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ARCHAEOLOGY NEWS

The Blood of Kings: A New Interpretation of Maya Art

by LINDA SCHELE and MARY ELLEN MILLER

The American public has been fascinated by the ancient Maya ever since Constantine Rafinesque's speculations about their writing system appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1827 and John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood published their enormously popular travel account in 1841. Flourishing in the tropical forests of the Yucatan peninsula between 150 B.C. and A.D. 900, the Maya were seen by past researchers and the public as illiterate farmers who tended milpas of maize and aloof calendar priests who watched the stars in an endless progression of time.

But in fact the Maya were the first Americans to have a written history that

rescued from prehistoric oblivion their kings, titles, battles, and rituals. In the past 25 years ongoing archaeological investigation and the decipherment of their hieroglyphics and imagery system have transformed our understanding of Maya history. To emphasize this new awareness of the Maya as a historical people, and in honor of the Sesquicentennial anniversary of Texas, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth has organized a major exhibition of Maya art called *The Blood of Kings: a New Interpretation of Maya Art*.

For the first time, a major public exhibition of Maya art will present objects of unparalleled beauty and refinement to reconstruct not only the personal history but also the religious and world views of the Maya. These objects, which span Maya cultural history from 900 B.C. to A.D. 900, are covered with imagery and writing that speak eloquently of a bygone world. It was a world of heroic deeds of kings and warriors forgotten by their descendants and lost to world history, but also of rituals and religious beliefs, many of which survive among the Maya of today.

The *Blood of Kings* includes over a hundred objects gathered from the great museums of the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Honduras. Almost all of the material taken to the British Museum by Alfred P. Maudslay, including all six Yaxchilan lintels and most of the material from Copan, now returns to the Americas for the first time since the late nineteenth century. The finest objects excavated by Thomas Gann and given to the British Museum and to the Museum of the American Indian in New York are also reunited for the first time. From the *Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde* in Leiden, the Netherlands, the most famous Maya jade now known, the Leiden Plaque, has traveled with the beautiful lintel from La Pasadita, a subsidiary site across the Usumacinta River from Yaxchilan. The *Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia* has loaned the central ballcourt marker from Copan and an extraordi-

nary carved bone from a cache in Temple 11 found in the 1930s. Joining these pieces are stone reliefs, jades, shells, figurines, and painted and carved pottery vessels that have been chosen for two reasons. First, they are objects of extraordinary quality that reach out dramatically to the modern viewer; second, each object carries cultural information that provides a key to the history, ritual life and world view of the ancient Maya.

The new interpretation of Maya art presented in the exhibit is based on the pioneering work of Maya scholars Tatiana Proskouriakoff and Heinrich Berlin, who proved in 1959 and 1960 that the contents of the Maya inscriptions are historical. The process of decipherment that their discoveries began has accelerated dramatically and is still in progress today, yielding detailed dynastic histories of the rulers of many major sites, such as Piedras Negras, Quirigua, Yaxchilan, Palenque, and Tikal. In addition, the demonstration by Michael Coe of Yale University that the mythology recorded in the postconquest Quiche Maya Popul Vuh is also found on pottery of the Classic Maya period was a significant step toward understanding Maya imagery. Finally, recent excavations of Preclassic sites in the Maya Lowlands have forever altered our perception of early Maya history and the rise of civilization in the region. In the new understanding reaped from these complementary approaches, the Maya, who had been muted by their status as a prehistorical civilization, have found a voice that speaks eloquently and powerfully to people of the twentieth century.

Maya imagery

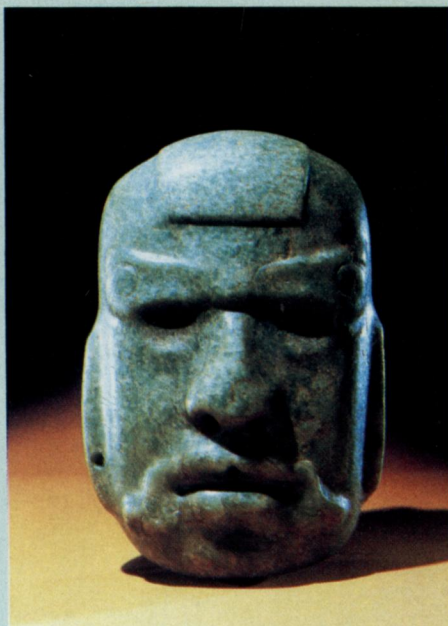
Since the foremost problem facing people unfamiliar with Maya art is simply to recognize its imagery, the exhibition is designed to help visitors understand what they are seeing. Objects are documented so that each builds upon the understanding of the other, culminating in what will be a dramatic and enlightening journey into the world of the ancient Maya. The exhibition is organized into eight themes concerned with the most important rituals and events in the lives of Maya rulers. The first theme, "The Royal Person," focuses on the sacred costumes of kings and the



