

We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art

This supplement is produced in conjunction with the publication for the exhibition *We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, September 15, 2024–September 1, 2025. It contains gallery photography, interpretive content, press clippings, and additional materials about the exhibition's installation that were unavailable at the time the catalogue went to press in April 2024.

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Exhibition Introduction

O Giver of Life,
Who paints with flowers,
Who bestows color with songs,
Who gives form to all those
Who dwell on earth;
We live here only
In your book of paintings.
—Nezahualcoyotl, 16th-century Nahua poet, ruler of Texcoco

We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art explores the relationships between color and cosmos in Mesoamerica, a region comprising most of what is now Mexico and Central America. Through their profound knowledge of the natural world, ancient Mesoamerican artists wielded the power to transform such materials as flowers and tree bark, insects and snails, and clays and minerals into vibrant colors replete with meaning. Sophisticated palettes of dyes and pigments adorned textiles, bark-paper and parchment pages, stuccoed walls, clay vessels, and sculptures, yielding enduring images that were meant to be an integral part of life. The artist—as scientist, technician, and sage—thus related to the cosmos through their work. As Nezahualcoyotl wrote of the Giver of Life, artists’ creations were designed to live on beyond the bounds of mortality, creating the knowledge that would guide present and future generations.

Today, these artworks transcend space and time, living here as testaments to Indigenous science, art, and worldview. Many were crafted during the millennia of artistic traditions spanning roughly 1200 BCE to 1521 CE, and continuing even after the Spanish invasion. Contemporary works from Indigenous weavers and painters, who revitalize the practice of crafting natural paints and dyes in their work, emphasize the continuity and dynamism of Indigenous traditions. These are living arts. We invite the visitor to explore the multifaceted nature of color as craft, as science, and as an expression of cosmic significance.

Diana Magaloni

Deputy Director, Program Director and Dr. Virginia Fields Curator of the Art of the Ancient Americas, and Director of Conservation, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

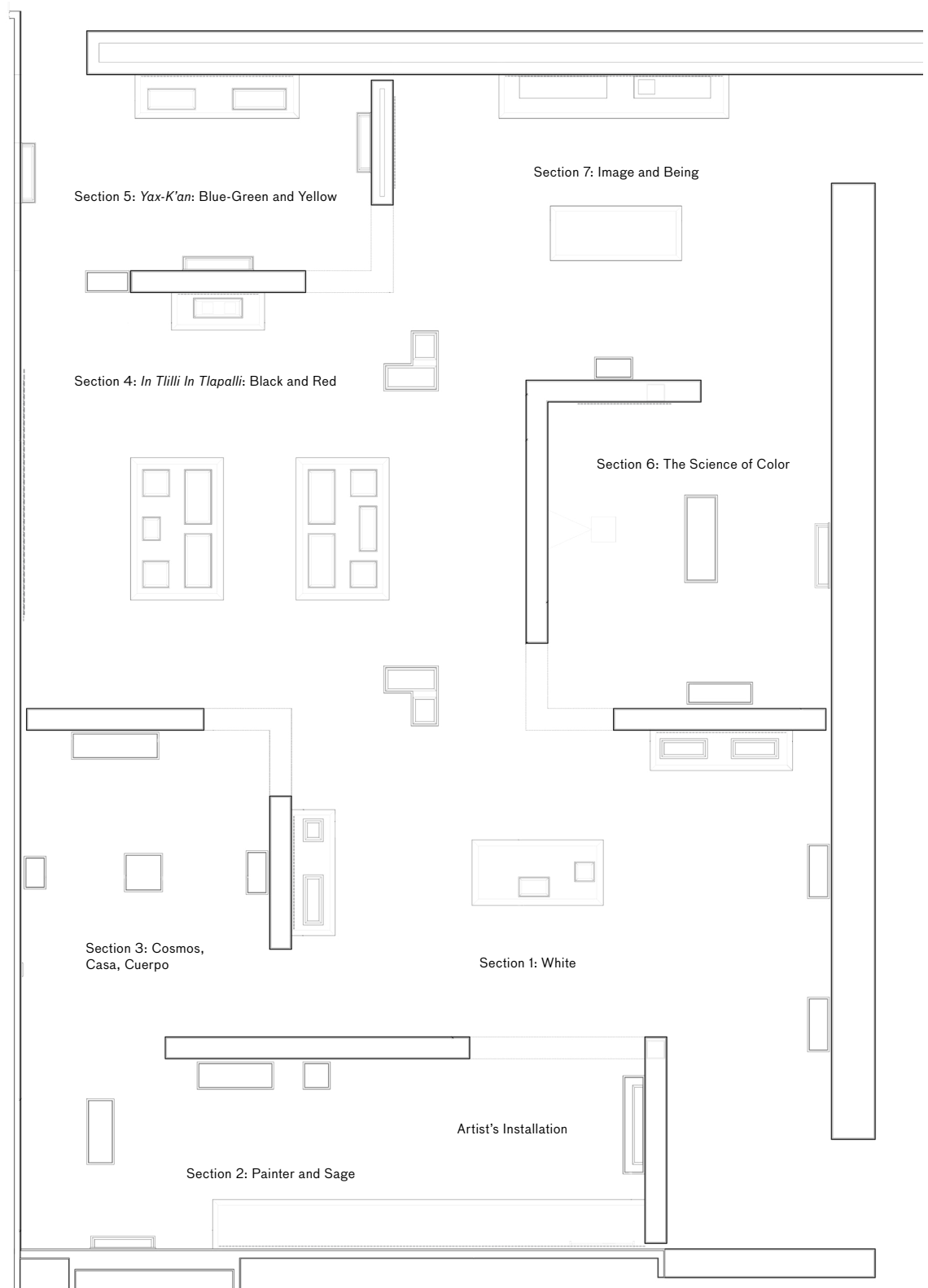
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Exhibition Floor Plan



