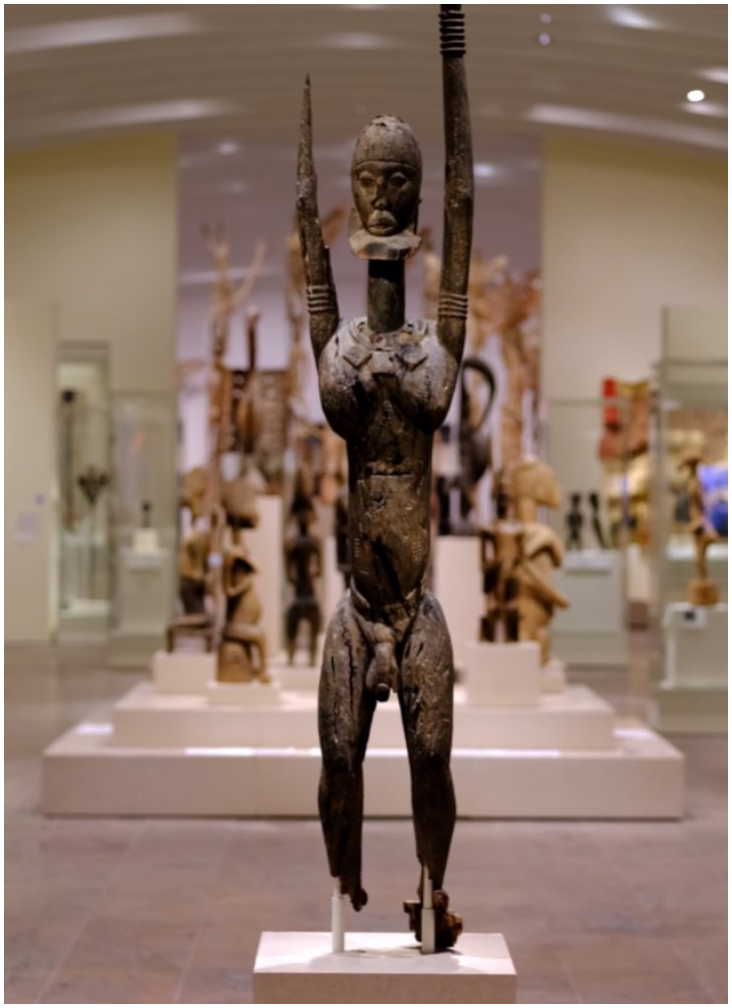
The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

The Most Wondrous Art in the World in 1,726 Objects

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Michael C. Rockefeller collection from Africa, the Ancient Americas and Oceania reopens with a pantheon of historic art stars.



In the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, a carved figure from Mali is the welcoming host.

By Holland Cotter

Visuals by Christopher Gregory-Rivera

May 28, 2025

If you want to feel the charge of excitement that great art — no imaginative limits — and new thinking about it can bring, head to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's redesigned and reconceived Michael C. Rockefeller wing, and its collection of work from Africa, the Americas and Oceania that opens on Saturday. Go for the pure visual pleasure of the work there — believe me, it'll have your eyes spinning — and go for the still unfolding histories it tells.

Every step of the way through the revamped galleries, closed since 2021, is wondrous. Spaces that once felt cramped and crowded have become enveloping vistas that will stop you in your tracks. Objects once confined to boxy wall cases are now free-standing and approachable, to be engaged with, like the living things they were conceived to be, and truly are.

These 1,726 objects — majestic carved wood figures from Africa; pocket-size mythical beings, cast in gold, from Mexico; a communally painted, Sistine-worthy ceiling of the South Seas from New Guinea — are as beautiful as any art anywhere on this earth, and represent the spiritual, political and emotional lives of people spread over five continents and eight millenniums.

