

# THE “NOMAD GUY” MAKES GOOD ON CULTURAL PROMISE, PART 2



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*The Point* has traditionally done an admirable job filling its pages with regulatory, legislative and procedural articles. On occasion, it departs from the clinical in favor of the cultural—certainly my personal preference, for a balance of the cultural and the clinical serves to enhance piercers’ understanding of the origins of our art form, which benefits our clients and the collective mythos of all.

For the second time on these pages, there is the opportunity to profile a museum body art exhibit as it relates to piercers and jewelry. The first surfaced in the pages of *The Point* #39, when then President Alicia Cardenas wrote an article on the San Diego Museum of Man’s exhibit titled, “*Body Ornamentation: Artistic Representations of Self.*” Though this was brought to the attention of *Point* readers after the exhibition had ended, I was fortunate enough to catch the exhibit while visiting family in San Diego on its last weekend. (I salute Art from Church of Steel for his work with the exhibit.)

It is a rare event when a major museum features an exhibit that has body modification as its main focus. (Some of you may be familiar with the Sarawak Museum and its body art installation.) In the late 1990s, the Met seized on this idea with a tattoo-related exhibition that focused on contemporary people primarily—big photos of “freaks” from our industry shocked viewers, and there was little narrative. But many people saw that exhibit, which I feel sadly missed the point.

Which brings us to the present: a new exhibit has just opened at the Portland Art Museum. I had the rare opportunity and honor to co-curate a special exhibition at their newly opened pre-Columbian wing. This exhibition, from conception to fruition, has been in the works for several years. (I learned the wheels of change can turn very slowly in these matters; is was truly a Zen exercise in patience for me.) It certainly helped to have the credentials of author, [See *The Point* #42] and having a collection of relevant ornaments with impeccable provenance\* to loan the museum was also helpful. But a greater synchronicity of events with the “Powers that Be”—and their personal connection to the topic—was what helped it all come together.

Before the installation there was much archival work to be done: We redesigned the exhibit to include jewelry, as well as relevant ceramic figures and polychrome vessels—all of which embody, or are rendered upon, adorned images of the people of the pre-Columbian world. Working behind the scenes—with blue gloves—with Curator Anna Strankman was truly an exhilarating experience. We designed, for the first time at any American museum (to my knowledge), an exhibit that would provide the true context for the jewelry. In my years of haunting museums around the world, I have heard many say, “How is that an ear

ornament?” (Many great museums are guilty of such minimalist “text panel” interpretations for their displays. The finest of Walter Alva’s pre-Columbian excavations at the Met are diminished when a viewer does not understand what they are looking at, or how it was worn.) There is also a large display devoted to Western Mexico. Though jewelry does not survive in abundance from this region, the large and exquisite ceramic figures are all depicted with earplugs and a variety of septum jewelry, as well as having heavy tattooing.

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At the Portland Art Museum, we tried to make clear what the viewer is looking at, and provided context as never before—I even provided original illustrations and text for the exhibit. We have also clearly delineated the difference between a “perforator” (ritual bloodletting) and a “piercer” as well as, illustrated with jewelry, the actual process of enlarging of a piercing. The installation includes life-sized ceramic figures from the famous collection of Phil and Sue Bogue, with the timetable ranging from

the preclassical/formative periods (2000-1000 BCE) to the late classic period of the Maya and the Aztecs (1500 CE). [Technical note: Museums have shifted away from the old terminology of BC (before Christ) in favor of the more neutral BCE/CE, which denotes “before the common era” and “common era.”]

The museum also recently received a multi-million dollar endowment, and kids 17 and younger are admitted free forever! As a father of three kids younger than 17, I confess that the opportunity to educate the children of the future (and make contemporary people aware of ancient rituals) was my primary motivation for this project.

I have always been acutely aware of my responsibilities—as a piercer—to pay homage to the ancient cultures from whence our profession came (and from where we are all descended), and provide the educational forum embodied by my studio, Nomad. After 21 years as a piercer, and 16 of those years as “The Nomad Guy,” it has become apparent that in order to bring my vision of



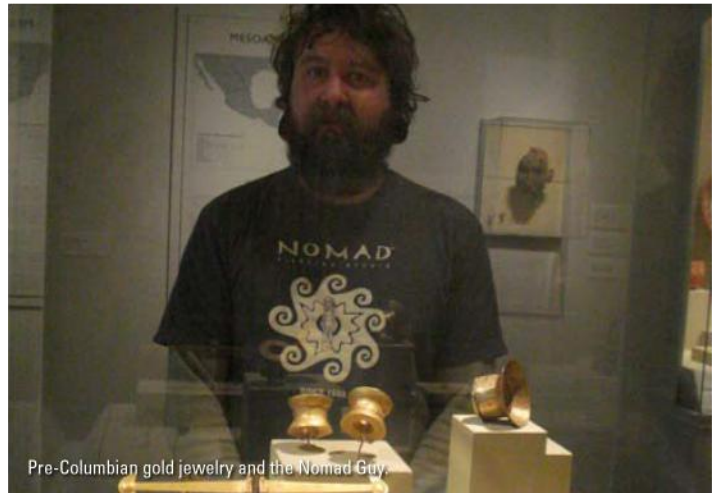
Archival work, cataloging and research in the Museum's basement. A storage area for priceless artifacts in their permanent collection that are not on display.



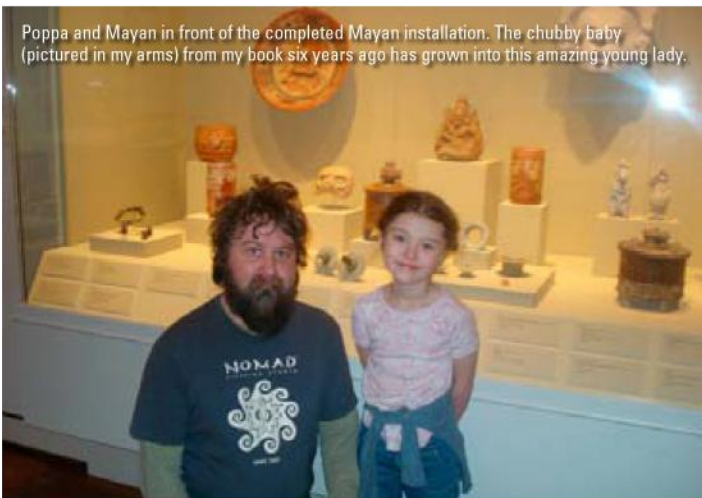
Installation of the art (note the "kid in a candy store" here).



Curator Anna Strankman and her enthusiastic assistant working in the new wing.



Pre-Columbian gold jewelry and the Nomad Guy.



Poppa and Mayan in front of the completed Mayan installation. The chubby baby (pictured in my arms) from my book six years ago has grown into this amazing young lady.



A portion the new pre-Columbian wing at the Portland Art Museum. Kids admitted for free!

culture to a wider audience, to the next level, a far grander venue than Nomad was necessary. A big museum attracts all sections of society, while a piercing studio attracts mostly studio clientele, and by design is limited in its scope. Though piercing is now part of the mainstream, a mainstream audience is where the power to educate has the biggest impact.

This new exhibit will be on display for all of 2009, and will delight anthropologists, enthusiasts, collectors and kids alike. Special thanks to Anna, Bruce, Steve and Matthew for their fine work, and

for helping to contribute to the culture of our community.

(\*Provenance is documentation associated with art or collectables which authenticate the item, establish the value of the item, and also speak to the items origins and dates.)

[nomadmuseum.com](http://nomadmuseum.com)

[portlandartmuseum.org](http://portlandartmuseum.org)

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