

# The Molina Family Latino Gallery: A PEAS Case Study

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## Abstract

On June 18, 2022, the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) debuted the Molina Family Latino Gallery (MFLG), the Museum's first exhibition space. Inside the National Museum of American History (NMAH), the Gallery opened *¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States*, an exhibition affirming NMAL's credo that Latino history is U.S. history. In the 4,500ft<sup>2</sup> Gallery, objects on loan from six Smithsonian (SI) units and over 50 external lenders are on display in large wall cases and highlight "nooks." Despite all objects being behind large glass doors, visitors can engage with multi-sensory interactives, digital interfaces, and the 500ft<sup>2</sup> General Motors Learning Lounge. One nook highlights a ceramic Tree of Life by Veronica Castillo on a rotating base. The QR codes throughout the Gallery allow visitors to explore the Museum's online presence, including a 3D-scan of Castillo's piece. Even with efforts for broader accessibility, the Gallery still faces unexpected challenges when considering exhibit access and safety. This article explores MFLG from many angles and the balance between collection care and interactivity. From environmental monitors to enthusiastic visitors, *¡Presente!* demonstrates the challenges that museums face and serves as a platform to prepare for the new National Museum of the American Latino.

## Keywords

PEAS, exhibition, case study, access, Molina Family Latino Gallery, museum, subject focus, collections care, interactive, education, interactives, 3D, scanning, collections, national museum, research and topics

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## Introduction

On December 27th, 2020, legislation<sup>1</sup> was enacted by the United States Congress to establish two new museums within the Smithsonian Institution: the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL) and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum (SAWHM). NMAL "advances the representation, understanding and appreciation of Latino history and culture in the United States."<sup>2</sup> Although the physical buildings of both new museums are still in their early planning stages, NMAL has the Molina Family Latino Gallery (MFLG) as the museum's first exhibition space. Located in the National Museum of American History (NMAH), "the Smithsonian's first gallery solely dedicated to Latino contributions to America"<sup>3</sup> opened to the public on June 18, 2022. MFLG provides an excellent case study for exhibit access and safety, allowing the new museum to navigate the challenges of collection care and interactivity.

Planning for this gallery predates the legislative creation of the museum. Founded in 1997, the Smithsonian Latino Center (SLC) built up and reinforced expertise in Latino Studies across the Smithsonian, especially in areas such as staffing, collections, exhibits, and programs. It developed physical and online exhibitions with other Smithsonian units and traveled some in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). By 2013, SLC started planning for its own gallery. This predecessor to the Latino Museum had no accessioned collection. It ultimately identified NMAH as the optimal location for a gallery with changing exhibits that would drive home the message that Latino history is U.S. history.

## Gallery Overview

MFLG is designed to be a flexible space, allowing for multiple exhibitions to rotate through the space without major changes to physical or digital infrastructure. In the bilingual 4,500 ft<sup>2</sup> Gallery, there are exhibit cases, a digital entry wall called "Meet Us," digital history consoles, sensory interactives, digital storytellers, video projections, directed overhead speakers, a Learning Lounge with live-streaming capabilities, and a theater. This layout provides a variety of experiences for visitors, involving four out of the five senses (see Figure 1). The vast diversity of these elements is intended to create memorable, impactful, and layered visitor experiences within the limited space of one gallery.

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1. "Text - H.R.2420 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): National Museum of the American Latino Act," Congress.gov, December 3, 2020, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2420/text>.
  2. National Museum of the American Latino, Molina Family Latino Gallery, "About the American Latino Museum," available at: <https://www.latino.si.edu/about/american-latino-museum>.
  3. Ibid.



