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Ambassadors Who Stay: Toritos de Pucará and the Completion of a Consular Home in Chicago

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Abstract

In November 2025, twenty-five ceramic bulls arrived at the Consulate General of Peru in Chicago as part of *Toro Itinerante de Pucará, Embajador del Altiplano Peruano*, a program that had circulated fifty works donated by artisan associations through Peruvian missions since 2021. Chicago was the final stop of the traveling exhibition, and the twenty-five works subsequently remained at the consulate. In the southern Peruvian highlands a *torito* (bull) is set at the roof ridge when a house is completed, and from there it accompanies the household beneath it. The 2025 Chicago exhibition did not mimic that setting; rather, it brought the toritos into the direct field of view of a standing visitor, intending to make the labor of each maker legible before the form resumed its ambassadorial role. A proposed permanent installation would raise them again into lit niches above the consular service counter, where staff work and members of the public wait. This essay reads that sequence as an argument about architectural completion. Construction ends before inhabitation begins, and a place becomes ready through the presence of those who will take part in its life. Drawing on curatorial experience and on scholarship on Andean houses, material presence, heritage, and diaspora, the essay proposes that a consular interior can be completed as a house is, and that holding an Andean and an administrative account of the same object without resolving either is pluriversal work. Receiving heritage as an active presence obliges the institution that receives it. Their continued residence provides the basis for considering how an administrative interior might become a consular home.

Keywords: living heritage, Andean materiality, exhibition design, cultural diplomacy, decoloniality, pluraversality

The arrival

Twenty-five ceramic bulls arrived on the twenty-second floor of a high-rise on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago, in a space where people come to renew passports and register births. They are small, brightly glazed, and plainly out of context. Five months earlier, the consulate had inaugurated these premises with a program of Peruvian art, performance, gastronomy, and fashion (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2025a). By November, the offices were fully operational. The building was complete, and the institution was working, and the arrival of the toritos still marked a beginning. They brought the work of artists from the Peruvian highlands into the rooms, and with it a familiar promise of protection and care. Their arrival raises an architectural question. Can a place be complete before the presences that give it cultural life have arrived?

On houses in the southern Peruvian highlands, toritos are commonly placed at the roof ridge to mark the culmination of the house. Placed in pairs, they accompany the family and the life that will unfold below them. The gesture may be small, yet it carries a large and embodied idea. Construction provides shelter, while placing the toritos marks the moment when that shelter is entrusted with the well-being of those who will inhabit it. In Chicago, no roof received these twenty-five works. They entered a consular interior and stood in a line, one after another, each bearing its own form, decoration, and presence. The relationship to the roof did not disappear, however. It gave the exhibition its central question and eventually its architectural force.

The works had traveled as part of *Toro Itinerante de Pucará, Embajador del Altiplano Peruano*, an international program launched in 2021 around fifty toritos donated by artisan associations to Peru's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2021). Peruvian diplomats María Ximena Martel Huerta and Carlos Alejandro Dextre Izquierdo, who have written about the program as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, explain that the collection grew through collaboration among artisans, local government, and the ministry (Martel Huerta and Dextre Izquierdo, 2025, pp. 68–69). Half of that collection reached Chicago. The exhibition opened to the public in December after the works arrived and were installed (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2025b). For these twenty-five pieces, the consulate became the last stop. They did not leave after the exhibition closed. They remained, and that decision changed the meaning of their arrival. The toritos were no longer passing through a gallery on the way to another city. They had acquired an address and a continuing role in the consulate's public life.

This essay emerges from my involvement as their receiver and custodian in Chicago and from the decisions that shaped the 2025 exhibition and the works' continued residence at the consulate. It approaches curatorial work as a way to think through architecture, recognizing that the placement of objects alters the relationships a room can sustain. That experience is brought into conversation with historical research and scholarship on Andean houses, material presence, heritage, and diaspora. The interpretation is speculative in the architectural sense. It asks what the exhibition made possible and what the continued presence of the toritos may require of the institution that received them.

