

Curricular Guide to

Gala Porras Kim: Precipitation for an Arid Landscape and the Sacred Cenote collections cared for by Harvard's Peabody Museum

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Gala Porras Kim

Fig. 54. Gold cap and face, probably from an idol.

Scales: a, 2/3; 6, 3/4. See table XXXVI. (Lothrop, p. 70), 2021

Graphite on paper, Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council



Harvard
Radcliffe
Institute



Peabody Museum
of Archaeology & Ethnology

About the Guide

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape is on view from February 14 – July 2, 2022, in the Johnson-Kulukundis Family Gallery on Radcliffe's campus at 8 Garden Street, Byerly Hall.

Individuals and groups can plan their visits to the [exhibition](#) and to the [museum](#) online.

This resource, compiled by the Harvard Radcliffe Institute and Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, is a guide to the exhibition *Precipitation for an Arid Landscape* and the collection from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá that is currently cared for by Harvard's Peabody Museum. This guide invites gallery and museum visitors to learn more about the artist's work, the history of the Sacred Cenote, and allows both institutions to address the history of this challenging collection.

About the Peabody Museum

As one of the oldest museums of anthropology, the history of the Peabody Museum is intricately linked to legacies of colonialism and imperialism. In its development as a research and teaching institution, the Peabody directly benefited from collecting practices that ignored the wishes and values of families and communities of origin. The Peabody Museum is committed to ongoing engagement and collaboration with descendant communities and examination of the practices that led to the collection of all cultural material in the collections. More information on the museum and the collections can be found [here](#).

[View collections and photographs from Chichén Itzá](#) in the care of the Peabody Museum.

About the Radcliffe Institute

The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University is one of the world's leading centers for interdisciplinary exploration. We bring students, scholars, artists, and practitioners together to pursue curiosity-driven research, expand human understanding, and grapple with questions that demand insight from across disciplines. Learn more about the Radcliffe Institute [here](#).

Precipitation for an Arid Landscape is organized by Meg Rotzel, curator of exhibitions at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Contact meg_rotzel@radcliffe.harvard.edu for tours and further information about the exhibition.

About the Exhibition



Gala Porras-Kim: Photo Courtesy of Tony Rinaldo

Gala Porras-Kim (b. 1984, Bogotá, Colombia) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work contemplates the relationship between historical objects and the institutions that collect, care for, and exhibit them. During her 2019–2020 fellowship at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Porras-Kim examined how objects from the Yucatán Peninsula of what is now Mexico, entered the collection of Harvard University’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

The exhibition presents artworks that explore how sacred objects may continue to perform their original functions after they arrive in museum collections and offers a series of speculative interventions that grapple with questions surrounding stewardship and restitution. The making of the exhibition required close collaboration and conversations with museum staff about the nature of ownership and care – work that is as vital a part of this project as are the objects on view in the Radcliffe gallery and in the Peabody Museum.

Porras-Kim’s research-based practice focuses on the social and cultural contexts that shape how sounds, language, and history have been represented in a variety of disciplines, from linguistics to museum conservation. Her work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions over the past decade and is included in collections worldwide. She has been the recipient of numerous grants and is a 2020–2021 artist in residence at the Getty Research Institute.

Selected Artworks

The exhibition features new artworks alongside a textile on loan from the Peabody Museum's Sacred Cenote collection. These materials, paired with correspondence between the artist and Jane Pickering, William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of the Peabody Museum, imagine strategies for thinking through issues of restitution.



Mediating with the Rain, 2021-ongoing

Correspondence between Gala Porras-Kim and Jane Pickering, William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology
(Full-size images of the letters appear at the end of this document)

Following Porras-Kim's research into the artifacts from the Sacred Cenote, the artist drafted a letter to the director of the museum that offered suggestions for reconnecting the items in the collection with their spiritual life. The artist questions what it means to serve as a steward of the collection, and the director responds with the institution's priorities.