The Museum of Primitive Art, in a townhouse on West 54th Street in Manhattan, was founded by Nelson A. Rockefeller and opened in 1957. It was devoted to the early arts of the Indigenous cultures of Africa, the Americas and Oceania before closing in 1976.Credit...Museum of Primitive Art Records, Visual Resource Archive (VRA), Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art via The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Photo by Charles Uht

And for even deeper appreciation, it's useful to remember the history of such work as it has existed in our art museums. Until fairly recently, this art wasn't here. When, early in the 20th century, the Met was given a substantial collection of pre-Columbian art, it trucked the material across Central Park to the American Museum of Natural History, where, the idea was, it belonged among mineral specimens and dinosaur bones. "Primitive" art was an art of no dates, produced by craftsmen (always men) with no names, in cultures out of touch with any larger world.

Such thinking was still the rule at most art institutions in the 1950s, when Nelson A. Rockefeller, the politician, avid art collector and Met trustee, tried to interest the museum in exhibiting his large collection of pre-Columbian and African material.

Failing in his persuasion, he opened in 1957 a museum of his own, calling it the Museum of Primitive Art. (The original name, the Museum of Indigenous Art, was rejected for fear people would confuse "Indigenous" with "indigent.") It occupied a modest-size townhouse on West 54th Street directly behind the Museum of Modern Art, of which Nelson's mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, was a founder.

In 1982, the Met incorporated Nelson Rockefeller's collection and his son Michael Rockefeller's art from the Pacific islands and Australia into a wing designed by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo.Credit...Jack Manning/The New York Times

A dozen years later — by which time the holdings included a significant gathering of art from the Pacific islands and Australia assembled by Rockefeller's son Michael, a budding ethnologist who died in New Guinea in 1961 at age 23 — the Met changed its mind. Under its venturesome director Thomas Hoving, it agreed to acquire the collection and build a 40,000-square-foot addition to house it. And in 1982 the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing opened.

The newly refreshed $70 million version — designed by Kulapat Yantrasast of WHY Architecture, in collaboration with Beyer Blinder Belle and the Met's design department — stays within the wing's original footprint, but shifts the ground plan around.

A problem with the old configuration was that the Wing didn't feel organically part of the museum. The primary entrance, from the Greek and Roman galleries, brought us into the African portion of the collection but also seemed to lead us past it, as if it were a roadside attraction to whatever lay beyond.

Surrounded and embraced by the creative power of Africa in the entry to the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, with clusters of work from many cultures.

This has wonderfully changed. The main point of entry to the African collection is still from the Greek and Roman galleries, but now when we enter, under a high white ribbed-arch ceiling, we are *in* Africa, surrounded and embraced by it. In the center is a savanna of wood-carved sculptures, with enfilades of intimate exhibition spaces on either side and, leading off to the left, deep into the wing.

And the material installed in these spaces is dizzying in its inventive range, letting you know at a glance that there is no single essential "Africa," but a multitude of individual cultures rooted in the continent that we have bundled, through lack of knowledge and for political convenience, under that name. And even within those individual cultures, the formal and conceptual variety of the art is awesome, as is instantly evident.

In front of you at the entry is a tall wood-carved male figure, one of the first works acquired by Nelson Rockefeller around 1958. Made by a Dogon artist in an arid, rocky region of Mali between the 14th and 17th centuries, he stands with his long, thin arms raised straight up, heavenward. Commandingly? Beseechingly? A label identifies him as a priest, but we don't really know. One thing for certain, the impression he makes as a welcoming host to the wing is indelible.

Look to his right, and you see a second arresting sight, another male figure, also from Mali, but earlier in date and completely different in style and affect. Molded from terracotta, it's seated and seems to be curling protectively in on itself, as if attempting to sleep, or meditate or hide. Recent research has led to the speculation that ceramic sculptures in this distinctive style, associated with the archaeological site of Jenne-Jeno, were made by women.

Seated Figure, terracotta, from the Middle Niger civilization (what is now Mali), 13th century. The fluidly modeled figure is in a posture that suggests deep contemplation. The artist is unidentified, but women were likely responsible for figurative works created as part of this tradition.

