Selected Artifacts from the Marco Forster Collection

Henry C. Koerper

Abstract

Four artifacts were chosen out of the Marco Forster Collection for illustration and discussion. Each selection followed some observation that anticipated revelation of at least one point of information that might be generally unfamiliar, perhaps even unknown, to students of southern California archaeology and that at the same time might pique special interest for some number of consumers or practitioners of regional prehistory. A fired clay figurine demonstrates that ceramic artisans sometimes employed a post, such as a twig, to stabilize appliquéd components to the body of an effigy prior to firing. A steatite bat ray effigy adds a new type of species representation to the plastic arts repertoire of regional animal iconography. A steatite tubular artifact has implications for assessing whether certain other multi-holed objects encountered in publications or museums are authentic Indian manufactures. An example of shaman curing paraphernalia provides evidence of a technique used to more securely fasten beads or other decorative elements onto steatite surfaces.

Introduction

Until recently, Indian artifacts with the Marco “Tom” Forster Collection, loaned by the Forster family to the San Juan Capistrano Historical Society (SJCHS), were on display at the O’Neill Museum (Figure 1) in the Los Rios District of the city of San Juan Capistrano. The majority of those specimens relate to coastal southern California magico-religious practices; a list of the collection’s artifact types is extensive (e.g., cogged stone, discoidal, Universe effigy, shaman’s tube, donut stone, anthropomorphic effigy, zoomorphic effigy, spike, phallic pestle). Much of the largely unprovenienced collection will soon again be available for public viewing, but at the society’s nearby Silvas Adobe (Figure 2), when that historically significant structure becomes fully refurbished in 2016 (Don Tryon, personal communication 2015).

Several years ago the author was allowed access to the Marco Forster Collection and examined the Universe effigies for a study focused on that genre (see Koerper and Chace 2009). In 2015, granted access once more to the collection, the author photographed, weighed, measured, and otherwise documented over 50 of its southern California artifacts. The present essay describes and discusses four of those objects, the selection of each having turned on a specimen’s potential to offer an observation either generally unfamiliar to or unknown by students of local prehistory. In order of appearance, attention is given to a fired clay female figurine, a steatite bat ray effigy, a tubular object having linear arrangements of holes drilled into its sides, and a steatite shaman’s sucking tube. This essay ends with a summary and concluding remarks section.

Ceramic Female Figurine

A fired clay, anthropomorphic effigy (Cat. No. T2-002-80) residing with the Marco Forster Collection (Figures 3–5) was probably baked in an open hearth. Weighing 58 g and standing 95 mm tall, the specimen is broken near its middle, but modern repair reattached the two halves. The body of the artifact was hand-modeled out of paste containing natural temper, and two breasts were subsequently appliquéd (wet clay to wet clay) onto the torso. Surfaces were smoothed perhaps using a waterworn pebble or small wooden...
spatula. The figurine is now missing its right breast. What is instructive here is the presence of a small hole centered within the “footprint” of the detached breast (Figure 5), an indication that a small post (a twig?) once functioned to pin the breast to the torso.

Interestingly, this same construction technique was employed in the manufacture of a Middle Holocene ceramic figurine found at the Encino Village site (CA-LAN-43) in the San Fernando Valley (Desaute-Is-Wiley 2013:30, Figure 4i), but the evidence of such went unobserved and undocumented until now. Within the Encino specimen’s footprint of the disengaged, appliquéd right breast, there is a small hole (Figure 6) that reveals the imprint (cast) of a small twig (Figure 7) implanted, obviously, when the clay was wet. Another small hole, slightly lower and just to the right, probably once held a similar post.

The left breast of the Forster Collection specimen bears a small, round punctate element front and center (Figures 3 and 5), certainly indicating a nipple.
Figure 3. Frontal view of the ceramic female figurine in the Marco Forster Collection.

Figure 4. Backside of the ceramic female figurine in the Marco Forster Collection.