This Maya king of the Late Classic period wears a special warrior costume in ceremonies celebrating the end of the katun, a 20-year period of the Maya calendar.



(Left) *The lord with a penitent's rope around his neck cuts his penis in the bloodletting rite central to Maya religious thought. Height, 19 centimeters. (Center) This greenstone Late Preclassic mask of a god was not designed to be worn. The eyes were once inlaid, probably with shell and obsidian pupils. Height, 32.2 centimeters. (Right) In a bloodletting rite, Lady Xoc, wife of Shield-Jaguar, pulls a thorn-lined rope through her mutilated tongue.*



objects they used in rituals. By seeing the actual elements of costume—such as earflares, pectorals, belts, masks, and necklaces—the visitor becomes familiar with the Maya sense of wealth and beauty and learns to see the objects that appear in the painted and carved imagery of Maya art. The function of these costume elements and ritual objects was not merely decorative: they also encoded crucial information about the people who used them—their status, privilege, religious intent, and political function. Among the objects in “The Royal Person” section are a relief panel of an El Cayo woman from the Cleveland Museum of Art; an extraordinary figurine of a Late Classic ruler dressed in an elaborate royal costume from the Kimbell Art Museum; a huge jade Jester God from the Utah Museum of Fine Arts; a Late Preclassic jade mask that had lain unrecognized in the vaults of the British Museum since the late nineteenth century; and from Dumbarton Oaks, a very early jade celt that was once part of a royal belt.

In “Kingship and the Rite of Accession,” the second theme, the institution of kingship, is explored from the earliest appearance of stratified society in the Copan Valley (ca. 900 B.C.) to Temple

11, the great architectural monument of Yax-Pac, one of the last kings of Copan. The theme begins with three Middle Preclassic bowls of Olmec design found in burials at Copan dated at 900 B.C. These early bowls are joined by an Olmec pectoral from Dumbarton Oaks, recarved around 50 B.C. by a Late Preclassic Maya ruler to display himself in a seated portrait together with a text recording his accession as ruler. This inscription is the earliest deciphered accession text known in Pre-Columbian American. The magnificent Leiden Plaque, which records the second known accession and the third oldest Lowland Maya date (A.D. 320), was once part of the royal belt of an Early Classic Maya ruler. Finally, the cosmology of accession and the function of kingship in Maya thought are explored through the symbolism of Temple 11, dedicated by Yax-Pac at Copan in A.D. 775.

The third theme, “Courtly Life,” explores the activities of the Maya court and the interactions of the king with his peers and subordinates, especially the rank of *cahal*, the equivalent of a territorial governor. Piedras Negras Lintel 2, from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, depicts young lords who came from Bonampak and Yaxchilan to participate in a ritual conducted by Ruler 2 at Piedras Negras. A series of figurines illustrates some of the domestic activities of women, such as weaving, and several works feature the patron gods and activities of scribes. Maize agriculture is celebrated by the beautiful Young Maize God from Copan Temple 22, now in the collections of the British Museum.

