



FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO
DE YOUNG MUSEUM

HIGHLIGHTS TOUR

Audio tour script

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Stop 302 Unidentified, *La Carreta de la Muerte/Chariot of Death*, ca. 1900

NARRATOR: This is no ordinary cart driver. See those bony ribs? – the figure is actually a skeleton, representing Death itself. Seated in a chariot with a bow and arrow, Death is out hunting for its next victim.

This sculpture was made around 1900, by members of the Roman Catholic “Penitente” brotherhood in present-day New Mexico, in the American Southwest. During Easter Holy Week, the brotherhood carried objects like this in processions through the streets. The figure reminded viewers that death comes to everyone, and warned them to live a moral life before they died.

Take a closer look at the figure. Sometimes, we think of art as being very grand and costly. But this simple piece was created by a devout Catholic from hand-carved wood, a pair of toy marble eyes, and horsehair. With origins in the Spanish Colonial empire in the Americas, it’s just as much a part of the story of American art as the more elaborate portraits and furniture that you’ll see in the galleries ahead.

167 words

Stop 304 The Freake-Gibbs Painter, *David, Joanna, and Abigail Mason*, 1670

NARRATOR: David, Joanna, and Abigail Mason were the children of a rich baker from Boston, Massachusetts. Their portrait, made in 1670, is full of clues about their family's status in society, and their parents' expectations of them as they grow up. Like miniature adults, they hold formal poses, and are dressed in smaller versions of adult clothing. Their sleeves are fashionably slashed to show two layers of expensive fabric at once. Eight-year-old David stands in a commanding pose, holding a gentleman's gloves and a silver-tipped cane.

So if David, who takes up half the painting, poses as the man of importance he's expected to become – what can we tell about the girls' future? Joanna's fan indicates ladylike accomplishments and graces. Abigail's rose symbolizes childhood innocence, and perhaps also the marriageable beauty her parents hope she'll grow up to be. And the coral beads around the girls' necks and in Joanna's hand? Those are a sign of wealth, but were also thought to keep sickness away – an important consideration when raising a healthy child to adulthood was an achievement in itself.

179 words

Stop 308 **Joshua Johnson, *Letitia Grace McCurdy*, ca.
1800-1802**

NARRATOR: Gazing solemnly out at us, Letitia Grace McCurdy of Baltimore offers her dog a cookie. Will he wait patiently, or jump up to grab the treat? Including the dog in the painting is a charming, playful touch – but it has a deeper meaning, too. Puppies, which can be trained to be well-behaved, faithful adults, symbolized the state of childhood, and are often seen in early 19th-century portraits of children.

Letitia’s portrait expresses her family’s wealth and social standing. She has a fashionable, high-waisted muslin dress, short haircut, and red leather slippers -- known as “straights” because there was no left or right shoe! The artist, Joshua Johnson, followed the traditions of grand American and European portraiture in picturing a luxurious setting with a marble floor and fringed red curtain.

Johnson is the earliest identified African-American artist in the United States. Born enslaved, he was freed as an adult by his white father. He built a successful career as a portrait painter for families in and around Baltimore. While historians initially assumed that Johnson first studied with a local artist, he proudly advertised himself in local newspapers as “a self-taught genius.”

187 words

Stop 311

Thomas Hovenden, *The Last Moments of John Brown*, ca. 1884

NARRATOR: A white-haired man leans over to kiss an African-American baby. This is John Brown, who famously fought and died trying to abolish slavery. In 1859, after leading an unsuccessful attempt to start a slave rebellion in the American South, he was captured. He is pictured here, a noose around his neck, on the way to his execution – or martyrdom, according to his supporters.

The artist, Thomas Hovenden, made this painting 25 years later after carefully researching the details. The soldiers' uniforms and the condemned man's slippers were true to life. But the scene depicted here never happened - the enslaved mother and her baby were invented by a sympathetic Northern newspaper reporter. It provided an uplifting interpretation of Brown's story though – a symbolic blessing for African-Americans who would grow up free because of his sacrifice. And Hovenden heightened the drama by portraying Brown as a noble, Christ-like figure calmly going to his death. Christ's cross is even suggested behind Brown's back, created by the vertical gun and, on either side, a man's belt and a horizontal line of dark bricks. *

There's a very different image of John Brown to the left. Let's take a look - press play when you're ready.

