Royal Visions: Art of the Maya Courts

Left, Shield Jaguar, Lady Xok and a jaguar headdress (Lintel 26), 87% by 33% by 10% inches. Photo Michel Zabé. Museo Nacional de Antropología—Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), Mexico City. Works this spread Yaxchilan, Mexico, ca. 725 A.D., limestone.

Opposite left, Lady Xok conjuring a giant serpent (Lintel 25), 46% by 29% by 2% inches. Photo Justin Kerr. British Museum, London.

Opposite right, Bloodletting ritual of Lady Xok (Lintel 21), 43% inches high. Photo Justin Kerr. British Museum.
Eighteen years after a landmark exhibition, "The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art" (1986), fundamentally changed our understanding of Maya historical iconography, a remarkable curatorial effort brings us closer than we have ever been to the multi-dimensional, social and lived aspects of the Maya nobility. Curated by Yale University Mayanist Mary Miller, veteran of "The Blood of Kings," and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco curator Kathleen Berrin, "Courty Art of the Ancient Maya" gathers together 130 objects ranging from small carved shells and intricately painted ceramics to giant stelae. Nearly half of the works have never before been seen in the U.S. This is the first Maya exhibition to comprise objects borrowed from so many collections all over the world, 30 altogether, many of them located in the regions from which the works originate.

Over the past half-century, as Maya hieroglyphics have been deciphered and the texts translated, our increased ability to comprehend the culture has fundamentally changed how we interpret the constantly transforming figures on limestone, jade and shell carvings, in stucco portraits and on slip-painted clay pots, all objects that the ancient Maya left behind, from the Chiapas rainforests to the Honduran border. Together they constitute one of the world's great inventories of figural and abstract metamorphosis: words slip into images and human figures into animals; bodies convey in their twisting postures aspects of sacrifice, dance, lordship and captivity. Until recently, such representations were barely comprehended. Archeologists and researchers considered the Maya, cultivators of maize and expensive cacao, to be a priestly, comparatively passive civilization, especially in contrast to their neighbors to the north, the Toltecs and Aztecs. Now we understand that the Maya were governed by elaborate and often violent courts, the epicenter of their city-states. The Maya were just more subtle than the Aztecs in expressing their extravagant rituals and beliefs, using a script that sequesters content between words and images.

Between 600 and 800 A.D., at the height of what is called the Late Classic period, the Maya established more than 60 independent city-states around ceremonial sites that included the famous massive stone-faced pyramids. Courts at such Mexican and Guatemalan locales as Palenque, Yaxchilan and Tonina, and further south, in Honduras, at Copan, included warriors, scribes, musicians, artists, tradesmen and priests, ruled by lords with dominion over territories supporting as many as 100,000 inhabitants. Each court was intensely aware of the others. They challenged each other for decades at a stretch, strutting about in performances, undertaking battles and construction campaigns, and

An exhibition now in San Francisco offers an unprecedented look at Maya culture between 600 and 800 A.D. Newly translated inscriptions allow us to know more than ever about the customs and rituals of this elaborate courtly milieu.
Three eccentric flints, Centro Regional, Copan, Honduras, ca. 755 A.D., (left to right) 12\% 13\% and 10\% inches high. Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, Tegucigalpa.

For hundreds of years, from the Spanish conquest onward, Maya hieroglyphic writing was a mystery to those attempting to read it. In the 1950s, linguists and Mayanists began to crack the code, opening the way to deciphering the abundant inscriptions present on Maya objects and ruins.

Previously, scholars had believed that Maya writing was either pictographic or ideographic and had not "advanced" to representing phonetic elements of any kind. This misconception was maintained in the 1930s by Eric Thompson at the Carnegie Institute in Washington, D.C., who was for decades the world's reigning Mayanist. Ironically, it was the Russian linguist Yuri Knorosov, working in Cold War isolation, who challenged Thompson's domination by proposing that Maya hieroglyphs were made up of several facets including phonic elements, signs for spoken syllables and whole words. In 1952, Knorosov (who had never traveled to Central America) published an article in Sovetskaya Etnografiya that led to the reading of the inscriptions. (After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, Knorosov finally traveled to Guatemala to visit the ruins he had done so much to explode.)

