

The Musical Instrument Museum

By Manuel Jordán

Phoenix, Arizona

The Musical Instrument Museum

(MIM) was inaugurated in April 2010 in Phoenix, Arizona, with the goal of representing the rich and diverse musical traditions of the world through a comprehensive collection of musical instruments. With “music is the language of the soul” as a guiding adage, the objective of representing and preserving the world’s musical heritage takes on a “live” human dimension. Beyond the display, a significant amount of effort was made to make music (and performance) part of the visitor’s experience.

The museum was designed by Richard Varda in conjunction with the Minneapolis/Phoenix firm RSP Architects. The building reflects a harmonious balance between structure and environment, organically blending into the Arizona desert landscape and mirroring natural forms in some of its design features and space layouts. The two-story, 192,000-square-foot museum houses 75,000 square feet of gallery/exhibition space. The second floor includes most of the musical instrument collection that is on display, divided into five geographic regions, including Africa and the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States and Canada, and Europe. The well-lit galleries are vast, with large numbers of instruments on display. Visitor transit spaces are broad, fluid, and open, allowing one to see the other end of a gallery upon entering it. Very refreshing (and cleverly designed) are the large windows that allow views out to the landscape with mountains at a distance, from the galleries on the second floor. The



museum designers insisted on open object displays, and plexi-covered cases are a rarity. The galleries are evenly balanced in terms of allotted floor space, attention to specific countries and their representative musical instruments, and their associated traditions. In fact, the museum includes/recognizes every country in the world in its geographic second-floor arrangement.

According to Director Bill DeWalt, part of the aim of MIM is “to have the widest focus” possible in representing world cultures, “to celebrate the diversity of music around the globe,” and “to understand how music both

FIGS. 1 & 2 (above):
**Overall exterior view
and main entrance of
the Musical Instrument
Museum in Phoenix,
Arizona.**

© MIM.
Photo: MIM/Bill Timmerman.

FIG. 3 (below and right): **Five harps from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, on loan from the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.**

© MIM. Photo: MIM/Holly Metz.

FIG. 4 (bottom right): **Lyre. Ganda, Uganda.**

© MIM. Photo: MIM/Holly Metz.



defines us and unites us.” Pertinent to the views of what the museum represents, Matthew Hill, Assistant Curator for North America and Guitars, noted that beyond MIM’s focus on musical instruments and traditions, it reflects a palpable sense of humanity, something that is tangible throughout the museum.

Besides the impressive array of musical instruments from around the world, the experience of humanity comes across readily through well-thought-out and attractive displays. These provide the visitor with varied forms of didactic contextualization for the instruments and their respective cultures. Introductory texts for specific sections, proper labeling for the numerous instruments in their forms and types (including local names), generous photographs illustrating the instruments in use, and state-of-the-art audio-visual displays featuring performances all add to the MIM experience, and their effectiveness is evident when observing visitors pleasurably engaged with the displays. Worth stressing here is the astonishing quality of video images and clarity of the audio that people enjoy through headsets—the sound portion is automatically activated as one approaches the different sections and specific monitors. This is not the typically random museum use of audiovisual materials but rather a thoughtful array that is professionally designed and edited to enhance the visitor’s experience to its fullest throughout the museum.

In keeping with the highest quality standards possible, the museum features a theater for presentations and mu-



sical performances with a full concert/performance schedule for 2011. The theater includes a recording studio that furthers the museum's active role in promoting all aspects of music in creative and innovative ways. From the experience of music to that of museology, MIM takes every opportunity to engage the visitor through participatory experience. On the first floor, the conservation laboratory can be viewed from the main hallway by means of a large window that allows visitors to see aspects of the maintenance and restoration of musical instruments. An Experience Gallery includes a large number of instruments from guitars to lamellaphones (thumb pianos) that guests can play, and it has an adjoining classroom for special educational programs. An attractive and spacious foyer includes orientation areas (including a guitar gallery and a large-scale musical instrument display), an engaging video overview of music traditions around the world in a dedicated room, and a Musical Journeys display on the historic spread/exchange of ideas and instrument types across the world.



