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Recovering the Missing Chapters

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In 1870 George Fiske Comfort, one of the founders of the Metropolitan Museum, stated that “[a]n ideal museum must . . . be cosmopolitan in its character; and it must present the whole stream of art-history in all nations and ages, as represented in the three great arts, of architecture, sculpture, and painting, in the minor arts, and in the many applications of art to industry, by the adornment of every material production which comes from the hand of man.”¹ Despite early attempts to address this goal, it would be over a century before the lofty ideal of representing the art history of all cultures and ages was more truly realized. Prior to 1970, the Museum, by and large, did not see the artistic traditions of Africa, Oceania, and Native America as worthy of inclusion in the collection. The art of the ancient Americas (Latin America before the arrival of Europeans), also called Precolumbian, has a more complex history at the institution, extending from a robust presentation of thousands of works in the late nineteenth century to its nearly complete banishment from the halls from about 1914 until the time of the centenary.

The first gifts of Precolumbian and Native American art came within three years of the Museum’s founding in 1870, with additional significant gifts and purchases in the following two decades (see “The Founding Decades”). Other artifacts were presented by diplomats, missionaries, soldiers, and artists, such as “an ancient idol from Kauai, Sandwich Islands [Hawaii]” given in 1876 by Captain Henry Erben of the United States Navy.² The largest number of works from Africa and Oceania arrived with Mary Elizabeth Adams

Brown’s collection of musical instruments (see “Art for All”); indeed, by 1903, that African collection was sufficiently large to warrant its own room. Particular attention was also paid to the acquisition of American antiquities, which reflects a broader move toward hemispheric unity in the nineteenth century, one that was deeply entangled with political—and emergent national—ambitions toward Latin America. In 1882 the Museum’s first president, John Taylor Johnston, declared that “the antiquities of our own continent should form a prominent feature in an American Museum.” He also acknowledged the functional nature of many of these works as a complement to their status as fine art: “In gold and other metals, in stone, in textile fabrics and in pottery, are found works which sufficiently indicate the possession by ancient Americans of many useful arts, and a cultivation of the love of beauty, measured by an independent standard which, however distinct from ours, nevertheless proves the presence of intellectual and art loving races of men.”³

The rising tide of interest in what Johnston called “old American art” brought in a number of major works and supporters (fig. 224). The Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church became an enthusiastic advocate for the creation of a department devoted to what he called “Ancient Art of the New World” and donated a splendid pair of Toltec panels depicting an eagle grasping a trilobed object in its talon (fig. 34).⁴ Church also supported the acquisition in 1900 of a collection of some sixteen hundred Mexican antiquities assembled by Italian diplomat Luigi Petich.

Acquisitions slowed considerably in the early twentieth century, however, and the Museum began to reconsider the place of Precolumbian works within a fine arts institution. Letters between Robert W. de Forest, then the Museum’s secretary and vice president, and Henry Fairfield Osborn, director of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, betray an increasing unease on the part of the Metropolitan Museum with its ancient American collection. In a 1911 letter to de Forest, Osborn wrote, “Our lines of demarcation are perfectly clear: historic peoples belong to The Metropolitan Museum; prehistoric peoples and prehistoric and primitive works of art may well come here.”⁵ The two men had come to an agreement: When it came to antiquities, the Metropolitan Museum would focus on the Mediterranean world and Asia, and the American Museum of Natural History would be responsible for everything else. Soon afterward plans were drawn up to exchange their respective holdings in these areas.



In 1914 Edward Robinson, director of the Metropolitan Museum, sent most of the ancient American collection—which by that point numbered some two thousand items—across Central Park to the American Museum of Natural History. Ancient Peruvian gold and silver were held back, at least for a few decades, but they were ultimately sent on long-term loan to the Brooklyn Museum in 1935 at the behest of Herbert Spinden, a pioneering Brooklyn curator with strong interests in the arts of the Americas. The decision to relegate the arts of the indigenous Americas, Africa, and Oceania to the realm of a natural history museum reflected the attitude of the day that these cultural traditions existed outside of history. At that time the decipherment of Mesoamerican writing systems was in its infancy; it would take another fifty years for the historical dimensions of Maya inscriptions to be identified. An understanding of archaeological stratigraphy—the idea that things lower in the ground were older—was not yet widespread, and radiocarbon dating methods would not be developed for close to sixty years.

In some ways, this history is an idiosyncratic saga of the Museum's collecting and its evolving institutional identity. On a deeper level, however, this history is also about shifting definitions of what is considered "fine art," and the recognition of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas as part of global narratives. The rise of the use of the term

"primitive" to describe these fields in the first decades of the twentieth century could not have helped the case for their inclusion at the Metropolitan Museum, an institution that, by that time, prided itself on a growing collection of European masterpieces and its overall sense of discernment in the fine arts. In such a context, the nearly complete absence of artists' names as part of the documentation of African, Oceanic, and Precolumbian works, and the unfamiliar nature of their traditions of patronage, would have likely mitigated against an embrace of them as fine art. Interestingly, however, textiles from all three areas continued to be collected, in part to fulfill the Museum's mission to educate and inspire contemporary industries (see fig. 51).