Another Russian scholar, Tatiana Proskouriakoff, at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Art, first identified the hieroglyph for "woman" in 1961. Since then, as further translations have identified specific historical figures, we have been able to recognize the central position of Maya women in court life. A strength of the current exhibition is the section titled "Women at Court," which precisely focuses on this issue. Proskouriakoff was also responsible for the identification, in 1960, of the Long Count, a series of numbers the Maya used to measure historical time (as opposed to the many cyclical Maya calendars, following the movement of the sun and moon, for

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example, which was important for agriculture, or that of the planet Venus, which helped to predict auspicious times for war and sacrifice).

In the 1980s a new wave of translation involved shared databases and unprecedented collaboration between epigraphers and the living descendants of the Maya, over five million of whom still speak languages linked to that of their ancestors. The 1986 exhibition "The Blood of Kings" benefited from these linguistic advances. The exhibition catalogue for "Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya" is co-authored by the epigrapher Simon Martin, research specialist at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and is thus enriched by recent discoveries made in this vital field. —A.B.

Stucco glyphs, Tonina, Mexico, 700-900 A.D., stucco, each approx. 2\% inches square. Museo de Sitio de Tonina, Chiapas—INAH, Ocosingo.
according to myth, they were created when limestone was struck by lightning, which remained in them, ready to ignite sparks when the flints were struck.

Lightning was seen to belong to the upper world of the sun, moon and stars, and is personified by the god K'awiil, protector of kings and patron of fertility of body and mind. The Maya often depict K'awiil as he is shown in a scepter of unknown provenance, with a head bursting into flames, a gaping bestial mouth and a single long, conspicuous leg that ends in a serpent's wide-open maw, teeth bared and forked tongue splayed. In addition to his other attributes, this K'awiil has his head thrown back like that of a sacrificial victim and his hair tied up much in the manner of the Maize God, who was often depicted with long, thick tresses bundled like corn stalks after the harvest. This associates the god with the central belief that only with the fallen stalks will a new crop arrive, and that from sacrifice one is made sacred and linked to creation. As an implement of power that would have been carried by the ruler, a scepter filled with such symbolism would link its bearer to a rich cosmogony.

A focal point of the exhibition is the section titled "Palenque: An Exemplary Maya Court," in which the curators have gathered more than 20 works from the famous court that flourished under Pakal the Great and his descendants in the 7th and 8th centuries. Palenque remains one of the best preserved and most visited sites in Chiapas. Since it was first rediscovered by the modern world in the 18th century, it has stood out as an often idealized ruin; European-biased observers favorably compared it to ancient Greece because of the mathematical precision of its architecture, set into the surrounding hillside.

Palenque prompted some writers of the 19th century, among them the French abbot and scholar Brasseur de Bourbourg, to formulate the fantastical theory that all civilizations sprang from Latin America and subsequently migrated to the "Old World." To our thinking such notions seem outlandish, but we need only contemplate the fine portraits of Pakal and other members of his family, along with their delicately carved jade masks and adornments, to feel ourselves in the presence of a highly refined, still vastly unknown past.

At Palenque, artists modeled stucco made from finely powdered limestone that hardened into sensual, lifelike forms, such as the freestanding fragment, a portrait head of Pakal, broken off of a body that no longer exists. Ornamented and dignified, the monarch stares from beneath fully rounded lids, his mouth slightly open and his nose sculpted into a prominent, almost architectural form. His hair is coiffed to symbolize the natural and supernatural worlds: at once maize foliage and Jester-God dangle, with the bangs of a fashionable 7th-century nobleman.