And to the left you find the image of yet another Malian, this one wearing a wristwatch and dreamily sniffing a flower. It's a self-portrait by the great Bamako photographer Seydou Keïta (1921-2001), whose decades of images of his homeland compatriots constitute a kind of ancestral empyrean, a vivid archive of a people, a time and a place. (The self-portrait is part of a large cache of African-made photographs recently gifted to the Met by the German collector Artur Walther.)

The reinstallation adheres to a format set in this opening selection: clusters of works from individual cultures anchored by one or more single outstanding pieces. A succession of mini-galleries devoted to Central Africa follows, lined with one masterwork after another. A fan-shape Tsesah crest mask that looks like frozen fire. A palm oil-saturated Fang female reliquary figure is flexed like a wrestler but plump as a baby. (She was once owned by the Parisian painter André Derain, and with her geometrically imagined limbs — all swelling tubes — she could well have provided master-class training for the likes of Matisse and Picasso.)

Left, a reliquary guardian figure of the Okak-Fang people (Gabon), 19th to early 20th century, made from wood, metal.

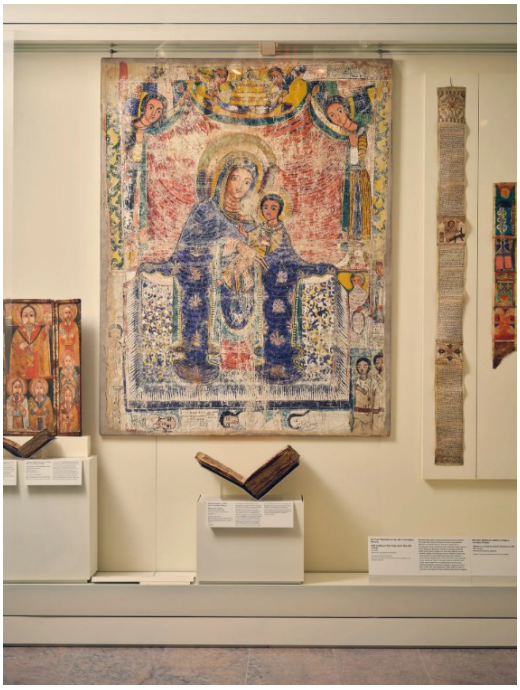
Left, the reliquary sculptural bust known as the Great Bieri, by a Fang-Betsi artist, 19th century, wood, copper alloy, palm oil.

A 19th-century Kongo power figure identified as Mangaaka, an embodiment of ferocious, eruptive justice, looms in your path. And in a West African gallery a short distance away, an exquisite 16th-century carved ivory face, in the form of a pendant, glows like a candle. Carved in what is now Nigeria, and long acknowledged as one of the Met's marquee masterworks, it's an image of a revered Benin queen named Idia, and honors her as both a moral exemplum and a brilliant political strategist.

A view facing the Benin gallery in the African wing. In the center is the ivory pendant mask of Queen Idia.

From Nigeria, the Queen Mother Pendant Mask, by a 16th-century Edo artist, honors the Benin queen Idia. It “glows like a candle,” our critic said.

All along this sculptural route, the air is alive with atmospheric activity: the sound of devotional Bwiti harp music recorded in Gabon; the flickering sight, in films, of masks being danced. Together these complete the art here by suggesting the world it existed in and enriched. The many, varied and fabulous examples of textiles now on view throughout the galleries — an innovation of the rethinking — serve the same purpose. (You’ll find echoes, by the way, of the colors and patterns in the collection’s silk kente cloth wrap from Ghana in the Costume Institute’s current dynamite exhibition “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style” upstairs.)



Wall painting of the Virgin and Child, possibly Lake Tana region of Ethiopia, circa 1800. Egg tempera on cotton canvas.

