WHAT IS REAL?
A New Look at PreColumbian Mesoamerican Collections

by Jane MacLaren Walsh

[Editors’ Note: Museums are increasingly seen as educational institutions for the 21st century. In the midst of “reality” T.V., we find increased demand among the public to see “the real thing.” Meanwhile, behind the scenes, museum anthropologists, archaeologists, and art historians use collections not simply for exhibition, but as texts that can be read, compared, contrasted, deciphered, and analyzed. Museum collections, because of their size and historical depth, allow the people studying them to gradually develop and enhance their expertise, by exploring a variety of avenues of inquiry. This process inevitably leads to new information and ideas and is one of the principal reasons collections are kept. In the following article, Jane MacLaren Walsh, who has worked with the Smithsonian’s Mesoamerican collections for over 30 years, takes a new look at some old collections, raising provocative questions that require new examination of important museum objects.]

Introduction

Pre-Columbian art and artifacts exist in extraordinary variety and in great abundance in museums and private collections throughout Europe and the Americas. Many of these collections were begun in the nineteenth-century, before any serious archaeological investigation had been accomplished, and when large national museums were seeking to fill out their inventories of world prehistories. These pre-Columbian collections were often amassed by amateurs, tourists, and, occasionally, collectors, who purchased attractive or unusual items from local and international dealers. They sought objects that appealed to their own taste and to their own concepts of fine workmanship and beauty, which determined the focus and nature of what they collected. Inevitably these objects lacked any reliable provenience data, since they were often purchased from dealers located outside of the country of origin or from sellers within the country who attempted to obscure the actual origins of individual objects.

The scientific and technological advances of the twenty-first-century afford us an important opportunity to reexamine these nineteenth-century objects to verify their authenticity, and confirm that the materials and techniques employed in their creation are representative of pre-Columbian art and culture. We are also compelled in this endeavor to reexamine our own history of acquiring, exhibiting, and publishing these artifacts that have become icons of Western notions of exotic and beautiful “primitive” art. The Smithsonian’s William Henry Holmes warned 115 years ago that there is “pressing need of clearing away much useless and harmful debris” of fake antiquities, confusing and distorting our understanding of pre-Columbian art and artisanry (1889:334). Just as the problem of fake antiquities confronted Holmes at the end of the nineteenth-century, so the problem is no less irksome for us at the beginning of the twenty-first.

Until nearly the turn of the twentieth-century, little was known about Mesoamerican iconography, its cultural and stylistic differences. The range and choices of materials utilized by Pre-Columbian artisans were neither well-documented nor well-understood. As a result, nineteenth-century collections of pre-Columbian artifacts often contain objects that appear anomalous when compared to artifacts actually found in documented archaeological context. Despite this fact, the
presence of these anomalies in important collections and
the passage of time has contributed to the odd conse-
quence that many of these objects are now considered
masterpieces because they are, in fact, unique. In many,
if not most cases, this designation seems to be princip-
ally a response to "their aesthetic appeal to the Western
eye and their 'authentic' — that is, untainted by Western
intervention — character" (Baudez 2002:139). As mas-
terpieces, they have invited various forms of stylistic and
historical analyses, from which iconographic, mythologic,
and cultural information have been extrapolated. The
body of scholarship that centers on anomalous,
unprovenienced, and surely suspect artifacts is quite di-
verse and impressively large.

It is my opinion that many of these
unprovenienced, "pre-Columbian masterpieces," well-
known and often the subject of scholarly papers, are not
authentic, but instead represent the inventive creations
of nineteenth-century artists and artisans. Among my
reasons for drawing this conclusion are that these ob-
jects that bear little relationship to documented pre-
Columbian artifacts present obscure, misinterpreted, and
often incorrect iconography. The carving style may be
too crude or too refined for the subject or the time
period. The material the object is made of is often entirely
wrong — stone where it ought to be ceramic, or ceramic
when it should be stone — and occasionally the wrong,
type of material for the class of artifact or for the sub-
ject depicted.

Perhaps, as Esther Pasztory of Columbia Uni-
versity has pointed out, it is because "forgeries are better
than the real thing because they fit our ideas better" (2002:
162). Pasztory is one of the recent scholars pointing to
fakes and forgeries in Pre-Columbian collections, but she
follows a distinguished cadre of earlier scholars, as will
be documented in this article.