Equally skilled in monumental limestone carving and the minute working of jade for jewelry or small precious figures, the artists of Palenque were also masterful ceramists. In an extraordinary 33-inch-high ceramic censer stand, for example, the artist depicts a serene, deeply modeled face of a woman surrounded by a teeming combination of inanimate and animate forms, from vultures to serpents, topped with a miniature seated lord holding a censer of his own.

While the artifacts from Palenque, including recent spectacular findings on loan from Mexico, will no doubt impress specialists who have studied this site for decades, it is three carved limestone lintels from the lesser known site of Yaxchilan that may produce the most lasting effect on those who are seeing the ancient Maya for the first time. These repeatedly depict the commanding Lady Xok, who, along with her husband Shield Jaguar, ruled Yaxchilan between 681 and 742. The three separate reliefs were made for the structure in which
Maya lords were located within historical time, yet also set among the gods, heroes and supernatural entities who perpetuated humanity.

The relief on Lintel 25 depicts Lady Xok kneeling at the feet of her husband, who holds a burning torch. She draws a cord with sharp thorns through her tongue; low-relief scrolls representing blood mark her face, and blood falls onto a piece of bark paper beneath her. Shield Jaguar has the shrunken head of a sacrificial victim attached to his hair, tied back like that of the Maize God. He holds a full-length torch to spotlight Lady Xok in the process of bloodletting, whose violence he will match with the ritual perforation of his penis. Other adornments on the rulers' bodies include depictions of broad jade bracelets and elaborate earrings (earflares), along with finely woven and patterned textiles. Ancient Maya weaving on a backstrap loom was done much as it is today by the contemporary Maya of Chiapas and Highland Guatemala, and, like their spoken language, provides a continuity over 3,000 years. On Lintel 24, Shield Jaguar wears a cape and hip cloth with quatrefoil forms associated with the mouths of caves and the powers of the underworld. His cape is woven so finely that it clings to his body, while his hip cloth appears to be much thicker. Such subtleties in execution attest to the range of Maya expertise in weaving as well as to their ability to convey minute details in stone carving. Lady Xok wears a long robe patterned with star and sky symbols fringed with delicate pearls.

On Lintel 25 we find Lady Xok experiencing a vision. (In addition to bloodletting, which in itself was performed to alter consciousness, Lady Xok might have enhanced her experience by imbibing raw alcohol or a hallucinogenic substance drawn from a toad.) She is alone this time, wearing a garment patterned in quatrefoil motifs of the underworld. In her hand and at her feet are baskets containing the tongue cord and bloodied paper; the latter is burned, releasing a curl of smoke out of which her vision emanates—a vision born out of her sacrifice. Before her is a great double-headed Vision Serpent (a common motif in Maya iconography) that crosses behind her right wrist. Peering from the upper mouth of the serpent is a warrior, his lance poised to strike Lady Xok, and from its lower mouth an elaborate warrior's headdress emerges, replete with symbols. Lady Xok has induced this ecstasy, calling forth otherworldly beings, in order to enhance the supernatural and terrestrial powers of Shield Jaguar and his progeny (as represented by Lady Xok, who bears them). In the last of the

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Censer stand with human face.
Photo Javier Hinojosa. Museo de Sitio de Palenque—INAH, Palenque.
three panels, Lintel 26, the most weathered of them, Lady Xok, wearing a garment patterned with toad motifs, stands equal to her husband, dressed in cotton and feathered armor; she hands him his lily jaguar mask, which he will wear for power and protection in battle. Yet it is the representation of Lady Xok in these three masterful lintels, more central and potent than that of her husband, that is truly unparalleled in Maya courtly art.

Much of what we know about the very complex Maya religion comes from the Popol Vuh, a text secretly written down in the 16th century in the Roman alphabet the Maya had been taught by Spanish priests. Ancient bark codices that likely recorded mythology, literature and other kinds of texts were systematically burned and otherwise destroyed by the Spanish, who wished to eradicate the extensive beliefs of their newly colonized subjects. (Other codices met their end during the unearthing of tombs, dissolving on the instant of their contact with the air.) Just four of these texts (not included in the exhibition) survived the colonial period, leaving the more terse inscriptions to do the work of reconstructing Maya customs and beliefs.

