



Good Things for the Good People

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
February 2012

Recently, a remarkable book arrived at my office, titled *Tesoros del Arte Taíno*. Produced by the Fundación de Culturas Americanas and published by the Vicini conglomerate of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, it is a stunningly beautiful volume that reveals the prolific artistic production of the Taíno peoples, and validates current Smithsonian efforts to tell a new American story.



The Taínos, literally the *Good People* in the Awarak-derived language common in the Pre-Columbian Caribbean, were the predominant indigenous group of the region, and the ones who met Columbus on the island of Hispaniola, present day Haiti and Dominican Republic (Quisqueya), in 1492. It is this first encounter that spawned European "discovery" of the Americas. It is the Taínos who also bore the brunt of Spanish incursions. Their numbers and culture were decimated by horrendous warfare, disease and exploitation. Largely due to their presumed extinction, Taínos have oftentimes been relegated to relative footnote status in the telling of America's (continent, not country) grand story.

The Smithsonian, through its George Gutav-Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian and Smithsonian Latino Center, is exploring Taíno culture and its legacy. With access to over 6,000 Taíno objects in its collection, we have decided to tell a deeper, foundational origin story. What provoked Taíno migration to the greater Caribbean from present-day Colombia and Venezuela? What was the impact of exchange with other indigenous groups in Meso and Central America? What was the nature of their social organization and cultural, religious and agricultural practices? What were the implications of miscegenation with African slaves? How do we interpret the DNA research establishing pervasive indigeneity in the region? How do we treat current movements to assert Taíno culture, language and identity? Writing in a recent edition of *Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink*, researcher Maximilian Forte cautions against the notion "that biological parentage and cultural heritage are one in the same." Currently, Smithsonian researchers and a goodly number of Taíno scholars and activists from the Caribbean and New York are in the second phase of intense research that will shed light on these and many other inquiries, after which we will proceed with exhibition and public and educational program development. We also anticipate casting the net beyond the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (not surprisingly, Jamaica and Bahamas are also Taíno names, like Cuba and Haiti.)

A couple of weeks ago, I hosted a dinner party at my place for which I made one of my favorite hors d'oeuvres, a baked Queso Fresco from Oaxaca served with Casabe crackers. Casabe is a flatbread from the cassaba root, also known as yuca (not to be confused with yucca). Cassaba is the principal ingredient in tapioca. Casabe has been made continuously in many parts of the Caribbean long before the arrival of the Spaniards and is a staple in the Taíno diet. (Incidentally, I served *Guamaní* brand casabe. Produced in Quisqueya/Dominican Republic, it derives its name from a prominent Taíno cacique, or chief.) I proudly announced that this was ancestral food. "This is really good," remarked a guest. "Good food from the *Good People*," I smiled.