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Arts & LEISURE

Art

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Despite, or maybe because of, its hallucinatory religious imagery, pre-Columbian art seldom gets the full-dress museum treatment it deserves. But when it does, the results are unforgettably dramatic, as will undoubtedly be the case in **"FIERY POOL: THE MAYA AND THE MYTHIC SEA,"** at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass.

The exhibition of 90 objects is based on



PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM AND JORGE PÉREZ DE LARA

Frog carving from Topoxte Guatemala, in the Maya exhibition at the Peabody Museum in Salem, Mass.

the idea that the Maya, although they built cities across Mexico and Central America between A.D. 300 and 900, were a less thoroughly land-based civilization than once thought. It was only in the late 1980s — after the sign for “sea” was deciphered in the Maya writing system — that the importance of aquatic references in the culture’s literature and art became apparent.

This show traces it in images that in one way or another refer to a foundation myth that envisions the cosmos as composed of sea, sky and land in a continual process of interaction. In this view the Yucatán Peninsula is a great turtle swimming in a “fiery pool” formed by the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Maya rulers appear seated on waterlily thrones. The world is populated by mythical fish, frogs and birds and frogs that move back and forth between natural elements. Whatever the meanings of these images, their imaginative realization by Maya artists is instantly gripping. And what better place to see them than in a New England port town and in a museum whose 18th-century founding history is intimately tied to the sea? *Through July 18, East India Square, Salem, Mass., (866) 745-1876, pem.org*