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Reflection to MFA Visit

Before Saturday, I interpreted the Mayans as a faceless group of people, with a bland, dry culture. But you could hardly blame me, considering all understood about these people was the mathematical advances they made, and the societal mistakes that lead to the demise of most of their civilization – clearly, I was missing some major parts of their culture. On Saturday, the trip to the Museum of Fine Arts, in the Arts of Americans wing, my perception of the Mayans changed greatly. From just seeing a few dozen of their artifacts, this faceless bunch turned to a detailed, colorful society. Using primarily reds, oranges and greens, paintings on ceramics came to life, depicting the men, women and gods of the time, and their vivid culture.

These ceramics came mostly as, plates and bowls, which the Museum of Fine Arts described as used mostly for court feasts. The bowls were used mostly at the feasts to serve a “stew-like drinkable cereal of flavored rice” and “wah”, a tamale style food, was served on the plates. The cylindrical ceramics held a chocolate, sometimes alcoholic drink called “kakaw”, a Mayan word in which the English word chocolate was derived. But my favorite part of the ceramics is the skillfully decorated outside. Each one describes a different scene, both religious and historic. For example, a vase on display demonstrated a Mayan drinking ritual, in which to achieve so-called “visionary experiences”, the Mayans drank an alcoholic, hallucinogenic kakaw and smoked very strong tobacco, finishing by giving blood sacrifices. Another piece of pottery contained the longest text on any Mayan ceramic, painted on a court feast bowl. The grand text on this bowl recounts the happenings before the times of humans, including such miraculous events as the birth of deities. When I saw this plate I could not help but wishing I could read the beautiful Mayan hieroglyphics so I could read the detailed version of this incredible story, but the museum summary had to suffice.

Each piece of pottery told a different story about Mayan life, and I was lucky enough to get a small glance into that life. The Mayan word “ts’ib” means to paint or write, two concepts usually considered different in the modern day, but linked every so closely to the Mayans. On a dish one can usually find a picture of sometime of importance to the Mayans, such as people, animals or deities, surrounded by hieroglyphics, which are artfully scribed, describing the scene. Their ceramics stereotypically depict animals, like sharks, eagles, snakes and deer – each clearly representing something to them. Based on the descriptions provided, the shark, from the Mayan work “xoc” pronounced shork, was feared as a dangerous animal, whereas the deer was considered calm and gentle. Many images of humans depicted a strong jawbone, emphasized by hair pulled tightly back on the head into a bun-like fashion, probably signifying the physical appearances of the Mayans at that time. One of the most interesting pieces in the museum was titled “The Human-Head Effigy Jar” which portrayed a half fleshed-half skull head. Apparently, the skull symbolized the maize that the Mayans based their diets around, implying linkage between cobs of the maize and human skulls – a similarity between human physical and spiritual being and the core of their sustenance. The depths of understanding I came realized from some of the paintings on Mayan pottery gave me a small insight into the Mayan culture, but enough of an insight to develop a strong appreciation for it.

I feel my lack of personal knowledge towards the Mayans inhibited a connection from being formed. I had formed a belief that the Mayans used their environment with small consideration towards the potential repercussions, solely to benefit them in the now. I considered them a selfish, ignorant bunch, looking for instantaneous benefit from their surroundings. But their art showed light into their lives, proving my previous conjecture completely false. The Mayans were much more than a society that just collapsed – they were a group of living, beautiful people who not only participated in mathematics, but also religion and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, when studying Mayans before, all I studied or cared to learn about was their collapse. Their customs and traditions, beliefs and religious icons, some of the most defining features of a society, I glazed over, too focused on how their society ended. However, simple things from their lives confirmed how artistic and thoughtful they were – their paintings are beautiful and detailed, and truly helped me to understand the Mayans on a deeper level.