

PSYCHEDELICS

Art. Culture. Science.



M3LL155X, 2015, FKA Twigs album art

ROM

The Exhibition

Medicine.

Mind-manifesting drug.

Hallucinogen.

There is no simple way to describe “psychedelics.” From sacred traditions stewarded over millennia to mental health research today, psychedelics mean many things to many different people.

How we understand psychedelics has cultural, scientific, and political consequences. And it is critical that our understanding encompasses multiple perspectives.

ROM’s new exhibition is a thought-provoking, transdisciplinary journey through the science and cross-cultural uses of psychedelics.

Deeply rooted in science, it will evoke the unnerving, colourful, and downright “trippy” experience of these substances.

The exhibition’s goal is to prompt reflection and invite dialogue about the role psychedelics could, should, and should not play in our shared futures.



The Deification of Our Mother Dew Soul, Jose Benitez Sanchez, 1975

Big Idea

Exploring the diverse cultural practices, art, and science of psychedelics empowers critical reflection on their current and future role in distinct and shared societies.

Visitor Outcomes

Visitors will:

- Feel awe and intrigue by the diverse art, species, research, and cultures linked to psychedelic use.
- Grow curious and ask questions about the expanding presence and future applications of psychedelics in society.
- Contextualize today's growing interest in psychedelics by examining past and present uses.



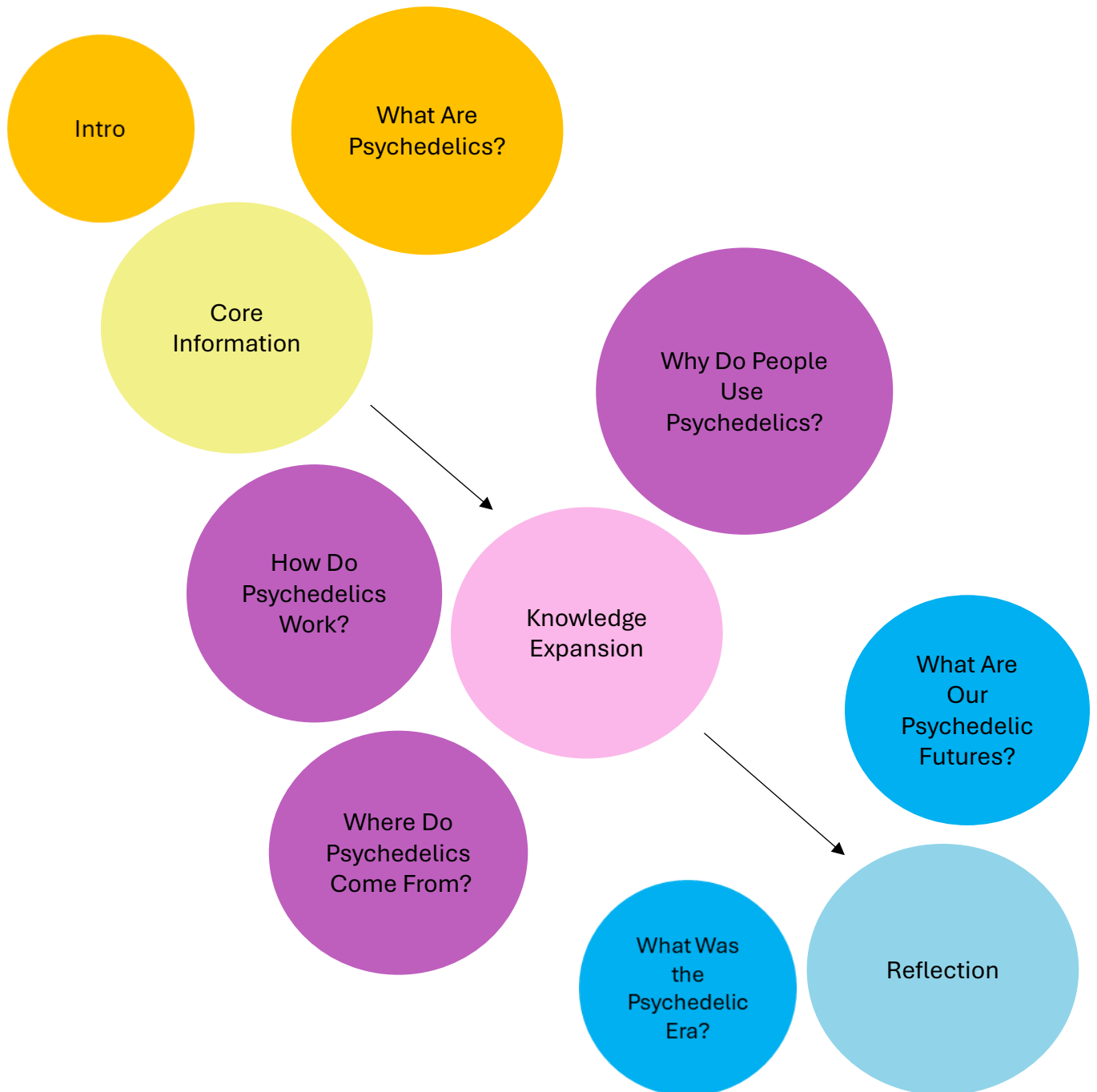
Huichol gourd, about 1970-1975, Mexico. ROM