216 words

Stop 371

Horace Pippin, *The Trial of John Brown*, 1942

NARRATOR: “The Trial of John Brown” is by African-American artist Horace Pippin. He painted it in 1942, inspired his mother’s eyewitness account of John Brown’s hanging in 1859. In this painting, the wounded hero is accurately depicted lying on a stretcher on the courthouse floor, with his open Bible nearby. The prosecutor points accusingly at him, while the all-white and all-male jury looks on without sympathy.

Pippin’s painting is very different in style from Hovenden’s, but both artists turn Brown into a Christ-like figure. His bloody head bandage recalls Christ’s crown of thorns, and the pointing prosecutor reminds us of the apostle Judas, who betrayed Christ and condemned him to death.

So – whose version of John Brown’s story contains the deeper truth? Hovenden’s painting depicts Brown as a larger-than-life hero, while Pippin’s depicts the freedom fighter as an ordinary—and vulnerable—man. Both paintings contain elements of the true story, but neither was made by someone who was actually there. And like most images of historical events, both paintings were carefully composed to convey a specific meaning or interpretation. Which painting do you find more moving?

169 words

Stop 370 Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave*, ca. 1873

NARRATOR: At first glance, this graceful marble statue on its classical column resembles a Greek or Roman goddess. Venus, perhaps. But you see details that you won't find around the goddess of beauty. Like the shackles binding her wrists together. And beside her right hand, a shawl, hat, and Christian cross. This is no goddess – although the artist, Hiram Powers, certainly was inspired by an ancient statue of Venus when he made the first version of this sculpture, in 1843.

Powers called his sculpture “Greek Slave.” It represents a Christian Greek woman captured by Turkish forces during the recent Greek War of Independence. She's shown displayed for sale in a slave market, her clothes removed by her captors.

The *Greek Slave* caused a sensation when it first toured the United States. Some found the figure's nudity indecent. But others were convinced by the exhibition pamphlet describing the woman's Christian virtue and courage. Many viewers also connected Powers' statue to the enslavement of African-Americans in the Southern United States. The Greek Slave therefore became a powerful symbol used by those fighting to abolish slavery in the years before the American Civil War.

194 words

Stop 380

James McNeil Whistler, *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre*, 1879

NARRATOR: A cruel caricature, created as an act of revenge. Not what we might expect from a famous artist – but that was the original purpose of this painting. The American artist James McNeil Whistler made it in London, England, where he'd become famous for daringly modern paintings partly inspired by Asian art.

Here, we see a grotesque creature - half-man, half-beast with a mangy peacock tail. He hunches over a piano, heaped with bags of gold coins. This is Whistler's caricature of Frederick Leyland, a wealthy shipping tycoon and keen amateur musician who'd been a very important patron. But Whistler went way over-budget, without permission, in redecorating the dining room of Leyland's London home. This was the celebrated blue and gold "Peacock Room," now preserved in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington D.C..

When Leyland refused to pay all of the enormous fee Whistler demanded for his work, the artist portrayed Leyland as a hideous and greedy peacock. And in a final flourish of venom, he added his signature butterfly emblem at the top of the painting, with a long, barbed tail that's about to sting the back of Leyland's neck!

193 words

Stop 325

Frederic Edwin Church, *Rainy Season in the Tropics*, 1866

NARRATOR: Imagine seeing this painting just after it was made, in 1866. In an era before color photography, this spectacular view of a “tropical” landscape took people’s breath away when it was displayed in New York City.

The painting is by Frederic Church, who had traveled to South America and Jamaica. But rather than depicting a real place, he conjured up a landscape blending experience with imagination. We’re floating above a dramatic, mountainous river valley. Those two tiny men and donkeys at the lower right give us a sense of the landscape’s vastness. There’s a dash of modern scientific knowledge about the double rainbow - the colors on its upper arch are accurately reversed. Church may have had a scientific treatise in his New York studio, as well as sketches, potted palms, and preserved tropical birds and butterflies he’d brought back from his travels as inspiration.

