

The Maya

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Maya were a civilization that is important to explore when studying art and architecture in Mesoamerica. Some aspects of this culture directly relate to the stylistic traits of their art and architecture. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: The Maya
2. Maya Culture
3. Maya Stylistic Traits
4. Tikal
5. Palenque



BIG IDEA

Every day we are discovering more and more about the Maya. The use of LiDAR (light detecting and ranging) technology has uncovered hundreds of settlements that were previously unknown, in addition to 110 miles of roads made of raised stones that link these settlements. Archaeologists made these discoveries by flying over areas in southern Mexico and Guatemala in an airplane. The LiDAR consists of pulsed waves of light that bounce off of objects made of stone and pass through the thick vegetation covering Maya structures that have not been excavated. Because of these discoveries, we are now aware that there were many more settlements than we previously knew of, and that many of them were linked through trade.

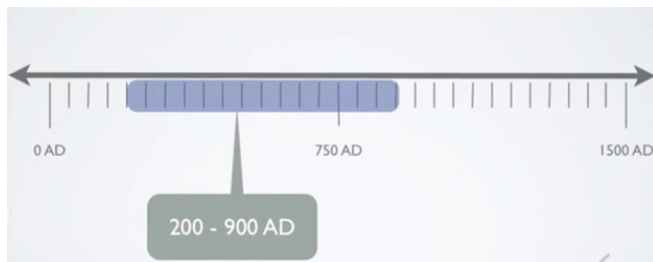


DID YOU KNOW

The fall of the Maya civilization does not mean that the Maya people ceased to exist. Rather, it means that the governments of major settlements were no longer functional, and no monumental architecture was being produced. Today, around eight million Maya people live in the states of Veracruz, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo in Mexico, and in the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize, in addition to Mexico. There are around 30 Maya languages, with Yucatec being the most widely spoken. Some of them are dying out and have fewer than 10,000 speakers.

1. Time Period and Location: The Maya

The art and architecture from today's lesson extends from about 200 to 900 CE, as shown in the timeline below. The Maya civilization largely covered portions of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, where modern-day Cancún is, and parts of Guatemala. We'll be looking at two cities within this area, Tikal and Palenque.



2. Maya Culture

The artifacts and art discovered in this geographical region have told us much of what we know about the culture of the Maya. Maya writing has been mostly deciphered, due in part to the hard work of successive generations of epigraphers, or scholars who study writing systems. They realized that written classic Maya is most closely related to the modern Yucatec Maya language, making decipherment much easier. Maya society consisted of city-states, similar to ancient Greece or Mesopotamia. Some of these sites were connected by pathways that may have been religious or used for trade. Some sites went to war with each other, most likely over natural resources.

The main food that the Maya relied on for sustenance was corn, supplemented by squash, beans, and meat of turkey and other animals. The calendrical system of 260 days was an agricultural calendar that helped the Maya track the best days to plant and harvest corn. They also used the 260-day calendar for divination and naming. The 360-day calendar consisted of 18 months of 20 days each, plus 5 unlucky days. They used these two calendars together to create a larger cycle that would resolve itself and start over once every 52 years.

The land where many Maya city-states existed was primarily jungle and not very fertile, so cities mostly consisted of a ceremonial center with pyramids and other structures (a ball court, palaces for the ruling class) surrounded by settlements spread out over a large area. The foundations of everyday Maya homes were made of stone, while the rest of the house was made of more perishable materials, so archaeologists look for this evidence to indicate the density of Maya populations.

