

CHILDREN'S GUIDE



Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya

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Mesoamerica

The Maya

They were artists, mathematicians, and scribes, warriors, weavers, and astronomers. In the rainforests of Mesoamerica, they built the most sophisticated civilization the New World had ever seen. They developed a complex writing system, invented the idea of zero, and tracked the stars and planets more accurately than anyone else.

Since European explorers first found the crumbling ruins of Maya cities in the sixteenth century, the Maya have slowly given up their secrets. In this exhibition you will discover the Maya, too. You'll see works they made between about AD 600 and 900, when their civilization was at its peak. Most of them come from the courts of Maya kings.

By about 1000, the greatness of Maya civilization had passed. Five hundred years later, more than half the population died of new diseases brought by Spanish conquerors. But the Maya people survived. Today some six million Maya live in Mexico and Central America—and probably a million more have settled in the United States. Maya culture is diverse and alive, rich with traditions from the past. Maybe you have Maya friends.



1 • Maya woman carrying flowers through a market in Chichicastenango, Guatemala



2

Kings and Courts

Ancient Maya society was organized into city-states ruled by kings. Cities traded with one another and competed for precious goods like jade and the brilliant feathers of the quetzal bird. They made treaties—or war. Fortunes rose and fell, but no city ever controlled the whole Maya world. The largest cities had sixty thousand people or more and hundreds of buildings. Temples and palaces were painted red and decorated with sculpture. Temple-pyramids rose thirty stories high.

The Maya ruler was at the center of the city’s political, economic, and religious life. His role on earth mirrored the role of the gods. He styled his appearance to match the corn god and wore ornaments made of jade and quetzal feathers. Green like the leaves of corn, they symbolized fertility and wealth. When he donned ceremonial costumes and the masks of gods, the king not only looked like those gods—he became like them.



3



4

▲ **MEET ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS OF ALL MAYA KINGS**—the great Pakal from Palenque. This portrait was found buried under his tomb. Pakal became king in 615 when he was twelve years old and ruled until he died in 683—a very long life in ancient times. He and his sons turned Palenque into a splendid city.

2 · Ruins of Maya architecture at Palenque

3 · Cylinder vase with lords and cloth, (“Fenton Vase”), Nebaj, Guatemala, 600–800, ceramic, Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum

4 · Portrait head of Pakal, Palenque, Mexico, c. 650–683, stucco, Museo Nacional de Antropología–INAH, México

5 · Mask, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 600–800, jade with obsidian and shell, Museo Arqueológico de Campeche “Fuerte de San Miguel,”–INAH, México



5



The Maya court included many people beyond the royal family: attendants to offer food and drink, servants with flysweps and fans, singers, musicians, and entertainers. There were also priests, diplomats, and warriors. Hunchbacks and dwarfs were trusted advisers.

^ **THESE FIGURINES WERE FOUND IN TOMBS.** Some are whistles or rattles. Perhaps they were put in graves to serve or entertain the person buried there, or maybe they represent that person in life.

Who's who? See if you can identify:

- a diplomat or trader who traveled to distant cities under hot sun or pelting rain
- a ruler in heavy padding, contemplating the battle ahead
- a priest in feathered regalia
- a trumpeter

< *A mask like this was placed over Pakal's face in his tomb. Jade was more precious to the Maya than gold.*

MAYA BEAUTY

Have you noticed that Maya men and women—and gods—have a certain “look”? Their ideal of beauty was modeled on the corn god—youthful and fresh, strong. Long heads and flowing hair mimic the corn plant. Parents gave their children's heads this long tapering shape by pressing the skull between boards for a few days just after birth. It only took a short while because babies' bones are soft, but the effect lasted for life. It didn't affect intelligence.

The perfect Maya nose was large and sloped to the forehead; people used inserts to get the right profile. Crossed eyes were also desirable. Maya parents probably trained their kids' eyes to cross by hanging something in front of their noses! Teeth were filed down to points or even T-shapes and sometimes decorated with small inlays of colored stones.

6 • Seated figurine of a trumpeter player, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, University of East Anglia

7 • Standing figurine in a blue coat, probably a messenger or emissary, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología—INAH, México

8 • Seated figurine on a throne, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Gillett G. Griffin

9 • Standing figurine of a priest, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979

The Gods and the Maya

The Maya saw all things as interconnected. The past and present. The earth, the sky, and the underworld. People, nature, and the gods. The Maya needed the gods, but the gods needed the Maya too. Every facet of life—even a ball game—linked them.