The painting also may be symbolic. The year it was finished, Church and his wife were expecting a new baby, having lost two older children. On the national front, the end of the American Civil War the previous year heralded a new era of hope for the United States. So the painting’s veil of mist, melting in the warm sun, may perhaps hint at the lifting of both private and public traumas.

222 words

Stop 321 **William Michael Harnett, *After the Hunt*, 1885**

NARRATOR: Did you do a quick double-take as you walked over to this breathtakingly realistic painting? It looks like we just missed a hunter walking away. But he's hung up the rabbit and birds he caught on this wonderful old door with its curly, rusty hinges. And he's left his guns, flask, battered hat, and well-used hunting horn.

Philadelphia artist William Michael Harnett specialized in “trompe l’oeil”, or “fool-the-eye,” paintings. He intended this one, made in 1885 in Europe, to be his masterpiece. Soon thereafter, it was purchased for an incredibly high price, and hung in a luxurious New York City bar as part of the owner’s art collection. The painting, framed in drapery and dramatically lit, quickly became the most famous still life in America. Newspapers reported people fighting about which elements in it might actually be real, and trying to jump the guard rail to find out.

By 1885, most of these objects would have been considered antiques. But viewed in a New York City saloon, especially by first-generation immigrants, they would have served as nostalgic reminders of a simpler, rural life in Europe that was now part of an idealized past.

199 words

Stop 330 **Mary Cassatt, *The Artist's Mother*, ca. 1889**

NARRATOR: What are you drawn to first in this portrait? Probably the woman's face – even though she gazes away from us, seemingly lost in thought, her features and expression are painted with so much care and insight that she is very compelling. It's not surprising that Mary Cassatt was able to capture and convey such a strong sense of individuality and character, as this is a portrait of her mother, Katherine.

Cassatt never married and was very close to her mother, who was supportive of her daughter's career as a professional artist. This was an extremely unusual path for a young American woman from a wealthy family to follow in the nineteenth century. By the time she painted this portrait around 1889, Cassatt had trained in Paris, been accepted into the circle of French Impressionists, and frequently exhibited alongside her male colleagues.

Here, she pauses to contemplate the woman whose constant encouragement meant so much to her, focusing our attention on her melancholy face and strong hands, and contrasting the solid figure with the swift, Impressionist-style brushstrokes in the background.

176 words

Stop 331**Chiura Obata, Mother Earth, 1912/1922/1928**

NARRATOR: Standing naked and alone in the forest, this woman appears to exist in perfect harmony with nature. Her slender, vertical form echoes the tall trunks of the ancient California redwood trees around her. And beneath her feet are delicate spring flowers, their soft blues and pinks reflected in the colors of her hair and body.

When Japanese-American artist Chiura Obata began this portrait of his wife Haruko in 1912, they were expecting their first child. Obata eventually titled the finished painting “Mother Earth,” making the female figure a universal symbol of motherhood and fertility, and linking the cycles of human life with those of nature. His title reflects his global perspective - “Above the border line of nationality”, he stated, “everybody must feel a deep appreciation toward Mother Earth.”

This painting fuses Obata’s knowledge of traditional brush-and-ink techniques learned in his native Japan, with elements of western perspective and realism. Obata played a key role in introducing Japanese art techniques into the United States, initially as an instructor at the University of California, Berkeley. Later, when his family was confined to an internment camp in Utah during World War II, he organized an art school to offer hope and inspiration for the future.

202 words

Stop 337 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Petunias*, 1925

NARRATOR: Georgia O’Keeffe wanted to get at what she called the “real meaning of things.” She set about this by looking at the world around her in new ways, focusing intently and poetically on its natural forms and geometries. In the summer of 1924, she decided to plant purple and blue petunias while staying at Lake George in upstate New York. As they flowered, she studied their soft, velvety petals up close, capturing their intense colors and delicate forms in her paintings.

No-one had looked at flowers in this way before, allowing them to fill the whole canvas so that their intricate structure and rich colors take on a monumental presence. It was a very radical, modern way to approach what could have been a very traditional subject – these are both beautiful flowers, but also semi-abstract forms, seemingly floating in space and taking on a life of their own. O’Keeffe observed, "When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else."

