OBSERVATION ESSAY: Pre-Colombian Objects

Historians study the human past using evidence created by people who rarely are present to answer questions about what effect they intended their creations to have. They do not just report on what they study, but interpret the evidence. That is, they develop ideas (theses, hypotheses) about the evidence to discuss not just what they find, but how it fits into a bigger picture: who made it? how? why? when? for whom? Those who study societies that used text to leave a record behind often rely substantially on that written record—laws, decrees, wills, accounts, speeches, diaries, etc—for their interpretations. However, sometimes there is little or no written record to rely on. In that case, historians, like archaeologists, strive to interpret and understand the past based on material culture, including pictures, architecture, and objects such as jars, knives, earrings and other fragments of daily life or institutional ceremony.

Your assignment, due February 2, requires you to put yourself in the role of a historian of the non-written past by thinking about what information can be drawn from a physical, rather than textual, primary source. After picking a pre-Columbian object in the Tang Museum’s permanent collection, you will write a 500-750 word narrative essay that first describes the physical object (what is it?), and then interprets and analyzes what that object suggests to you about the society that made it WITHOUT using any other sources. Your paper should communicate what you can reliably observe about the object, how the object helps you speculate about (interpret) the society that created it, as well as reflect on the advantages and limitations of this kind of object as a historical source. (What kind of questions can you think of to ask?)

Your paper should have all the elements of an essay: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In other words, you should organize your material in a logical fashion and think about how your text represents your ideas. To help your reader understand why you are presenting your own (written) evidence in a particular order, each paragraph should have a topic sentence that introduces the main idea of the paragraph. For guidelines on writing a college essay, you are encouraged to consult the Skidmore Guide to College Writing. For specific guidelines for writing for this class, see: http://www.skidmore.edu/~jdym/Writing_Handout-Skidmore.htm.

You will have about 30 minutes to take notes on your selected object on Friday, January 27 (2:00-2:30, 2:40-3:10, 3:20-4). You may bring ONLY notebook & pencil with you to take notes. Please leave all other items in the Tang Museum cloakroom.

If you require additional time to look at the object, I have arranged additional viewing times: Monday, January 30, 3:00-4:30. Once you arrive at the Tang, ask the receptionist to contact Tang registrar so that she may conduct you to the objects.