



Fig. 2.4

Ceramic vessel. Maya, Yucatan, Mexico. Classic Period, 250–900 C.E. Ceramic. H: 16 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Anonymous Gift. X91.632.

Unit 2

LESSON 8: MEMORY AND COSMOLOGY

Cacao and a Ballplayer: Maya Ceramic Vessel, Mexico

Lesson Summary and Objectives

As students explore the iconography of a Maya chocolate vessel they explore topics of hieroglyphics, the ancient ball game, and culinary arts. Other curriculum connections include a focus on the Maya epic, *Popul Vuh*, in which are told stories of the Hero twins, and contemporary sociological challenges for Maya today. Activities involve research, visual analysis, artmaking, creative writing, and cooking. Students will

- Explore the iconography on a Maya chocolate vessel through drawing activities and compare these with logographs in our writing system.
- Explore topics of hieroglyphics, the ancient ball game, and culinary arts of the Maya through a variety of activities.
- Develop a deeper understanding of Maya civilization through a study of the stories in the Maya epic *Popul Vuh*.
- Consider and respond to issues and concerns facing the modern Maya today as they assimilate into new homes, far removed from their highland origins.

Background Information

The ancient Maya civilization occupied the forested lowlands of today's Guatemala and parts of Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, primarily in the Yucatan Peninsula. While people there mainly grew crops for their own use, the lowlands were also important for the extensive trade that was carried on among the city-states. Volcanic highlands offered up valuable minerals, basis for much of the trade.

Many of the city-states (really separate kingdoms) were established between about 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E. In subsequent centuries—300 to 900 C.E.—the Maya fashioned pottery vessels, elaborate jewelry, and masks of jade, and lived in spread-out cities with great pyramid-temples and observatories. Much that we know about the Maya of this era—known as the Classic Period—comes from their art. As they combined text and images, artists communicated ideas about natural surroundings, religious beliefs, daily activities, and the achievements of the various city-states. Works of art served to activate memories of important social situations and ensure cultural continuity.

The pottery vessel from the Classic Period that is displayed in *Memory and Cosmology* (**fig. 2.4**) was made to hold cacao or chocolate beverages consumed by the elite. Such vessels are characterized by deep relief carving. On one side of the vessel a ball game is depicted, and on the other a hieroglyphic text.

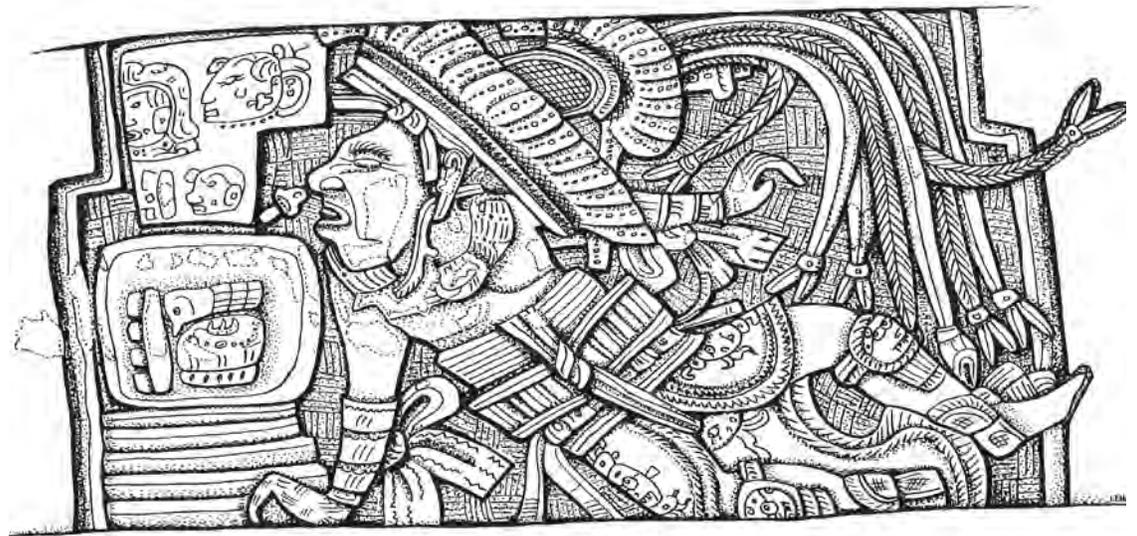
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About the Artist