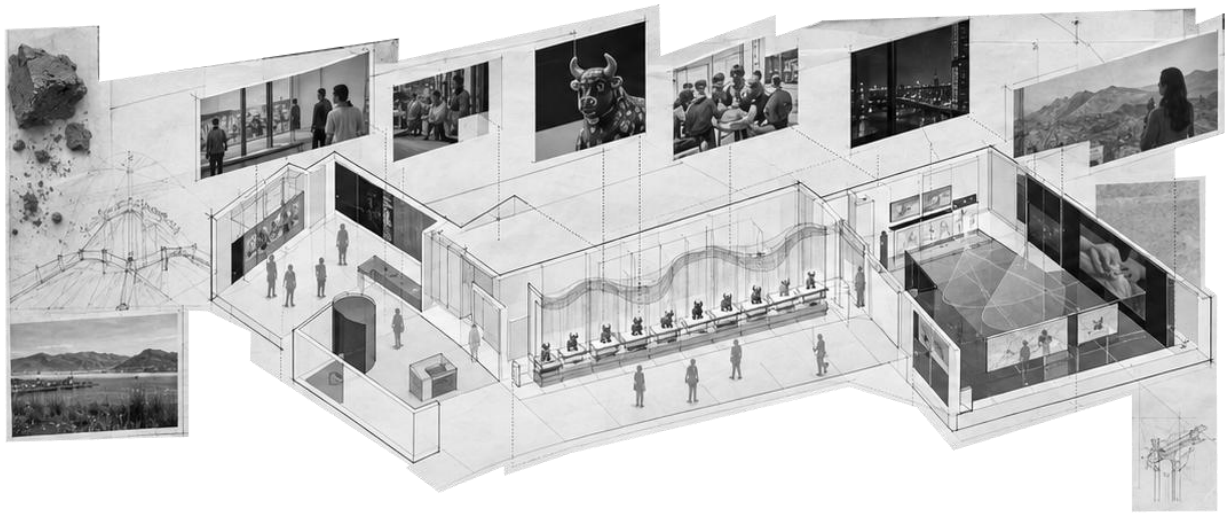


Figure 1. *Axonometric Spatial Diagram of the exhibition at the Consulate General of Peru in Chicago, December 2025. The linear installation runs the length of the main hall beneath a draped ceiling line, with adjoining rooms carrying video and interpretive material and the consular service areas at left. The surrounding montage sets the installation within the longer route of the works: clay and the altiplano landscape at left, visitors, works and the city along the top, and the hands of making at right. Diagram by the author, elaborated October 2025.*

From the roof to the world

The *Toro de Pucará* (*torito*) belongs to a long history of movement and change. The ceramic bull developed through encounters between Andean practices and colonial introductions, including cattle and glazing. Its modern name also carries a history of circulation. Peruvian art historian and curator Fernando Villegas Torres links the name Pucará to the railway station where ceramics from places such as Santiago de Pupuja and Checca Pupuja entered wider markets (Villegas Torres, 2010). He also shows how the Peruvian artists José Sabogal and Enrique Camino Brent brought the bull figure into twentieth-century discussions of national and popular art. The torito never existed in a single, unchanging context. Railways, markets, artistic attention, tourism, and state recognition widened its public life. Each movement created new possibilities for recognition, and each also changed how the work could be seen.

What remained through these changes was the knowledge of making. Peru's 2019 recognition of the traditional ceramic production of *Checca Pupuja* identifies knowledge, techniques, and practices as the substance of this heritage (Ministerio de Cultura, 2019). The form survives because artists continue to work with clay, fire, glaze, image, and inherited ways of making. It also survives because artists change what they make. Peruvian researcher F. R. Reyes Apaza examines the ceramic technology and symbolic representation of the torito under changing production conditions (Reyes Apaza, 2021). An interdisciplinary team of Peruvian humanities and communication scholars, Ana María Flores-Núñez, Mauro Marino-Jiménez, and Henry César Rivas-Sucari, approaches the same figure through cultural resistance and the renegotiation of identity (Flores-Núñez, Marino-Jiménez, and Rivas-Sucari, 2025). Their work also documents the torito's continuing associations with protection, prosperity, fertility, and collective identity. Heritage lives through repetition and adjustment. A recognizable figure returns, but it never returns in exactly the same body.

The roof gives this changing figure an architectural responsibility. Its position above the house joins expectations of protection and well-being to the completed building. Scottish social anthropologist Jonathan Alderman clarifies why this moment matters through his long

ethnographic work with Kallawaya communities in the altiplano region of Peru and Bolivia. He describes roofing rituals through which a house enters social life and acquires personhood, even as roofing materials change over time (Alderman, 2021, pp. 134–136). Using the toritos as part of this parallel cultural heritage shows that architectural completion might involve more than the end of construction. A house becomes part of a social world through the relationships people establish as they prepare to live within it.

