

**Exhibition:** *The Portable Universe / El Universo en tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia*

**Dates:** May 29–October 2, 2022

**Location:** Resnick Pavilion



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(Los Angeles, CA – March 24, 2022) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art presents *The Portable Universe / El Universo en tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia*, a groundbreaking exhibition showcasing the diversity and materiality of ancient Colombian cultures. Comprising approximately 400 works, the exhibition reframes how we approach ancient Colombian art and invites visitors into a cultural dialogue that spans both space and time. With the European conquest, Indigenous cultures and knowledge, based on millennia of intellectual efforts, were disregarded as crude superstition. By drawing heavily on the involvement of contemporary Indigenous collaborators, *The Portable Universe* is designed to recognize some of that knowledge and to envelop the works with life, meaning, and relevance for today and the future.

The works in *The Portable Universe*—which encompass figurative ceramics, ceremonial and ritual items, featherworks, textiles, metalworks, and historical documents, among others—include an unprecedented number of loans from the Museo del Oro in Bogotá, as well as pieces from LACMA’s permanent collection, many of which have never been exhibited. The exhibition is co-curated by Diana Magaloni, Deputy Director and Dr. Virginia Fields Curator of the Art of the Ancient Americas at LACMA, and Julia Burtenshaw, Assistant Curator, Art of the Ancient Americas at LACMA, The Museo del Oro, Banco de la República, Bogotá, and the Museum Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) are co-curating partners. The curatorial team has also been working in close collaboration with the Arhuaco community of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, who are supporting and engaged in the project, as part of a long-term initiative in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and knowledge exchange.

“The narrative of the show is designed to be compatible with Indigenous concepts, rather than Western cultural-historical narratives,” says Burtenshaw. “Indigenous

people and knowledge have things to teach us today, about how we view ourselves in relation to others and to 'nature' and how we consider and categorize the world around us. It can enrich our worldview and understanding of ancient artworks immensely."

"The works are considered to have a spirit, and are subjects more than objects," said Diana Magaloni. "They are 'messengers,' as the Arahuaço have said, and as such, they are also not of the past, but continue to be relevant in the present."

"*Portable Universe* is a long-term exchange between LACMA and members of the Arahuaço community, who have profoundly influenced the exhibition itself as well as the way our institution relates to our own collections," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "Through years of thoughtful curatorial research and collaboration with the Arhuaco community, this groundbreaking exhibition recontextualizes the artworks in order to emphasize an Indigenous perspective and to give them a voice. We are grateful to our partners for their collaboration."

The *Portable Universe* will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from November 6, 2022 through April 16, 2023, and to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from May 29 through October 8, 2023.

LACMA will also present a new behind-the-scenes documentary series called *Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition*. This new series follows the journey of LACMA curators Diana Magaloni and Julia Burtenshaw over six years as they develop this landmark exhibition, *The Portable Universe / El Universo en tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia*. The film reveals the curatorial collaboration with Indigenous representatives and the choices curators made in the interpretation and display of the works. The new series will be available to watch on LACMA's YouTube channel in late May 2022. [View the trailer](#) for *Unpacking the Universe: The Making of an Exhibition* and learn more about the series on [Unframed](#).

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue co-published by LACMA and DelMonico Books/D.A.P. The book is arranged so as to envelop the works with life and meaning, and guide readers to different ways of understanding the world and our place in it. It includes insightful contributions by Indigenous Colombians, historians, ethnographers, archeologists, and art historians.

### **Exhibition Organization and Highlights**

*The Portable Universe* is organized into seven thematic sections that center the voices and concepts of descendant Indigenous communities in the display and interpretation of the works. The galleries include visual projections, a musical score composed to be played with ancient Colombian ocarinas, and audio elements to envelop the pieces with proper context and meaning.

The opening section, **Conceiving the World**, invites visitors to appreciate Indigenous traditions of thinking and storytelling as ways of creating and re-creating our world. The focal point is a traditional wooden stool (*banquito*) that Indigenous leaders and elders use for conversation, meditation, and decision making. Similar stools will also be placed throughout the exhibition for visitors, encouraging them to sit, think, and connect with a world and knowledge opened to us by Colombia's Indigenous spiritual leaders.

**Rethinking History** transitions to the arrival of Europeans in Colombia, which led to a loss of long-preserved knowledge and information. Historical documents on display are reinterpreted to consider how Colombian history was invented to meet Western expectations and values. Objects like colonial-era European gold coins displayed alongside ancient gold pieces also present fundamental contrasts between European and Indigenous notions of value.