Figure 5. Chest area of the Marco Forster Collection ceramic figurine. Within the footprint of the missing right breast is a hole that once held a small post that helped anchor the mamma.

Figure 6. Ceramic female figurine (Cat. No. 3701) from the Encino Village site (CA-LAN-43). Arrow points to the imprint of a small twig that was implanted to help anchor the right mamma to the chest area.
Another Middle Holocene figurine from the Encino Village site, but with both breasts present, has more prominent punctations to indicate nipples (Figure 8). Parenthetically, White (2013:Figures 3a, b, 4c) illustrated northern California female figurines showing punctate nipples.

Despite its highly conventionalized morphology, the Marco Forster Collection representation is unequivocally female. Further demonstration of feminine gender turns on the bulbous bottom end, its maximum diameter 33 mm and minimum diameter 30 mm. Such devices often occur along with representations of mammae on clay effigies found in southern California (e.g., True 1957:292; True and Warren 1961:252; see also Sawyer and Koerper 2006).3 It has been suggested that the bulbous device communicated a condition of pregnancy (True et al. 1974:67; Freeman and Van Horn 1990:30–31). The overriding thematic undoubtedly revolved on fertility/fecundity, increase, nature’s bounty, etc.

Clearly, sex-based imagery was paramount for this Forster Collection artifact, there being no crafted arms or legs, and also consider that in front view there is merely a mildly expanding curved element rising upwards of the chest area, a minimal head, absent any hint of facial features.

The overall surface look of the figurine is remindful of Tizon Brown pottery. A reasonable guess is that the specimen was crafted in Luiseño territory.

**Steatite Bat Ray Figurine**

Effigies confidently attributed to Native coastal southern California manufacture and that clearly communicate piscine imagery are referenced only infrequently in the regional literature. There are published stone carvings so stylistically conventionalized that it would be a fool’s errand to attempt assignment to categories of either fish mimic or cetacean mimic (see Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2012:67–83). Further, numerous published effigies projecting enough morphological accuracy to reasonably suggest a fish referent range from just a bit “fishy” to egregiously phony.4
The Forster Collection specimen shown in Figures 9–12 (Cat. No. T2-001-80) unequivocally represents a bat ray (*Myliobatis californica*). It weighs 121 g, is 77 mm long, and measures 22 mm in height (thickness). Its width at 99 mm is noticeably greater than its length. In life the bat ray body is wider than it is long. It is almost certainly a genuine piece, and if so, this adds a new species to the repertoire of regional Indian iconography. The ray-like figurines in Burnett (1944:Plates 25 and 32 [20/1856]) are not only too fanciful to consider as authentic Native art, but they were most likely crafted using metal tools (see Gamble 2002). Another phony steatite bat ray appears in Anonymous (1947:104).

The proximal end of a very rounded, upraised device on the dorsal surface is clear indication of the animal’s head. Unlike the mantas encountered along the California coast, bat rays have massive heads, elevated well above the disk, and so the intended referent was not another species of ray. The said device is reduced slightly in size where it sits between the outstretched wings (dorsal fins) of the dorsoventrally flattened disk.

Some small amount of asphaltum accompanies the piece. A gently curving incised mouth was plugged with tar (Figure 11), presumably to offer quick recognition of that facial feature. The mouth is in correct anatomical position, that is, on the ventral side. The head displays two drilled holes placed more or less equidistant away from an imagined line that would bisect the face. The mastic inside the two orbits does not completely fill these small cavities which had likely held shell insets, such as drilled beads, to stand for eyes. A condition of missing insets, if that is in fact
the case, has implications for the issue of authenticity. In the author’s experience recent forgeries/fantasy creations purporting regional prehistoric provenance as well as artifacts suspected as doctored with shell beads or other shell insets invariably retain all these decorative elements (i.e., no empty holes).

