

## Word and Image in the Maya Court

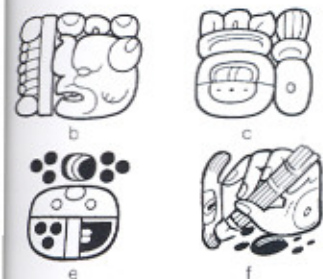
The Maya court styled itself, among all its other ideals and paragons, as a house of artists and scribes. That the perfect palace should be seen as something of a workshop may surprise modern observers, but this must be read within a mythic context in which the gods played the role of skilled craftspeople and, at the highest level, the “makers” of all things on earth. Accordingly, the Maya elite regarded artistic ability favorably and gave key roles in the intellectual and administrative functioning of the court to those with such gifts. Indeed, deeply engaged with arcane and recondite knowledge, artists and scholars, scribes and administrators, were often one and the same person. The nobility rubbed shoulders with, and to some degree idealized themselves as, a professional class of artisans. Maya art was not only created in the service of a courtly culture, but within and by it.

Even centuries later, at the time of the Spanish invasion, threads of this courtly culture survived. Certainly the very different Maya polities of 16th-century Yucatan had governing courts that performed many of the same functions. Bishop Diego de Landa, second bishop of Yucatan and a man burning to extirpate idolatry, described a priestly elite who were responsible for apportioning priests and books to smaller towns. He went on to say:

“[The elite] taught the sons of the other priests and second sons of the lords who brought them for this purpose from their infancy, if they saw that they had an inclination for this profession. The sciences which they taught were the computation of the years, months, and days...and their antiquities and how to read and write with the letters and characters, with which they wrote, and drawings which illustrate the meaning of the writings.”<sup>1</sup>

Like their 16th-century descendants, the Maya of the 1st millennium used one term, Ah Tz'ib (*aj tz'ib*), or “painter,” to describe all those who worked with a brush, whether they created images or texts (Fig. 40a).<sup>2</sup> In a phenomenon almost unknown in the ancient world outside Classical Greece, a few Maya artisans signed their works, so we know something of their names and status in society (Plate 85). A separate title, perhaps to be read Ah Uxul (*aj uxul*), “carver,” identified those who practiced sculpture or incision using tools of bone, tusk, or the volcanic glass called obsidian (Fig. 40b), and the term Baah Uxul (*b'aab uxul*), or “head carver,” is even known (Fig. 40). Carvers often worked together on monuments—up to seven signatures could appear on the same stone—while there is good reason to believe that both scene and text on almost all Maya vases are in a single hand. Signatures tend to have a regional bias, those on sculpture appearing predominantly in the west of the Maya realm, and those on pots in the central zone of the Peten. The artisans' names and elevated titles often place them within the elite class and doubtless quite a number were of noble birth. In

ilan Lintel 48, Plate 70. These six full-  
the text, collectively establishing a day



Titles associated with artists: a. Ah Tz'ib, “painter”; b. Ah Uxul, “carver”; c. Itz'aat, “wise one”; d. Huun, “ink”; e. Utz'ib? “his painting” (note the

fact, all young nobles may have received some scribal training—the graffiti in Maya palaces is often literate and demonstrates skill in sketching both architectural scenes and humans caught in motion. Worth noting here is the complete absence of women's names from the ranks of scribes, although there is no particular reason to think of women as illiterate: had paper not survived from 1st-millennium Japan, we would not know of women authors in that ancient society, and the same might pertain to the ancient Maya.

At Aguateca, in Guatemala, Takeshi Inomata has excavated the house of a noble artist, which was set in the midst of a courtly complex within shouting distance of the king's own residence. Here he found tools, including tiny mortars for grinding pigments and diminutive axes, amid dozens of half-worked pieces of jade abandoned during the fire that destroyed the city shortly after AD 800. One recovered shell fragment names its lord as an *itz'aat*, a scribal title meaning "wise one," emphasizing the relationship between scribes and significant offices: bureaucrats, accountants, and notaries. And what of this official's status within the city? He owned at least one finely painted Maya vase that archaeologists found tucked under a bench in his house; under what must have been siege conditions, he mustered dozens of plain vessels to store food and drink in hope of survival. Yet the royal family themselves fled the city ahead of the fire, leaving lesser courtiers, like this artist, to the conflagration.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time that the Maya admired the special talents of artists, they retained ambivalence toward them. Their supernatural patrons were monkey gods: not quite human in their imitation of mortals, yet gifted at mimesis (see p. 239 ff, and Plates 63–66). Monkeys were failed humans from a previous creation—creatures to be both pitied and mocked. Later, the Aztecs would comment that even simple potters can "fabricate," suggesting the transformation of the raw lump of clay into some other form.<sup>4</sup> Art-making was a peculiar and dangerous power, and it was important for the lordly elite to keep these savants in their places, no matter how much they admired their craft.

