

ANCIENT GREECE COMING ALIVE AT CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF MANHATTAN

What if you could journey back in time, long ago, for an amazing look at the ancient roots of Western culture and modern day science and technologies?

Eleni Daniels talks with the creative team behind *Gods, Myths and Mortals: Discover Ancient Greece*

Exhibition Opening
May 25, 2007
At the Children's
Museum of Manhattan

New York's leading cultural institution for children and families will unveil their most ambitious project aptly labeled as their "labor of love" on May 25. The 4,000 sq. ft. high-tech interactive touring exhibition, Gods, Myths and Mortals: Discover Ancient Greece will take children in New York and around the United States on a journey to the world of ancient Greece and learn of its impact to the modern world. The hands-on exhibition celebrates the contributions of ancient Greek culture and scientific achievement with original artifacts, authenticated replicas, multimedia games and immersive interactive experiences. Gods, Myths and Mortals also features an exclusive American debut reconstruction model of the Antikythera Mechanism, which is recognized as the "world's first computer" and dates back to 150 to 100 B.C.

On a sunny afternoon in New York, Eleni Daniels met with Karen Snider, Deputy Director of Exhibits and Project Co-Director at the Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM), and consultant Dr. Megan Cifarelli, Project Co-Director and content specialist, to talk about the exhibit.

Eleni: How was the exhibit created?

Karen: Way back in March 2004, we were having a discussion about the ancient Greeks and how their epics, art,

architecture and philosophy left a legacy of creativity, wisdom, and insight into the human condition that has shaped western civilization for 2,500 years. This really IS the kind of thing we sit around discussing! So, for the past three years, CMOM's in-house exhibition, education and development teams have been hard at work (and play!) with scholars, designers, fabricators, artists, focus groups, television producers, and the Greek community to create this \$2 million national traveling Greek experience that we are so proud to introduce to our youngsters.

Eleni: How did CMOM begin to create the exhibition and share your thoughts on the relevance of introducing the Classics to school-aged children today?

Karen: We conducted audience research and formative testing that demonstrated children's fascination with the stories of Greek mythology and what they wanted to know. Children learn from what they do and we understand the need to share these iconic stories and to supplement children's classroom education. Our aim is to prepare children to be the critical thinkers of the future.

Megan: Children have a magical way of thinking that comes in handy when you're learning about something that's from long, long ago and far away. For example, while talking about Greek mythology with kids, they completely understood the concept of why monsters are important in the ancient world. This exhibition will help children and their parents understand the here and now bet-



ter. It will help make the world seem richer and less accidental. The testing results also helped us realize that we had to ensure that information was readily available in the exhibit for parents to learn along with their kids.

Eleni: The target age for this exhibition is higher than past CMOM exhibitions. Will this exhibition impact kids differently from previous ones?

Karen: The exhibition is designed for children aged six to ten but it's also designed to provide an inter-generational experience. Coming into this project without much of a classical background, I have personally been enriched by it; it has been extraordinary to walk the streets and notice the Greek architecture – the way we think and classify the world – it's all rooted in ancient Greece. It's been true for the whole team that has worked on the exhibition as well. It has an inter-disciplinary element and lends itself into a meaningful exhibition experience: visuals, stories, artifacts, games/logic, competition, etc. It's not just the information kids will take with them but it's the wisdom that we hope families will go home with.

Megan: As an art historian, I initially had wanted the visual arts of ancient Greece to play a larger role in the exhibition. What happened in the process of developing the exhibition is the designers themselves became immersed in the different styles of ancient Greek art. Now visitors coming through Gods, Myths and Mortals will walk through the history of art. The information is presented in a way

that optimizes children's learning. There are also a number of public programs and educational programming that will accompany the exhibition including extensive school-based programs, teachers' guides, performance series, public lectures for adults and an interactive website.

Eleni: How is this exhibition supported academically?

Karen: Our advisors come from the disciplines of classics, archaeology, physics, astronomy, philosophy, art history, anthropology and mathematics. The History Channel is producing three original short videos for the exhibition; the Center for the Reconstructions of Historical and Archaeological Sites (CERHAS) at the University of Cincinnati is creating a computer program through which children reconstruct the Temple of Zeus at Olympia; the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is loaning original artifacts; and the Antikythera Mechanism Research Project (Greece, UK, USA) is creating a reconstruction model of the Antikythera Mechanism, an ancient astronomical computer. The exhibition draws upon The Examined Life, a professional program for teachers aimed at strengthening Greek Studies in the schools, administered by the Newton Public Schools in cooperation with Brandeis University, and extensive research with children conducted at CMOM.