American sociocultural anthropologist and Andeanist Catherine J. Allen makes a related point through her ethnographic writing on the Quechua-speaking community of Sonqo in southern Peru. She describes the house, *wasitira*, as a presence that witnesses what occurs inside and must itself be treated well (Allen, 2015, pp. 24–25). The house participates in the life it shelters. This understanding gives the toritos more than a distant symbolic role. Placed above a household, they take part in a relationship among building, family, and the forces asked to care for both. Their ceramic bodies hold an expectation that life can be protected and accompanied.

Two descriptions of the same object are in play here, and neither is a figure of speech for the other. In one, a torito is a ceramic work from a recognized artisanal tradition, cataloged and displayed. In the other, it is a presence with obligations, able to accompany a household. Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena and anthropologist and geographer Mario Blaser describe the pluriverse as a condition in which worlds meet without one being absorbed as the folklore of the other, and they develop this argument through sustained engagement with Indigenous and Andean thought (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). A room that holds both descriptions at once, and declines to resolve them, is doing pluriversal work rather than staging a display of difference.

The toritos sent through the traveling program were made for another kind of placement. They were not taken from occupied roofs. Artisan associations made and donated the collection so that it could travel as an ambassador of the altiplano (Martel Huerta and Dextre Izquierdo, 2025). The displacement is real, but it occurs within the relationship between the form and its customary architectural setting. The artists allowed the torito to leave the roof as an idea and to carry its knowledge elsewhere. The house did not travel with it. The practices surrounding its placement did not travel in full. What traveled was a ceramic body formed by those relationships and entrusted with a new public role.

Calling the toritos ambassadors gives that role a particular weight. An ambassador is sent by someone, arrives somewhere, and forms relationships in the place of arrival. The word gives the works agency, but it also keeps their makers within the story. The knowledge carried by the toritos began in artists' hands. It can be seen in the modeling of the body, the handling of the surface, the use of color, and the images chosen for decoration. Each work enters the world through a specific practice, even when a national program later asks it to represent Peru. The torito can speak across distance because an artist first gave it a body. This movement can be understood as a lending of heritage to the world. The works were formally donated, but donation does not erase the relationships through which they were made. American cultural anthropologist Annette Weiner developed the idea of keeping while giving through her study of exchange and inalienable possessions in Oceania (Weiner, 1992). Her work helps explain how a work may circulate while retaining attachments to the people and groups from which it came. The Chicago toritos entered a state collection, and then a consular space, yet the knowledge they carry did not become the property of those institutions. Their presence remains tied to the communities and artists whose work made the journey possible.

That connection is also an ethical responsibility. National cultural programs can turn individual works into a single, polished image of the country. They can celebrate heritage in ways

that make the people who sustain it harder to see. Archaeologist and critical heritage scholar Laurajane Smith calls this institutional power the authorized heritage discourse, a process through which states and professional bodies define what heritage is and how it should appear (Smith, 2006). The Chicago installation could not resolve that larger problem. It could keep the artists and their practices present, avoid treating the toritos as anonymous emblems, and make room for the differences among the works. Cultural authority remained with the people who made and entrusted them. The consulate received the objects and, with them, a responsibility to care for their histories as well as their material bodies.

Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo and cultural theorist Catherine Walsh, both central to Latin American decolonial thought, argue that decolonial work proceeds through delinking rather than through inclusion (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Their argument sets a limit on what any state cultural program accomplishes on its own terms. A ministry that sends fifty bulls abroad under the sign of the altiplano has not thereby ceded authority over how Peru is described. The installation could not change that. What it could do was keep the makers named and their practices legible, and accept that reception carries obligations the sending institution does not administer.

A line of living presences

The Chicago exhibition displayed the toritos in a linear arrangement that was visible from the public rooms of the consulate. The floor plan matters because the installation shared an institution organized around entry, waiting, service, and administrative work. The exhibition did not occupy a separate museum sequence. It was placed within the same circulation through which visitors entered the consulate and moved through its public spaces.

The twenty-five works occupied a long display run wrapped in white fabric and set against translucent white drapery. Clear acrylic vitrines gave the works a protected enclosure while keeping their silhouettes visible from several directions. Some vitrines held a single torito and others held a small grouping, but the spacing within the line allowed each body to remain legible. Directed lights and the filtered light behind the drapery loosened the glazed surfaces from the room and gave the installation the ethereal quality the curatorial team sought. The layout presented the works obliquely along the length of the display while also allowing a frontal approach. The supports brought the toritos into the direct field of view of a standing visitor. The installation was intended to lower the encounter from the distant height of the roof to the scale of one body meeting another.

Two decisions organized the work. The first was height. The toritos were positioned for close looking rather than raised above the visitor as household guardians would be, because the Chicago installation needed to make the labor of each artist available before the form could resume its larger ambassadorial role. The second was spacing. Pairing belongs to the roof condition, while the consular display emphasized the individual ceramic body. Even where more than one work occupied a vitrine, the interval between figures kept their different curves, colors, and surfaces from becoming a single decorative field. The line held the collection together, and the spacing allowed the works to remain distinct.



Figure 2. *Toro Itinerante de Pucará, Embajador del Altiplano Peruano, Consulate General of Peru in Chicago, December 2025. Left: a burnished torito with slip-painted decoration, vitrined against the window wall above North Michigan Avenue, with the Wrigley Building beyond. Center: plinth-mounted vitrines set against the consular reception room's curtained perimeter, with wall screens carrying production footage and customary use. Right: the linear run of gilt open-frame vitrines along the corridor, each piece individually lit and captioned. Photographs by the author.*

The consulate has no roof suitable for these works and no Andean house in which to place them. Reconstructing such a setting as scenery would have reduced a relationship to dwelling to a theatrical image. The installation gave each torito its own space and allowed the repeated form to remain visible as a collection. From a distance, the outlines established a rhythm. Up close, repetition gave way to difference. One body turned through a different curve. One surface carried a denser field of decoration. Another artist used color, imagery, or proportion to give the familiar form another character. The linear arrangement was intended to slow the encounter and make the craftsmanship of each piece legible. It offered the possibility of comparison without requiring any work to serve as the definitive example. Through this arrangement, a visitor might perceive both a shared inheritance and the decisions of individual makers.

Allen's later study of Andean miniatures takes seriously the personhood of small objects, particularly stone *inqaychus* associated with the vitality of herds (Allen, 2016). The toritos belong to a different practice and a different commission, but her insight clarifies the work of their scale. A small body can concentrate a relationship rather than merely represent one. Scale does not dilute the relationship. It makes the relationship portable. The physical presence of the toritos mattered because a photograph could show their shape and a catalog could describe their history, but neither could occupy the room. The ceramic bodies had to arrive so that the labor of making, the vulnerability of the material, and the differences among the works could become part of the encounter. Removing the roof did not remove context. It changed how context entered the room. The pieces carried material histories through form and surface, while videos documented production processes and customary practices. This division was intentional. The objects did not have to represent an entire cultural world by themselves, and the videos did not substitute for standing before a made thing. Together, these media provided two forms of attention. A visitor could look closely at an individual work and also encounter the larger practices from which it came.

As curator, I used the nimbleness that the traveling program provided. Peruvian historian and cultural manager José Gabriel Aguilar Pinto, who worked professionally with the exhibition during its international circulation, describes the freedom local venues had to develop their own presentations (Aguilar Pinto, 2025). Martel Huerta and Dextre Izquierdo document other venues where local artists and communities painted unfinished toritos together (2025, p. 69). Chicago used the same openness differently. The toritos arrived as completed works, and the exhibition focused on encounters with their individual bodies and on the possibility that they would remain. The program could respond to the place receiving it, and the place could accept a responsibility particular to that encounter.

Their embodiment also changed the meaning of ambassador. An ambassador cannot remain an image or an idea. An ambassador has to be somewhere. The twenty-five toritos occupied the same room as the people they were sent to meet. They held together several distances at once. They joined the artist's hand to the finished surface, the protective figure of the roof to an unfamiliar interior, and the Peru represented by the consulate to the particular lives through which Peru is remembered and remade in Chicago. Their presence made those relationships available at the scale of the body. The exhibition was designed to support several possible forms of engagement without dictating a single response. A person familiar with toritos on rooftops might approach the works through recognition and memory. Another person might first encounter them through their beauty or through curiosity about their presence in a consulate. These are interpretive possibilities enabled by the display rather than documented visitor responses. The installation could therefore accommodate those different interpretive beginnings. The toritos could be works of art and living heritage in the same room. Their beauty did not require setting aside the histories of protection, blessing, and making that they carry.

The work of staying

A consulate is often described through the documents it issues and the legal relationships it maintains. That work is essential, but it does not account for everything that happens within a consular space. Political scientist Alexandra Délano Alonso studies how consulates in the United States have expanded into education, health, legal advocacy, and cultural programming, becoming institutions through which diasporic communities gather, find support, and sustain relationships with places of origin (Délano Alonso, 2018). The opening program for Peru's new premises in Chicago already treated culture as part of this work (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2025a). The toritos entered an institution that was becoming more than a bureaucratic office.