In all this, there is no specific word in the ancient New World for "art." Works had value because of their material (such as jade or feathers, or the expensive pigments used in paints), because of the skill and labor they took to make, or because they were associated through setting or ownership with the most exalted class of person. Yet at the same time, some works clearly transcended these notions and became exemplars that influenced everything that followed them. For example, the Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26—so keenly appreciated by modern observers—must also have been admired by the ancient Maya at Yaxchilan. They remained in place over the doorways of Structure 23 (Fig. 36) on the main plaza, and they transformed the nature of sculpture at the site, where subsequent generations of carvers saw them and emulated them.

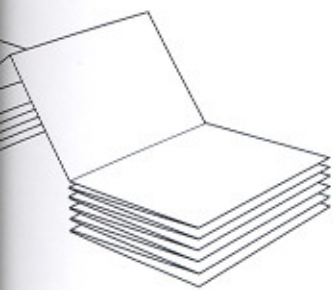
But we cannot begin to imagine all the contexts in which fine—and less fine—things were made. Clemency Coggins proposed some years ago that the guests at the funeral of a Tikal king in the 8th century may have painted clay vessels using identical pigments and a series of prepared "blank" pots, resulting in both inept and fine depictions, all of which were placed in the tomb together.<sup>5</sup> Fine painting limns the occasional clumsy and misshapen vessel, as if an adept parent painted the child's trial pot (Fig. 41). All such works help us see the family shop, where some artisans made pots and others painted, where some works must have responded to the commission, and where others sat on the shelf, in hope of a sale.

### Script

Writing was one of the foremost achievements of Maya civilization, and one with far-reaching consequences for both its intellectual culture and art. Maya hieroglyphs represent a complete writing system that faithfully reflects the grammar and vocabulary of Mayan languages. In other words, lit-



Fig. 41 Cylinder vessel, codex-style. Despite its eroded condition, this awkwardly formed vessel still reveals the confident hand of an experienced painter.



a



b

made their books of a paper made  
ed in sections to form a concertina-like  
natural scribe writes in such a book, here  
; detail from a painted vase.

erate members of society could have spoken aloud any text put in front of them. Invented during the 1st millennium BC but reaching its greatest sophistication during the 1st millennium AD, Maya writing is what grammatologists call a “mixed system,” one that combines signs for whole words with others for syllables and vowels. At any one time the Maya recognized about 500 signs in common use. Startling progress over the past two decades has seen our ability to read the inscriptions transformed, and every year fresh decipherments offer deeper insights into past ideas and practice.

Most of what survives today are formal historical texts on stone monuments, written as terse third-person narratives. Their content dwells on the lives of kings: on ritual performances, genealogies, and political events, all embedded within lengthy calendrical notations. But those texts found in more informal contexts, such as on vases or other personal possessions, often feature very different subjects, from myths to tribute deliveries, sometimes with spoken captions or more flowery descriptions (Plate 69). They give us some glimpse into the content of innumerable lost books that once lay at the core of scholarly and administrative life at court. Many painted scenes depict scribes, both supernatural and mortal, who write and paint in jaguar-skin-bound tomes (Fig. 42a and b). Only a bare handful of late barkpaper almanacs survive today, but colonial-era accounts emphasize the range of topics they covered and the extraordinary value the Maya placed on them. Landa wrote, “We found a large number of books in these characters, and, as they contained nothing in which there were not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they regretted to an amazing degree, and which caused them much affliction.”<sup>6</sup> The Spanish collected from their Aztec subjects of the 16th-century tribute lists, histories, mythologies, and divinatory books: surely the Maya wrote such texts and others as well. The story of the *Popol Vuh*—the great Maya supernatural and historical epic set down in the Roman alphabet in the 16th century, which can be compared with the Hebrew *Genesis* or the Greek *Odyssey*—could have been set down in a hieroglyphic book.<sup>7</sup>

At the junction between art and writing lies calligraphy, and the Maya infused their script with the same sureness of line and richness of imagination that characterizes their image-making. The hieroglyphs range from the overtly pictorial—the heads of humans, animals and gods, body parts

and depictions of everyday objects—to those that appear wholly abstract (Plates 72, 73). Signs crowd close to one another—some genuinely fused together—challenging the eye to unravel their constituent parts. The resulting blocks of text resemble more the carpet page of a medieval manuscript than the linear registers of Old World writing.

The fluid character of Maya script developed at the point of a brush and found its natural home on the pages of books and in ceramic and mural painting. However, in the 8th century we see a few instances where painting briefly escapes into stone carving, exemplified by the hand of the master scribe or scribes who painted the templates for the “Creation [Throne] Panel” and the “Tablet of the 96 Glyphs” at Palenque (Plates 119–121, 122; Figs. 43, 71). Here, in work comparable to the best of Islamic and Chinese calligraphy, the brush seems to dance across its stony page. Using a fine chisel, probably of obsidian but perhaps of flint, the painted line has been cut into the stone, retaining both whiplash lines and flourishes that waver from thick to thin, as ink might pulse through a brush or pen.

