

The maya – college essay



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The Maya were a dominating society of Mesoamerica, rich in culture, community, and art. While life may not be completely interpretable yet, much is known about how these societies were constructed, and how their religion dominated their lives. Much is generally made of their massive stonework, their ceremonial complexes, and ritual sacrifices, but their small jade, ceramic, and stone sculpture deserves as much attention as the works of much larger size have received.

The Maya, inhabiting southern Mexico, Guatemala, and northern Belize, began to settle in communities around 1500 b. c. By A. D. 200, these communities had grown into large cities with expansive areas of temples, pyramids, ball courts, and plazas. 1

Pre classic Maya sculpture developed under the geographic expansion of the inhabitants into a variety of ecosystems, inspiring technical and artistic change. The highland inhabitants may have been earlier in initiating stone sculpture. 2Figure 8, an anthropomorphic mushroom figure found in Guatemala may have been a symbol of fertility, judging by its shapes connotation. Other regional sculpture includes figurines with swollen bellies, accentuated sexual regions, and even pregnant animal depictions. This could be because of the association of maternity and fertility with nature and Mother Earth.

The Classic Period of the Maya began to develop around A. D. 250 and flourished through A. D. 900. Around that time was the start of the Post Classic Period, which was conquered by the Spanish in the early 16th century. 3The information about the classification of these cultures is not

strong in that it may be considered inappropriate to call certain periods Classic, Pre Classic, Post Classic, etc. because the rise and fall of Mayan cities was an overlapping sensation, and the establishment of a certain style would appear at many different times throughout the domination of the culture. For classification of the purposes of this paper, however, the division of the culture is used.

Small Mayan sculpture has been discovered at a variety of locations. An Early Classic jade piece, 4 1/4 tall, of the Bird-Monster God (fig. 9), was found at Copan, Honduras. This tiny, sculpted piece of a deity features human hands and feet, with the figure seated cross-legged, fists clenched. He wears beaded necklaces and ear plugs. He appears to have four eyes or two eyes and two mouths, and perhaps this mean he is wearing the costume of this deity, and it is a man that sits disguised.

Because maize was considered sacred during the Classic Maya period, that god was a prominent figure in Mayan sculpture. The peoples belief that maize was ground with water to create the flesh and blood of the first human is essentially what prompted such revere of this particular deity. A stone figure of the Maize God, from Copan, depicts ritualized gesture and contemplation. Figure 10 is a figurine of a ruler dancing with maize, from Guatemala. According to Mary Ellen Miller, the Maize God dances as the mother-father- a primary source of human life. 4Some characteristics of this god include the enormous rack on his back, with small creatures wedged into a frame, usually wearing a betted hipcloth or skirt, and generally wearing a carved spiny oyster shell to give a symbolic vagina. 5

Rulers were also depicted during this time in sculpture. Figure 11 is a funerary vessel with a portrait head to embody the man as eternally youthful. While figure 12 is an incense burner depicting the ruler sitting on a Cauac Monster throne. This also represents the ruler as an eternal youth figure. The throne symbolizes earth, rocks, and mountains.

Late Classic Maya sculpture demonstrates the freedom that artists now had to develop original style. According to Coe, their art is essentially a painterly one, narrative and Baroque, tremendously involved with ornament and grotesques. 6Sculpture had evolved quite a bit from previous works, now lending itself to more ornate qualities. Two examples of this appearance hail from the island, Jaina, a small limestone island off the coast of Campeche. The use of the island appears to be as a necropolis for the leaders and noble of the mainland Puuk communities.

The first example is the Fat God (fig. 13). He is wearing a feathered war costume, carrying a shield and the other is of a seated man (fig. 14), holding an object of some sort. Greater technique is involved here. Figures are not all self-contained. Both of these small pieces have carved areas jutting out of the main sculpted body, and jewelry is more three-dimensional than ever. There is more attention to detail and greater individuality among the characters.

It took a long time before explorers and archaeologists were able to truly understand Mayan culture. Nothing could really be told of early life accurately before the glyphs were deciphered to reveal their meanings. The translation revealed a whole Mayan history inscribed on stelae, monuments,

sculpture, and on paper. Suddenly, the characters depicted in Mayan culture were known as the deities they represented and what purposes they served to the people who created them. Now it was known why maize was depicted so much in their art, how the calendrical system worked, and the purpose behind the religious sacrifices performed regularly throughout their existence.

Before the discovery of the meanings of the glyphs, it was thought that the Maya were a peaceful, egalitarian society, content to live comfortably off of their land. Now we know of the elite and the non elite, the slavery, and the division of land; the culture as it really was.

Though the Maya continue to live in Mesoamerica, the other cultures died out. The Maya today still wear similar clothing, and believe in their cultures religious past, most have converted to Roman Catholicism because of the influence of the Spanish missionaries.

The Maya has left behind a fascinating study of culture. Not only can we admire the beauty of the art and architecture remaining, but many types of learning can be combined for an interdisciplinary approach to deciphering these societies. Anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and art historians have come together to recreate the truth in the past of Mesoamerica. As time passes, we know more and more about how life really was, and speculation leads to actuality of events as scientists decipher the glyphs and symbols of the past.

Interpreting smaller sculpture is a way to see objects as both aesthetic and utilitarian. While larger works may dominate a mass of space, smaller works

may be admired for the intricate detail and time spent on such tiny proportions. I have always been fascinated with miniature works, because such small scale takes a truly steady hand and sharp eyes to create. Seeing the evolution of Mesoamerican sculpture shows how it evolved from simple, self-contained form, to three-dimensional masterpieces.

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