

Media Contact:

Katie Bruton, katie.bruton@blantonmuseum.org

Blanton Museum Presents Major Exhibition of Ancient Maya Art



**Forces of Nature: Ancient Maya Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art
*features 200 objects that explore supernatural worlds.***

AUSTIN, TX— July 6, 2023—The Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin presents [*Forces of Nature: Ancient Maya Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*](#), an exploration into the rich world of the supernatural in Maya art of the Classic period (250–900 CE), featuring 200 objects from LACMA’s renowned collection of Ancient American art. Opening August 27, 2023 at the Blanton, *Forces of Nature* is only the second major exhibition of Maya art to be presented in the U.S. within the last decade. The Blanton will be the first and only museum in the U.S. to present the exhibition, which traveled to three venues in China in 2018 and 2019; it will remain on view through January 7, 2024.

As in other Mesoamerican cultures, for the Maya, supernatural entities were manifestations of elements of the natural world, including weather phenomena such as the sun, rain, wind, and lightning; staple crops like maize; and animals such as the jaguar and monkey. *Forces of Nature* presents how ancient Maya artists, who lived in the area now known as Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, depicted these supernatural entities and how Maya kings, queens, and royal courts actively engaged with them to reinforce their own power.

“*Forces of Nature* is the first major exhibition at the Blanton dedicated to art of the ancient Americas in more than a decade and an incredible opportunity for many in Central Texas to see ancient Maya artworks in person for the first time,” said Blanton Director Simone Wicha. “This large selection of works shows the grandeur of an ancient and resilient culture that in many ways is still alive in a large region ranging from Mexico to Honduras. *Forces of Nature* makes these fascinating objects accessible to the public while also providing a wealth of learning and teaching opportunities for educators and students across the region, especially here at UT Austin, home to one of the most highly regarded Ancient Maya studies programs in the world.”

The exhibition focuses on portable works, including an exemplary selection of painted ceramic vessels that portray scenes from Maya cosmology and royal life. Several of these vessels importantly feature Maya hieroglyphs, a sacred element employed to identify figures and historical events, thus connecting humans to the divine. The ancient Maya writing system is one of the only Mesoamerican scripts largely deciphered, thanks in part to significant breakthroughs by researchers at UT. The exhibition curator Megan E. O'Neil, Assistant Professor of Art History at Emory University and Faculty Curator of the Art of the Americas, is a UT Austin alumna (MA Art History, 1999).

Also featured in the exhibition are greenstone jewelry, stone sculptures, and ceramic whistles constructed as figurines. While Maya art is the focus of the exhibition, select Aztec, Olmec, and Zapotec objects are included from other areas of Mesoamerica, a historic area that encompassed diverse Indigenous groups living in modern-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, western Honduras, and the Pacific lowlands of Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica.

“Art and the sacred were intertwined for the ancient Maya and so these objects convey beliefs and ritual practices as were experienced centuries ago,” said Rosario I. Granados, Marilyn Thoma associate curator of art of the Spanish Americas at the Blanton, who is managing the exhibition at the Blanton. “Although these objects are more than a thousand years old, the Maya understanding of nature as both a source of nourishment and danger will resonate with audiences today, especially with recent headlines about extreme weather events and an increasing appreciation for our environment. There’s lots to learn and discover from these ancient artworks, which have such a strong connection to contemporary Maya culture today.”



Carved Box with Deities, 450–550 CE

Forces of Nature is organized into four sections. **Introduction**, the first of them, orients visitors to the Maya cosmos and conceptions of the supernatural. Objects in this section convey the Maya cosmology of a five-part universe associated with the cardinal directions plus the sun at the center, which determined how cities were built and rituals were performed. It also introduces one of the major themes of the exhibition: how artists personified supernatural entities in anthropomorphic forms.

A rare box-shaped vessel in this section, considered a masterpiece of Maya ceramic art, is adorned with inscriptions featuring calendar information and images of six of the most important supernatural beings depicted in their anthropomorphic forms. One known simply as “God L” is depicted as a tobacco smoker. Here, he wears a jaguar-skin cape and large feathered headdress, carrying a lance in his left hand and a smoking tube in his right. In addition to painted ceramics, this section includes “eccentrics,”

or non-tools, made from chert and obsidian and often used for ceremonies. Several depict the lightning deity K'awiil with his serpent leg and human body in variable naturalistic and abstract forms, highlighting the artist's role in making supernatural entities visible to humans.