The distal third of the figurine’s dorsal surface is characterized as only moderately upraised to a rounded crest. Some small part of the composition has detached from the rear extension. Pitting occurs sporadically on the dorsal surfaces, which nonetheless retain an overall somewhat smoothed look, even to a degree polished and palpably reflecting light. The surfaces of many forgeries appear almost without blemish—just too perfect. The tooling of the Forster Collection effigy appears consistent with the use of stone implements.

Below and back from the mouth, on the ventral side (Figure 12), there is an eminence, generally rounded but flattened at its surface, which extends along the area between the two wings. It meets a linear ridge that occupies the distal third or so of the ventral side. The underside was also smoothed, and it too presents some small pits.

Parenthetically, in a photograph showing Thomas Tower I posing with some of his Malaga Cove (CALAN-138) Level 2 finds, in a display case he is holding, there is a small object having a generally similar appearance (see Koerper et al. 2014:25, Figure 4). That specimen sits only several centimeters left of the large disk-shaped object seen within the upper right corner of the display.

Multi-holed Tubular Artifact

The tubular object with 14 small holes (Cat. No. Z-014), all drilled from the outer surface and penetrating into the chamber, was manufactured from whitish-gray, highly micaceous steatite (Figures 13–15). Weighing 1,176 g, its length is 180 mm, and its maximum and minimum diameters are 70 mm and 63 mm.

Undoubtedly, initial hollowing of the chamber proceeded mostly by drilling from both ends using a stone tool, resulting in uneven, biconically contoured inner walls. Subsequently, repeated thrusting of a pointed tool through both entrances excavated out additional material, thus effacing rotational scars, straightening walls, and striating interior surfaces. Striae are immediately apparent at the chamber’s two openings (see Figure 15).

Both ends of the tube eventually suffered breakage; repair included rounding the rims of the openings. Additional damage later occurring at one end was not reworked to smooth the broken edge. That end has a maximum diameter at its entrance of about 34 mm, and its maximum and minimum wall thicknesses measure 19 mm and 10 mm. The opposite entrance has a maximum diameter of about 29 mm, its maximum and minimum wall thicknesses being 19 mm and 13 mm.

Outer surfaces of the cylinder exhibit a rolling bumpiness. The small holes occupying these surfaces show rotational drill scars, and all break into the chamber. A total of 13 holes, 12 complete and one only partial,
occur in four rows, but there is another complete hole sitting apart from any row. All holes aligned in the row having five holes are intact. The incomplete hole shares a row with three complete holes; it can be seen at the breakage along one end of the specimen. There is one other linear arrangement of four complete holes.

Attention to this unusual artifact is opportune for revisiting issues of authenticity and function that were bandied about years ago, at least verbally, among some Orange County avocational and professional archaeologists, whose familiarity with multi-holed steatite tubes may have been restricted to a specimen appearing in Burnett (1944:42, Plate 39) (Figure 16) and two specimens (Figures 17 and 18) curated with the Bowers Museum, Santa Ana.

The ca. 135 mm, eight-holed tube in Burnett’s book, then at the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York, was attributed to San Nicolas Island. The inauthenticity of many objects illustrated in Burnett (1944) casts varied levels of suspicion on most other artifacts shown and discussed in the book. The Bowers Museum 155 mm long, eight-holed tube and the museum’s 113 mm long, three-holed tube lack provenance, a circumstance that has contributed to concerns about the legitimacy of each. Many of us wondered whether regional Indians had ever actually manufactured multi-holed, steatite tubular artifacts.

The Marco Forster Collection specimen should demonstrate that some south central coastal California Native peoples did indeed craft multi-holed tubes. To explain, the Forster artifact is unlikely to represent a forgery or fantasy piece produced for the antiquities market since: (1) it offers little if any aesthetic draw, and (2) its very low-grade soapstone is far-and-away inferior to the harder, finer grained soapstones favored for production of known or reasonably presumed fakes. In southern California the varied grades of soapstone employed to craft bogus effigies, pipes, ornaments, etc. are generally of the same grades of
stone that were used to fashion similar kinds of items determined to be authentic.