In the section titled "The Divine Models of Courtly Culture," we find that Maya deities or supernatural beings "were not discrete, separate entities in the way we think of Greek or Roman gods. Certain supernatural characters had affinities that caused them to merge with one another in ways that seem fluid and unbound." Such entities (called way) were often incorporated into elaborate scenes, especially on the ceramic pots that the Maya slip-painted, fired and buried with their owners.

On one cylinder vessel with companion spirits, of unknown provenance, one cylinder vessel with companion spirits, of unknown provenance, the artist has subtly woven into the composition the Maya belief in three realms—sky, earth and underworld. A kind of conversation occurs between natural and supernatural beings, traversing and connecting the realms. Three dancing human figures wearing masks and pelts, prominently placed in the middle (earth) realm, gesture to figures above and below them. In the upper register (the sky), a celestial bird swoops in and opens its mouth as if speaking, and an elegant screeching serpent is coiled about its neck. Two seated human figures also float in the sky realm, one peering into a pot. The other gazes, as if in a mirror, at a disembodied head.

In the lower area (the underworld), a skeleton brandishes a knife, while a jaguar, with the curled mark of a water lily on its head, writhes in pain within a rectangular field framing its curved and spotted body. Its pose is the distinctive one of a sacrificial victim. The jaguar appears a second time, mouth open wide as if responding to the shrieking serpent above, but it appears to be half-morphed into an abstract, circular form.

Though hundreds of Maya books were burned, we do have their visual art and their hieroglyphic inscriptions to partially reveal a poetics we are only beginning to understand. Western alphabetic writing lacks the Maya's demonstrative, visual figuration with words. When we say "the leg of the table," we no longer see the animal leg and hoof that may have been the origin of this figure of speech, or rather the figure in the speech. When we look at the Maya through the words and images they have left behind, we best do so by way of poetry, and specifically of metaphor. One thing stands in for another, making two meanings: one present, the other evoked, like a textile in which weft and warp threads of green and red cross to form a phantom, flickering third color.

On one shell plaque, a conch fragment, a man sits alone enjoying a long cigar, elegant smoke glyphs rising in incised cross-hatched marks. Inscriptions, written in a manner echoed in the calligraphic lines of the man's body, visually frame and identify him. He wears a deer head and gestures to a small creature emerging from a conch shell at his feet. The scene is incised on the fleshlike inner surface of the shell, itself doubled in its own representation. The shell, used the shell, itself doubled in its own representation. The shell, used by the Maya to mark zero as well as to symbolize both the ocean and the Void, is speaking with the man, in a conversation the hieroglyphic text records. Such works provide traces not only of Maya beliefs, but of their inner lives as well. This is Maya lyric poetry, or at least what we have of it: a subtle, lovely dance of line connecting words and beasts, gods and people.

"Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya" is more an immersion in the tactile immediacy of Maya objects than a didactic explanation of the culture. Even without the scent of strong tobacco or the effects of arcane hallucinogens, enough of the Maya is present in this extraordinary show to intoxicate us with the particular beauty and strangeness of a people who will, perhaps, always defy the limits of our imagination.

1. To accompany the show, Mary Miller and Maya epigrapher Simon Martin have co-written a substantial catalogue that generously includes, in addition to the main text, individual entries on each work and an introduction by Kathleen Berrin, as well as 13 essays, each by a different specialist, on new discoveries and diverse aspects of Maya art and culture. Oriented to a wide range of readers, the book contains an extensive bibliography and a glossary of terms. Miller and Martin, Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya, New York, Thames & Hudson Inc., 2004.
2. Two of the lintels, numbers 24 and 25, were excavated by the British explorer and statesman Alfred Maudslay and added in 1882 to the British Museum. The third, Lintel 26, was found several years later and, in 1964, placed in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Historia in Mexico City.


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