Fowler
MUSEUM AT UCLA

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mountain Spirits: Rice and Indigeneity in the Northern Luzon Highlands, Philippines

An immersive exhibition presenting rarely seen works from the Fowler Museum's collections, *Mountain Spirits* brings Indigenous knowledge, artistry, and living cultural traditions to the forefront—revealing how centuries-old Ifugao relationships to land, ritual, and rice offer urgent insights for our world today.

Unidentified maker, Hunter's backpack (inabnūtan or bango), early to mid-20th century, Ifugao, North Luzon, Philippines, Rattan, palm fiber

Los Angeles, CA — January 15, 2026 — The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *Mountain Spirits: Rice and Indigeneity in the Northern Luzon Highlands, Philippines*, a major immersive exhibition that invites visitors into a living cultural landscape where rice cultivation sustains life, memory, and spiritual practices. Opening April 12, 2026, the show explores how the Ifugao of northern Luzon have for centuries shaped their mountainous habitat through agriculture, ritual, and ancestral knowledge.

At a moment of global environmental crisis and renewed attention to Indigenous sovereignty, *Mountain Spirits* demonstrates how Ifugao artistic traditions encode ecological wisdom, collective responsibility, and spiritual connection to land.

Through carved wooden figures, ritual objects, baskets, textiles, tools, and videos, *Mountain Spirits* presents rice not only as food, but as a sacred substance central to Ifugao cosmology, social life, history, and identity. Drawing on the Fowler Museum's holdings, the exhibition

foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems based on reciprocity and long-term environmental stewardship.

The presentation centers on the Ifugao rice terraces—engineering and ecological achievements first constructed in the 16th century as a strategic response to Spanish colonization of the Philippine lowlands. By moving into the highlands and expanding wet-rice agriculture, the Ifugao transformed steep mountainsides into irrigated fields supported by complex forest and water-management systems, ensuring both food security and political autonomy. Today, five terrace clusters in Ifugao Province are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

“The rice terraces are agricultural structures that express Ifugao identity, values, and responsibility,” said exhibition curator Marlon Martin, chief operating officer of the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo). “They are living heritage, shaped by community and long-standing relationships with the land. This exhibition demonstrates that the terraces persist not through preservation alone, but through continued use across generations.”

Mountain Spirits unfolds across three thematic galleries. The first centers on tawid, or inheritance, highlighting how land, labor, and knowledge are passed down through farming tools and everyday objects adapted to a demanding mountain setting. The second explores baki, the Ifugao belief system, presenting ritual practices led by mumbaki (ritual specialists) who mediate between earthly and spiritual realms. Carved bulul rice guardians, ritual boxes, rice wine bowls, textiles, and offerings echo different stages of the rice cycle, which are accompanied by prayer, chant, and ceremony. The final gallery examines social rank and prestige, focusing on the kadangyan elite, whose generosity and sponsorship of major rituals, most notably the Hagabi, sustain community bonds and cultural continuity.

Recent archaeological research has transformed scholarly understanding of the terraces, challenging long-held assumptions that they represent a timeless or isolated past.

“Archaeology shows that the Ifugao rice terraces are products of accommodation and resistance,” said Stephen Acabado, professor, chair of the Archaeology Interdepartmental Program, and director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. “They were built in response to colonial pressures and reflect Indigenous agency, not isolation. This exhibition brings that scholarship into conversation with community knowledge and material culture in meaningful ways.”

Highlights include consecrated bulul figures regarded as ancestral presences; finely woven ikat textiles associated with myth and ritual; and baskets and tools designed for harvesting, storage, and ceremonial use. Multimedia installations featuring panoramic landscapes, ritual soundscapes, and historical footage situate these works within the living environments and practices from which they have emerged.

“At the Fowler, we are committed to presenting Indigenous cultures as dynamic, contemporary, and intellectually rigorous,” said Silvia Forni, Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. “*Mountain Spirits* exemplifies this approach by

centering Indigenous voices and inviting visitors to rethink relationships between land, culture, and responsibility."

By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives, *Mountain Spirits* challenges romanticized narratives of isolation and timelessness, presenting Ifugao culture instead in light of historical contingencies and sophisticated social relations.

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Exhibition Details

Exhibition: *Mountain Spirits: Rice and Indigeneity in the Northern Luzon Highlands, Philippines*
Venue: Fowler Museum at UCLA
Opening: April 12, 2026
Location: Los Angeles, California
Organized by: Fowler Museum at UCLA
Curated by: Marlon Martin, Stephen Acabado, Gassia Armenian, and Amy Landau

About The Fowler Museum:
The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas—past and present. The museum enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. The work of international contemporary artists is presented within complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action. The Fowler Museum is one of three public arts institutions of the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture.

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