The multi-holed Heye Foundation tube of Figure 16 was presumed to be a flute by Burnett (1944:42). Unpublished, informal discussions of the functions of the two Bowers Museum artifacts, when supposing them to be of genuine Indian manufacture, centered largely on the question of musical instrument versus shaman curative paraphernalia.

The three largest multi-holed tubes illustrated in this essay are especially poor candidates for flute status. For a flute to work, a thin stream of air is blown across a sharp edge, or lip, thus initiating a robust swirling motion in the airflow, a consequence of nearly simultaneous compression and then expansion of the air, thus causing sound. This sound, directed to the instrument’s cavity, produces tonal resonance. A blown stream of air will not break effectively on a thick rounded edge, such as those occupying openings at each end of these three multi-holed tubes. Also, had the small holes been intended to function as stops to allow changes in pitch, their arrangements on the three larger specimens, especially the Forster artifact, would pose a most inconvenient challenge to any flutist.

Regional ethnographic and ethnohistoric records never identify stone as a manufacturing material for windblown instruments. Most flutes were crafted out of wood, fewer of bone, although bone was the medium of choice for whistles (see Harrington 1942:29; Hudson and Blackburn 1986:347–368; also Abbott 1879; Corbett 2001). Finger holes, or stops, were grouped single file and generally numbered between four and six.

The Heye Foundation artifact and the larger Bowers Museum specimen both exhibit abrupt diameter constriction at these tubular objects’ ends, resulting in circumferential shoulders (see Figures 16 and 17). The end devices, it would seem, are superfluous to sound production. Also, those objects’ chambers seem too spacious to effect useful resonance.

Hollow, cylindrical stone artifacts of sufficient length to set them apart from certain possible tubular adornments (e.g., see Hudson and Blackburn 1986:288) include secular and ritual smoking pipes and shamans’ sucking tubes (see Bonner 1985). However, the small holes of multi-holed tubes would seem counter-productive to pipe smoking or sucking ritual. Speculatively, perhaps the holes would help oxygenate an ignited combustible (e.g., sage or native tobacco).
within a hand-held tube, producing smoke that might have been waved back and forth over a shaman’s patient. Following this thought involving combustion, perhaps such multi-holed tubular objects served medical procedures such as counterirritant treatment, cauterization, or cupping (see Snyder and Koerper 2014:72–73). If anything was ever ignited within the above noted multi-holed artifacts, all evidence of such has disappeared. The function of the three larger tubes remains elusive.

Questions remained regarding interpretation of the smaller Bowers Museum tubular object (Figure 18). Is the piece genuine or fraudulent? Its morphology (three holes in a single alignment and one end tapered) might suggest a musical purpose, but had it ever actually produced a sound? If not, perhaps it was a flute mimic that functioned in some magico-religious capacity, or was it a child’s plaything? If it is absent evidence of shaping by metal tool, authenticity becomes a credible hypothesis, bolstered by the fact that a very similar object (Figure 19) is recognized in two photographic images taken nearly 11 decades ago.

The better image of the steatite object shown in Figure 19 was published in an article by Frank Palmer (1907:66, Plate 3, No. 4, or see also 1905:19, Plate 3, No. 4), first Director of the Southwest Museum, who was writing about the Palmer-Campbell Collection of Indian artifacts. While Palmer provided no measurements for what he believed was a three-stop fife, circumstantial evidence allows a judicious estimate of length, viz., somewhere between 12 cm and 14 cm.

The Palmer-Campbell specimen also appears, but less clearly, in a photograph taken by Charles Lummis (1907:24) for an article announcing the beginning of the Southwest Museum.6

Does the reader now anticipate an opportunity for experimental archaeology? Employing good quality steatite, it would not be difficult to replicate a three-holed tube.

