



Figure 1. **Merchant Ship.** Woodcut (detail) from *Perigrinatio in terram sanctam*, by Bernhard von Breydenbach, Mainz, 1486. The New York Public Library, Rare Books Division, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

This vessel, called a *nao* in Spanish, is of the type sailed by Christopher Columbus in 1492 westward across the Atlantic Ocean on his voyage that led to the discovery of the Americas.

“. . . the quantity of gold they have is endless . . .”—Marco Polo

During the earliest years of European expansion onto the American continents, the search for gold was one of the driving factors in the exploration and colonization of the vast, unknown lands. The existence of the two great continents had been unsuspected in Europe until the fateful day in October 1492 when Christopher Columbus landed on an “island in the Indies,” having miscalculated the circumference of the globe by about 25 percent. Columbus, a master mariner then in the service of Spain and an avid reader, was searching for Cipangu (Japan), the island of “endless gold,” about which he had read with great excitement in Marco Polo’s *Travels*. Convinced that fabled Cipangu was not far from the small island on which he had landed, Columbus went ashore and, unfurling royal standards, claimed it for his sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain—thereby initiating what would become the vast Spanish empire in America.

The island’s inhabitants greeted Columbus with curiosity. According to the journal he wrote about his voyage, he found them to be handsome and very gentle. Some wore little pieces of gold suspended from holes in their noses. Intrigued by these ornaments, Columbus attempted to learn more about the availability and quantity of the gold. He made the first inquiries into local sources, instigating the search for precious American metals that would be a major obsession of conquerors, colonists, travelers, and opportunists for centuries. As he sailed among the islands of the Indies searching for the wealthy courts of Asia, Columbus asked repeatedly about gold. When, on Christmas Eve in a calm sea, his ship, the *Santa María*, ran aground, he thought he found the evidence he was seeking.

The *Santa María* was firmly stuck on the banks of an island that Columbus named Española (Hispaniola). While the crew attended to the damaged vessel, local people arrived to trade bits of gold for brass hawks’ bells carried by the sailors. Columbus was so cheered at the sight of the gold that the island chieftain—who wished to see him even more pleased—told the dismayed, grounded mariner that the precious metal was abundant nearby and gave him an impressive mask inset with large pieces of gold. This evidence and the prospect of much more led Columbus to believe that the shipwreck had been providential. To Columbus, driven by the search for the wealth that would be a tangible indicator of a successful voyage, the discovery of vast quantities of gold would be both a personal reward and a paramount sign of the triumph of his vision.

En route to Spain, Columbus wrote to the king and queen, telling them of the newfound lands across the western sea and the rich islands of the Indies. In a letter amazingly brief for the magnitude of its contents, he reported that he had claimed the islands for the Spanish sovereigns. He told of the innumerable peoples he had encountered; of birds, trees, exotic fruits, and plants; of the rivers that contained gold; and of mines for gold and other metals. This astonishing letter was eagerly received in Spain and initially published in Latin in the spring of 1493. By the end of the fifteenth century it had been printed in numerous editions in various cities in Europe, where the news was disseminated quickly.



Figure 2. **Bell Ornament.** Mexico (Mixtec/Aztec), 15th–16th century. Cast gold, h. 1 in. (2.5 cm). Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1974, 1977 (1974.271.49)

*This small head of cast gold was probably part of a necklace that belonged to a powerful Aztec lord when Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519. The Spaniards greatly admired the quality and were astonished at the imagery of the Mexican gold objects they encountered. An ornament was originally suspended from the open nasal septum of the powerful face.*



Figure 3. **Pectoral.** Peru (Chavín), 6th–2nd century B.C. Hammered gold, w.  $9\frac{1}{4}$  in. (23.5 cm). Jan Mitchell and Sons Collection, Gift of Jan Mitchell, 1999 (1999.365)

*Among the earliest gold works made in the Americas, this wide pectoral shows the command of material and degree of showmanship already present in objects of north Peru. Hammered from a single sheet of gold, it displays complex imagery that can be read two ways, either as mirror-image birds' heads with great hooked beaks or, when rotated, as a broad-nosed face with no lower jaw.*

The search for gold became a predictable part of the European experience in the Americas from Columbus's day onward, despite the fact that during his second voyage he learned that there was no mine on Española. Gold mines were rare in the Americas, as the precious metal was chiefly taken from rivers and streams. Yet the notion of accessibility to great riches endured, and the search for them was compulsively pursued. Rumors of gold brought Hernán Cortés and several hundred men to Mexico in 1519. Making his much-noted way into the interior from the Gulf Coast, Cortés heard, and followed, tantalizing tales of a powerful ruler and immense wealth.

