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Mathematics Across Cultures

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**MFA Field Trip: Maya Art**

In order to obtain a good understanding of an ancient civilization, it is important to study all aspects of their culture. However, some aspects, such as daily life events and religious beliefs, are lost and forgotten if the civilization has collapsed. This is the case for the ancient Maya civilization. Fortunately, though, what was directly lost with the collapse of the Mayas can be studied with the help of ancient Maya art. The little details that made the Mayas different from other cultures can now be studied with the images created on the sides of ceramic containers such as cups, vases, and bowls. The Mayas decorated their ceramics with colorful pictures and script that depicts specific Maya cultural events. Using these ceramics, which are on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, people can accumulate a lot of knowledge about what it was like to live as an ancient Maya.

Recently, it was discovered that the images painted on the sides of Maya pottery are more likely to be scenes of historical events rather than those of religious events. Maya objects on display in the Art of the Americans wing were all used by and given to guests at Maya court feasts. The “ul,” now called “atole” that are the tall bowls on display were used to hold a thick, drinkable cereal type substance of flavored maize (corn). People drank a chocolate beverage called “kakaw” out of the cylindrical vases. In fact, the Maya word “kakaw” is the stem of the current English word “cocoa.” Lastly, the plates were used for wah (tamales) that were served with specific sauces.

 On display in the museum exhibit was a piece titled “Vase with tribute presentation scene” that recorded a specific event with a precise date. The date of the event depicted on the vase is October 7, 691 CE. The location in which the vase originated from is the Tikal area in Guatemala. The image painted on the vase is colored in with mainly yellows, oranges and reds. The image shows five people, two of which are most likely slaves, two other are Maya people bowing down to a man who looks of high economic and political status who is sitting on a throne. Maya writing outlines the picture and some writing can be found throughout the picture.

 The most important Maya god was the Maize god. He was thought to be the chief creator of the universe and he was believed to have created the world tree that provided the universe with its structure. The Maize god sacrificed his own blood to connect the universe with the living beings of Earth, but unfortunately he was killed by the lords of the underworld. The good thing that arose from the Maize god’s death was that he was resurrected by his sons- the hero twins (Yax balam and Hun Ahaw). His resurrection created the path for resurrections of human souls. The resurrection is represented each year by the growing of corn in the spring with the corn seeds representative of the Maize god’s bones.

 The Mayas believed in and worshipped more than one god. With their polytheistic views, Mayas had shamans who served as their religious practitioners. It was believed that these shamans could transform themselves into spirit-companions based on different animals. While transformed, the shamans could travel to the spirit realm where they would gain powers and insight; these journeys were known as “vision quests.” In the spirit realm, there existed vision serpents who conveyed supernatural messages to shamans. Not only could shamans travel to the spirit realm, but also incense burners were considered oracle vessels through which people could contact the spirit realm.

 Maya nobles were known for their lavish garments and fancy jewelry. In particular, the nobles would wear quetzal-bird feathers as ornate jewelry and the more rare shells they owned, the wealthier they were. The nobles’ earflares (earring-like stones that were placed in the earlobes and were symbolic of portals to the supernatural) were made out of the stone Jadeite. These earflares represented a king’s ability to influence the people and activities around him by connecting with sacred forces. Some of the earflares were made in the shape of the frames on stone monuments whereas others were made in the shape of flowers. In one of the ceramics on display, there was a noble depicted with a lack of clothing and a strip of cloth that replaced his earflares. In the textual explanation, it was stated that this nobleman was captured and because of his lack of earflares, it was clear that he had been forced into giving a blood sacrifice.

 Maya noblemen participated in ritual intoxication ceremonies. In these ceremonies, the nobles smoked very strong tobacco, and drank either alcoholic or hallucinogenic beverages. The alcoholic beverages were kept in jars and were typically made out of fermented honey and additionally flavored with special leaves. During the ceremony, the Mayas made personal blood sacrifices whose main purpose was to help maintain the balance of the universe. The Mayas would eat wah, which is known today as tamales- a traditional Mexican food. A popular Maya game was the ballgame where there were two teams who tried to get a ball into a net without using their hands-similar to current day soccer. It has been rumored that the losing team was sacrificed after they lost. This game was not only used for recreation, but it also played a significant role in politics and religion. One of the two current English words that can be traced back to the Mayas is cacao, which was known to the Mayas as kakaw, and the other is the Maya word ts’ib which is known in English as to paint/write.

 Unlike many modern viewers, I do not agree with the statement that Maya ceramics is strikingly beautiful and wonderful examples of artistic creativity. I do appreciate the effort that went into the pieces and I admire the artwork, but I have also seen more strikingly beautiful pieces of art in my life. I enjoy the colors that make up most of the ceramic illustrations; however, I do not enjoy the pieces of art as a whole as much. The Classic Maya viewed artistic creativity with very high standards. Their artists were cultured in not only the field of visual arts, but also mathematics, history, and religion. This related to other aspects of their culture including writing and mathematics because, as a result of their artists being trained in these topics, they could easily incorporate them into their artwork. For example, writings can be easily found throughout the images displayed on Maya ceramics. The Maya word ts’ib denotes the meaning to paint and/or to write. This can sum up Maya artwork because both painting and writing went into the final completion of Maya ceramics.

 With all of the new pieces of information I learned at the MFA regarding the Maya civilization, my views of their mathematics and astronomy have changed a little bit. Knowing detailed aspects of their religion has helped me get a better understanding of why their astronomical ideas were what they were. From Diamond’s book, *Collapse*, I learned about the warfare that contributed to the downfall of Maya society. However, at the museum, I learned more about their specific warfare. For example, knowing the fact that the main purpose of warfare for the Mayas was to capture the opposing ruler being fought against made me realize why they are defeated so easily. The Mayas were not as focused on killing their opponent as they were on taking their patron god statues and gaining their power; a tactic that made them easier targets. The exhibit at the museum reinforced the idea that Maya was not a united society, but rather a bunch of little towns and cities that were competing for power. Knowing this, it shows that a united civilization will probably last longer and be stronger than a divided one. When a civilization collapses, the small details of that civilization tend to be lost. The exact dates of important events from that civilization are no longer known and it can be hard to find them out because the civilization’s language is most likely destroyed and forgotten.

 The ceramic art that was left behind after the ancient Maya civilization collapsed has been a big indicator as to what consisted of common Maya lifestyle. From the artwork it can gathered that religion was very important to the Maya people. Their religious beliefs affected both their daily lives and the ways in which they dressed. Religion was woven into social gatherings such as parties and recreational games, as well as their study of astronomy and the change of the seasons. All of this can be learned as a result of studying the art that survived the Maya collapse. The detailed scenes depicted on Maya ceramics give a clear image of what was most important to the Mayas. Even though the civilization collapsed centuries ago, with the help of the Maya’s artwork, people today can learn what it was like to live as an ancient Maya.