In the African galleries, the spiritual and secular mingle. This rainbow-hued Book of the Gospels, by a Northern Highlands artist in what is now Ethiopia, was made in late 14th to early 15th century, of parchment, wood and tempera.

This procession of marvels, in which the spiritual and secular cannot be separated, concludes with a chapel-like treasury of Ethiopian liturgical material — a rainbow-hued, 14th- and 15th- century Book of the Gospels and a timeworn but luminous painting of the Virgin and Child are the breath-takers here — after which we transition to other cultural worlds, those of Oceania and the Americas.

In the Rockefeller Wing's original design by Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, the collection's three titular categories were laid out in big, solid, side-by-side blocks with little or no overflow from one to the next. The Oceania collection, which featured towering wood funerary poles carved by Asmat artists of Papua New Guinea, was almost entirely contained in what is still the wing's most dramatic space, a gallery with angled floor-to-ceiling windows looking south onto Central Park.

Over time, though, this sunlight-flooded location proved threatening to art made, as most Oceanic work is, from light-sensitive materials: wood, fiber, paint. Attempts to apply filters to the windows were only partially successful. So with the redesign, a portion of the most vulnerable Oceanic art has been moved to new quarters in the wing's interior, and a selection of durable Ancient American objects made of stone, metal and ceramic has been brought out into the light.

Vista of the Arts of the Ancient Americas, where venerable objects made of stone, metal and ceramic have been brought out into the light from Central Park.

The Art of the Americas display, with its primary entrance across from the museum's Modern and Contemporary galleries, begins with some of the oldest objects in the collection. One is a near life-size Olmec head from Mexico cut from sea-green jade and dated from 900-400 B.C. Its features look human but also, with catlike eyes, not. Another is an extraordinary, fragmented ceramic figure made sometime between 200 B.C. and 400 A.D. in Colombia or Ecuador. It depicts an avidly energetic-looking super-ager — a shaman? — who seems to occupy nonbinary terrain between genders and species. (The figure's spine resembles an iguana's tail.)

A jadeite face by an Olmec artist, 900-400 B.C.E.

A gold Serpent labret, or lip plug, from Mexico, 1325-1521 C.E.

The phenomenon of in-betweenness, which can also mean all-togetherness, is the subject of much of this art. A pert bird with human limbs balances like a dancer on tiptoe in a Moche ear ornament.

A small, cast-gold snake with an open-mouth grin and a movable tongue serves as a lip-plug — a prestige ornament — for an Aztec ruler; when the ruler moves, the tongue moves as if the snake is speaking for him, or about to strike.

And in two intricately layer-carved Toltec relief panels, the image of an eagle devouring a human heart is equally an image of human and avian rule: magnificence and predation joined.

In the Arts of the Ancient Americas, these exquisitely carved stone Eagle Reliefs by Toltec artists, 900-1200 C.E., were gifts to the Met from Frederic E. Church, a painter of the Hudson River School, in 1893. They depict an eagle biting into a stylized rendering of a human heart.

The eagle reliefs, donated to the Met in 1893 by the Hudson River School painter Frederic E. Church — his cinematic “Heart of the Andes” is on permanent view elsewhere in the museum — likely once adorned a temple facade. Conceived to catch the daily play of sunlight and shadow, they’re ideally situated in their new home in the south-facing gallery, which they share with one of the space’s original tenants, an Oceanic work too big to fit anywhere else.

An Inca artist made this tunic around 1400-1535 C.E., from camelid fiber, on display in the new Andes textile gallery, which the Met calls the first of its kind in the United States.

It's one of the museum's tours-de-force sights: an 80-foot-long suspended ceiling originally composed of some 270 palm-leaf paintings made by some two dozen Kwoma artists from the single village of Mariwai in Papua New Guinea. Such ceilings were traditionally created for community ritual centers. This one was produced for museum display. Commissioned in 1970 by the art historian Douglas Newton, the Met's first curator of Oceanic art, it was shipped to New York and placed in the Met in 1982. For the present reinstallation, changes have been made. After consultation with the village, paintings of what are considered spiritually restricted imagery have been removed, though the impression of rhapsodic energy the ceiling projects remains unchanged.