148 words

Stop 343 Grant Wood, *Dinner for Threshers*, 1934

NARRATOR: When artist Grant Wood made this painting of a Midwestern harvest meal in 1934, the Great Depression and the drought-driven “Dust Bowl” had made life extremely hard for farm families. But this scene is set earlier, perhaps around 1900 – and evokes the Iowa farm where Wood was raised.

Beginning at the left side, two horses rest while farmhands wash before they eat. Through the door, in the farmhouse dining room, a group of farmers eat together, weary and hungry from gathering the harvest. Women serve them, and work in the kitchen to the right. Everything is clean, orderly and idealized. Even the kitchen cat waits until the meal is over to beg some scraps!

But there’s more to this scene of rural American life. Although Wood depicted his native Midwest in his work, he was also inspired by European Renaissance paintings. Wood’s portrayal of the farmhouse recalls Italian Renaissance religious paintings, which open up a cross-section of a building to reveal the stories of the people inside. The farmers at their dinner table recall images of Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper, giving their simple meal a sacred association.

199 words

Stop 345 Aaron Douglas, *Aspiration*, 1936

NARRATOR: Let's start at the bottom of this visionary painting about African-American history. Made in 1936, it's titled "Aspiration". The hands of enslaved people, chained at the wrists, reach up from the waters below toward figures representing freedom and achievement. To the right is a seated woman in an Egyptian headdress holding a book, and below her are silhouettes of three pyramids. Together, they symbolize African American pride in an ancient and noble heritage. Meanwhile, two men in business suits holding symbols of learning point to a modern city with towering skyscrapers and factories.

This painting is by Aaron Douglas, the first African-American artist to fully embrace modernism. He made it for the "Hall of Negro Life" at the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition. See the five-pointed stars radiating light across the painting? Texas viewers may have seen these stars as symbolizing their "Lone Star State." But it can also be seen as a reference to the North Star that guided slaves out of the South to freedom in the North of the United States. Douglas himself compared his use of radiating stars and circles to radio waves, which spread the African-American art form of jazz around the world.

185 words

Stop 346 Richard Diebenkorn, Berkeley No. 3, 1953

NARRATOR: Wide expanses of warm orange, red and yellow. Energized black lines and vivid blue forms. Seemingly an abstract painting. And yet, as we look closer, we may see a landscape emerging from the rectangles of color. Perhaps that long, dark line is a horizon, with a milky-blue sky stretching across above it.

Richard Diebenkorn made this painting in 1953. He'd just returned to the San Francisco Bay Area after teaching in the Midwest for a year. Happy to be back in the landscape he knew and loved, he began an extensive series of numbered paintings, all titled Berkeley, after the East Bay city where he settled. This is number 3. They're all abstract on the surface, but Diebenkorn observed that, on some level, he had "always been a landscape painter." These paintings also hint at the artist's recent experience of flying for the first time, and the thrill of seeing the landscape from a radically new angle.

167 words

Stop 245 Larry Rivers, The Last Civil War Veteran, 1961

NARRATOR: The Stars and Stripes, hung next to a Confederate flag – potent symbols of the two opposing sides in the American Civil War. Between them, an old Confederate army jacket. And beneath, a frail, ghost-like figure lying in bed. This painting, dating from 1961, is titled “The Last Civil War Veteran”. It was made by Larry Rivers, who based it on a photograph in a 1959 *Life* magazine article of the man thought to be the last living Civil War veteran.

U.S. census records later revealed that this man was too young to have fought in the Civil War. For Rivers, this information made the photograph even more compelling. On one hand, it had seemed to depict a powerfully emotional scene, encompassing life, death, and duty, not to mention the historical event that most profoundly shaped the United States. But, the whole premise for the photograph had proved to be inauthentic. Rivers was fascinated by mass-circulation imagery and its power to shape our perceptions of the past and the present, and made it the main focus of his art.

194 words

Stop 375 Frank Stella, Lettre sur les aveugles II, 1974

NARRATOR: Take a moment to let your eyes travel around this enormous 12-foot-square canvas. * As you look at its flat bands that alternate between a color spectrum and a gray scale, you become aware that it's two things at once. It's a two-dimensional surface, but at the same time, these concentric bands seem to draw you in, giving a sense of depth and volume. * Do you feel like they're pulling you into a deep, geometric hole? * Or do those darker colors at the center appear to be pushing out toward you, like a four-sided pyramid? *

This painting does not have a traditional subject or story. Instead, it's about the nature of how we see – an idea that fascinated Frank Stella. He made this painting in 1974, as part of a series of experiments into bands and stripes of color, and how they play off both against each other, and how we perceive them. In fact, Stella titled the painting after a famous essay by an 18th century French philosopher named Denis Diderot, called “Letter about the blind for the use of those who see,” which explored vision and perception.