Eleni: What are the major components of the exhibition? And what were some of the challenges you faced in the developmental process?

Karen: The biggest challenge was to make sure it appeals to a wide variety of people. We kept examining an array of activities for content and tactile approach. Each section of the exhibit is an interactive, educational immersion into a key aspect of ancient Greek society and mythology. They include Gods of Olympus – an introduction to the ancient Greek deities; Growing Up Greek – activities evoke the ancient gymnasium and oikos (home), where boys and girls were educated; The Odyssey: A Hero's Journey – based on Homer's epic poem, children assume the role of Odysseus, and Discovering Greece – where visitors discover the impact of ancient Greece on the modern world.

Megan: For me, it was how to take something you know very well and break it down to learning building blocks that kids can use to construct their own understanding, i.e. children will climb into a towering Trojan Horse to help the Greeks defeat the Trojans, then outwit the Cyclops and sing with the Sirens while discovering what it takes to be a real Greek hero. They will marvel at the world's oldest computer and discover the roots of democracy and western education in the Greek town square... The biggest challenge really was what to leave out of the exhibition.

Eleni: What are the key physical elements of Gods, Myths and Mortals?

Karen: We have collaborated with Roto Studio and Heartland Scenic Studios to create environments in which the physical structures and scenic elements introduce children and families to the history of Greek art and architecture. The Gods of Olympus are presented in a Classically inspired temple structure, and the Gymnasium activities take place in a columned "stoa" or loggia. The 13 foot tall Trojan Horse overlooks the Odyssey area, which includes the Cave of the Cyclops, the Sirens' Cove, and a reconstruction of a Bronze Age palace.

Megan: We have incorporated the use of real artifacts from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and replicas from the Hellenic Ministry of Culture's Archaeological Receipts Fund. Replicas also provide an incredible hands-on experience for kids. They are important because the real objects belong in Greece; and this represents our relationship with the Ministry of Culture and the understanding of the significance of this exhibit in sharing Greek culture with American children.

Eleni: What role does technology play in this exhibition?

Karen: Technology plays a critical role. Throughout the exhibit, there are interactive kiosks and technology-based stations to engage children and their families, e.g. "Aristotle Knows" animatronic allows children to use technology to communicate with the great philosopher, while the "Hero Stations" along the Odyssey Game calculate a personalized "Hero's Record" for each participant. Another kiosk will

allow children to become a scientist and help light and decode one of the original fragments of the Antikythera Mechanism using the HP Labs reflectance imaging technique.

Author's note: Enrich your child's mind; expand their horizons. Children and adults need to understand the past in order to better prepare and understand the future. The national touring exhibition is supported by the City of New York, the National Endowment for the Humanities, The Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Stavros S. Niarchos Foundation, the Jaharis Family Foundation, the John P. Calamos Foundation, and the History Channel. Additional support is provided by Olympic Airlines. The exhibition will remain at CMOM for 18 months, before embarking on a four-year national tour to major American cities. The more you learn about ancient Greece, the more you will see it all around you. Dr. Megan Cifarelli, Project Co-Director, has participated in archaeological excavations in Syria and has worked in various capacities in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She holds a Ph.D. in Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology from Columbia University and is a specialist in the art of the Assyrian Empire. She joins the department of Art History at Manhattanville College as Assistant Professor in fall 2007. Karen Snider, Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Project Co-Director, is responsible for the development, design and production of exhibitions and graphics, as well as strategic and long-range planning at CMOM. She holds a M.Ed. from Harvard University, a degree in sociology from Cornell University and a degree in architecture from the University of Minnesota. Snider's exhibition projects include PlayWorks™, Little West Side, Art Inside Out, Dora the Explorer, Oh, Seuss! Off to Great Places, Monkey King: A Journey to China, and WordPlay.

Just as Odysseus traveled on his epic journey to arrive home – Gods, Myths and Mortals: Discover Ancient Greece will take children on a journey home to the roots of Western culture. For more information, visit www.cmom.org.

Editor's note: Eleni Daniels is a journalist, radio producer & talk show host of "All Things Greek" on WNYE 91.5FM CosmosFM. She is president and principal of DanielsMedia Co. where she lives and works in New York City. She cannot wait to play the Odyssey game and climb the Trojan Horse!