

History of Machu Picchu Collections at Yale

The collections of artifacts from Machu Picchu at Yale were excavated by Hiram Bingham during his historic Peruvian expedition of 1912. Machu Picchu was not a well-known site then, and Peru's Civil Code of 1852, in effect at the time, permitted the finders of such artifacts to keep them. A presidential decree authorizing Bingham's excavation (but not superseding the authority of the civil code) contained a provision allowing him to bring the material to Yale for scientific study, and gave Peru the right to request him to return certain "unique" or "duplicate" objects, which it did not exercise in the ensuing period. The materials sent to the Peabody consisted mainly of fragmented pottery, animal bone and other items discarded by the Incas. They also included a small number of used but largely intact personal possessions, such as bowls, left as grave goods in the cave burials of Inca retainers who were buried around the periphery of the site, but no treasures. These items strongly resembled materials found at other Inca sites such as Sacsahuaman and consequently were of little interest to the Peruvian government in 1912.

Bingham returned to Peru for a second expedition in 1914-1915. By then, Peru's policies regarding archaeological discoveries had changed. As a result, the materials Bingham excavated outside of Machu Picchu during that expedition were loaned to Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History for a finite period of time and these items were eventually returned to Peru after a delay due to World War I. The materials from the 1912 expedition, and items purchased by Bingham in Peru during both expeditions, remained at Yale and were conserved and studied by generations of scholars from Yale and other parts of the world.

Throughout his life, Bingham served many distinguished roles: archeologist, professor, statesman, and elected official. From 1922 to 1933, he served consecutively as Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut, its Governor, and then its United States Senator. Following his retirement from the Senate, he worked on literary and business matters in the nation's capitol.

In 1948 Peru invited Bingham back to Machu Picchu for the dedication of a new road that would improve access to the historic site. According to a local newspaper report, the elderly explorer was greatly moved by the tributes he received from local dignitaries, government officials and the U.S. Ambassador to Peru. The Peruvian government's representative was quoted as saying that the "Hiram Bingham Highway" would "again unite the prestige of the illustrious professor, Dr. Hiram Bingham, with the destiny of our country."

In 1981, a quarter century after Bingham's death, Peru and the United States signed a bilateral agreement prohibiting the export of archaeological remains from Peru. This agreement was not retroactive, and it did not cover the Machu Picchu materials from the

1912 expedition that remained at Yale.

Select objects from Bingham's 1912 expedition to Machu Picchu were used in the past decade in an educational exhibition about Machu Picchu developed at the Yale Peabody Museum, which traveled throughout the United States. This exhibit brought the reality of everyday Inca life at Machu Picchu to over one million visitors, broadening their knowledge and appreciation of Inca life and culture.

In recent years, the government of Peru has sought return of the materials, and the University has engaged in negotiations with the government's representatives with the goal of an amicable resolution that would ensure the continued conservation and scholarly study of the historic collection.

On September 14, 2007, Yale University and representatives of Peru's government, Minister Hernan Garcia Lecca and Instituto Nacional de Cultura director Cecilia Bakula, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that would form the basis of a groundbreaking agreement to acknowledge Peru's interests in the materials, and establish an international collaboration for education and research to ensure that the materials remain available for study to scholars from Yale, Peru and other parts of the world. The goals of the MOU include creating a traveling exhibit of Machu Picchu artifacts; creating a museum in Cuzco to house museum-quality objects returned to Peru by the University; and developing an ongoing scholarly collaboration between Yale and Peru.

As negotiations continued to finalize the agreement between Yale and Peru contemplated by the MOU, a delegation from Peru traveled to Yale in March 2008 to examine the University's inventory of Machu Picchu materials.