



*City of Arts & Innovation*

# City Council Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL DATE: JANUARY 23, 2018

FROM: MUSEUM DEPARTMENT WARDS: ALL

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON THE RIVERSIDE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM 2018 EXHIBITION  
"UNCOVERING ANCIENT MEXICO: THE MYSTERY OF TLATILCO" IN  
PARTNERSHIP WITH THE RIVERSIDE ART MUSEUM

## **ISSUE:**

Receive an update on the Riverside Metropolitan Museum 2018 exhibition "Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco" in partnership with the Riverside Art Museum.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

That the City Council receive an update on the Riverside Metropolitan Museum 2018 exhibition "Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco" in partnership with the Riverside Art Museum.

## **BACKGROUND:**

In 2015, a Riverside Metropolitan Museum (RMM) intern, who was working in the Museum's Anthropology collection, noticed some unusual ceramic sculptures. Upon research, these objects were identified as belonging to a people who lived 3000 years ago along river banks in the Valley of Mexico. These people were known as Tlatilco, which translates to "where things are hidden." Objects from these people had been sold in Mexico City markets for many years. However, where they were found was not initially known until the 1920s-1930s. During this period, Mexico City urbanization spread into the area where the archaeological site of Tlatilco is located.

The RMM's Tlatilco collection came from the bequest of Christopher L. Moser, Ph. D., a former RMM Curator of Anthropology. Moser conducted his doctoral fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico in the 1960s. During this time, he visited the markets in Mexico City and purchased objects from vendors during his visits. Some of these objects had come from "Tlatilco".



"Pretty Lady"  
RMM Collection A1108-259



"Two-faced Head Mask"  
RMM Collection A1108-384  
Photograph by Catharina E. Santasilia

The Museum's Tlatilco collection, which includes figures, masks, bowls, musical instruments, earplugs and seals, has never been exhibited. There are female figurines, which are called "Pretty Ladies" and "Ball Player" figurines, which are associated with the renowned Olmec ball game.

This collection inspired the RMM to start developing a Tlatilco exhibition in 2015. In addition to the RMM Tlatilco collection, the exhibition will also feature Tlatilco objects on loan from the National Museum of the American Indian – Smithsonian Institution (nine objects) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (eleven objects). These objects will enhance the visitor's understanding of the Tlatilco people.

At their November 30, 2017 meeting, the Metropolitan Museum Board received an update on the Riverside Metropolitan Museum 2018 exhibition "Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco" in partnership with the Riverside Art Museum (RAM).

## **DISCUSSION:**

### **Partnership with the Riverside Art Museum**

On July 11, 2017, the City Council voted to approve shuttering the Museum for three years to focus on reorganizing and improving operations. This direction meant that the RMM would not be available for new exhibitions until 2020. With exhibition planning underway and Tlatilco object loans pending with the National Museum of the American Indian – Smithsonian Institution and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, it was decided to investigate alternative Riverside museum sites for the Tlatilco exhibition.

Upon discussions with RAM, a new venue became possible and a partnership was formed. The partnership offered exciting possibilities, especially in exhibition planning and development. RAM

brought a new perspective, diverse experiences, and a team of staff with different strengths. RMM brought its collections, history of creating culturally diverse exhibitions, and regional and national museum connections through past loans and Smithsonian Affiliates.

Through this partnership, a different method of exhibition planning and development was implemented, which included a team approach with advocates for institution, subject matter, visitor experiences, design and project team. The RMM/RAM team with its multiple sources is shaping an enriching exhibition with innovative experiences, which is the goal of the exhibition.

### Tlatilco Exhibit

“Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco” will open at the RAM on Saturday, February 3, 2018 and will close on Sunday, December 30, 2018. The Tlatilco exhibit will include the following features:

1. RMM’s Tlatilco artifacts that tell a story supported with loans from the National Museum of the American Indian – Smithsonian Institution and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
2. Documents, maps and photographs that represent the location, site and material culture of the Tlatilco people.
3. Interactives highlighting section themes.
4. Archaeological tools and equipment explaining the process for uncovering the story.
5. An activity guide for young visitors guiding them in exploring the exhibition and learning about the people.
6. An archaeological dig in the Taylor Learning Center for Children will provide an opportunity for students to investigate an archaeological mystery.
7. A feedback station will allow visitors an opportunity to comment on this exhibition.

