

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 27, 1998

MEDIA CONTACT: Julie Wilson, 303-640-7587
Christine Genovese, 303-640-2933

Denver Art Museum Returns Architectural Artwork to Guatemala

Denver, CO—After a quarter-century in the United States at the Denver Art Museum, a rare Mayan architectural artwork has been returned to Guatemala. The carved wooden lintel from the archaeological site of El Zotz', Department of El Petén, Guatemala is one of fewer than a dozen surviving carved wooden lintels from the Classic Maya civilization (A.D. 250-850).

While wood was one of the primary media used by the Ancient Maya, most Classic Period wooden artworks have not survived the ravages of the wet jungle environment—nearly all have rotted away. The few surviving lintels are on display at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología E Etnología de Guatemala, a museum in Basel, Switzerland, and the El Zotz' lintel at the Denver Art Museum. The largest and most important carved wooden lintel (important aesthetically, iconographically, and epigraphically) is from Tikal, located 20 kilometers from El Zotz'. This lintel is on view at the Museo Nacional de Arqueología E Etnología in Guatemala City. Smaller fragments of lintels are found in a few other museums in Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

The El Zotz' lintel was given to the Denver Art Museum in 1973, at a time when no United States laws banned the importation and acquisition of pre-Columbian art. The UNESCO Convention on the Manner of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was accepted by the United States in 1983. The Denver Art Museum is sensitive to the issue of national patrimony and the preservation of the world's architectural treasures. Thus, because it is known from which site and even from which building this lintel was removed during the late 1960s, the Museum believes it was proper to return the lintel to Guatemala.

The Denver Art Museum hopes that this is the beginning of a collaborative relationship, among equals, with Guatemalan institutions of art and archaeology. The Denver Art Museum hopes that, in the future, the Museo Nacional de Arqueología E Etnología and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología E Historia de Guatemala will exchange works of pre-Columbian, colonial art, and modern art for temporary exhibitions at the Denver Art Museum and at museums in Guatemala.

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Dr. Lewis Sharp, director of the Denver Art Museum, strongly believes that one of the most effective ways to preserve cultural patrimony is through exhibitions in museums. Exhibits share these artworks with the public, and the labels in the gallery and the museum's educational programs inform the public about the wonders of other cultures. Further, museums can play an important role by informing the public about the ongoing worldwide problem of the looting of archaeological sites. Through this increase in public awareness, they can help stop this destruction of the world's cultural history. Further, the sharing of art works among nations lessens the need to acquire art works through the international art market. Dr. Sharp believes this is the future for the world's cultural heritage; that the mutual sharing of art treasures between museums is more effective than purchasing cultural patrimony. The Denver Art Museum is very pleased to work with Guatemala in this kind of preservation effort, together offering a new collaborative model to the world.

The lintel left the Denver Art Museum on Wednesday, October 21, and will be welcomed to Guatemala with a repatriation ceremony on November 12. Dr. Juan Antonio Valdés, director of the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology, is assisting with the return and display of the lintel in the national museum. He will install the El Zotz' lintel next to the one from Tikal. By so doing, the Denver Art Museum and the Museo Nacional will provide the unique opportunity for Mayanist scholars, art historians, and the interested public to compare two outstanding and rare examples of Maya sculpture in wood.

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