

SMITHSONIAN EXPEDITIONS: A Museum Partnership

by Jane MacLaren Walsh & Tonia Barringer



Smithsonian *Expeditions, Exploring Latin America and the Caribbean* is a 3,200 square foot exhibition in Miami, Florida, which showcases the Institution's 150-year history of pioneering contributions to the study and preservation of the natural history and cultures of the Americas.

The exhibition at the Miami Museum of Science is designed to invite visitors to trace the steps of scientists through time and space as they traveled to remote regions to explore desolate shores, tropical jungles, archaeological ruins and a Mayan ruler's tomb. Ancient artifacts, ethnographic objects, photographs, field notebooks, and drawings of early scientists and explorers allow visitors to discover how the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History amassed one of the largest and most important collections in the world.

The exhibit begins on a mid-19th-century dock somewhere in Latin America, with a display of some of the Smithsonian's earliest collections, ready to be loaded aboard a ship bound for Washington City. Some of the objects on the dock have catalogue numbers in the low hundreds, accessioned when the Institution was only beginning to entertain ideas about collections and exhibitions. The National Museum of Natural History maintains over 120 million objects in its collection with the Anthropology Department caring for 2.5 million artifacts of its own.

The first half of the 19th century was an exciting time for our newly independent country, with American scientists and researchers eagerly competing with Europeans to inventory and document the natural and cultural history of the Americas. The earliest artifacts collected in Latin America come from the first government sponsored, collecting and research voyage—*The United States Exploring Expedition*—that set sail in 1838 and for four years circumnavigated the globe. The naturalists on board collected more than 40 tons of natural and cultural history specimens.

THE FIRST EXPLORERS

The exhibit's *First Explorers* section features four large stone monuments found by Ephraim Squier in 1849 off the coast of Nicaragua. The stones



Monoliths found by Squier in 1849 on Zapatero and other Islands

date between 900 and 1500 A.D., with the largest weighing nearly a ton. Squier hoped they would form the core of a new Smithsonian museum on the Mall dedicated to American archaeology; they eventually did become part of a U.S. National Museum display. Drawings and objects of natural history as well as a variety of gourds collected by Lieutenants Herndon and Gibbon are also on exhibit. The two naval officers traveled the Amazon River and its tributaries in the mid-19th century to explore the possibility of steam travel on the waterway.

TRADING TREASURES

The *Trading Treasures* section describes exchange networks created by the Smithsonian to encourage travelers in Latin America to work with local authorities, scientists, and residents to collect or trade specimens. Spencer Baird, the Smithsonian's second secretary, corresponded with numerous North Americans traveling for diplomatic and economic reasons to involve them in the task of building the national collections.

Many museum objects also were acquired by means of exchange with museums throughout the Americas. A good example of this can be seen in several archaeological objects from Costa Rica, a few of many hundred sent to the Smithsonian by José Zeledón, as part of an exchange program. Zeledón was a Costa Rican ornithologist trained at the Smithsonian, who eventually returned to his homeland to help found a national museum there.

THE SCIENTISTS' CAMPS

Smithsonian researchers spent extended periods in the field, building their own native style housing or renting a local house. *Expeditions* displays a replica

of a native house in Mexico, similar to one that naturalist Edward Nelson stayed in, as seen in a photograph taken by his assistant. The house, which you can walk into, features the work of many pioneer scientists, such as Mary Agnes Chase, who studied grasses throughout South America. She was a pioneer feminist sometimes jailed for political activity, who also was a mentor to many South American women scientists. Alexander Wetmore was the sixth Secretary for the Smithsonian and an important ornithologist, who traveled extensively in Latin America and Panama. His personal collecting kit, which contains, among other things, arsenic for treating the skins of bird specimens, is on display. Lucille and William Mann traveled throughout Latin America trading North American animals for species found in the tropics. William Mann was the director of the National Zoo, and when the reptile pavilion opened in the 1930s, he and his wife traveled as far as Argentina to exchange animals. They traveled on ocean liners with crates of American buffalo, reptiles, birds and other species that required extensive care and feeding on the long voyage.

Another scientist, some of whose collections can be seen in the native house, was William Henry Holmes, artist, geologist and archaeologist, who traveled widely in Mexico. He collected artifacts wherever he went and arranged trades with collectors in Latin America. One of the most interesting pieces in the Holmes case is the Aztec obsidian knife, which may have been used to cut out the heart of sacrificial victims. The Aztecs believed that human hearts were food for their sun god, and that daily sacrifices would ensure that the sun would rise.

Beyond the scientists' field camp are artifacts collected on various islands of the Caribbean, long the crossroads for people and ideas. In prehispanic times the ritual ball game spread from Mexico and Central America throughout the Caribbean and was shared by many cultures including the Taino. Various artifacts from the ball game are on view in the exhibition.

Jesse Fewkes, a Smithsonian archaeologist, made comparative studies of cultures and archaeological sites among the islands, and collected many of these artifacts. Also of note in this region was the scientific collecting voyage around western Cuba and the Colorados reefs on a vessel called the *Thomas Barrera* in 1914. This Smithsonian sponsored expedition was a cooperative venture with Cuban scientist Carlos de la Torre, from the University of Havana, and

the results of the study on marine flora of the islands were published in 1916 in *The Cruise of the Thomas Barrera*.

