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Math Across Culture

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In every culture on the planet, the relics and other art forms left behind serve as windows into the beliefs, traditions, and daily culture of now non-existent civilization. The Maya are no exception, leaving behind a vast array of ceramic cups, plates, and bowls that displays bits and pieces of what their culture was like. Some of these objects served as documentations of historic events, complete with precise dates and detailed descriptions of the event itself. Others displayed images of gods and other religious traditions, such as myths or the origin stories of specific deities. Whether they focus on religion or events, these ancient artworks help us to see other aspects of Maya life, such as what they wore or what they ate. These beautiful relics not only express the creativity of the Mayan civilization, but also preserve what little else remains of their culture after their collapse.

Regarding the relics found in museums and art galleries, specific pieces of ancient civilizations are preserved through the many types of artwork they leave behind. The ceramic cups, bowls, and plates used by the Maya most likely served as decorations, due to the state of how well the images are preserved. Many of these objects features detailed descriptions of specific events that occurred during the time period, such as diplomatic meetings or coronation ceremonies. Religious traditions and rituals were also represented on Mayan ceramics, showing multiple means of sacrifice and prayer ceremonies offered up to the gods. Even the gods themselves were painted onto the bowls and plates of the Maya, usually depicting the god at the center with hieroglyphs painted along the outside of the image. Such diversity between the depicted images suggests that Mayan citizens were well versed in different areas of learning.

Events that were very important to the Mayan Empire were illustrated on ceramic pieces as reminders of that event. One example is a plate which depicts K’ ak’ Hiix, an emissary to Yich’ aak, the ruler of Calakmul (now modern-day Mexico) presents a tribute to Ch’ok Wayis, the ruler of Tikal. The tribute included 12000 cacao beans, a stack of cloth, and quetzal-bird feathers; a rather valuable collection of objects considering that it’s a tribute given fro one king to another. What’s interesting about this particular piece is that it gives both the exact date when this occurred and where the event took place. The Long Count date is given as 9.12.19.10.0 and the Mayan Calendar date is 4 Ajaw 13 Keh (translates to October 7th, 691 AD.) The tribute was delivered to the town of Topoxté, located on an island in Lake Yaxhá. The amount of detail about the event is evidence to the fact that the Maya viewed their artwork to be as important for recording events as carving them into stone tablets would be.

Likewise, the ceramics that remain from that time period also display more religious themes, from ceremonies and traditions to gods and their origins. One such example is the birth of the maize god, a very important substance to the Mayan people. Ixchel, the jaguar goddess of midwifery and medicine and a “sun” god stand on either side of him. His umbilical cord spreads throughout the entire scene, signifying the connection the gods had to the human world. On the vase itself, both the god’s mythological date and supernatural location are given, which reads Na-Ho-Chan (Five Sky House.) Again, the amount of detail provided in the image tells us that religion was important to the Maya.

In addition to recording significant dates and religious beliefs, the Mayan ceramics also provide us with vital detail about the day-to-day lives of the people who lives in the Empire, specifically the style of the time, foods they ate, and music they listened to. Men usually wore loincloths and women wore simple dresses, but during special occasions they would wear headdresses. In addition, royalty wore finer versions of these articles of clothing with the addition of a cape. Based on the detail given in the works, hairstyles tended to come in a variety of types, most of which were either hidden by or worked into their headdresses. Certain English words also have they origin in Mayan culture, such as “shoke” (shark) and “kakaw” (cacao.) The Maya tended to eat maize, tamales, stew, and cacao beans and drank a certain alcoholic drink. Finally, the citizens of the Mayan Empire used hand drums, conch shell trumpets, rattles, and flutes to create the music of their time period. All this we know thanks to the careful, detailed work that artists put into making these beautiful pieces of art.

Most people regard the ceramics left behind by the Mayan Empire to be strikingly beautiful and honestly, I have to agree with them. What is unique about the art of the Mayans is how they incorporate both images and writing into their artwork. The Mayan word “ts’ib”, meaning “to paint” and “to write”, is exact representation of what Mayan ceramics are. Artists pushed the boundaries of both painting and writing with dazzling brushwork and unorthodox color choices. They also devised novel combinations, forms, and even substitutions of hieroglyphic word play. Such masterful artwork provides us with a window into the world of a pre-colonial Mayan Empire, making it all the more tragic how little remains of their majestic civilization.

After having gone through the exhibit and seeing the relics that remain from the Classic Mayan culture, I don’t think my views about their civilization has changed much. Their detailed mathematics system and their accurate astronomical predictions led me to the conclusion that the Mayan Empire was one of the greatest civilizations in the pre-colonial Western Hemisphere. The precise detail of their artwork and the creative mixture of writing with art only further solidify that point. Yet at the same time, these pieces represent what is lost when a culture collapses. Pieces like music, recipes, and dances vanish completely with the fall of civilization, leaving behind only the tools and materials with which to make them again. If a culture cannot save itself, it should, at the very least, preserve what made it unique.