Such was the value placed on writing both as an art form and a mark of social distinction that many vessels carry “pseudo-glyphs”—designs that merely imitate writing. This practice supports the idea that literacy in Maya society was very largely restricted to the highest echelons. Lower classes aspired to the real thing but lacked the wherewithal, or perhaps the permitted rank, to commission a literate work. Pseudo-glyphs also became common among non-Maya speakers in Honduras, where all that mattered was that it looked like writing.

“Full-figure” hieroglyphs represent the deepest expression of the interplay between Maya art and writing. Here signs expand into whole creatures—or perhaps conversely whole creatures reduce themselves to signs—in animated poses that force legibility to its very limits and verge on elaborate, highly decorative, puzzles (Plates 70, 71, 75). This baroque form of writing reached its highest achievement in the eastern cities of Copan and Quirigua during the 8th century, but the earliest dated example comes from Yaxchilan, dedicated around AD 550.

Fig. 43 The Tablet of 96 Glyphs, Palenque, drawn small panel, probably a throne seat, exhibits calligraphy in which the chisel replicates the line of the brush.





Fig. 44 Carved from a bone, this crocodile features tiny full-figure hieroglyphs on its belly (Plate 71).

The conventions of writing and art-making intersected continually for the Maya. Sculptors shaped quarried limestone blocks into freestanding shafts of stone, called stelae (sing. stela), that modeled themselves on the rough proportions of height to width common for manuscripts. In turn, these pages generally conform, more or less, to the proportions of the human body. In this, we see the Maya human form not only as the obvious basis for human representation, but also as an underpinning of more subtle aspects of Maya design. Screenfold books may have run horizontally as well as vertically (the orientation of the surviving Maya manuscripts), like the surviving books of Oaxaca. Is it the book that influences the overall configuration of Maya art, or is it the human body itself? We may never know, but we can see in these relationships a fundamental humanism unique in ancient Mesoamerica to the Maya.

### Numbers, Mathematics, and Calculation

The modern world has long known of the ancient Maya mastery of numbers. Like all Mesoamerican peoples, they based their counting system in 20, rather than 10, although indigenous peoples in other parts of the western hemisphere, including the Iroquois and the Incas, favored the decimal. The Maya also developed the most sophisticated calendars of the New World, chronicling several observable cycles of time—solar, lunar, venutian, martian, all with unequalled accuracy—along with several documentable but invisible cycles—9 days, 819 (the sacred numbers  $7 \times 9 \times 13 = 819$ ) days, and most importantly, 260 days. All these cyclical calendars operated alongside a Long Count calendar, a continuous reckoning of all days elapsed since a supernatural zero date in 3114 BC. The Long Count, which was established in the 1st millennium BC, was calculated by periods of days (*kin*), 20 days (*winal*), 360 days (*tun*),  $20 \times 360$  days (*katun*), and  $400 \times 360$  days (*baktun*). Like our calendar, the Maya calendar put emphasis on years that closed out “round” numbers, like the turn of our centuries or decades. That “zero” date back in 3114 BC was the completion of a period of 13 *baktuns*, and so the forthcoming completion of 13 *baktuns* on 23 December 2012 should simply turn over from one cycle to another, as do our millennia. Although scholars have quarreled about the correlation between the Maya Long Count records and our own calendar, we use here the revised Goodman-Martinez-Thompson standard (and the Julian calendar). The correlation, which is based in 16th-century records, agrees with radiocarbon dates of the 1st millennium AD.

We know from a handful of monuments—for it was far from common—that the Maya also reckoned numbers of enormous magnitude. Knowing that the *baktun* was 20 *katuns* squared, one can see how quickly the order of magnitude of the periods of the calendar progressed in the Maya mind. In addition to such depth of time, the Maya also had a precision of time, and a facility in calculating numbers of days that our own records do not offer—for example, the number of days between any given first Monday in September and Christmas is something that a school registrar knows by heart but anyone else would have to sit down and count out, day by day. Although not a single transaction—no record of tax, trade, or census—survives, the Maya probably kept good account of such matters, and would have recorded such items using a pure vigesimal system, that is, without the 360-day feature of the calendar that makes a rough accommodation to solar time.<sup>8</sup>

Early in the 20th century, the recognition of the sophistication of their calculations catapulted Maya civilization onto a unique plane, and they came to be known as peaceful timekeepers. Although such a vision of the Maya has been thoroughly discredited, we would emphasize that the Maya did have a notion of time and counting in the ancient New World that exceeded the achievements of all others. Their own interest in the very “art” of this effort can be seen in the emphasis on calligraphy in the reckoning of time, the subject most likely to be inscribed in the full-figure glyphs.

