About four hundred years ago Spanish free-booters returning from Nueva Granada brought back the tale of El Dorado, giving new impetus to the greatest gold rush in history. In the scramble that followed, countless gold-hungry Europeans perished in the steaming jungles and icy mountain passes of South America, the River of the Amazons was discovered, and over half a continent was explored. But the legendary El Dorado was not found.

Today in Bogotá the Museo del Oro has made that sixteenth-century golden legend a twentieth-century reality. The museum is a creature of the initiative, foresight, and imagination of Dr. Luis-Angel Arango, the Managing Director, and his colleagues at the Banco de la República. In 1939, in an effort to preserve an important part of the artistic patrimony of Colombia, they persuaded the Governing Board of the bank to establish a museum devoted exclusively to pre-Hispanic goldwork of that country and embark on a program of acquiring and exhibiting only the finest examples. Within the short space of fifteen years the museum has assembled from every region of the country a collection embracing over six thousand seven hundred fine pieces, more than four times the total number of gold objects from Colombia in all the other museums and private collections in the world. This monumental undertaking is all the more remarkable considering the capacity of the early conquistadores, the unprecedented gift to Spain of the “Treasure of the Quimbayas” in 1892, and the depredations of generations of guaqueros (grave robbers), whose finds either were sold clandestinely to collectors or went directly into the melting pot.

With the collaboration of the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco we have been able to arrange a special loan exhibition of eighty masterpieces from this unrivaled collection. These works have been sent to the United States from the Republic of Colombia at this time to salute Columbia University on its two-hundredth anniversary. This marks the first time in its history that the Museo del Oro has ever been willing to lend any of its treasures, for which we are deeply grateful.

Included in the exhibition are representative examples of the goldsmith’s art from every known region or style: graceful Quimbaya ceremonial urns, a Calima chieftain’s complete regalia with each piece beautifully executed in repoussé, familiar votive tunjos of the Chibchas, delicately cast nose ornaments from the Sinú River region, anchor-shaped figure pendants from Tolima in the south, stylized human figures with animal masks from Darién near Panamá, a magnificent Tairona nose ornament, and many others. The group constitutes a veritable catalogue of goldworking techniques, demonstrating that these ancient indigenous artists had mastered virtually every technique which is now known to modern goldsmiths. Many of the pieces show a surprising knowledge and use of copper alloys for aesthetic reasons as well as for the practical one of lowering the melting point of the mass.

The student who seeks precise archaeological data will be disappointed. The archaeology of Colombia is a neglected field. Excavations have been few, and most of the objects in this exhibition are the result of chance finds by guaqueros, who for obvious reasons make no records and disclose no information. However, within recent years Rivet, Margain, and Pérez de Barradas have begun to devote serious attention to the wealth and variety of the Gold Museum’s collection, and much can be hoped for as a result of their studies.

In the meantime, the pieces speak for themselves; and, despite the relative lack of documentation, both the uninitiated casual visitor and the scholar can enjoy their beauty and superb craftsmanship on an equal footing.
Pre-Hispanic goldwork in the current exhibition lent by the Gold Museum of the Banco de la República in Bogotá, Colombia. LEFT: Pectoral, Darién style; pendant, Tolima style. RIGHT: Repoussé figure of an animal, Calima style; ceremonial urn, Quimbaya style. Photographs courtesy of the National Gallery of Art