Prayer Arrows, about 1950, unrecorded Huichol artist(s). ROM

Interpretive Strategy

The exhibition flows through three phases—Core Information, Knowledge Expansion, and Reflection—mirroring the journey of a psychedelic experience (i.e. preparation of self, opening of consciousness, and return to real life).

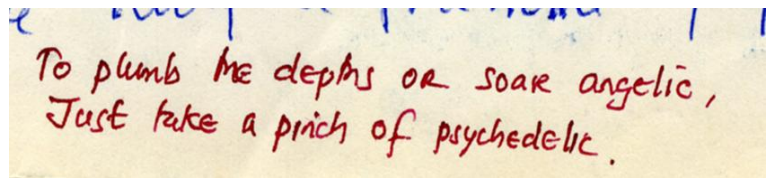
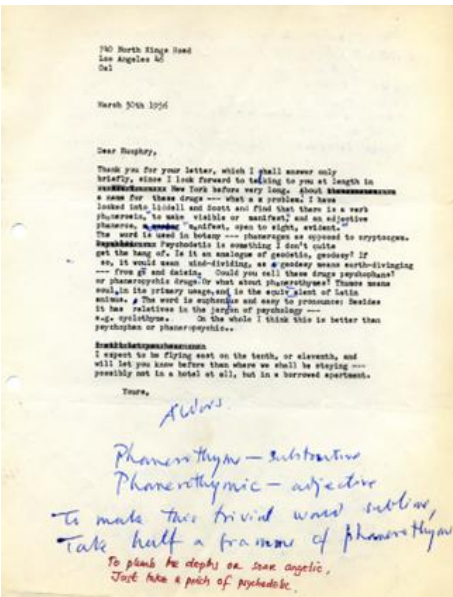


Floorplan



What are Psychedelics?

Psychedelics are controversial. Scientifically, psychedelics are a class of drugs that produce an altered state of consciousness. Culturally, they hold many meanings, each rooted in the unique practices and worldviews of a community. Visitors are introduced to the four 'classic' psychedelics that act on the brain in a similar way: psilocybin, LSD, mescaline, and DMT.



This letter from famed novelist Aldous Huxley to psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond captures the birth of the term "psychedelic." Replying in red ink to Huxley's suggested term for these substances, Osmond pens a rhyme expressing the highs and lows of psychedelic use. The term "psychedelic" was coined in Canada and translates to "mind-manifesting."

Letter from Aldous Huxley to Humphrey Osmond
(reproduction), 1956. Courtesy of Huxley Literary Trust



There are different ways for psychedelics to enter the body - whether inhaled, swallowed, or absorbed - shapes the onset and intensity of the experience.

Nicoya pedestal jar, 1000-1350, Costa Rica. ROM
Cuiva snuffing tube, 1966, Colombia. ROM



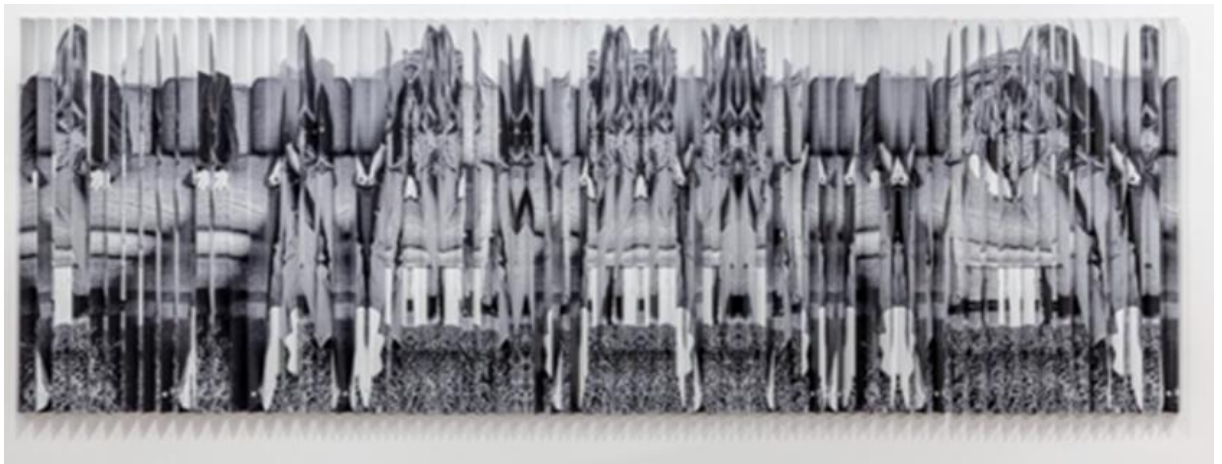
Poster from the Joint Show Exhibition,
Moore Gallery, 1967, California. ROM

