

PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM

ANCIENT MAYA FIGURINES: RITUAL, ROYALTY, AND REGULAR FOLK

Saturday, November 18

2 pm

Brown Auditorium

Explore beguiling and beautiful ancient Maya figurines in association with LACMA's exhibition *Ancient Bodies: Archaeological Perspectives on Mesoamerican Figurines*. The exhibition highlights the importance of archaeological context and includes 23 exquisite figurines portraying an ancient Maya resurrection ritual recently excavated from a royal tomb at the Classic-period Maya city of El Perú-Waka', Petén, Guatemala. The symposium features four specialists whose presentations will bring ancient Maya figurines to life through discussions of ancient ritual and politics, as well as archaeological research and conservation work associated with interpreting and preserving these miniature masterpieces.

DR. CHRISTINA HALPERIN

Assistant Professor, Anthropology Department, University of Montreal

Dr. Halperin is a specialist in Maya archaeology, focusing on quotidian aspects of ancient Maya life. From that perspective, she has examined figurines recovered from archaeological excavations in Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize in her book *Maya Figurines: Intersections between State and Household* (University of Texas Press, 2014). Her research provides a counterpoint to monumental art, broadening our understandings of not just royal contexts, but the visual culture and activities associated with the households of "regular folk."

Title: Maya Figurines as part of Popular Culture, Ritual, and Ceremonial Fanfare

Abstract: At the end of the Classic period (c. 300–900 CE) in the Maya area, ceramic figurines had become the most common type of durable imagery featuring the human body. What do these images depict and how were they a part of popular culture, rituals, and ceremonial life? Taking examples from recent archaeological excavations in the Maya area, this presentation explores how Classic Maya figurines were produced, their meanings, and how they compared with other Mesoamerican figurine traditions.

DR. RHONDA TAUBE

Professor, Art History and Chair, Art Department, Riverside City College

Dr. Taube received her PhD in Latin American Visual Culture at the University of California, San Diego. Her MA degree is in Pre-Columbian art history from Northern Illinois University where she specialized in the art of the ancient Maya. Her current research interests include ancient, colonial, and contemporary Mesoamerican ceremonial pageantry and public performance. In 2013, Dr. Taube received the Distinguished Faculty Lecture award for Riverside Community College District for academic year 2013–2014. Recent publications include "The Ideal and the Symbolic: the Use of Shared Orientational Space in Contemporary Highland Maya Performance," in *Maya Imagery, Architecture, and Activity: Space and Spatial Analysis in Art History*, eds. M. Werness-Rude and K. Spencer, 2014; and "Sexuality in Mesoamerican Figurines," in *The Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, published by Wiley Blackwell Press, eds. P. Whelehan and A. Bolin, 2015.

Title: Old Ducks, Upright Dogs, and Monkey Grandmothers: Human-Animal Interplay and Daily life in Ancient Maya Figurines

Abstract: Perhaps because they are among the more common artifacts found in archaeological excavations, Late Classic Maya figurines are often viewed as anecdotal "snapshot" scenes of daily life.

While this may sometimes be true, many are decidedly not. Numerous examples display features that far exceed characteristics and qualities known for living individuals including grotesque faces and other physical appearances. In addition, figurines can also depict individuals engaged in anomalous behavior, such as ugly old men coupled with attractive young women or dwarves appearing as warriors or ballplayers. Another common genre is anthropomorphic animals that exhibit human habits and behavior and seem to embody the opposite of human physical beauty and moral virtue. These creatures appear with enough frequency to be catalogued as specific personalities and types and although they defy our current understanding, we may explore similar imagery in art from other cultures for comparative material and speculative explanations.

DR. MICHELLE RICH

San Antonio Museum of Art; Former LACMA Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow, Art of the Ancient Americas and Assistant Director, El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project (PAW)

Dr. Rich earned her PhD from Southern Methodist University conducting archaeological investigations of monumental architecture and highly-charged ritual contexts at the ancient Maya city of El Perú- Waka', in Petén, Guatemala. In 2014 she co-edited *Archaeology at El Perú-Waka': Ancient Maya Performances of Ritual, Memory, and Power* with O. Navarro-Farr, University of Arizona Press. Most recently, she curated an exhibition at the LACMA entitled *Ancient Bodies: Archaeological Perspectives on Mesoamerican Figurines*, which explores the central role of archaeological context in situating ancient art and artifacts in a cultural framework.

Title: The El Perú-Waka' Figurines: Politics and Portraiture in the Classic Period Maya World

Abstract: The El Perú-Waka' narrative figurine scene, purposefully arranged by mourners in an ancient Maya royal tomb, bring three-dimensionality to scenes depicted on Maya polychrome vases. Together with the hieroglyphic inscriptions and portrayals of queens, kings, and other royalty on monumental stelae, these representations provide insight into the lives of Maya rulers as well as complex Classic Maya politics. When augmented with the critical information revealed by archaeological excavation, connections between historically-known individuals can occasionally be further illuminated. The fascinating relationship between the Waka' narrative figurine scene, an enormous stone monument at the Cleveland Museum of Art depicting a Waka' queen named Lady K'abel, and a tomb excavated at Waka' in 2012 provides a foundation to explore imperial intrigue in the Classic Maya world.

MSC. GRISELDA PÉREZ ROBLES

Assistant Director, El Perú-Waka' Regional Archaeological Project (PAW)

Pérez is an Assistant Director of PAW, and has been with the project since 2003. She was integral in the restoration and conservation of the Burial 39 figurines, single-handedly carrying out much of the work in PAW's Guatemala City lab facility under the mentorship and supervision of Lynn Grant, Head Conservator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Pérez will present on the conservation process and challenges of such work.

Title: Mending the Past: Conservation and Restoration of the Waka' Figurines

Abstract: The discovery of the 23 ceramic figurines comprising the Maya Ritual Resurrection Scene with Royal Court and Supernatural Characters in Waka's Burial 39—dating to 600–650 CE—is of paramount importance to our understanding of the ancient Maya. After nearly 1,500 years, the figurines were seriously damaged in the tomb chamber, and it was necessary to carry out an extensive project to clean, stabilize, and restore them. PAW successfully accomplished this, with the support of multiple institutions in two countries. This presentation recounts the fascinating conservation work, explaining the painstaking process and the decisions made along the way.