Effigy pottery has been created by indigenous cultures across the Americas. Dr. Cherry gives us a comprehensive examination of a subset within the genre: classical Mississippian headpots from the titular region, formed entirely in the shape of a human head, with a single opening on top. While highly consistent in form and overall style, facial features range from simple abstraction to individualistic representations suggestive of portraiture. The purpose of the vessels remains a mystery, with indications of both ritualistic and everyday use. Bringing together documentation for 138 classical headpots now held in museum and private collections, this publication is a catalogue raisonné for a rare vein of prehistoric American material culture.

Sixteenth-century Spanish expeditionary chronicles list two native groups, whom they called the Pacaha and the Casqui, flourishing along the rivers of the region. The remains of their unpopulated villages, laid out around mounds, are noted in French accounts of the following century. By the time that the Smithsonian formed its Mound Exploration Division in the 1880s, the origin and fate of the prehistoric mound builders were subjects of public interest, conjecture and debate. Harvard’s Peabody Museum sent a crew to Arkansas in 1879 under the direction of Edwin Curtiss, who collected some of the earliest examples that appear in Cherry’s catalog. Interesting, though not exhaustive, details are presented from the history of collecting during this period.

Catalog entries are arranged by date of collection, with stylistically related specimens clustered in groups, and one-of-a-kind examples coming last. All are described extensively. Written and oral records are analyzed meticulously to establish a provenance for each vessel, as well as to point out where errors and gaps appear in the historical record. Only pots of reliable authenticity are included, with some discussion of how to spot restorations and reproductions. Several small color photographs document each headpot from numerous angles, with larger shots included for only a few items. Photographs are drawn from several sources. They vary noticeably in quality but adequately serve their documentary purpose. Appendices provide additional data, drawings, maps, a glossary and a bibliography.

Perhaps too narrow for general art collections, this publication is indispensable for art or anthropology libraries supporting specialized research in Mississippian culture, and should be considered for any library with strong interest in the geographic region. For a broader treatment of Mississippian pottery, with fewer but more aesthetically consistent photographs, see Gifts of the Great River: Arkansas Effigy Pottery from the Edwin Curtiss Collection by John House (Peabody Museum, 2003).

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