

The Museum of Cultures of the North

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The Museo de las Culturas del Norte (Museum of Cultures of the North) is the crystallization of an old idea that we archaeologists who study Mexico's North had. It summarizes and beautifully and didactically exhibits many years of efforts and ideas from various Mexican researchers. Situated in the western part of Chihuahua in Casas Grandes, the museum is strategically located, very close to the Paquimé archaeological site, the largest and certainly the most important in Chihuahua. This gives all museum visitors the opportunity of also seeing the site, which has similar cultural traits to those of the U.S. Southwest.

The Museum of Cultures of the North has a permanent exhibit arranged in a circuit that begins with a section showing some of the oldest pre-his-

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toric remains in the country: stone tools, objects from daily life that were used by hunting-gathering families, like scrapers to skin animals with, baskets and *yaguales* (rings for carrying objects on the head), similar to those found in the Candelaria Cave in the neighboring state of Coahuila.

The archaeological material from the area is complemented with models like the one showing old houses of the Paquimé culture. The models are cross-sectioned so that the interior of the houses can also be seen. They were semi-subterranean houses, with round floor plans, that from the outside looked semi-spherical. Since these little houses had hearths, it is no surprise that they have holes in the roof to allow the smoke to escape. The stakes placed around the houses were really longer and served to form the body of the room, which was made of compressed mud. The entryway was a small tunnel through which the inhabitants had to crawl or walk stooped over in order to get in.

A mural depicts the way the houses were distributed in the region's ancient towns during their first stages of development.

Visitors have commented that one of the museum's most attractive sections is the series of models showing what the communal houses that also existed in Paquimé were like. They were tiered buildings constructed with the poured adobe technique; the most complex varieties can be observed in the archaeological site, although in an advanced state of deterioration. The most beautiful model is a scale copy of the houses of a large cave in Mesa Verde, Colorado, in the U.S. Southwest, which undoubtedly had an influence on the builders of Paquimé.

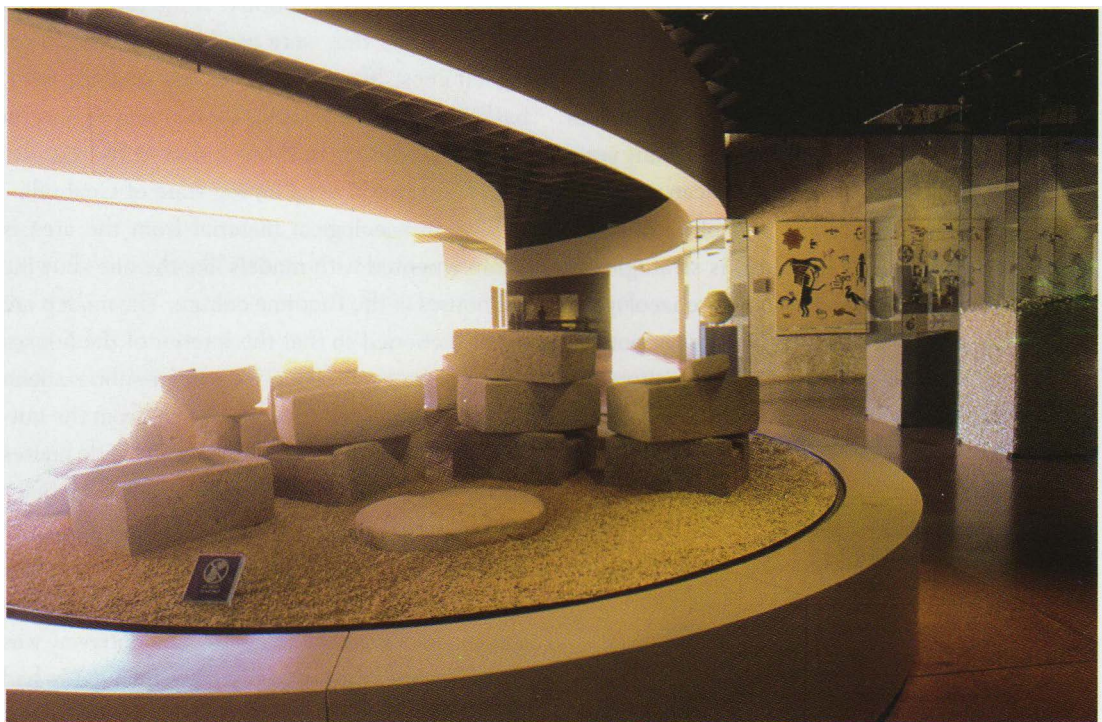
The Mesa Verde archaeological site is steeply tiered and of several stories, some very high, like towers. Clearly, the rooms were arranged to adapt to the floor of the great cave that houses them.