**Figure 1.** A 3D birds-eye rendering of the Molina Family Latino Gallery. National Museum of the American Latino.

The first exhibition in MFLG *¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States* won the 2022 Smithsonian Excellence in Exhibits Award. The exhibition is divided into four sections: “Colonial Legacies,” “Wars of Expansion,” “Immigration Stories,” and “Shaping the Nation.” To tell these stories, each section has an introductory nook with a large highlight object; wall case(s) with objects, text, and graphics; an interactive console with video animations and biographies; and a manual, sensory-based interactive. NMAL is still in the early stages of collections planning, so the objects on display are a combination of loans from external institutions and individuals, loans from other Smithsonian collecting units, graphic reproductions, props, and commissioned works. Throughout the show’s run of 3.5 years, loaned objects are on display from over 50 different lenders. Rotations are conducted every six months for paper, textiles, and other vulnerable objects, which allows the visitors to see new stories and objects.

There are multiple digital elements throughout the Gallery to help visitors connect history to the present-day experiences and identities of U.S. Latinos. The 15-minute video titled “Somos,”<sup>4</sup> meaning “We Are,” explores what it means to be Latino from multiple perspectives through a series of contemporary interviews with Latinos from

4. See National Museum of the American Latino, Molina Family Latino Gallery, “Somos Theater, 6 of 16,” available at: <https://www.latino.si.edu/exhibitions/presente/somos-theater-6-16>.

diverse regions and backgrounds. The black and white film draws in visitors to watch and listen to the interviewees tell stories about growing up experiencing different cultures. Many visitors feel themselves represented through the interviews, including non-Latinos who identify with the video's universal themes like family, language, and migration. Another digital interactive is a series of vertical screens in a plaza-like space in the center of the Gallery. Here, individuals talk about topics such as identity, community, and connections to place and history. These themes and stories are threaded across the exhibit's four main sections. This range of digital experiences help visitors make sense of the exhibit's big ideas, and creates ways for visitors to connect with the story of *¡Presente!*.

The Gallery's enclosed cases protect the objects from dust, light, pests, curious guests, and exhibit damage. Ten cases make up the entire space, with six larger cases built into the Gallery structure and four cases free-standing and visible on five sides. Because of the number of visitors expected to move through the Gallery, all items are behind glass to ensure object safety.

Each case has silica gel drawers built in under the case structure with room for at least two silica gel cassettes. The drawers are gasket lined and sealed for adequate air exchange. Each case door also has a two-lock system and alarm. The security protocols for the Gallery meet and exceed Smithsonian standards, and meet lender requirements for loans. The museum's Office of Protection Services monitors the alarms 24/7 and alerts MFLG representatives if the alarms are triggered.

Each case has at least one temperature and humidity reader that collects data from inside the cases. This allows the collections staff to monitor conditions in the cases and report back to the lenders if there are any changes or drastic swings. There are overhead spotlights creating a walkway throughout the Gallery and dedicated spotlights on each individual object help control the light levels. There are also "No Flash" signs in specific areas of the cases where required by lenders.

The exhibit team worked in collaboration with the NMAL Digital Initiatives Team to 3D digitize key objects. These complex and visually inviting objects, and their accompanying 3D scans, were used to highlight key stories in the Gallery. A pair of black leather boots covered in paint splatter, a religious statue, two musical instruments, a raft, a sculpture, and a small printing press were digitized. They were 3D scanned using photogrammetry, where many photos are digitally stitched together to create the 3D model. The models can be viewed or downloaded on the exhibit website. The digital platform allows for interaction and physical manipulation of the scan, creating much more access for the visitors while protecting the physical objects.

## **"Tree of Life"**

One of the largest, most accessible, and most popular objects in MFLG is a "Tree of Life" made by San Antonio artist Veronica Castillo (See Figure 2). Commissioned by



**Figure 2.** Veronica Castillo and her husband installing the Tree of Life in MFLG. Photo by Natalia Febo.

NMAL, the large sculpture incorporates people and objects displayed in the last section of the exhibition that focuses on “Shaping the Nation.” Images of a Tree of Life, or *Arbol de la Vida*, is a traditional Mexican ceramic sculpture inspired by the Biblical creation story. Here, Castillo’s sculpture is an allegory of the history of the national Latino community and previews the content of the final section with miniature figures depicting individuals such as C. David Molina, and Sonya Sotomayor, and objects including a Bolivian Tinku outfit. The nook case was custom built to the tree’s dimensions.