The Maya worshiped dozens of gods. Many could appear old or young, in human or animal form. Before we could read Maya writing we did not know their names; they were called God A, God B, and so on. Some are still known that way. As you go through the exhibition, look for these gods:

Chak Chel was the patron of women, a weaver (with cotton skeins tied in her hair) but also a warrior. Her name means “Great Rainbow,” but don’t think that is a lucky omen—the Maya saw rainbows as dangerous signs from the underworld.

> VASE WITH MOON GODDESS

Women also prayed to a beautiful young moon goddess. You’ll find her sitting in the curve of a crescent moon, holding a rabbit. The Maya don’t see a man in the moon—they see a rabbit. So do other people in Mesoamerica, Native Americans of the southwestern United States, and the Chinese and Japanese. Next time the moon is full, look again!



12

> MAIZE GOD

No god was more important to the Maya than the maize god, the god of corn. Always handsome and young, he danced when the breeze rustled his long leaves. Corn’s cycle of planting, growth, harvesting, and replanting is the cycle of life itself—birth, death, rebirth.



13

< VASE OF 7 GODS

Ruthless God L was a prince of the underworld and a god of commerce and trade. He’s prosperous and smokes a cigar. Like Maya kings he sits on a jaguar pelt. Look for the feathered headdress where his messenger owl nests.



10

> SCEPTER

K’awiil (God K) was a god of lightning and had one snake foot. Because he also was a protector of royal family lines, he often decorates kings’ scepters.



11

10 • Cylinder vessel with underworld scene (“Vase of the Seven Gods”), Naranjo region, Guatemala or Belize, 755–784, ceramic, Anonymous loan, courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago

12 • Cylinder vessel with Itzamna, Moon Goddess, and scribe, detail, Mexico or Guatemala, 700–800, ceramic, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

11 • Scepter of K’awiil, provenance unknown, 600–900, white stone, probably albite, Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund

13 • Maize God, Temple 22, Copan, Honduras, 680–750, volcanic tuff, Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum

IT’S AMAZING!

In the United States we call it corn, but the rest of the world knows it as maize. For the Maya it was literally the stuff of life—they believed the first people had been created from corn. Corn needed humans as well—to tend it and plant it. Corn cannot seed itself the way many other plants can.

Corn was the Maya’s most important food, and it’s still fundamental to the diet of people in Mesoamerica. Before being ground to a paste, the kernels are soaked to make them more nutritious, a process called (here is a word to impress and “amaize” your friends) *nixtimalization*.

The ancient people of Mesoamerica learned this secret thousands of years ago. We know the Maya ate tamales—sometimes with iguana meat!—and maybe tortillas too.



14



15

The Maya Ball Game

Ballcourts are found in the center of nearly every Maya city. As in soccer, players had to keep the ball in the air without using their hands. The ball was solid rubber and weighed eight pounds or more (that's at least eight times a soccer ball). No wonder players wore heavy padding!

In parts of Mexico and Central America a version of the ancient game is still played. But for the ancient Maya the stakes were especially high. Although it was played for sport, the game was also a mythic struggle. It reenacted contests of life and death, war, and sacrifice.

14 • Figurine of a ballplayer, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología–INAH, México

15 • Figurine of a ballplayer, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología–INAH, México

16 • Ballcourt at Copan, Honduras



16

THE HERO TWINS PLAY BALL

Some myths have survived in the *Popol Vuh*, a text that recounts the Maya story of creation. It was translated into Spanish about 1700, but the stories it tells are much more ancient.

The Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque (pronounced “shaw bal an KAY”), were excellent ballplayers. Unfortunately, the noise of their incessant games disturbed the gods of the underworld. Irritated, the gods sent a messenger owl to summon them. Every day the twins played ball against the gods, just managing to hold their own. A good thing, since a loss would cost them their lives! Each night they faced other dangers in the houses where they slept: the Dark House, Razor House, Jaguar House. They escaped with cunning and the help of forest creatures—until the night in the Bat House, where snatcher bats flew. The boys slept inside the tubes of their blowguns for protection, but Hunahpu stuck his head out too soon and was decapitated. The next day, the gods used Hunahpu’s head in place of the ball. Xbalanque was able to trick them, however, and reunite his brother’s head and body. In the end, it was the gods who lost that game.