## Painting and Ceramics

The greatest ceramic painting workshops developed in the central heartland of Maya civilization, where artists learned to paint with thin suspensions of unwieldy clay slip: like the Greeks, the Maya knew neither glass nor glaze. Artisans in small ateliers worked collectively to make Maya ceramics, first acquiring the clay—usually from locally known sites along riverbanks—and then shaping coils into the tall cylinder shapes characteristic of the best workshops. Women may have made the vessels, but the signatures tell us only of painters who were men. Pigments of minerals—particularly iron ores for the reds and oranges, along with other minerals for blue and green that have since dulled to grey—were ground into the slip and then painted onto unfired vessels using brushes or possibly even pens.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time that particular styles characterize particular regions, individual artists sometimes mastered multiple styles. A handful of pots in “black background” (Plate 35)—or what would be called red-figure in the Greek vase painting tradition—were completed by artists who also worked in more conventional formats. A single workshop produced extraordinary work at the site of Naranjo, with vessels in the conventional red and orange on cream of the region, black on cream, and the “black background” style all at once. One of its painters, a master who signed himself Ah Maxam (*aj maxam*), created one of these pots for a son of the Naranjo king around AD 780 (Plate 85).

Little remains today of the painted architecture revealed on vases, but the jaguar pelt motifs, *kin*, or “sun,” signs, and quatrefoil “opening” signs common on painted vessels probably characterized the ancient buildings themselves. Such motifs would have sanctified the highly restricted spaces of courtly activity. Of the themes treated in Maya vase painting, few are as common as palace interiors where rich description shows us the actors, furnishings, and costuming that lie beyond any archaeological recovery. Books and scribes often appear in these palace scenes, so that one can see the relationship between the artists’ milieu and the subject matter of their works.<sup>10</sup> They are *of* the court, and they also *are* the court.

Artists decorated elite structures in both abstract and figural painting in rare cases—most notably in the incomparable program at Bonampak, Mexico. At first sight these unnamed muralists would appear to have transplanted work from ceramics to the stuccoed walls. However, recent study of the paintings of the north walls of Rooms 1 and 2 has revealed an animated contour line akin to the work of monumental sculptors—particularly those at Yaxchilan—based on the way artists worked body details, especially hands, feet, and ears. As far as modern archaeology can tell, the ceramic tradition itself did not flourish in the Maya west to the degree that it did in its center, in the Peten of modern-day Guatemala and southern Campeche; rather, sculpture and monumental painting reigned. We can see that artistic practice was not uniform across the Maya region, and that different expertise thrived in different regions.

We can see some of the more unusual talents of artists on ceramic vessels that depict the *way* (pronounced “why”) or “spirit companions” of the lordly elite (Plate 88). This bewildering variety of supernatural creatures—some based in human forms, some in animal—bear texts that identify them as belonging to particular kings or their kingdoms, and, as if to confound modern understanding of them, to gods as well. These *way* seem analogous to mystical alter-egos—or what is usually called the *nagual* elsewhere in Mexico. They often reveal creatures of horror and outright evil, visible nightmares of danger and putrefaction—even representing “animated diseases,” as David Stuart has recently suggested.<sup>11</sup> The ability of the elite Maya artist to conjure such imagery and put it to paint must have signaled his status and even his own priestly powers. That the subject matter was not appropriate for stone may also tell us something about the privacy and inner workings of the court: these are aspects that the lords might not have sought to broadcast.

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Like other art forms, vase painting also engaged the aesthetic based in the Maya book. Painted with a black clay slip against a cream background and rimmed with red—"the red and the black" as the later Aztecs metaphorically called all writing—the surfaces of "codex-style" vessels are pages wrapped into a cylindrical form (Plates 32, 85). By the 8th century, when the majority of cylinders were painted, the vessels had taken on a life of their own, and we cannot know how engaged they were with the painting of books. Just as dramatically as the cylinder form had arrived, it vanished by 800 or so and a new, jar-shaped pot became prevalent, decorated with a pressed, mass-produced imagery. Screenfold books, by contrast, continued to be made well after the Maya abandoned their greatest cities.

Other local carving and sculpting traditions in clay developed, particularly in the Maya west. The practice of carving vessels when the drying clay reached a fragile leather-hard stage reached its highest development in western Yucatan, where the modern town of Chochola has given its name to the style (Plates 54, 76). Artists in the region also commonly used resist paints—utilizing beeswax, a product of the region—to render what often look like batik designs on these wares. Other vessels were formed in molds, sometimes to be retouched and finished by hand. In areas such as Comalcalco, in the far west of the Maya area where local limestone is absent, clay was baked into tile-like bricks for building temples and palaces. These often carry improvised sketches, graffiti that were hidden once the bricks were laid atop one another, and thus with no thought to future sight (Plate 86). The versatility of clay naturally made it a favorite for modeling figurines. Although they are found across the Maya realm, figurines from the island of Jaina are the most famous (e.g. Plates 41, 42, 44, 94–97). Larger works in clay, such as the incense-burner stands from Palenque, had important roles in ritual (Plates 123–125, 128).