**Shaman’s Sucking Tube**

The shaman’s sucking tube (Cat. No. Z-013) weighs 344 g and measures 172 mm lengthwise (Figures 20–22). This magico-religious artifact was shaped from good quality, medium gray soapstone. “Good quality” signals that, unlike the Forster Collection multi-holed tube previously described, the material is harder talc schist, definitely not “highly micaceous.”

It is reasonably expected that initial excavation of the chamber involved a stone drilling tool applied at both ends of what was probably a rough-hewn cylinder. This was followed by fine shaping of the interior walls, effacing evidence of rotational scars and making the chamber nearly straight, using a hard-pointed implement. This operation left only striations, especially apparent at both entrances to the tube (Figure 21). The striated markings are shallow, hinting at possible further effort to smooth the chamber’s inner walls. Abrading of exterior surfaces conferred a pleasing symmetry to the piece, made all the more attractive by smoothing the surfaces to the level of a moderate polish. The outer walls are only minimally convex, far from barrel-shaped in plan view. Maximum diameter (38 mm) occurs at midsection. At the end of the tube near the encircling groove, diameter measures 32 mm; here, some gopher gnawing is apparent.

The grooved area (Figure 22) was undoubtedly carved to display an encircling panel of decorative elements, most likely insets such as shell beads.

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Figure 19. Three-holed, steatite tubular object from the Palmer-Campbell Collection. Length estimate, between 12 and 14 cm. Reproduced from Palmer (1907: Plate 3, No. 4).
or shaped but unperforated pieces of shell. Some asphaltum adheres to the surfaces of the groove, but not enough to retain an imprint of former decorations. There are incisions, mostly longitudinal, within the grooved area, their probable purpose to help adhere applications of the mastic and thus stabilize the decorative panel. Attention to these kinds of incisions coupled with a statement of their inferred purpose did not turn up during the author’s extensive search through the published literature of aboriginal California.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

This article’s introduction announced that 2016 would be the Silvas Adobe Museum’s inaugural year. The museum was conceived by the SJCHS as a remembrance and celebration of especially local Native American culture.

Among the museum’s Indian artifacts with coastal southern California provenance are objects reasonably presumed or demonstrated to have served magico-religious purposes. Included are four specimens belonging to the Marco Forster Collection, two figurines and two tubular objects that were chosen for discussion and illustration. The selection of each artifact was directed by some observation or observations that might provide at least some instruction, or more specifically, an insight not generally familiar to or even recognized by students of regional prehistory, at least not through formal publications.

The ceramic anthropomorphic effigy (Figures 3–5) reveals an interesting manufacturing technique used to appliqué a body part component onto the larger still wet ceramic figurine prior to firing. Within the footprint of the detached right breast (Figure 5) of the anthropomorph, a small hole attests to the former presence of a post, or pin, likely a small twig, which helped attach the appliquéd mamma to the chest. Observation of the Forster Collection specimen recalled
a recently published Encino site (LAN-43) female
figurine (Figure 6), also with a missing right breast
and a similar hole, but one in which the cast of an
implanted twig is clear and unequivocal (Figure 7).
The Forster Collection specimen and Encino spec-
imen are of very different stylistic traditions that
occurred several thousand years apart, thus present-
ing an example of independent invention. Another
highly probable example of independent invention
is revealed when one looks at how nipples were
represented on the Late Holocene Forster Collection
effigy and a second Middle Holocene effigy (Figure
8); in both cases nipples are shown as indentations,
the result of pushing some sort of stylus (an awl?)
into wet clay.

The Marco Forster Collection bat ray effigy (Figures
9–12) was crafted with such realism that observers
familiar with southern California fishes would not
misidentify the referent as guitar fish, thornback,
skate, or butterfly ray. Regionally, it may be the least
conventionalized carved stone fish mimic among those
specimens with solid provenance or otherwise deemed
to be genuine. It represents a new type of animal effi-
gy within the south central coastal California icono-
graphic landscape. Also, it should be noted that one
means to effect its realism was to apply asphaltum to
highlight the carving’s distinctive mouth. Such infill-
ing as adjunct to figurine production is now formally
documented in the regional plastic arts.

