

The Mayas

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Mayas lived in present-day southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and western El Salvador. When the Spanish arrived in Central America and Mexico in the sixteenth century, the Mayas occupied lands shown on the map opposite.

The Mayas were so culturally advanced that they have been compared to the Greeks of the Old World. They were fine farmers and architects. They built magnificent pyramids and temples. They were also fine artists, goldsmiths, and coppersmiths. Their social system, based on their beliefs and ideas, ensured harmony with the environment.

Maya writing is a kind of hieroglyphic writing. Today, many of the hieroglyphs can be read. The ancient Maya texts tell us about many aspects of Maya culture and history—even the names of ancient rulers.

For the Mayas, time was of great importance. Many of their stelae, altars, and books marked the passage of time. The Mayas believed in the eternity of time, respected it, measured it, and recorded it. The Mayas developed their own calendar, probably based on ones used by earlier peoples who had lived nearby.

Some great Maya cities developed during the Formative period, but it was during the Classic period that the Maya civilization reached its peak and the greatest cities flourished. During that time, Maya lands were divided into powerful city-states, each ruled by a city. One of the

largest of these centers was Tikal, in Guatemala's northern Petén. The excavated center has thousands of structures, from tiny house mounds to gigantic temples and palaces. Some important Classic Maya sites are Palenque and Coba in Mexico and Copán in Honduras. The stone walls at some sites are decorated with murals and carvings that show human sacrifice and other details of Maya life.

Jade was the Mayas' most precious stone, quantities of which have been found buried with the Maya elite in tombs.

Some of the neighbors of the Maya in Mexico and Central America also developed advanced cultures. The Mayas had constant contact with these groups, traded with them, and exchanged knowledge. Beginning in about A.D. 790, and extending to A.D. 900, the great Maya lowland

HISTORY OF THE MAYAS

The history of the Mayas is usually broken down into the following periods:

Formative Period	c 2000 B.C.—c A.D. 250 Includes the rise of powerful rulers and the development of cities.
Classic	c A.D. 250—900 The greatest era of sculpture, writing, building, and pottery.
Postclassic	c A.D. 900—1540 Many Classic-period centers abandoned. Spanish influence begins in sixteenth century.

SOURCE: Odijk, Pamela. *The Mayas*. South Melbourne, Australia: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, 1989, pp. 9, 29-30, 32.

civilization went into a decline and change from which it never recovered. Explanations for this are still being sought.

Today, descendants of the Maya people still live in parts of Central America and Mexico. Many tend their crops and dress in very much the same way as their ancestors. They practice old religions before their altars, even though Christianity is the accepted religion. Although no modern civilization is a living relic of its ancestors, we see a resemblance to the past in

the modern Mayas.

The Mayas were not completely conquered by the Spanish until 1697. With this, their civilization and spirit were not broken, but evolved into the Maya culture of today.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The Maya civilization was characterized by monumental art and architecture. There are countless sites. Some have pyramid-temples more than 200 feet (60 meters) high.



Maya effigy whistle, ceramic.

