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Montserrat- Math Across Cultures

19 April 2011

Mayan Exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts

For students of any ancient culture, there is perhaps no better learning tool than a visual to supplement age-old ideas. After spending some time looking into the complex Mayan calendar system and the related mathematics, it was refreshing to see the more tangible (and beautiful) products of their civilization that have survived to this day, products that provided ample information about their everyday lives.

Most of the artifacts in the exhibit were ceramic wares, crafted in the fiery red clay of Central America. The Mayan people used these clay bowls, cups, and platters as we use our modern day eating vessels: for food and drink. However, they were also used as gifts for guests who attended the great feasts of the court. At these feasts, they were filled with stew made from maize (an essential part of Mayan life to be discussed later), brimming with chocolate drinks made from the cacao plant, or piled high with tamales.[[1]](#footnote--1)

Many of these ceramics include painted portrayals of specific events, giving us the dates of those particular events as well. One of these scenes shows K’ak’ Hiix, emissary of the ruler of Calakmul, a Mayan state in modern-day Mexico. In the depiction he is presenting a tribute to the ruler of Tikal, a tribute that was made up of cacao beans, cloth, and quetzal-bird feathers. One of the most remarkable things about this artifact is that archaeologists and scholars are able to discern a location from the writings on the vase, which state that the tribute was handed over in Topoxté, a town on an island in the middle of Lake Laxhá. Furthermore, by interpreting the Mayan calendar date given, we discover that the event took place on 9.12.19.10.0 4-Ajaw 13-Keh: October 7th, 691 A.D.[[2]](#footnote-0)

Not all scenes depicted on the pottery in the exhibit were of this world. Many of the cups and vases portray mythical scenes of the births of gods and ritual sacrifices. One such piece shows the birth of the “Baby Jaguar” god. The deity is resting in a dish-like object in a supernatural location in the mountains (indicated by the lizard-like heads covered in maize leaves shown in the scene) and the umbilical cord, painted as a serpent, curls away from him.[[3]](#footnote-1) Because the background of the scene is painted black, we know that the scene took place in primordial time, “before the creation of humanity.”[[4]](#footnote-2)

The importance of divine beings to the Maya is portrayed through the frequency of the mythological scenes we see depicted on ceramics, but this is just one aspect of their culture that we can glean from their art. Mayan nobility is also a common subject for depiction, hinting at the prominence of royalty in their society. The nobles were outfitted in skins of jungle animals and elaborate headdresses. They were also often decorated with copious amounts of jadeite, a green, very rare and prized mineral whose color symbolized maize and water, the key elements of life according to the Maya.[[5]](#footnote-3)

Rituals and ceremonies existed at the center of Mayan court, and the nobles took pride in hosting grand feasts. Judging by the number of ocarinas in the exhibit, the small clay flutes were a popular instrument in the court. The Maya also used percussion instruments made from wood or tortoise shell.[[6]](#footnote-4) Food was another integral part of royal ceremonies. Maize and products of the kakaw plant were two staples of Mayan cuisine, as they were readily available in large quantities, being native crops to Central America. Kakaw (cacao) is a perfect example of how some Mayan words carried over into the English language (another remarkable example was “xox”, or shark!)[[7]](#footnote-5) As mentioned earlier, tamales, or roasted meat and meal-filled cornhusks, were a common dish in Mayan feasts, a dish that has carried over into modern Mexican cuisine.[[8]](#footnote-6)

In the great ceremonies of the Mayan court, royals were not the only people put on a pedestal. Artists’ creativity was extremely valued in Mayan society, and therefore, they had high social status and were seated, wearing their own ornate clothing and jewelry, next to nobles at feasts. In fact, the Maya “likened artistic creativity to the creation of the universe by the gods.”[[9]](#footnote-7) Mayan artists did not only produce spectacular works of art; they were also well versed in mathematics, history, and religion, and were treated as scholars. In the Mayan language, the word ts’ib has a dual meaning, denoting both “to paint” and “to write.” With fluid but complicated brushstrokes, painters would include glyphs in the borders of their ceramic masterpieces, and even use a sort of “word play,” mixing colors and diction to convey a message or describe a scene.[[10]](#footnote-8)

After visiting the exhibit, it is clear that the Maya were a complex people whose culture has a lasting legacy. The products of their artistic talents provide amazing, beautiful, and very unique looking depictions of their myths and everyday lives that give us a look into a long-lost culture, a look that increased my awe and respect for Mayan culture. It is wonderful to know that even though a society can crumble, some of the most beautiful products of that society can remain for the pleasure and wonderment of the modern world.

Works Cited

Various artifact labels, *Art of the Americas: Maya Ceramics,* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA.

"Maya Art." Authentic Maya. Web. 20 Apr. 2011. <http://www.authenticmaya.com/maya\_art.htm>.

1. Label [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Label [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
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