EARLY ARCHAEOLOGY

Standing out at the entrance of the *Early Archaeology* section is a large carved stone portrait of an Olmec individual known as *El Rey*, or the King. It is an exact replica of the original colossal head found at La Venta, an archaeological site in Mexico, by Matthew W. Stirling, another Smithsonian archaeologist. At 9.5 feet high, this one is the largest example of a total of 13 heads found. Some archaeologists think that these heads were portraits of ball players or important rulers.

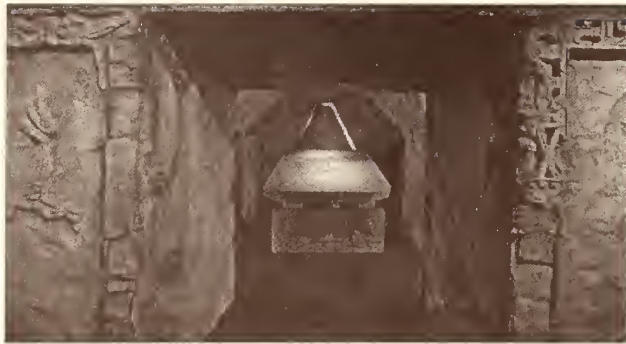


This replica of "El Rey" was carved from Styrofoam, and though light as a feather, it is quite accurate

A continuous video, filmed by the National Geographic Society in the 1940s, shows Matthew Stirling, his wife Marion, and his crew of workers in the field at various Olmec sites in Mexico. Marion Stirling's narration was added later. Other Olmec objects are on display, such as jade figures, a carved basalt ax, and figurines.

THE PALENQUE TOMB

Toward the close of the exhibition is a re-creation of an archaeological dig where young children can try their hand at finding shark's teeth and pottery fragments. The grand finale of the *Smithsonian Expeditions* exhibit is an interpretation of the tomb of King Pakal discovered at the site of Palenque in the jungles of Chiapas, Mexico. The tomb was found inside the base of the Temple of the Inscriptions, the tallest building at Palenque. To reach the tomb in Palenque requires climbing to the upper platform of the temple and then descending 80 feet down steep stairs to the tomb. Miami Museum of Science visitors can enter directly through the temple piers into the tomb chamber. It



The replica of the tomb of King Pakal within the pyramid called the Temple of Inscriptions

took three years for archaeologists to excavate the stairs leading to the tomb in Palenque.

THE INTERACTIVES

The exhibition concludes with a laboratory section and two interactive virtual exhibits. In the lab, visitors can view marine specimens through microscopes and with computers can go online to visit sites at the Smithsonian Institution. The computer interactive, called *The Expedition Continues*, allows visitors to see what Smithsonian, Miami Museum of Science, and other Miami-based scientists are working on today in the Americas. Another computer interactive invites budding archaeologists to continue exploring ancient American cultures using Smithsonian pre-Columbian objects to illustrate artistic styles and artifact types.

Smithsonian Expeditions is the first large exhibition in the nation to result from a Smithsonian Affiliations partnership. It celebrates more than a century and a half of scientific research and collecting in Latin America and the Caribbean, and exhibits the fruit of our labors to inform the public, at every age level, about the reasons for collecting and the true nature of museum science. The exhibition presents science in an adventurous and entertaining way.

To see the exhibition online, visit www.miamisci.org. Biographies of the many scientists featured in the exhibition are available at www.mnh.si.edu/online_exhibits.html

Jane Walsh, anthropologist in the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology, and Tonia Barringer, former exhibit director at the Miami Museum, co-curated "Smithsonian Expeditions."

THE SMITHSONIAN AFFILIATION PROGRAM

Since 1996 not-for-profit museums, historical societies, and other cultural organizations have participated in the Smithsonian Affiliations Program. Through this program the Smithsonian is sharing its collections through long term loans and developing relationships with "affiliates" who pay an annual fee and may use a Smithsonian logo and the tag line "in association with the Smithsonian Institution" along with their own name.

The National Affiliations Conference convenes representatives from all the affiliates for two days of dialogue and brainstorming, introducing the affiliates to a myriad of Smithsonian programs they can take advantage of, including co-branding affiliate merchandise and national affiliate memberships to the Smithsonian. Jointly funded internships and fellowships are also offered.

The Miami Museum of Science, described in the article by Walsh and Barringer, is one of the most extensive Smithsonian affiliations. This affiliation demonstrates the way in which the National Museum of Natural History has created ongoing, in-depth linkages with communities across the country, such as in San Antonio, Texas; Anchorage, Alaska; and San Diego, California. In the case of Miami, there is both a major research-based museum exhibition and a research consortium in tropical biology (CETroB), demonstrating the effectiveness of science partnerships in bringing Smithsonian research and public program resources to communities outside Washington.

During 2000-2001, the National Museum of Natural History co-organized with the Miami Museum of Science six teleconferences from Washington, D.C. for 150 university professors and education professionals from six southeastern states. Part of a program called START—Southeastern Student Teachers Are Revitalizing Teaching Through Technology—this Miami Museum of Science initiative was developed with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The affiliations program is an opportunity for sharing Smithsonian resources across the country. The Smithsonian Department of Anthropology has been an active partner in this program.