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The Committee for the funded research fellowships

Bard Graduate Center

38 West 86th St.  
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Dear Committee Members:

I am writing to apply for a funded research fellowship of the Bard Graduate Center. I am an art historian and archaeologist interested in art as well as in the material culture of Andean societies, both in ancient and colonial times. In my graduate studies and research career, I have developed expertise in these two fields as well as in ethno-history. As an art historian, I have conducted research on Andean iconography, Andean textiles, and Andean gender structures. As an archaeologist, I have participated in several projects in Israel and Peru.

The last major research that I carried out is my Ph.D. thesis, “Beyond the Image: Femininity and Other Gender Expressions in the Ancient Art of the South-Central Andes (800 B.C-1532 A.D).” Through an examination of artistic expressions, this study explores the ways that Andean gender mechanisms functioned, and reconstructs the roles and status of women in these societies. The research also reveals how women’s fertility and sexuality were perceived by cultures such as the Nasca, Wari, Tiwanaku, and Inca, among others. Furthermore, the study delves into various ideas and notions about menstruation, the insignificance of virginity, and the feminine ideal of beauty in Andean societies. Another important component of Andean gender structures that was explored in this project is that of additional gender categories. I found that the Andean gender structures contained at least five categories of gender; three of these are neither entirely feminine or masculine. I was able to identify several anthropomorphic images that are classified under these categories.

During my study on these additional gender categories, I was exposed to visual and textual evidence of similar gender categories that existed among the societies of the northern Peruvian and Ecuadorian coasts, an area not included in my doctoral dissertation. In light of this discovery, I decided to focus on these societies in my postdoctoral research, “A Queer Reading of Ancient Northern Andean Coast Iconography and Practice.” The research is based on a detailed study of artifacts made by the cultures that prospered in this area between 500 A.D. and the colonial period. These artifacts depict anthropomorphic images whose attributes do not fully correspond to either the feminine or masculine image, or who present unique characteristics that may imply that they represent individuals in additional genders categories. Another component of this research is the colonial documents describing individuals, mainly priests, who can be classified under additional gender categories. In this context, it is important to note that one of the ways that the Spaniards and the Catholic Church legitimized their conquest and missionary work was by highlighting the fight against the phenomenon they called “sodomy,” which, according to these texts, was practiced by the priests.

The first objective of my proposed research is to reveal the different narratives regarding these gender categories: the European one and the native one. The second goal is to explore the ways in which Northern Andean Coast societies represented the additional genders in their art. A further purpose is to understand the roles that individuals with additional genders fulfilled in these societies. The final objective is to delve into questions related to the representation of gender issues in museums. On that basis, I hope to create a museum exposition that combines findings from this research with those from my doctoral study.

This last research goal is related to my great interest in museology. For several years I was the curator of the Maiman Collection, a private collection of ancient Andean artifacts (unfortunately, the collection was closed due to financial difficulties). Since the time I began working with this collection, and especially since having obtained my Ph.D., I have sought ways to create a bridge between the knowledge I established in my research and the broader public. I aspire to create a dialogue between the broader public and this artwork, which has come from a very different cultural context than that of the viewer.

Another pillar of the proposed study is the aforementioned colonial documents. The choice to include the colonial era in this study stems from my scholarly approach, which perceives the European invasion of the American continent as a tremendous crisis for native peoples and cultures. This historical encounter did not completely destroy the native traditions, but rather represents a starting point of a long process of both adaptation to and rejection of European tradition. In my work on colonial art and ethno-history, I am interested in the theme of the encounter between the native Andean societies and the Europeans. More precisely, I am interested in how this encounter was understood, perpetuated in the collective memory, and communicated to the next generations of Andean inhabitants. One manifestation of my interest in this is a study I conducted with two of my colleagues, Amnon Nir and Javier Fonseca, in which we analyzed a unique ceramic fragment that was found in the last Inca refuge at Vilcabamba (1537-1572 A.D.). The iconography of this piece describes the encounter from the Andeans’ point of view.

The proposed research combines the three foundations of my research: ancient and colonial Andean art, colonial ethno-history, and museology. In the proposed study, these pillars reveal three ways of telling the story of individuals of additional genders who were part of ancient and early colonial Northern Andean Coast societies. The first point of view in telling this story is that of the native societies of this area, primarily represented by the artistic expressions of the area’s ancient cultures. The second viewpoint is that of the Spaniards and the Catholic Church; according to the colonial documents, they perceived these gender practices as a custom that must be fought. The last perspective to consider is our own. When dealing with native and colonial art in a museum exhibition, the curator should consider this complex picture. In the end, the story itself depends on whose story it is and who tells it. My goal is to reveal these narratives, or, more precisely, their surviving fragments, and to interweave them into one multifaceted story that will be told in academic publications and a museum exhibition.

Your distinguished institution, which nurtures the decorative arts and material culture research, among other fields, can contribute significantly to the proposed study and to my development as a scholar. I am confident that the exchange of ideas with colleagues studying these and other disciplines will introduce me to new ways of thinking about and studying artifacts. At the same time, I believe that my research can enrich the center’s dialogue on the use of gender, queer, and postcolonial theories in the study of art and material culture and in museology practice. For these reasons, it would be a great honor for me to be a part of the Bard Graduate Center program.

I thank you in advance for your consideration.



Bat-ami Artzi