194 words

Stop 368 Ruth Asawa Sculpture installation in Education Tower

NARRATOR: Look up and move around as you listen. ** Metal sculptures bring this space to life. Their elegant, often elongated forms remind us of the natural world – seaweed, roots, trees, and seedpods. These sculptures go beyond traditional definitions of positive and negative space, and the idea of inside and outside, blending those concepts together. And the shadows they cast are as engaging and beautiful as the sculptures themselves. **

All of these sculptures are by artist Ruth Asawa, who was fascinated by the possibilities of using wire in her work. She would crochet the flexible wire by hand, creating shapes that are full of light and air, and sometimes contain other smaller forms inside them. They're almost like intricate, 3D drawings in space. Asawa's techniques were partly inspired by a trip to Mexico as a very young artist, where she watched women making baskets that were woven, yet still transparent. In other pieces here, tied wire creates delicate branch and root-like forms. Asawa was deeply connected to nature all her life, ever since her childhood on a California farm. Later, at her family home in San Francisco, her garden was a constant source of inspiration, while inside, her sculptures hung from the ceiling like vines, as she worked on them.

213 words

Stop 385 Louise Nevelson, *Sky Cathedral's Presence I*, 1959-62

NARRATOR: In Louise Nevelson's hands, discarded materials scavenged from the streets took on a new life and identity. "All objects are retranslated", she said, "that's the magic." In this piece, made between 1959 and 1962, she combined wood and metal fragments, creating box-like structures partly inspired by the urban landscape of New York City, where she lived. Together, they also make us think of the façade of a great, Gothic cathedral – an association evoked by the sculpture's title: *Sky Cathedral's Presence I*.

Around this time, Nevelson painted much of her work a rich black, believing that it contained all the colors of the spectrum. This black veil unifies her sculptures, while giving them a sense of mystery and bringing to mind darkness, death, and mourning. In fact, Nevelson connected her coffin-like black box forms to the lingering trauma and uncertainty of World War Two, in which her son had served. But in a more positive light, she also spoke of her black sculptures as encompassing "the Universe, the stars, the moon – and you and I, everyone".

187 words

Stop 211 Figure of an Ancestor or Deity (Dogon), 1027 - 1209

NARRATOR: This figure's elongated, slender form makes its body seem even taller, more imposing. Made by the Dogon people of Mali in west Africa around eight to nine hundred years ago, it may be a spirit or ancestor figure. It would have acted as a link between living people and the spirit world. Originally, its arms were raised upward – perhaps in a prayer for much-needed rain, or in some other kind of communication with the spirits.

You might have noticed something else remarkable about the sculpture – it features both male and female body parts. * This may refer to the Dogon people's ideal of a perfect balance in nature. The figure also has a prominent beard, symbolizing older age. Dogon society, like many around it in Africa, greatly valued the wisdom of its elders. They were thought of as being closest to the ancestors whose power was so deeply revered in Dogon culture, and rulers were often chosen from among them.

165 words

Stop 215 Hornbill Mask for Poro society, 19th century

NARRATOR: This mask represents a spirit that mixes human and animal characteristics. Its large, ridged beak looks like a hornbill's – which may have been a deity in the Mano culture of Liberia in west Africa, where the mask originated.

When it was worn in a ceremony, the mask was seen to take on active spiritual powers, acting as a bridge between the living and supernatural worlds. On the forehead, you'll see encrusted dried blood, feathers and little pieces of iron. These were all added during sacrificial rituals, increasing the mask's power.

There's something else very rare inside it – Arabic or pseudo-Arabic numerological squares and lettering that reference the Koran. By the nineteenth century, the Islamic faith had coexisted with local religions in west Africa for over three hundred years, and Muslims were the only literate people in this region. The Mano people revered the power of the words that made up the Muslims' holy text. So by copying some of them into this mask's lining, they intensified its spiritual powers.

