Net Balance Scale
South America; Peru
600-900 A.D.
Bone, cotton, wool, stone, linen, spondylus
Pre-Columbian
Bone: 4 7/8 x 5/8 in.; 12.3825 x 1.5875 cm; suspending string: 17 1/2 in.;
44.45 cm; nets: 23 1/2 x 8 3/4 in.; 59.69 x 22.225 cm

Gift of Mrs. George D. Pratt
AC M.1940.1

This net balance scale originates from 600-900 AD, pre-
Columbian Peru. The two diamond shaped nets are made out of
wool, cotton, and linen and hang to create a triangular form.
Inside the two large nets, the knots and spaces of the textile form
miniature diamonds that mirror the shape of the larger bags. The
nets are bordered with a red and black wool finish. The
rectangular beam is a stylized bone with circular drilled blue marks in a curving line. It has a slight
intentional curve for better handling and the suspended string coming hanging down from it is adorned
with three beads made of lapis lazuli stones and spondylus.

The materials indicate that the artifact comes from coastal Peru, where the dry weather allowed
for its survival. Other net balance scales exist from the Chimú culture, located in the northern coastal
region of Peru. The oldest known civilization in that area was the Early Chimú, also known as the Moche
civilization. The Moche society lived from 100-800 AD, which intersects with the estimated time period
the balance scales was made.

Moche weaving techniques were particularly sophisticated. One technique involved spinning the
yarn tightly to make the net stronger and able to sustain more weight. The two diamond shaped textiles
forming the bags of the balance beam was most likely created from Z spun, S-plied cotton fiber threads.
Cotton was the most common used fiber for textiles. In this scale there is a combination of wool and
cotton, which indicates a greater level of importance. Another indication of the importance of the
object is the fact that it uses different ply yarn. Multi-ply yarn was uncommon in Moche culture and the
use of it in this object leads us to the conclusion that it was not for every day use. The balance scale was
most likely used to carefully weigh materials of high value to the Moche civilization such as metal ingots
or rare dyes.

The dye was made naturally - red dye from the insect *dactylopius coccus* and the black comes
from indigo. The stones on the balance are very rare and also point to the importance of the object. One
of the stones is spondylus. This stone comes from the shell of the spondylus oyster. The Moche people
were known to worship these animals and depicted spondylus shells in their art. Spondylus shells were
also used as currency for trade. The other stones found on the scale might be lapis lazuli. They were
mined in the Andes and were obtained by the Moche through trade. In ancient times, goods were
measured based on value, not mass. Although the object was most likely owned by a high authority
figure, chances are a woman made it. Weaving was one of the many duties of the women of Moche.
This artifact is an interesting way to learn about the economies of Pre-Colombian Peru. This piece illustrates not only significant skills but also the unique way in which ancient Andean societies used design, technique and precise amounts of unusual materials to bridge functionality and art.

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Bibliography:


