

An aerial, sepia-toned photograph of a wide mountain valley. A large, light-colored river winds through the center of the valley, surrounded by steep, dark slopes. The river flows from the upper left towards the lower right, with several meanders. The valley floor is a mix of light-colored earth and patches of vegetation. In the distance, more mountain ranges are visible under a hazy sky. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Enchanted  
*Visual Histories  
of the Central Andes*

THE MENIL COLLECTION

July 30–November 14, 2021

Running along the western side of South America, the Andes Mountains traverse the national borders of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. A vast system of mountains, high-altitude plains, and fertile riverine valleys divides dense tropical regions of the continent's interior from the arid Pacific coastline. This remarkable diversity is equaled only by the histories and cultural practices of Andean people. *Enchanted: Visual Histories of the Central Andes* presents a window into this multifaceted and vibrant world with the Menil's first display of archaeological material and visual culture from Peru and northern Bolivia.

Blue-and-yellow macaw-feathered panels, colonial-era paintings and ceremonial wood *hero* cups, 20th-century examples of the dress worn during seasonal Andean religious *fiestas*, and the other works on view exemplify the overlapping histories of representation and their constant renewal by Andean people. The study of this area of the museum's collection occasioned by the exhibition also highlights decisive moments in its formation during the mid-century, such as John and Dominique de Menil's fortuitous introduction to French photographer Pierre Verger (1902–1996), whose captivating black-and-white images are interwoven throughout the exhibition and depict the drama of Andean *fiestas*.

In 1941, while living in Caracas, Venezuela, the de Menils met Verger at the home of painter Jean Dries (1905–1973) in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After meeting, the de Menils supported Verger's aspiration to travel with his Rolleiflex camera to photograph in the different towns in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador. Arriving in 1942, he was one of many non-Andean photographers working among an active, well-established network of professional Andean photographers with studio practices, such as Martín Chambi (1891–1973) and Juan Manuel Figueroa Aznar (1878–1951). Verger's photographs notably were among the de Menils' first representations of Andean visual culture in their collection; they would acquire examples of archaeological material and visual culture from the Andes only later, between the 1950s and 1970s.

*“And what is art if it does not enchant?”*

—Dominique de Menil, 1987

The Central Andes supported a rich, interconnected history of ancient settlements and empires such as the Caral archaeological site in the Supe Valley of Peru that dates to at least the third millennium BCE. The textile fragments and painted ceramic ware attributed to the Nazca (ca. 100 BCE–800 CE), Moche (ca. 100–800), Wari (ca. 600–1000), Chancay (ca. 1000–1470), and Chimú (ca. 1150–1450) cultures on view were essential to the ritual maintenance of life. Intricately designed and handwoven textiles were worn, exchanged as tribute, and used to wrap bodies for burial.

A large, two-panel section of a painted textile dating to the 13th century features prominently in the exhibition. It was once part of a monumental textile composed of at least thirteen known panels and, possibly, several others that are now missing. The complete textile has been estimated to measure at least 75 ft. (22.9 m) long and is recognized as one of the most significant extant works from the Chimú or Chimor, a Late Intermediate Period civilization centered in the ancient city of Chan Chan, near present-day Trujillo, Peru. Similar to other known sections of the textile, the Menil’s double panel pictures a procession of captives with ropes around their necks, surrounded and attacked by other zoomorphic beings incompletely painted with alternating colors. The ominous scene evokes the history of warfare among factious early Andean civilizations, and the imagery and size emphasize the supreme importance of textiles.

When the Spanish arrived in the early 16th century, the Inca Empire (ca. 1200–1532) had colonized much of the western stretch of South America as well as the visual traditions of

earlier people. Forever altering the fabric of Andean societies, Spanish conquistadors and European missionaries brought disease, Catholicism, and enslaved people from West and Central Africa. Since the European colonial period, the religious and public performances of *fiestas* have been spaces through which Andeans transform imposed traditions and social changes, fostering new forms of visual culture.

