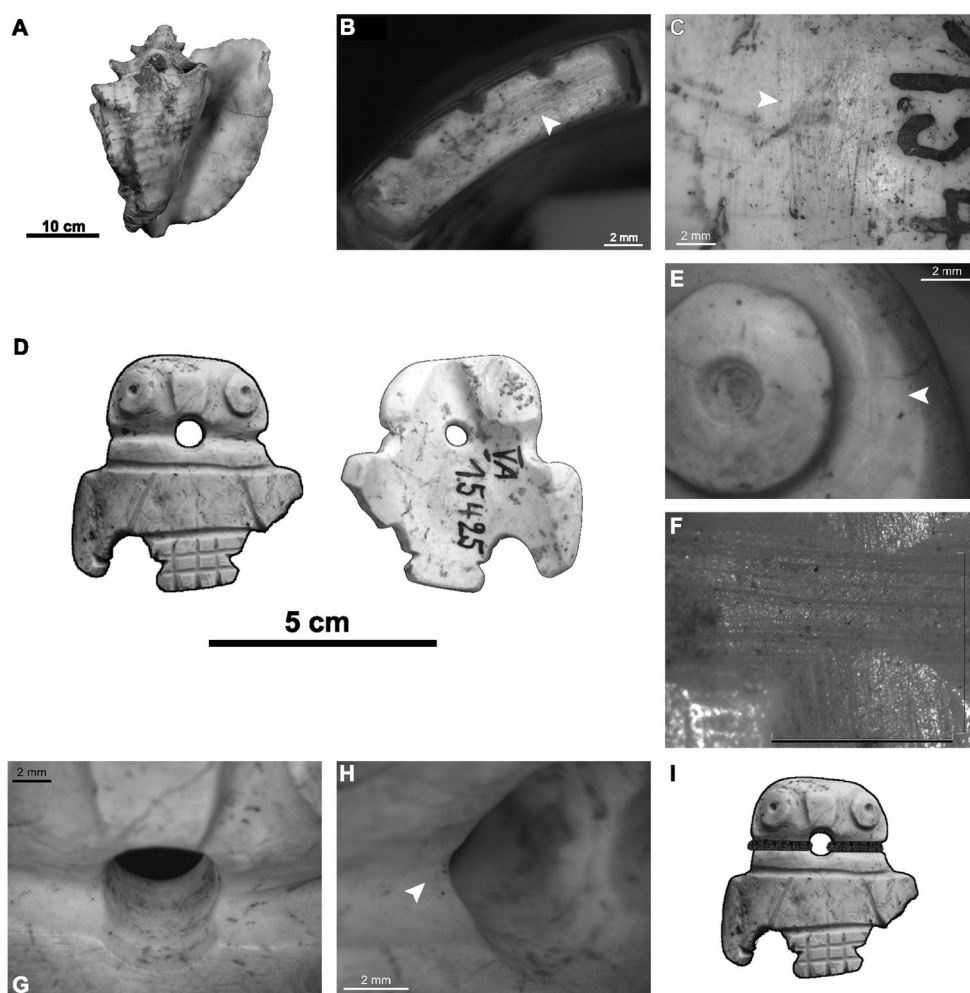
**Table 1.** Raw material and types of the studied ornaments from the Alfredo Jahn collection in Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

