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Math Across time

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Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts displays an array of detailed, colorful, ceramic objects from Mayan culture, and their survival represents their society’s prosperity. Many vases, plates and cups endured the elements for hundreds of years and continue to display colorful vivid images about Mayan history, religion and their lifestyle, which represent insight into Mayan culture. Modern researchers have learned about the lavish lifestyle of Mayan leaders as well their religious ceremonies and diplomatic tributes. Therefore, Mayan ceramic vessels and their beautiful images remain critical to researchers as they study and uncover lost information about Mayan culture.

Mayan ceramic bowls, cups and plates at the Museum of Modern art were used and given to guests during court feasts. Tall cups, called atole, were used for a stew like drinkable cereal of flavored maize. Cylindrical bowls were used to serve chocolate flavor beverage, and Mayan plates served savory sauces. The use of chocolate was reserved for leaders, so the use of these vessels were most likely reserved for influential Mayan leaders and not commoners.

 The advancement in mankind’s understanding of Mayan culture reveals that images placed on vases represent specific events with precise dates rather than religious or mythical beliefs. In the images on a particular vase, th k’ak’hiix, an emissary of Yich’aaK’ak, ruler of Calakmul, presents gifts to Ch’ok Wayis, the King of Tikal. The tribute, as depicted on the vase, illustrates 12,000 cacao beans and a stack of cloth and quetzal-bird feathers. In the accompanying texts, researches had discovered that tribute occurred at the town of Topoxte on an island Lake Yaxha. The Mayan long count dates to 9.12.19.10.0 4 Ajaw 13 Keh, or October 7, AD 691 based on the Gregorian calendar. The Mayan culture reserved long count dates to important events that coincided with a Mayan King; consequently researchers at the Museum of Fine Arts, believe King Tikal won a significant battle against Calakmul only four years later.

 Although actual events were depicted on Mayan vases, Mayans also expressed cosmologic, religious and mythical beliefs on their vessels like in the ones represented in the epic Popol Vuh. The epic which is painted on thousand year old ceramics illustrate the god’s attempts to create proper human beings, and the trials of the Maize gods and his sons, the Hero twins. Information about the Popol Vuh epic survives only from a seventeenth-century version that was written in European script. On one particular vase that dates from AD 600 -750, the Hero twins sit opposite to Its’ amnaj, one of the primary lords of the underworld. Its’ amnaj remains seated in his throne with sky symbols and the bones of the Maize god before him. As the remnants of their father remain in the underworld the Hero twins, Hun Ahaw and Yax Bala, sit politely and request the return of their father. The detailed and numerous illustrations of religious artwork illustrate Mayan culture’s fascination with religion and its significance within their culture.

 Mayan leaders are captured and portrayed on painted ceramic vessels, which illustrate their lavish and luxurious lifestyle. In many images, like the one with Lamaw Ek’, rulers enjoy smoking a tobacco cigarettes and drinking a fresh maize kakaw, or cacoa, beverage. The modern word for chocolate derives from the Mayan word of cacoa; similarly the modern word for shark traces back to the Mayan word Xoz that is pronounced shoke. Leaders also drank stew-like drinkable cereal flavored maize, which could be similar to oatmeal. Additionally, nobles wore excessive amounts of rare and valuable jadeite, whose green color symbolized both the maize plant and the water. Since Mayan culture believed that maize and water were critical elements that the gods used to create the first people, the displays of these symbols represent a spiritual connection towards the gods. Mayan leaders also wore finely woven cloth and choose to wear their hair up. Mayans also owned hand drums (AD 450-650) that were used most likely used in a variety of social and ritual events for nobles because they generated amplified sounds. Performs would carry the drum underneath one arm and bang on the drum with one hand, thus leaving their voice and one hand free. Unlike other, instruments Mayan hand drum could produce additional displays of celebration with their voice and hand movements during religious of diplomatic ceremonies. Based on images from ceramic vases, nobles lived luxurious lifestyles like gods, evident upon their ceremonies, clothes, jewelry and their pampered treatment.

Mayan artists were well respected within Mayan culture because they were responsible for capturing and recreating the success of their leader. The artists’ proximity to Mayan leaders and their ornate clothing and jewelry are displayed in the artwork of ceramic pottery, which indicate their importance. Mayan artistic styles served as identification for themselves as well as their local style. Easily recognized styles, that differed based on where the vessels were constructed, enabled ordinary painted pottery to emphasize the political power, wealth and status of a particular Mayan leader. Therefore, the artist’s ability to capture beauty illustrated the power and prosperity of his Mayan leader. Consequently, Mayan artistic talents were also trained in mathematics, history, and religion in order to have encompassing knowledge of Mayan culture. Their education enables artists to accurately and simultaneously represent various aspects of Mayan culture in the artwork they create.

Mayan culture encouraged artists to display their creativity when creating their Mayan Hieroglyphics, as illustrated in Mayan society’s advancements. The Mayan word ts’ib translates “to paint” and “to write”, which emphasizes that Mayan hieroglyphics were texts that record words, but were also a form of “visual poetry”. Modern research shows that Mayan artists wrote with a type of hieroglyphic “word play” by connecting and inventing new interpretations of hieroglyphs. Consequently, modern researchers have only made gradual progress in deciphering Mayan writing because of the differentiation of each artist’s personal writing. Although Mayan writing creativity is impractical to comprehend, I believe their art illustrates their culture’s creativity and artistic expression. The ability of Mayan artists to depict vivid and stunning imagery demonstrates the advanced development of their society to care about artwork.

The compressive and extensive development of Mayan culture impressed me because it indicates the prosperity of their society beyond mathematics and astronomy. I believe that for a society to focus on the development of culture, fundamental needs such as food and shelter must have already been solved. Therefore, the advance Mayan development of artwork, as evidence in the endurance of their detail and vivid color, emphasizes their society’s prosperity. The creativity of their artists, over various time periods and different regions, exemplifies the widespread development of their society and their culture. Additionally, the similar fundamental Mayan religious beliefs like the Popol Vuh indicate the sophisticated nature of their society to create and develop a successful religious theory. Therefore, my new understanding of Mayan culture and their success coincides with Mayans success in mathematics and astronomy, which are other aspects of Mayan culture.

The interpretation of the Mayan Culture becomes lost as a result of a collapse because researchers can only speculate on each object’s significance. Without communication or interaction with the Mayan society, modern mankind has a difficult task of reconstructing aspects of Mayan culture. The collapse of Mayan society will prevent our society from fully learning about the intricate complexities that define their religious beliefs, artistic beliefs, diplomatic ceremonies and mathematical thinking. In addition, our society will never understand aspects of their spoken language. When the Mayan society collapsed, like any failed society, their unique cultural perspective remains lost forever because researchers are unable to rediscover their unique thinking and interpretations.

The Museum of Fine Art emphasizes Mayan cultural prosperity as evident through the images on their ceramic vessels. Their vases indicate that Mayans emphasized both historical and religious significance within their culture. The creative expressions in their vessels illustrate the respect by Mayan culture toward artists. Although, modern mankind learns a lot about the collapsed Mayan society, researchers are unable to learn about Mayan thinking or their unique perspective.