Colonial art and artifacts

The art and artifacts from the colonial period help to build a fascinating picture of life in early Jamestown, and you can see many of the objects for yourself in displays and exhibitions in Virginia. By David Hogge

The art and artifacts associated with the first permanent English settlement in the Americas offer an insight into the diverse people and culture of Jamestown, and help us place that pivotal moment in time into the broader context of 17th-century history. Whether the following items were excavated at the actual settlement or represent someone’s effort to capture in words or pictures the essence of this new colony, each artifact offers the opportunity, as the expression goes, to see the world in a grain of sand.

Owo ivory bracelet
Ivory was one of the most crucial exports from Africa to Europe in the 17th century, and elaborately carved ivory bracelets made by the Owo people in West Africa were in high demand among collectors. Demonstrating the skill of West African craftsmen, these ivory bracelets often depicted mythical animals, and they were made for a king to wear on ceremonial occasions. Owo ivory bracelets were among the earliest African artifacts to be discovered in European museum collections.

The legend of Pocahontas
Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend explores the life of the woman who was both Powhatan’s daughter and John Rolfe’s wife, as well as the role she played as intermediary between two disparate cultures. While what we know about Pocahontas comes from narratives of English men, this exhibit provides an opportunity to examine her life independent of the prejudices and legends that have shaped public perception over the years.

William Strachey’s brass ring
William Strachey’s voyage to Virginia began in 1609 on the Sea Venture. Sailing from England, the ship encountered heavy storms during the voyage and

WHERE TO SEE THEM:
above: an ivory bracelet from the Owo kingdom, on display at Jamestown Settlement. Ivory bracelets were in high demand in 17th-century Europe.
left: William Strachey’s ring. The ring was found during excavations of the James Fort site, and can be seen at Historic Jamestowne.
right (inset): a pair of earrings, believed to have once belonged to Pocahontas, can be seen at the Visitor Center at Historic Jamestowne.
and was wrecked on Bermuda. Strachey and the other passengers reached the colony in 1610, sailing in ships they built on the island by hand. He left Virginia in 1611. The following year, Strachey published *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania*, and some scholars believe Shakespeare based his play *The Tempest* on Strachey’s account of his experience in Bermuda.

**The Garden of Eden**

Virginia was viewed in England as a virginal, pristine land of abundance and pastoral bliss—a new Eden. Capturing this perception, even reinforcing it, is John White’s engraving that shows Virginia as the archetypal garden of Judeo-Christian heritage, complete with Adam and Eve standing by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In publishing his report on Virginia, Thomas Hariot aimed to convince Elizabeth I to continue exploring this potentially profitable land despite the failure of the lost colony in Roanoke.

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*above right:* John White’s engraving *Adam and Eve from Thomas Hariot’s A Briefe and True Report of the Newfound Land of Virginia* (1590) is part of the Paul Mellon Library of Americana at the Virginia Historical Society.
"While smoking was popular in England in the late 16th century, the colonists learned the practice of smoking tobacco in clay pipes from the Indians ... Pipes were often items of trade between an Indian and colonist and could have served as a symbol of friendship."

**Virginia's golden weed**

While smoking was popular in England in the late 16th century, the colonists learned the practice of smoking tobacco in clay pipes from the Indians. Pipes made by Indians differed from those made by settlers such as Robert Cotton in the size of the bowl. Indian-made pipes had larger bowls, suggesting that several people smoked from the same pipe, while the smaller bowl of the pipes made by colonists indicates that each man had his own pipe. Pipes were often items of trade between an Indian and colonist and could have served as a symbol of friendship.

**Silver ear picker**

Shaped like a sea rhinoceros or dolphin, ear pickers were cosmetic implements that had an ear scoop on one end and a tooth/nail cleaner on the other end. They were made of different materials. Made of silver, this ornate ear picker may have been owned by a gentleman, who used the loop to hang the device around his neck to indicate his social status. Other ear pickers were made from materials such as bone or cheaper metals.

**JAMESTOWN'S TIME CAPSULE**

The art and artifacts unearthed during the excavation of James Fort reveal a clear picture of life at Jamestown after the settlers landed.

What have they found?

- More than 100,000 artifacts dating from 1610 and earlier
- Leather shoes, surgical tools, buttons
- A full suit of armor
- Nuts, tobacco, seeds
- Ceramics, including a 1604 German Bartmann jug (above)
- A Scottish snaphaunce pistol and other weapons
- Shells, crab claws
- Tree leaves that are still green
- Many of the artifacts pulled from wells had been underwater for four centuries, but they were well preserved because it was an airtight environment

Many of these objects can be seen on display at Historic Jamestowne.

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**David Hogge** has worked as a freelance writer for more than 20 years, specializing in corporate communications and capital campaigns. His clients include businesses from financial services, health care, and commercial real estate, as well as colleges and universities.