The redesigned wing, by Kulapat Yantrasast of WHY Architecture with Beyer, Blinder, Belle, features a Ceremonial House Ceiling by Kwoma artists, Papua New Guinea.

The dates alone make it a work of contemporary art; all the artists, whose names are recorded, would have agreed with that designation. Yet at least some of the contents of the Papuan paintings — plant and animal forms, constellations, clan emblems, spiritual insignia — represent histories and philosophies originating far back in time.

It's good to know that the architectural plan for the next wing to be reimagined, the Met's Tang galleries for Modern and Contemporary Art, due for completion in 2030, calls for eliminating the hallway that separates the Rockefeller wing and this new space. We will step directly from the new art of one culture (primarily Western) to the new-old art of other cultures, much of which has, whether we are aware of it or not, influenced us profoundly.

Meanwhile, the bulk of the museum's Oceanic material has now been repositioned within the Rockefeller wing. Much can be found in a string of galleries that cuts diagonally across the wing, forming a kind of tidal stream linking the south-facing space to a brand-new gallery of similarly monumental scale.\

Mask (Buk, Krar or Kara cultures), made by a Torres Strait Islander, mid-to-late 19th century, from turtle shell, wood, cassowary feathers.

The trip from one to the other is an archipelago journey, with stops in the Torres Strait Islands for the sight of a fantastic turtle-shell mask topped with seraphic wings; and in New Guinea for an openwork panel chirping and buzzing with the tracery forms of Sepik River birds and bugs; and in New Zealand for the Maori artist Fiona Pardington's grave photographic memorial to native species now lost. (Pardington will represent New Zealand in the 2026 Venice Biennale.)

The journey concludes (or begins) in a high-domed gallery adjacent to the large introductory African space. Here, height means everything. The primary display is the cluster of nine 15-foot-tall carved wood Asmat funerary poles acquired in 1961 by Michael Rockefeller, who disappeared after a boating mishap off the New Guinea coast the same year.

A South Seas Ceremonial House Ceiling from pieces of painted sago palm leaf stems. The panels, through their designs, are a map of the cosmos, mythical knowledge and clan histories.

As a wall text notes, such poles, despite their size and their elaborate carvings, were, by intention, ephemeral things. They were made in response to emergencies, specifically to the deaths — through wars or headhunting raids or sorcery — of community members. Once those deaths had been avenged, the poles were moved to the forest to rot. The nine examples acquired by Michael Rockefeller were new when he got them, made in the 1950s, which qualifies them, like the South Seas ceiling, as modern or contemporary work.

The organizers of the refreshed Rockefeller galleries — Alisa LaGamma, curator of African art and curator in charge of the Wing; Joanne Pillsbury and Laura Filloy Nadal, curators of the arts of the Ancient Americas; and Maia Nuku, curator for the arts of Oceania — are clearly aware of the cultural pertinence, concrete or symbolic, of the art under their care and make an effort to situate the works, ancient or modern in date, on an art historical continuum coming up to our own time.

A woven body mask by an Asmat artist of southwest New Guinea, mid-20th century, used for ritual feasts that celebrate passage of the recently deceased to the ancestral realm. It comprises a wealth of local materials including mulberry fiber, rattan, sago palm leaves and bamboo feathers.

