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MFA

Maya Ceramics

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is home to many artifacts of Ancient Maya. Many are ceramic cups, bowls, vases, and plates from a long time ago that depict important parts of Mayan civilizations. Most are multipurpose as they not only serve the purpose as a vessel to hold something but also as a way of recording important dates and texts about their history and cultural beliefs. They also allow insight into discovering more about the Mayan culture.

Many of the Mayan artifacts on display at the Museum of fine arts were ceramic bowls, cups, plates, and vases. But I’m afraid we can only speculate to the uses that these objects served their owners. Their primary purposes were very practical as they all are vessels that are used to hold things. Based on the ornateness of their designs and the important events they resemble I’d say that these ceramics belonged to the nobility. Besides holding food and drink they could also have held various natural things for aesthetic purposes or they could have potentially been made to honor the gods or to remind the people of significant events depicted by their engravings.

One of the Mayan ceramic bowls records the events before the advent of humans and the birth of deities. The bowl has the longest recorded hieroglyphic text on any Maya pottery vessel. The Long Count date recorded for this bowl is 1.14.3.3.12 and the calendar round date was 9 Eb 10 Muwan. The painting on the bowl is of an artist wearing a mask and the traditional head wrap of a Maya painter. He sits higher above his peer, which signifies a title shared with the gods of cosmic creation. Another date on the inscription is said to be the accession of a historical person on January 25, A.D. 717 with the Long Count date 9.14.5.4.0 and the Calendar Round date 1 Ajaw 8 K’umku, a date 3,159 years after the initial Long Count date.

An important event to discuss in Mayan culture is the epic of Popol Vuh. This epic recounts the creation of the universe, the gods’ attempts to craft proper human beings, and the trials of the Maize God and his sons, Yax Balam and Hun Ahaw, who are called the Hero twins. This epic has been painted in scenes on the ceramics of the Mayans and has lasted thousands of years. On several ceramic pieces a story is depicted of how the Hero Twins, Hun Ahaw and Yax Bala, sit with Its’ amnaj, the lord of the underworld. The Hero twins ask for the return of their father, who had previously been sent to the underworld. These types of depictions on ceramics display how Mayans are heavily interested in recording their religious and cultural events.

Another one of the Mayan ceramics depicts some of Ancient Maya’s religious beliefs. It is a tripod cylinder vase from A.D. 650-780. The paintings on the vase feature ritual blood sacrifices and dance performances by Yajawte’ K’inich, ruler of the Ik’ polity, which is a state or province. The vase has a performance date as 7 Ok 13 Xul, May 25, 749. The text on the vase describes Yajawte’ K’inich dancing as his “jaguar throne” apparently the name of his spirit companion, while his two dance partners wore their equivalent spirit companion costumes.

Based on how artists depicted the people in their ceramics we can tell that the nobility lived desirable lifestyles. They are depicted in lavish clothing with ornate fashions demonstrating their wealth. The artists’ ability to capture the wealth of their leaders and nobles in the paintings is quite remarkable. Based on specific clothing and hairstyles observers can tell the importance of the Mayan depicted.

I agree with the statement that these ceramics are beautiful and a wonderful example of artistic expression. The Mayans were able to paint in such a way that is remarkable given the tools they had and their lack of technological advances. I can see many of these ceramic designs used primarily for aesthetic purposes and as beautiful ways to record the history of their significant events and dates. Based on their accuracy and detail, one can tell that they clearly cared very much for their art and they way they recorded special events. The Maya verb ts’ib means two things, to pain and to write.

This view of Classic Maya was completely different from anything that we have previously studied about their culture so my views have definitely changed from our previous studies. Now I can see that they appreciated much more than just the mathematics that we have studied. It makes me speculate that something much more major must have happened to their culture for them to collapse if they could dedicate so much time to their mathematics and artistic creativity. It also indicates that they were clearly a prosperous society because of the beauty of both their math and art. Prosperous societies also have individualized culture and religion, which the Mayans clearly had based on the scenes on their ceramics. When a human civilization collapses the culture is lost along with everything that is not recorded in a detailed way.