



# NEWS

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## EXPERIENCE AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTION IN A NEW BEHIND-THE-SCENES SETTING:

### ***VISIBLE VAULT: ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES FROM ANCIENT LATIN AMERICA***

*Celebrated Collection Goes on View January 23, 2009  
Features over 700 Objects from Ancient Civilizations of Mexico, Central  
and South America*

**LOS ANGELES** — An Aztec stone skull, Maya glyphs and ancient gold *keros* (drinking vessels) pre-dating the Inca empire are just a few of the rare and important objects that will be on view, when the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County throws open a cache of centuries-old riches in a new behind-the-scenes exhibition, *Visible Vault: Archaeological Treasures of Ancient Latin America*.

Scheduled for completion on January 23, 2009 when its multi-media and online-collections integration reaches completion, *Visible Vault* will present more than 700 objects from the Museum's archaeological collections representing ancient civilizations of the Americas, with objects from the Southwest United States, Mexico, Central America and South America. Installed in a dramatically designed vault-like space, which provides the experience of exploring archaeological collections ordinarily hidden from public view, the objects are grouped by region to immerse visitors in the breadth of material culture produced by the ancient peoples of each area. Visitors will also be able to see *Visible Vault* taking shape starting on December 19, 2008, as the nearly complete exhibition receives its final flourishes.

*Visible Vault* provides a creative new means of access to one of the Museum's most important collections, following the closure of the Ancient Latin American Hall as part of the Museum's \$84 million transformation project. This historic transformation at the Natural History Museum will result in the renovation of more than half of the Museum's exhibition spaces.

"We want to provide our visitors with a sense of the richness of the collection while also inviting them to engage with individual objects," says NHM archaeologist and exhibition curator Dr. Karen Wise. "As curators and collections staff, we spend our working lives with these wonderful objects. We wanted to share the feel of being in an archaeological storeroom, where everything is accessible, with our visitors." Multimedia access stations further provide visitors with tools for in-depth research, including maps and information about each object on display.

*Visible Vault* was designed by the Los Angeles-based firm of Hodgetts + Fung Design and Architecture (hplusf) which developed a curved ceiling, industrial shelving systems and glass jewel-case enclosures, which sprout from various sections of the cavernous surroundings.

Central to the design of *Visible Vault* is a system of shelving that presents the archaeological collection of each region in the form of "back storage" where visitors may see objects carefully packaged in archival materials, such as protective foam blocks, coil, and acid-free cardboard units. In the forefront of the installation are highlighted display areas featuring 37 selected objects mounted in a more traditional manner, offering unobstructed viewer access.

"We hope the design sets a tone of engagement with the objects and a greater understanding for their collective framework," said hplusf design principal Craig Hodgetts. *Visible Vault: Archaeological Treasures from Ancient Latin America* will be the second behind-the-scenes gallery experience designed by hplusf for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. This new permanent gallery will join its paleontology predecessor, the *Thomas the T. rex Lab*, on the second floor of the Museum.

### **Inside the Vault**

Objects from many Mesoamerican cultures, such as the Teotihuacan, Toltec, Mixtec, Olmec, Zapotec, Veracruz, Nayarit, Jalisco, Colima, Zacatecas, Casas Grandes, Chupicuaro, Hohokam, and Tarasco, are arranged along one side of the *Visible Vault* gallery, where they are anchored by artifacts from one of the region's most famous civilizations - the Aztec.

Highlighted treasures, such as a large stone Teotihuacan carving of an “Old Fire God” and a ceramic figure with a removable chest, give visitors a dramatic encounter with objects from ancient Latin American civilizations having sophisticated belief systems and state-building techniques. Other featured treasures include a Zapotec relief panel (to be displayed along the top portion of the gallery) and a stone “yoke” from Veracruz associated with the famous Mesoamerican ball game. A Jalisco warrior figurine sits complete with armor, helmet and spear juxtaposed with a strikingly modern-looking ceramic dog from ancient Colima in West Mexico.

