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SCVA Mesoamerican exhibition

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BRIEF

Objective

The objective behind this proposed redesign is to take the SCVA's current Mesoamerican collection, and reorder it in a more coherent way in relation to the artifacts' history and geographical context, creating in this way an exhibition that helps the museum's visitors understand the complex area called Mesoamerica by showing the evolution and relationships between the cultures that comprise it.

It is also a template for how the rest of the exhibitions in the museum can be organized and redesigned in order to provide the visitors with a new understanding of the zones without falling into the trap of modern geographical areas.

The redesign aims at honoring the SCVA's ideals of minimal tag information and the ability to observe artifacts from all possible angles, while using information panels, leaflets, an educational brief and a companion website as a way deliver more information to the visitor who wishes to learn more about the exhibition. It will also attempt to more closely represent the objects in a living room or casual environment.

The engagement with the audience will be made through the information panels which will contain information on the objects relationship with their cultures, while the website will contain information on those cultures background, history and the way the objects are thought to have been used and their significance, through activities such as interactive timelines and explorable objects.

The target audience

With this exhibition being part of the SCVA's permanent exhibitions, the public to approach will be local families, UEA and WAM students, and the academic community.

Storyline

Mesoamerica is a term that refers to a geographical region based on ethnographic and linguistic data. It comprises central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica. The aims of this exhibition is to show visitors who these cultures were and how they related between each other through their art. The objects for this project have been chosen from the SCVA collection for being striking visually and representative of the cultures that generated them. By placing

them within the same "gallery" this exhibition seeks to encourage visitors to compare and contrast the artifacts they are being presented with.

Visitor outcome

By the end of the visit, the visitor will have a greater understanding of where is Mesoamerica, and which cultures inhabit it, while also gaining a greater appreciation for their art.

Information system

The information system that will support the exhibition will be comprised of the following elements:

- SCVA information panel
- Exhibition information panel
- Section information panels
- Object labels
- Conclusion
- Companion website
- Leaflet
- Educational brief

Information panels

The information panels for this exhibition will attempt to emphasize how cultures in Mesoamerica influenced and drew from each other, ending with a panel that draws attention to 5 specially selected objects that through their characteristics or history are perfect examples of cultural interrelationships.

SCVA information panel

Welcome to the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts.

The SCVA opened in 1978. It was a gift from Sir Robert Sainsbury and his wife to the University of East Anglia. The Sainsburys hoped that others would enjoy their collection the same way they did at home. To do this, the SCVA created a space where it was possible to look at the objects as much as and as closely as they wanted without it feeling like a traditional museum.

The collection consists of 1700+ objects from cultures around the world, as well as artists who were friends of the Sainsbury.

Having all these objects from around the world allows us to study and better understand cultures and people around the world.

Exhibition information panel

Mesoamerica

The area we now call Mesoamerica is located in the modern day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. All the cultures in this area share similar religious beliefs, sports, utensils, foods and many more things. In many cases, they were either the direct successors of or the inspiration for Pre-Colombian cultures. Just like the Greeks were the inspiration for Roman culture and the Normans reshaped English culture, similar things happened between Mesoamerican cultures.

Section panels

Olmec 1200 B.C. - 400 B.C.

Olmecs whose name means "The Rubber People" are considered the "Mother Culture", and their influence can be seen over all of Mesoamerica. They settled in great city states such as La Venta, and San Lorenzo. Olmec art is characterized by its use of stylized figures, usually man-animal hybrid statues. There's even evidence of Olmec artifacts being kept as heirlooms by members of other civilizations such as the Aztecs 2000 years after the Olmecs were gone.

Capacha 1500 B.C. - 400 A.D.

Capacha refers to an archeological site in the modern day state of Colima in North West Mexico. Current research questions the inclusion of Capacha into the Mesoamerican region. Little is known of this unique culture that embraced concepts such as equality, family centered unlike other cultures that depict great lords, gods, rites, and exotic overtones characteristic of stratified cultures. Their sculptures depict dancers, animals, and pots called Bules.

Teotihuacan 150 B.C - 650 A.D.

This great city state shaped Mesoamerica in similar ways to what Constantinople did in Europe. The city was never truly lost and continued to hold importance even to the Aztecs who thought of it as a pilgrimage spot. Teotihuacan art shaped its successors and contemporaries. It even inspired artists such as Henry Moore through its sculptures.

Classic Veracruz

What is called now Classic Veracruz style relates to various settlements along the Veracruz area without ethnic distinctions. Of all these centers the most important was El Tajin. Art coming from this region features close relationships to Teotihuacan and the Maya. The cultures in Classic Veracruz had a strong relationship with the ritual ball game. The ball game itself has spread over all of Mesoamerica and continues to be played today.

Maya 250 A.D - Today

Located in the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America, the Maya created one of the greatest civilizations known to man. Influenced by Teotihuacan, they took these influences and shaped them into something new. The Maya were never an empire, instead they lived in city states similar to ancient Greece. Everything from their architecture, to their writing system had strong design elements and were highly artistic. Their paintings are dramatic and expressive, their sculptures monumental and imposing. Everything the Mayas did was done with the intention of impressing whoever viewed it. Maya people never disappeared and they still keep some of their traditions alive even now.

Ulua

These people lived in close relation with the Maya however they remained a distinct group. Their art reflects an interesting mixture of Teotihuacan and Mayan influences creating something not quite like either "parent." It seems the Ulua would take what they considered high culture from others and adapt it for themselves and in this way created their beautiful marble vessels.

Huastec

While related by their language to the Maya, their culture evolved separately. Their art was later adopted by the Aztecs as a template for their own. The Huastec sculpture style is slab-like, and two sided. One of the sides represented a human while the other was often a god which was carried by the human aspect.

Aztec 1345 A.D. - 1521 A.D.

