

The Banco Central Museum Mummy

Written by Karen O. Bruhns, Nancy L. Kelker

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{rokbox}images/stories/apachita/Apachita_17_2.jpg{/rokbox}

There are fake mummies here and there. Actually, they mostly, like the Egyptian ones, are pastiches, bits from various bodies and objects from various burials all put together into one fraudulent whole. Such is the poor "Cañari lady" of the Museo del Banco Central in Quito. The Museo del Banco Central is, essentially, the national museum of that country. The museum was founded on private collections and selective buying from looters, so most of the pieces have little in the way of a reliable or detailed provenience. The alleged mummy, if actually Cañari, would have come from the southern highlands; this is especially problematic since the area is a generally damp place with few dry caves or other such mummy-preserving amenities.

The mummy is lying on its back, legs slightly flexed. The skull has some hair preserved, long and curly and presumably why the mummy is generally referred to as a "she." The body is clad in a coarse textile *uncu* (ancient-style man's shirt) with some rather generic-patterned belts attached horizontally to it. This strange costume ought to be a dead giveaway, as women did not wear male shirts, but rather wore wrapped skirts or sarong dresses and shawls. Cañari ladies from the ultimate Prehispanic period wore Inca clothing, a belted, wrapped dress with shoulder pins, and a pinned shawl (Bruhns 2002). The decorated belts tacked horizontally onto the garment approximate no ancient style. When the Museo del Banco Central moved from its original quarters in the Banco Central Building in Quito to the Casa de la Cultura building some blocks to the north, some other anomalies became evident. The most outstanding one was that the head and body were clearly from different people. They didn't match, and the head was attached to the body with wire. Despite some caveats from the few remaining archaeologists associated with this archaeology museum, the mummy was put back on display as a Cañari, and there she lies, in spotlighted splendor.

Although there is no reliable evidence as to her origins, the best bet is that both body and head came from somewhere in Peru, a place where mummies are not uncommon. The relatively poor preservation might suggest northern Peru, an area with which there is a lot of exchange, including exchange of antiquities. The clothes too are probably coastal Peruvian, a coarse shirt gotten from some grave or mummy bundle somewhere (the coarseness of the fabric suggests that it did not come from a wealthy interment) and some belts from the same general source, later sewn onto the shirt for a little extra pizzazz. What is pretty certain is that nothing came from Ecuador, a land where ancient textiles are best known from imprints on pottery and figurines and where mummies are rare to nonexistent.

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Why a fake mummy? You might as well ask John Dillinger why he robbed banks! Knowing collectors, as the authors do, mummy-makers would have no difficulty in finding at least a half dozen people who collect antiquities, who know very little about prehistory but are vain enough to compete for the most exotic pieces, and who would go for a dubious mummy in a heartbeat, especially if it were given an appropriately patriotic provenance by the enterprising seller. And this, again, is how fakes make their way into museums.

Bruhns, Karen O., 2002, Vestimenta en el Ecuador precolombino. *Arqueología del Area Intermedia* 4:11-44,
Popayán.

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