Studied consideration of the Forster Collection multi-
holed tube (Figures 13–15) supports the idea that
the piece was of Native crafting and not fraudulent.
Its material, highly micaceous steatite, was not the
choice for faking artifacts. The techniques of manu-
facture are consistent with those witnessed for tubular
steatite objects reasonably attributed to regional Indian
craftsmanship. Further, it lacks aesthetic appeal; such
appeal is desired for marketing phony pieces.

Its many holes, inconveniently positioned to serve as
stops, and its lack of a sharp edge at either opening to
the chamber, disqualify the tube as a flute. Consider
also that stone wind instruments are absent from the
ethnobiographic and ethnographic records. Attention
given here to this Forster Collection artifact should
mitigate skepticism surrounding the authenticity of
certain other multi-holed tubular objects.

The shaman’s sucking tube from the Forster Collec-
tion (Figures 20–22) provides evidence bearing on the
technique used to stabilize the decorative panel that no
longer adheres to the circumferentially carved groove
at one end of the artifact. The panel probably held
shell beads embedded in its asphaltum. Since most of
the tarry mastic is missing, one easily observes short
incisions spread along the groove’s lower surface.
The incisions were likely intended to better adhere
the asphaltum panel with its insets to the tube. The
author was unable to locate prior documentation of
this manufacturing technique, a reflection, perhaps, of
but casual attention to details in descriptive analyses
of certain kinds of artifacts.

On a final note, this article further points up the poten-
tial value of visiting older, relatively obscure collec-
tions of artifacts, even those accumulated outside the
purview of rigorous scientific inquiry.

End Notes

1. The O’Neill Museum was named in honor of Mar-
guerite O’Neill. The building was originally known
as the Garcia/Pryor residence, one of the first frame
houses in San Juan Capistrano. Saloon owner Jose
Dolores Garcia and wife Refugio Yorba built their res-
didence between 1870 and 1880 near today’s El Adobe
Restaurant. In 1977 the house was relocated across the
railroad tracks to its present location, 31831 Los Rios,
San Juan Capistrano, 92675.
2. Marco F. “Tom” Forster was a great-grandson of Don Juan Forster and Governor Pio Pico’s sister, Ysidro. Like some other members of the Forster family, he had an enduring interest in the Indian cultures of the San Juan Capistrano Valley and beyond. Accumulation of the Marco Forster Collection may have begun with grandfather Marcos Forster (Pat Forster, personal communication 2015).

3. Three ceramic female figurines, each with breasts and somewhat bulbous devices at their lower ends were found together at the Malaga Cove site (CA-LAN-138) by Thomas Tower. They are seen in Koerper and Peterson (2014:52, Figure 5, upper row [middle]) and in Figure 2 in Koerper et al. (this Quarterly issue). They too are Late Holocene artifacts.

4. Of the many inauthentic effigies intended to project some degree of cetacean or piscine content, some such carvings combine body parts that do not go together in nature (see Burnett 1944). The more fantastical examples might carry imagery evoking cross-species mixing to the extent that a few appear as fish-cetacean hybrids. For the reader’s amusement we recommend a look at Figure 38a in Koerper and Desautels-Wiley (2012:75), where a steatite effigy seems to be part sperm whale, part orca, and part human. The great majority of bogus objects in Burnett’s (1944) book were purchased by the Heye Foundation, Museum of the American Indian, from Arthur Sanger and O. T. Littleton (see Koerper and Chace 1995).

5. The author supposes that the steatite carving is probably a genuine piece but suspects that it may have been doctored in modern times using authentic shell beads to produce the beaded decoration.

6. The Lummis image captures an impressive array of southern California Indian manufactures in several display cases that house both the Rutter and Palmer-Campbell collections. The photo was taken inside the Pacific Electric Building, Los Angeles, which served as a temporary home for the museum until the museum’s Highland Park building was completed.

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