

NEWS RELEASE

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MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA GALLERY ILLUSTRATES POWER, DIVERSITY, AND INFLUENCE IN THE ANCIENT AMERICAS

PHILADELPHIA – Opening November 16, 2019, the Penn Museum's **Mexico and Central America Gallery** examines the region's distinct societies, as well as the connections between political and divine power—when rulers enlisted forces of nature and celestial objects to reinforce their roles of authority.

Through 250 stunning artifacts—many of which have never been on display—and their universal, relatable stories, the 2,000-square-foot **Mexico and Central America Gallery** spans more than 3,000 years of history and timeless human experiences, from shared ideas about politics and the divine world to a common calendar.

Highlighting the Museum's history of innovative archaeological research across the region, the new gallery explores the stories of powerful ancient civilizations including the Maya, Aztec, and Zapotec. Guests will encounter ancient cities, uncovering the meanings of cosmological symbols and the traditions of people living in Mexico and Central America today.

"The reimagined **Mexico and Central Mexico Gallery** offers a new vision of ritual and power in the ancient Americas. Featuring works of cultural significance and artistic achievement—some created as much as three millennia before the arrival of Europeans—it shows how distinct regional identities were closely linked by their common histories and ongoing interactions," says Simon Martin, Lead Curator and one of the few people in the world who can read Maya hieroglyphs. "The gallery brings you face-to-face with some of the earliest rulers and most enigmatic deities in the ancient Americas."

Unique to this world-renowned collection are its breathtaking sculptures, including four majestic Maya stone monuments from sites in Guatemala and Honduras. One of these, a renowned monument known to archaeologists as Stela 14 (from Piedras Negras, ca. 761 CE), helped researchers to crack the code in deciphering Maya writing during the 1960s. This finely preserved towering artifact celebrates the accession of a local king in 758 CE and includes the hieroglyphic names of the sculptors who carved it.



Across the gallery sits the Water Goddess of Teotihuacan, a mysterious fertility deity. This is one of only two such complete sculptures ever found—the other is in Mexico City. Another corner of the gallery traces the legacy of Maya weaving with elaborately embroidered textiles that are still woven and worn by living Maya people today. Although they've changed over time, these textiles retain their connections to their origins. In addition, there are exceptional carved jade pieces, brilliant gold figurines, and a massive conch shell—thought to have come from the sacred precinct at the heart of the Aztec Empire.



“Rare and important Aztec sculptures mingle with the largest collection of Maya stelae outside Mesoamerica. Olmec jade and Zapotec obsidian retain a luster that is only outshone by the gold from Costa Rica and Panama. Paraphernalia of the ritual ballgame on the Gulf Coast join the portraits of ancestors and heroes from West Mexico, both facing the stony stare of memorial masks from Teotihuacan,” Martin adds. “It presents many intriguing and powerful objects, but its greater goal is to give the cultural legacy of our continent the stature and prominence it truly deserves.”

Enhanced with multimedia elements, the **Mexico and Central America Gallery** provides a comprehensive view of the area’s societies through contemporary videos, a listening bench for visitors to hear living languages that are the direct descendants of those spoken long ago, and a hieroglyph writing section, where people can create their own names in Maya glyphs.

Also Opening November 16

Other reimagined areas opening as a part of the Penn Museum’s *Building Transformation* include the **Main Entrance** and the adjacent **Sphinx Gallery**, a space created by the Museum’s construction project with the 25,000-pound Sphinx of the Pharaoh Ramses II at its heart; a suite of **Africa Galleries**; and the restored **Harrison Auditorium**, a 614-seat performance venue first constructed in 1915.

About the Penn Museum

Since 1887, the Penn Museum has transformed understanding of the human experience. Dedicated to building connections between cultures, the Museum welcomes everyone to uncover the ancient past, gain an understanding of our shared humanity, and find one’s own place in the arc of human history. For more information, visit pennmuseum.org or call 215.898.4000.

MEET THE LEAD CURATOR

Simon Martin, Ph.D., is Associate Curator and Keeper of Collections in the American Section, Penn Museum. He began his professional career in graphic design and holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Archaeology at University College London. A scholar of the ancient Maya and a renowned specialist in deciphering the Maya script, he specializes in the study of political interactions and dynastic histories of the Classic Maya kingdoms. His current field research in Ucanal, Guatemala, focuses on the last century of the Classic Period and the unraveling of those kingdoms. At the Museum, he co-curated *Maya 2012: Lords of Time*.



Curatorial Team

Other Museum personnel working on the Gallery, in addition to Dr. Simon Martin, include:

- **Lucy Fowler Williams, Ph.D.**, Associate Curator and Sabloff Keeper of Collections, American Section, Penn Museum
- **Annabelle Rodriguez**, Lecturer, Rutgers University; Future Faculty Fellow, Temple University
- **Jamie Forde, Ph.D.**, Curatorial Assistant, Penn Museum; Consulting Scholar, Penn Cultural Heritage Center

Support

The Mexico and Central America Gallery is made possible with lead support from Dr. David A. Schwartz, in remembrance of Dr. J. Alden Mason; Charles K. Williams, II, Ph.D.; the Forney family; Gregory T. Maslow, M.D., and Laurie Maslow; Carlos and Renee Nottebohm; and Nina Robinson Vitow.



Photo captions for objects in the Mexico and Central America Gallery

This Maya monument, Stela 14 from Piedras Negras (ca. 761 CE), is a large stone column of stone that portrays a king and his mother. Hieroglyphs on the side of the monument give the date of his accession. Object: L-16-382.



The Margarita Panel, the façade of a temple, was discovered by a Penn Museum excavation team in the 1990s. The original—created around 450 CE—is still in Copán, an archaeological site in Honduras. Measuring nearly 9 feet high by 12 feet wide, this replica features the name of the Copán king, which is shown as two entwined birds. Object EP-2011-7-1.



A figure of the Water Goddess of Teotihuacan, a mysterious fertility deity. It is one of only two such complete sculptures that have ever been found—the other is in Mexico City. Object 1950-134-282 is on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Made of colorful cotton and silk threads, this Maya blouse is called a "huipil." Each blouse tells the story of a woman's relationship to the Maya cosmos and acknowledges her presence within the Maya world. Object: 42-35-190.