The tree trunks that protrude from the construction can also be seen and have been used to date the structures using dendrochronology.¹ The constructions were made of stone and some of the doorways were T-shaped, a characteristic of the Casas Grandes site.

With certain variations and on a small scale, these T-shaped doors can be seen in the Paquimé constructions. However, specialists are not completely sure of their function. It has been said that the shape of the doors is part of a defensive strategy, or is due to aesthetic reasons, but, in any case, it had religious symbolism since small, stone, very well made representations of them are found in one of the city's temples, like pieces used in worship.

The round underground places that today look like holes are actually *kivas*, or ceremonial spaces; they are so important that an additional model was

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Sector Chihuahua

made of them. A smaller model shows a cross-section of a *kiva*, so the viewer can see its interior: the upper floor where people circulated, as well as the hole through which the faithful entered using a wooden ladder. The walls are curved and, in this case, made of stone. The floor is round; the roof has vertical supports and the end of the room is ringed by a ledge where ritual participants sat. Also visible is a cavity in which the fire was built, of vital importance in a place with winters as cold as in Mesa Verde.

Paquimé was a very large city that had trade relations with a very wide area. It is supposed that many of the materials located among the ruins had been stored—there is no trace of them being used—ready to be taken to other parts of Mexico. This is the case, for example, of a series of carefully fashioned, polished *metates* (curved stones used for grinding corn), decorated with geomet-

ric forms, showing the technical mastery of the artisans who made them.

A walk through the museum reveals numerous pieces of Paquimé ceramics, with very well done monochromatic designs, as well as other pieces of ceramics for daily use. In addition, polychromatic pieces stand out due to their magnificent finishing and decoration, in which very particular iconographic elements can be observed like circles and zigzags and broken lines.

Among the objects stored in Paquimé are sea mollusk shells used in making beautiful necklaces, bracelets, pectorals and many other pieces widely used by the inhabitants of the area. Some of the shells are very small and it is thought, although with no certainty, that they may have been used as coins. There are millions of these little shells in Paquimé and today they are exhibited, protected by large glass columns.

The most beautiful model is a scale copy of a large cave in Mesa Verde, Colorado, which had an influence on Paquimé.



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Another section displays different objects used in daily activities and others for attending festivities, like necklace beads of different colors and materials and several small stone sculptures that testify to the great ability of Paquimé carvers. One should pay particular attention to anthropomorphic ceramic pieces that show costumes worn by the city's inhabitants, with designs very similar to those on the polychromatic ceramics.

The museum also exhibits pieces that must have been used in the worship of Paquimé's deities: for example, large trumpets made with shells whose surfaces were decorated with blue-green stones which, it was said, pleased the gods. Another piece is a sculpture of a figure wearing a headdress with tiers, similar to those still used in worship by the indigenous groups of the United States Southwest.

Because of the Apaches' importance in the history of Chihuahua and Mexico both, they have been given a space in the museum, where objects used in wartime and pictures of some of their most noteworthy chiefs are displayed.

The men of the Mexican Revolution were of particular importance in the social processes that have made our country what it is today. For that reason, some of the heroes, those who offered their lives for the nation, also have a place in the museum.

The Museum of the Cultures of the North is an obligatory stopping place for Mexican and foreign tourists alike, especially for those interested in the vestiges of the very important cultures of Mexico's North. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Dendrochronology is the science of dating events, intervals of time and variations in the environment in former periods by study of the sequence of and differences between rings of growth in trees and aged wood. [Editor's Note.]

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<p>Museo de las Culturas del Norte Paquimé Archaeological Site Casas Grandes Chihuahua Phone: (636) 692 41 40 Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.</p>