City-states were quite large, and featured many different types of structures, including:

- Religious temple pyramids
- Public plazas for gathering
- Residential palaces for the elite members of the city
- Ball courts for entertainment and ritualistic games

As we begin to better understand the Maya culture, two main conflicting views have emerged. Early impressions of the Maya characterized them as peaceful astronomers. Later on, as texts on monuments were deciphered, a more warlike image emerged. Important components of Maya religion included human sacrifice and sacrificial rituals and ceremonies, in the belief that the gods were satiated through the spilling of human blood, which they thought to be the most valuable substance they could give. Below is an image of a high-relief sculpture that was originally located at the site of Yaxchilan in Chiapas, Mexico. A series of these sculptures were installed above the doorways of a structure at this site. This scene depicts the leader of Yaxchilan, Shield Jaguar, holding a torch while his wife, Lady Xook, pulls a rope studded with obsidian shards through her tongue. The inscriptions describe the scene and also mention the name of the artist who produced this work. Bloodletting was a way for people to show their gratitude to the gods for the food they had been given, especially corn. These lintels were produced as part of the coronation ceremony of Shield Jaguar II. It is possible that their function was as propaganda and that they do not depict actual events, but rather the way these rulers would like to have been seen, by both the gods and their subjects.



Lintel 24
Yaxchilan, Chiapas
c. 725 CE

In the following scene, from Lintel 25, Lady Xook is burning sheets of paper that have spots of blood on them. Smoke arises out of the paper, and a vision serpent opens its mouth, revealing an ancestor from Teotihuacán. The Maya knew about Teotihuacán and references to the city; in addition, elements of its artistic style have been found at several Maya sites. Maya ceramics have also been found at Teotihuacán. However, it is unclear whether people from Teotihuacán traveled to Maya sites like Tikal and conquered them, or if the Maya adopted aspects of their artistic style of their own free will. One aspect complicating this issue is the fact that no references or monuments to specific rulers have been found at Teotihuacán, which is very much the opposite case at most Maya sites.

The Maya had very specific beauty standards that set them apart, even from other Mesoamerican people. They attached boards to babies' heads to shape them so that they would be elongated and sloped, making them look like the corn god. They also filed their teeth so that they could place ornaments in them. They wore earspools, or disc-shaped ornaments, in their ears. These practices occurred mostly among the elites, but they can still help determine whether a skeleton belongs to a Maya person or someone from another region.



Lintel 25
Yaxchilan, Chiapas
c. 725 CE

3. Maya Stylistic Traits

Artwork was abundant throughout this civilization. Maya vases, for example, were created to hold items such as food but also to present as gifts. They were often inscribed with **hieroglyphs** indicating the contents, as well as the name of the recipient and details of the events, which were often depicted around the vase. Human depictions in Maya art shared similar stylistic elements:

- Faces in profile
- Bodies formed using the contour line
- Proportional bodies
- Use of clothing to indicate status
- Prominence of **relief sculpture**
- Interest in narrative scenes
- Presence of hieroglyphic inscriptions

Below is an image of a Maya cylindrical vessel that depicts the creation myth known as the Popol Vuh and its two main characters, the hero twins. Here you can see all of the traits of Maya art: the depiction of people in profile, the use of contour drawing with little or no shading, an emphasis on clothing, headdresses, and signs of status, and an

emphasis on inscriptions. This type of vessel was usually cylindrical, and the inscription usually named the owner and the function, which was for drinking fruity, fresh cacao. This photo is a rollout obtained by placing the vase on a turntable and photographing it at just the right shutter speed so that all of its elements can be viewed simultaneously.



Maya vase depicting hero twins



TERMS TO KNOW

Hieroglyphs

A form of writing that uses pictures and symbols to represent syllables and entire words or concepts.

Relief Sculpture

A sculpture technique that uses a process of cutting into a flat surface, i.e., wood, stone, or other material, by chiseling or gouging.

4. Tikal

Maya pyramids resemble stepped pyramids from ancient Egypt but feature a temple at the top with a projecting structure on the roof called the **roof comb**. Roof combs were vaulted on the interior with **corbel vaults**. On the exterior, they featured brightly colored sculpture, usually **portraits** of rulers that have since been eroded away.