17 • Ballcourt marker, La Esperanza, Chiapas, Mexico, 591, limestone, Museo Nacional de Antropología—INAH, México

^ COURTS WERE MARKED WITH THREE FLAT STONES DOWN

the middle, probably scoring markers —also passages to the underworld. Look closely at the ball this player is hitting off his hip. It’s engraved with a human head. Hunahpu! That might lead you to believe that the ball player is one of the underworld gods. But the inscription gives an earthly date—May 19, 591. So, the player is really a ruler acting out the Hero Twins’ game in a ritual that tied the human and supernatural worlds.


NUMBERS


The Maya wrote their numbers using a dot for 1 and a bar for 5. Zero was a shell shape.




For larger numbers, they used place notation just as we do, except that the Maya positioned the numbers vertically and horizontally and used base-20 where we use base-10.

The Maya wrote...

22 as  that’s one 20 + 2 ones

49 as  that’s two 20s + 9 ones

86 as  you figure out this one!

Now that you know the system, can you find the numbers on the ballcourt marker? Because the Maya recorded so many dates you’ll find numbers on lots of the objects in this exhibition.

ROOM 3

Maya Women

Women were more prominent in Maya society than in many other ancient cultures. A few even ruled as queens.



18 • Figurine of a woman preparing food, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Yale University Art Gallery, Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund

Women ran the home as mothers, nurses, and cooks. In addition to corn, they prepared several kinds of beans and squash, various meats, and fish.

v WOMEN CONTRIBUTED TO THE WEALTH OF MAYA CITIES

as spinners and weavers. Beautiful fabrics were even exchanged as luxury gifts between royal households. Weaving fine cotton cloth would have been one of a royal woman’s main occupations.

Ancient Maya women wove on backstrap looms. The long threads of the warp were fixed to a beam that was looped around the weaver’s back. It was a simple device she could use nearly anywhere. Maya women today are still known for their skill in weaving, and they still use the backstrap loom.



19 • Figurine of a woman at her loom, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología—INAH, México

Ritual Roles

One of the most important roles for royal women was in ritual. To contact and care for gods and ancestors, queens offered their blood, just as their husbands did. Meeting the gods' needs was the royal family's greatest responsibility. Everything depended on it: rainfall and crops, the universe itself.

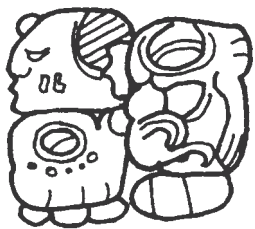
> **THESE RELIEFS, FROM YAXCHILAN**, show Lady Xok (pronounced “shoke”) and her husband Shield Jaguar, one of Yaxchilan's greatest kings.

Above, Lady Xok performs a sacrifice by pulling a thorny rope through her tongue. Her blood falls in drops and is collected by small bits of paper in the bowl at her feet. Shield Jaguar holds a torch to light the nighttime ritual.

Below, the blood-soaked papers are burned, the smoke rising to the gods. In reward, they send Lady Xok a vision—a serpent, with a warrior emerging from its mouth. Her sacrifice created a bond with the supernatural, not just for the queen and her family but for all the people of Yaxchilan.

MAYA NAMES: LADY XOK AND SHIELD JAGUAR

Look for the names of Lady Xok and Shield Jaguar in the inscriptions. Shield Jaguar is a name researchers gave the king before they could read the ancient Mayan language. It describes what the signs look like but does not tell us what the king's name sounded like. Now we know he was called Itzammaaj Balam. “Balam” was the Maya word for jaguar.



Lady Xok



Shield Jaguar



20



21

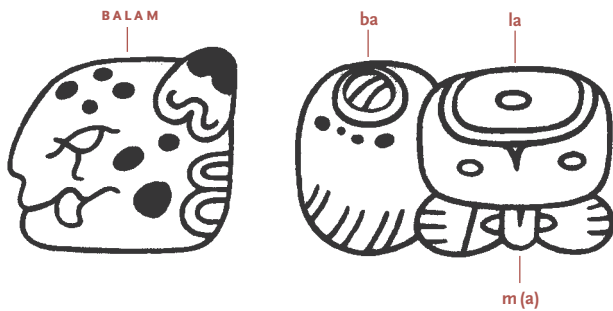
20 • Bloodletting ritual of Lady Xok (Lintel 24), Structure 23, Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, c. 725, limestone, Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum

21 • Lady Xok conjuring a giant serpent (Lintel 25), Structure 23, Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, c. 725, limestone, Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum

Writing and the Arts

The ancient Maya wanted history to know who they were. They recorded their names and their deeds. But since the Spanish conquest the Maya remained anonymous, because we could not read their writing. We could not learn their names or histories. The decoding of Maya writing in the last fifty years has been a triumph of modern archaeology. It reintroduces us to real people and events.