Another plastic material widely employed both for architectural decoration and small works of sculpture was stucco. To make stucco, the Maya burned limestone or seashells until they had a fine powder, which they could then refine and mix with water to make a thick, quick-drying paste. At Palenque, Tonina, and Ek Balam, artists built up layers of the stucco paste on armatures of small stones. Flint hard, stuccoes made for superb architectural sculptures (Plates 91, 113, 114), from larger-than-lifesize figures to delicate renderings of hieroglyphs (Plates 73, 89, 92, 115, 116).

The Maya incised smooth passages of conch shell or bone—usually the femurs of jaguars, tapirs, deer, or humans—with a flowing line (Plate 69). These materials were of continuing significance to their owners, and the inscriptions they carry very often state "this is the jaguar bone of so-and-so." In the case of shell, its natural shape or surface patterning was exploited wherever possible (Plates 67–69, 83, 84).

Another side to the Maya's manipulation of natural materials was their exploration of the replication of perishable objects in stone and clay. The Maya must have used gourds for most common vessels, but in one example they shaped a ceramic vessel into a squash—and then named the vessel as one for their precious chocolate drink, and the prized possession of the king of Acanceh, in northern Yucatan (Plate 74). In another instance a skilled draftsman painted a pot to make it resemble a basket, replicating not only the design that forms the woven basketry but also recognizing the thick-and-thin broken lines the pattern requires (Plate 52). These works strike us as clever today, and the Maya much admired cleverness: in the *Popol Vuh* it is neither their power nor their humility that makes us admire the Hero Twins but rather their quick wittedness and ingenuity.

### **Carving in Stone: Lithics and Jade**

Along with interest in artifice and transformation, Maya artists also had a fascination for materials in the raw, especially where mastery could be achieved over the most obdurate of them. Specialists knapped flint and obsidian from quarried blanks brought to them as large ovals—whose outline forms define the limits of many "eccentrics" as they are known today (Plates 78–82). Among the



most common motifs were human profiles, reduced in flint to their simplest outlines in the lithic equivalent of rapid brushstrokes—though in fact the product of laborious and masterful chipping. They preferred a very dark flint for these eccentrics, and although flint itself is a common material, the source for this particular blackish-brown flint material has never been found.

The Maya prized jade over all other stones, seeing in its range of blues and greens the color not only of the growing maize but also of the sky, oceans, and forest—the color of life itself. The earlier Olmec civilization had mastered jade carving by the 1st millennium BC, and the Maya adopted many of their techniques for string-sawing, drilling, and grinding. Like the Olmecs, the Maya manufactured jewelry and figurines (Plates 24–27, 47, 118), but their innovation was to carve large, flat panels of jade with figural representations engraved on them—often a Maize God or ruler joined by a dwarf—a technical tour-de-force in Mesoamerica's hardest stone (Plate 77).<sup>12</sup>

For all the skill and imagination of portable artworks, the ancient Maya are best known for their monumental work in stone. The entire Maya lowlands lie on a huge limestone shelf and the material for stone-carving was never far from hand. Yet the quality of the natural rock varies markedly across the region. At the great city of Calakmul, for example, the limestone is so weak and powdery that most of its monuments have been eaten away by centuries of exposure to the elements. The limestone around Palenque, by contrast, is of exceptional quality. Dense and fine-grained, it can be split readily into thin plaques ideal for wall panels, with smooth faces immediately available for outline sketching (the traces of which survive in a few cases). Easy to carve when newly exposed, this stone hardens into a resilient, buttery surface perfectly suited to detailed work (Plate 129). In upland regions sandstone was another option, best seen at Tonina, Mexico, and Quirigua, Guatemala. Relatively easy to work when first quarried, the volcanic tuff used for the magnificent three-dimensional work of Copan, Honduras, hardened to adamant after exposure to air (Plate 30). The Maya Mountains of modern-day Belize were an important source of slate, which was employed for large-scale work at nearby centers such as Caracol and transported elsewhere for fashioning into smaller items.<sup>13</sup>

### Lost Arts: The Body, Textiles, Wood

Unlike these durable works, much of what constitutes art in its own time is ephemeral. Perhaps the best example is a medium used worldwide, the human body. The Maya painted their faces and torsos in colored blocks and designs, encoding both intelligible iconography (Plate 97) and patterns