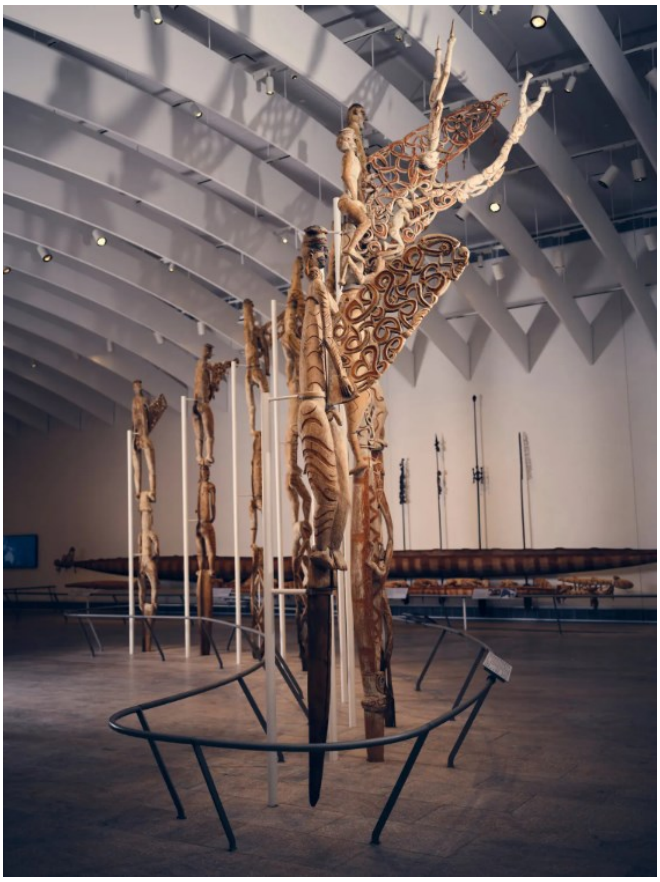
You find this in a gallery of rotating short-term exhibitions, the first one devoted to the influential Senegalese-born, French-trained painter Iba Ndiaye (1928-2008), whose career coincided with the colonial independence movement in Africa, and whose work references Indigenous West African art, European modernism and African Islamic tradition.

You find it in the presence of a 2008 series of large-scale photographs called “African Spirits” by the Franco-Cameroonian artist Samuel Fosso, in which he “masks-up” as Angela Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Malcolm X and other heroes of 20th-century Black liberation movements.

Samuel Fosso: From the series 'African Spirits' L_002649 (Tommie Smith), 2008, Ilford Fiberbased Glossy Paper

Samuel Fosso: From the series 'African Spirits' L_002202 (L. S. Senghor), 2008, Ilford Fiberbased Glossy Paper

You find it in informational wall texts and object labels that are straightforward on such once-skirted subjects as the reality of institutional slavery within Africa and in the pre- and post-conquest Americas. (For the record, there’s also an ultra-discreet reference to the repatriation issues that have roiled the art world over the past several years.)



The Asmat people of southwest New Guinea honored their ancestors with rituals that reminded the living to avenge their deaths. Their towering carved “bis” poles in the Oceania section, circa 1960, incorporate ancestor figures and were a focal point for memorial feasts.

You find it in a museum presentation of cultures, formerly known as “primitive,” in which artists are no longer treated, by default, as “anonymous.” With the increase in research since 1982, a pantheon of historic art stars — Olowe of Ise; Zlan of Belewale, Ngongo ya Chintu, formerly known as the Buli Master — has formed and continues to expand.

And you find it in the acknowledgment, totally absent in 1982, of the creative power of women, aesthetic, social and political.

“We are aware of our kinship with all mankind,” the art historian Robert Goldwater wrote in his 1957 introduction to the first catalog of the Museum of Primitive Art. And a sense of global kinship is alive in the Met reinstallation, with its equal-time inclusion of hundreds of cultures, all in different ways striving for internal balance and pursuing spiritual yearnings, and — many more than we once imagined — in productive communication across lands and seas.

Again I say, come to savor developing histories and some of the most moving art, old or new, you’ll ever see.

The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing

Opens May 31, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave, (212) 535-7710; metmuseum.org.
Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic and a senior writer for the Culture section of The Times, where he has been on staff since 1998.