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ANTIQUES

Kerosene Lamps With a Long Afterglow



Jorge Pérez de Lara/National Institute of Culture and History

This mid-16th-century effigy of a lobster, from Belize, is featured in a show about the role of the sea in the Maya world.

By EVE M. KAHN

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MAYA'S MYTHIC SEA

Mayan artisans rarely saw the ocean; their cities were concentrated inland, in what is now Guatemala, Belize and Mexico. But they feared, revered and tried to depict sea creatures, as symbols of vengeful ancestors and gods paddling through the underworld and giving birth to celestial bodies and clouds.

Stone and bone carvings and painted clay vessels have been excavated from Mexico and Central America that show lobsters, oysters, conch shells, pelicans, stingray spines and sharks, as well as warriors steering canoes over waves.

About 100 of these maritime-theme objects, many recently dug up, have been assembled for "Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea," an exhibition that opens on Saturday at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass. The Mayan word for ocean, k'ahk'nahb, means "fiery pool."

Display cases contain ritual objects like god statuettes, incense burners and temple fragments, in addition to practical vessels for frothing and drinking chocolate. Videos of storm clouds, turtles and schools of fish roll across the gallery ceilings and interactive touch screens.

The curators, Daniel Finamore and Stephen D. Houston, spent weeks during the last two years scouring remote Central American museums to gather pieces with sea imagery and hieroglyphics about ocean legends. "No one had ever pulled this all together, to see what this all means," Mr. Finamore said.

Completing loans and export agreements required days of paperwork, and some stretches of dirt road were repaired just in time for the museum's trucks to fetch the objects. In Belize, the government sent armed guards to escort a jade head of a deity for its trip north. "It's known as the crown jewel of Belize," Mr. Finamore said. "It appears on every denomination of their currency." The piece is normally kept in a bank vault. "They don't yet have a museum with high enough security," he added.

To help insure the artifacts' authenticity and clean provenance, in a field sometimes rife with looting and fakes, the Peabody Essex borrowed from institutions rather than from private collectors. "That was a policy decision," Mr. Finamore said. "There are challenges involved in collecting this material."