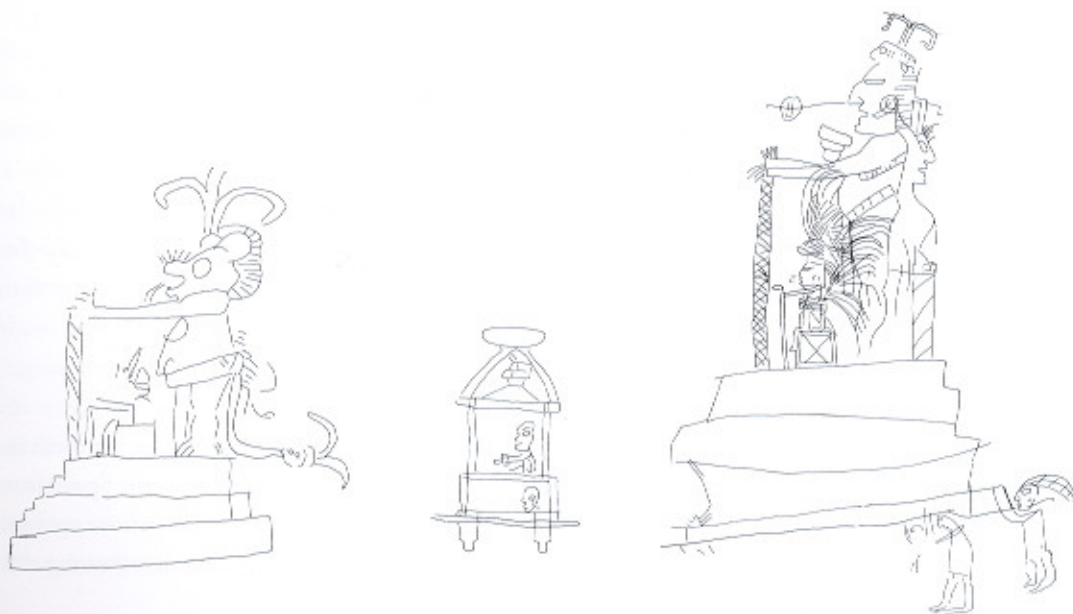


Fig. 45 Graffiti from the Central Acropolis, Tikal, drawn by archaeologists. Observers of huge perishable litters sketched these figures onto palace walls.

whose meanings elude us (Plate 34). Lost masterpieces of weaving and embroidery are richly represented in Maya art, forcefully demonstrating the intricate design and technical sophistication of ancient textiles (e.g. Plate 49). Equally short-lived are the efforts of feather-workers. Using a range of exotic plumes, including the rare and precious quetzal tailfeathers, they made luxuriant headdresses and high-status garments. Tropical hardwoods, many redolent with fragrance, were hewn into sculptures, musical instruments, utensils, and furniture of all kinds. Precious few of these once ubiquitous works survive; when they do their pitted and decayed surfaces make it hard to imagine their original luster (Plate 16). Papier-mâché—easily formed with manioc or cornstarch—may well have been used to create some of the immense effigies that were trooped around Maya cities like floats in a carnival, as attested in sculpted scenes and in graffiti. Of such perishable works only these secondary representations survive—a half-life in which art reflects other art (Fig. 45).

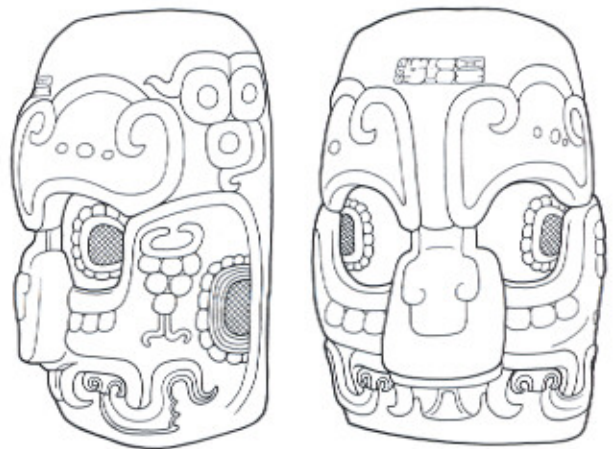
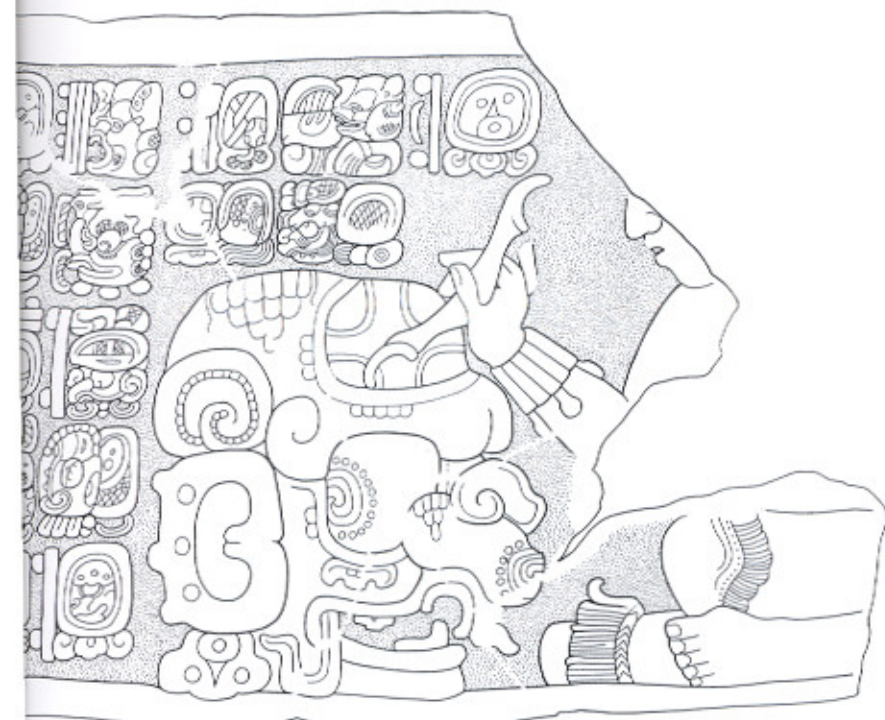
### The Role of the Artist in Maya Art-Making