Verger's photographs of *fiestas* depict hazy scenes of packed crowds, delightful moments of dances, and processions of people carrying statues of patron saints, all of which emphasize the joy and weight of religious devotion. His closely cropped portraits picture dancers, musicians, and iconic characters wearing knitted wool masks (*waq'ollos*) with distinctive mustaches—the playfully mischievous and combative *Qhapaq Qollas*, who personify merchants and llama drivers (*llameros*) from the Cuzco region. On view among Verger's images are examples of *waq'ollos* and colorful *monteras*, the flat rectangular hats also worn by some *Qhapaq Qolla* dancers. A similar relationship highlights the dance capes (*esclavinas*) from the Hauncayo region of Peru, which are worn during the *Negritos* dances that recognize the abolition of slaves in 1854. Inscribed *La Esclavitud de los Negros*, the cape in the Menil's collection on view here directly references this historic event. It depicts a group of freed Black Peruvians looking up at Ramón Castilla, the Peruvian military leader and president credited with making slavery illegal. Spiders on the shoulders of the cape not only reference the epaulettes of Castilla and other Peruvian leaders (*caudillos*), but also symbolize the significance of weaving and textile art. The heavy embroidery and rich iconography of the capes from the Museum of International Folk Art reward close inspection. Resembling examples seen in Verger's photographs from Huancayo, which are on view nearby, these *esclavinas* similarly reference historical figures and events.

Verger originally presented his photographs from Peru and Bolivia in *Fiestas y Danzas en el Cusco y en los Andes*, his first major photographic book, which he dedicated to the de Menils for their support. Published in 1945, *Fiestas y Danzas* situates Verger's images of Andean fiestas within the politics and discourses of *indigenismo*, a modernist movement during the late-19th and 20th centuries intent on elevating marginalized "indigenous" peoples—the different groups of Quechua- and Aymara-speaking rural farmers and pastoralists—as the heart of progress and culture in the Andes. The equitable application of the movement's ambitions was, however, constrained by a racial hierarchy inherited from the colonial era, which distinguished white Europeans, mixed-race European and Indian (*Mestizo*), Indian (*Indios*), and formerly enslaved Africans (*Negros*).

A key proponent of *indigenismo*, Peruvian historian Luis E. Valcárcel (1891–1987) wrote introductions to Verger's books of photography. In *Fiestas y Danzas*, Valcárcel contends: "As long as these native multitudes continue to dance one rhythm, uniting their bodies and spirits in one soul, there will be an Indian reality despite ever-increasing intrusions of foreign civilization." Verger's photographs are visually rich, but they also underscore his position as an outsider and, paradoxically, a representative of the inevitable intrusion of foreign civilization. In this light, these images of *fiestas* contributed to a strand of documentary ethnographic realism, which animated the competing cultural and political narratives of *indigenismo*. Notwithstanding its different applications and trajectories during the first half of the 20th century, *indigenismo* depended on an idealized representation of the Andean, one that essentialized the heterogeneous and layered past of Andean civilizations represented by the ancient and colonial works in the gallery.

*Enchanted: Visual Histories of the Central Andes* is curated by Paul R. Davis,  
Curator of Collections.

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#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

##### IN DIALOGUE

On the Chimú Prisoner Textile

*Susan E. Bergh and Andrew Hamilton in conversation with  
the Menil's Paul R. Davis and Kari Dodson*

*Wednesday, September 1, 1 p.m. CDT*

*Online (menil.org)*

##### LECTURE

The Folkloric Arts of the Peruvian Andes

*Zoila S. Mendoza, Professor and Chair, Native American Studies,  
University of California, Davis*

*Friday, October 15, 7 p.m. CDT*

*Menil Foyer*

##### COMMUNITY DAY

Outdoor performances, music, and food trucks

*Saturday, October 16, 3 p.m. CDT*

*Menil Lawn*

##### MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Stop, Look, and Listen!

*DACAMERA Young Artists respond to the exhibition*

*Saturday, November 13, 3 p.m. CST*

*Menil Foyer*

All programs are free and open to everyone.

Additional programming information can be found at [menil.org/events](http://menil.org/events).

An online compilation of essays and multimedia features by scholars of Andean visual culture enriches the museum's display with in-depth considerations of these works and the intersecting threads of their sociohistorical contexts. Visit [menil.org/read](http://menil.org/read) to learn more.

FRONT Pierre Verger, *Untitled (Winding River Between Mountains)*, 1939–45. Gelatin silver print, 9½ × 7¼ in. (24.1 × 18.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston.

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