168 words

Stop 216 Nail and Blade Oath Taking Figure, Democratic Republic of Congo, 19th century

NARRATOR: This figure has an important job. Acutely alert, hands on hips, his mouth opens as if he's about to speak, and he fixes us with a powerful gaze. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, in central Africa, *Nkisi n'kondi*, or oath-taking figures, were used to help settle lawsuits and resolve disputes.

If you had a disagreement with a neighbor, you would summon the supernatural powers believed to be contained within a figure like this. Nails or blades were pounded into the figure when the spirit was asked to respond, and also represented the argument that helped resolve a legal matter. * The key sites for placing blades were those which symbolize seeing, thinking, speaking and feeling in human terms - behind the eyes, on top of the head, in the mouth, and inside a hidden behind a piece of mirror on the figure's chest. Over time, these mounted up, contributing to the figure's stern and fearsome appearance.

157 words

Stop 221 Plaque, Girl with Leopard, Nigeria, Kingdom of Benin, 1600, 1980.31

NARRATOR: Cast bronze and brass plaques like this were made for the court of the ancient kingdom of Benin. They decorated pillars inside the royal palace, and were kept highly polished.

The young girl on this plaque carries a water-jug shaped like a leopard on her shoulder. Leopards were an emblem of royal power, and leopard-shaped jugs were used to pour water on the king's hands during an annual ceremony. This detail, in addition to the girl's elaborate body decorations, jewelry and hairstyle, tells us that she must have been of noble, or maybe even royal, birth.

The powerful kingdom of Benin existed for almost a thousand years. In 1600, when this plaque was made, its warrior kings had conquered neighboring lands, and traded regularly with the Europeans. The court employed highly skilled artists, such as those who made beautifully detailed representations of courtiers, like this one.

151 words

Stop 222 Master Drum for a Civic Brotherhood, Ghana, Fante, 1980.73

NARRATOR: Move around this drum and you'll see that the surface is covered with carved imagery. It's a rich source of information about the society that made it – the Fante people of Ghana. Civic brotherhoods are often found in Fante communities, and they usually have a band. The drum was made around the 1940s for one such group.

Let's take a closer look. First, you might notice the breast-like forms that protrude from the drum's body of the drum. * These signify that the drum is the mother, and leader, of the group. Wording below confirms that this is "number one", setting the tone for performances. In a matrilineal society like this one, this also echoes the women's important role. Around the drum, pictorial carvings represent Fante proverbs. A scholar who studies these drums, Doran Ross, has helped us interpret them. For instance, a semicircle with six arrows is the sun, illustrating the saying "who is most senior – dark or light?" An elephant moving into a trap represents the proverb "When an elephant steps on a trap, it does not spring". And a leopard preying on a tortoise alludes to the fact that an animal will turn a tortoise over and over in vain, foiled by his strong shell!

208 words

Stop 223 Kane Kwei, Coffin in the shape of a cocoa pod, ca. 1970, 74.8

NARRATOR: This intriguing object was made for a surprising purpose. A huge cocoa pod with a carved stalk, it's made from a single piece of wood and painted in a glorious, glossy orange. But see the line that runs horizontally along it? ** That's a break in the wood, enabling the top to open like a lid. The cocoa pod is, in fact, a coffin.

It's one of the many special coffins made by the Ghanaian artist Kane Kwei, each one designed to symbolize the trade or interests of the deceased. Kwei began by creating a boat-shaped coffin for his fisherman uncle, and his imagination and career took off from there. He made massive hens, giant onions, enormous fish, and often, cocoa pods like this, since Ghana was the world's largest cocoa producer in the 1970s when this particular coffin was made. Kwei's coffins were beautifully finished inside too, with satin, velvet or tie-dyed mattresses and pillows.

The coffins' joyous, flamboyant design and high cost reflect the importance of funerals for important people in Ghana, which often last for days and are attended by many people. Kwei's work was a symbol of wealth, prosperity and worldly success.

194 words

Stop 240 Tsimshian artist(s), Totem pole, ca. 1880
8947

NARRATOR: This massive totem pole features a wonderful array of creatures, each interacting with the next one down in different ways. A bald eagle crouches at the top. With his claws, he grips the head of a whale whose tail flops down over the head of a large bear. * The bear holds a small human figure upside down by his feet! * The bear's hind paws rest on another fish.