Pendant with God N Emerging from Shell, 600–900 CE

The second section, **Supernatural Entities of Sky, Earth, Water, and Underworld**, presents the pantheon of Maya deities according to their place in the cosmos. The beings belonging to the sky, earth, water, and underworld are portrayed in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic form and often rendered as fantastic creatures with features of humans and animals that bear characteristics indicating age. Some like the Maize God appear youthful, while others like God N are aged with wrinkled faces and sunken mouths. An earth deity that holds up the sky at the earth's four corners, God N frequently emerges from portals associated with water, such as a turtle or crocodile. A carved jadeite pendant in this section depicts him emerging from a mollusk shell.

This section also explores how these entities formed relationships with one another that mimicked natural cycles and human bonds. Scenes in subterranean palaces showing celestial and underworld deities explain the changing of the seasons or weather phenomena like lightning; other lively underworld scenes depict entities consuming alcohol and hallucinogens. Scenes carved or painted on vessels are important ancient sources for these stories, complemented by writings from the 16th century and later, notably the *Popol Vuh*, a collection of K'iche' Maya narratives about the creation of the world and actions of deities and humans.



Plate with Supernatural Monkey, 600–900 CE

The worlds of humans and animals were intertwined, both in everyday situations and in the supernatural realm. **Animals in Maya Art and Religion**, the exhibition's third section, celebrates the range of creativity in the rendering of animals in Maya art, also according to their place in the cosmos. Vessels, plates, and bowls in this section depict creatures of the sky, earth, and water in human, animal, and supernatural forms. One plate features a jaguar, an animal revered for its physicality, as a stand-in for a warrior holding a decapitated head. Celebrated for their humorous nature, howler and spider monkeys are portrayed engaging in human activities like dancing and extravagant enema rituals.

Animals were given divinity thanks to characteristics that enabled them to transform and transcend cosmic levels. Crocodiles and turtles, with their ability to live in both water and on land, exemplified this. In Maya stories of creation, the earth is the backside of an enormous crocodile or turtle that rises from primordial waters. As in the previous section, ancient objects are complemented by later narratives such as the *Popol Vuh*, that show the pervasive presence of animals in Maya art and religion.



Whistle with Ruler, Bicephalic Serpent, and Ballplayers, 600–900 CE

The supernatural world was likewise intertwined with the human world where human rulers had special access to the divine. The final and largest section, titled **Divine Rites of Kings and Queens**, presents the world of Maya kings and queens, the royal court, and royal families and children, followed by portrayals of their engagement with the supernatural. Polychrome vessels narrate elaborate palace scenes that depict rulers with similar characteristics and names as supernatural entities. Exemplary vessels and ceramic figures also show how Maya rulers amplified their power of divinity by tapping into supernatural forces through rituals that included offerings, hallucinogens, dances, music, and the most intriguing—the ballgame.

The ballgame was a ritual practice performed all throughout the cultural area known as Mesoamerica. In this ritual game, players directed a ball—often with their hips—towards stone hoops or markers attached to the walls of a rectangular court. It represented a battle of life-and-death: the ballcourt served as a place of transition between the natural and supernatural, between death and rebirth. In one ceramic whistle, three figures raise a palanquin holding a ruler who, dressed in ballgame regalia and flanked by a two-headed serpent, sits within another stepped niche symbolizing the ballcourt; underneath, a supernatural game is underway.

Art was sacred for the ancient Maya and often created as a display of power and to venerate rulers following their death. By exploring the supernatural worlds of the ancient Maya, *Forces of Nature* also examines how objects could be perceived as divine and powerful.

Forces of Nature was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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About the Blanton Museum of Art

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with more than 21,000 objects. Recognized as the home of Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, its major collecting areas are modern and contemporary U.S. and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and prints and drawings. The Blanton offers thought-provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

About the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 149,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Image Captions:

Vessel with Young Lord and Monkey, 600–800 CE, slip-painted ceramic, height: 5 3/4; diameter: 7 5/8 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Guatemala, Northern Petén, *Carved Box with Deities*, 450–550 CE, slip-painted ceramic with post-fire pigment, 10 3/4, x 17 3/4 x 14 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost through the 2008 Collectors Committee, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Pendant with God N Emerging from Shell, 600–900 CE, jadeite with pigment, 2 4/5 x 3 x 3/5 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Guatemala, Petén, *Plate with Supernatural Monkey*, 600–900 CE, slip-painted ceramic, 12, 2 3/10 x 12 in., Los Angeles Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Guatemala, Petén, *Whistle with Ruler, Bicephalic Serpent, and Ballplayers*, 600–900 CE, ceramic with post-fire pigment, 2 3/4, 6 4/5 x 3 x 4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA