In September 2019, the Penn Museum will open its re-installation of the Mexico & Central America Gallery. The current display is one of the oldest in the institution, with wall cases dating to 1949 and the layout of stone monuments from 1954. The first big change will be architectural, with two false walls—which formerly enclosed storage spaces—demolished to add about 20% to the available floor-space. There will be new flooring and lighting as well, and, for the first time, air-conditioning. The exhibition itself will be radically different, with new case designs showing a larger number of objects and wider representation of cultures from across the region. The Museum’s field research has long focused on Maya culture, and that area will remain a key part of the reconfigured gallery. Yet rarely seen pieces will allow us to better tell the story of other major civilizations, including those of the Olmec, Teotihuacan, Zapotec, Tajin, Mixtec, and Aztec, all from Mexico, and the varied cultures of Central America that reach all the way down to Panama.

Shown here are three of the objects that will be featured in the re-installed Mexico & Central America Gallery. The greenstone yoke (above left) is from the Gulf Coast of Mexico and dates to ca. 700 CE. It is carved with human heads, leaves, and knots. Traces of cinnabar (red pigment) were found over the entire yoke. PM object 62.11-3. A gold bell pendant from Costa Rica (top center) features a monkey with a headdress of snakes. PM object SA2781. Piedras Negras Stela 14 from Guatemala (above right) is one of the best preserved and historically important outside Mexico and Central America. PM object L-16-382. Photograph courtesy of Nightfire Films.