A carved panel from somewhere near Palenque opens a window onto the role that a noble lord could play in art production (Fig. 46). On it, a high-ranking lord and artist takes a boar's tooth and carves a stone; the text notes that the event takes place seven days after the death of the Palenque king Kan Bahlam.<sup>14</sup> What the noble artist works on is a great head of stone, almost identical to any one of the several such sculptures which personify the animate qualities of rock (Fig. 47). Self-descriptive, the stone object itself spells hieroglyphically *kantuun*, “yellow/precious stone,” the Maya word for limestone. We might presume, based on similar precedents, that the work served as some kind of memorial to the Palenque king. But is it the very passing of Kan Bahlam that liberates the satellite from some prohibition on representation? Does his death result not only in the memorial but also in the freedom to make the memorial? To which object does the act of carving refer? The work depicted or the very panel itself? Would the answer be clear to a contemporary viewer or is the ambiguity intentional?

Nothing like these self-conscious Maya works was being made anywhere else in ancient Mesoamerica at the time, although the allies, enemies, and trading partners of the Maya must have

Zapata Panel, drawing. A seated lord uses boar tusks to fashion a personified rock.

parts of a carved leg, Piedras Negras Altar 4, and other parts of Piedras Negras Altar 4 take the forms very much like the one depicted on the panel (Fig. 46).



been well aware of them. As Esther Pasztory has insisted, the emphasis on different subject matter and the rejection of Maya script must have been active choices for the lords of the great city of Teotihuacan.<sup>15</sup> Teotihuacanos knew of the Maya system and chose not to adopt it, perhaps because the writing system in particular did not lend itself to their multiethnic, multilingual world, or because its specificity and historicity seemed antithetical to their culture.

Certainly Maya art underwent its own transformation, moving from monuments depicting single individuals to dynamic depictions of groups within architectural settings. What makes art change in this way? Most early depictions feature static Maya lords, without a strong temporal or locative inflection. Yet at the same time that such representations were made, by means of their script and the calendar, the Maya narrated the life stories of individual kings, tying their lives to those of their gods, in shifting pasts, presents, and futures that could span millions of years.

In comparison to such writing, the representation of the human figure in time and space lagged behind the inscriptions through the 6th century. Then, during the 7th and 8th centuries, the Maya artist sought to render human and divine actors in just that time and space that the text already had mastered. Because a Maya artist was also a scribe, he would have understood the full range of capability of Maya writing and arithmetic and their ability to represent time, place, and development through time. Of course, all representations always underrepresent the complexity of human actions, but the Maya scribe may well have sought greater visual representation, one with greater specificity of place and one with narration and time embedded, driven by the achievements already in place in writing and calculation.

In their greatest works of the 7th and 8th centuries, Maya artists conflated several aspects of representation, and they may have done this with a careful eye to the ways that visual and verbal representation differed, particularly with regard to pictorial space and its human occupants. Whereas Maya texts carefully record sequential moments, distinguishing events to the day and protagonists precisely, often with the naming of a location that may indicate a city or building within a city, a visual representation collapses and reduces time, while offering specificity of location—the furniture, the awnings—that is not spoken of in texts.

In the case of a work like Piedras Negras Panel 3—a depiction of the court in action created around AD 795, but picturing events from 40 years earlier—we can appreciate one of the last great engagements between Maya text and image (Fig. 48). Here we see a throne-room scene encased in a textual frame that doubles as enclosing architecture. In a composition much influenced by the asymmetry found in ceramic and mural painting, a group of naturalistic, if now rather damaged, characters sit in front of and stand alongside an enthroned ruler. Although painted scenes had included spoken captions for most of the 8th century, the first-person monologue engraved on the “back wall” of this chamber is unique in Maya monumental art. Image and script supply complementary but divergent parts of the overall message, since the climax of the text lies not in the depicted gathering—which we are told is a feast—but in the re-entry and burning of the same king’s tomb 40 years in the future.

