

## A new wing for art of the Americas; Museum of Fine Arts Boston

**By Shirley Moskow**

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### **Gallery Place**

The jadeite mask of a man's face hurls a challenge across almost three millennia of western civilization. "Who am I?"

The Olmec mask (900-550 BC) is the oldest American artifact in the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MEA). It is one of the treasures helping to sketch the history of the western hemisphere in the museum's new Art of the **Americas** wing. The mask's thick lips, broad nose, square forehead, and wide-set eyes--mere slits topped by well-defined eyebrows--reveal its origins in Mesoamerica's earliest civilization. But the mystery persists. Little is known about the Olmec of southwestern Mexico, not even what they called themselves. The Aztec named them "Olmec," meaning "rubber people," for the liquid they harvested from the trees.

The mask is one of more than 5,000 works from the MEA collection on view in the new Art of the **Americas** wing, more than twice as many American objects as previously displayed. The collection includes paintings, sculpture, furniture, decorative arts, works on paper, musical instruments, textiles, and costumes. For the first time since the museum's founding in 1870, the art of all of the **Americas**--South, Central, and North--is together in one place.

Pritzker Prize-winning architects Foster + Partners, London, designed the gleaming glass and granite wing. It is an international resource for the study of the art, history, and culture of the **Americas**. The 121,307-square foot Art of the **Americas** wing is flanked to the north and south by pavilions made of glass. The new building is made of the same Deer Isle, Maine granite that architect Guy Lowell chose for the MFA's original 1907 Beaux Arts building. It comprises 53 galleries on four floors.

The journey of discovery begins with the oldest objects on the ground level and continues, floor by floor, up to the top level, where art and objects from the third quarter of the 20th century are on view. Chronologically integrated exhibitions encourage a dialogue between objects that fosters an appreciation of the depth and breadth of all American cultures and periods.

The Lower Ground Level Gallery is the foundation of the Art of the Americas collection. It presents ancient indigenous cultures in galleries organized according to culture, period, region, style, artist, maker, and theme. The Ancient Central American Gallery area covers Mesoamerica; the region of what is modern-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. In addition to the Olmec mask, it exhibits enormous, highly-decorated K'iche Maya (650-850 AD) burial urns from ancient Guatemala. Each day urn is decorated with a distinctive three-dimensional face. A single small figure sits on each domed lid.

This gallery also includes pictorial Maya vases and Mo'n Buluk Laj's (755-780 AD) masterpiece depicting the birth of the Maize God. The MFA's collection of Classic Maya ceramics is

exceptional, ranked among the best outside of Guatemala. An interactive touch screen helps visitors explore the themes presented in the ceramics.

The Ancient South **America** gallery features objects from the area that is now Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, as well as gold work from the cultures that once existed in what is now Colombia and Panama. A large cast gold Tairona "cacique" figural pendant effigy from Colombia is among the most impressive works. The standing human male wears a leaf-nosed-bat face mask. An elaborate headdress features two birds facing forward and profile zoomorphic flanges at each side of his head. His hands clutch serpent heads. Archaeologists suggest that this type of elaborate pendant may represent a shaman, a chieftain, or other high ranking male in transformation to his spiritual animal companion.

The Moche and Chimu cultures of northern Peru created hand-modeled and mold-made sculptural pottery in the shape of fruits, animals, and historical figures. The ceramics of the Nasca, who inhabited what is modern day Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, show simple vessel forms exquisitely painted with abstract motifs and schematic renderings of the human form. The Nasca--who produced beautiful crafts and built an impressive system of underground aqueducts that still function--are recognized today for their ancient geoglyphs, the mysterious lines on the fields of the high plateau desert in Peru.

The Lower Ground Gallery displays rare musical instruments, including flute-like ocarinas, shell trumpets, rattles, and hand drums. In addition, ship models, maritime artifacts, Andean textiles, and Native North American objects demonstrate how similar themes were interpreted in different cultures and media.

The MFA has always collected objects produced by the indigenous peoples of North America. The expanded collection now encompasses the continental United States and Canada from ancient times to the modern day. Spectacular objects from the Pacific Northwest--a mid-19th-century Tsimshian chiefs' chest, a Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) potlatch figure, and a recently-acquired Chilkat dancing blanket, masks, and scrimshaw produced by Inuit artisans--are featured in the Lower Ground Gallery.

