
American Anthropologist

Inaugural exhibitions at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles. **Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture.** *Doran H. Ross*, curator. September 30, 1992–May 16, 1993; **Threads of Identity: Maya Costumes of the 1960s in Highland Guatemala.** *Patricia B. Altman* and *Caroline D. West*, curators. September 30, 1992–January 24, 1993; **Ceramics of Ancient Peru.** *Christopher B. Donnan*, curator. September 30, 1992–January 23, 1994; **Reflecting Culture: The Francis E. Fowler, Jr., Collection of Silver.** *Betsy Quick* and *Henrietta Cosentino*, curators. Permanent installation.

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Situated among exotic flowering plants in the shadow of Royce Hall, UCLA's founder's building, lies Arnold Savrann's elegant tribute to northern Italian Romanesque architecture. The new Fowler Museum of Cultural History conjures a resplendent visual dialogue with the old campus's predominant Lombardian style. Echoed here in the new building are the picturesque tile roofs, square towers, arched doorways and windows, and an oculus glazed with protective filtering glass.

A large wall case in the foyer displays a chronology of the museum from its establishment in 1963 to the opening of the present building. Over the past 30 years, the museum has boasted a modest but distinguished exhibition program and has acquired a collection of over 750,000 artifacts.

The inaugural exhibitions embrace the intellectual passions of some of the most prominent figures responsible for the development of the new museum. Director Christopher Donnan relates his life's work on the study of ancient Peruvian ceramics; Deputy Director Doran Ross communicates his long-standing fascination for the elephant in African culture; veteran Curator of Textiles Patricia Altman interprets a systematic collection of Maya costume donated by cocurator Caroline West; and museum benefactor Francis E. Fowler, Jr., shares posthumously his collection of silver—one of the fruits of his fortune made from the invention of Southern Comfort whiskey.

Although the planners of the new Fowler Museum probably did not intend any meaningful associations between these four very disparate exhibitions, it could be argued that each in its own way deals with a common theme of disappearance. Hunted down by Western greed, elephants have now become an endangered species threatened with disappearance. Functioning as key symbols of ethnic pluralism and indigenous identity, Guatemalan textiles may eventually be in danger of disappearing as a result of the nationalist ambitions of the central state. Retrieved as material records of the past, ancient ceramics are pressed into service as visual testimony to the now disappeared ancestors of modern Peruvian cultures. And, finally, the permanent exhibition of silver speaks to the disappearance of great affluence in America—a vanishing era in which vast family fortunes were often earned in a single generation, with enough surplus capital to endow a major museum.

Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture is a monumental homage to the Afri-

can elephant that explores both the representation of the elephant in African material culture and the use of the elephant body as raw material. In the first gallery, devoted to early portrayals of the elephant, amidst silk-screened images from prehistoric African rock art stand some of the exhibition's most precious artifacts: a 14th-century Nigerian bronze elephant from Tada and a terracotta elephant-head potlid from Ife. Objects that draw meaningful associations between their owners and the elephant's characteristic qualities of strength, nobility, and clairvoyance are highlighted.

A dramatic change of mood is signaled by a swirling assemblage of elephant masks positioned at varying heights against a painted red background, suggestive of the hot color of power and majesty. The masks are contextualized and further animated by photographs and a video.

Included in a section on "Urban Elephants" are a six-pack of Tusker lager and a box of Elephant Power laundry detergent. From its traditional function as a symbol of royal authority and spiritual force to its new role in advertising the intoxicating potency of spirits or the cleaning power of soap suds, the symbolic strength of the elephant has not been diminished—its metaphorical domain has simply been shifted and revised.

The second half of the exhibition illustrates how the elephant's body provides the natural materials for the fashioning of cultural artifacts. Included here are elephant tail flywhisks, ivory trumpets, callus and hair bracelets, and hide and bone masks.

Sixteenth-century ivory carvings commissioned by European sailors as tribute to the Portuguese crown signal a shift in the exhibition from the display of indigenous uses of the elephant body to its exportation to the West. African slaves transporting ivory from the interior to the coast are depicted on a 19th-century Loango tusk. Upon arrival, both the porter and his load were shipped overseas. The cruel irony expressed in this carving is exacerbated by the fact that its medium of execution is itself the product of a monumental tragedy—the signified thus becoming the vehicle of its own signifier.

Turn-of-the-century photographs of European hunters and traders, and a reconstruction of a Victorian parlor appointed with ivory household items, document the West's obsessive desire for ivory. From these various images of dismembered elephants to their recontextualization in the lap of bourgeois luxury, the viewer begins to get a sense of the

profound impact of the West's appetite for ivory, which has led to the endangerment of a species.

Turning the corner, even the most thick-skinned viewer is overcome with a feeling of depression. The gallery's raking light, beamed on walls bleached white as bone, bathe in radiant splendor the massive pachyderm cranium that dominates the center of the room in evidence of the West's crime. In the dead-whiteness of this gallery, are we to reach a state of illumination? Small photographs of protest, ivory burning, and the butchery of bloody carcasses provide an intimate experience of the carnage. Torn between the exuberant celebration of elephant imagery in African culture and the bleak vision of the elephant's potential future, one enters with mixed emotions into the silence of the final gallery, where a single closeup photograph of an elephant's eye reproaches the viewer with an urgent glance that asks us not to forget.

The rich nuances and wide range of aesthetic variability in Maya dress are demonstrated in *Threads of Identity: Maya Costumes of the 1960s in Highland Guatemala*. An orientation room provides an introduction to regional geography, cosmology, the relationship between dress and gender, and the effects of change through time. A grouping of *huipils* from the 1950s to 1970s conveys how new colors and materials, such as rayon and acrylic, have successfully been incorporated into Maya clothing.