Raw material	Type	Number	Inventory numbers
<b>Shell</b>			
<i>Lobatus gigas</i>	Bead (disc; tubular)	02	V A 14050; V A 15406b
	Disc	01	V A 14013
	Pendant (zoomorphic; rectangular)	03	V A 14017; V A 15425; V A 13994
	Pyramid	10	V A 15497 I-X
<i>Spondylus americanus</i>	Bead (zoomorphic)	05	V A 14021 I-V
	Pendant (biomorphic; triangular)	04	V A 14014; V A 14018; V A 15522; V A 14019
<i>Oliva reticularis</i>	Pendant (tinkler)	17	V A 15411 I-XVI; V A 14046b
Other bivalves	Bead (disc)	01	V A 14050b
	Pendant (perforated bivalves)	03	V A 15534 I-III
Indeterminate	Pendant (knob-shaped)	03	V A 15431 I-III
Total shell:		49	
<b>Lithic</b>			
Slate	Pendant (rounded; diamond-shaped)	02	V A 63024; V A 14049
	Nose rings (rounded)	02	V A 14016a; V A 14016b
Serpentinite	Pendant (rectangular)	03	V A 15536b; V A 14002; V A 63025
Chalcedony	Bead (tubular)	01	V A 15525
Bituminous coal	Pendant (elongated)	01	V A 14038
Plutonic rock	Pendant (elongated)	01	V A 14004
Indeterminate	Pendant (zoomorphic)	01	V A 14001
Total lithic:		11	
<b>Clay</b>			
	Bead	01	V A 14050d
Total clay:		01	

tools, and sequences of operations involved in their production, and the presence and distribution of traces related to their use (i.e. use-wear). In order to assess the tools used during the production of an artefact, traces were compared to an experimental reference collection. The experiments carried out involved the application of varied techniques and tools to work marine shells and lithics.<sup>77</sup> In the following, the biographies of shell and lithic ornaments are summarised.

All shells used for the production of ornaments were marine specimens brought from the Venezuelan coast or the off-shore islands into the settlements of the Valencia Lake Basin.<sup>78</sup> Shell acquisition, both as unmodified shells and as partially worked pieces, was at first done by exchange with Ocumaroid communities living on the coastal areas and, in the later centuries, by direct acquisition of shells from the off-shores islands through the expansion of the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction. The production sequence varied according to the specific shell taxa being worked and the desired end-product (e.g. a disc bead or a large turtle-shaped pendant). For instance, a complex sequence was involved in the creation of figurative and geometric carvings (Figure 4(a–g)): 1) acquisition of a suitable portion of material (i.e. a blank) through flaking and/or sawing the shell, 2) grinding of the faces and sides of the blank, 3) carving of preliminary notches on the sides and incisions on the faces, 4) drilling of suspension holes, and 5) reinforcing and widening the notches and incisions. Certain tool types and raw materials could be identified as likely used for applying specific techniques, such as brittle and hard lithic flakes for sawing, organic saws (such as wood) with abrasives for widening notches and incisions, organic drill-bits for perforating and creating decorative holes, and mineral stone platforms for grinding.<sup>79</sup>

Most shell ornaments displayed evidence of being worn, with only seven (14.3% of all shell ornaments) not displaying use-wear either due to lack of usage or poor preservation.



**Figure 4.** Example of the reconstruction of the biography of an ornament, using as example a zoomorphic shell pendant (El Zamuro, No VA 15425, EMB); (a) unmodified marine shell (*Lobatus gigas*) used for ornament production; (b and c) sawing and grinding traces with partial superposition of traces by modern ink and varnish; (d) front and back views of the pendant; wear traces produced during different biographical phases: (e and f) excision and incision traces, (g) drilling traces on suspension hole; (g and h) use-wear; and (i) reconstruction of system of attachment based on use-wear distribution (photographs by C. Guzzo Falci). EMB - Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany.

The use of certain artefacts was prolonged, leading to deformation of the suspension holes towards the areas where a string was placed (Figure 4(g–i)). Such deformations provided evidence of the specific systems of attachment of the ornaments.<sup>80</sup> Some of the biomorphic ornaments with and without use-wear were reportedly found in burials at the Los Cerritos site. This suggests that not only ornaments used by people in life were placed with the dead, but also that some ornaments were made exclusively to be placed with the dead. Ten small pyramid-shaped artefacts studied during this research originally made part of a group of 203 pyramids recovered from an urn burial in the Camburito site. The studied specimens had no suspension hole and no evidence of being used in any way.

This suggests that they were unfinished when deposited in the grave. This points out to yet another biographical possibility: unfinished ornaments could also play a role as grave goods. Finally, a number of ornaments were also recovered from domestic (midden) contexts, suggesting that they were either discarded or lost.