The artist transported the Tree from her workshop to NMAH and was instrumental in the installation of the 200-pound piece. The sliding glass door for the nook case was fully removed to give us as much access to the case as possible. As we installed the tree, Ms. Castillo made some adjustments to the pliable pieces of the sculpture to ensure it fit into the case.

One of the reasons for this object’s popularity is that it sits on a rotating pedestal. This pedestal has electrical components, so it went through approval processes to ensure that the motor would not be a fire hazard or build up heat inside of the case, both of which could be hazardous to the object. The direction and speed of the

pedestal's rotation are controlled with a dial and switch housed outside of the case. We opted for a slower speed, both for the visual comfort of the viewer and because the dangling ornaments would shake at a faster speed.

The rotating display enables visitors to view all 360 degrees of the piece from multiple viewpoints. With ADA accessibility an important part of the Gallery design, free-standing vitrines that visitors could walk around would require substantially more space than the 4,500 square foot flexible gallery provides. Additionally, this is one of the objects that was 3D digitized, providing even more visitor access on the Gallery's interactive online map.<sup>5</sup> The vitrine glass, a key feature of object safety, can limit the visitors' capacity to access and connect with displays, and the 3D render and rotating pedestal circumvent that disruption.

## **Gallery Damage**

In the ten months since the Molina Family Latino Gallery opened, over 300,000 people have visited the space. With the Learning Lounge, Somos theater, digital interactives, and touchable elements, in combination with the exhibit cases, visitors spend an average of about eight minutes in the Gallery as a whole.

Even with this limited time spent in MFLG, there is an accumulation of human impact visible throughout the Gallery. The large glass cases are cleaned at least once a week and each time there is a buildup of marks from hands and faces. Most marks are small, reflecting an incidental fingerprint or smudge from pointing. Sometimes, however, we find very large smudges, handprints, and smears that reflect more deliberate contact with the glass. Sneezes, lip prints, and concentrations of activity at a height indicative of a child are also common, especially in the "Tree of Life" nook. The nooks use media to further contextualize and build impact around the section introductory object, including incorporating a touchable or olfactory interactive near the object label. There are additionally small scratches in the glass, likely from someone's clothing or bag.

While all the collection objects on display are fully enclosed within exhibit cases, the Gallery deliberately encourages visitors to interact with sensory elements throughout the space. These aspects incorporate sight, sound, touch, and smell in various ways that further engage and immerse the visitors. The touchable resin figure in front of the "Tree of Life" case lasted nine months before someone broke a piece off. The

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5. National Museum of the American Latino, Molina Family Latino Gallery, "Raíces, historia y justicia latinas (Latino Roots, History, and Justice)," available at: <https://www.latino.si.edu/exhibitions/presente/shaping-nation/raices-historia-y-justicia-latinas-latino-roots-history-and>. And, see National Museum of the American Latino, Molina Family Latino Gallery, "Explore the Gallery," available at: <https://latino.si.edu/exhibitions/presente#map>.

interactives in front of the two larger wall cases have fan-operated olfactory elements as well. Some of the figures in one of the “touchables” have started to come loose, and the Gallery staff is monitoring to see if it becomes potentially dangerous to visitors.

In the rear of MFLG near the Learning Lounge is one of the most impactful objects on display. On loan from Anacostia Community Museum, this makeshift raft<sup>6</sup> was used by two refugees fleeing Cuba in the 1990s. To accompany this object and deepen the immersive atmosphere, there is a small 3D-printed lever that the visitor can press down on to smell the scent of the ocean. Within the first month of the Gallery being open to the public, the lever broke twice. Team members in the Gallery quickly noticed that the lever had broken, covered the pieces, and posted a sign to prevent potential injury. A sturdier replacement lever was printed and has not broken since.