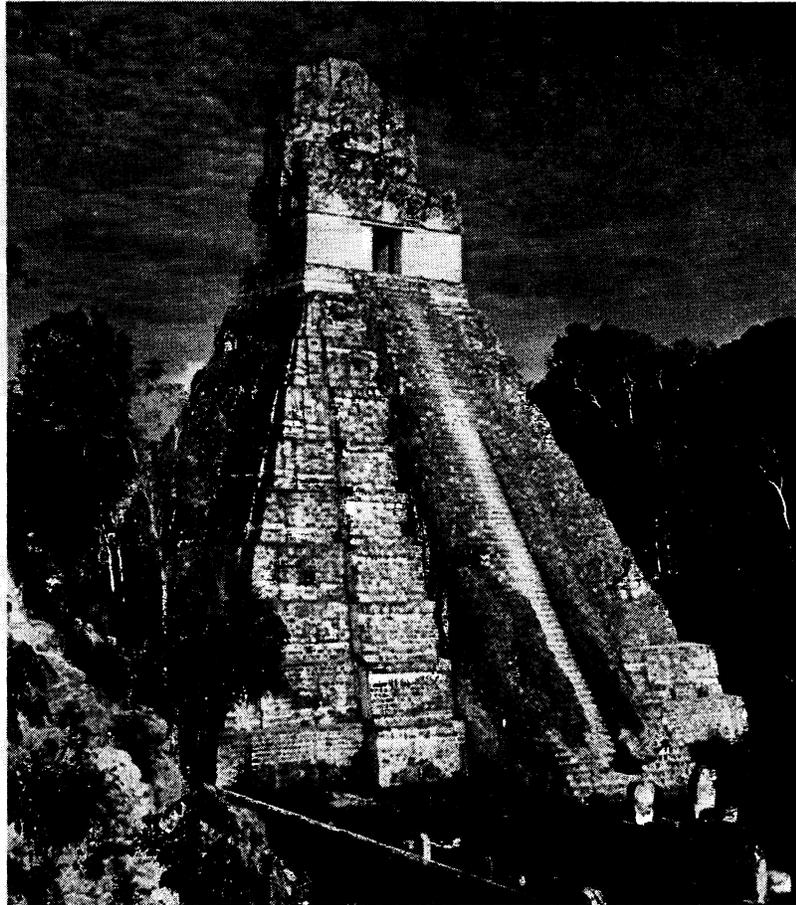
SOURCE: All rights reserved. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

HANDOUT #1 — continued

Beginning in the Formative period, the Mayas built and dated many stone monuments and buildings. Temples, ornaments on architecture, altars, and stelae were constructed as monuments to leaders and gods. Temples were the tallest structures. They usually sat on top of

Below: Temple I at Tikal, the largest site in the Maya area. This is the funerary pyramid of the ruler Ah Cacan (Lord Cacao').

lofty stone pyramids that had flat tops. Many cities had one or more ball courts where a game, played for religious purposes, took place. Scholars believe this game represented the movements of the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies. The game probably served as entertainment as well.



SOURCE: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania
(neg. #65-4-1904).

Palaces, Temples, and Pyramids

Maya palaces differed from the temples and pyramids in that they were lower and had a great many rooms. The royal family probably lived in the palaces along with many elite relatives. Some rooms probably served as administrative offices.

Temples and palaces were often arranged around courts, with stelae and altars built before them. Great stone causeways lead from central plazas in many Maya centers.

At Tikal is a large Maya ceremonial group of buildings, known as the Acropolis, which has white stucco platforms, stairways, and polychrome masks. Maya architects often built new buildings on top of older structures.

Copán was the southernmost large cultural center of the Mayas. Copán architecture has many figures of kings, gods, carved stelae, and monuments, as well as a well-preserved ball court. At Copán, a royal dynasty of sixteen kings ruled for about four hundred years.

Palenque lies above the flood plain of the Usumacinta River and has many beautiful temple-pyramids.

Uxmal is a Yucatan city where fine examples of platforms, plazas, pyramid-temples, and palaces are to be found. The site is famed for the delicate stone ornamentation on many of its buildings.

At Bonampak, fine examples of Maya murals show royal ceremonies. Pigments that have been identified include red and pink (red iron oxide); yellow (hydrous iron oxide); black (carbon); blue (origin unknown); and green (by mixing yellow and blue).

Pottery Vessels

Many pottery vessels that have been found are painted with scenes of mythology and royal life and show skill and a variety of detail. Pottery figurines ranging from simple ones of early times to sophisticated lifelike ones of later years show Maya artistic achievement.

ERAS OF MAYA POTTERY

Formative period	Well-made monochrome with occasionally two-color polychrome.
Classic period	Polychrome pottery in the Petén.
Postclassic period	Lifelike scenes and geometric designs, also carved pottery made in two-piece molds.

Other types of pottery, which were obtained by trade, have also been found in Maya lands.

The pottery described above was made for the elite and for ceremonies. Most pottery had more practical uses, such as cooking and water storage, and was not elaborately decorated.

Jade Carving

Jade was the stone most highly prized by the Mayas. Exquisite relief designs on jade ornaments show the high level of skill achieved by the Maya artists.

Art styles generally changed through each period of Maya history, but artists in every era worked for the rulers and nobles, creating jewelry and other treasures in jade.