The ruler was the Aztec king Motecuhzoma (Montezuma II), whose capital city was Tenochtitlán, in the central highlands. Wishing to prevent the arrival of the Spaniards in his city, he sent emissaries to Cortés with extravagant gifts: a gold disk the size of a cartwheel; a silver disk of the same size; diadems, earrings, and figures of gold and mosaic; armbands of silver; multistrand necklaces with hundreds of gold beads and red and green stones; hollow gold ornaments cast in complex shapes; shields and helmets covered in turquoise mosaic; brilliant feather fans and headpieces; elaborate garments and costumes—all were among the exotic and wonderfully strange objects the Spaniards received as tribute.

Cortés sent the gifts to Spain, and in the spring of 1520 the treasure was presented to the newly elected Holy Roman emperor, Charles V, king of Spain. Great excitement greeted the wondrous objects, and learned men commented upon them. No opinion is better known or valued than that of Albrecht Dürer. He saw the treasure in Brussels in August 1521 and wrote, in the diary of his journey to the Netherlands (1520–21), of the gifts “brought to the King from the new golden land: a whole golden sun, a whole yard wide, likewise a whole silver moon, also equally big, likewise two chambers full of . . . wonderful things for various uses, that are much more beautiful to behold than things of which miracles are made.”

Unfortunately, such learned interest and appreciation were of modest duration, and none of the works from this hoard is known to have survived. The cartwheels of gold and silver and all the precious-metal pieces were melted down, and objects of more ephemeral materials were discarded. The same fate befell the royal treasury of the Aztecs. Cortés, far from being deterred by the rich presents he was offered, marched on to Tenochtitlán, where he imprisoned Motecuhzoma and sacked the treasury. Much of the contents went to Spain, but only a few of the most exceptional pieces reached there in the shapes made by the Mexican artisans; the rest arrived as bullion.

The lure of the golden cities continued, and in the mid-1520s another adventurer, Francisco Pizarro, sailing along the Pacific coast of Colombia, encountered communities with abundant gold and silver. Wishing to gain control of the region for himself, Pizarro hurried to Spain and successfully petitioned to become governor in 1529. Shortly thereafter he set out for Inka Peru, the richest of all the American kingdoms, where temple walls were covered with gold and golden pots held golden treasure. Precious metals had been worked in Peru for some three thousand years before Pizarro arrived. Personal adornments of gold—diadems, ear ornaments, pectorals—of great size and substance were produced during the first millennium, and by the sixteenth century gold and silver creations were highly imaginative and included, according to the accounts of Spanish chroniclers, miniature gardens made entirely of gold. The use of precious metals was restricted to the Inka nobility, concentrating power and wealth in royal hands. Pizarro gained access to this fortune in 1532, when he and his men ambushed the Inka ruler, Atawalpa (Atahualpa), and held him for ransom.

The ransom was immense. In an effort to gain his freedom, Atawalpa filled a large room with gold and two rooms with silver. The rooms were stacked high with tubs of the metals, platelike tiles of gold, and many other objects. Yet this treasure did not buy freedom for Atawalpa or his kingdom. The country was stripped of its wealth, and the rich temple fixtures, as well as the precious gardens with earth of gold granules, gold cornstalks, and gold figures of men and of llamas, were rendered into neat bars. Forty years after Christopher Columbus saw modest bits of gold among the peoples of Española, the dream of incredibly rich royal courts and a seemingly endless supply of gold had come true.

—JULIE JONES