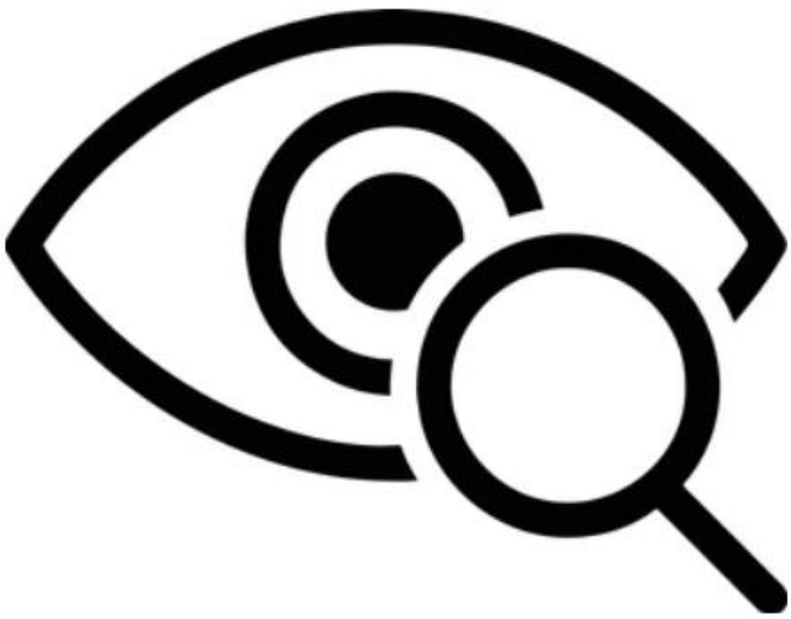
ROOM GUIDE · LARGE PRINT

Room 4

Recent history

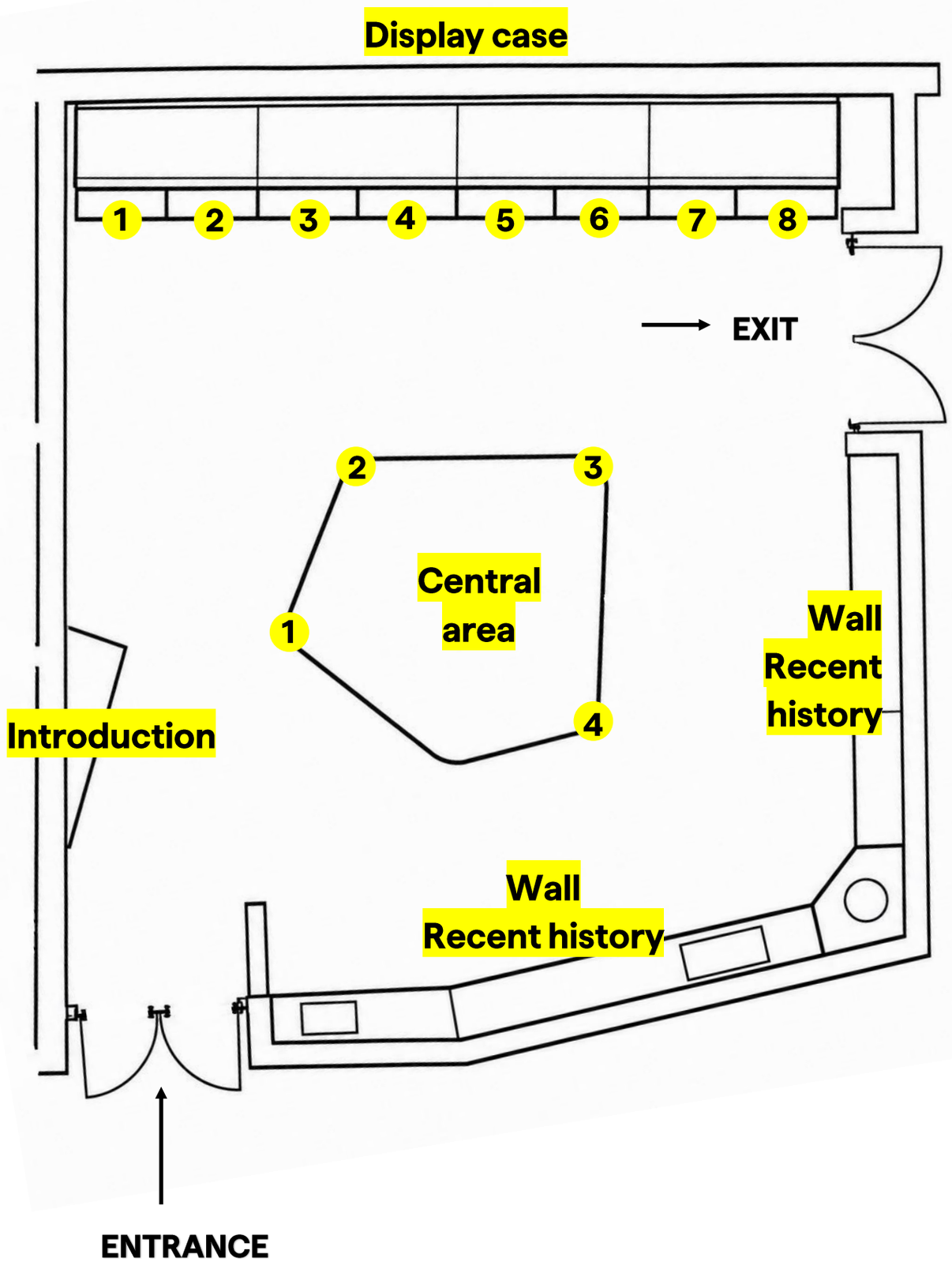


Growth and challenges

Atacama in the 20th century

Over the past hundred years, mining has driven the regional economy and transformed the lives of its inhabitants, opening paths to prosperity and dynamism while also creating challenges and tensions in the areas where it takes place.

Room 4 plan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Introduction

Chile

A new frontier

Following the War of the Pacific, Tarapacá and Antofagasta were annexed to Chile, redrawing the country's map. The nitrate industry became the main economic activity, making Chile the world's largest producer until the 1930s. Thousands moved north in search of new opportunities, while Atacama lost prominence in the region.

- At the end of the war, the Chilean State commissioned maps to understand and control the newly incorporated territories. Published in 1892, this map shows the desert between the Loa and Huasco rivers, including its roads, cities and mineral deposits.

Atacama around 1900

A territory reinventing itself

The 20th century began with the Region in crisis. High-grade minerals were running out, while limited technology

made lower-grade deposits difficult to exploit. Poor connections, high railway fares —then privately operated— and a shortage of professionals added to the challenges.

Meanwhile, the nitrate boom farther north increased demand for food and services, boosting agriculture and livestock farming in the Copiapó and Huasco valleys. At the same time, new copper discoveries in northern Atacama also opened prospects for the local economy.

Showcase

Atacama

Trades in a diverse territory

In one of the country's least populated regions, diverse communities coexist and intertwine, bringing the desert to life. Along the coast, traditions remain closely tied to the sea, while in the valleys the landscape is shaped by farmland, livestock and urban activity. In the mountains, ancestral traditions continue in close connection with their surroundings.

1. Legacies of a glorious century

A modern territory

The beginning of the 20th century was economically difficult for the Region. However, the preceding decades of prosperity had left a strong foundation, positioning its cities as centres of development in the desert, with shops, theatres, telegraphs, railways and established institutions able to adapt to change.

A strategic location

Atacama was key in linking central Chile with Antofagasta and Tarapacá after the War of the Pacific, which led the State to strengthen its presence through education, agricultural development and railway networks. By the mid-20th century, the Paipote smelter helped revitalise the local economy.

- The collection belonged to Eduardo Calcagni's chemical laboratory, where rocks from the mine were analysed to determine their grade and value before metallurgical processing.

