

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

Dates: September 15, 2024–September 2, 2025

Location: Resnick Pavilion



(Image captions page 5)

(Los Angeles, CA—July 24, 2024) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art*, a groundbreaking exploration of the science, art, and cosmology of color in Mesoamerica. Artists adorned the surfaces of buildings, clay vessels, textiles, bark-paper and deer hide pages, and sculptures with color, to (re)create the world by transforming raw materials into art.

The power of color emerged from the materiality of its pigments, the skilled hands that crafted it, and the communities whose knowledge imbued it with meaning. Just as dawn brings about life in color, and night transforms the world with darkness, artists use colors to express their understanding of life and time. Mesoamerican artists developed one of the most robust color traditions in the world, manufacturing stable and vibrant colors with minerals, flowers, tree barks, and even insects. Color is thus a means of keeping this ancestral knowledge. However, histories of colonialism and industrialization have long minimized the deep significance of color in the Indigenous Americas.

Featuring more than 270 objects, the exhibition features ceramic vessels, mural fragments, stone sculpture, painted amate paper, and textiles dyed with natural dyes, raw minerals, gold, jade, carved shell, and more. Notably, more than half of the exhibition is drawn from LACMA's renowned collection of the Art of the Ancient Americas. Unprecedented loans of artworks and archaeological artifacts, were made possible through collaborations with INAH (Mexico), many of which have never been displayed before. Visitors will also have the rare opportunity to view two Mesoamerican codices, Codex Selden and Codex Mendoza, on loan from Oxford's Bodleian Library.

The exhibition partnered with two groups of contemporary Indigenous artists to revitalize artistic practices of pigment production. 17 works were commissioned from Nahua, Tzotzil, Mixtec and Zapotec artists to be in dialogue with ancient Mesoamerican art works in the exhibition.

This exhibition is presented as part of PST ART: *Art & Science Collide*. Southern California's landmark arts event, PST ART, returns in September 2024, presenting more than 70 exhibitions from organizations across the region exploring 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

We Live in Painting is co-curated by Diana Magaloni, Deputy Director, Program Director & Dr. Virginia Fields Curator of the Art of the Ancient Americas, LACMA; Alyce de Carteret, Assistant Curator, Art of the Ancient Americas, LACMA; and guest curator Davide Domenici of the University of Bologna. The exhibition will travel to two other venues following its presentation at LACMA.

"Through groundbreaking research led by Diana Magaloni and her curatorial team, *We Live in Painting* brings new perspectives to ancient and contemporary Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "Drawing extensively on LACMA's remarkable collection of Mesoamerican artworks and complemented by a number of unprecedented loans from Mexico—this exhibition allows us to experience the cultural and cosmic power of color in a radically new way."

Diana Magaloni adds, "*We Live in Painting* considers two sciences in dialogue: the Western science undertaken by contemporary scholars, and the Indigenous science of artistic production that, through millennia of empirical practice, engineered artificial pigments from the natural world. Progress in the former cultivates an appreciation for the latter, rendering the exceptional technical achievements of Mesoamerican artists legible to our audiences—a remarkable example of the collision between art and science."

We Live in Painting furthers LACMA's commitment to reconceive the museum's stewardship of collections such as that of Art of the Ancient Americas. The museum has developed close, collaborative relationships with Indigenous artists, descendant communities, and international institutions to share Indigenous stories and perspectives. In preparation for this exhibition, curators partnered with Indigenous artists who are revitalizing the craft of making natural paints. LACMA supported a series of workshops in Xalitla, Mexico—a Nahua town known for its painters—where community members learned more about the art of crafting pigments from traditional materials from artist and scholar Tatiana Falcón. Their commissioned works, along with those of the other living Indigenous artists featured in this exhibition, including

Tzotzil and Mixtec weavers and Ventura-based Zapotec-American textile artist Porfirio Gutierrez, stand as a testament to the resiliency and tenacity of Indigenous art makers.

Exhibition Organization and Highlights

To reach the full richness of color at the core of Mesoamerican worldviews, this exhibition follows two interconnected lines of inquiry—technical and material analyses and Indigenous conceptions of art and image. Mesoamerican societies classified the color spectrum into five primary hues: black, red, blue-green (conceived as a single color category), yellow, and white. To guide visitors through this exploration, the exhibition is organized by seven thematic sections.

The exhibition begins with the color **White**. The works in this section are hand-crafted from white materials, which are associated with creative potential. Mesoamerican artists transformed white raw materials into mediums to receive color and image such as the bark of the amate tree into paper sheets, and cotton into yarn to weave its fibers into textiles. They also carved marble, alabaster, shell, and bone.

In the next section, **Painter and Sage (the cosmic role of the artist)**, viewers will see how Mesoamerican artists acquired knowledge of color-producing natural resources and used that knowledge to create pigments. Within the exhibition, Zapotec-American textile artist Porfirio Gutierrez creates an immersive experience that showcases the labor of his contemporary art practice. Here, he reimagines his artist's studio where he reinvents the ancestral weaving and dyeing practices of his community.

