



Smithsonian Associates

## Cultural Diplomacy and Ancient American Art: 1930–1950

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Tuesday, December 10, 2024 - 6:45 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET

**www.ellenhoobler.com** – *please feel free to send comments and/or questions through the form on the site*

### VOCABULARY:

**Ancient American** art is now the preferred term among many museum professionals, replacing Pre-Columbian or Prehispanic. “Primitive” art rarely used at this point, (to describe art from Africa, Oceania, the ancient Americas and sometimes Native American art) as it’s considered too unspecific and pejorative.

**Definition:** “Cultural Diplomacy may best be described as a course of actions, which are based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and beyond; Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by either the public sector, private sector or civil society.” (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy)

### TIMELINE:

**1928:** Herbert Hoover makes a goodwill tour of Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil as President-elect; was the first U.S. president to visit Latin America, receives gift of ancient Peruvian textile while on his tour there

**1929:** Great Depression begins with stock market crash of October 28

**1932:** Find of “Treasure of Tomb 7,” found at Monte Albán, Oaxaca, southern Mexico, by team led by archaeologist Alfonso Caso

**1933:** \*FDR uses the term “Good Neighbor” in his inaugural address, Pan-Americanism and non-intervention will become themes of his administration

\*The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) holds the show *American Sources of Modern Art (Aztec, Mayan, Incan)* from May 8 -July 1

\*A Century of Progress International Exposition (aka the World's Fair) opens May 27 in Chicago including the "Treasure of Tomb 7" in luxury Pullman train car

**1935:** San Diego Pan-Pacific Exposition includes the "Treasure of Tomb 7" exhibit

**1936:** FDR attends the Inter-American Peace Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, making stops in Brazil and Uruguay as well

**1937:** Greater Texas and Pan-American Exposition held in Dallas, TX, linking ancient American and contemporary Latin American artworks

**1938:** March 18, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas signs an order expropriating the assets of foreign oil companies in Mexico and nationalizing the industry

**1939:** New York World's Fair begins with the theme "The World of Tomorrow"

**1940:** \*MoMA holds the show *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art / Veinte Siglos de Arte Mexicano* May 15 – Sep 30

\*Diego Rivera paints the mural *Pan-American Unity* at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco

**1941:** \*U.S. enters World War II after bombing at Pearl Harbor

\*Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) established by FDR; Nelson Rockefeller named as its head

**1943:** Publication of Pál Kelemen's book *Medieval American Art* by Macmillan publishers; first large-scale reference book for this work, will go on to be reprinted 4 times through 1969

**1944:** Art activities of the OCIAA transferred to the National Gallery of Art

**1945:** OCIAA transferred to the Department of State and become Office for Inter-American Affairs

**1947:** Harry Truman becomes the first U.S. President to visit Mexico City, is instrumental in the signing of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance

**1950:** *The Maya Through the Ages* documentary released by Kenneth MacGowan (producer) with assistance from the United Fruit Company

## KEY FIGURES:

**Alfonso Caso (1896-1970)**: Alfonso Caso y Andrade was one of Mexico's foremost archaeologists of the twentieth century. He became famous for his discovery of rich treasures at the site of Monte Albán in southern Mexico in early 1932, and accompanied those objects on a tour of the US in 1933. He was appointed first Director of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), Mexico's archaeological institute, in 1939. He was also main organizer of the 1940 *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition at the MoMA, as well as the curator of the Pre-Spanish section. He would continue to have a long and career working with Indigenous peoples and ancient artifacts.

**Kenneth MacGowan (1888-1963)**: An American film producer and later first Chair of the Department of Theater Arts at UCLA. He was the Director of Production for the Motion Picture Division of the OCIAA, and produced a number of documentary and educational films on Latin America. A later 44-minute feature, "The Maya Through the Ages," was released in 1950 and sponsored by the United Fruit Company. MacGowan also authored the popular-scholarly publication *Early Man in the New World* (1950 and reissued 1962.)

**Nelson Rockefeller (1908-1979)**: Best known as the 41<sup>st</sup> Vice President of the United States from 1974-77 and governor of New York from 1959-1973. An avid art collector and philanthropist, Rockefeller was influential in smoothing the way for 1940's *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* exhibition at the MoMA, a museum co-founded by his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. The exhibition strengthened his convictions about the strategic importance of Latin America, and after voicing concerns to the President, he was appointed Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs by FDR in 1940. Later, he would become Assistant Secretary of State for American Republic Affairs.

**Herbert J. Spinden (1879–1967)**: Herbert Joseph Spinden earned his B.A. (1906), M.A. (1908), and Ph.D. (1909) from Harvard University. From 1909 to 1921, Spinden was assistant curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. From 1921 to 1929, he was the curator of Mexican archaeology and ethnology at the Peabody Museum at Harvard.

In 1929, the Brooklyn Museum hired Spinden as curator of ethnology and head of the Education Division. He ceded responsibility for the Education Division to John I.H. Baur in

1935. Spinden would head the “Department of Primitive Art” until 1950, when he became curator emeritus. In the 1930s and ‘40s, Spinden would curate a number of traveling exhibitions that highlighted the cultural achievements of Latin American nations.

#### FOR FURTHER READING / RESOURCES:

--Kathleen Berrin, *Exhibiting the Foreign on U.S. Soil: American Art Museums and National Diplomacy Exhibitions Before, During, and After World War II.*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

--Elizabeth Boone, ed. *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993, see especially Holly Barnet-Sánchez, “The Necessity of Pre-Columbian Art in the United States: Appropriations and Transformations of Heritages, 1933-1945.”

--Ellen Hoobler, “An ‘Artistic Discovery’ of Antiquity: Alfonso Caso, the Archaeologist as Curator at the New York World’s Fair and MoMA’s *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, 1939-1940,” in Finegold and Hoobler, eds. *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017.

--Ellen Hoobler and Victoria Lyall. *Collecting the “Other” Americas: Ancient Americas Collections in American Art Museums*. Denver: Denver Art Museum, forthcoming 2025.

--Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo. *Mexico At the World’s Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Also online at:  
<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft2k4004k4;query=;brand=ucpress>

--Youtube – copy of *The Maya Through the Ages* available at  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67DRwY3KZUA>