The great empire, was one of the last Mesoamerican empires and while the empire is gone, its people, the Nahuatl, are still around. The Aztecs were a vast empire that imitated Huastec and Mixtec art. They even commissioned art in the styles of other cultures or bought souvenirs that the Mixtec made specifically for this purpose. They were a brutal but sophisticated culture. A place where human sacrifice and beautiful poetry coexisted. To this day Aztec culture keeps shaping Mexico and its citizens.

Relations

The objects in this table come from different cultures yet they are perfect examples of the tight relationships between Mesoamerican Cultures. All these objects can be related to one or more of the objects around you. Examine them from all angles and try to find the similarities between any two objects. You will be surprised at how similar they can be, no matter how far apart in time and space they are.

Labels

Olmec Seated Figure

Mexico: Veracruz.

1200-900 BC. Early Formative period

Acquired in 1977

This figure represents a were-jaguar or a similar cross between man and animal. These figures are thought to be related to deities. Grey basalt, traces of red pigment or soil.

UEA 692

Olmec Seated Figure with splayed legs

Mexico: Puebla.

1200-900 BC. Early Formative period

Acquired in 1978.

“Baby” sculpture, its use is unknown, it has a paw/wing motif on the back of its head, this design is typical in Olmec sculptures. Terracotta, cream slip, red pigment.

UEA 697

Olmec Celt

Mexico: Veracruz.

900-600 BC. Middle Formative period

Acquired in 1975

Jade celts are found usually in burials, and the ones made out of jade, like this one, may have been used for cutting. Blue grey jade.

UEA 623b

Olmec Seated Figure

Mexico: Guerrero (?).

900-600 BC. Middle Formative period

Acquired in 1977

Statue of what has been interpreted as a dwarf. Jade, traces of pigment or soil.

UEA 691

Capacha Dancing figure

Mexico: Colima.

600-200 BC. Late Formative period

Acquired in 1983

Statue is possibly a ceremonial dancer. Grey-buff earthenware.

UEA 865

Capacha Dancing figure with removable head-dress

Mexico: Colima.

600-200 BC. Late Formative period

Acquired in 1983

Standing figure possibly of a dancer with removable head-dress; the head-dress fits the dancing figure next to it. Grey-buff earthenware.

UEA 864

Capacha Vessel in the form of a figure with a burden

Mexico: probably Colima.

300 BC-300 AD. Late Formative period

Acquired in 1977

Vessel in the shape of a *Tlameme* (burden carried). Interestingly burdens represented both the nobles and the lower castes in society. Terracotta, red slip.

UEA 670

Capacha Reclining dog effigy vessel

Mexico: Colima.

200 BC-300 AD. Proto-Classic period

Acquired in 1983

Vessel in the shape of a sleeping Techichi (a species of hairless dog). Dogs in Mesoamerica were both pets and food. Earthenware, red slip, buff paint.

UEA 867

Standing Figure, female

Mexico: Nayarit

200 BC-300 AD. Proto-Classic period

Acquired in 1949

This figure of a woman presents characteristics of different cultures around Mesoamerica such as: Hairbands (*rodete*) worn in Guatemala and parts of Mexico, the small mantle on its left arm is characteristic of males in West Mexican ceramics and unlike ceramics from Colima (its closest neighbor), it is a woman. This is a perfect example of how Mesoamerican cultures shared stylistic and cultural similarities. Earthenware with red, yellow and black pigment.

UEA 406

Teotihuacan Face Plaque

Mexico: Puebla/Guerrero.

200-750 AD. Early Classic period

Acquired in 1976

Not a mask but possibly part of an armor, in Teotihuacan III style. Pale green translucent onyx with traces of fresco.

UEA 651

Effigy conch shell

?

300-900 AD. Classic period

Acquired in 1977

Conch shells like these were probably used by the Maya as trumpets to call ancestors or supernaturals. In Teotihuacan effigies were also used as trumpets or whistles. In this particular case it was probably an offering. The Aztecs related it to their rain god Tlaloc. The one you are seeing seems to be very similar to an example found in Colima which is a totally different part of Mesoamerica. Terracotta, white slip.

UEA 673

“Classic Veracruz” Smiling face head

Mexico: Veracruz.

600-900 AD. Late Classic period

Acquired in 1987

"Smiling face" head with deformed cranium and head-dress. This figure's head-dress is thought to represent monkey tails. Monkeys in Mesoamerica were related with music and dance. Los Cerros. Orange earthenware.

UEA 958

“Classic Veracruz” Standing Figure

Mexico: Veracruz

600-900 AD. Late Classic period

Acquired in 1954

Can be used as a whistle and has a relationship to human sacrifice and dancing ceremonies. Remojadas style. Earthenware.

UEA 144

“Classic Veracruz” Yoke (yugo)

Mexico: Veracruz

300-600 AD. Classic period

Acquired in 1986 as a gift to Sir Robert on his 80th Birthday

Yoke shaped like a toad, believed to be related to the ceremonial ball game. The name simply refers to its similarity to a yoke. Might have been a trophy or a burial offering. Greenstone.

UEA 446

“Classic Veracruz” Hacha (axe-shaped head)

Mexico: Veracruz.

600-900 AD Classic period

Acquired in 1979

Hachas (axe-shaped head) along with yugos might be stone representations of wooden objects used during the ball games. In relief sculpture and figurines they appear attached to Yugos. Greenstone.

UEA 698

Mayan Two-part effigy vessel/censer

Guatemala, El Petén: Maya.

400-550 AD. Classic period

Acquired in 1975

Two-part effigy vessel/censer with a jaguar head-dress and clothing. Terracotta with red, black and yellow paint.

UEA 624

Mayan Eccentric Flint Symbolic Weapon

Guatemala: Maya

600-900 AD. Late Classic period

Acquired in 1979

Mayas believed that flint and obsidian were created when lightning struck the earth and were divine. This object may have been a ceremonial weapon. Brown flint, traces of white stucco and red paint.

UEA 708

Mayan Pendant Plaque

Mexico: Maya.