Eyewitness

José Antonio Olivares Valdivia spent forty years portraying Copiapó society from his studio on Atacama Street. His photographs are a record of everyday life during the first decades of the 20th century.

2. A region of knowledge

Educating the young

The Copiapó School of Mines was founded at the height of the mining boom in the mid-19th century. By the beginning of the new century, hundreds of its graduates were working in different areas of mining, contributing to the growth of the industry across the Region and the country.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the State expanded its facilities, adding an important mineralogical collection, a training mine, laboratories, mechanics workshops and drills powered by hydroelectric energy from the Copiapó River.

Mercedes Fritis Mackenney

She was the first headmistress of the Copiapó Girls' High School (1877), a pioneering institution in female secondary education in Chile. The School became state-run in 1904.

Teachers for a nation-building project

Copiapó Normal School

Opened in 1905 as part of a network of state schools, this institution trained primary teachers who were later assigned to Antofagasta, Iquique and Arica, contributing to the “Chileanisation” of the recently annexed territories.

3. The *Longino*

Connecting a territory

At the beginning of the 20th century, Atacama had numerous privately built railway lines linked to mining, but they were not interconnected. Seeking to strengthen its presence in the north, the State acquired several of these routes and developed the Northern Longitudinal Railway, the *Longino*, linking Tarapacá with Valparaíso.

- The railway enabled the transport of mining, marine, agricultural and livestock products within the Region across the Region and the country.

From sea to mountains

These display tables invite you on a journey, like the *Longino*'s, through the cultural landscapes of the Atacama Region, exploring the territories, communities and trades that have shaped this land.

4. Life along the coast

To the rhythm of the waves

Atacama's nearly 300 km of coastline have been inhabited for millennia, but during the mining boom, small settlements grew into port cities such as Caldera and Barquitos, while the *Longino* connected the coast to other economic regions. Today, coastal communities keep long-standing traditions alive alongside modern activities.

Atacama preserves for the world

As part of a policy supporting the fishing sector, a cold-storage facility opened in Caldera in 1928, later giving rise to the Corbeta company, which produced canned fish, shellfish and agricultural products.

5. Transverse valleys

The land and its trades

In the early 20th century, the Copiapó and Huasco valleys strengthened their agricultural and livestock traditions, which still shape the landscape and daily life. Today, this sector contributes about 2% of the Region’s wealth in a context marked by tensions over water use in one of the driest territories in the world.

- As intensive agriculture expanded, Huasco Valley communities have organised to recover traditional crops, create seed banks and pass on local knowledge.

6. Life in motion

Moving with the herd

Valley and mountain communities combine farming with livestock raising, especially goats, which provide wool, meat and cheese. Seasonal journeys in search of water and pasture shape their way of life.

- The veranada refers to high-altitude pastures and wetlands where livestock feed during the warmer months, while the invernada refers to lower mountain areas used during the colder months.

7. Highland heritage

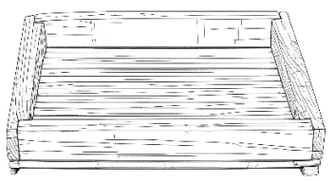
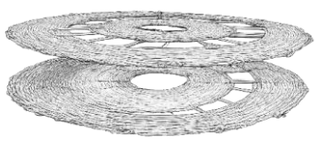
The collection includes objects linked to transhumant life along trails, valleys and mountains; from clothing such as ponchos and cloaks to saddles, harnesses, ropes and hobbles used to handle animals.

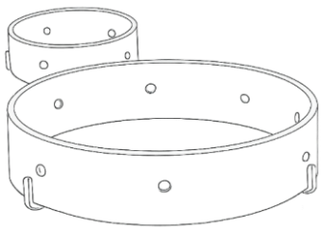
8. Colla people

Living among the mountains

In Atacama’s highlands, Colla communities maintain ancestral traditions of herding, alfalfa cultivation, craftwork and small-scale mineral extraction, with knowledge passed down within families and a way of life shaped by movement and a close connection to the land.

