

# The National Museum of Cultures: A place for reflection

**D**evoted to the permanent exhibition of collections related to foreign cultures, the National Museum of Cultures is unique in Latin America, both because of its subject matter —international

anthropology— and the origin of the objects it displays, gathered through exchange, donations and sometimes purchase. Inaugurated on December 4, 1965, the museum has remained true to its original objective of placing our culture

within the context of world history by imparting knowledge about other cultures. Thirty years of existence have allowed it to deepen its vision, enter worlds different from our own, and promote a veritable dialogue between the objects displayed and the visitors who come to see them.

## Museum with a history

The National Museum of Cultures is part of the same city block occupied by the National Palace, in Mexico City's "Historic Center." It is located on a beautiful side street, which has been called Moneda (money) street since Colonial times, when the building now occupied by the museum housed the first mint for processing the gold and silver extracted from Mexico's mines. This street maintains its original features and its historical value, since the buildings that line it include those of our country's first university, the first printing press and the Archbishopric of Mexico, headquarters for the highest officials of the Catholic Church.

While the building now occupied by the museum displays the architectural traits characteristic of Colonial construction, its history takes us back to pre-Hispanic times. Research has revealed that the second palace of Moctezuma, the last ruler of the Aztecs, was located here. Also known as Tlillanaco or "the blackened house," since many of its walls were paint-



Photos by Leopoldo Hernández

South Sea Hall: pieces from Melanesia.



ed black, the palace was used by Moctezuma whenever he needed to consult the gods regarding a serious issue or when he felt sad and wanted to be alone.

After the Spanish Conquest, when Mexico City was laid out atop the old city of Tenochtitlan, the lands adjoining the central plaza were ceded to those Spaniards who had distinguished themselves most in battle. The site occupied by the palace, together with other buildings, was given to Hernán Cortés himself in 1529. The “new houses of Cortés” were built there, and subsequently sold to the Spanish Crown in 1562. Thus the building became a palace for the viceroys and the location of the first Casa de Moneda (mint —literally “House of Money”). Around 1730 the Palacio de la Moneda was built; the building subsequently went through a series of extensions and modifications.

It also housed a school of engraving, and sheltered a wide range of guests from 1847 until 1866, when it became the city’s first public museum. Called the Public Museum of Natural History, Archeology and History, its collections included archives and documents related to the pre-Hispanic era and the early Colonial period, as well as archeological monuments from the Plaza Mayor (central plaza). The museum subsequently became the National Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnography, and later the National Museum of Anthropol-



The museum’s central patio invites meditation.

ogy. It was simultaneously the headquarters of the National School of Anthropology and History from 1938 to 1958.

When space limitations made it impossible to exhibit all the museum’s holdings, the decision was made to build a new home for the collections of archeological and ethnographic pieces from Mexico itself. Thus, in 1964 the new National Museum of Anthropology was inaugurated, in Chapultepec Park. It was then that the idea arose of creating a museum devoted to the ongoing exhi-

bition of collections from foreign cultures.

This led to the birth of the National Museum of Cultures, under the direction of Dr. Julio César Olivé and the archeologist Beatriz Barba, with the objective of placing our country in the context of world history and promoting respect for cultural diversity through knowledge of other cultures. The museum was started with international anthropological objects which had not been transferred to the new Anthropology Museum; these pieces pro-





One of the entries in the toy car contest.

vided the basis for the first permanent exhibition halls. They include a collection from the South Seas (Oceania) which is considered one of the best in the world.

From its beginnings up to the present day, the museum has built its collections through donations and exchanges promoted by the team of anthropologists who work on the museum's projects. Many Mexican and foreign anthropologists provided pieces from their personal collections, motivated by their enthusiasm for the idea of creating this international museum. At the present time, in addition to loans from private collectors, the museum's holdings grow through donations from various countries, via their diplomatic representatives or academic projects. One of the most recent is the collection donated by the League of Arab States.

### Many worlds to discover

The museum's current holdings include approximately 13,000

archeological and ethnographic pieces, which are divided among more than twenty permanent exhibition halls. Exhibits display the typical, the mysterious and the unique, from cultures that have developed in various parts of the world which are both distant and frequently very different from our own, such as those of Africa, the South Seas, the Arab countries, Japan and China, to mention but a few.

A visit to the museum allows one to observe the differences and similarities in the ways man has related to nature and other men over the course of time, and to reflect on the validity of different cultures and the respect they deserve. One example is the magnificent collection of masks from the most diverse regions and eras, displayed in the museum's exhibition halls. The uses of these masks range from the sacred to the profane, but all of them awaken fascination and the desire to discover the viewpoints and feelings of the men and women who hid behind them.

One of the museum's distinguishing features is the constant research activity that its permanent staff of historians, ethnologists and archeologists carry out in order to further the institution's exhibitions. Their objective is to transmit knowledge of the processes of transformation and change undergone by the cultures represented at the museum. A clear example is the hall devoted to Japan,

which leads us through economic, political, religious and social developments over the course of several historical eras.

Yet among the most interesting facets of this museum are the daily visits made by those who possess an unlimited capacity for wonder and curiosity: children. Since the museum includes displays on world history that coincide with study plans followed by institutions of basic education, many of these children are sent by their teachers. Nevertheless, the museum's staff takes advantage of these mandatory visits in



Wood carving of archangel, from Venezuela.