600-900 AD. Late Classic period

Acquired in 1976

Pendant plaque used as a pectoral or maybe a necklace. Deep green jade, with pale green areas, traces of red pigment.

UEA 649

Ulvan Tripod vessel with two handles

Honduras: Ulua

800-1000 AD. Late Classic/Early Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1980

While Ulua were in contact with the Maya, they remained as a separate culture. White marble, with pink veins.

UEA 746

Ulua Tall vessel with two handles

Honduras: Ulua

800-1000 AD. Late Classic/Early Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1991

The Ulua vessels are an example of a culture influenced by two different civilizations. In this case Maya and Teotihuacan. From the Maya comes the tall vessel style. The short

one is related to Teotihuacan tripod vessels while having Maya elite symbolism in its designs. White marble, with pink veins.

UEA 1043

Huastec Standing Figure, female

Huastec

900-1500 AD Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1980

Female figure thought to represent a fertility goddess. Tan sandstone.

UEA 761

Aztec Seated Figure, male¹

Mexico: Aztec

1200-1500 AD. Late Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1951

Carved figure of a sitting man, basalt.

UEA 147

Aztec Kneeling Figure, female

Mexico: Aztec

1200-1520 AD.

Acquired in 1962

Stone figure of an old lady kneeling and may be a representation of the Goddess Oxomoco the responsible for the origin of life. Basalt (stone), traces of red pigment.

UEA 146

Standing Monkey

Mexico: Campeche.

1200-1500 AD. Late Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1982

This figure was found in Campeche far from the Aztec capital amongst Maya and Post-colonial objects. It is difficult to say where it belongs since it has similarities to other Aztec sculptures. However, these characteristics along with where it was found make it impossible to tell where it came from.

UEA 818

Conclusion panel

Now that you have seen all these beautiful objects, look around once more and try to think how these relationships came to happen. Was it war? Commerce? Some type of

¹ I was unable to find any information regarding this object and I'm hesitant to speculate on them, its left in here as it fits the exhibition, however someone more experienced could improve this label.

ancient archeology? Tourism? Many things could have happened to create these strong links between cultures and it's our job to ask these questions and find the answers. Finally, can you draw more parallels between what was happening in Mesoamerica with similar situations in Europe?

Companion Website & Educational Brief

These two elements of the information system are focused at supporting the exhibition's purpose by expanding on the little information given in the exhibition itself. Both are supplementary educational materials aimed at users around Key Stages 3-4, providing them with extra data that can be used in school projects or personal research. By aiming the overall tone and complexity of the information towards these stages, the intention is to keep the entry barrier to data relatively low without it being too simplistic or patronizing yet complex enough for older audiences. Teachers and adults can still draw knowledge from this without feeling they are being talked down to. However the younger audiences will not be neglected and will have activities aimed at them.

Care will be taken to avoid romanticizing or demonizing the cultures represented throughout the exhibition, while not glossing over their cultural achievements or their ritualistic human sacrifices. It is the intention of these materials to present their subject as neutrally as possible so as to not permeate them with western concepts such as "noble savage" or "cannibalistic."

Educational Brief

Welcome to the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts Mesoamerican Exhibition.

In this brief you will find activities and trails to help you plan an exciting and educational visit.

For more information visit our mini website: www.scva.org.uk/meso

Teacher Led Activities

All resources and materials for these activities are provided by the museum.

Mesoamerican Cultures and their relationships K1-2

Mesoamerican cultures shared and adapted other cultures into their own. In this activity students will try to find the similarities in craftsmanship, graphic elements and themes within the objects in the collection.

Getting in touch with Mesoamerica K2-4

Students will get in contact with the SCVA's handling connection. Students will be encouraged to come in contact with the objects and derive their own artistic expressions based on the objects and the exhibition.

Art and Sacrifice K3-4

Mesoamerican cultures used to play a ritual ball game, some of them may have used it as conflict resolution instead of war, while others used it as a religious ceremony with human sacrifice involved. Students will explore why Mesoamericans related conflict and death as natural parts of life. Comparisons will be made to other cultures such as the Celts.

Other activities

The museum has a great amount of resources that both teachers and students can make us of. Books in the library, pictures of the objects and guided tours are available. Finally we have set up a mini website with additional information, maps, pictures, and web resources.

Companion Website

The companion website will consist of several interactive sections and activities and will be patterned around movie websites such as suckerpunchmovie.warnerbros.com/ where the user is able to get information on the movie, create wallpapers, learn more about it, watch videos etcetera. By treating the exhibition as a movie release and allowing visitors to take a "part" of the exhibition home we generate interest in it and encourage word of mouth promotion. Social media integration is a must and will allow users to share bits of data they found interesting, wallpapers they created or just promoting the exhibition itself.

Timeline

An interactive timeline will show the rise and fall of all the civilizations included in the exhibition while also showing parallel developments in cultures along the world, and in this way framing the exhibition within the rest of the world. Developed with Flash animation. Clicking on the cultures will show relevant information. The whole timeline, as well as the pop-ups will be shareable.

Art up close

Here visitors will be able to see selected objects and rotate them, zoom in and out, and get small trivia on the objects when they are clicked on. The trivia will be either culture related or museological, e.g.: This object's feet were made by its previous owner, the original ones were broken when it was found. These bits of trivia will make the activity more interesting as they have a sort of treasure hunt feel to them. These factoids will be shareable through social media networks.

Make your wallpaper

Here visitors will be able to choose a wallpaper size, an object from the collection, choose its size and position and then choose a background from a selection available and then place the SCVA logo where they please. Once they have done that they will be able to share the wallpaper they created and download it to their computer.

Civilizations

This section will contain a more detailed history of the cultures in the exhibition, alongside maps, and pictures of the people, their surroundings and architecture. The following is an example:

Aztec

1345 A.D. - 1521 A.D.

Originally from northern Mexico, the Nahua, also called Aztecs, dominated a great part of Mesoamerica. Through alliances and military power they created a powerful empire based on tributes and not on government domination. During the period the Nahua dominated Mesoamerica, they adopted artistic and cultural concepts from Teotihuacan and the Mixtec people. After the Spanish conquest, Aztec influences can still be found in Mexico: street names, places, rituals, and even the Nahua themselves are still around, creating a rich culture in modern Mexico.