For a museum anthropologist, it should be abun-
dantly clear that weeding out, or at least identifying,
unprovenienced anomalies masquerading as pre-
Columbian artifacts is an important and valuable pur-
suit: fakes and forgeries distort the picture of pre-
Columbian art and culture history. We should maintain
and document our museum collections to better educate
our eyes, to strengthen and improve our expertise, and
to fill in the blanks in our knowledge, thereby enlarging
our often fragmented view of the worlds we study.
there can be no trickery about that" (1861: 229). Tylor is mistaken in this assessment, since fake obsidian idols, masks, knives, and other implements have been in fairly constant production to this day.

A slightly earlier work, Mexico As It Was and As It Is (Brantz Mayer), does not specifically discuss archaeological fakes, but contains numerous illustrations of objects from private and public collections that depict fraudulent pieces (1844: 102, 104, etc.). One of the ceramic vessels depicted by Mayer, which Tylor later declared to be fake, in fact, appears to be authentic (1844: 93; 1861: 229). Interestingly enough, Brantz Mayer donated a series of stone and ceramic artifacts to the Smithsonian in 1860, and the few that remain appear to be of somewhat dubious authenticity. Mayer described receiving a number of artifacts from the Count of Peñasco in Mexico, some of which he presumably gave to the Smithsonian (Mayer 1844). The British Museum possesses drawings of archaeological collections that were in private and public hands in Mexico City as early as 1825, and Peñasco’s collection is one of them. Quite early in the nineteenth century, Mexican artisans were already creating a supply of “ancient” artifacts and passing them off to collectors as antiquities.

French explorer Desire Charnay, inspired by John Lloyd Stevens and Frederick Catherwood’s Incidents of Travel (1843-45), was one of the first travelers to photographically document Mexican pre-Columbian sites and objects between 1857 and 1861. Charnay made several collecting trips to Mexico and eventually did some digging at archaeological sites. In Ancient Cities of the New World, he wrote with great detail about the faking industry in Mexico, for he too had been taken in by it. After a visit to the National Museum in Mexico City, he wrote:

As for the long rows of so-called ancient vases, there is not one that is not imitation. This I know to my cost, for with a credulity which subsequent events hardly justified, I no sooner was told that these vases were of great antiquity, than I immediately ordered three hundred to be cast from them, which I caused to be placed in the Trocadero during the Paris Exhibition; but on an expert in such matters seeing them, he at once detected and exposed the fraud (1887: 55).

Early Collections
The growth of the forgeries market coincided with the opening of Mexico to foreigners after the first decade of the 1800s at the end of the colonial period, following the War of Independence. It is also a time when many of the great national museums endeavored to complete their inventories of world ethnography and archaeology and became interested in acquiring Mexican archaeological artifacts. The manufacture and trade in fake antiquities had begun around 1820, according to Charnay, with the center of manufacturing being Tlatelolco, a suburb of Mexico City. “If we are to judge from the quantity which we sent broadcast into the world — most museums, nearly all private collections are infested with them, whilst a great number are even now bought by the unwary” (1887: 56).

At a slightly earlier date, Eugene Boban, another French collector, dealer, and student of ancient Mexico, amassed several very large pre-Columbian collections
(Walsh 1996 & Rivalle 2001). He lived in Mexico City during the 1850s and 1860s, and during the French intervention he advertised himself as archaeologist and antiquarian to the Emperor Maximilian. In association with the French Scientific Commission that explored Mexico to evaluate and describe the country’s resources, Boban made a large collection of antiquities, many of which eventually became part of the Trocadero Museum in Paris.

As a collector and dealer, Boban also understood the problem of fakes and expounded upon their manufacture in his catalogue of ancient artifacts. He listed them as "contrefaçons d’antiquités mexicaines" (counterfeit Mexican antiquities), saying that they were fabricated (then and to this day) by the Indians in Tlatelolco and Los Angeles, a neighborhood just a few blocks from the central plaza of Tlatelolco. “These objects are neither molded from casts nor copies of ancient monuments of the country, they are pure fantasy, and are a type of bizarre caricature whose inspiration escapes us but whose principal purpose is to trick the public” (1881: 47-48).