### **Exhibition Story Line**

“Uncovering Ancient Mexico: The Mystery of Tlatilco” explores the role of archaeology in understanding an ancient culture. Visitors will investigate how ceramics from the Tlatilco provide clues for archaeologists to solve mysteries of an unknown people.

### **The Mystery**

Buried deep beneath the bustling freeways and factories of Mexico City laid the relics of a civilization for thousands of years. Until recently, the secrets of this community remained undiscovered, hidden away and lost beneath history’s layers. The ancient people of Tlatilco may be gone, but they left many clues under the surface; clues that archaeologists use in their quest to decode the past and reveal the details of this lost community.

### **The Search: How Archaeology Helps Solve the Mystery**

Starting in the 1940s with Miguel Covarrubias’ work, Tlatilco figurines have captivated the imagination of archaeologists and other scholars. Through fieldwork and careful visual study of the artifacts, much can be discovered, but the technology used by archaeologists today gives us a more accurate picture of life.

### **The Findings: Mystery Solved?**

The archaeological evidence tells us that the people of Tlatilco lived busy lives. Farming and hunting provided necessities while artisans created jewelry and sculptures. Musicians, athletes, dancers, and acrobats entertained the living while the dead were prepared for an afterlife. While much is known and much can be assumed based on the practices of other similar cultures, many of the answers to the mystery of Tlatilco remain unsolved.



Tlatilco Archaeological Site, 1940s  
Archive of Miguel Covarrubias, Libraries Division, University of the Americas, Puebla, Mexico

The Tlatilco exhibition is a significant opportunity for the RMM and provides the following benefits:

1. Gives the Museum a presence in the community while the RMM is shuttered;
2. Brings a partnership with the Riverside Art Museum, enhancing the concept of a “Museum Corridor” on Mission Inn Avenue;
3. Features a Museum collection that never has been exhibited;
4. Enhances regional and national connections with loans from the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution and Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and
5. Shares the RMM’s Mexican archaeology collection with the community and honors the City of Riverside’s Mexican-American residents who claim this ancient heritage.

#### Community Outreach:

Educators from RAM and RMM have collaborated to provide content from this exhibit to Riverside Unified School District students in grades K-6 through the successful Art-to-Go program. Through the visual arts, students will be introduced to the concepts of ancient civilizations and archaeology. Students who participate in the Art-to-Go program will be given a free ticket to visit the exhibit.

Partnerships with local artists will also bring this exhibition to the community. A nine-foot sculpture made of recycled cans by local artist Martin Sanchez features the Museum’s Tlatilco ‘Pretty Lady’ figure. The large sculpture will be exhibited at various locations throughout the City including at libraries and the Riverside Art Museum.

After visiting the Tlatilco exhibit, it is the Museum’s goal that visitors will leave with the following outcomes:

1. Greater appreciation of the rich culture of these ancient Mexican people;
2. Greater understanding of the archaeological process and how these people and their objects were uncovered;
3. Members of Riverside's Hispanic community will have the opportunity to experience this aspect of their rich heritage;
4. Visitors will be inspired to search for answers to the questions they have about Tlatilco;
5. Visitors will compare how they live today with how ancient Tlatilco peoples lived; and
6. Visitors will recognize that the foods they eat today were eaten by Tlatilco peoples thousands of years ago.

### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

The fiscal impact of this action for the Riverside Metropolitan Museum is \$69,211 funded by Museum Exhibit Account 5305000-450048 (\$12,275) and Special Department Supplies Account 5305000-426800 (\$56,936) over two fiscal years (\$51,050 in FY17-18 and \$18,161 for FY 18-19). The remaining cost of the exhibit is \$29,530 and will be funded by the Riverside Art Museum, Riverside Museum Associates and private donors.

Prepared by: Dr. Brenda Focht, Museum Curator  
Certified as to  
availability of funds: Adam Raymond, Chief Financial Officer/Treasurer  
Approved by: Alexander T. Nguyen, Assistant City Manager Acting Museum Director  
Approved as to form: Gary G. Geuss, City Attorney

Attachment: Presentation