The totem pole dates from the later 19th century and was likely carved by a Tsimshian artist who lived in British Columbia, or another northwestern area. By then, most poles were mostly carved for sale, rather than for the community's own use. Tsimshian artists are well known for their carving and painting skills – notice how the shapes of eyes, noses and tails harmoniously echo one another here.

137 words

Stop 225 Abraham Anghik Ruben (b. 1951), Passage of Spirits, 20th-21st century, 2007.21.292

NARRATOR: Look at the front of this vessel, carved by the contemporary Inuit artist Abraham Anghik Ruben, and you'll see a female face. It's Sedna, the goddess of the sea. Her hair flows back to form the body of the boat, and echoes the shapes of the waves we imagine below. She is carrying ten small figures. Half have human heads, the other half animal heads. Several of them have oars, and the figure in the helm brandishes a drum to set up a beat for the oarsmen.

Sedna is taking them on a journey through time and space, to the spirit world, since these are all shaman – mortals who have special powers and access to the spirits. Above them rise white antlers. Their graceful, curving forms represent the Northern Lights, or smoke that might come from oil lamps, lighting the way through the darkness.

144 words

Stop 220 Teotihuacán People, Feathered Serpent and Flowering Trees

NARRATOR: At the top left of this fragment of a mural, or wall painting, you can see the splendid head of a mythical serpent. Its long, rippling body, colored with green, blue and yellow, extends back for many feet. And it's covered with feathers. * Why? This supernatural creature can slither into holes beneath the ground, and fly up to the heavens – both places that you might find water. For the people who lived in the great and powerful city of Teotihuacán just outside modern-day Mexico City, water was a precious substance. So the deities who were seen to help bring it were deeply revered.

Look at the serpent's mouth, and you'll see it's obliging handsomely. A great torrent of water streams down, throwing out drops to either side. Beneath, beautiful flowering trees thrive, their roots growing strongly. Many of the tree trunks contain a glyph, or symbol. * They may refer to the families who lived in the apartment compound that the mural once decorated, or to the types of plants being depicted.

173 words

Stop 236 Maya Stela 761 CE

NARRATOR: At the center of this carved stone panel, known as a stela, is a stately figure crowned with a tall feather headdress. She is Ix Mutal Ahaw, a queen of the Maya people who lived in the 8th century. By then, the Maya were very powerful – their territory extended over what we'd now call southern Mexico and Guatemala, as well as parts of Belize and Honduras.

Let's take a closer look at the queen. Her beaded dress with a mask at the waist symbolizes maize, or corn – a key crop for the Maya. She holds a hollow bone in her arms. Through it moves a gigantic snake, which coils around her body – up beside her headdress, you can see its mouth opening wide. As you might have guessed, this is no ordinary snake. The queen has summoned it in order to communicate with the ancestors on behalf of her people. In response, a head emerges from the snake's mouth. * It's the lightning god, K'awiil, who helped rulers communicate with the spirits and was welcomed as the bringer of storms that would mean all-important rain for the crops.

185 words

Stop 230 Maori Canoe Prow

NARRATOR: Imagine this incredible carved wooden boat prow coming at you through the waves. It was once the front part of a huge canoe powered by many oarsmen, belonging to the Maori people of New Zealand. At the front of the prow is a formidable figurehead. Representing an ancestor, he thrusts out his tongue and glares forward with eyes of inlaid shell. His function? To challenge and intimidate anyone who saw him, and to protect the canoe and its oarsmen from the enemy.

Woodcarving was a sacred activity for the Maori. A *tohunga*, or master carver, would have worked on a piece like this with stone blades until European metal tools became widespread. The *tohunga*'s job was to create figures filled with the power of the ancestors, which would act as an intermediary between gods and people. Ceremonies, rituals, and purifications accompanied every step of the carving process, from selecting the wood to installing the finished carving.

156 words

Stop 231 Toraja Housefront with Water Buffalo

NARRATOR: Originally, this huge carving would have been placed high on a house front, looking down on everything beneath it. The carving was made by the Toraja people who live in the mountains of Sulawesi, one of Indonesia's largest islands. It features an ancestor figure, dressed in full battle dress, sitting astride a water buffalo. To the Toraja, water buffalos symbolize prosperity and virility. And its curved horns suggest the shape of a boat – another powerful symbol for the Toraja.