Home away from home is a worn phrase, and it remains the most exact description of what a consular interior is asked to be. The link it maintains has historically been legal and administrative before it is anything else. However, people now arrive carrying more than that. They bring languages, memories, family histories, expectations, and changing ideas of home. Cultural geographer Divya Tolia-Kelly examines how objects in diasporic homes gather memories and relationships to places that cannot always be visited (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). The consulate is not a private home, but it is one place where distance is repeatedly negotiated. A torito might be encountered by someone who remembers seeing one above a roof in Peru. It might also be encountered by someone unfamiliar with the form, for whom the work offers one possible point of entry into Peruvian cultural life. These possible encounters belong to the consular interior because the institution serves people whose relationships to Peru take many forms.

The toritos introduced the scale and intimacy of the household into the public setting of the consulate. They did not transform the consulate into a literal house, and the exhibition did not reproduce a roofing ritual. The curatorial expressions did not try to mimic traditions; rather, the

exhibition presented these heritage works as part of a culture and embodied narrative. Their arrival suggested a relationship between completing a roof and completing a new interior. In both cases, construction ends before inhabitation fully begins, and a place may become meaningful through the presence of those who participate in its life. At the Chicago consulate, the 2025 exhibition offered a temporary expression of this idea. The rooms were already constructed, furnished, and open to the public; the exhibition introduced the toritos as companions within them. The proposed permanent installation shown in Figure 3 develops this interpretation architecturally but had not been implemented at the time of writing.

Colombian anthropologist and design theorist Arturo Escobar argues that design participates in world-making rather than only in problem-solving (Escobar, 2018). Arranging these works in these rooms was a decision about which worlds the rooms could hold. The consulate did not become Andean. It became a place where an Andean account of what a ceramic bull is could stand alongside an administrative one. Architecture and heritage acted upon each other at this point. Architecture provides a setting in which heritage can be encountered and sustained, while heritage introduces relationships and meanings that plans alone cannot anticipate. The toritos require surfaces, light, spatial arrangement, and continued care. The consulate receives works that change how its rooms are understood. An administrative interior can also become a place of memory, artistic engagement, cultural continuity, and protection. Here, the continued presence of the toritos gives this exchange duration.



Figure 3. *Design proposal for a permanent installation of the twenty-five toritos at the Consulate General of Peru in Chicago; the installation had not been implemented at the time of writing. Illuminated timber niches would carry the works above the service counter in a stepped arrangement, flanking the national coat of arms. Rendering/drawing by Studio David J Isern.*

Chicago, their last stop, did not end the toritos' ambassadorial work; the decision that they remain changed their role from travelers to residents. Their continued presence may allow visitors and members of the Peruvian community to encounter the same pieces again. The consulate assumes ongoing responsibilities to care for the works, identify their artists, and keep their creation

histories available. If realized, the proposed permanent installation would give this continuing relationship a dedicated architectural form.

What makes the Chicago case particular is that the works remained at the consulate after the 2025 exhibition. The argument developed here cannot be transferred without change to every diplomatic or diasporic exhibition, since each setting brings different communities, buildings, objects, and relations of cultural authority. Chicago offers a way to consider how an institution changes when it receives heritage as an active presence rather than as decoration. The question can travel, even when the answer must be made locally. Artists shape heritage through the decisions they make, and those decisions carry knowledge and memory forward. Buildings accumulate practices in the same way, and practices in turn make buildings inhabitable. The toritos hold these together without collapsing them. Each piece is an individual work. Together they carry an inherited relation to the roof and the household. In the consulate they also do public work.

For these twenty-five works, Chicago became a final destination and the potential beginning of another home. They arrived after the consulate had opened, when construction was complete and daily routines had begun. Their continued presence suggests another kind of completion, defined through inhabitation and cultural presence rather than construction alone. The toritos brought the knowledge of their makers, the memory of the roof, and the promise of accompaniment into the consular rooms. If realized, the proposed permanent installation would give architectural form to this interpretation. The works' continued residence may help the new consulate become a place where Peruvian cultural life can remain present, continue to change, and be encountered again.

Declaration of generative AI assistance

Grammarly was used for grammar and syntax correction and to check reference formatting. The writing, exhibition account, the curatorial decisions, and the architectural interpretation are the author's own. The author is responsible for the final text, its factual claims, and its references.

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