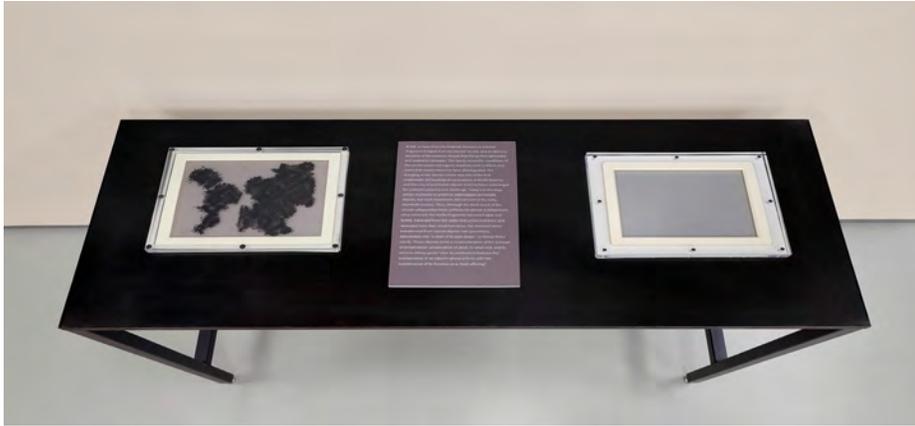
44 offerings for the rain at the Peabody Museum, 2021, and 203 offerings for the rain at the Peabody Museum, 2021
 Graphite and ink on paper,
 48.5 x 36.5 inches
 Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council

The six large-scale drawings that appear in the exhibition function as an inventory of the textile fragments from the Sacred Cenote held in the museum. These renderings invite visitors to contemplate how institutional framing and museological practices shape the meaning of objects.



Precipitation for an arid landscape, 2022
 Copal, dust from the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, rain
 12 x 10 x .5 inches

This sculpture combines dust collected by museum staff from its facilities with copal, a tree sap burned in Maya ceremonies, which was found in the cenote. Each institution that exhibits a version of this sculpture devises a system for watering it with local rainwater, facilitating a potential reunion between the sacred materials and the rain. The ongoing care required by the artwork enlists the exhibitor as a partner in enabling the enduring spiritual life of these materials, while examining the obligations museums have toward the objects they collect.



Left: Carbonized cotton textile fragment from Chichén Itzá, CE 1300-1539
Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 984-2-20/25612A-C

Right: Museum mount for crepeline, 2022
Acrylic, screws, interior mat, crepeline, dried rainwater

The exhibit features a textile from the museum paired with a facsimile of the textile's mount. The cenote had safeguarded items for almost a millennium; once removed, they became fragile and brittle. Extracted and alienated from ritual functions, the removed items transformed from sacred objects into specimens.

Historical Context

Dotting the limestone plateau of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula are many natural sinkholes, called cenotes, which expose pools of groundwater—the only permanent source of surface water in the region. The Sacred Cenote at the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá is one of the largest, measuring 200 feet in diameter. The Maya consider cenotes to be entrances to the spirit world and the dwelling places of Chaac, a Maya god of rain and thunder. Beginning around 750 CE and for many centuries thereafter, the Sacred Cenote served as a site of pilgrimage for the Maya, who venerated Chaac by depositing offerings and sacrifices in its depths, where they remained submerged and well-preserved for many hundreds of years.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, Edward H. Thompson—a diplomat and an ethnographer originally from Massachusetts—purchased the estate that contained the ruins of Chichén Itzá and began to dredge the Sacred Cenote. Over the course of several years, he extracted thousands of artifacts made of cloth, wood, ceramic, bone, shell, gold, jade, and copal (a fragrant tree sap that was burned as incense), along with human remains. Thompson's excavations were privately funded by the Maya scholar Charles Pickering Bowditch, who specified that many of the discovered objects be brought to the Peabody Museum at Harvard. Although Thompson legally owned the land and thus the objects found there, an 1897 Mexican law outlawed exporting antiquities out of Mexico. To evade the authorities, artifacts were smuggled into the United States, sometimes in the luggage of Thompson's friends and colleagues.

Timeline of the Collection from the Sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá	
1894	Edward B. Thompson, an archaeologist and the U.S. Consul stationed in Yucatán, Mexico, purchases a plantation that includes the Maya site of Chichén Itzá
1899	Thompson corresponds with Alfred Tozzer, soon to be a faculty member at Harvard, regarding his plans to dredge the Cenote for cultural material and conduct archaeological investigations on the land
1901	Thompson sends fragments of mural paintings to the U.S. consulate acknowledging a 1897 law that outlawed the removal of antiquities from Mexico
1904-1910	Thompson dredges the Sacred Cenote to collect cultural material, including gold, jade, copal, wooden artifacts, as well as human remains
1909	Charles Pickering Bowditch, American financier, archaeologist, and epigrapher, agrees to privately fund Thompson's work in Chichén Itzá
	Thompson utilizes underwater diving technology to explore the floor of the Cenote
1910	Bowditch gifts Cenote collections to the Peabody Museum
1910-1920	Mexican Revolution
1921	Thompson's residence burns
1926	The Mexican government seizes Thompson's residence and charges him with the theft and illegal exportation of archaeological patrimony; the Peabody Museum is named as an accomplice
	Thompson returns to the United States
	A letter is sent by the Mexican secretary of education to the legal department of the Mexican government asking for an investigation of Thompson's work at Chichén Itzá
1935	Thompson dies, and the criminal case against him is withdrawn
1940	Alfonso Caso, director of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, meets with Alfred Tozzer to discuss the return of a representative sample of the Cenote material
1942	The Mexican government brings a civil suit against heirs to Thompson's estate
1944	The Supreme Court of Mexico rules in favor of the Peabody Museum, acknowledging "[the Peabody] as the ultimate recipient of objects exported illegally"
1959	The Peabody Museum returns approximately 50 gold artifacts from the Sacred Cenote to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City
1976	The Peabody Museum returns a selection of jade artifacts from the Sacred Cenote to Mexico with the understanding that they will become part of the collection at the regional museum in Yucatán