Instead of using an alphabet, the Maya wrote with signs called hieroglyphs. Some are pictures that stand for whole words, others for the sounds of syllables. Take the word “jaguar,” for example. It could be written two ways.



How many Maya could read and write? Probably only those at the top of society. There were professional writers, called scribes, but even some princes decorated and wrote on vases. It's possible that all the boys in noble families learned at least the basics of writing—some scratched graffiti on palace walls. Did women learn to read and write too? We're not yet sure.

> **THIS SCRIBE IS POISED WITH A BRUSH** and an inkpot made of a sliced shell. He is not the Maya ideal of beauty—he resembles the mythical patrons of writing, the Monkey Twins. They were the older half-brothers of the Hero Twins and the masters of all kinds of arts. As the Popol Vuh says, “all they do is play and sing, all they work at is writing and carving, every day, and this cheers the heart of their grandmother.” The story goes on:



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Although talented, the Monkey Twins tormented their younger brothers mercilessly. Originally they were boys just like the Hero Twins. But one day, the pair climbed too high in a tree, greedily eating fruit, and were unable to get down. They asked their younger brothers for help. Revenge! The Hero Twins rescued their brothers by giving them tails and turning them into monkeys who easily scampered to the ground.

Most Maya writing that survives is on stone monuments and pottery. It is only a fraction of what once existed. The Maya wrote books too, just as the Monkey Twins do on the vase above. The books were made of folded bark pages, with jaguar skin covers. Today only four survive, and they were written much later, about the time of the Spanish conquest.

22 • Cylinder vessel with Monkey Scribes (Monkey Twins), Mexico or Guatemala, 700–800, ceramic, New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum purchase, Women's Volunteer Committee Fund and Anonymous Funds



23 • Sculpture of a scribe, Copan, Honduras, 650–800, stone, Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia

23



24 · Eccentric flint with human faces, El Palmar, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 711, flint, Museo Nacional de Antropología—INAH, México

▲ **THESE ARE MYSTERIOUS OBJECTS.** No one knows what they were used for. They were buried under buildings and large sculpture. Their strange shapes—razor sharp and impossible to hold—were formed by chipping the hard stone, flint. Many look like faces. Do you see them? It might be K’awiil, the god of lightning. If you strike flint against a rock, it will spark. Easy to see why the Maya believed flint was formed when lightning hit the earth.

Try sketching the faces here:



25 · Cylinder vessel with flower motifs (“Fleur-de-lis vase”), Naranjo region, Guatemala or Belize, c. 780, ceramic, The Art Institute of Chicago, Ethel T. Scarborough Fund

REALLY HOT CHOCOLATE

The Maya labeled their pottery with their names and what it was used for. This cup, and ones like it, held one of the Maya’s favorite drinks—chocolate. But it was not cocoa as we know it. It was bitter and spiced with hot chilies!

▼ **TRY THIS RECIPE.** You can sweeten it if you like with honey. (The Maya kept bees—stingless bees!)

1 oz of unsweetened baking chocolate

2/3 cup boiling water

ground chili peppers (as much as you dare)

Grate the chocolate and melt it in a bowl with a little of the boiling water. Mix it well, then add the other ingredients. Let the drink cool and beat it to a frothy mixture.



< **LOOK FOR THIS GLYPH.**

It means cacao. Cacao, from which chocolate is made, was not just valuable as food. It was used as money! Counterfeiters even faked the dried beans with clay imitations.

War

War was a part of Maya life too, and military leadership a responsibility of the king and court. Maya cities fought to obtain valuable resources and to win control over smaller, weaker neighbors.

> **WARRIORS WERE ARMED WITH FLINT-TIPPED WEAPONS** and protected by leather vests and padding. They carried shields and wore helmets decorated with jaguars and other fierce creatures to share these animals' power. Battle was a noisy affair, accompanied by drums and loud horns.

v **CAPTIVES WERE MARCHED TO THE VICTORIOUS CITY** and forced to kneel before the king and his officers. They were stripped of their finery and tied with ropes. Torn cloth replaced their large jade earrings. Some prisoners were forced to play a deadly ritual ball game they had no hope of winning—or surviving.

