

Exhibition: *Mapping the Infinite: Cosmologies Across Cultures*

Dates: October 20, 2024–March 2, 2025

Location: Resnick Pavilion



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles, CA—September 4, 2024) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Mapping the Infinite: Cosmologies Across Cultures*, an expansive exhibition that brings together nearly 120 works from around the world to explore how humans have endeavored to explain the universe's origins, mechanics, and meaning over 12 millennia.

Throughout the course of human history, narratives have been devised to explain the universe's significance and processes, often looking to the heavens as a mirror for concepts of time and space. Over time, these cosmologies, whether created within the realms of myth, philosophy, religion, or science, have been regularly superseded by newer narratives. Spanning from the Stone Age to the present, *Mapping the Infinite* considers layered histories of cosmology through the prism of art, architecture, and design across Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Islamic Middle East, the Indigenous Americas, and Northern Europe.

Mapping the Infinite is presented as part of PST ART: *Art & Science Collide*, a landmark regional event exploring the intersections of art and science, both past and present. Developed in collaboration with scholars at the Carnegie Observatories and the Griffith Observatory, LACMA's show nods to the centennial anniversary of cosmologist Edwin Hubble's monumental discovery, at Mount Wilson in Los Angeles County, of other galaxies beyond the Milky Way.

The exhibition is curated by Stephen Little, Florence and Harry Sloan Curator of Chinese Art and Department Head, Chinese, Korean, and South & Southeast Asian Art with Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director; Diana Magaloni, Deputy Director, Program Director, and Dr. Virginia Fields Curator of the Art of the

Ancient Americas, and Suzanne D. Booth and David G. Booth Conservation Center Director; Nancy Thomas, Senior Deputy Director for Art Administration and Collections; Julia Burtenshaw, Associate Curator of Art of the Ancient Americas; and Alyce de Carteret, Assistant Curator of Art of the Ancient Americas, at LACMA.

“In our contemporary world, emerging technologies continue to reveal that the universe is far bigger than ever before known or even imagined. Yet, at the same time, religious and political beliefs are increasingly divisive,” said Stephen Little. “*Mapping the Infinite* invites visitors to reflect on their own individual place in the universe while illustrating that humanity’s experiences of the cosmos are both universal and relative.”

“Humans have defined their wondrous, diverse origin stories in relation to the all-encompassing cosmos that we inhabit together,” said Michael Govan. “*Mapping the Infinite* is the first exhibition to examine our fascination with the universe across so many different cultural contexts. We are excited to share this multidisciplinary project during PST ART, made even richer through collaboration between LACMA curators and our scientific colleagues.”

Exhibition Highlights

Mapping the Infinite is organized into geographic and chronological sections that are woven together by key questions about the universe’s creation, constructions of time and space, the relationship of cosmology to political and religious power, cross-cultural influences in the evolution of different cultures’ cosmologies, and the birth of modern and contemporary cosmology.

Creation: A central theme in *Mapping the Infinite* is the question of the universe’s origin—something that has captured the imagination of every culture since the dawn of human self-awareness and has been answered with an astonishingly wide variety of possible scenarios. Was the universe created through the actions of a deity (or deities), or did it originate without divine agency? As religions evolved, many ancient cultures conceived of celestial deities, visible and invisible, that created the world. The theme of creation is underscored, for example, by images of the gods Brahma and Shiva, both of whom are credited in Hindu mythology with the universe’s creation.

Constructions of Time and Space: In nearly all cultures, fundamental concepts of time, space, and existence have been linked to the regular and predictable movements of the sun, moon, planets, and stars, and disrupted by the unpredictable appearances of eclipses, comets, and novae. These concepts have been given shape through works of art and oral and written traditions, as well as measuring instruments such as armillary spheres, celestial globes, sundials, and calendars. Examples in the exhibition include both symbolic and scientific celestial diagrams and star charts, and superbly crafted astronomical instruments from the Islamic Near East and Renaissance Europe.