During the Classic Period, Maya artists were among the elite members of society. On painted pottery they are identified holding paintbrushes and paint holders, and wearing elaborate clothing and jewelry. Often they are shown seated next to the rulers' thrones. Some artistic styles can be connected with specific regions and cities, and even with specific members of royalty.



The Mayan ballplayer.
After drawing by J. T. Hales.
Reproduced from Carolyn Tate,
"The Carved Ceramics Called Chocholá."
In *Fifth Palenque Round Table*, 1983,
edited by Virginia M. Fields, 123-33
(San Francisco: The Pre-Columbian Art
Research Institute, 1985)

Curriculum Connections

1. On and within a Maya Vessel

Artistic imagery and a complex writing system recorded and asserted achievements of city-states and communicated important dynastic information. This vessel (**fig. 2.4**) with its drawing of a player recorded the outcome of a ritual ball game, and reflects the powerful place this activity held in Maya royal memory. The writing consists of hieroglyphs formed with a combination of different signs that represent either whole words or single syllables.

Activity

Without giving information to the students, give them time to look closely at the figure. Have them sketch the image (the process will alert them to details) and then describe or write what they see, what they believe to be happening, etc. Then share with them copies of **Handout A MAYA VESSEL** and the information about the ballgame included in the Play Ball! activity that follows, and let them offer further speculations and/or do further research.

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Activity

Understanding that the vessel was utilitarian, what do students think it held? Analyzing residue in the bowl, archaeologists have identified its use as a chocolate vessel. Evidence of chocolate dates from before the Maya civilization and depictions of it being poured for rulers and gods are seen on Maya murals and ceramics. Cacao beans were even used as money.

At this point students could research the origins of chocolate, discover how people learned to extract it from the bitter seeds of the *Obrana cacao* tree (the tree's name means "food of the gods"), trace its history from early royal and religious ceremonial use to its current worldwide popularity, and drink a cup of chocolate that they make.

To make a cup of chocolate, use one of the many recipes available in cookbooks or online. To make the drink closer to that consumed in Mesoamerica, include seeded chili pepper and cinnamon sticks, and use grated bittersweet chocolate or tablets of Mexican-style chocolate added to boiling water. As in Mexico it is important that the chocolate, removed from the heat, be whipped into foam. For this purpose you can use a rotary beater, or use a whisk that you stand upright in the cup and rub briskly between your hands, thus creating the foam. In the past and even today an individual would use a carved wooden utensil known as a *molinillo*, twisting the utensil between the two palms, to make the chocolate drink frothy.

Activity

Students can look up some samples of Maya hieroglyphs. At first they will probably recognize the picture-glyphs of faces and animals compacted into rectangles or squares and will possibly assume that the pictures stand for events in a story. Further study will inform them that a picture can stand for a being, an idea, or an action. In addition there are symbol signs for syllables of a word and for various combinations of consonants, making the writing system very complex. There are published "syllabaries" that students can use to illustrate words.

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Activity

We are familiar with glyphs that represent the meaning of a whole word or phrase. These are called logographs and we incorporate them in our writing system. Students can compile a list of these (i.e., “&” for “and,” “@” for “at,” %, \$, =, #). Traffic signs (for “turn left,” “stop,” “narrow road,” etc.), corporate logos, religious symbols, and icons on the computer are all logographs. Students should collect and compile samples, and then make up some of their own that would be useful in the classroom, lunchroom, or on the yard.

2. Play Ball!

The figure on the vessel is a participant in a ball game played by Maya and other cultures throughout Mesoamerica. (Archaeologists have found remains of the ball court in many sites.) The playing field was long (about 90 meters) and narrow, and bordered by two parallel walls that were stepped, sloped, or stood tall and straight. Two stone scoring rings were high up on opposite walls. Nobody knows exactly how the game was played, but most authorities believe that a hard rubber ball had to be passed through the rings to make a score. Players could not touch the ball with their hands, feet, or head—only elbows, shoulders, chest, hips, and knees were used.