Yet, the Maya pictured captives with dignity and carefully recorded their names. Capture of a prince or king was greatly prized. This prisoner was a king of Palenque and son of Pakal. He was captured by nearby Tonina. His fate is unclear, but recent evidence suggests that he returned to Palenque. Maybe he was ransomed or made a subject king. Unlike most captives, he has kept most of his jewelry.



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26 · Carved panel with warrior, Chiapas, Mexico, 864, limestone, Private collection

27 · Relief carving of captive King K'an H'oy Chitam of Palenque (Monument 122), Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, 711, limestone, Museo Regional de Chiapas—INAH, México



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Archaeology

In the eighteenth century, Palenque was the first Maya city to reemerge from the tangle and mists of the high-canopy rainforest. It captures the imagination of visitors, not to mention the dedication of scholars who continue to learn its secrets.

WORK CONTINUES NOT ONLY AT PALENQUE, but at Maya sites all over Mesoamerica. Teams include many different specialists—archaeologists who painstakingly uncover monuments buried under layers of forest and rubble, epigraphers who study inscriptions, and conservators who care for artifacts. Other scientists research plant and animal life and the interaction of people and the environment. Artists copy inscriptions and draw objects, even in the age of digital photography, while new imaging technology lets excavators “see” underground.



28 · The mists of Palenque

29 · Archaeologists at work in Palenque

CHICLETS AND MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY

In 1871 the first chewing gum factory opened in New York. The new candy, “snappy and stretchy” and so much better than the flavored wax people had chewed before, was hugely popular. It also played a surprising part in the rediscovery of Maya civilization. Gum is made from chicle, which was collected from trees in the jungles of Mesoamerica. Roads cut through the dense forest to make transportation easier led explorers to ancient cities lost for centuries.

29



30

^ **THIS RELIEF, WHICH WAS PROBABLY PART OF A THRONE,** was found in 2002, as Mexican archaeologists worked to clear rubble from a temple in Palenque. Although it was in many pieces, careful excavation managed to recover almost all of it. It looks small here, but it is actually seven-and-a-half feet long.

30 · Front of the royal platform of King Ahkal Mo' Nahb, Temple 21, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, 736, limestone, Museo de Sitio de Palenque "Dr. Alberto Ruz L'Huillier" – INAH, México

Try This!

NUMBER, PLEASE

Try writing your phone number using the Maya method.

			—			
--	--	--	---	--	--	--

Write a friend's phone number here.

			—			
--	--	--	---	--	--	--

Write another friend's phone number here.

			—			
--	--	--	---	--	--	--

	B	CH	
A			
E			
I			
O			
U			

> Now write your name, using this chart. It is a simplified version of a Maya syllabary. Complete syllabaries are much more complex. Use one glyph for each syllable. Not all of the sounds of English exist in Mayan languages, so you may have to improvise. Wondering about the empty boxes on the chart? They are discoveries still waiting to be made!

You could make an entire Maya telephone directory of your friends.



H K L M N P S T TZ W X Y



Books for Kids

Laurie Coulter, *Secrets in Stone: All about Maya Hieroglyphs*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001.

Rachel Crandell, *Hands of the Maya: Villagers at Work and Play*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002.

Peter Lourie, *The Mystery of the Maya: Uncovering the Lost City of Palenque*. Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mill Press, 2001.

Dorothy Rhoads, *The Corn Grows Ripe*. New York: Puffin Books, 1993.

Marc Talbert, *Heart of a Jaguar*. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1995.

WEB SITES

Try these Web sites. You can play a virtual ball game, see the latest information from archaeologists at Palenque, figure your birthday in the Maya calendar, see and hear glyphs— even match wits with the Hero Twins.

Mesoweb.org

Ballgame.org

Famsi.org

Half-moon.org

Lady Xok glyph: Drawing courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, Harvard University; Shield Jaguar glyph and Balam logograph and phonetic: reproduced from David Drew, *The Lost Chronicle of the Mayan Kings* (University of California Press, 1999), 159, 169; Cacao glyph: Reprinted from David Stuart, "The Rio Azul Cacao Pot: Epigraphic Observations on the Function of a Maya Ceramic Vessel," *Antiquity* 62: 153–157, fig. 2; Glyph chart: Adapted from Laurie Coulter, *Secrets in Stone: All about Maya Hieroglyphs* (Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 44, 45.

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Cover • Figurine of a ballplayer, Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 600–900, ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología — INAH, México (no. 14)