Installation Images





Exhibition Design

Zapototec and Mesoamerican temple architecture was the main inspiration for building the display cases for *We Live in Painting*, and the exploration of simple geometric and decorative architectural motifs served as a guiding principle throughout the entire exhibition.

The floor plan was imagined as a large prism, with colors inspired by the [Florentine Codex](#) and distributed throughout each gallery space. This served to elevate and further define objects as they related to a specific color grouping. Color-washed plaster walls demarcate each section of the exhibition, inspired by the natural pigments and textural qualities of ancient Mesoamerican architecture. This feature allowed us to further contextualize the many mural fragments, vessels, and stone objects on display.

Bright, clean gallery spaces allow visitors to closely observe the beauty of each object. Ultimately, the exhibition design aimed to provide continuity throughout the exhibition, using color as the connecting foundation between the work of Indigenous contemporary artists and that of ancient artists, thereby interweaving the practices of both the past and the present.

Martin Szyk

Manager of Exhibition Design



Ancient Works, Modern Science

The Florentine Codex, an encyclopedic manuscript produced by Nahua historians and artists in the late 16th century, contains a wealth of information about Nahua culture and history that informed a great deal of the scholarly research and development of *We Live in Painting*. This exhibition marks the first use of [Bloomberg Connects](#) at LACMA, and features digital entries for numerous objects that are linked directly to relevant passages in the digital edition of the [Florentine Codex](#), allowing visitors to explore historical writing about the colors, materials, and objects on view.

LACMA partnered with Italy's Institute of Heritage Science to bring the science of Mesoamerican codices to life. Codex Cospi, a painted screenfold manuscript produced in Central Mexico between the late 15th and early 16th centuries, has been the subject of scientific research since 2005. [The Magic Lens](#), an interactive visualization technology developed by the Institute, allows visitors to explore Codex Cospi virtually. Visitors activate the Magic Lens by hovering their hand over a sensor, giving them the ability to view three pages of Codex Cospi as well as learn more about the science that has been used to understand its painted imagery. Various spectroscopic techniques, digital microscopy, and hyperspectral imaging, conducted by the traveling science laboratory MOLAB, have identified the chemical composition of specific pigments and the distinct painting traditions they represent.

LACMA's Maya Vase Research Project, a partnership between the Conservation Center and the Art of the Ancient Americas department, has examined the materials and artistic processes involved in the creation of Classic Maya polychrome ceramics. A variety of imaging techniques have revealed new insights about how ancient artists manufactured these vessels and formulated the ceramic paints that decorate their surfaces. Side-by-side displays of Classic Maya vases and technical images in *We Live in Painting* allow visitors to see the results of this research. For instance, near-infrared false-color (FCIR) imaging can indicate the chemical compounds used to produce certain colors. Blue pigments that shift to magenta in FCIR images indicate the use of indigo, a key component of the famed Maya blue pigment. [English](#) and [Spanish](#) editions of the project's digital publication are available for free online.



