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TAÍNO: NATIVE HERITAGE AND IDENTITY IN THE CARIBBEAN AT THE SMITHSONIAN

BY [ROGER HERNANDEZ MOYET](#) / [CURRENTS](#) / 29 JUL 2018



A Taíno semí (spiritual icon) on display at the exhibition. Photo Credit: Roberto Borrero
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NEW YORK — “Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean are still here” is the foundational message of a new exhibition, [Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean](#), presented by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian and the Smithsonian Latino Center. The exhibition is presented in English and Spanish and opens to the general public on July 28, 2018 through October 2019 at the at the museum’s George Gustav Heye Center in New York.

“For us, it was important to push through the myth of extinction and explore the historical and living legacy of Indigeneity in the Caribbean,” said Eduardo Díaz, director of the Smithsonian Latino Center. “We believe this exhibit will give visitors a new, alternative way to look at First Contact in the Americas, and the implications that play out today in the cultures and identities of the islands and their diasporic communities on the mainland. I cannot think of a more important, or original, American story to share.”

“Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean” begins with an overview of Taíno cultures before European contact. Here the exhibition highlights exquisite examples of utilitarian objects and spiritual icons infused with layers of meaning. Engagement with these aspects of cultural life would change drastically during European colonization. There are 31 objects from the museum’s collection serving as focal points for the exhibition, 19 of these date back to pre-contact (ca. A.D. 800–1500). Moving from pre to post-contact, the exhibition also explores topics such as genetic testing, family stories of “Indio ancestry” and the Native roots of the Caribbean’s rural cultures.

The exhibition concludes with photographs and contemporary expressions of ancient arts and craft traditions. There is also a significant focus on community and activist groups keeping the Taíno movement strong, such as the United Confederation of Taíno People, which maintains a visible presence internationally including within the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, among others.

“The exhibition offers an important opportunity to advance the conversation on race, identity, and human rights in the Caribbean” stated Roberto Múkaró Borrero, President of the United Confederation of Taíno People and kasike (leader) of the Guainía Taíno community. “The Taíno were the first Indigenous Peoples of the Americas to be called ‘Indian’ and this exhibition expands on that unique historic reference point, acknowledging our people not only in the past, but in the present tense.”

Representing the Confederation, Borrero was part of a consultative group of Taíno community leaders and academics first convened by the Smithsonian in 2011 toward the development of the current Taíno exhibition.

In conjunction with the exhibition “[Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean](#),” a symposium scheduled for Saturday, September 8, 2018 from 10:00am to 5:30pm will feature a diverse group of scholars, as well as presenters from the Taíno community to address various topics from genealogy and genetic testing to history and future directions of the movement.

Roger Hernandez-Moyet is a member of the Guainía Taíno Tribe and founder of Presencia Taína TV, an indigenous media and cultural arts organization.