Broader currents in New York and beyond also had a bearing on the reception of the arts of non-Western cultures. In the wake of the 1913 Armory Show, the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas were increasingly seen through the lens of modernism, a movement the Metropolitan Museum still viewed with skepticism (see "Reckoning with Modernism"). Indeed, the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), was born, in part, out of frustration caused by the Metropolitan Museum's refusal to entertain contemporary art, and, later in the century, it would be MoMA that would mount the most important exhibitions of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

225. Double crocodile pendant. Panama, Coclé (Macaracas), 8th–10th century. Gold, quartz. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (left); Double-bat-head figure pendant. Panama, Coclé (Parita), 12th–14th century. Gold, greenstone. Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 (middle); Double crocodile pendant. Panama, Coclé (Macaracas), 8th–12th century. Gold, shell. Jan Mitchell and Sons Collection, Gift of Jan Mitchell, 1991 (right)

The Metropolitan Museum was not entirely without advocates for the arts of these three regions, however, and occasionally gifts from these areas were accepted, such as a bronze rooster from the court of Benin, Nigeria, which came as part of the bequest of Mary Stillman Harkness in 1950.⁶ Nevertheless, these works were isolated in the absence of a sustained program of study and support, as were the small number of modest exhibitions of Precolumbian art mounted at the Museum in the 1950s and 1960s. Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, who joined the board of trustees in 1930, made various attempts to increase the Museum's engagement with these fields, but for almost forty years he was largely rebuffed.⁷ With the encouragement of René d'Harnoncourt, director of MoMA, Rockefeller founded a cultural organization devoted to the arts the Metropolitan Museum largely ignored. The Museum of Primitive Art, located in a brownstone across the street from MoMA, opened its doors in 1957 and became an important springboard for the research and appreciation of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

In the meantime, there was a growing acknowledgment at the Metropolitan Museum that the Precolumbian

collection should not have been annexed to the American Museum of Natural History.⁸ Dudley Easby, a lawyer who had previously worked with Rockefeller and became secretary of the Metropolitan Museum in 1945, began to lay the groundwork with Director James J. Rorimer to rebuild the Precolumbian collection through select purchases and major gifts of ancient Peruvian ceramics and goldwork from Nathan Cummings and Alice K. Bache, respectively (fig. 225, middle). A few long-term loans were recalled from the Brooklyn Museum and the American Museum of Natural History and installed in an exhibition on archaeology at the Junior Museum, a museum-within-a-museum geared toward children and families.

Easby may have helped ignite the Museum's renewed engagement with Precolumbian art, but it was ultimately the influence of Nelson Rockefeller, and the promise of his collection, that led to the institution's decision to embrace the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the indigenous Americas on a permanent and continuous basis. In 1967 René d'Harnoncourt, acting on behalf of Rockefeller, brokered a deal with Director Thomas Hoving to create a department encompassing the collections of the Museum of Primitive Art and





226. (opposite) Seated female figure from a reliquary ensemble. Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, Fang peoples, Okak group, 19th–early 20th century. Wood, metal. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965

227. Mirror-bearer. Guatemala or Mexico, Maya, 6th century. Wood, red hematite. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979

228. Female figure with mortar and pestle. Mali, Dogon peoples, 16th–early 20th century. Wood, iron. Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1979

Rockefeller's personal collection. The agreement was celebrated in 1969 with an exhibition of works drawn from the Museum of Primitive Art, and in that same year Easby became consultative chairman of the new Department of Primitive Art (renamed the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in 1991). *Before Cortés: Sculpture of Middle America*, a major exhibition of ancient Mesoamerican sculpture, including many works acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in its first decades, followed in 1970 as part of the centenary celebrations.

The Museum of Primitive Art closed in December 1974, and its staff, library, and 3,500 works were transferred to the Metropolitan Museum, where they joined the some 2,300 works already in the collection, including art recalled from other institutions, and a recent gift of close to eighty Dogon

sculptures from Lester Wunderman (fig. 228). The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing was dedicated to the memory of Nelson's son, who lost his life on a collecting expedition in New Guinea in 1961 (figs. 226–27, 229–31). Although closely involved in the planning of the wing, Nelson himself did not live to see it open to the public in 1982. The wing, designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates as a pendant to the one housing the Temple of Dendur on the Museum's north end, provided nearly an acre of exhibition space and featured a dramatic glass curtain wall on the south facade that enclosed the spectacular Asmat *bisj* poles (see pp. 190–91), collected by Michael Rockefeller, and the ceiling of a ceremonial house from New Guinea, commissioned by the Museum.

The installation was intended to be the antithesis of an ethnographic display and to make the case that so-called



229. Horn player. Nigeria, Court of Benin, Edo peoples, 1550–1680. Brass. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972



230. Standing male and female figures. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lake Tanganyika region, Tabwa peoples, 18th–19th century. Wood, beads. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1969



primitive art belonged in the context of a fine art museum. The walls and cases were painted with a muted beige palette, works were bathed in dramatic spotlights, and supporting documentation was kept to a minimum. The works were organized by geography, and to a lesser extent chronology—a reflection of the still nascent knowledge of the art history of these regions—and emphasis was placed on single, outstanding examples of great aesthetic merit. In certain places, works were grouped by medium, such as the “treasury” of ancient American gold, an installation that would be expanded significantly in the 1990s with the addition of the Jan Mitchell gift of Precolumbian gold.

Visited by half a million people in its first year, the new installation signaled that the Museum had become encyclopedic, as the idea was then understood.⁹ Four decades later,

we recognize that the term “encyclopedic” requires constant scrutiny and revision. Yet, undeniably, the Metropolitan Museum’s embrace of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas has had a notable impact on museums and the practice of art history. In the 1981–82 annual report, Director Philippe de Montebello stated that “[a]t long last, the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Native Americas have shed their image as ethnography or exotica and speak to us . . . in the universal language of aesthetics and of significant form.”¹⁰ Since 1982 the Museum’s holdings of the arts of these areas have doubled in size, and the institution has mounted some fifty scholarly exhibitions illuminating the histories and meanings of the artistic traditions of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, laying a new foundation upon which future endeavors can rise.

231. Body mask. New Guinea, Papua Province, Asmat people, mid-20th century. Fiber, sago palm leaves, wood, bamboo, feathers, seeds, paint. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection; Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller and Mrs. Mary C. Rockefeller, 1965