Featured collection

	Crucibles Ceramic and volcanic rock | 98.217 Crucibles are high-temperature resistant containers used to melt , calcine or filter materials. In laboratories, they are used for chemical analyses and controlled reactions.
	***Zaranda*-Grape destemmer** Wood | 19.54 The *zaranda* is used in the production of wine, *chicha* or *pajarete*. Grape bunches are rubbed firmly across a surface made of coligüe cane, separating the fruit from the stems and leaves.
	***Esportines*** Iron | 224.5-A | 224.5-B These wire rings are known as *esportines* or *capachos*. Several are placed one on top of another —like a stack of pancakes— to press olive paste and extract its oil.

	***Zunchos*-Cheese moulds** Plastic and metal | 24.3-A | 24.3-B | 24.5-A | 24.5-B These bands, also known as moulds or presses, help shape handmade cheese during production. Traditionally they were made of wood or wicker; over time, metal and plastic versions were introduced.

Central area

Mining

Mother lode

Since the early 20th century, mining has shaped Atacama's history and transformation, creating jobs, driving new technologies, shaping ways of life and giving rise to settlements and cities in the desert. Yet this development has also generated tensions around the conservation of the environment which is unique and fragile.

The century of copper

Around 1900, new technologies for exploiting low-grade porphyry deposits drove a major rise in copper production and the development of mines such as Chuquicamata, El Teniente and Potrerillos, the latter located in Atacama. This marked the beginning of the "copper cycle", which continues today as the Region's main economic activity.

1. *Pirquinería*

A trade that endures

Pirquinería is small-scale mining, often family-run, using artisanal methods. The trade has endured over time, combining traditional tools and techniques with motorised or electric machinery.

- This practice supports many families, who search the desert for mineral veins and set up temporary camps. When prices fall, they often turn to fishing, farming or raising livestock.

2. Potrerillos

Life and work high in the mountains

The Potrerillos copper deposit was one of Chile's most important between 1920 and 1960. The US-owned Andes Copper Mining Company introduced cutting-edge technology and built a town in the Domeyko Range, more than 2,900 m above sea level. Following the company-town model, workers and their families were provided with

housing, education, healthcare and leisure spaces, under strict supervision and control.

An operation from mountains to sea

Dynamite was used to extract the ore, making the rock easier to break. Copper-processing plants and a thermoelectric power station were built at the port of Barquitos, along with an extensive network of roads, railways, power lines, aqueducts and communication lines linking the different operations with one another and with the rest of the world.

3. El Salvador

Another Scale of Exploitation

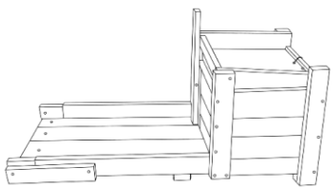
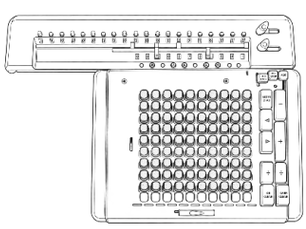
By the mid-20th century, the Potrerillos ore body was declining. Nearby, a low-grade, high-volume copper porphyry was discovered and given the symbolic name El Salvador (The Saviour). There, Andes Copper Mining Co. developed large-scale facilities with more efficient extraction, greater division of processes and improved safety standards, bringing Atacama into large-scale mining.

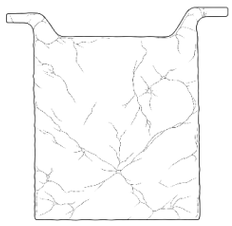
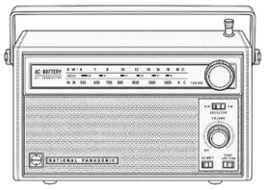
4. “Copper is ours”

A national struggle

In 1951, the Copper Workers’ Confederation brought together the unions of Potrerillos, Chuquicamata and El Teniente to demand better wages and living conditions. It later played a key role in the Chileanisation and nationalisation of copper, in 1966 and 1971 respectively. These changes brought copper exploitation under State control and materialised an economic development project that had occupied national attention for years.