Leaflet

A small leaflet could be produced that would center on the central objects of the exhibition:

- Effigy conch shell
- Standing Monkey
- Standing Figure, female
- Tripod vessel with two handles
- Tall vessel with two handles

The objects would be showcased with large color images, and a description of each one and a more in depth explanation of their uses. In essence it would be a small catalogue that focuses on the main narrative device of the storyline: Mesoamerican cultures and how they relate to each other.

Example:

Effigy Conch Shell

?

300-900 AD. Classic period

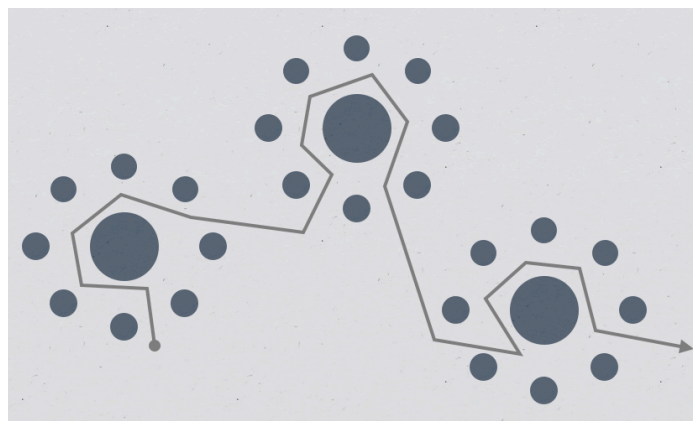
Acquired in 1977

Conch shells hold a strong meaning in Mesoamerican cultures, used as musical instruments in rites of passage and religious ceremonies and as funerary offerings in tombs and war trumpets. These conchs could be either actual seashells or as in this case, carved from stone.

Conch shells or “Caracoles” as they are called in modern Mexico are found all across Mesoamerica, from Capacha in north west Mexico, all the way down to the Mayas in Nicaragua. Not only that but from the “mother culture”, as the Olmecs are called, to the last great indigenous civilization in Mesoamerica, the Nahua (of which the Aztecs are part of), conch shells were used all across Mesoamerica.

Exhibition Layout

A “Star System” was chosen for the exhibition strategy. This system is specially useful when the intention is to draw the visitors attention to an important or central object and then have them then interact with “lesser” objects.



The layout will try to adhere to the SCVA's visual style while at the same time attempting to better represent the “art in a living room” ideals behind the creation of the Centre.

Taking into consideration these needs, the exhibition will require an area of 10 meters by 6 meters, a custom built table/case, 9 chairs and a regular circular table, and two 10mts x .20mts x 2mts screens.

The objects will be laid out in 8 groups divided by culture instead of by chronological order, with the five central objects sitting in the custom made table where they will invite visitors to compare and contrast them to each other and to the rest of the exhibition.

Labels for objects will measure 15 x 12 centimeters, and will follow the following format:

- Objects name with place of origin
- County and state of origin
- Date and historic period
- Acquisition date
- Description
- Catalogue Number

Sample label:

Standing Monkey

Mexico: Campeche.

1200-1500 AD. Late Post-Classic period

Acquired in 1982

This figure was found in Campeche far from the Aztec capital amongst Maya and Post-colonial objects. It is difficult to say where it belongs since it has similarities to other Aztec sculptures. However, these characteristics along with where it was found make it impossible to tell where it came from.

UEA 818

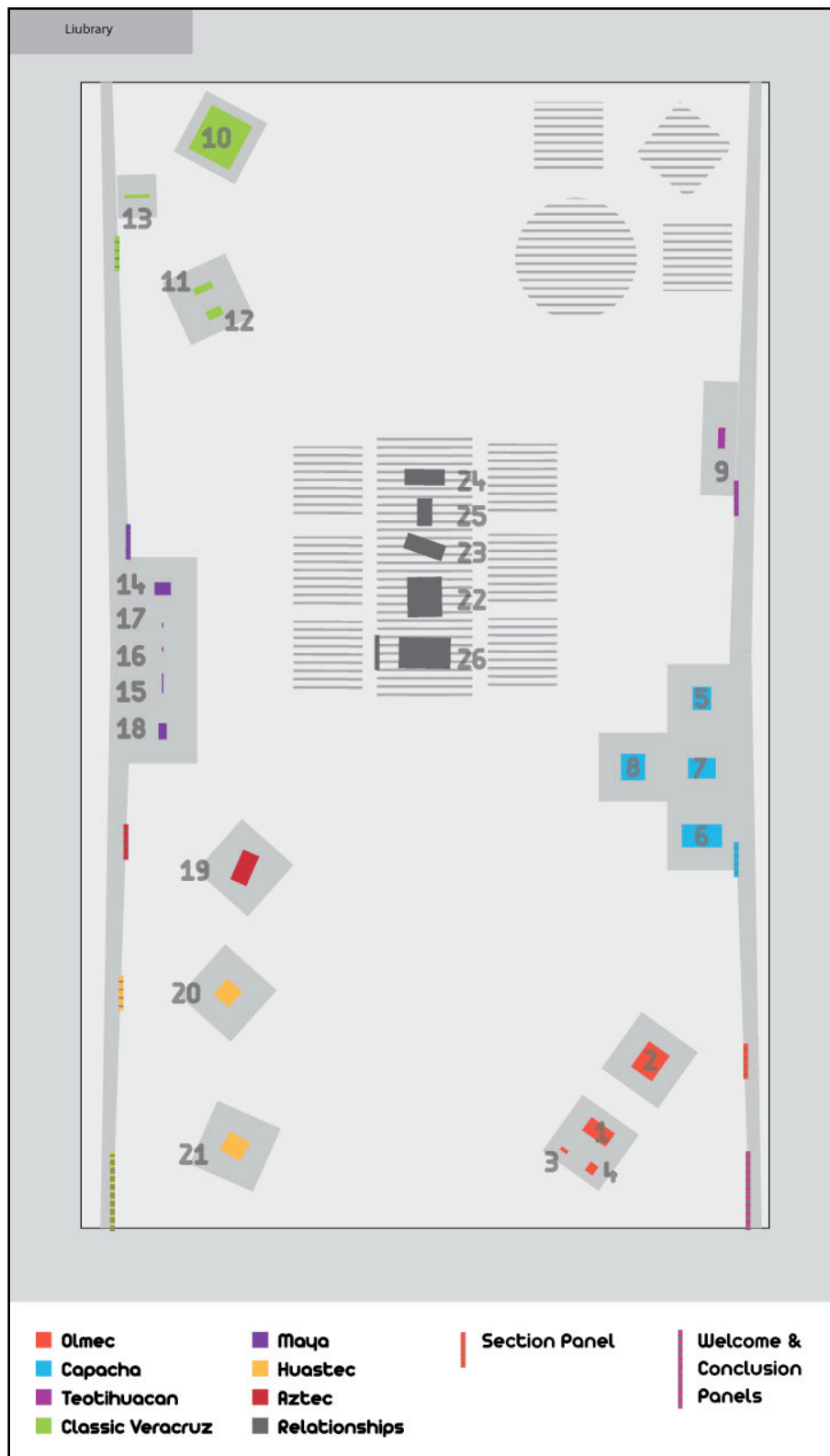
Sample Section Labels:

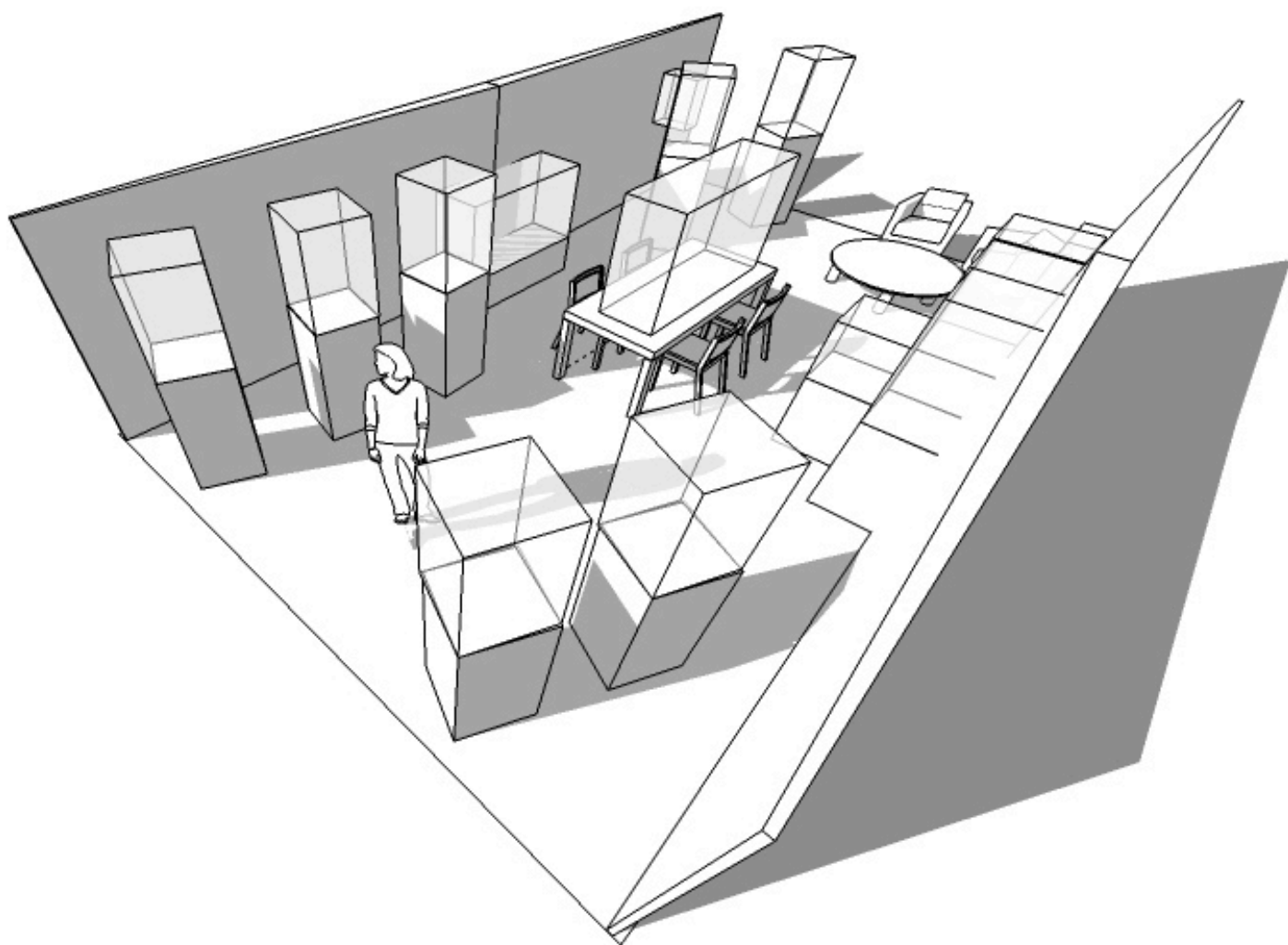
In the case of the section labels, these will be printed onto 21 x 28 centimeter labels

As you leave...

