Muhammad Aqib Javaid

Professor John Little

MONT-109N

20 April 2011

Museum of Fine Arts Paper

Many Mayan artifacts on display at the Museum of Fine Arts consisted of ceramic cups, bowls, and plates. These artifacts had various different paintings on them consisting of historical events with corresponding long count dates and religious ceremonies. For their owners, these artifacts preserved the history of the Mayan culture and were considered prestigious gifts. Events depicted were blood ceremonies, rituals, religious myths, and meetings consisting of tributes between kings of neighboring lands.

One of the vases at the MFA dating back to about 750-800 AD and found in present day Guatemala had a scene of a drinking ritual. On this vase there was a picture of nobles becoming intoxicated so that that could achieve visionary experience. The people depicted are shown smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol or other hallucinogenic drinks. The vase also shows a personal blood sacrifice being made as a part of the ritual. The names of the officials present were written in hieroglyphs on the vase, but have not been ciphered yet.

Some artifacts displayed in the MFA depicted the Maya epic called Popol Vuh, which is a tale about the creation of the world, human beings and the gods. The artifacts on display show different parts of the epic. One artifact has the Maize god being sacrificed in the underworld and then later being resurrected by his twin sons pouring water on him. This instant is related to a farmer watering his plants to nourish their growth. In another instance the ceramics show that the humans are created from maize and water, which were the two most respected resources.

After looking at all the Mayan artifacts in the MFA, it is evident that these artifacts carry a lot of information on the daily life styles of the Mayan nobles. The Mayan nobles spent most of their days in the courts and held different religions ceremonies and rituals. The king wore a white cloth that had head-shaped beads attached to it. He would wear a head dress with many feathers and other decorative jewelry. Many nobles wore a significant amount of rare and expensive jadeite which was mostly green, representing maize. Additionally, nobles, both men and women, wore some kind of decorative head dress, some men also wore some kind of necklace. Most nobles that were men covered their genitals while woman wore a dress. The common people typically wore light clothing covering the abdomen or no clothing at all, mostly likely because of the climate conditions. The common music instruments played during rituals and other ceremonies were hand-drums, flutes, rattles, and trumpets. Most Mayans enjoyed drinking alcohol and chocolate derived beverages. They ate maize (corn), tamales, stew, and chocolate. Even until today tamales are a famous modern Mexican food. Two English words have also been derived from the Mayans. The word *Xoc* pronounced “Shoke” is where the English word “Shark” comes from, secondly the Mayan regularly drank beverages that were made from chocolate called *Kawka* which is where the English word “cacao” comes from.

What makes me see the Mayan artifacts as strikingly beautiful is that they have been so well preserved even after such a long time. Many of the artifacts have retained most of their color and the detail they contain is indeed beautiful. Many ceramics are well made, and represent different parts of the Mayan culture. It seems beautiful to me how the picture on the ceramics can give so much detail of a society and its people. Just by looking at the paintings and the other artifacts you can get a sense of the society and its traditions. The fact that even some of the bigger artifacts that were displayed in the MFA have almost all of their parts and are significantly detailed shows an essence of beauty. Some artifacts still have visible long count dates which show how the Mayan culture represented its historical events. It seems to me that the Classic Maya viewed artistic creativity with a very high status. All artists were from noble families and most sat next to the nobles and wore the clothing of the elites. Just by looking at all the artifacts, it can be seen that the arts were a significant part of the Maya. The artists were also very well educated in mathematics, history, religion and visual arts. Their paintings visualized what the hieroglyphs said. The Maya word *ts’ib* denotes to paint and to write, which shows how the paintings of the Mayan artists were illustrations of the hieroglyphs, some paintings even representing specific glyphs.

After visiting the Museum of Fine Arts and looking at the actual Mayan artifacts you can’t help but appreciate the artistic work done by the society. All artists were well educated in mathematics and some of that is seen through the ceramics. The Mayan interest in astronomy led them to develop a calendar that was very accurate and so close to our modern day calculations of the solar and lunar cycles. Their level of intelligence at that time period is remarkable. My views on the Mayan mathematics and astronomy have changed a little. I believe that the Mayans were indeed thinking mathematically to an extent. Their development of the calendars was a product of mathematically thinking, which allowed for it to be used for their benefit. However even after looking at the Mayan artifacts, in my perception the ultimate fate of Maya has not changed. The Maya collapsed because of their social problems that were caused by both the people and the nobles leading them. The Mayans had destined themselves for a collapse by deforesting and misusing their resources. The Maya lost their incredible intelligence and advancements when they collapsed. But their legacies of beautiful artistic work still remain.