The case for the raft is quite low to the ground, allowing visitors to see the side, front, and top of the raft very easily. The vitrine was custom built for this raft, so visitors can look into the interior of the boat, often leaning on the top of the case to do so. This case consistently shows the most interactions on the glass, precisely because people can lean on the glass. Visitors clearly want to get as close as they can to the objects, which is why these nooks are so popular.

We have also had one incident of deliberate destruction. A group of students used a pen to dig into the seam between two sections of the terrazzo bench at the center of the Gallery, removing the adhesive and pushing some of the sticky substance onto the bench. They additionally scraped out some of the adhesive between the bench and the wall behind it and scraped off some of the decorative patterns on the panels. No severe damage was done, especially not to collections objects, but this was visible and tangible.

Throughout this exhibit, there is language that directly encourages visitors to physically touch educational props and digital media. The nooks allow additional access to the objects themselves, although with a physical glass barrier. With the exuberance shown by some of the visitors and the encouragement to interact with so many elements of the Gallery, the objects are safer behind glass.

## **Lessons Learned and Conclusion**

Over the course of installation and user testing, the team discovered that although the boundaries of accessibility had been pushed, there were still some issues not considered. The entire Gallery is bilingual in both Spanish and English which led to text labels with almost double the amount of text than typically seen on museum labels.

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6. NationalMuseumoftheAmericanLatino,MolinaFamilyLatinoGallery,“ImmigrationStories Nook,” available at: <https://www.latino.si.edu/exhibitions/presente/immigration-stories-nook-12-16>.

Throughout the object installation, it was determined that the credit lines on the labels were too small to see once the label was installed on the back wall of the case. The labels closer to the front of the case could be seen by someone with good vision but may be difficult for those with vision impairment.

Through user testing and staff feedback, we discovered that directions for the interactive technical elements were not clear enough. Visitors and test users could not easily navigate their way through the various screens. It took a quick demonstration from the Digital Initiatives Team for volunteers to better understand the technology and better assist visitors. The goal of the interactives is to learn more about the stories and objects in the cases and connect themes across the Gallery. Almost a year since opening, some visitors still struggle to navigate the technology or skip this exhibit element all together.

The open layout of MFLG allows for an organic flow through the *Foro* (the plaza-like center of the Gallery) but the outer perimeter of MFLG has traditional case work that encourages visitors to move from case to case. The artifacts are displayed in chronological order and move clockwise from left to right. However, about half of the visitors enter the Gallery on the right side and move through the Gallery in reverse chronological order. Although it does not take away from the experience, it occasionally causes crowding with visitors moving in the opposite direction. There are noticeable pinch points near the back corners of each side of the Gallery, due to the location of the Learning Lounge and cases on both sides of the walkway. During peak visitor times, these walkways and turning points can be crowded or difficult to navigate. The full glass vitrines prevent visitors from accidentally bumping into objects when trying to avoid other people or strollers. There are several small scratches in the glass that indicate someone has bumped into and scratched the vitrines, especially with a bag or jacket zipper.

The versatility of the Molina Family Latino Gallery has allowed NMAL to display—and protect—a wide variety of objects and meet the range of conditions set by lenders. The documented environmental success of the cases can guide the NMAL team in future exhibit planning, especially pertaining to object display. Through social media and the museum's website, NMAL highlights object rotations, light levels, and conservation to help educate the public. As the new Museum begins to develop, this Gallery will help us learn and provide better and safer access for visitors in the future.

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**Sarah Elston** is a museum specialist registrar for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Latino. Prior to joining the museum, she earned a B.A. in Archaeology and an M.A. in Museum Anthropology, both from Columbia University. Her Master's thesis focused on ethical museum practices pertaining to pesticide contamination and repatriation. Before becoming a full-time employee, Sarah was a contract Museum Specialist for NMAL and the National Museum of the American Indian.