How do Psychedelics Work?

Psychedelics may forge new brain pathways across neurons, provoking striking visuals and a journey that unfolds in stages. A key experience will be an immersive room that may feel 'alive'. Created based on certain documented common characteristics, visitors will hear sounds and see visuals that build and distort mirroring a 'trip'.



A Psychedelic Journey. Immersive Theatre



Artist Annie MacDonell reconfigures a photograph of a woman amid a psychedelic experience, creating a visual exploration of ego dissolution. Commonly reported during psychedelic experiences, ego dissolution refers to one's sense of self melting away as connections to the broader world intensify.

Ego Death Trip, 2023, Annie Macdonell.

Where do Psychedelics Come From?

Across the world, many organisms produce chemicals with psychedelic effects that aid survival – deterring predators, suppressing competitors, or spreading spores. Scientists are still uncovering how these compounds work. When humans ingest these compounds, the effects can vary widely, from medicinal to toxic and even deadly.



Fire Salamander (*Salamandra salamandra*),
Europe



Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), Northern hemisphere



Ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*), global

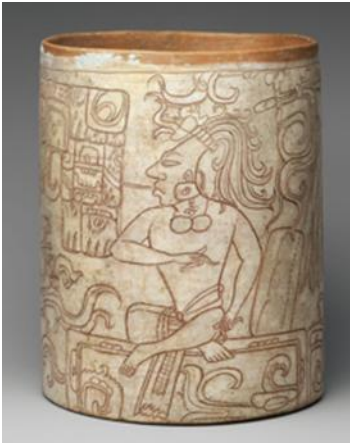


People are overharvesting peyote because of the human demand for its psychedelic effects. Today, it faces endangerment in the wild.

Peyote in terrarium

Why do People Use Psychedelics?

Visitors encounter historic and traditional practices involving psychedelic substances by examining objects and belongings that accompanied their use. To this day, psychedelics remain important to diverse cultures around the world, many united by a desire to reach beyond ordinary consciousness.