**People of Ancient Colombia** introduces the many different ancient societies of the diverse territories that encompass present-day Colombia. Through representations of themselves in items such as masks, figurines, and effigies, visitors get a glimpse into the unique ways of subsistence, social organization, cosmology, and art developed by the people of ancient Colombia.

**Our House, Our World, Our Cosmos** presents the house as a metaphor for humanity's place in the world, an image central to the exhibition's wider theme of humans as the world's caretakers. Two extraordinary ancient house models from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston made of tumbaga (*gold-copper alloy*) will be on view for the first time, and a set of ear ornaments with monkeys are interpreted, thanks to an Indigenous myth, to represent the Orion constellation and associated astronomical information, another first.

**The Extended Family** explores Indigenous concepts of "nature" and the role of humans within this network of life. A key artwork is a set of 14 contemporary paintings on paper (2020) of a single Caimo tree and its roles and relationships through the seasons by Confucio Hernandez Makuritofe, a member of the k̄igipe muina (*gente de centro*) Indigenous peoples from the Colombian Amazon.

**Materials: Technology & Concepts of Value** explores uses, values, and meanings of materials like metals, textiles, and stone. Aside from showcasing sophisticated scientific metalworking techniques developed by ancient Colombians, this section challenges visitors to consider the value of gold and other materials from an Indigenous perspective fundamentally different from that of the West.

The final section, **Caring for the World**, explores the roles of leaders and shamans as protectors of the world, a practice which relies on sophisticated philosophical and botanical knowledge rooted in an intimate understanding of the natural world. On

display are tools such as healing staffs, feather headdresses, and snuff trays, as well as depictions of the results of these practices, like representations in metal and ceramic of figures in transformation.

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

Accompanying the exhibition is a landmark publication reframing ancient Colombian art as vehicles of cultural knowledge across space and time. *The Portable Universe/El Universo en tus Manos: Thought and Splendor of Indigenous Colombia* is edited with text by Julia Burtenshaw, Héctor García Botero, Diana Magaloni, María Alicia Uribe Villegas and an introduction by Wade Davis. Additional texts by Luis Cayón, Francisco Chimonero Nuibita Dingula, Juan Fernando Cobo Betancourt, Tom Cummins, Ana María Falchetti, Santiago Giraldo, Ariel James, Carlos David Londoño Sulkin, Carlos E. López, Santiago Muñoz Arbeláez, and Carlo Emilio Piazzini Suárez.

### **Credit**

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Museo del Oro of Banco de la República, Bogotá.

The exhibition has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom.

Generous support is provided by Daniel Greenberg, Susan Steinhauser and The Greenberg Foundation, Bill and Dee Grinnell, and Mechas and Greg Grinnell. Support for LACMA's Art of the Ancient Americas department is provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg.

All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Meredith and David Kaplan, with generous annual funding from Kevin J. Chen, Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Emily and Teddy Greenspan, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross, Mary and Daniel James, Justin Lubliner, Jennifer and Mark McCormick, Kelsey Lee Offield, Jen Rubio and Stewart Butterfield, Lenore and Richard Wayne, and Marietta Wu and Thomas Yamamoto.

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

### **About LACMA**

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 147,000 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 caption:** *Female Figure Container*, Colombia, Calima Region (Ilima Period), 1500 BCE–100 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Muñoz Kramer Collection, gift of Camilla Chandler Frost and Stephen and Claudia Muñoz-Kramer, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; *Circular House Model*, Colombia, Calima, 200 BC–800 AD (Yotoco Goldwork Style), Museum Of

Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., photograph © The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; *Funerary Vessel in Form of Seated Thinker (Pensador)*, 700-1600 CE, Colombia, Middle Cauca Valley (Late period), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Muñoz Kramer Collection, gift of Camilla Chandler Frost and Stephen and Claudia Muñoz-Kramer, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; *Whistling Vessel with Jaguar Attributes*, Colombia, Calima Region (Yotoco Goldwork Style), 100 BCE–800 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Muñoz Kramer Collection, gift of Camilla Chandler Frost and Stephen and Claudia Muñoz-Kramer, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; *Basket-Carrier (Canastero) with Fangs and Serpents*, Colombia, Calima region, (Ilama period), 1500 BCE–100 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Muñoz Kramer Collection, gift of Jorge G. and Nelly de Muñoz and Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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