Boban was upset by the fact that the objects cast disfavor on authentic pre-Columbian art, and noted that unfortunately “as they are very easy to obtain and very cheap . . . many of these monsters strut about in the beautiful glass cases of our museums in Europe” (1881: 48).

Boban amassed material from travelers and collectors for several decades, selling, trading, and writing about these artifacts for nearly a half century. Pre-Columbian ceramics and stone sculpture sold by the French antiquarian have turned up in numerous important public and private collections, and I believe that his impact on certain embedded notions about pre-Columbian art was profound (Walsh 2004).

Boban corresponded with William Henry Holmes of the Smithsonian Institution during the late 1880s, principally to discuss the sale of some of Boban’s Mexican artifacts to the Institution, but he also addressed the subject of fakes. Holmes had published an article in *Science* on Mexican pre-Columbian fakes. Boban informed Holmes of the Mexican lapidary named Juan Bobadilla, who he said “has fabricated and still fabricates numerous statues or idols in hard stone, obsidian, jadeite, etc.”

Boban went on to identify other fakers: “Mr. Amador, who worked for the French legation, also carved objects in hard stone; and there was a Frenchman named Praget whose specialty was bronze work.” His personal opinion was that all obsidian statues representing small idols with arms and legs could be definitely considered false (Boban 1887, unpublished letter).

On Holmes’ first trip to Mexico in 1883, at the expense and behest of one of the developers of the Mexican Central Railroad, he accompanied Mr. J. A. Chain of Denver; Chain’s wife, a landscape painter; and the renowned photographer, William Henry Jackson. They traveled throughout the Mexican republic, or at least as far as the railroad could then take them. In Mexico City, they lived in a train car stationed in the central railway yard of the Valley of Mexico. Holmes spent some of his spare time collecting potsherds he found nearly everywhere he looked. These collections eventually convinced him that most of what was being sold to tourists and foreign collectors as ancient Aztec pottery was fake, bearing no resemblance to what he had been picking up in the railroad yard. Holmes wrote:

This elaborate "excrescence" with lid and pedestal was exhibited in the National Museum of Mexico in 1880. Photo: William Henry Jackson, 1884.
In pre-Columbian times the native potter of that country had reached a high degree of skill in the handling of clay.... It is very easy, therefore, for the native artisan to imitate any of the older forms of ware; and there is no doubt that in many cases he has done so for the purpose of deceiving. A renewed impetus has been given to this fraudulent practice by the influx of tourists consequent upon the completion of numerous railways (1886: 170).

Professor Gumersindo Mendoza, director of the Museo Nacional, had concluded that the pottery in question, what Holmes called in his 1886 Science article "eccentric black ware excrescences," was ordinary domestic Aztec ceramic ware. These ceramic productions were often large, heavy, clumsy vessels in a variety of odd and baroque shapes, usually covered with irregularly attached figurine heads sometimes made from pre-Columbian molds. Mendoza assumed that these black wares (also in a dark brown and red variety) had continued unchanged from pre-Columbian times to the present day and could, therefore, be considered Aztec. "It was not all that science demanded," Holmes wrote, so he "undertook to examine into the subject more closely" (1889: 320-1). Despite the fact that Holmes recognized these wares as fraudulent in the 1880s, the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology collections still maintain some 50 or more examples.

Following his first visit to Mexico, Holmes, an archaeologist, geologist, and academy trained artist, started to develop a theory of pre-Columbian art. He began by attempting to distinguish between genuine pre-Columbian artifacts and contemporary folk art, masquerading as antiques. He published two seminal articles on the subject, "The Trade in Spurious Mexican Antiquities," in Science (1886) and "Spurious Mexican Antiquities," in the Smithsonian Annual Report (1889). Holmes wrote that despite his previous warnings, the Smithsonian was still being offered the blackware pottery inventions he had so clearly condemned. He also delivered a more sweeping condemnation of fakers and their products.

Spurious [Mexican] objects are executed in wood, stone, and metal, and experts of no mean order of talent ply their trade within the valley of Mexico. One reproduces ancient instruments of music, the curious teponaztli, for example, in worm eaten wood and with surprising cleverness; another forges articles of bronze and copper in divers well-known, as well perhaps as heretofore unknown, forms; whilst many carve in stone, rivaling the ancient lapidaries in shaping even the harder forms of quartz. ... Three-fourths of the objects of copper and perhaps one-third of those of stone now found in American collections are frauds (1889: 320).

