

Museum of Anthropology: Unique from Its First Day!

When it opened in 1976, Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology on the grounds of the University of British Columbia was the first museum in the world to present its entire collection of roughly 20,000 artifacts for public exhibition. The majority of those artifacts had been in storage, inaccessible to either the public or academics wishing to study them, since the early 1900s so it was indeed a momentous day when a large fleet of moving vans rolled up to the front doors of the strikingly-designed museum building to deliver their precious boxes into the vast empty spaces. A team of ten museum installers was on hand to unpack and create attractive, informative exhibits showcasing every item, and to do this in just four months when Canada's Prime Minister cut the ribbon for the official opening.



How do I know this? I was privileged to be one of the ten installers committed to this daunting adventure 37 years ago, completing our mission just minutes before the ribbon cutting outside the doors! Since most museums only ever exhibit about 10 per cent of their collection, word had spread about the revolutionary idea of displaying everything. As we worked, museum professionals from around the world came to see how this display concept could work in reality, and Aboriginal artists and elders of the Pacific Coast tribes often observed in silent awe as many indigenous examples of precious baskets, masks, carvings and adornments saw the first light of day in their lifetime.

BC's Museum of Anthropology (<http://moa.ubc.ca>) **remains a place of extraordinary architectural beauty, one** of the world's leading museums internationally renowned for its collections, research, teaching, public programs and meaningful commitment to collaboration with the Aboriginal community. Today, about 135,000 visitors to Vancouver annually come to MOA, with 15,000 of those being school and other educational groups. The museum offers tours and information in a variety of languages, including maps in 10 different languages.



One of the biggest draws is the collection of carved poles from the Pacific Northwest. The museum's Great Hall features a number of poles, as well as carved figures, boxes, huge wooden feasting bowls and decorated canoes. Smaller, more intimate spaces throughout the museum are also popular with visitors for the exquisitely-crafted items, both large and tiny. One of those spaces is the Bill Reid Rotunda, celebrating the diverse talents of renowned Haida artist, Bill Reid. Visitors will want to linger there for a while, especially reflecting on his most iconic yellow cedar sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*. Recently the Museum has acquired a beautifully-carved Nuu-chah-nulth club originally given to explorer, Captain James Cook, in 1778 when he visited the west coast.

Outdoor displays around the museum's extensive grounds are also popular with visitors, featuring Haida houses and poles by renowned Aboriginal artists, both historic and contemporary. The Multiversity Galleries are a unique feature to MOA, as they display over 10,000 objects that would otherwise be in storage, forever behind the scenes.

While the Pacific Coast Aboriginal themes will always be a primary focus of MOA, about 40% of the collection is from other regions and countries. The Chinese collections include between 1,000 and 1,500 pieces of Chinese ceramics, Chinese calligraphy, and paintings. In addition, there is a large collection of Japanese prints, Buddhist art, Hindu art, textiles and clothing. Other collections include Chinese coins and amulets, Sichuan blue thread embroideries dating to circa 1900, rare Tibetan robes, and masks from Japan, Sri Lanka and Korea. The museum also has an extensive collection of artifacts from the South Pacific, Africa and South America.

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A visit to this museum is not a mere pass-through on the way to lunch, but rather a place to linger and explore in either a traditional stroll-about fashion or a deeper high-tech manner, if desired, with MOA's CAT system of computer terminals that provide additional information, images, audio and video about the objects. Needless to say, this was not part of the original installation! In fact, if it is absolutely impossible to visit this wonderful facility in person, all the collections can also be accessed online (moa.ubc.ca/collection-online).

MOA underwent an extensive renovation and expansion in 2010, almost doubling the space in the Museum. "In the three years since opening our new galleries and public spaces," says MOA Director, Anthony Shelton, "we have hosted 18 exhibitions, presented over 95 public programs and welcomed nearly 50,000 school children. We have hosted festivals of First Nation dance and film and promoted

talks and discussions on some of the most burning questions in the arts today. First Nation arts and cultures remain at the heart of MOA, but our collections, exhibitions and programs also provide the opportunity to experience and better understand cultures from all over the world.”

By Alison Gardner

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