Featured collection

	**Gold pan** Wood | 19.76 The pan was used to separate gold from other materials found in rivers or mines.
	**Calculator** Metal | C.25.2-A These calculators were essential for accounting, scientific and administrative work. At the Potrerillos company store,

	they were used for ledgers and balances before portable electronic models became available.
	**Anode** Copper On loan from Empresa Nacional de Minería (ENAMI) C.24.1
	**Radio** Metal and wood 0.223.20
	Kerosene lamp Metal and glass 0.223.2
	Gas mask Plastic On loan from Codelco El Salvador C.25.1-C
	Cobresal Industrial Union pennant Fabric On loan from the Maldonado Aravena family C.25.2-D

Recent history wall

1. After the breakdown of democracy

Local repercussions

On 11 September 1973, Salvador Allende's government was overthrown in a civil-military coup led by Augusto Pinochet, who remained in power for 17 years under a dictatorship marked by serious human rights violations. In Atacama, the Armed Forces intervened in mining companies and harshly repressed workers' organisations that had actively participated in the social and political struggles of the preceding years.

The Caravan of Death in Atacama

This was the name given to the military delegation that travelled through several regions of Chile in October 1973 and arrived in Atacama to execute political prisoners. Sixteen people were killed in Copiapó. Their remains were missing for years, until a mass grave containing 13 of them was found in the Municipal Cemetery in 1990, marking a milestone in the Region's search for truth and justice. Three victims remain missing today.

- The Memorial Site at Copiapó Cemetery identifies 39 victims of the dictatorship in the Atacama Region, including disappeared detainees and political prisoners who were executed. Investigations are ongoing, and this figure may rise as the National Search, Truth and Justice Plan, launched in 2023, progresses.

2. Organised community

Faced with repression, Atacama society mobilised. Marches, support from the Church and alternative media such as *Dialogando con Atacama* and *El Asomao* helped expose human-rights violations. Women organised through UDEMA (Union of Women of Atacama), and on 8 March 1985 — despite strict military surveillance— ten members marched through Copiapó's Plaza de Armas in a peaceful protest that began a tradition still observed in the Region today.

- On 5 October 1988, a plebiscite was held to decide Chile's political future. In Atacama, the "No" vote received 56% of the vote, following the national trend

and opening the way to democratic elections and the end of the military dictatorship.

3. Mining at the end of the century

A new roadmap

Since 1970, Atacama has experienced continuous mining modernisation. Following the nationalisation of copper in 1971, the state-owned company Codelco was created during the dictatorship to manage large-scale mining. At the same time, the new economic framework liberalised the rest of the mining sector, encouraged private investment and redefined the role of medium-scale mining, paving the way for new copper, gold and iron projects.

- At least two mining operations in the Region qualify as large-scale copper mining —based on annual production, investment and other criteria— but small- and medium-scale mining remain the backbone of the local industry.

4. The industry today

- Copper extraction is the Region’s main mining activity, concentrated in small- and medium-scale operations.

- Atacama accounts for more than 60% of Chile’s iron production.

- Mining accounts for 29% of the Region’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) —about 3 out of every 10 pesos generated in Atacama.

- 77% of mining workers live in the region where they work; in Atacama, 3 out of 4 miners live in the Region.

- According to 2024 figures, mining provides around 25,500 direct jobs in Atacama, representing almost 20% of regional employment.

- Women’s participation in mining has increased in recent years, reaching approximately 15% of direct employment.

5. The 33 of Atacama

A case that shook the mining industry

In August 2010, a collapse at the San José mine —about 45 km from Copiapó— trapped 33 miners underground. Despite known structural and safety problems, the mine had remained in operation. Seventeen days later, all 33 were confirmed alive and, after nearly three months, were rescued in an operation that captured global attention and became a milestone in Chilean mining safety.

