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4/17/11

MFA Response Paper

. Though I did not join Math Across Culture students at the Museum of Fine Arts last Saturday, I have seen much of the museum before, and also got a closer look at many artifacts via the MFA’s website. Looking at the images one gets a full appreciation for the depth of culture and civilization of the Maya.

The Maya exhibit, at the Museum of Fine Arts was full of Mayan ceramics, bowls, cups, and plates. As a testament to this the majority of the images on the the MFA’s “Maya ceramics” page on their website are these types of objects. One must imagine that these ceramic objects had very many practical uses, such as drinking or eating.

In addition, many of the ceramics also have artwork on the side, so it could be considered an artistic outlet. As part of the artistry though we see a lot of paintings that seem either mythical, or they may act as recordings much like the artwork on the Greek vases, or the hieroglyphs in the pyramids. Accordingly, another aspect of this is likely religious where some of the symbols or figures could be deities, or images from religious beliefs.

The Popol Vuh is a mythical story of the Maya that tries to explain much of their world, much like the Greek or Roman myths. It tells the tale of the twins Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, and their familial relations. The epic explains the creation of humans, and the lineage of the twins. There is one bowl labeled, “2003.776” that depicts the Sun god or the wife Maize god. On the bowl itself there are images of deer hunting. While this does not relate directly to the Popol Vuh, for example, its religious or mythological connotation is clear. Both the Sun god and wife of the Maize god are associated with deer.

Myths were likely a very important part of the culture due to the fact that there was, up until conquest, a lack of a written language. In other words, one can easily imagine these tales being told by a sort of bard, or passed along by oral tradition, which would have been very common.

It is likely that many of the images that appear on the sides of the ceramics represent nobles, much like most European art was of people wealthy enough to have a portrait done. In the image labeled “2003.778”someone that is presumably a lord is being waited on hand and foot so to speak. The first notable thing is that the lord is perched on a throne, indicating to the viewer that he is a lord, or noble. In this image the lord is being given a performance costume and a dance fan. This lord pictured is mostly nude except for a cloth around his waist. He also has an elaborate headdress that seems to have a head on it, a plethora of jewelry, a belt buckle, and what appear to be gloves.

They had stew called ul that is similar to our cereal. Chocolate, maize, and tamale also made up their diet. Though I am not too familiar with modern Mexican food, I know that corn is still a staple part of their diet.

I find these ceramics very similar to early art from European culture. As mentioned above, this is very similar to many Greek vases. I do think that these images are beautiful. I am particularly drawn by the fact that with few colors –red, orange, black, and white- they managed to make such vibrant images.

They believed that every piece of art held its own universe. These artists were also familiar with other intellectual areas including, math and religion. Since they were the creators of new universes they felt like they must know about their own. For it is difficult to create a new universe without knowledge of how one works. The word ts’ib translates as both to paint and to write.

After looking at the various artifacts, and artwork I do not think that my opinions of the Maya civilization has changed. The simple notion of an early people that could build a cities of such great magnitudes had already proved to me the greatness of the Maya, these ceramics only solidified that. Earlier in the semester we also learned of their mathematic prowess, particularly as calendar creators. This was another piece of evidence that the Maya were an advanced civilization. Earlier in the semester we also learned of their mathematic prowess, particularly as calendar creators.

I suppose my opinions have no changed, because they were already so high. For this reason we can say that much is lost when a civilization is lost. In the case of the Maya, we undoubtedly lost some architectural knowledge, perhaps some astronomical knowledge, artistic knowledge, and cultural knowledge. In fact, I was just reading an article that noted the alarming rate of the death of indigenous languages.

2. (I am choosing to describe an image since I was not on the field trip.) The image labeled “1988.1211” is titled “human head fragment.” The ceramic piece fittingly is of a head. The head has a very angular face, almost like the crystal skulls from the dud 2008 Indiana Jones film. There head is adorned with a headdress or hat of some kind. The head also has a pointed goatee.