A work like Piedras Negras Panel 3 shows that the Maya artist had learned to trust what the eye sees over what the brain knows—that is, that the thigh of a sitting figure seen face-on will essentially vanish from view, for example. Maya artists can show that space is infinite, captured only in part by any frame. They cut body parts in remarkable ways by means of frames, commonly cutting a figure off, acknowledging that a part can stand for the whole. This concept of synecdoche—the part standing for the whole—was an essential notion of classical Greek and Roman poetics; in the visual arts its introduction in Europe is often heralded as a step toward modernism. For the Maya, the sense of infinite space is paired with an interest in illusionistic space: indeed the Maya saw these as two differ-

Piedras Negras Panel 3. Made during the last years of the Classic Maya court, this small but very fine carving depicts a ruler and his courtly retinue of the



ent problems, although they were for the European artist usually a single problem. The Maya established the principle that figures set higher up in architectural settings were more distant, while figures along the ground line were understood to be close, and indeed sometimes adjacent to, the viewer.

Especially in the 8th century and using all these tools, Maya artists began to assemble far more complex compositions, works that sometimes capture an event as if seen from slightly different points of view, or as if over a brief period of time, say, the time of a long exhalation or the turning of the head. Panel 3 from Piedras Negras or the Kimbell Panel (Plate 2) both feature this “ripple in time,” in which the eye moves from one protagonist to another, detecting movement and progression, hierarchies, spatial relationships, and ultimately, the passage of time. The furled awnings add to the sense of transience, whether it is of the viewer’s ephemeral opportunity to see (will the moment vanish?) or the event altogether. These Maya artists so mastered the word and image of the court that even now, over 1,000 years later, we catch our breath at the sense of the moment revealed, and at the mastery of the makers.



Plate 63

### Sculpture of a scribe

Copan, Honduras

AD 650–800

Stone

22 7/16 x 14 3/16 in. (57.0 x 37.0 cm)

Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia

CPN-P-3446

Ranking lords at Copan severed the head from the body of this sculpture, burned the head and then deposited the two parts separately into the rubble foundation of a late-8th-century structure owned and used by a lineage of scribes, according to the building's inscriptions. This sculpture presumably belonged to this same lineage that constructed the new building, but who nevertheless felt the need to "terminate" the old work.

Probably from the early 8th century, this seated scribe is about half life size and may once have been set inside a niche. He hunches forward, and although his hands rest on his knees, he's poised with brush to inscribe the next line of text, drawing pigment from the sliced shell paint pot in his left hand.

Like many other scribes, this profoundly human figure displays aspects of his simian supernatural patrons, the twin Monkey Scribes. His eyes are small and close together, his teeth visible, his forehead broad, and his nose broad and flat, all in direct counter to the reigning canons of beauty. Yet of course it is the scribe and artist who give form to what is beautiful, so in this self-abnegation, one sees a carefully cultivated representation of humility and effacement.

References: Webster ed. 1989; Schele and Miller 1986, p. 101

### Cylinder vessel with Monkey Scribes

Mexico or Guatemala

AD 700–800

Ceramic

4½ x 4⅞ in. (11.2 x 12.4 cm)

New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum purchase, Women's Volunteer Committee Fund and Anonymous Funds

73.13

This small vessel depicts the Monkey Scribes, twin half-brothers of the Hero Twins. Although of human body, the Monkey Scribes have monkey faces, characterized by hideous jaws and teeth, and a snake-like tongue.

The artist has worked quickly in an extremely fluid and confident line that conveys the intensity of the scribes themselves. They hold jaguar-covered books in their extended left hands; their right hands may be tied, perhaps an indication of the binding of the writing pen to the hand.

Reference: Schele and Miller 1986, p. 151



Plate 65

**Human artisan**

Unknown provenience

AD 250–600

Ceramic

22 7/16 in. (57.0 cm)

The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund

1994.12.1

Maya artisans created these ceramic figures as a pair to represent their divine counterparts, the patrons of art and writing in Maya culture (see p. 239). They appear in the Popol Vuh epic as the elder half-brothers of the Hero Twins; they are sons of the Maize God but of a different mother. They mastered the arts, and they were singers and musicians as well as carvers and painters. But despite their talents they were also jealous bullies who persecuted their younger siblings. The Hero Twins eventually avenged themselves by tricking their tormentors into climbing a tree; having trapped them there, the Hero Twins transformed their half-brothers into monkeys. The defeated brothers are common subjects in ancient Maya art where they are represented in both human and simian form, and often, as here, as one of each.

Both of these finely detailed figures bear their original paint schemes and would originally have held perishable tools, a stylus and brush, in their hands. The simian artisan models a small mask in his hand; a rearing serpent forms his menacing tail. His human brother, by contrast, paints on a piece of bark—a symbolic book since beaten bark was the paper of the New World. The serpent heads under his arms are simplified forms of the “number tree”—a characteristic snake-and-tree outgrowth marked with Maya bar and dot numbers. The pair probably date to the 5th century; their domed bases may have been the lids of incense burners.

Reference: Berjonneau and Sonnery eds. 1985, pp. 236–237





Plate 66

**Monkey artisan**

Unknown provenience

AD 250-600

Ceramic

23 1/4 in. (59.0 cm)

The Cleveland Museum of Art,

John L. Severance Fund

1994.12.2