

# Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

May 4, 2006

WITH THE KIDS

## Skeletons in their closets

At a UCLA open house, bones and shards from a bygone world will bring the past to hand.

By Brenda Rees  
Special to The Times

THOMAS WAKE is busy preparing his lab for Saturday's archeology open house at UCLA - he's considering displaying a 1,000-year-old howler monkey skull from Panama, shells from long-ago oceans and ancient spearheads fashioned out of panther bones.

Just for fun, he may drag out a 1,800-year-old piece of giant sloth dung, followed up by balls of dried owl vomit.

"Kids really enjoy seeing that," Wake says with a chuckle. "And there's so much to learn by examining specimens like this. They tell us a lot about what was happening here way back when."

As the director of the zooarcheology lab, Wake knows a thing or two about the beasts - including early man - that roamed the Earth thousands of years ago. He picks up a simple crocodile bone.

"Each bone has a story," he explains. "Look, this piece has been burned. So now we know that someone lived in the environment. Someone had to figure out how to capture the croc and then how to cook it. Once you start looking, you see a bigger picture opening up."

Plenty of stories from the past will be told at Saturday afternoon's annual open house held at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, home to the nation's largest group of working archeologists.

A wide variety of labs and archives will be opened for the public to browse, snoop and learn from archeological experts, who'll answer questions and talk about current projects in Albania, Egypt, Chile and Iceland, among others. Peer into microscopes, check out ceramic shards, touch ancient remnants and watch a virtual reality demonstration of what communities from the past possibly looked like.

In addition to touring the labs, future Indiana Joneses can hear stories about archeology and primitive cultures in a children's area as well as do craft projects with Egyptian hieroglyphics.

But don't expect to see dinosaur bones and fern fossils. The institute mainly focuses on a relatively more modern timeline that goes back about 5,000 years. According to the director of the institute, Charles Stanish, there is much to discover about our recent collective past.

"We know more about the surface of the moon than the eastern slope of the Andes," says Stanish, who adds that it's only been since the early 19th century that people have been interested in archeology, sparked by Darwin's discoveries and the introduction of museums in major cities.

Archeology, sums up Stanish, is like any science because it starts with questions: Why did this happen? Where did we come from? What does it mean for us today?

INDEED, a walk through the institute corridors gives a glimpse of not only how scientists work but also a peek into the history of life on the planet.

In the paleoethnobotany lab, for example, director Virginia Popper peers into a microscope at vegetation samples from a Ventura County Chumash Indian site circa AD 900.

In addition to tracing the evolutionary process of plants, Popper also investigates how early man interacted, exploited and changed vegetation throughout the decades. Using all parts of native plants to the fullest, early Californians saw trees and bushes as a life-sustaining smorgasbord.

"When they walked in the wilderness, they saw grocery and hardware stores, construction materials, tools and food," she says. "Today, we see the world in a completely different way."

Another insight into the workings of our ancestors emerges at the nearby rock art archives that contain documentation of early man's creativity captured on stone canvases. Gleaned from sites all over the world, the collection features stunning examples of petroglyphs and pictographs that depict humans, animals and other symbols.

"There's always been some controversy about certain images," says Gordon Hull, a volunteer at the archives who adds that much of the art involves hunting and fighting. Still, he says, some artwork with religious or shamanistic overtones can't fully be explained, making them wildly interesting.

Another fascination for Hull is the uniformity of some motifs, such as sheep, that are found in such far-flung places as California and China.

"The similarities are striking," he says. "We're more alike than we think."

While much of archeologists' work is out in the field, plenty is done in labs, including how to save artifacts - such as tools, weapons and jewelry - from deterioration. The relatively new Conservation Lab, a joint program with UCLA and the Getty, also will be showing off its research with examples of restored Egyptian axes, Asian furniture and mosaics.

All in all, the open house hopes to demystify what archeologists do, whether they're excavating Moche tombs in Peru or using charcoal in lab experiments to deduce the agricultural practices of the past.

"It's not as romantic as the movies like you to think, with the hero digging a bit and then discovering a golden idol," Stanish says. "But the excitement comes when we can show how humans, say 2,000 years ago, lived, worked and played. That's when everything we do comes together."

-----

Brenda Rees may be reached at [brenda@brendarees.com](mailto:brenda@brendarees.com).

\*

Archaeology open house

Where: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, lower level of the Fowler Building, UCLA

When: 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday

Price: Free; \$8 parking fee at Lot 4 (Sunset and Westwood)

Info: (310) 206-8934