

## ***TAÍNO: ANCIENT VOYAGERS OF THE CARIBBEAN***

***An exhibition organized by El Museo del Barrio, New York, New York***

Services provided: Exhibition coordination, conceptual design, final design, fabrication and installation in this interpretive exhibition.

Size: Approximately 1,800 square feet

Opening: October 2000

This permanent interpretive exhibition features approximately 114 Pre-Columbian artifacts, taken mostly from the collection of El Museo del Barrio. The exhibition is intended to provide a context for the permanent display of the museum's Taíno collection, complimented by a changing variety of objects on loan from museums in the U.S. and the Caribbean. The exhibition reflects ideas from scholars working with Taíno material, highlighting major cultural and visual themes from the Taíno culture of 1200 to approximately 1500 A.D.

GANYS worked closely with the planning team from El Museo to develop an interpretive vision for the exhibition that meets the museum's audience education goals. Together with curators, educators, and the registrar, GANYS developed an interpretive plan that presents the Taíno world from this culture's own perspective, looking at its mythology, environment, and material culture and weaving together a picture of the dynamic but now mostly lost culture of the Taíno people. The group wanted to tell the story of the Taíno people through visual references to the sea, forest, and caves—images from which appear on the artifacts featured in the main portion of the exhibition. Visitors enter the exhibition through a long, multi-use hallway. This space has often caused traffic flow problems, and the designer encouraged visitors to move along the hall by creating a three-dimensional timeline, drawing the audience down the space while helping them to understand the migratory origins of the Taíno people and their precursors in the Caribbean. Halfway down the hall, the exhibit shifts its focus from how anthropologists understand the Taíno to how the Taíno conceptualized their own universe. Text and diagrams explain the Taíno worldview, while the visitor encounters an impressionistic mural of the Pre-Columbian mangrove forest, which was central to the Taíno world. Interwoven with stencils of leaves are images of animals found in both the forest and in mythic stories—fish, birds, snakes, lizards, manatees, and mammals, including bats. The mural is completed at the terminus of the hallway, where a canoe silhouette is projected onto the floor, reflective of the creation-voyager myths explored in the exhibit. Straight ahead, preceded by a cave mural with petroglyphs and backed by a star-filled wall is a case with a sculpture of Deminan—the powerful culture hero who was instrumental in the establishment of the sea and in the generation of the Taíno people. Moving in this way, from forest to cave to the celestial world, the mystery of Taíno ritual and its visual vocabulary is set.

The main portion of the exhibition highlights artifacts that illustrate themes related to the social, political, and spiritual world of the Taíno. This exhibition space reflects the visual structure of the Taíno village, with the most powerful space being in the center (with the circular case and the Deminan sculpture), surrounded by a secondary radius of cases containing objects of secular and spiritual importance, to a wider circle of cases displaying objects related to various subthemes. A series of artifacts related to Taíno ballgames is included in the exhibition, along with a photomural of a partially preserved ball court. All the self-lit cases in the exhibition were designed in consultation with conservators, ensuring the cases' ability to maintain various relative humidity levels. This provision is especially critical with the rare wooden and bone objects in the exhibition, many of which are conditioned to high humidity levels in the Caribbean museums from which they were borrowed. Throughout this area of the exhibition, bilingual graphics are used to outline various aspects of secular and spiritual life in the Taíno village, as well as some surviving remnants of Taíno culture. A video is set into an alcove designed for personal reflection or as a gathering space for school groups; this silent DVD presentation is a "virtual village" re-creation of a child's view of his village, as he walks through the village space and presents a view of the changing nature of his world as it moves from day to night. The video ends with a visual reference to the relationship of the exhibit to the village plan, highlighting various artifacts from the exhibit, and reinforcing the idea of the sacred center as a major concept in the Taíno worldview.

Project Designer: Ted Anderson  
Exhibition Coordinator: Donna Ostraszewski

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