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Paper 2: MFA Visit

The collection of Mayan ceramics, located in the Art of the Americas Wing in the Museum of Fine Arts, provides visitors with insightful information regarding Mayan culture and ways of life. Not only does the exhibit allow us to actually *see* the ceramics that the Mayans used, it also teaches us about the purpose of each item and the stories that the paintings on the ceramics tell. After spending only a few hours in the exhibit, one could certainly develop a deeper understanding of the ancient Mayan world.

The ceramic cups, bowls, and plates served multiple purposes for the Mayan people. They were used, for example, as containers for food and water. These kinds of ceramics had relatively modest decoration, unlike most of the ceramics on display in the museum. The types of ceramics we saw at the museum were much more ornate because they served a different, arguably more important purpose: to furnish the homes of the elite while also depicting Mayan rulers, rituals, and even the story of Mayan creation, known as the *Popul Vuh*. Many Mayan artists were able to express themselves through the creation of ceramics by using their artistic skills to illustrate important aspects of their culture. Over time, the designs on the ceramics became more and more elaborate, and soon Mayan kings were decorating their homes with them. Ultimately, Mayan ceramics were used for utilitarian, decorative, and cultural purposes.

The illustrations on the ceramics sometimes portrayed specific Mayan events with precise dates. An example of this is a ceramic from Guatemala, created sometime between A.D. 735 and 768. This bowl depicts Yajawte’ K’inich, the ruler of Ik’, and his successor, K’inich Lamawek, participating in a “joyaj” ceremony. Unfortunately, the significance behind the joyaj ceremony is still unknown to this day.

Mayan religious beliefs and myths were also popular themes that the artists depicted on the ceramics. One of the most important Mayan myths is illustrated on a bowl found in the museum’s exhibit- the myth of the Hero Twins, or the *Popol Vuh*. According to legend, the Hero twins sought to retrieve the Maize god’s remains after lords of the underworld had sacrificed the Maize god and had taken his bones and jewelry. The Hero twins were the sons of the Maize god, and in order to obtain his remains, they had to survive several trials created by the lords of the underworld. They were finally able to defeat the evil lords in a ball game (the soccer-like Meso-American ballgame was both sport and serious ritual for the Mayan people) and retrieve their father’s remains.

Aside from telling us religious and mythical stories, Mayan ceramics also provide insight on the Mayan way of life. Based on the illustrations, we know that Mayan warriors wore jadeite earflares, elaborate headdresses, and necklaces made of tubular beads. They usually had facial hair, wore body paint, and covered their bodies with tattoos. Similarly, kings also wore jadeite earflares and beaded necklaces, as well as decorative pendants. It is difficult to say what type of music the Mayans listened to based solely on the pictures on the ceramics, but it is likely that they played with drums and maracas (other Mayan murals suggest this). As far as food and drink go, maize was a paramount food in Mayan culture and it is still an important ingredient in modern Mexican recipes (i.e. tortillas). Popular drinks included chocolate beverages and fermented honey with flavored leaves; they even had drinking rituals where they would smoke tobacco, drink these aforementioned beverages, and then take part in blood sacrifices. Mayan language also had an effect on our modern vocabulary; the Mayan word “xoc” (pronounced “shoke”) is where the word “shark” comes from, and the word chocolate derived from the Mayan word “kakaw”.

I would definitely say that the ceramics in the museum were strikingly beautiful. Although their color palette was limited, the rustic colors were unique and aesthetically pleasing. The meticulous detailing on the ceramics is pretty astounding (in a good way of course) and the stories that the artists were trying to portray in such a small space are nicely and clearly displayed. The Mayan word ts’ib denotes the two English verbs “to paint” and “to write.” To the Mayans, painting became a form of “visual poetry”; that is, the paintings on the ceramics actually told a story and were forms of expression for artists. There was a thought process and meaning behind every piece of artwork- these weren’t just random, pointless paintings. They related to Mayan mathematics because Mayan mathematics focused on astronomy, and many Mayan astronomical stories were depicted on the ceramics. This also means that Mayan culture was expressed on these products; from astronomy to traditional rituals, almost all important aspects of Mayan culture were represented on a ceramic painting.

Ultimately, viewing the Mayan ceramics gave me a better appreciation for Mayan civilization, as well as a deeper respect. When we learned about the collapse of their civilization, I initially thought of the Mayans as irresponsible, careless people with skewed priorities. However, seeing how immersed they were in their culture, and the focus that they had on enriching it and preserving it, I can finally understand the thought process of the Mayans a bit more. Had it not been for the Mayan ceramics left behind in the wake of their collapse, we may never have had the opportunity to learn about Mayan life and culture. When a civilization collapses, the people, their morals, their beliefs, and their culture are usually lost. However, in the case of the Mayans, their legacy and culture lives on in various museums around the world, including the Museum of Fine Arts.