- The refuge was about 700 m underground, with temperatures above 30°C and humidity near 90%. The miners survived by rationing canned food and water. Once contact was established, a borehole delivered food, medicines and messages from their families.

- After the accident, safety and geomechanical assessment standards were tightened, inspections became stricter, and authorities gained the power to close unsafe operations. Penalties for companies that fail to comply with regulations were also increased.

6. Altered Territory

The Footprint of Mining

Across the vast desert landscape, the ruins of old settlements and abandoned operations —mine shafts, tunnels, remains of hoists and traces of old railway lines— evoke Atacama's history. They are remnants of labour systems that shaped social dynamics and identities distinctive to the Region, leaving deep marks on an arid and fragile territory.

- In the late 1990s, the Potrerillos mining camp was closed and its residents relocated because high sulphur dioxide (SO_2) emissions from the smelter posed a health risk. Thanks to the efforts of former residents, this emblematic mining settlement was designated a

Typical Zone and Historic Monument in 2023, recognising its value in the Region’s history and culture.

7. Tailings

A toxic legacy

When rock is separated from valuable minerals —such as copper, gold or silver— the waste mixed with water and chemicals becomes tailings. Nearly 200 tailings deposits have been identified in Atacama, 26 of them abandoned, with no legally responsible party for their maintenance or closure. These deposits predate the 2011 law requiring companies to establish closure and monitoring plans once operations end.

- Between 1938 and 1990, Andes Copper Mining Company and later the state-owned Codelco dumped thousands of tonnes of mining waste into the Salado River, which flows into Chañaral Bay, causing one of Chile’s largest environmental disasters of the 20th century. Despite recovery efforts, the tailings continue to release heavy metals and contaminate the coastline.

8. Future horizons

The challenge of sustainability

In recent decades, tensions between economic development and environmental protection have intensified. Cases such as the pollution of Chañaral, the Freirina health crisis and the Pascua Lama project —which threatened glaciers in the Huasco Valley— marked a turning point. In response, local communities and scientists have pushed for stronger ecosystem protection and measures towards a more sustainable future for the Region.

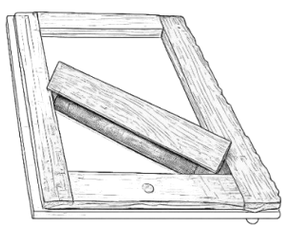
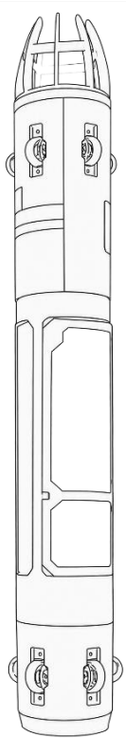
A complex relationship

Although agriculture uses the most water nationally, mining also requires large volumes and often operates in water-scarce areas, frequently in the upper parts of river basins. In response to this situation and new regulations, companies have improved water management and introduced seawater desalination plants.

- Chile, Argentina and Bolivia form the “Lithium Triangle”, home to more than half of the world’s easily extractable

lithium brine reserves, a key resource for clean-energy development. Yet these salt flats are also unique ecosystems, home to species adapted to extreme conditions, where resource use and environmental conservation coexist in a fragile balance.

Featured collection

	Industrial mimeograph Metal On loan from Jorge Oporto C.25.3
	**Handmade mimeograph** Wood, muslin and rubber Donation from the UDEMA Archive Made by Sergio Jirón 226.1
	**Fénix capsule** Steel and iron | 11.02 Fénix II, the capsule on display, was used to bring the miners to the surface, one by one. It was among three prototypes built for the rescue; another was used for field tests and the third kept as a backup. Its 54 cm-wide interior included a harness, oxygen supply and communication system.

Script, curation and coordination

Exhibitions Department

Subdirección Nacional de Museos

Museo Regional de Atacama

Atacama Region,

January 2026

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DE
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