



Celebrating the Life of  
**Colin McEwan**

August 11, 1951–March 28, 2020



Director of Pre-Columbian Studies, 2012-2019





# Memorial Program

Welcome



Shared Memories by

Thomas B.F. Cummins

Margaret Mullett

James Zeidler

Tamara Bray

José Oliver

Christopher Beekman



Po Atarau

(Farewell Song from New Zealand)



Celebration

Catherine Allen · Luis Alberto Borrero · Frank Meddens · Eduardo Góes Neves



Brindis

Steve Kosiba

(Please join us for a toast and be prepared to raise a glass to our dear friend)



Closing Remarks





## ‘And the Sun Sits in His Seat’

Born in Falkirk, Scotland (11 August 1951), raised in New Zealand, and educated in the United Kingdom and the US, he made the study of the art and archeology of Pre-Columbian Americas his life-long passion. His curiosity for the landscape and inhabitants of the Americas was awakened through his studies in Geography at Aberdeen University (BSc degree, 1973). He continued graduate studies at Cambridge University, where he participated in excavations led by Eric Higgs and John Coles and obtained a Certificate in Prehistoric Archaeology (1975). These early incursions into archeology motivated him to travel to South America in 1975 where he joined Earle Saxon’s (University of Durham) excavation at the famous Paleo-American ‘Mylodon Cave’ site. He then travelled through the Andes, reaching the Azuay Province in Ecuador where he participated in the Buena Vista Valley excavations by the British Museum and the Institute of Archaeology. Later he was recruited by Professor Warwick Bray (Institute of Archaeology, University College London) to participate in the 1977 Anglo-Colombian Expedition along the Caquetá River (Amazonian forest), which led to the first characterizations of anthropogenic soils (*terras pretas*) outside Brazil. In 1978 he worked at Isla de La Plata (Ecuador), excavating a site with Inca ritual offerings (*capac hucha*). Throughout his life, he continued to revisit and analyze in greater depth the thematic research threads arising from this early fieldwork, thus informing his research and elaborated upon in numerous publications and articles.

In 1979 he transferred from the Institute of Archeology to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) to study with Tom Zuidema and Donald Lathrap, receiving his PhD in Anthropology in 2004. From 1979 to 1991 he directed the Agua Blanca Archaeological Project focused on the principal seat of the ancient Manteño Señorío of Salangome in the Machalilla National Park, Ecuador. At Agua Blanca, he guided the local community into the creation and ownership of a cultural center and site museum, which became the locus for intra and intercommunity activities. This archaeological project and community-led heritage initiative catalyzed a remarkable process of ecological and cultural awareness that also spurred economic advances for the local community. It is considered as one of the first of initiatives of this kind in Ecuador. In his PhD research (1983–1990) at the Agua Blanca site in Ecuador, he deployed a multi-disciplinary approach to analyze the political-religious power as expressed by its famous U-shaped stone-sculptured seats, and their relationship to the architecture and landscape, with attention to the underlying human cognition and agency.

After his work at Agua Blanca, his personal research focused in exploring alternate ontologies, reconstructions and interpretations of the multifaceted roles that objects and their users play in Pre-Columbian cultural landscapes. The experience of working on exhibition projects in the World Heritage Museum at the UIUC, at the Agua Blanca community museum and later at the Art Institute of Chicago (1990–1992), led him to pursue a productive and successful career as a curator. He was appointed Curator of Latin American Collections (1993–2004) and then Head of the Americas Section (2005–2012) at the British Museum, London. At the British Museum he brought Pre-Columbian Latin America to a worldwide audience through major exhibitions, accompanied by scholarly conferences, public events, and numerous publications. His curatorial approach was distinguished by his ability to weave together science-based research of the artefacts with anthropological and art historical analyses. This made the collections from Latin America visible and comprehensible to a wider public and simultaneously provided new insights for academic scholars from different disciplines. In his projects and exhibitions, he fostered a collaborative approach, bringing together teams of specialized





researchers from Latin America, and beyond, to introduce trans-regional perspectives and to push the boundaries of knowledge of the cultures showcased in the exhibitions and thus provide a wider context for interpretation. During the London years, he authored and co-edited numerous publications, most notably: *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum* (1994); *Patagonia: Natural History, Prehistory and Ethnography at the Uttermost End of the Earth* (1997); *Pre-Columbian Gold: Technology, Style and Iconography* (2000); *Unknown Amazon: Culture in Nature in Ancient Brazil* (2001); *Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico* (2006); *El Caribe Pre-Colombino* (2008); *Ancient American Art in Detail* (2009); *Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler* (2009); *Turquoise in Mexico and North America* (2012); *Inca Sacred Space: Landscape, Site and Symbol in the Andes* (2014).

At Dumbarton Oaks, he supported and mentored a vibrant community of resident fellows, shepherding a succession of ambitious symposia, lecture series, workshops, and colloquia with resultant proceedings. Latterly he promoted and organized discussions on the future directions for Pre-Columbian scholarship at venues in Central and South America as well as in Washington, D.C. He was also Series Editor for the Pre-Columbian Symposium publications and the Art and Archaeology Monograph Series, showcasing his literary and editorial skills. During his tenure, he steered the program into new geographical areas, leading to a series of forthcoming publications. These include the catalogue of the Bliss Collection of Pre-Columbian Art from Central America and Colombia and its accompanying scholarly volume, and the volume for the 2019 symposium “Waves of Influence” that he co-organized, which reexamines the evidence for Pacific coastal contacts extending from Mexico through to Ecuador.

Colin was equally an accomplished and much respected field archaeologist, trowel in hand, boots on feet. His field/excavations in apparently disparate regions and cultures—in Patagonia (1976), Araracuara (1977), Isla de La Plata (1978) Magellan Strait (2001-2003), Agua Blanca (1983-1990), and the Ayacucho highlands of the Central Andes (2006-10)—all are articulated and underpinned by a common scholarly line of inquiry: an exploration through archaeological material culture of the principles (axiality and radiality; duality and quadriparture) that give expression to power and thus structure ceremonial rituals, give agency to objects and social groups, shed light on cosmology, and render landscapes vibrant and meaningful. This coherence of inquiry is best encapsulated in the title of his thesis, “*And the Sun Sits in His Seat: Creating social order in Andean Culture*”. These are the interwoven themes that Colin explored during his life: the ontological meaning underlying interconnections across landscapes, people, and material culture. In this Colin belonged to the vanishing group of generalist scholars. It has been rightfully noted that Colin was an ‘all-terrain’ investigator, where no culture of the continent was out-of-bounds to his interests and knowledge.

Colin devoted his professional life to the understanding of archaeology of Latin America. He was influential in using his prestigious positions to empower people, ranging from the “comuneros” of Agua Blanca to archaeologists and researchers—students and professors alike—from all over Latin America and beyond. Colin had a genuine passion for the continent and its peoples, an unrelenting zest in generously sharing his skills and prodigious knowledge not only with Latin Americans but a broad world audience as well. Just as important, he listened intently to other points of view. His was a remarkable life, lived to the full, one that touched so many individuals from all walks of life. Colin has bequeathed a rich legacy that is a source of inspiration for generations to come.

José R. Oliver with Margaret McEwan and Norma Rosso