Along the opposite gallery wall are artifacts from Central and South America. One group includes the ancient civilizations of the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America, such as Maya, Diquis, Coclé, Veraguas, Chiriquí, Tairona, Quimbaya and Muisca. The other group includes objects representing ancient Andean civilizations including Inca, Tiwanaku, Wari, Chavin, Chancay, Moche, Chimú, and Nazca. Featured prominently are objects displaying written language, testifying to the sophistication of these ancient Latin American civilizations.

Limestone wall carvings and colorful pottery with prominent glyphs underscore the tradition of Maya writing, whose existence was not accepted until the 1970s. A metate grinding stone from Costa Rica portrays a jaguar, a popular ceremonial effigy in the Atlantic Watershed. The importance of gold is highlighted in the intricate and highly stylized adornments of the Tairona, Quimbaya and Muisca cultures from Columbia and Panama, which inspired the lore of El Dorado.

*Visible Vault: Archaeological Treasures from Ancient Latin America* also offers a closer look at ancient cultures pre-dating and leading up to the Inca civilization. Spectacular objects include a standing funerary figure from the Chancay; an exquisite Moche stirrup spout-bottle formed as a llama carrying cargo; and a Nazca gold nose-ring accompanying painted pottery portraying a figure with the same type of facial adornment.

“This contemporary presentation invites visitors to experience this beloved and important archaeological collection and represents a level of collections-based access we’ve not been able to achieve prior to this exhibition,” said Dr. Jane Pisano, president and director of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. “Its unique design makes these once-privileged materials, previously viewed only by a few curators and archaeologists, available to all our visitors.”

For more information on this exhibition, visit [www.nhm.org/visiblevault](http://www.nhm.org/visiblevault)

## ***Latin Festival***

On Saturday, January 24, 2009, NHM will celebrate the completion of *Visible Vault* with an all day ***Latin Festival*** that presents a variety of craft workshops and performances, culminating in a featured performance by the world-renowned **Poncho Sanchez Latin Jazz Band**. From **10 a.m. to 5 p.m.**, visitors will be able to make their own *Lucha Libre* wrestling masks; create decorations for special occasions using the *Papel Picado* paper-cutting method, or use the Mexican bark paper known as *Amate* to cut out spirit figures. Other crafts include weaving, rattle making and gold foil. Two performances by the Peruvian dance ensemble **INCA** will be followed by the Grammy-winning percussionist Poncho Sanchez and his nine-piece jazz group.

## ***A Historic Transformation at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County***

The development of the new *Visible Vault: Archaeological Treasures from Ancient Latin America* is part of the Museum's current transformation of galleries, the creation of "behind-the-scenes" experiences and restoration of historic dioramas and halls. The Museum is also involved in an \$84 million project to restore and seismically strengthen its original 1913 Beaux-Arts inspired building. The project includes the installation of new exhibits in the Rotunda of the 1913 Building as well as a portion of the adjacent 1920s addition. Restoration work will reveal exquisite details that have been obscured over the years and highlight elements such as the ceramic-tiled exterior dome, the original stained glass skylight of the Rotunda (by Walter Horace Judson) and architectural details on the East Entrance. In this historic setting, state-of-the-art galleries will feature new exhibits that draw from the Museum's vast, world-renowned collections, nearly tripling the number of objects that are currently on view and emphasizing connections between nature and culture. The newly designed galleries will open beginning in 2010. Over half of the Museum's total exhibit-related space will be renovated.

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### **Museum Admission and Hours**

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is located at 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles. It is open weekdays, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and weekends and holidays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tickets are \$9 for adults, \$6.50 for children. For more information, visit the museum's website at [www.nhm.org](http://www.nhm.org) or call (213) 763-DINO.

### **About the Museum**

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County serves more than one million families and visitors annually, and is a national leader in research, exhibitions and education. The Museum is L.A.'s first official cultural space, the first to open its doors to the public in 1913, and has amassed one of the world's most extensive and valuable collections of natural and cultural history – more than 35 million objects, some representing the Earth's 4.5 billion year history.