Cosmos, Casa, Cuerpo explores color's principal role in animating the universe at every scale. The cosmos, the house (*casa*), and the body (*cuerpo*) each embody the sacred "wholeness" of the universe. Ceramic sculptures, paired with murals, textiles, and paintings, highlight the conceptual fluidity between these cosmic wholes.

The next section, **In Tlilli In Tlapalli: Black and Red** looks at how black and red colors form a complementary pair in Mesoamerican conceptions of the world. Together, they comprise a limited palette meant to depict primordial, supernatural events. Artists across Mesoamerica made use of this convention, from the muralists of Teotihuacan to Classic Maya potters. The pairing of black and red could also signify the whole of knowledge. Calligraphic black lines delineate the contours of a painted scene, while vibrant reds and other hues complete the figures.

Yax-K'an: Blue-Green and Yellow presents examples of works with blue-green and yellow materials and pigments. For the Classic Maya, blue-green and yellow represented an entire cycle of life, from new growth to ripeness. Preciousness, vitality, and abundance are conveyed through this complementary relationship. Across Mesoamerica, blue-green and yellow materials such as jade and gold embodied this

preciousness and manifested ephemeral forces of life, including water, breath, and sunlight.

The Science of Color focuses on contemporary scientific investigations into ancient color. In recent years, new methods in scientific analysis have opened an intercultural dialogue with ancestral Indigenous science, revealing the richness of the body of knowledge built by Mesoamerican artists over centuries. For the first time, this section will present some of the new research conducted by The MOLAB Mobile Laboratory, a traveling science lab that performs non-invasive analyses of Mesoamerican codices held in European institutions, The Prehispanic Mural Painting in Mexico Project, a research group at the National Autonomous University of Mexico that has analyzed the materials and techniques of mural painting traditions of Mesoamerica, and the Maya Vase Project at LACMA, which studied the technological advancements of Classic Maya potters.

Finally, **Image and Being** explores color as an animating force in Mesoamerican art. The Mesoamerican image embodies the very essence of the being it represents: a painting of a deity *is* that deity. A sculpture of a ruler *is* that ruler. By transforming the natural world into images, Mesoamerican artists deployed a creative power much like that of the primordial creator deities who crafted the cosmos itself. Their animate, polychromatic creations populate this gallery, living on in painting and allowing us to stand in the presence of gods and ancestors.

Highlights of the exhibition include rich examples of ceramic color palettes including one featuring an artist's portrait; mural fragments excavated from Teotihuacan; effigy vessels, rare codices, and a series of recent commissions from Indigenous artists in Mexico who are reviving the art of creating paints and dyes from organic materials. One of the oldest artworks in the exhibition (ca. 1200–900 BCE) comes from a grouping of precious clay figurines from Tlatilco. This work serves as an early example of how color and the body were used in the earliest art forms, particularly amongst young women.

Catalogue

Co-published by LACMA and DeMonico Books/D.A.P., this exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with text by Diana Magaloni, Davide Domenici, Alyce de Carteret, Michael Govan, Antonio Saborit, Carlos Barrera Reyes, Claudia Brittenham, Élodie Dupey García, Tatiana Falcón, and others. This publication was created as part of the PST ART: *Art & Science Collide* series.

Film

LACMA will also present the documentary film "Harvesting Color: Ancestral Recipes for Today's World" which follows a group of artists from the village of Xalitla, Guerrero as they revitalize the manufacture and use of natural pigments in their painting practice. Through a series of LACMA-sponsored

workshops, the artists reconnect with ancestral recipes, their cultural inheritance.

Credit: This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Presented by **Getty**

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

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



We Live in Painting: The Nature of Color in Mesoamerican Art, LACMA, participated in the PST ART Climate Impact Program, a groundbreaking integration of climate action, community building, and data reporting. Learn more at pst.art/climate.

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 to right) *Masked Male Figure with Dance Staff*, Mexico, Campeche, Jaina Island, Maya, 700–900 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of John Gilbert Bourne, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; *Cylinder Vessel with Palace Scene*, Guatemala, Petén, Motul de San José or vicinity (Maya), 740–800 CE, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; *Bowl*, Mexico, Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan, (Teotihuacan), 200–650 CE, Museo Nacional de Antropología, México, Digital Archive of the Collections of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México / INAH-CANON; *Figurine Carrying a Dog*, Mexico, Tlatilco (Tlatilco), 1200–400 BCE, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Digital Archive of the Collections of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México / INAH-CANON; *Fragment from Mural of the Mythological Animals*, Mexico, Basin of Mexico, Teotihuacan (Teotihuacan), 250–350 CE, Acervo de la Zona de Teotihuacan, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA, by Javier Hinojosa

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