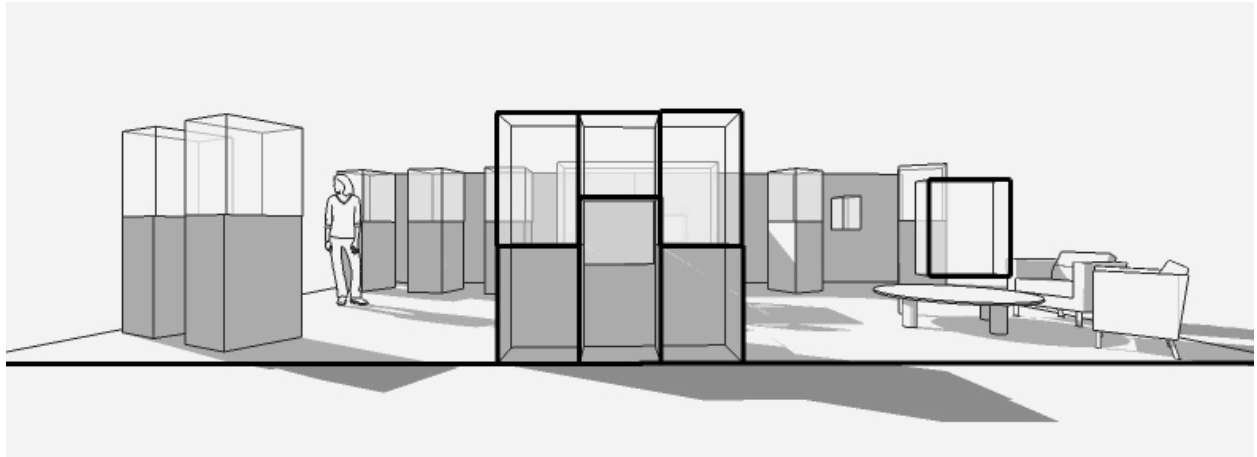
Now that you have seen all these beautiful objects, look around once more and try to think how these relationships came to happen. Was it war? Commerce? Some type of ancient archeology? Many things could have happened to create these strong links between cultures and its our job to ask these questions and find the answers. Finally, can you draw more parallels between what was happening in Mesoamerica with similar situations in Europe?