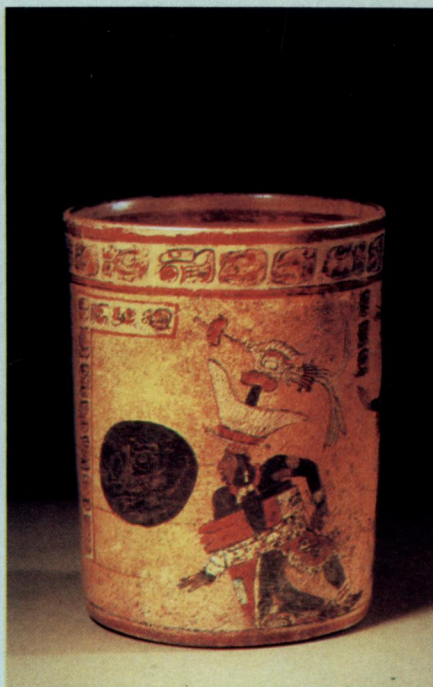
“Bloodletting and the Vision Quest,” is, perhaps, the most exotic of the eight themes, since it investigates the role of

self-sacrifice through penis and tongue mutilation. The function of this ritual was twofold: to achieve visions, symbolized as great rearing serpents, that to the Maya were the means of contacting the gods and the ancestral dead, and to nourish the gods so that they might continue to sustain the universe. Two series of lintels from Yaxchilan—Shield-Jaguar’s Lintels 24 and 25 and Bird-Jaguar’s Lintels 15, 16, and 17, all from the British Museum—are featured in this theme. Preserved in magnificent condition, Lintels 24 and 25, like the Leiden Plaque, are widely admired as great masterpieces of the Maya art. The Hauberg Stela, now the earliest dated Lowland stela known (A.D. 199), also depicts the same vision rite, demonstrating that bloodletting was the first ritual to have been portrayed in public art by the Lowland Maya. In the same section is an unusual carved bowl from San Agustin Acasacuastlan (loaned by the Museum of the American Indian, New York City), an Early Classic bowl that shows the Sun God creating the cosmos through the vision rite. Equally impressive for its aesthetic refinement and its cultural message is a Late Preclassic stone mug from Dumbarton Oaks depicting two Vision Serpents undulating across its outer surface. An exceptional figurine loaned by the American Museum of Natural History depicts a Maya noble in the act of penis mutilation.

The fifth theme, “War and Captive Sacrifice,” concentrates on the sacrifice of captives taken in battle and on the state of war that existed constantly among many Maya cities. The modern myth that the Maya were a peace-loving, gentle people who only tended their milpas and followed the stars has fallen with a thunderous crash. On Yaxchilan



(Left) A shrouded man sits on a scaffold chair above the bowl that will collect his blood. His face is marked with the image of a human skull, perhaps in preparation for a battle. Height, 15.4 centimeters.
(Center) The polychrome ceramic vase depicts the ball game, a sport played by most of the societies of ancient Mesoamerica. Height, 20.5 centimeters.
(Right) The lid of this Early Classic footed bowl, of terracotta with polychrome, is in the shape of a cormorant.



Lintel 16 Bird-Jaguar is shown standing over a battle captive; on Lintel 41 he prepares for the battle in which he will take his captive Jeweled-Skull, who was made famous by Proskouriakoff's study of Yaxchilan history. Both lintels come from the British Museum to adjoin a wall panel from the Kimbell Art Museum that shows a *cahal*, who ruled the subordinate site of Laxtunich for Shield-Jaguar II (Bird-Jaguar's son), preparing to dispose of captives brought before him by his *Ah Kin*. Figurines of warriors have been chosen to show different kinds of battle gear and those of captives to demonstrate in devastatingly realistic detail the horrifying fate of those taken in battle.

The "Ballgame," the subject of the sixth theme, was both a sport and a ritual activity of great importance in which captives of the highest ranks, usually kings, were sacrificed. The famous center marker from the Copan ballcourt, which comes from Honduras, shows, for example, 18-Rabbit, the Copan ruler captured by Cauac-Sky of Quirigua, as the ball in play between Hun-Ahau, one of the Hero Twins of Popol Vuh fame, and a lord of the Underworld, the God of the Number Zero. Other objects depict the ballgame being played against stairs rather than in ballcourts, and the use of portable court markers so that the game could be played anywhere.

