



▲ String puppets. By unknown makers (Sinhalese). MOA Collection: Eh149, Eh147, Eh164, Eh144, Eh142.

The theatrical world of puppets

by KATY SWAINSTON

In *Shadows, Strings and Other Things: The Enchanting Theatre of Puppets*, visitors will be able to explore a series of elaborate stages that have been created especially for the puppets exhibition. Curator Nicola Levell believes that visitors will be surprised by how the gallery has been transformed in order to accommodate the exhibition.

"It is incredibly theatrical. I am surprised and delighted every time I see what the Museum's exhibition team has created. They have produced full stages, complete with everything from red velvet curtains to hand drawn backdrops. Everything in the exhibition is made by hand," says Levell. "It is phenomenal."

An immersive exhibition of Western Canada's largest puppet collection will go on display



▲ String puppet. By unknown maker (Burmese). MOA Collection: 3307/1.



▲ Shadow puppets. By Lu Family (Chinese). MOA Collection: 3338/8-12, Eh164, Eh144, Eh142.

at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) from May 16–Oct. 14.

The decision to handcraft each part of the exhibition was intentional, as a way to reflect the unique role that hands-on skillfulness plays in the creation and use of puppets.

"All of the puppets are hand-made. Of course, the human hand is central to bringing the puppets to life. It is through the hands that puppets move, dance and even fight," says Levell.

An international collection

Levell did not want to stop at exploring this expertise through just showing MOA's existing world-leading puppet collection. She proactively worked with an international network of knowledge holders, partners, and scholars to acquire over one hundred new puppets for the Museum, along with commissioning the creation of new puppets.

"We have had a set of Chinese shadow puppets crafted for us by the Lu family. They are made of leather but are translucent and absolutely exquisite," she says. "We have also had a new set of the traditional English Punch and Judy characters created, which some of our visitors may be familiar with."

To find puppets from both China and England in a single exhibition is an indicator of the variety of traditions that visitors will experience. Over 250 puppets from 15 countries, exploring the five main areas

of puppetry: shadow, string, rod, hand, and stop-motion animation will be on display. Beside the surprising range of puppet types being exhibited, visitors may also be taken aback by the sheer variety of their sizes. Puppets in the exhibition range from being the length of a finger to the height of a bus.

"There is a twelve-foot tall puppet, Meh, who was created by the Mortal Coil Performance Society and the Tsatsu Stalquya (Coastal Wolf Pack)," says Levell. "Through collaboration they have made this incredible, gigantic puppet that needs five puppeteers to operate it."

Meh will find its way to the Vancouver Folk Music Festival this summer when it is brought out by its team of puppeteers as part of the three day long event. Levell is looking forward to seeing festival-goers' reactions to this.

"Something happens - not only children but also adults can suspend their disbelief. There is a chemistry and connectivity between a puppeteer and their puppets that enables these little, or in this case huge, inanimate entities to come to life", says Levell.

Levell feels that although the popularity of puppetry has declined in some parts of the world, it is as loved as ever in other parts. More than that, she believes that there is a growing shift in what today's audiences are looking for, which is leading to a resurgence in interest in puppetry.

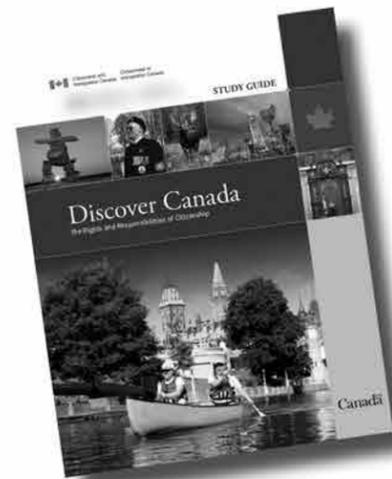
"I would like to think we are returning to more engagement with analogue forms of entertainment. It is like throwing out smartphone and getting a flip phone," she says. "Creating puppets and telling stories with them is human inclination. We are storytellers. We want to be enchanted. For at least the last 2000 years, puppetry has been doing just that." ✍

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