Take, for example, this sculpture on the roof comb of this temple at Tikal, titled Temple I:



Temple I at Tikal
Guatemala
200–900 CE

This roof comb was originally covered with massive stucco portraits of the rulers, but unfortunately, those have largely eroded away, as seen here. Temples such as this could function as ritualistic temples or as funerary tombs. The **stela** was located in public space and expressed the ruler's authority through its imposing size and complex iconography. It is a much more static image than the relief sculptures of Assyria, which depict the king's soldiers killing the enemy or a snarling lioness.

Here is an image of a stela featuring a ruler nicknamed Ruler A. This stela documents the accession of Siyah Chan K'awiil II to the rulership of Tikal. On the sides of this stela are images of his father dressed like a warrior from Teotihuacán. The back of this stela features the longest inscription of any monument. It describes, in part, the conquering of Tikal by Teotihuacán in the year 378 CE.



Stele from Tikal
Guatemala
200–900 CE

Notice the elaborate headdress and set of clothing in the above image. This indicates an act of displaying tremendous wealth as well as authority. He is also holding a ceremonial bar of Maya rulership.



TERMS TO KNOW

Roof Comb

The construction that tops a pyramid in monumental Mesoamerican architecture; it is decorated with iconography of the Maya culture.

Corbel Vaults

The simplest type of vault, involving step support systems.

Portraiture

An artistic likeness of an individual.

Stele

A slab of stone or terracotta, usually oblong, carved.

5. Palenque

Palenque, also called Lakamha, is a smaller Maya city-state just west from Tikal. Like other Maya cities, this complex featured palaces, pyramids, and a ball court. The Palace of the Inscriptions, shown below, was a nine-tiered step pyramid similar to Temple I from Tikal. However, this pyramid was used as a funerary tomb for a ruler of Palenque named Lord Pacal.



Temple of the Inscriptions
Palenque, Chiapas, Southern Mexico
Late 7th century CE

Lord Pacal was a powerful ruler, also known as Pacal the Great. He is known for having one of the longest reigns in history. Below is his image.



Portrait of Lord Pacal
Palenque (Mayan City), Southern Mexico
7th century CE

This portrait sculpture of Lord Pacal from the 7th century realistically depicts the Maya aesthetic ideal, which includes:

- A sloping forehead
- Elongated skull
- Long, curved nose
- Full lips
- Open mouth

This ideal of beauty was so important that babies' heads were actually bound so that the soft plates of their little skulls would reform into the desired shape. Therefore, the sloping forehead is not a genetic feature, but instead is the result of physically manipulating the skulls of babies.

Below is one of the most famous images in all of Mayan art. The image from the **sarcophagus** lid from Lord Pacal's tomb depicts him at the moment of his death, transforming into a god. His body rests on top of the jaws of a serpent representing the underworld. Pacal is wearing a headdress that identifies him as a form of the maize god, making his head resemble an ear of corn with a tassel on top. Behind him is a world tree shaped like a cross. It functions as an axis mundi and connects this image to similar world tree imagery at the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross nearby. It shows Pacal between the underworld and the heavens, in the process of transformation.



Sarcophagus lid from tomb of Lord Pacal
Palenque (Mayan City), Southern Mexico
Late 7th century CE
Stone

This drawing depicts the ruler situated between Earth and the underworld, and it symbolizes his death and **apotheosis**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sarcophagus

A stone coffin, often decorated with sculpture.

Apotheosis

The elevation of a person to the status of a god, often seen in ancient Rome in portraits of emperors and busts of deceased family members.



SUMMARY

The Maya were one of the most important early civilizations to develop in Mesoamerica. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of the Maya**. As you explored **Maya culture**, you learned that architecture and artwork in this area projected the power of the rulers. Human sacrifice and self-mutilation were very common throughout the Maya culture, and this was also depicted in the art of this time.

Maya stylistic traits were explored in this lesson. You learned that some of these stylistic elements included faces in profile, proportional bodies, use of clothing to indicate status, interest in narrative scenes, and the presence of hieroglyphic descriptions.

Finally, you learned about **Tikal** and **Palenque** and the art and architecture from these two areas.

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