Also on the first floor, the Target Gallery is dedicated to traveling exhibitions. *American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Music* is on view in that gallery until May 18, 2011. Organized by the Experience Music Project in Seattle, it traces Latin American musical influences in the United States.

Other MIM exhibition spaces include an Artists Gallery featuring musical instruments from world-renowned artists and performers, ranging from Carlos Santana's Yamaha guitar with inlaid Buddhist motifs to a 1926 oud, a lute-like instrument owned and played by Palestinian master musician Simon Shaheen. Adjacent to the Target Gallery is a Mechanical Music Gallery where visitors can focus on precisely that: the automated mechanical or technological aspects of instruments including multi-instrument combinations. The first-floor galleries are accessed through "El Rio," a riverbed-inspired hallway that sinuously plays with the organic intent of the building's architecture while implying a particular flow or rhythm that complements the museum's musical theme. It also provides access to

the museum café and restaurant that in turn opens to a courtyard with waterworks (flow and sound) and a centrally placed, instrument-inspired rotating sculpture titled *Phoenix*, by Belgian artist Louis Halleux.

Part of what is truly extraordinary about MIM as an institution is that it was conceived and executed in a period of less than five years—from the time of the original idea to its opening date in 2010. Although the museum's objective never was to be the largest institution of its kind in terms of collection numbers, it may already have surpassed that milestone, housing more than 14,000 objects.

Africa, the Americas, Oceania Collections

Of particular interest to readers of *Tribal Art* magazine may be the musical instrument collections from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. Of these, Native American musical instruments are shown as part of the broader USA/Canada gallery space. A central "Big Drum" installation highlights the powwow drum, music, song, and dance as a reflection of inter-tribal musical unity and sense of renewal. This serves as a pivot for the group-specific and cultural/regional instrument displays that range from Southeastern United States groups to those of the Arctic and subarctic of Alaska and Canada.

The displays often include corollary materials to contextualize the musical instruments such as costumes, items of dress, and masquerade elements. Notable in this section is an articulated Kwakwaka'wakw Raven mask by carver Ross Henderson in the Northwest Coast display. It is pertinent to mention that MIM explores old and modern musical traditions and contexts, and it represents individuals who have gained recognition (whether locally or internationally) as master instrument-makers. Many displays represent the old and the new in proximity, allowing the visitor to consider aspects of continuity and even innovation. Such juxtapositions increase in scope as one reaches the Latin America gallery, where musical instruments reflect the exchange between European, African, and Native American instrument forms and modes of music-making.

The African diasporic traditions are well represented in the Latin America gallery. The Haiti section, for example, features an ensemble of instruments that includes three drums with painted *Vodou veve* motifs and loa spirit/deity associations. Similarly, the Cuba display shows a set of double-headed batá drums that can be typologically traced to Nigeria. Part of what is fascinating about MIM is that one has the opportunity to access the mirroring traditions just a short walk away, in this case in the African gallery. From The Bahamas to

FIG. 5 (above):
Ivory trumpet with cross motif. Kongo. 16th century.

MIM collection.
© MIM. Photo: MIM/Holly Metz.

FIG. 6 (right):
Drum. Lapland, Sweden.

MIM collection.
© MIM. Photo: MIM/Holly Metz.

FIG. 7 (screened behind):
Drum. Mapuche, Chile.

MIM collection.
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Colombia, Brazil, and beyond, the visitor can explore the African roots at the core of their diverse musical traditions. Within that spectrum, the fusion of African music and instruments with those of indigenous American peoples is also recognized in pertinent countries. Outside the confines of political borders, a section is dedicated to the Garinagu (singular Garifuna) descendants of Carib, Arawak, and African peoples who are today spread across several Central American countries along the Caribbean Coast.