Exhibition Themes and Guiding Questions

The following prompts are designed to explore the broader themes of *Precipitation for an Arid Landscape* and to elicit further discussion around Gala Porras-Kim's artistic practice.

- Consider institutional collections of historical objects: How do we understand collecting and collections? In what ways does ownership differ from stewardship?
- Explore an object's functionality: What is the relationship between an object's physical form, its function, and its sacred meaning? How are these elements prioritized in museums?
- Note the environment: What is the role of the environment in Gala Porras-Kim's work? How did the environmental conditions of the Sacred Cenote affect the objects found within its watery depths?
- Assess the potential for maintenance: Is preservation synonymous with conservation? How might the social or spiritual life of an object continue after its accession into a museum collection?
- Reflect on the legality of events: How did the law influence the trajectory of objects excavated from the Sacred Cenote?

Resources and Further Reading

Peabody Museum projects regarding Latin America

- The [Muchos Méxicos](#) exhibition, on display at the Peabody Museum through spring 2023, explores Mexico's rich history as a site of human innovation, creativity and cultural diversity
- The online exhibition [Fragile Memories](#) highlights the long-standing relationship between the Peabody Museum and the community in Copan, Honduras, which have been tied together through nearly 100 years of archaeological work in the area
- The [Corpus for Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions](#) Program is an active publication series, field research and archive of ancient Maya inscriptions and art, begun in 1968 that is grounded in community collaboration and engagement

Peabody Museum Resources

Lothrop, Samuel K. (1952). Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza, Yucatan. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum*, vol. 10, no. 2. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Tozzer, Alfred M. (1957). Chichen Itza and its Cenote of Sacrifice: a comparative study of contemporaneous Maya and Toltec. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum*, vols. 11, 12. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Proskouriakoff, Tatiana. (1974). Jades from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza, Yucatan. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum*, vol. 10, no. 21. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Coggins, Clemency Chase, editor. (1992). [Artifacts from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza, Yucatan: Textiles, Basketry, Stone, Bone, Shell, Ceramics, Wood, Copal, Rubber, Other Organic Materials, and Mammalian Remains. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*](#), vol. 10, no. 3. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

[Spencer Burke. Envoy: From Deep to Dark](#). The Harvard Advocate, 2011 Commencement issue.

Videos and articles about the artist

[“Delfina Presents: Gala Porras-Kim,”](#) Delfina Foundation (2021)

Porras-Kim describes how and why she investigates the functionality of historical objects in museum collections, including those at the British Museum.

[“In This Moment: Art and Museums,”](#) Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University (2020)

Megan O’Neil, assistant professor of art history at Emory University, speaks to Porras-Kim about her art practice and the role of museums in the world today.

[“Gala Porras-Kim: Artist Talk,”](#) Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University (2019)

Porras-Kim discusses the way in which her work explores the limits of artistic agency, property rights, and corporal integrity.

[“Made in L.A. 2016: Gala Porras-Kim,”](#) Hammer Museum (2016)

Porras-Kim describes her speculations on the potential histories of unidentified objects at the Fowler Museum of UCLA.

[“On the Afterlife and Happiness of Objects,”](#) 13th Gwangju Biennale (2020)

An interview between Defne Ayas, Natasha Ginwala, and Porras-Kim on the treatment of human remains at the Gwangju National Museum.

[“An Encounter with Gala Porras-Kim: Afterlife of an Artifact,”](#) Max Pearl for *Vulture* (2021)

A profile on Porras-Kim and her artwork in *Precipitation for an Arid Landscape* at the Amant Foundation, Brooklyn NY.

