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Maya Ceramics

From the sonnet “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelly, the reader is told of an ancient statue that once seemed to have stood all mighty. Lying beside it were the words written, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” Yet, the tragedy behind this boast was the fact that it lay in ruins. The kingdom that had once stood with it had collapsed and what remained was only the statue, a remnant of what was possibly once a prospering civilization.

Such an event seen by the traveler was similar to what had happened during the trip to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Walking through the museum and examining the ancient artifacts, we were the travelers that could only see remnants of the culture that had once existed in Central America, mainly the ancient Maya civilization.

The artifacts seen, however, were only some aspects of the Mayan culture and history. One example was the feasting potteries. These served many purposes. Some of them, the cylindrical vases, were used to serve beverages such as Kakaw, which is chocolate. The plates had been used for tamales and were often served with savory sauces.

These potteries were decorated with images that often depicted events in Mayan histories or told the myths in their religion. Feasting potteries, for example, were often decorated with images that suggested “military powers and prowess.” One of the vases had the scene of the birth of the Mayan maize god. The other showed one of the events in the ruler of Calakmut’s, Kak Hiix, life. It showed Kak Hiix giving tribute to Chok Wayis who was the ruler of Tikal. In the text, it stated that that took place at the town of Topoxte on 9.12.19.10.0 or in our modern date October 7, 691 AD. Another smaller vase showed Yajawte Kinich, the ruler of Ik, and Kinich Lamaw Ek (his successor) participating in the Joyaj ceremony. The taller one showed him in ceremonial ritual that included personal blood sacrifices. This event was marked to have taken place in 750 AD.

Other artifacts showed the people’s custom, what they wore, their music, and the kinds of food and drinks they had. One of the statues depicted a Mayan King showed him with headshaped beads attached to a white cloth that was wrapped around his head. He also had jadeite earflares and an elaborate headdress. One note card told of the women wearing jadeite earflares also. Some of the food and beverages they had as were mentioned earlier were tamales and chocolate. The nobles also smoked tobacco and drink alcoholic beverages.

On the other side of the gallery were musical instruments that showed what music the ancient Mayans played. Some of them included flutes called ocarinas, drums and trumpets made from a segment of a cane that was glued to the shell.

The Mayan writing system and language was also seen painted on some of the artifacts as well as explained on the note cards. Some of these were very close to our English words today. Kakaw, for example, closely resembles cacao and “xoc” is shark in our language. As a matter of fact, some of our current English words can be traced back to Mayan languages. Another word found was “ts’ib,” which means to paint or to write, but this does not have any similarities to our current words.

As the statue in the sonnet had boasted, these artifacts revealed the rich culture and history of the Mayans. Many of them showed the prosperity of the civilization and their advancements. Such findings makes some of us wonder how such society could have collapsed. From a quick study of their mathematics and astronomy, it is clear that the Mayans were an advance civilization of rich customs and culture. How could such a society whose artifacts boast of its prosperity end up collapsing in the end.

The artifacts do not reveal everything about the culture and history of the people living there however. After a collapse, what are lost and forgotten are often the culture, custom, and many of its history. The artifacts do help us to understand the some aspects of it, but not all.

From a little trip to the museum, we as travelers can learn so much about the Mayan civilization. When browsing through what is on display, we can see a culture rich in artistic expression, which showed the importance of art in the culture. Comparing artists to the elite, we learned that in the Mayan society these two groups can be considered to be from the same class because art was so important to them. Yet, judging from what we know these facts can never tell us the whole story about the culture that had once stood. What was lost in the collapse cannot often be retrieved. Many histories are still left buried and unfortunately due to the collapse some parts of the culture are lost as well. This tragic theme of lost can be seen in the sonnet “Ozymandias” and it is seen in the Mayan collapse as well.