The Maya way of death

"Death and the Journey through Xibalba," the seventh theme, investigates Maya beliefs about death. The

Maya metaphor of death was couched in the myths of the Hero Twins' confrontation with the Lords of Xibalba, their name for "hell." The journey after death is traced from the initial fall into the Underworld to the confrontation with the Lord of Death. One of the most outstanding objects in the exhibition is an eccentric flint from the Dallas Museum of Art, depicting the fall at the instant of death as the dive of the Celestial Monster into the Underworld with the soul of the deceased on its back. A number of objects depict the smelly inhabitants of Xibalba, including a three-dimensional depiction of the God of Zero from a Copan temple, loaned by the Cleveland Museum of Art. Maya polychrome pottery showing the Hero Twins confronting the Lords of Death was regularly included in burials, perhaps to give guidance to the deceased as he began his journey to the Underworld. The most beautiful and famed of these vessels is the codex-style pot from the Art Museum of Princeton University showing two scenes—God L in his Palace with five loving ladies and a rabbit scribe, and the sacrifice of the bystander by the Hero Twins. Another codex-style pot, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, depicts the sacrificial dance of the Hero Twins before a Death God. A carved pot from the Kimbell Art Museum shows a conversation between the Hero Twins just before or after they danced for the Lords of Death.

The final theme, "Cosmos and Kingship," examines the interaction between Maya definitions of the cosmos, the institution of kingship, the function of ritual, and the imagery placed on ritual objects. The theme focuses on an exceptional incised drawing executed on a cylindrical vessel loaned by the American



This captive, eviscerated and scalped, is about to be burned alive in the sacrificial ritual that was the fate of those taken prisoner in battle. Height, 13.6 centimeters.



(Above) This bone is carved with the image of the ruler Xac-Pac, who is named in the text below, being attended by a young woman, probably his wife. (Above, right) The famous Leiden plaque is a jade celt showing a Maya king on his accession day standing before a sacrificial victim. 21.7 by 8.6 centimeters.



(Above) This Late Classic stone head of the God of Zero was once part of the architectural structure of a building. Height, 102.7 centimeters.

Museum of Natural History. Too complex and shallow to be perceived easily by a human viewer, the image addresses the gods and transforms a mundane clay container into a sacred object through which the power of the bloodletting rite was focused. The scene portrays the vision experience as it happened, not from the viewpoint of the humans participating in the ritual, but as it occurred in sacred space. The Vision Serpent is shown surging out of the Underworld to be announced by a god called Uc-Zip, who blows on a conch trumpet. In a fortuitous coincidence, the face of this god is executed on the large end of a conch shell trumpet loaned from the Edwin Pearlman Collection. The Hero Twins are incised on the same trumpet, one twin holding a Vision Serpent that emerges from within the shell itself. Another conch trumpet from the Kimbell Art Museum displays the portrait of an ancestor called back by the vision rite, who closely resembles the famous floating figures on the early stelae at Tikal.

The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art, the exhibition publication, is lavishly illustrated with color photographs by Justin Kerr. Most of the pottery will be published in both still and roll-out photographs, and hundreds of detailed drawings present explanations of the imagery and decipherments of the inscriptions. The text is not a traditional descriptive catalog divided

into individual entries but, in the spirit of the exhibition, it examines in detail the beliefs and history of the Maya as they were recorded in art.

The Blood of Kings brings together many of the most famous Maya art objects known, in one of the most extraordinary assemblages of Maya art ever to be made available outside of Mexico and Guatemala. These objects can be appreciated for their power and beauty alone, but more important, we hope visitors will leave the exhibition with the realization that Shield-Jaguar, Bird-Jaguar, Pacal, Yax-Pac, and the other kings of Maya history are to the New World what Alexander, Tutankamen and Qin Shi Huangdi are to the Old World. The written history of the Americas begins not in 1492 when Columbus "discovered" the New World, but in 50 B.C., when the Maya began to record the history of their kings for their descendants. Some of those kings projected that their names would be remembered at the end of the thirteenth period of 400 years in their calendar (the 13th baktun), which will occur in our year 2012, only 26 years from now. *The Blood of Kings* will open on May 17, 1986 (or 12.18.13.0.3 11 Akbal 16 Uo in the Maya way of reckoning time), and perhaps it will partially fulfill the aspirations of those long dead kings by once again celebrating their names and their deeds.

Following its premiere in Fort Worth, *The Blood of Kings* will be shown at the Cleveland Museum of Art from October 8 to December 14, 1986. □

(Right) The clay figurine shows the Young Moon Goddess engaging in love play with one of the toothless gods of Maya cosmology.