Floor Plan

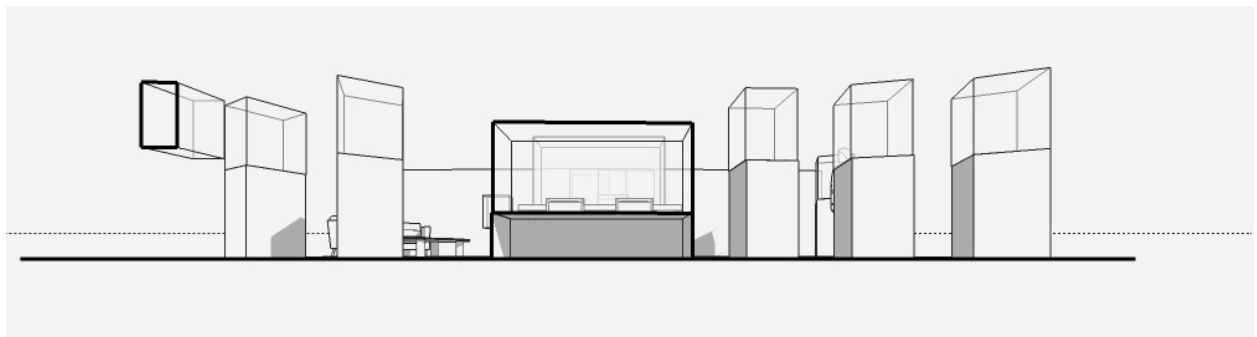




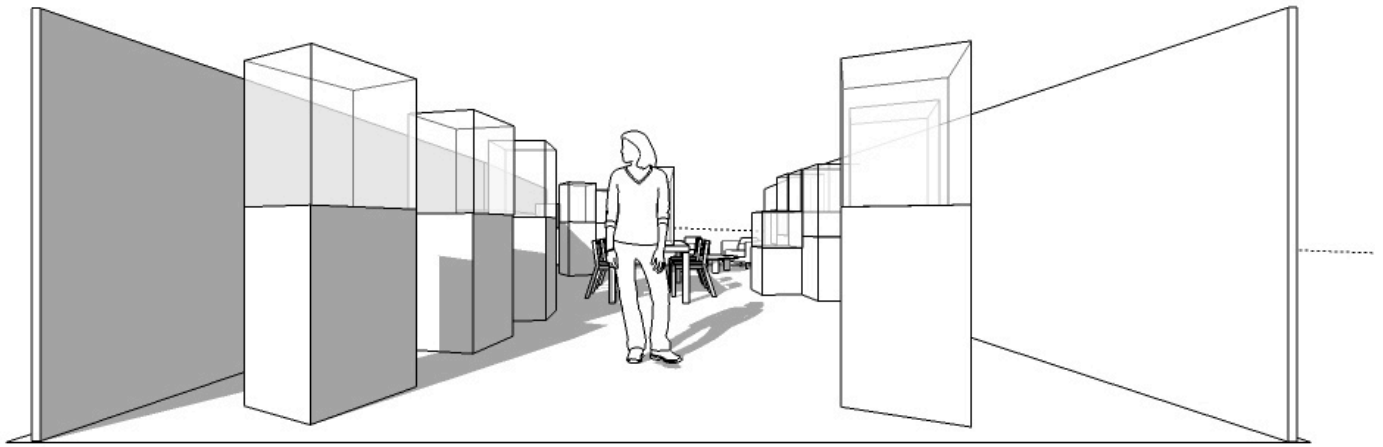
ISOMETRIC VIEW



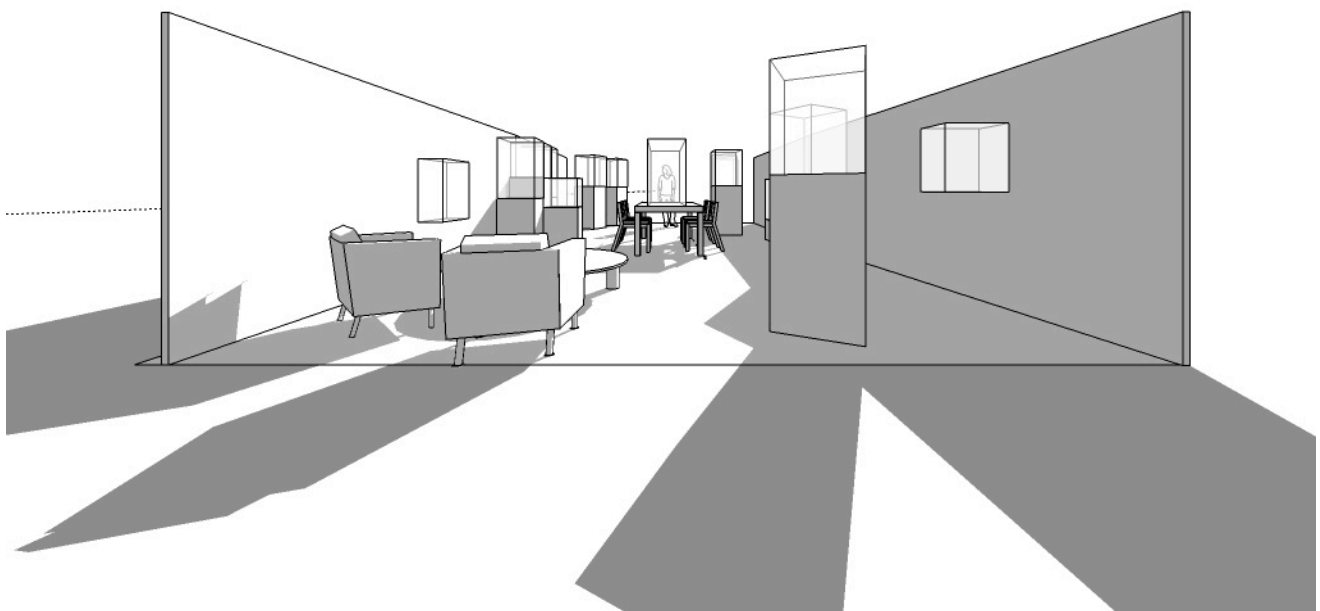
RIGHT SIDE VIEW



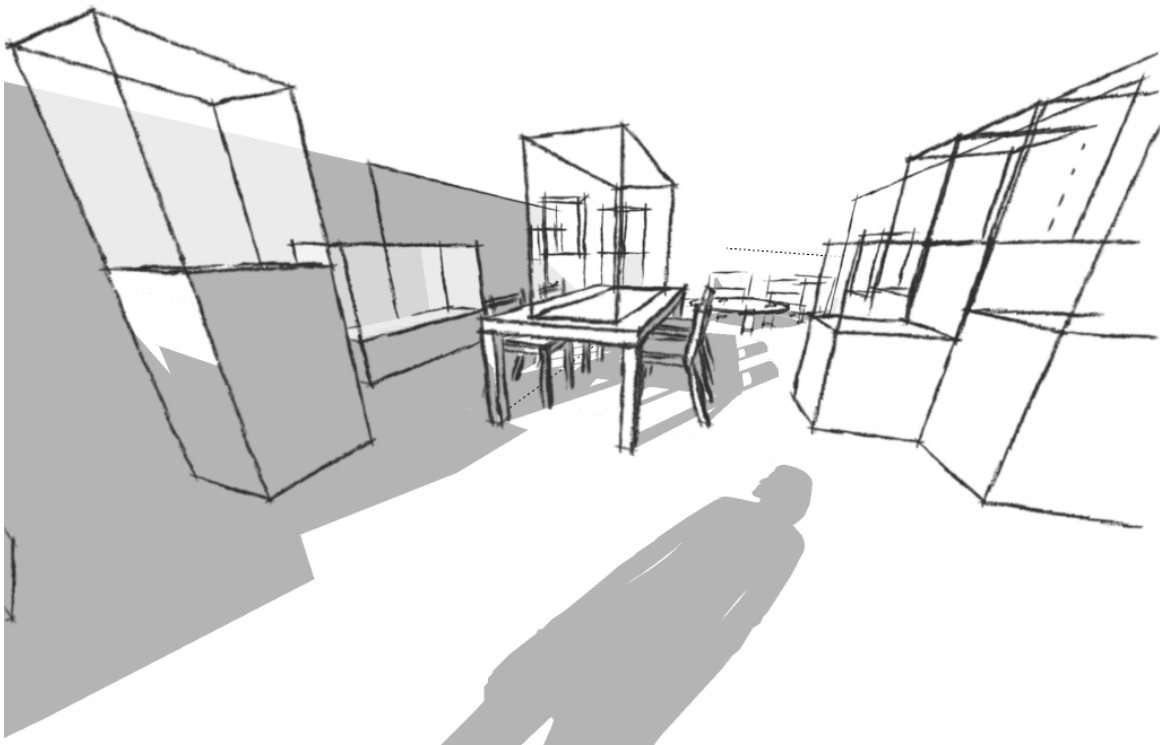
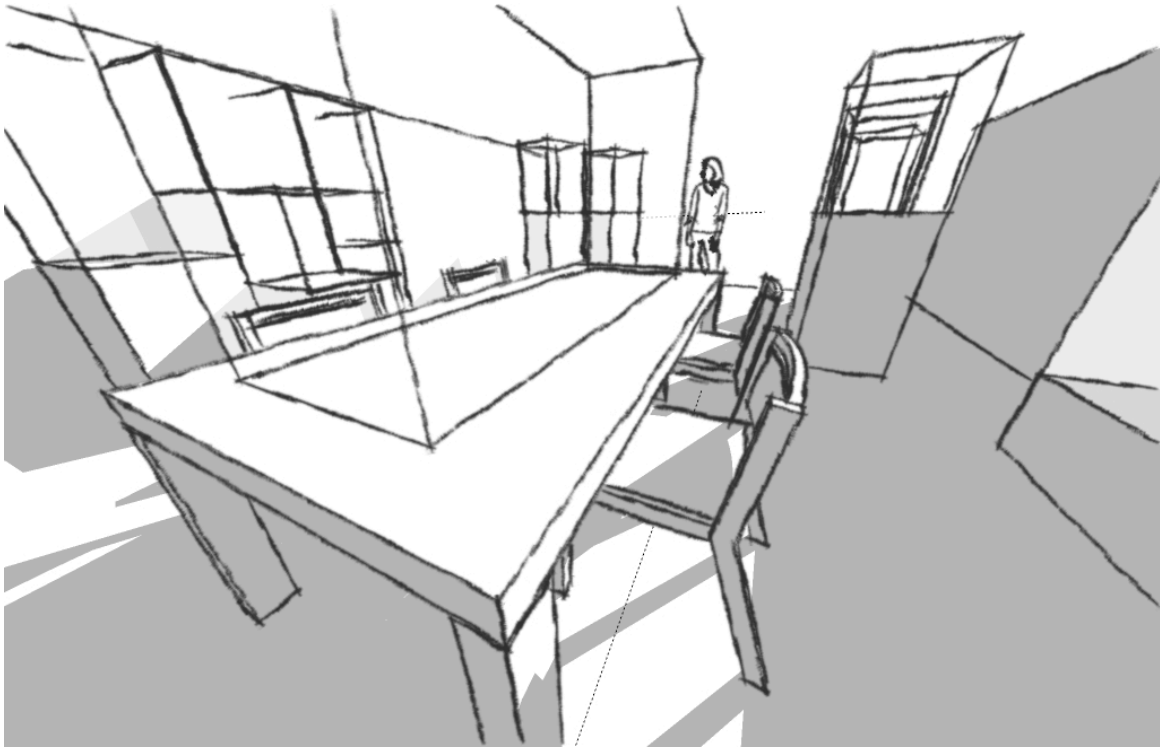
LEFT SIDE VIEW