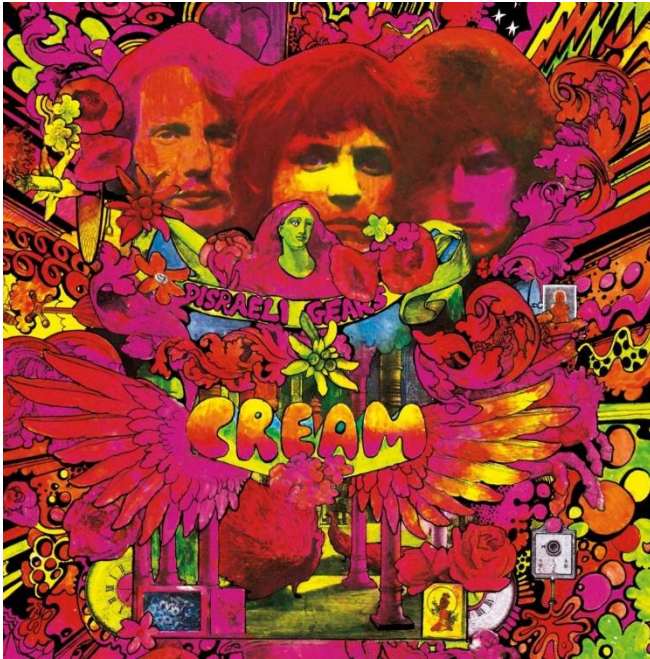


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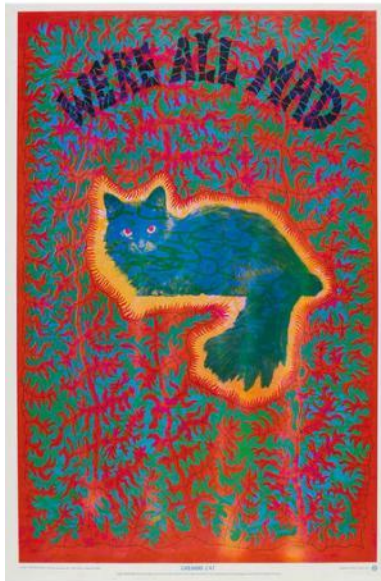
1. **Vessel with seated lord**, 600-800 CE, Mayan, Mexico. Metropolitan Museum of Art
2. **Statue of god holding two snuff trays**, 500-1000 CE, Tiwanaku artist(s), Bolivia. Metropolitan Museum of Art
3. **Butterfly warrior incense burner**, 450-650 CE, Teotihuacan artist(s), Mexico. Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art
4. **Punu mask**, 1980-1990, unrecorded Punu artist, Gabon. Private lender.
5. **Huichol men's ensemble**, about 1950, unrecorded Huichol artist(s), Mexico. ROM
6. **Harvest yarn painting**, about 1950-1975, unrecorded Huichol artist, Mexico. ROM

What was the Psychedelic Era?

Born on society's fringes, the psychedelic era exploded in the 1960s, fueled by radical artistic innovation and countercultural energy. As figures like Timothy Leary urged a generation to 'turn on, tune in, and drop out,' psychedelics such as LSD became both a creative catalyst and an act of resistance against the mainstream—seen by some as a path to liberation, and by authorities as a dangerous loss of control.



Psychedelic posters and album art used bright colours, swirling patterns, distorted typography, and surreal imagery to evoke the possibilities of altered states of consciousness.



Clockwise from top left:

1. **Disraeli Gears**, 1967, Cream album cover
2. **Richard Nixon's War on Drugs PSA**, 1971
3. **Dress**, 1970-1971, Marilyn Brooks. ROM
4. **We're All Mad, Cheshire Cat**, 1967, colour offset lithograph on wove paper. ROM

What are our Psychedelic Futures?

Psychedelics are making headlines. Are we in a “psychedelic renaissance?” Today, laws governing access to psychedelics are slowly loosening in North America, and cultural groups fight to safeguard their practices. Visitors consider the future of psychedelics as they explore ethical questions that inspire reflection about their use, regulation, and accessibility.



Brian Blomerth is an illustrator, cartoonist, and musician based in Brooklyn, NY, whose previous publications include the wildly popular visual histories *Bicycle Day* (2019) and *Mycelium Wassonii* (2021). Blomerth’s illustrations are found throughout the exhibition.

Lead Curator

Dr. Justin Jennings

Justin Jennings, Senior Curator of Latin American Archaeology at ROM, has conducted archaeological fieldwork in Peru for the last 25 years, publishing 14 books and more than 100 articles and chapters based on his research. His latest book, entitled *Rethinking Global Governance: Learning from Long-Ignored Societies* was published in 2023. His interests include the spread of early civilization, the first cities, feasting, globalization, and archaeological tourism.



Dr. Jennings has curated exhibitions on the ancient peoples of the Americas including *Ancient Peru Unearthed: Golden Treasures from a Lost Civilization* (2007), *Maya: Secrets of their Ancient World* (2011), *Toronto Underfoot: 10,000 Years of Our History* (2014), and *TSARNITUT! Music Born of the Cold* (2023).

Dr. Jennings is an Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Prior to joining ROM in 2006, Dr. Jennings taught at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania and the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Expert Advisors

This exhibition was developed with the assistance of an extensive group of 35 scientific experts, medical advisors, and cultural practitioners. Special thanks to Manoj Doss, Ph.D. from Dell Medical School, who provided insights on the basic neurocognitive mechanisms of psychoactive drugs, particularly the impact of psychedelics on different learning and memory processes in humans. A fulsome list of advisors is available upon request.

About the Exhibition

Availability: Spring 2027; Summer 2027; Winter 2027-28
4 months per venue

Size: 5,000-6,000 sf / 460-550 m²

Content Includes:

- Approximately 90 objects (paintings, textiles, artworks, botanical specimens, archival materials, and models)
- Object mounts and hanging systems
- Text files in digital format (Eng/Fr)
- Digital files (Eng/Fr) for 2 projections, 1 e-label, 2 videos, and 2 sound experiences
- Psychedelic Immersive Experience digital files and bespoke equipment

Fees:

- Fee and Shared Costs upon request
 - Shared Costs include: crating; packing; reproduction rights; and final dispersal
 - Additional Venue Costs: shipping; insurance; casework*; ROM couriers for de-/installation; international courier costs (if any); production costs; playback equipment; and all local costs.
- *ROM could provide terrarium, if of interest.



Yarn Painting, 20th century, unrecorded Huichol artist. ROM

Catalogue: Available for sale

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