Mexicans were the last to recognize, or at least to publicize their pre-Columbian fake problem, perhaps out of fear of discouraging the lucrative "antiquities" market, not to mention disappointing the growing number of tourists. In 1910, the year of the overthrow of his benefactor, President Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican archaeologist Leopoldo Batres, protector and conservator of monuments, published Falsificaciones y Falsificadores (Fakes & Fakeri). In it he writes that the Tlatelolco blackware fakes, which Holmes had written about twenty years before, were first manufactured in the seventeenth-century, although Batres does not say how he knows this. He describes ceramic fakes, which had fooled many colleagues, or at least his contemporaries, all of whom are either named or described in unmistakable terms. In addition to fake ceramics, he lists fake pre-Columbian objects of shell, bone, copper, gold and silver. In discussing some of the hard stone carvings, Batres notes:

The falsification of obsidian objects has reached a high degree of art. The fakers have managed to master the obsidian to such a degree that sometimes only the eye of a very expert person can distinguish the fakes, for the form of the piece being generally fantastic, although trying to imitate ancient pieces, or the manner of manufacture is distinct from how the Indians would have made it" (1910: 29).
More Recent Scholarship
In the mid-twentieth-century two archaeologists, Frederick Peterson and Gordon Ekholm, revisited the subject of Mexican pre-Columbian fakery. Frederick Peterson wrote two articles, one in Spanish and the other in English, about fake stone carvings from the Mexican state of Guerrero. He was particularly interested in fake Teotihuacan masks, as well as other stone masks and figurines that displayed strong Olmec features. He estimated at one point that there might be as many as 5,000 fake stone artifacts in museums and private collections, and that was in 1952! Some of the so-called Teotihuacan masks were so obvious to his eye, that he had dubbed the carvings as emanating from the “Taxco School” (Peterson 1953: 16).

In 1964, Gordon Ekholm wrote an article about pre-Columbian fakes in which he condemned an entire category of objects — obsidian masks — once prominent in public and private collections. Obsidian, he noted, “is a beautiful material closely identified with Mexico, but one which has been so commonly used by fakers that it can be stated almost as an axiom that all larger objects carved of obsidian must be viewed with suspicion.” Aztec lapidaries, Ekholm contended, used obsidian for tools and small ornaments but did not generally make masks or large carvings out of the material. Despite the fact that “Masks, figures, and effigy vessels occur in great variety, and because they are often very beautiful objects, they have had a fatal appeal to many collectors” (1964: 25).

Most recently the subject of fakes has been considered by Esther Pasztor in two important articles (1982 & 2002). The earlier article dealt with several Aztec stone masks in European collections that she believes to be forgeries, one of which had been sold by Eugene Boban. The fact that these masks had incised, striated hair, a design feature uncommon to most Aztec carving, first caught her attention. In further analyzing the iconography of one of the masks, she discovered an element that no Aztec artist would have included, the depiction of a deity with four arms. Pasztor believes that this had to have been a misinterpretation of iconography made by a nineteenth-century carver. In an even more recent article, “Truth in Forgery,” she reiterates the fact that during the nineteenth-century, when many of the best known Pre-Columbian objects were collected, an enormous market existed in Mexico especially aimed at foreigners. To “understand how those collectors saw Aztec art, we have to interrogate the forgery that was made to fit their tastes and interests.” The masks she had studied, interrogated, could be seen to “embody Western taste at a particular time” (2002: 159).

My museum research into museum collections also has involved studying pre-Columbian artifacts to determine authenticity. My initial studies focused on rock crystal skulls; two of the most famous skulls in museum collections were, in fact, sold by Eugene Boban. Using a variety of scientific testing at the British Museum, my colleagues there, Margaret Sax, Ian Freestone, and Elizabeth Carmichael and I determined that all of the crystal skulls, including the one in the Smithsonian’s collection, were modern manufactures.

The Forces of Supply and Demand
The European rediscovery of Mexico during the early nineteenth-century, and the American rediscovery in the later part of that century brought enormous popular attention to all things Mexican, particularly “ancient” Mexican. The nascent exploring and tourist industry inadvertently combined with European and American museum efforts to amass large and important collections of pre-

Obsidian mask collected c. 1870. Smithsonian.
Columbian art. It was that combination that undoubtedly created the demand that almost certainly exceeded the supply.