Great variability of types and materials is present among lithic ornaments. The sample includes local and imported raw materials: bituminous coal from the southwest of Venezuela and serpentinite from the foothills of the Andes. We reconstructed preliminary production sequences, noticing some similarities between the production of a turtle-shaped stone pendant and the figurative shell pendants. Differences were nevertheless present in the ways the blank was obtained and in the use of scraping to shape the stone specimen. The tools used for working the stone turtle also differed, with brittle and hard lithics preferred over tools of organic materials. Slate was made into simple flat geometric pendants and nose rings, whose final shapes were not much different from the natural blanks recovered from nearby the Valencia Lake. The rectangular serpentinite pendants underwent multiple production stages, including sawing, grinding, and drilling. These pendants were likely not produced in the Valencia Lake Basin, but probably obtained from workshops in the Venezuelan Andes.<sup>81</sup> All lithic ornaments displayed use-wear, having likely been used. The stone turtle displayed evidence of being used in different occasions, attached each time to a composite ornament through a different system. The specimens with known provenience, including one of the serpentinite pendants and the turtle-shaped pendant, were also recovered from burials, possibly in association to shell ornaments.

The examination of this collection also provided insights on the recent biographies of the artefacts. Post-depositional surface modifications were often observed in the studied sample, such as breakages, surface erosion, shell dissolution, and encrusted sediment. Post-excavation modifications encompass modern traces that can result from artefact excavation, transport, curation, storage, and/or display. Among these, we have identified recent breaks, the gluing of previously broken artefacts, the addition of identifications, pencil lead marks left during the drawing of artefacts, and scratches or breakages around the suspension hole possibly due to being recently strung together. The presence of multiple identification types (e.g. glued tags and ink markings) and their superposition on the artefacts provided evidence of the long and complex biography of this collection during the twentieth century.<sup>82</sup> Such additions resulting from artefact classification provide evidence of museum dynamics, trends, political agendas, and of the incorporation of the collections into the scientific discourse of specific time periods.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, however, post-excavation modifications can hinder future analysis by partially concealing the surface of the artefacts or by creating new traces on top of pre-colonial ones.

The combined study, including microwear analysis and archival research, provided insights on the biographies of Valencioid ornaments from raw material acquisition to deposition at the sites and, ultimately, on their museum biographies. This was successfully done despite the advanced state of modification of the artefacts (being mostly finished objects), the lack of detailed contextual information, or of associated artefact types, such as tools or production debris. In this sense, despite limitations, artefacts held in museum collections can provide abundant information relevant for current archaeological research. Further studies of other collections are necessary in order to assess how recurrent the production sequences and specific biographies noted here are and how they may have

varied across space and time. Associated to site provenience and contextual information, such studies can allow us to assess the conditions of ornament production, the existence of specialised production, and the ways ornaments were used, regionally exchanged, placed as grave goods, and discarded. These analytical and interpretative procedures can shed light into the social context of original use of the archaeological objects that were for decades kept in museum drawers and into their further biographies. Furthermore, there is also great potential for interweaving this new data into the ongoing archaeological research on the Valencioid Sphere of Interaction.

## 6. Concluding remarks and future research

As we have demonstrated in previous sections, only a few contributions to north-central Venezuela archaeology actively incorporate museum-held objects into ongoing research. Nonetheless, even if the battle seems temporarily lost, we are convinced that it is worth waging. Critical recontextualisation of ‘old’ collections into the plethora of ongoing archaeological undertakings means their incorporation into the current range of research agendas fuelled by fresh and diverse theoretical approaches and interdisciplinary methodologies. Application of cutting-edge techniques is especially promising, especially when we consider that some of those objects were not purposefully cleaned, glued or reconstructed in post-recovery times. Some of the results of such investigations may confirm trends suggested by previous research; some may challenge such seeming trends by producing unexpected new information or by enabling researchers to consider the same problems from different perspectives. Through the analysis of museum objects, we can examine shifts in relationships between objects and peoples, objects and objects, peoples and peoples, and peoples/objects versus other-than-human beings. This is true both for the indigenous makers and users of the objects as well as for scientists, collectors, curators, museum visitors, and audiences at presentations.<sup>84</sup> As the recontextualisation ascribes new value to ‘old’ objects, it should be one of the pivotal tools of current museum curatorship.<sup>85</sup>