[“Spiritual Coroner: Gala Porras-Kim,”](#) Travis Diehl for *Carla* (Contemporary Art Review LA) (2020)

A feature on Porras-Kim’s interests in historical collecting practices, museum conservation, cultural restitution, and speculative interventions.

[“The Irresistible, Transcontinental Art of Gala Porras-Kim,”](#) Alexandra Pechman for *Art Basel Magazine* (2018)

An article on Porras-Kim’s early interest in the Zapotec language and her research-based approach to art making.

Further Images

Gala Porras-Kim
4727 2nd Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90043

New York City, November 20, 2021

Ms. Jane Pickering
William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director
Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology
Harvard University
11 Divinity Ave, Cambridge, MA 02138

RE: Mediating with the rain

Dear Ms. Pickering,

Thanks very much to you and your staff for being so accommodating and helpful in providing records and information regarding the objects that were dredged from the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itza currently located in your museum. As I mentioned in our last meeting, I am interested in objects suspended from their original function or purpose by being stored and displayed in institutions solely as historical objects. In this case, these votive offerings were submerged as tributes to the Mayan rain god Chaac, and probably never meant to leave the cenote. It is clear from the documents regarding the provenance of these objects that human laws were used to displace them from their intended place to their current location at the Peabody. Their owner, the rain, is still around.

Some of the objects had been preserved over centuries because they were submerged in water in the cenote. Their current state of dehydration, caused by their extraction and maintenance by conservators, permanently changed their composition so now they are just dust particles held together through conservation methods. The Peabody is, in fact, preserving this dust as a shell of its past shape. Your storage, being one of the driest environments in which they can exist, is in complete opposition to their submerged wet state, and their current condition as historical artifacts might make it difficult to realize their purpose with the rain.

The museum is tasked with caring for the object, but should not be limited only to the physical conservation of material form, by extending this care to the immaterial and the preservation of the ritual function—the dignitary interests—that may still exist within the object. Since we can only speculate on what the rain might want, we can, by extension, consider ways in which we can reinstitute the ritual life they continue to have within them as well.

For this purpose, I would like to thank you for collecting and providing the fallen dust that was available in the storage room, which is now being rehydrated through various means. Of course, there are many ways that these multiple functions can coexist and I've attached some initial ideas to brainstorm. I look forward to discussing with you future solutions to this arid landscape.

Thank you again for your attention, consideration, and time, and I await your reply with interest.

Sincerely,

Mediating with the Rain, 2021-ongoing

Correspondence between Gala Porras-Kim and Jane Pickering, William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology

Mediating with the rain

- continue to collect the dust that falls off the objects in storage and release it in the rain.
- consider transferring the ownership in the cataloguing records to the rain, and identifying these objects as loans.
- ascertain scientifically the maximum exposure to rain water the objects can endure without physical change or damage, and arrange such reunion visits with the rain.

(continued)

Mediating with the Rain, 2021-ongoing

Correspondence between Gala Porras-Kim and Jane Pickering, William and Muriel Seabury

Howells Director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology



Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

JANE PICKERING

William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director

Gala Porras-Kim
4727 2nd Ave
Los Angeles
CA 90043
December 3rd, 2021

Dear Gala,

Thank you for your letter. I know my staff will appreciate your kind words, which I hope I may pass on.

Before I respond to the issues you raise, I would like to mention that, as we said at the time, the collection is in professionally-managed storage and there is no dust to retrieve from that location. However, since we were refinishing the floor of the third-floor gallery that houses the Maya exhibits ("Encounters with the Americas"), we were able to provide dust generated by that project.

The Peabody has committed to a holistic program of ethical stewardship of the collections in its care. Ethical stewardship includes culturally responsive practices often missing from traditional museum care and conservation, especially, as you note, when there has been a suspension from the original function or purpose of the item. As stewards, we are committed to sharing authority with descendant communities to understand how we can undertake these additional forms of care. We welcome perspectives on how to accomplish this goal.

We are looking forward to your exhibition in the Johnson-Kulukundis Gallery at Radcliffe and to the programming and further conversations it will generate. I hope we will be able to meet again in person then.

With very best wishes,

Jane

Mediating with the Rain, 2021-ongoing

Correspondence between Gala Porras-Kim and Jane Pickering, the William and Muriel Seabury Howells Director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology

Images of Chichén Itzá and the Sacred Cenote



View from the North, Chichén Itzá

Gift of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1950. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, [50-63-20/18490](#)



Photograph of the Cenote

Gift of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1958. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, [58-34-00/2.313](#)