Despite the fact that some archaeological ruins were known, and had been described by the end of the 18th century, systematic excavation of pre-Columbian sites by archaeologists did not begin until the late 1880s. The result was a significant lack of any real knowledge of what pre-Columbian ceramics, sculpture, and stone carvings actually looked like. Additionally, by mid-century tourists were visiting the central valley where they found an abundance of opportunities to purchase artifacts, purportedly ancient. By the turn of the century, despite the paucity of knowledge and information about artistic styles, choices of materials, and iconography, private collections of so-called Toltec and Aztec ceramics, stone carvings, and sculptures became almost too numerous to count. Additionally the British Museum in London, the Louvre, and later the Trocadero in Paris, various royal cabinets in Italy, Denmark, Germany, and Russia, as well as some select museums in the United States, including the Smithsonian Institution, all acquired large numbers of ancient Mexican art works by the 1860s through the 1890s. Like the Smithsonian, it may be fair to assume that most if not all of these institutions purchased pre-Columbian artifacts from collectors, dealers, and interested amateurs whose principal source of knowledge about ancient Mexican art was what had been told them by the purveyor. Many of these artifacts passed through the hands of antiquities dealers, with Eugene Boban being one of the principals. He definitely had more expertise than the tourists and other amateur collectors, but he, like Desiré Charnay, was taken in by indigenous sellers with good stories. He may well have made up a few of his own.

Connoisseurship vs. Expertise

The last quarter of the nineteenth-century saw a significant increase in the number of Mexican pre-Columbian art collectors who purchased artfacts not only in Mexico City, where antiquities shops were ubiquitous, but also from dealers in European capitals, with Paris apparently leading the trend. Collectors of pre-Columbian art came from all walks of life — diplomats, industrialists, bankers, naturalists, mineralogists, historians, physicians and a variety of other interested amateurs — who generally relied on what dealers told them of provenience, and otherwise trusted their own eye for each special acquisition. Private collections always reflect the tastes and interests of the people who amass them, since collectors focus on what especially appeals to their particular sensibilities. In the nineteenth-century, the common traveler purchased small and portable items, mostly ceramic pieces, which could be easily and economically obtained. This custom continues to this day. Wealthier travelers, on the other hand, with dreams of establishing important collections, demanded finer objects, not only of finer craftsmanship but also fashioned from rare and intrinsically valuable materials like gold, silver, jade, or rock crystal (Pasztory 1982: 94).

In an article describing the Robert Woods Bliss pre-Columbian collection at Dumbarton Oaks, Michael Coe took particular note of the notion of “connoisseurship,” and the fact that he considered it to be crucial to an understanding of collecting and the art market. Coe writes: “Bliss was a close counterpart of those Renaissance collecting princes who amassed rare and beautiful objects fashioned from expensive materials — what are known as objets de vertu. Gold and jade fascinated him, and stone objects had to be highly polished and of superb workmanship” (1993: 277). Mr. Bliss, in speaking about his long collecting career, noted that he had acquired from time to time in “Europe or in the United States examples of fine workmanship or of an arresting concept. But not one did I ever find in the country of its origin” (Lothrop 1957: 7).

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The central feature of connoisseurship, Coe wrote, was that “according to dealers one either has an eye or one does not. To have an eye means to possess a very good visual memory” (1993: 272). It seems to me that Coe is inadvertently pointing out the basic flaw inherent in many private and some public collections. While connoisseurship is crucial to understanding the idiosyncrasies of collecting and the modes and fashions of the art market, I believe that connoisseurship has had a very different effect on the essential nature of pre-Columbian collections. The “eye” of a connoisseur might also be described as an appreciation of a particular beauty, a look that is appealing to one person’s individual aesthetic sensibilities. The “good visual memory” thus could be the immediate recognition of that particular look or beauty, since the object will naturally be seen as fitting within one of the buyer’s own preordained categories.