Power: The exhibition also delves into the relationship of cosmology to political and religious power. In any given culture, who creates the reigning cosmology, and for whom? Works of art and architecture from the ancient world, such as images of Mesopotamian kings in proximity to the celestial sources of their power (for example, the planet Venus, embodiment of the goddess Ishtar) and an Egyptian pharaoh offering images of Ma'at, goddess of cosmic order, to Amun-Re, the Sun God, illustrate how both astronomy and cosmology have been utilized to shape, reinforce, and extend power.

Cross-Cultural Connections: Few cosmologies are entirely free from the influences of others. Using compelling works of art from across cultures, *Mapping the Infinite* includes case studies for the global transmission of cosmological knowledge from the first millennium BCE to the present. These include a copy of the 10th century Persian astronomer 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Umar al-Ṣūfī's *Book of the Constellations of Fixed Stars (Kitāb ṣuwar al-kawākib)*. Al-Ṣūfī was known to the European astronomers Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Stabius, and Galileo Galilei and his portrait can be found in the margin of Albrecht Dürer's star chart of the northern sky, which is also on view.

Contemporary Cosmology: Thanks to Albert Einstein, it has been known for over a century that space and time are inextricably linked and that these are bent by gravitational fields. Prior to the 20th century, few could have imagined or proven such realities. The exhibition engages contemporary thinking—including Einstein's theories of relativity and Edwin Hubble's discovery that the universe is expanding—and probes how these relatively recent findings have radically changed our understanding of the cosmos. In tandem, the show spotlights contemporary cosmology's reflection in artistic forms such as American painter Helen Lundeberg's *Microcosm and Macrocosm* (1937), which alludes to early 20th-century discoveries of other galaxies and star systems.

Companion Installation

In dialogue with *Mapping the Infinite*, Josiah McElheny's *Island Universe* (2008) will be on view at the center of LACMA's Resnick Pavilion beginning September 12, 2024. This dramatic chandelier-like installation embodies the concept of the multiverse, or multiple coexisting universes. Now a key element of contemporary cosmological thinking, the concept of the multiverse was first proposed in ancient Greece, then in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and 18th-century astronomy. McElheny, who is interested in how scientific inquiry is conditioned by and impacts philosophical, sociological, and political thought, finds a clear connection to the historical shifts that call for the decentering of Western knowledge, and even human-centric thought. The artist worked collaboratively with astrophysicist David Weinberg in developing *Island Universe*, which he considers "drawings of time," with "each rod a measure of time—every inch, time doubles."

Credit: *Mapping the Infinite: Cosmologies Across Cultures* was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Presented by

Getty

Generous support is provided by Jennifer and Mark McCormick. Additional support provided by an anonymous donor.

All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by The David & Meredith Kaplan Foundation, with generous annual funding from Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Mary and Daniel James, Bert Levy Fund, Justin Lubliner, Alfred E. Mann Charities, Kelsey Lee Offield, Maggie Tang, Lenore and Richard Wayne, and Marietta Wu and Thomas Yamamoto.

Mapping the Infinite is among more than 70 exhibitions and programs presented as part of PST ART. Returning in September 2024 with its latest edition, PST ART: *Art & Science Collide*, this landmark regional event explores the intersections of art and science, both past and present. PST ART is presented by Getty. For more information about PST ART: *Art & Science Collide*, please visit pst.art.

About LACMA: Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 150,000 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.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: (Left) *Bowl with Courtly and Astrological Motifs* (detail), Central or Northern Iran, late 12th–early 13th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, purchase, Rogers Fund, and gift of The Schiff Foundation, 1957, digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Open Access Program; (center left) Johannes Sadeler I, *Mercury, from The Seven Planets* (detail), Flanders, c. 1585, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mary Stansbury Ruiz Bequest, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (center right) Helen Lundeberg, *Microcosm and Macrocosm*, 1937, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Honeyman, Jr., © The Feitelson/Lundeberg Art Foundation, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (right) Thomas Wright, *An Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe* (detail), 1750, digital image courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program

Press contact: press@lacma.org

Connect with LACMA



@lacma