



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2006 Volume IV: Native America: Understanding the Past through Things

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## **Introduction**

by Mary E. Miller, Sterling Professor of History of Art and Dean of Yale College

Let's imagine the Americas before 1492, or before 1620, or 1534. What was the world like? How did this rugged continent first yield to Amerindians, and what did they make of it? How did they solve the fundamental human problems of first, shelter and food, and then, eventually, society, culture, and civilization? How did they care for children, and what solutions did they come to for their dead? Did they dream, and how were those dreams made manifest? How did they respond to the catastrophic events of their times, whether El Niños that drenched the western coast of South America or devastating droughts that made the US Southwest essentially uninhabitable. What strategies led to their success, according to Charles Mann's new book, *1491*, where we started our investigation? How did they cope with the invasion of Europeans, who brought, as Jared Diamond has written, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997)?

Following initial work at a long weekend seminar in May, eleven teachers from the public schools of New Haven, Connecticut; Houston, Texas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Duvall County, Florida; Richmond, Virginia; Wilmington, Delaware; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, met for two intensive weeks in New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale University, for a Yale National Initiative seminar, "to strengthen teaching in public schools." We met on a daily basis for two hours every morning; at a minimum, we met individually for half to three-quarters of an hour in May, during the first two days of the July seminar, and during the last two days of the seminar. Fellows prepared a prospectus for research, and then completed a first draft by the end of the July session. They submitted a second draft on August 1 and a final draft on August 15. All members completed every aspect of the seminar.

In this seminar, participants considered the strategies for success and adaptation all across the Americas, with attention to the tangible materials that survive, from drinking cups to roads, from temple hearths to corncribs. We looked at how space is conquered: when does the path take on verticality and become the stair? How do humans measure time? We took individual objects — say, a piece of cloth — to see how much we can learn from them. Who made them, who acquired them, and how have they survived? What can we learn about human ingenuity and the human quest for status differentiation in an individual thing? The two great civilizations encountered by the Spanish, the Aztecs and the Incas, were treated comparatively: were there New World empires? Throughout the seminar, recent controversies and theories will be evaluated. Primary sources from ancient times to the present informed our readings; real things, whether a modern-day hand-woven textile or a chocolate bean helped bring reality and practicality into the classroom.

During the seminar, participants explored resources at the Yale University Art Gallery and the Peabody Museum, along with the Yale University Library, including its many digital and online resources. Topics considered included the "Columbian" exchange of foods, peoples, animals, and diseases initiated by the

arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean; the concept of urban life, with particular attention to the Aztecs and the Inca; and the value placed on particular materials — whether fibers, metals, stones, or shells across the Native New World. Several Fellows chose to work on texts, from traditional 16th-century texts of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca, to the modern-day prose of Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian writing today; other Fellows looked at the visual record as text. Two Fellows, both art teachers, developed units in which students would learn the technology of traditional Native American things, including cordage, pottery, and weaving. A music teacher created a unit around North American Native music.

Teachers in the seminar represented many disciplines: science, history, English, art, music, social studies, and elementary education. They developed units for their students that would develop skills to meet local and state standards, and they developed their own skills of narrative and discursive writing as well.

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