

The Montague Tallant Collection of Historic Metal Artifacts

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THE MONTAGUE TALLANT COLLECTION OF HISTORIC METAL ARTIFACTS

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Born in Virginia in 1892, Montague Tallant moved to west-central Florida's village of Manatee with his family when he was 14. Tallant eventually inherited his father's furniture store, and later acquired a hardware store. His interests included gardening, taxidermy, and archaeology. In his specially equipped Model A Ford, "The Cacique," and using what is reported to be the first metal detector, he travelled all over Florida hunting and digging.

During the 1930s, Tallant wanted to start an avocado grove, and decided to sell his large collection of artifacts to finance the project. Turning down an offer from the Smithsonian Institution for twice the money, he sold it to Bradenton's Junior Chamber of Commerce so that it would be kept in the area. This was the stimulus for the founding of the South Florida Museum (SFM) in 1948. Tallant continued to collect during the latter part of his life. In 1965, his widow sold his second collection to New York City's Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

The South Florida Museum's collection contains over 5,000 late prehistoric and historic period gold, silver, copper, iron, ceramic, glass, and other artifacts. Most are from Florida sites, although some are from sites in other states. The SFM has the catalogue Tallant kept of his collection, but there are no notes, maps, or records of any other kind. Tallant reportedly kept some records of his finds and the sites he visited, but it is not clear whether these still exist. The artifacts were not excavated according to the methods of modern archaeology. Therefore, meaningful information must be gleaned from the objects themselves.

The collection is the topic of a recent thesis titled "The Tallant Collection: Metal Artifacts from Florida's Historic Period" (Branstetter 1991). Because the collection is so large, this thesis concentrates on the gold and silver artifacts. This paper is an excerpt from the thesis. Since metal is not native to Florida, it is asserted that these objects were obtained by Florida Indians from wrecks of Spanish ships transporting cargoes from Central and South America to Spain. Many of the artifacts represent the reworking of shipwreck-salvaged metal by Florida Indians.

The collection contains 45 artifacts from Orona, one of the many sites represented. Although the Orona group is said to have had more than 20 mounds at one time, it is believed that the majority of the metal artifacts Tallant recovered came from one sand burial mound in the northwest corner of the Orona group. This mound (8GL35) was about 27 m (90 ft) in diameter and 1.2 m (4 ft) in height at one time (Goggin 1949).

Description of Gold and Silver Artifacts

Gold and silver artifacts from Orona include beads, pendants, disks and cones, and Mesoamerican and South American Indian artifacts. Some represent reworking by Florida Indians, while others retain the original form made by European, Mesoamerican, or South American artists. A definition of each artifact category is offered, followed by a description of examples. Where possible, methods of manufacture are discussed.

Beads

A good portion of the metal in the Tallant collection consists of beads. There are different forms and materials, but they are all thought to be ornamental. Some are unique and will be discussed individually. The most numerous type of bead in the collection is the disk bead. They are tiny, flat, and all of nearly identical measurements. All of the disk beads in this collection are made of silver, although this bead type is known in gold (Bray 1978:114-115, 134-135), copper, and shell (Leader 1985:42). Their average diameter is about 0.3 cm. Hundreds of them are strung together, and the catalogue numbers do not reflect the actual numbers of beads on the strands. An example from Orona is SFM A1715-1939 (Figure 1d).

Goggin says that disk beads "appear to be perforated sections of silver wire" (1949:MO-7). Surely he was just describing the small diameter of the beads and was not insinuating that they were made from silver wire. Leader (1985:42) suggests that silver was used by the Florida Indians to make these disk beads because when the silver oxidized the color of the beads would be comparable to the similar and highly prized shell disk beads. Leader also discusses two possible methods of manufacture that involve hammering, drilling, and abrasion to fashion the uniform shape (1985:42-44), although he does not reach a conclusion about which method was used. Also, Leader does not mention that this type of bead was made in Colombia and probably in other areas south of Florida. In the Colombian El Dorado collection are two similar strands, one of hammered gold and one of cast gold (Bray 1978:114-115, 134-135). Therefore, it is possible that these beads may not have been reworked, but were simply salvaged.

Tube beads are rolled pieces of thin metal crimped together (Leader 1985:44). These beads are reworked, and there are many in the Tallant collection. Gold examples from Orona can be seen in SFM A6839-A6841 (Figure 1a). These are the "tubu-