Toraja houses often feature impressive carvings like this one. They signaled the wealth and status of the home's owners – as well as a connection to their powerful ancestors. A traditionally-designed house has a dramatically-shaped roof, sweeping upward at either end in a way like these buffalo horns.

138 words

**Stop 251 Biwat People, Male Figure, East Sepik Province,
LO5.1.15**

NARRATOR: As we look up at this imposing figure, it's impossible not to feel a little overawed by it. Almost six feet tall, it seems to survey everything around it with the intense gaze of its circular eyes. Deeply-carved eyebrows throw a dramatic shadow above them, throwing the eyes into even greater relief.

Made by the Biwat people who lived along the Yuat River in New Guinea, this is a spirit figure, representing a mythical giant. He was probably once a guardian for a family group, protecting their home and people. He would also have been called on to help with the success of hunting expeditions. Such a figure was central to people's lives, and it would have been kept in a family's home, and revered, worshipped and adorned. The figure is remarkable in another way, too – it may date back as far as the 15th century, which, for a wooden object kept in the hot, damp climate of New Guinea, an astonishingly long time to survive.

166 words

Stop 252 Sawos People, House Posts, New Guinea, 17th-19th century

NARRATOR: This pair of enormously tall figures might look like free-standing sculptures. But they were actually made as posts for a ceremonial building. Carved by the Sawos people, from the Pacific island of New Guinea, they are ancestor figures, with a commanding presence. Their eyes are made from stacked circles – a traditional way of representing awakened ancestors in the Sawos culture. On their heads, they wear towering headdresses. These are decorated with fish – very important to the Sawos, who are coastal people. And on the sides, you'll see circular forms that might symbolize waterlilies, or again, the stacked eyes of ancestors who are alert and active. You can look for other versions of the stacked eyes elsewhere in this gallery.

120 words

Stop 264 Astrolabe Figure, L05.1.432

NARRATOR: It's remarkable that this wooden figure has survived until today – it likely dates back to the 15th century. Only a very few others like it still exist. Made by the people of Astrolabe Bay, situated in northeast New Guinea, it personifies a mythical hero. His tall, elaborate headdress and large ear ornaments emphasize his importance, and his open, sturdy stance conveys a sense of strength. The figure would have been made to stand in a ceremonial men's house. As a powerful spirit, it played a significant role in young men's coming-of-age ceremonies and rituals.

94 words

Stop 266 Yimam People, Hunting Spirit

NARRATOR: This figure has an extraordinary aura of power. Its head is emphasized as the most important part of the body. And it seems almost alive, with its dramatic, deeply carved eye area, and open mouth, as if it has the power of speech. Compared to the more realistic head, the body is an almost abstract. Hook-like forms extend out from its spine, representing ribs that curve protectively over the straight form in the center symbolizing the heart.

The figure, called a yipwon, was made by the Yimam people of New Guinea. Representing hunting spirits, figures like this were believed to be able to steer the outcome of a hunting trip, or even a battle. This particular figure once belonged to a twentieth century artist named Roberto Matta. He and other Surrealists, who prized the unexpected and looked to the interior world of dreams and memory for inspiration, were very interested in art like this, which is all about the power of the spirit world.

164 words

**Stop 261 Lake Sentani Figure, West Papua, Doyo village
L05.1.19**

NARRATOR: Arms folded up against its chest, and head tilted very slightly, this figure seems to turn its attention on those who approach it. The carefully-defined eyes, appearing to look right at us, and faint smile, add to this feeling of connection.

Created in Lake Sentani in West Papua, the figure would originally have ornamented a ceremonial building, or a chief's house. It would have been seen as a powerful figure, able to act as a channel between the human and supernatural worlds. And the wood it's carved from, taken from a sacred tree, would have deepened people's sense of its special links with the spirits.

Dating from as long ago as the 18th or 19th century, the figure is one of the great treasures remaining in the world of Lake Sentani culture. It's extremely rare for such a figure to have survived, and people come from all over the world to see it.

153 words