Guatemalan music lures the viewer into the second gallery, where offerings of 17 textiles, arranged according to major language groups, are laid out on altarlike slabs. The complex relationship between dress style and cultural identity is explored in the label copy, while images of Maya people and landscapes are projected on three screens.

Concentrating on the range of styles and designs within single regions, low-relief mannequins are positioned in regimental rows framed by huge monochromatic prints of the frosted peaks of the Chuchumatán Mountains and the haunting spectacle of Lake Atitlán. While the goal was to dramatize the spectrum and intensity of textile colors by diminishing any competing sensory stimulation from the landscape or the mounts, the result is that the textiles assume greater vitality than their wearers or creators—people thus being reduced to languid props on which to hang this vibrant dress.

The absence of living voices and human agency is largely remedied in the fourth gal-

lery by Susan Masuoka's bilingual video *And This is Our Identity/Y Esta Es Nuestra Identidad*, which features interviews with Guatemalan immigrants in Los Angeles. In one of the most moving segments, Leonel Say, a senior at Los Angeles High, recounts how his mother was brought to tears when crossing Mexico on her passage to the United States, where she was obliged to remove her *corte* and *huipil* so as not to reveal her Guatemalan identity. The exhibition's theme about the relationship between textiles and cultural identity is remarkably well captured in this presentation.

White plaster figures reminiscent of George Segal's ghostly modernist creations populate life-size dioramas of public and domestic scenes in which architectural features have been reduced to wooden frames and bolts of draped muslin. In this final gallery, the vibrant textiles resonate against the austere backdrop of these minimalist constructions.

The exhibition concludes with the words of a Maya woman who laments the shedding of traditional dress in the heat of the current political climate in Guatemala. While the exhibition as a whole offers a celebration of these textiles, this final epitaph reminds us of the fragility of traditions—as the politics of homogenization in the modern nation-state threaten the survival of cultural pluralism and the preservation of indigenous aesthetic forms.

Perhaps more than any other exhibition in the museum's inaugural installations, *Ceramics of Ancient Peru* carries with it a strong pedagogical lesson. Organized like a finely crafted lecture, the museum visitor is guided through a three-dimensional textbook profusely illustrated with ceramics donated by Herbert L. Lucas, Jr., and other private collectors. The galleries situate these ancient ceramics in their proper context within a matrix of dimensions plotted through time and space.

The exhibition is divided by entranceways suggestive of the architectural features of ancient Peru and painted in colors that evoke the predominant shades of the ceramics' slip. Anthropomorphic images lifted from the vessels are reproduced on the walls. The first gallery is divided laterally between the cultures of the south coast and the north. Moving through the exhibit, one progresses from the Formative Period to the Florescent Period, with examples from the cultures of Nasca, Moche, Recuay, and Vicús. Other galleries are devoted to the arts of the Huari Empire, the Period of Regional States, the Inca Empire, and the Colonial Period.

Grouping ceramic vessels by subject matter, the exhibition's final gallery demonstrates the continuity of predominant themes through time.

Distributed throughout the exhibition are displays of various tools and explanations of the techniques of production. An educational component uses flash cards to instruct the viewer to distinguish between ceramic styles. On one visit to the exhibition, a weary mother was unable to extricate her child from this engrossing game.

The melody of a Baroque harpsichord entices the visitor into *Reflecting Culture: The Francis E. Fowler, Jr. Collection of Silver*. All manner of silver are exhibited in this opulent display—drinking vessels, food service, flatware, candelabra, religious and personal items. Unlike the familiar installations of silver at art museums, where such objects are presented without interpretation as “decorative” arts, this exhibition, curated by Betsy Quick and Henrietta Cosentino, attempts to contextualize this embarrassment of riches as ethnohistorical material culture. The exhibit is informed by current research in European social history, with its emphasis on reconstructing the past through attention to the details of domestic and private life.

Galleries introduce the viewer to the technology of silversmithing, the identification of guild punch marks, the role of women in the early European silver industry, and the symbolic function of silver as an emblem of wealth and prestige. Wall cases distinguish between rococo, regency, and other styles. One of the most remarkable galleries is devoted to silver drinking vessels—a focus of Fowler's collection that grew out of his economic interest in whiskey. Beer tankards, wine coolers, and coffee and tea services are contextualized through enlargements of period paintings that depict similar items in use.

In the final gallery hangs an oil portrait of Francis E. Fowler, Jr., holding a Russian Kovsch, an ornate silver-gilt and cloisonné commemorative drinking vessel. The return gaze of the benefactor urges the departing museum visitor to remember his generous gift.

At first it may seem odd that a collection of European silver should be exhibited in this museum. Indeed, one may be tempted to dismiss the exhibit by assuming that Fowler's financial support depended on the inclusion of a permanent display of his collection. This exhibit, however, represents more than just a fiscal silver lining; it speaks to an emerging philosophy of cultural exhibitions that throws into question the traditional boundaries between anthropology and art history. If it is no longer surprising today that African and pre-Columbian objects should be exhibited in art museums, why should a display of European silver seem out of place in this museum?

Anthropology museums and art museums have inherited from the 19th century an awkward division of labor that has proved problematic in representing accurately the vast array of material culture in the world. Since global societies are not fragmented into autonomous parts, why should museums charged with the representation of these societies be separated into discrete categories? While anthropology museums and art museums struggle in their respective ways to chip away at the academic boundaries that divide these two institutions, the Fowler Museum offers a new intervention into the discourse of museum representation. It defines itself neither as an anthropology museum nor as an art museum, but occupies the still ambiguous zone of a museum of “cultural history” that, in true postmodern fashion, defies facile classification.