Activity

Look again at the drawing (**Handout A MAYA VESSEL**), this time with the knowledge that the figure represents an elaborately dressed ball player, framed as though he were in a ball court. He is kneeling on his right knee, with his left hand and foot raised, seemingly about to hit a ball with his hip or thigh. His headdress of feathers resembles that of a god of the underworld. He wears thick padding around his waist, forearms, and knees as protection against the heavy ball. The game was played both as sport and as part of ritualistic competition between groups.

We know that Maya texts concerned with ball games commemorate victories and defeats, demonstrating the importance of the game in Maya royal memory. The other side of this vessel contains a text that names the owner of the vessel. What other information might have been included to communicate the significance of the game to others? (Date, location, score, player’s name, name of the ruler or the city-state, victories and defeats, etc.)



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Activity

Since experts are not sure how the game was actually played, ask students to develop rules for the game, design a playing court, create an advertisement for the game, or make a ball, etc. (Some versions of the *Popol Vuh* name this ball “White Flint” and say it was made of flint covered with powdered bone. Other sources say the ball was of rubber and the game came about after the discovery and use of this material.)

Activity

The closest related contemporary game is probably soccer, although some scholars liken the ancient ball game to hockey. Students could tell how the Maya game was apt to be similar to and different from today’s sports. The class could also investigate sports from different cultures—their own, one they’re familiar with, or one new to them. Possibilities include various cultures of the Americas, Africa, Australia, ancient and modern Europe (including ancient Greece), and Asia. Students should consider the history, location, rules, necessary equipment, uniforms, and players (male *and* female?). Often, as for the Maya ball game, there is a legend associated with the game, and if there is, the students should retell it. Later summarize the study with students talking about what they might have learned about a culture from the sport they researched, and about their own favorite sport or game, both to play and to watch.

3. The Hero Twins of the *Popul Vuh*

The ancient ballgame of the Maya civilization has its origins in the Maya epic known as the *Popul Vuh* that celebrates the Maya Hero Twins. The Hero Twins, like their father and uncle (also twins) played the ballgame above the lords of the Underworld. The noise of the Hero Twins’ game, like the game of their father and uncle, so angered the Underworld lords that they summoned the twins to see them. The twins’ father and uncle had similarly been called to visit the Underworld after disturbing the lords, and it was there that they were killed. The Hero Twins, however, were able to outsmart the lords and eventually overcome their enemies.

Activity

The epic *Popul Vuh* has been retold for readers (or listeners) of all ages. Look over the copies you select to bring into your classroom, not only for reading level, but also for content since some editions graphically describe trials and punishments endured by the twins. When the students are familiar with the story, let them retell it in pictures (in essence, create a storyboard), which can then be mounted onto an accordion-folded



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book, using heavy stock. This type of book will simulate the codices on which the Maya people left their written records. A simplified version for students to read, or for you to read to them, is included in this lesson as **Handout THE HERO TWINS**.

Activity

A film entitled *Popul Vuh: The Creation Myth of the Maya* uses imagery drawn from actual Maya ceramics, such as the Fowler's chocolate vessel with its depiction of a ball player. The filmmakers animated the figures to illustrate the narrated story. Suitable for classroom viewing, it is available for rent through UCLA's Educational Media Center.

4. The Maya Today

Activity

In Guatemala and Mexican highlands, Maya retain ties to their past when performing the same rituals as those of their ancestors. As they embroider their woven goods, women use motifs identical to those found in structures on ancient Maya sites; thus they recall the cosmological beliefs of the past.

In recent decades, the Maya of Mesoamerica have been in the news many times. Students can read about recurring civil strife in Chiapas, about the syncretic religious practices combining ancient Maya beliefs and rituals with Christian practices, and about the Guatemalan heroine, Rigoberta Mench'u Tum, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her struggles on behalf of the Maya. Use the Internet to learn about pertinent writings of famed novelist and human rights advocate Carlos Fuentes who has been concerned with Mexico's indigenous peoples.