Moving north, the Latin America gallery includes drums, rattles, wind and string instruments from indigenous peoples such as the Purépecha, Rarámuri (Tarahumara), Mayo, and Huichol of Mexico. Similar instruments from the Mapuche and Aymara are exhibited in the Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru sections. The Peru display highlights a full ensemble of Andean panpipes, Quechua string instruments, and coiled and shell trumpets. A centerpiece for the display is a full costume/dress from southern Peru, originally worn by a Scissors Dance performer. It is backed by a large frame harp.

The Asia gallery is vast. It features a number of contextualized stage-like areas illustrating aspects of performance and instrument production. A large section of the gallery is dedicated to a Javanese gamelan ensemble, including xylophones, metallophones, drums, and a full set of puppets and their background screen.

The Oceania display area is adjacent to the Asia gallery. This collection is also divided geographically and features around 300 objects. It includes drums that range from hour glass-shaped hand drums to slit gongs, and any number of other variations in different sizes, all with defining, regional modes of figurative and/or abstract decoration. Rattles, wind instruments, and harps are also on display, alongside ceremonial items, including masks and full costumes.

The Africa gallery features a large and comprehensive collection of musical instruments, matching the Latin America collection in size and scope at around 1,500 objects. The gallery extends to include the Middle East. The well-populated geographic displays allow visitors to enjoy multiple versions of instruments such as lute-like ouds, zithers, harps, and musical bows. Wind instruments include trumpets in different materials, as well as flutes and variations on reeds. Drums (single, double-headed, slit, friction), gongs, xylophones, and lamellaphones round out the extraordinarily rich African musical traditions. The display includes the ubiquitous (at least in parts of Africa) tin-can-and-fishing-line/string versions of modern guitars and other popular stringed instruments. Worth pointing out in the Angola section, the oldest musical instrument in the collection is a heavily worn Kongo side-blown royal trumpet made from an ivory tusk that has been dated to the sixteenth century.

The video presentations and didactic materials throughout the African displays are engaging in terms of contextual materials and information. Full masquerade ensembles, representative of musically backed ritual or ceremonial traditions, are part of the Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zambia presentations.

A particularly well-developed section of the Africa gallery highlights musical instruments and traditions from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This was made possible through collaborative efforts between MIM and the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (MRAC) in Tervuren, Belgium, which resulted in a loan of approximately 100 objects. Assisting in the selection was now-retired MRAC curator, Josef Gansemans. The loan complements the MIM's holdings, providing a special opportunity to experience a particularly select number of Central African musical instruments arranged themati-



cally under titles such as “hierarchy,” “communication,” “narrative,” and “ritual.” An array of Congo figurative and non-figurative harps and drums are on display, allowing for formal and typological comparison. The exhibition also features smaller and more delicate instruments such as a selection of carved figurative whistles from the Hungaan, Pende, and Chokwe.

Leadership

The Musical Instrument Museum was conceived and founded by its Board Chairman, Robert J. Ulrich, retired Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Target Corporation. Bill DeWalt (who holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology) has fulfilled a leadership role as the museum’s President and Director since 2007. MIM benefited from the advice of an international Curatorial Council of prominent experts from institutions with musical instrument collections ranging from the Smithsonian Institution to the Musée de la musique in Paris. MIM’s own curatorial and design staff includes experts from different disciplines including ethnomusicologists and musicologists, some of them musicians and instrument-makers in their own right. With the critiques of additional professional consultants, MIM continues a process of self-evaluation with plans to perfect and further expand the range of their displays and events, always with the visitor’s experience in mind.

Ulrich has stated that part of MIM’s role is to illuminate what is unique about cultures as well as what is shared and universal. The museum is dedicated to providing an experience that can be enjoyed by all, from the novice to the scholar. MIM’s potential as an institution for interdisciplinary study and research is immense and certainly worthy of notice by academics and other educational institutions. The Musical Instrument Museum is already a world-class museum, and what it represents and facilitates has considerable global import. It warrants a visit from anybody interested in music as well as world cultures and traditions.

Practical Information

The Musical Instrument Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
4725 East Mayo Boulevard
Phoenix, Arizona 85050
480.478.6000
<http://www.theMIM.org>

FIG. 8 (left):
Drum. Kundu, Papua New Guinea.

