

## 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 were 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-ply cotton five 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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*Special thanks to Elizabeth Klarich (Smith College) and David Carballo*

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