Collaborations with Contemporary Indigenous Artists

We Live in Painting bridges past with present by showcasing contemporary Indigenous artists who practice their ancestral traditions in dynamic and innovative ways. LACMA commissioned six artists from Xalitla, Guerrero, to produce paintings on *amate* paper using paints they crafted from local plants and minerals (opposite, top). These artists—Marina Martínez Pedro, Jesús Lozano Paredes, Alfonso Nava Larios, Gisela Martínez Morales, Rodolfo Rojas Bello, and Eva Perez Martínez—painted a total of sixteen works that can be viewed throughout the exhibition and are also now part of the museum's permanent collection. [*Harvesting Color: Ancestral Recipes for Today's World*](#), a documentary that follows these artists, written and directed by Alexa Oona Schulz, is available on LACMA's YouTube channel.

LACMA also commissioned two *huipiles* (Indigenous blouses) whose designs recreate historical garments using ancestral dyeing and weaving techniques. Both feature yarns dyed by artist Carlos Barrera Reyes with natural dyes (p. 11) in collaboration with Indigenous fiber artists from Oaxaca and Chiapas: for *Wedding Huipil* (p. 6), Epifanía Cruz López, Elsa López San Luis, and Glafira Olmedo Mendoza; for *Ceremonial Huipil* (p. 5, top), Martha Julia Méndez Hernández, María Méndez Hernández, and Gregoria León Santiago.

Unique to the exhibition experience, Zapotec American textile artist Porfirio Gutierrez created an immersive installation with hanging yarn sculptures and a meditative soundscape to convey the labor of his practice (opposite, bottom). *Linea del Tiempo/Timeline* demonstrates how color emerges from the artist's knowledge and labor: when and where he harvests his pigments, the seasonality of nature, and the relationship he cultivates with the environment itself. Every plant holds the markers of its birthplace and the conditions of how it grew—a memory of nature that will never be repeated. Coaxing color in the vat, tempering its tones as it reacts with mordants, water, heat, and the material itself, Gutierrez situates his *art* within the *work*, the act of making and becoming.

Selected Press Coverage

Press coverage for *We Live in Painting* was extensive, and included numerous international outlets.

The history of color in museums is often told through a European lens. This sumptuous exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, focused on the material and significance of colors in Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, helps fill out the story.

— Carolina A. Miranda, “Take a Breath,” [Alta](#), October 4, 2024

At LACMA, there is an amazing show, *We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art* which features treasures that have never traveled outside of Mexico.

— Tom Teicholz, “Introducing PST Art & Science Collide in Los Angeles,” [Forbes](#), September 20, 2024

La exhibición *We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art* (*Vivimos en la pintura: la naturaleza del color en el arte mesoamericano*), que comienza el domingo en el Los Angeles County Museum of Art, permitirá ver como nunca antes la profunda importancia cultural y técnica que tenía el color en el arte mesoamericano. [The exhibition *We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art*, which opens Sunday at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, will offer a glimpse into the profound cultural and technical significance of color in Mesoamerican art as never before.]

— Victoria Infante, “‘We Live in Painting’ en LACMA: los colores de Mesoamérica,” [La Opinión](#), September 12, 2024

A reasonable viewer might ask, where is the link to science? At a press preview last week, California-based Zapotec textile artist Porfirio Gutiérrez offered an answer. “Color comes from nature. Color is actually an extension of the information that each textile—in this case, the sculptures and the skeins of yarn—is a representation,” he said. “It is a database of the plants and where and when the plants were harvested.” [...] These works are the most entrancing of the exhibition, their colors deep and earthy. Two wool tapestries by Gutiérrez, one dyed darkening shades of blue and another turned crimson and black, demonstrate the richness of the pigments.

— Harrison Jacobs, “Getty’s PST ART Exhibitions Take an Expansive View of Science to Center Indigenous Knowledge,” [ARTnews](#), September 19, 2024

This catalogue explores “color’s material and cosmological significance, allowing us to view ancient and contemporary Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures in a different light,” writes Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in the foreword. The book follows two interconnected lines of inquiry: technical and material analyses, and Indigenous conceptions of art and image. Chapters cover topics such as “Reviving Natural Dyes in Chiapas and Oaxaca” and “Painting Technologies in Guerrero.”

— Gareth Harris, “September Book Bag,” *The Art Newspaper*, September 10, 2024



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