The problem arises with connoisseurs buying pre-Columbian art and artifacts during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they were doing so without any certain cultural or historical knowledge of iconography, of carving styles, or even of what might have been the choice of material made by a pre-Columbian artist. Indeed, as Pasztory has pointed out, a collector’s artistic taste was much more likely to have been formed by a knowledge and appreciation of Western art, and notions of beauty and workmanship founded upon a Western cannon rather than a pre-Columbian Mexican or Mesoamerican one (2002: 159-165). In sum, connoisseurs, or collectors of pre-Columbian art with the means to do so, sought out and purchased what appealed to them — “rare and beautiful,” intrinsically valuable, highly polished, and artistically sophisticated objects, principally without any provenience and mostly from art dealers far removed from the purported original context. Indeed, some of the Bliss collection’s highly polished stone carvings like the Xipe and Tlazolteotl sculptures have come into question in the past few decades by scholars such as Esther Pasztory (2002) and Claude Baudez (1998).

**Viewing Collections in the New Millennium**

Viewing nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century pre-Columbian collections from the vantage point of the twenty-first-century, with the benefit of more than a century of archaeological investigation and new scientific technological expertise, provides an entirely different perspective. The study and understanding of Aztec art, for instance, as Esther Pasztory has pointed out, suffers from the lack of a clear inventory of artistic styles, which has created a number of problems when attempting to judge these anomalous, unique, or unusual pieces (1983: 250). This problem has been somewhat ameliorated by the large number of finds from excavations in the Templo Mayor in Mexico City, which ultimately begins to provide us with enough examples to create at least an outline. In the case of stone carving and sculpture, we can begin to establish a data base of iconographic elements, carving and polishing styles and techniques, choices of materials, and relative measurements.

Yet the problem of unique works of art, unproveniened “masterpieces” remains, and despite their long exhibition histories and their familiar images gracing the covers and frontispieces of catalogues, many of them call for new analyses. What is perhaps most striking is the number of objects in both the private and public realm that have no apparent iconographic or stylistic counterparts from known archaeological contexts. These objects, collected by people only beginning to understand pre-Columbian art, seem to exist in a class by themselves — unique and anomalous. Yet, despite and at times be-

One of W. H. Holmes’ eccentric “blackware excrescences” donated to the Smithsonian by Mrs. Alfred Gibbs in 1871.
cause of their individuality, they are considered masterpieces, the artistic productions of master craftsmen, because of their technical sophistication and beauty. In a kind of circular logic emanating from connoisseurship and possibly the dictates of the art market, these “masterpieces” seem often beyond suspicion or criticism, in part because of their long term residences in important collections.

All collections go through periods of rethinking. When one encounters one of Holmes’s “blackware excrescences” (see illustration, page 17) or Eugene Boban’s “monsters” in a museum collection today, one wonders who could possibly have been fooled by such a bad fake. “That they were collected at all is embarrassing . . . but though they are fake Aztec, they are genuine embodiments of a European vision of the exotic” and as such they document our own evolution in thinking and expertise (Pasztor 2002: 163).

Looking Back, Looking Forward
A hundred years ago William Henry Holmes analyzed the stylistic and material manufacture of the fake Aztec blackware and found them to be entirely without relationship to documented Aztec pottery. A famous gold pendant, supposedly a depiction of the emperor Tizoc, was X-rayed in the 1960s and found to have been soldered using modern techniques, despite the fact that there had been several scholarly monographs written on the same piece (Easby & Dockstader). In the 1980s, Esther Pasztor employed a stylistic and iconographic analysis of several carved stone masks housed in two different European museums and declared them to be fake. She completed the article leaving doubt in the minds of her readers about several other objects that had certain similarities to those that had failed her analytic test. Pascal Mogné has written about Zapotec so-called funerary urns in European and American collections, many of which appear to have anomalous design elements, although apparently they are related to each other within groups (1987). Mogné completed a project to study some of these ceramic pieces stylistically, and, to verify this approach, he also used a dating technique called thermoluminescence, which measures the energy given off from the breakdown of radioactive elements. This energy is trapped in pottery and given off as light, which can be measured.

My own project to examine the tool marks left on carved stone sculpture has begun. My British museum colleague, Margaret Sax, and I will be using scanning electron microscopy to attempt to verify authenticity and also broadly date pre-Columbian stone objects. The future evidently holds great promise for new techniques and technologies, new analyses and dating possibilities, and altogether exciting new understanding of collections.

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