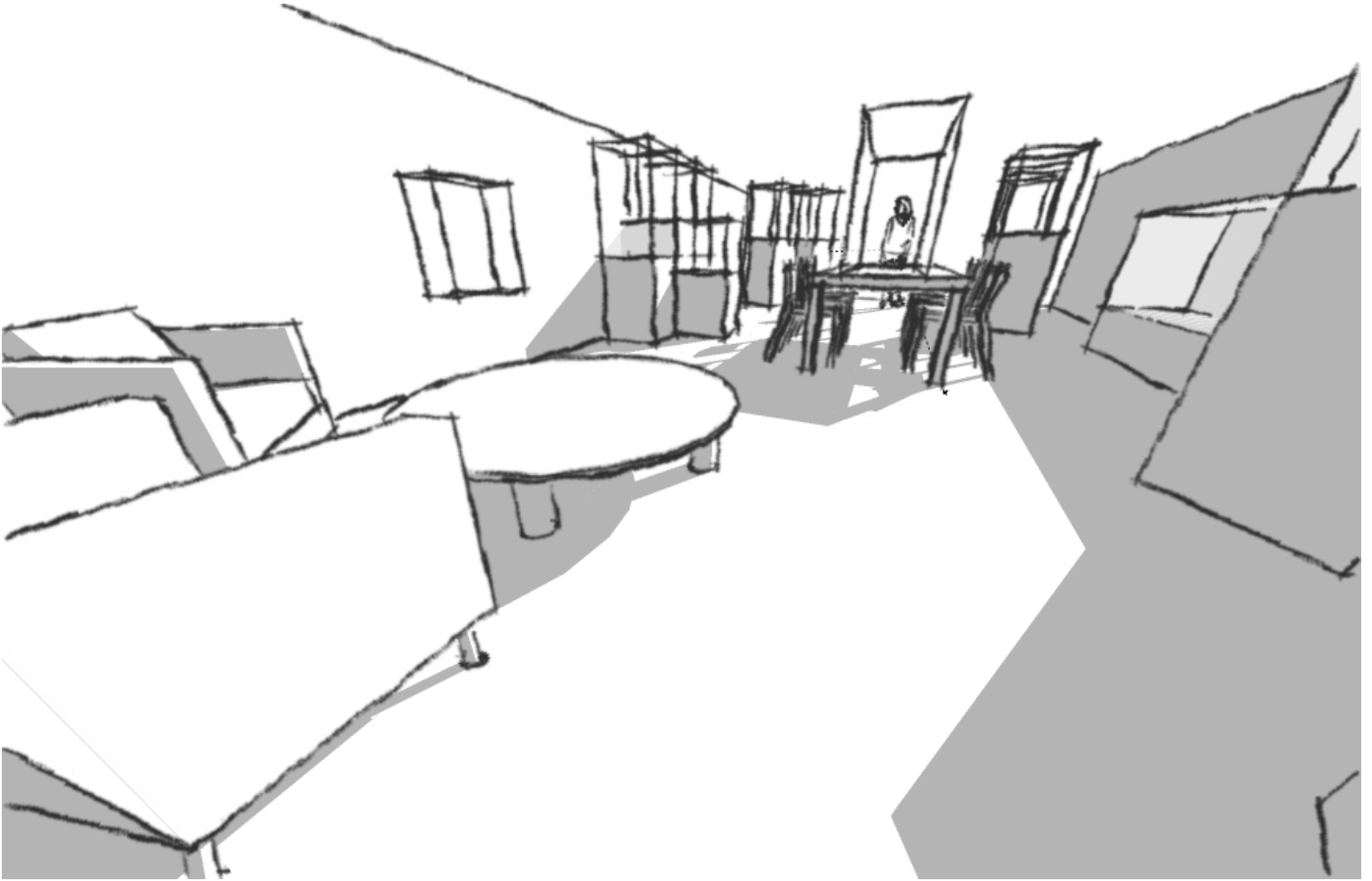


FRONT



BACK





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