Important too is the fact that museum collections are not only assemblages of objects but also repositories of the documentary information associated with them. Information from labels, fiches, diaries, letters, reports, and catalogues, can shed light on the developmental trajectories of various specialists’ approaches and on general public attitudes to the objects (e.g. Figure 3). Based on these associated documentary materials, we can study the people who excavated, collected, sold, traded, studied, catalogued, and exhibited the museum objects.<sup>86</sup> This endeavour serves to reveal ‘a dynamic set of material and social agencies that have been instrumental in creating, shaping and reworking museum collections [through time]’.<sup>87</sup> Such a biography of objects and entire collections may shed light on the history of anthropology, archaeology and museology. More broadly, it may also contribute to a better understanding of the collections of the indigenous materials subsumed within the label of the so-called ‘primitive art’,<sup>88</sup> contributing to the challenges imposed by the perspectival approaches to the native objects<sup>89</sup> (see e.g. Figure 3(f, g and i)) and to the constructivist histories of science in the West.

Assessing the examples provided in this paper makes evident the value of museum collections to ongoing research and present-day society at large. But we should not endeavour to ‘block out the sun with one finger’ (*tapar el sol con un dedo*). This popular Venezuelan saying remains valid in the present discussion even acknowledging, as above, that

archaeological objects in museum collections frequently lack data related to their archaeological and depositional contexts, which is a reality heavily constraining insights into extinct social worlds. In the case study posed by north-central Venezuela, where use of museum objects in archaeology is currently minimal, a more promising future depends on the united and sustained efforts of researchers and museum staff personnel to change the perception of museums away from mere repositories of ‘dusty old things’. This shift could result in exerting beneficial influence on the maternal institutions themselves (museums, universities, foundations, research institutes) as well as on policymakers and the general public. Furthermore, such a change would eventually help garner more support for research, as well as for the maintenance and improvement of archaeological collections in the country. It would also show how academia, museums and the public at large can take a mutual enhanced interest in objects and collections.

Although this article is directed mostly to archaeologists, the implications of its main argument, namely the recontextualization of the old museum collections, go far beyond disciplinary borders. The recontextualization process connects older collections not only to their contemporary understandings but also to their present-day use. It contributes to the strengthening of the relationship between museums and the communities from which the collections originate.<sup>90</sup> Connecting the museum assemblages with contemporary communities and their understandings of their histories and movements of peoples and things in those regions opens other avenues for future research. If old museum collections are not just dusty repositories of the past but are fruitfully recontextualised, the past itself can also be recontextualised and, as such, become of greater relevance to the present and the future.

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## Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to several colleagues across the Atlantic who contributed to the different stages of this research: Konrad A. Antczak, Oliver Antczak, Tania Andrade Lima, Sumru Aricanli, Daniel Bailey, Gernot Bergold (†), Mary Yamilet Bonilla de García, Arie Boomert, Warwick Bray, Rosa M. Chacón, José Ma. Cruxent (†), Maureen DaRos, André Delpuech, Natalia Díaz, Lois Dubin, Dorila Echetopuana, Emilio Espósito, Manuela Fischer, Beatriz Freire, Marie Gaida, Annelou van Gijn, Antonio Guarnotta, Corinne L. Hofman, Ulrike Hoffmann, Gabriel Mille, Leopoldo Jahn Montauban (†), Hiram Moreno, Patricia L. Nietfeld, José R. Oliver, Miriam Andrea Rada, Corinne Raddatz, Freddy Rojas, Irving Rouse (†), Laszlo Sajo-Bohus, Sabine Strelocke, Michelle Wollstonecroft, and Erika Wagner. We also would like to acknowledge the valuable support of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), American and German Embassies in Caracas, Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas (currently FONACIT), Universidad Simón Bolívar, and the museums mentioned in this chapter. This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) ERC Grant agreement no. 319209, under the direction of Prof. dr. C. L. Hofman.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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