This gallery also exhibits modern Native American and First Nation artists. Their works include paintings, works on paper, ceramics, jewelry, glass, basketry, and textiles in traditional and contemporary modes. The highlights present works by artist Preston Singletary, who explores his connection with ancient customs; paintings by Mateo Romero, David Bradley, and Stan Natchez; works on paper by Jaune Quick-To-See Smith; and ceramics by Nathan Begaye and Diego Romero.

On Level 1, one floor up, the galleries focus on colonial America through the early 19th century. Objects from important artistic centers from New Hampshire to the Barbados point out the cultural differences between the North American and South American colonies. Art and architecture of England and France inspired the patrons and craftsmen of pre-revolutionary North America. In South America, however, the colonies were influenced by Spain.

Tin-glazed earthenware from Puebla, pierced wrought iron wares, and ornate furniture from Mexico and South America showcase Spanish style. Wall plaques, a missal stand, a chocolate

pot, and ornamental silver exemplify the elaborate decorations on massive Spanish colonial silver.

The silver objects and colorful Peruvian tapestries and textiles emphasize the gallery's focal point: mestizo artist Miguel Cabrera's portrait Don Manuel Jose Rubio y Salinas, Archbishop of Mexico (1754). Cabrera was born in what is now Oaxaca. He was abandoned as a child, yet he grew up to become one of the most renowned and respected artists in New Spain. He founded an art academy in Mexico City and was a favorite of the Archbishop. He was prolific. People said he had a painting hanging in every church and convent in Mexico City.

The MFA collection excels in the art of Boston, New York, and the Middle Colonies from the colonial period to the early 19th century, the formative decades preceding and just following the American Revolution. Iconic portraits of patriots by Boston-born John Singleton Copley, carved furniture by Samuel Prince of Philadelphia, and silver by Daniel Christian Fueter of New York and Paul Revere of Boston, including his Sons of Liberty Bowl (1768), present a picture of prosperous colonies.

The spacious new galleries accommodate monumental works like Thomas Sully's painting Passage of the Delaware (1819) and period rooms from historic New England homes. Elizabeth Derby West had Oak Hill Mansion built in 1800-1801 in what is now Danvers, Massachusetts. She was the wife of North America's first millionaire. Her home includes the large original front doorway (the door is a reproduction), dining room, parlor, and bed chamber. Most of the furnishings are original. They include furniture by popular cabinetmakers John and Thomas Seymour, Samuel McIntire, and John Doggett, as well as Chinese porcelain and English silver owned by the family. A video presentation in the lobby details the history of the house and its residents through the years.

Proceeding through time, Level 2 galleries present a series of styles from the art movement of North America during the 19th and early 20th century. John Singer Sargent, one of the generation of Americans who went abroad to paint, is well-represented with two masterpieces, The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (1882) and Lord Londonderry (1904). Other artists helped to define the emerging American identity by painting landscapes of the new nation that depicted natural wonders like Yosemite Valley and Niagara Falls. The paintings and sketches of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, and the photographs by Alexander Gardner, explore Civil War subjects.

The gallery also showcases the Aesthetic Movement, which valued beauty for its own sake; American Expressionism; Folk Art (including the work of slaves); and the Arts and Crafts Movement, featuring works by Frank Lloyd Wright, Gustav Stickley, and the Grueby potters, among others. All these craftsmen stretched tradition.

The top floor, Level 3 Gallery, is devoted to 20th century art through the mid-1970s. It offers a fresh perspective on contemporary art in the Americas, showing the works of North American and South American artists together. This dialogue between cultures is revealing. South American and Central American artists who studied in Europe--like their North American counterpart who studied with such artists as Salvador Dali, Fernand Leger, and Pablo Picasso--

developed their own style. They mined inspiration in their history and heritage. Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres-Garcia, who studied with Antoni Gaudi in Barcelona, Spain, is best known as the father of constructivism. Alfred Hilto of Argentina painted in the style of Piet Mondrian's geometric abstractions.

Contemporary Argentine artist Cesar Patemosto learned about color from the paintings of Josef Albers. Yet, his work relates more closely to that of Frank Stella. In contrast to Stella's hard edged straight lines, Paternosto's hard edged abstractions are fluid. One of the MFA's recent purchases, Paternosto's painting *Staccato* (1965), is an engaging balloon-shaped composition in vibrant red, pastel blue, lime green, dark brown, royal blue, and orange stripes. The collection is evolving. A rotating group of paintings and sculptures on loan from the Collection Patricia Phelps de Cisneros augment the MFA's holdings.

No other museum devotes as much space to American art or attempts as ambitious a goal. By integrating the arts and culture of all the Americas, the new wing of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts may well change our perspective and understanding of the American experience.