MIM collection.
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FIG. 9 (right):
Southeast Asia, boat lutes display.

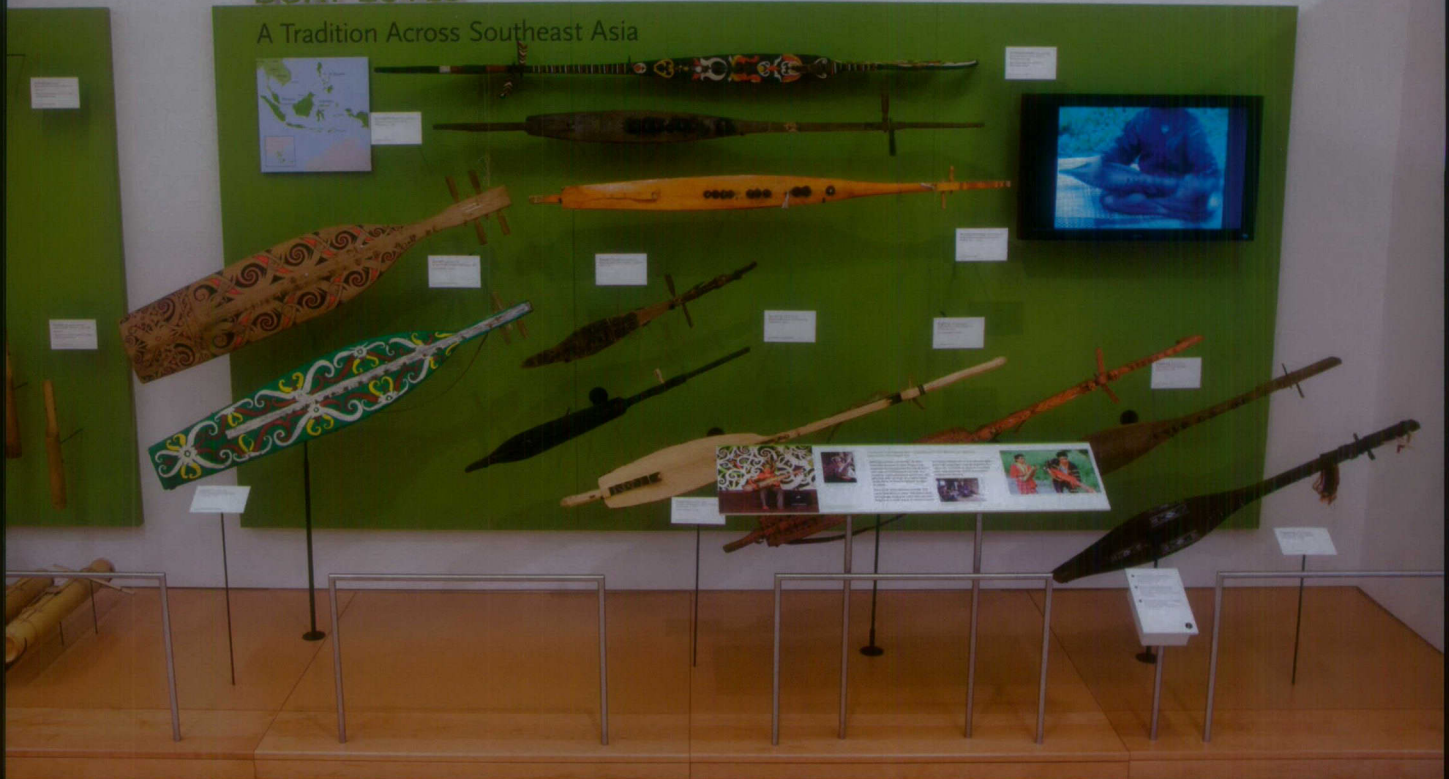
MIM collection.
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FIG. 10 (bottom right):
Communication display (Democratic Republic of the Congo), including loans from the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.

MIM collection.
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BOAT LUTES

A Tradition Across Southeast Asia



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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