

# Gallery of World Cultures

A wide array of ancient artifacts gives Oklahoma museum visitors a global perspective.



BY MICHAEL WATERS

**I**t is merely an elongated corridor, yet this gallery holds treasures from four continents—and offers visitors to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History a round-trip ticket to view masterworks from civilizations spanning thousands of miles and thousands of years.

The Merkle Family Foundation Gallery of World Cultures displays more than a hundred artifacts from the museum's collections of pottery, housewares, statues, and ceremonial and decorative items from antiquity. According to Julie Droke, SNOMNH registrar and repatriation specialist, ancient artifacts from Nepal, Tibet, China, Africa, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, and Guatemala are represented in the gallery's glass display cases.

"Our goal for the World Cultures Gallery is to demonstrate the breadth of our collections—and to bring the world to Oklahoma," Droke says. "The exhibit gives an opportunity to see unique artifacts from different civilizations to people who might not ever visit other parts of the world."

The gallery is housed on the museum's first floor, adjacent to the Great Hall. Four large glass-front cases covering the east wall are dedicated to artifacts of China, Oceania, Nepal/Tibet, and the Greco-Roman Classics, respectively. Opposite are six freestanding display cases containing ceremonial attire and handcrafted figures from Guatemala, Japan, Tibet, Thailand, Bali, and Africa.

Among the most striking displays in the gallery are the cases dedicated to Japan and Tibet. A mounted set of Japanese samurai armor prominently stands out, made of black-enameled steel and dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A fabricated-steel sword and wooden sheath, from the same era, boast one-of-a-kind decorations applied by the maker.

ABOVE: The Dancing Devil Mask from Bali, is one of many cultural artifacts from around the world that have languished in perilous storage awaiting a new museum home.

OPPOSITE PAGE: This Horse Effigy Statue, from China's T'ang (Tang) Dynasty more than 11 centuries ago, is one of two in a large collection assembled and donated to the museum by Colonel Paul Walker, who served in China 1945-47. The unglazed pottery was produced for the burial of a noble.



Nearby, visitors can examine a Tibetan Shaman's apron and cap, made of cotton and decorated with beads and animal-bone carved figures. The objects are fragile and are mounted with care, at an angle and at low-light levels, to retard further deterioration.

Some artifacts reflect the culture as well as the artistry of ancient peoples. For example, a clay statuette from first century B.C. Italy shows a woman clad in a cap worn by priestesses. Babylonian cones, from 2100 B.C., contain inscriptions to "Nindara, the exalted king," and a marble head from Greece, more than 15 centuries old, pays tribute to Zeus. African gold weights and carved figures, Buddhas from Nepal and Tibet, bronzed miniature animals from the Luristan region of ancient Iran, and a Cypriot bowl more than 30 centuries old also represent the variety of the museum's holdings in this area.

A display of three Thai shadow puppets, made from water buffalo hide, depict a prince, a princess, and a demon. The accompanying description attributes the supposed origins of the second century B.C. shadow theatre to a Chinese emperor, "distracted by the death of his concubine (who) recovered only when a magician produced a shadow figure of the woman."

Droke points to one of her favorite items in the gallery, a section of a Roman mosaic floor mounted on the gallery's south wall, circa 100-200 A.D. "The patience and artistry of using small cut stones in varying shades, called tesserae, to create beautiful images that look like they're painted—it just amazes me."

Another artifact close to Droke's heart is an unglazed pottery horse hand-sculpted during China's T'ang dynasty more than 11 centuries ago. It symbolizes, she says, the care taken to protect these priceless treasures in their new surroundings.

"It happens to be sentimental to me because, years ago when it was on exhibit in the portico of the old building, water leaked during a rainstorm onto the saddle and damaged it," she explains. "Although the horse has been conserved, and you can't tell now that anything happened to it, it means a lot to me that in our new facility we no longer have to worry about water getting into our exhibits."

Although the public previously could view a few such items, others have had a kind of "grand unveiling" in the World Cultures Gallery, Droke says. A carved drum from the Sepik River area of New Guinea, painted with speckled lizards, and clubs and carved wooden shields from various South Pacific islands finally can be exhibited after years, if not decades, of storage.

"People have to go back a long time to remember when some of the Oceanic artifacts were on display," Droke says. "In the

years we were planning this museum, you never would have gotten to see many of these items unless you were on a behind-the-scenes tour."

One aspect of the extensive planning for the gallery can be seen in a porcelain statue from China's Ming dynasty, created some four to seven centuries ago. The statue is of a female figure standing on a lotus-flower platform, representing the Chinese ideal of womanhood in that era.

"You can see that there's a mount on the bottom of that platform," Droke notes. "But it's been camouflaged to blend in with the artifact itself. What the exhibit designers have done is 'faux' the mounts, by painting them to look exactly like the exhibit itself. So, in a way, there's more art here than the art on display."

Probably the most colorful art in the gallery can be found in the Guatemalan display case, in which a trio of ceremonial masks, most notably a carved wolf-like face painted red with green spots, are set beneath a pair of multicolored ceremonial shirts, or huipil. A sombrero and palm hat with multicolored ribbons, along with toys of carved wood—a fish and a horse cart—lend the exhibit a touch of warmth and even childlike charm.

During the planning phase, Droke says, she worked with two other SNOMNH developers, Pam Wallace and Ellen Cordell, and with Bradley Sanders of Sanders Museum Services, which designed the mounts. The work involved taking a new look at many of the museum's long-stored treasures.

"We took all the objects we wanted to use from a given culture and put them out where we could see them, then designed their exhibit for the cases. Based on that design, we chose what looked good for those types of cases," Droke says. "We had to reject some because of condition, or some because they wouldn't fit in the cases."

Items for exhibit had to be chosen early in the process. "We knew what we wanted years ago and packed those items separately so that we could get at them quickly once we were in the new building."

The approximately one hundred items chosen for display are only a fraction of the museum's holdings of 2,500 to 3,000 such artifacts. But, Droke says, "That's the way a museum works. The idea is to rotate exhibits and keep things fresh."

And as planners fine-tune the exhibit, patrons can continue to savor the instantaneous journey that the Gallery of World Cultures offers, through distance and through time, to witness the greatest measure of cultural diversity that an elongated corridor could possibly hold.



Robert Taylor