



A Maya sculpture of a warrior with a jaguar mask at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

LA RUTA MAYA CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Stalking Heritage Far From Home

LOS ANGELES — It is odd to see an eight-foot-long stucco statue of a man in a jaguar mask slinking along the floor of the Convention Center here, as if stalking unsuspecting prey. Over 1,400 years ago, royal accouterments would have accompanied him: The yellow and black discolorations we see on his carved skirt, now faded, would have been potentially vivid — evoking animal pelts worn by the Maya elite. Jaguars, in some respects, were Maya lords of the under-

world; this representation — formal and monumental — is coiled with menace, threatening death. The convention hall setting for this exhibition, “Treasures of the Maya Spirit” — at the Los Angeles Jewelry, Antique and Design Show — is also strange, given how much better situated are the major international museum collections of Maya artifacts. Why is this jaguar — billed by the presenters as one of the most unusual Maya finds of recent decades — in a convention center with about 80 other pre-Columbian artifacts of this civilization that dominated regions of Meso-

merica for nearly a millennium? These artifacts are so potent that it hardly matters where they are shown. There is a haunting mask made of polished chunks of jade, conch shell, coral and obsidian, with startled, glaring eyes. And there are elaborate incense burners, in which humans or gods peer out of layers of appliquéd ornament, each a miniature ceramic cosmos, in which the magic of transformation would have once taken place, resin from the copal tree transmuted into spirit-smoke.

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EDWARD ROTHSTEIN
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Stalking a Heritage Far From Its Home

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These sculpted symbols are here as representatives of a collection of some 4,000 pre-Columbian artifacts from the La Ruta Maya Conservation Foundation, a nonprofit Guatemalan organization devoted to education and preservation of Maya culture. They have been taken here through Sunday to raise money and build support for the building of the Museo Maya de América in Guatemala City on a site provided by the government. Why Los Angeles? It has the largest population with Guatemalan origins in the United States.

So these objects are meant also to revive a sense of deep and broad heritage, which is why they are accompanied by an extensive display of contemporary textiles by weavers who identify with the Maya heritage. There is also a collection of masks that have been used in modern recreations of Maya ritual. And there is a selection of contemporary Guatemalan paintings that respond to the Maya traditions. The pre-Columbian displays are meant to lead us into the post-Columbian world, and from there to the new museum project.

The museum has its own display space here, describing its plans to be “the leading institution in the conservation of the cultural heritage of Guatemala.” It will house, we are told, “one of the world’s most significant collections of objects, artifacts, artworks, textiles and information on the history and culture of the Maya civilization.” A model shows the prospective building, which is expected to cost \$60 million. (The architects are Harry Gugger Studio, the firm over, under and Seis Arquitectos).

The guiding spirit of it all is the president of the foundation and of the museum, Fernando Paiz, whose family created the largest supermarket chain in Central America, which was sold to Walmart Stores in 2006. His donations formed the core of the foundation’s collection, and will be the kernel around which the government’s collection — he hopes — will congeal. Mr. Paiz said in an interview that the most difficult part may be persuading the museum of archaeology and ethnology in Guatemala to support a new institution that will unify the government’s Maya collections.

What is interesting, though, is how differently this museum is being imagined, compared with those of the past. The new museum, according to the founda-

tion’s literature, is not just meant to present a collection of artifacts or offer a form of ethnology. It is, instead, meant to be an advocate. Devoted to “heritage and patrimony” and to the survival of “traditions across the millenniums,” it will explore the past to find inspiration for the present.

The museum’s goal is partly political, its appeal national: It means to establish continuity and pride. In a sense, it will become an identity museum, in which the Maya past will become the core of the Guatemalan present.

Something very similar is happening in Peru, where the Incan past is being reclaimed as the core of Peruvian identity, not restricted to those who still speak Quechua. In some ways, it has also happened in Oaxaca, Mexico, with its Zapotec past.

With the Maya — perhaps because of the civilization’s apparently more advanced systems of



A slingshot in the “Treasures of the Maya Spirit” show.

writing and calculation — the Romantic impulse may be stronger. When the Penn Museum presented an exhibition about the Maya calendar in 2012, it concluded by genuflecting to contemporary Maya descendants, cheering their virtues, their heritage and their quest for justice and prosperity. It also ended up bowdlerizing ancient Maya culture, sanding away disturbing beliefs and practices, keen to celebrate the heritage. Will this also be the approach of another exhibition about the Maya, opening on Feb. 14 at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science?

This week’s exhibition shows slight traces of that impulse: It devotes considerable attention to the artistry of recent Guatemalan slingshots, but little to Maya warfare and none to bloodletting and human sacrifice. Will the Museo Maya de América follow suit?

Maybe there is another way to ask the question: Can a national museum devoted to heritage also be devoted to the complexity of that heritage?

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