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In the Art of Americas wing of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, there is a display of Maya artifacts dating from the first and second century. The artifacts depicted daily life, history, and myths the Mayans believed. They are one of the main sources that still exist today of information on the Mayan culture. The preservation of the artifacts for over a thousand years is truly amazing.

Most of the ceramics made were bowls, cups, and plates. They were designed mostly to record significant events and history. Some plates showed the Maize god doing the dance of creation made by Navanjo artists. In the Tikal-style of ceramics, the dance of resurrection was shown. Often the story of the creation of the universe was depicted. The cups, bowls, and plates were also used for serving food. Wah, now more commonly known as tamales, were served on plates. Bowls were use for serving a stew-like drink made out of flavored maize. The ceramics were used for serving food as well as looking at and reading the art.

On one of the vases, a tribute presentation scene is depicted. The emissary of Yich’aak and ruler of Calakmul, K’ak ‘Hiix is shown presenting a tribute to the ruler of Tikal, Ch’ok Wayis. The tribute scene could be seen as a diplomatic gift which included bird feathers, cloths, and cacao beans. The exact date of this event is 9.12.19.10.0, 4 Ajaw 13 Keh. In our calendar, that date is equivalent to October 7, 691 CE.

Multiple pieces of ceramics, when read together, depicted an entire story. The Popol Vuh is the story of the creation of the universe. The Maize god had two sons, Yax Balam and Hun Aham, known as the Hero Twins. The story tells of how the gods try to create human beings. In one of the vases one of the sons Hun Aham shoots a blowgun at Its’am-Yeh who was the “false sun of the previous creation era.” Another vase depicts the Maize god who took the form of a deer and seduced the beautiful wife of an ugly god named Wuk Zip. In the story, the father of Hun and Yax dies and they have to ask for their father’s remains. With his remains they use water to facilitate their father’s resurrection. Multiple pieces of pottery depict different parts of the one story and once they are read together, they complete the myth.

An idea of the Maya noble daily life is formulated from the ceramics. From the paintings on the pottery, it seems Mayans either did not wear clothing or wore a loin cloth. They seemed to have styled their hair with cacao flowers. They had very large gauge earrings and if someone wore a necklace they were probably of a high-standing position in society. For food and drink, they consumed tobacco, water, maize, wah served with a savory sauce, and alcohol which was made from fermented honey with special leaves. Their wah is now known as tamale. Maya nobles used flutes, hand drums, conch shell trumpet, and rattles for music. The flutes were used for melodic tones and complemented the drums. Hand drums were played under one arm and were made from animal hide. They were mostly used in the sacrifice of a captured warrior. Two English words with Mayan origins are chocolate, kakaw in Mayan culture, and shark, xoc in Mayan culture.

I do find their pottery as great examples of artistic expression. They use pottery as a way to depict their daily life and their stories. By looking at the drawings and paintings on the ceramics, it is possible to see what resources and artifact they might have used and what they may have looked like, whereas writings would not show that. Writings could only tell how they look. It seems to me that creativity in Classic Maya was limited to telling history, myths, and social life on pottery. They did utilize colors, brushstrokes, and hieroglyphs as a way to tell depict their life though. They certainly viewed art work as a way of writing their history and stories of their gods. Ts’ib means “to paint” or “to write.” It also is known as visual poetry, because paint was used in hieroglyphs. The way they chose their colors or brushwork and the combination of them meant something.

My views have changed, but they have not changed a lot. Now I know they recorded their history well and a lot of it was discovered after their collapse. Their documentation of their culture can also be easily related to the ancient Greeks. Although the Greeks did not collapse as the Mayans did, they did record some of their history through pottery. I also realized that their collapse was also clearly not because they were not intelligent; they knew very much about mathematics and astronomy, they just did not know what could destroy their society. Their collapse could have happened to any other society in their time.

Once a civilization collapses, their history is gone and people can only read or look at artifacts to think of what the history truly was. A lot of artifacts may be gone and destroyed through the years, so only parts of the history may be pieced together. Music, types of food, language, and clothing styles, among other cultural aspects of a society, may also be lost.

The display in the Museum of Fine Arts has an array of ceramics created by the Maya civilization. When pieced together, the history of their now collapsed society is discovered. Myths, history, and social aspects of their life are now known. I think it is fascinating that many of their artifacts still exist and were not destroyed in the collapse of their society. It would have been interesting to see how the images on their ceramics might have changed as the time moved closer to their collapse. Their depictions of their gods or the way they might have dressed or what they ate might have changed.