Activity

The Maya in Los Angeles today number over 20,000. Most arrived in the 1960s, fleeing civil war in Guatemala. An article written by staff writer Patrick J. McDonnell in the *Los Angeles Times* (1998, A1: 1, 10) chronicles the difficulties—and the importance—of preserving and passing on their Maya heritage in this large U.S. city. Using **Handout THE MAYA TODAY**, which features excerpted quotations from that article, students can react and express their feelings about the issues raised by those quoted.

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Useful Readings

- Coe, Michael
1992 *Breaking the Maya Code*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Coulter, Laurie
2001 *Secrets in Stone: All about Maya Hieroglyphs*. Boston: Little, Brown. *
- Garneri, Anita
2005 *The Ancient Maya*. Minneapolis: Compass Point Books. *
- McDonnell, Patrick J.
1998 "For Maya in Southland, Worlds Collide." *Los Angeles Times* (May 7): 1, 10.
- Miller, Mary, and Karl Taube
1993 *Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*.
London and New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Orr, Tamra
2005 *The Maya*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. *
- Rhoads, Dorothy
1956 *The Corn Grows Ripe*. New York: The Viking Press. *
- Takacs, Stefanie
2003 *The Maya*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. *
- Tate, Carolyn
1983 "The Carved Ceramics Called Chocholá," in *Fifth Palencque Round Table, 1983*.
Edited by Virginia M. Fields, 123-33, (San Francisco: The Pre-Columbian Art
Research Institute, 1985)

* Children's books

Photograph Captions **Handout A MAYA VESSEL**

Ceramic vessel. Maya, Yucatan, Mexico. Classic Period, 250-900 C.E. Ceramic. H: 16 cm.
Fowler Museum at UCLA. Anonymous Gift. X91.632. Drawing by J. T. Hales in "The Carved Ceramics
Called Chocholá," in *Fifth Palencque Round Table, 1983*.



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Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the second section of the exhibition called Art and Knowledge. In this gallery works are introduced that served to communicate knowledge and a sense of history. See “Unit Two—Art and Knowledge” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the *Intersections* web link <http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu>, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 5: Painting History: Fineline Painted Vessels of the Moche, Pre-Columbian Peru

Lesson 6: Memory and Cosmology: Mother of the Band: The Ntan Drum, Ghana

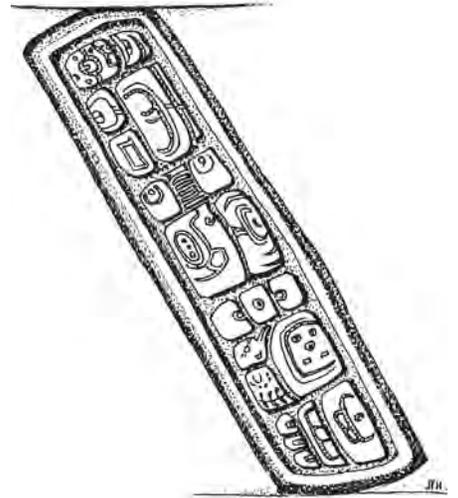
Lesson 7: Memory and Cosmology: Creator/Ancestors: The Wawilak Sisters Bark Painting, Australia

Lesson 8: Memory and Cosmology: Cacao and a Ballplayer: Maya Ceramic Vessel, Mexico

Lesson 9: Proclaiming Heritage: Canoes, Carvings, and the Austronesian World

Lesson 10: Proclaiming Knowledge: Teaching about the Spirit World: Katsina Traditions, Southwest U.S.

Lesson 11: Proclaiming Knowledge: Education as Entertainment: Asian Puppetry, Burma



The Hero Twins

Long ago there lived twin brothers whom people called the Hero Twins. They were very brave and very clever and their favorite pastime was playing ball. They played all day long and everyone said that the twins were the best ball-players in the land. When they played they wore their best ball-playing clothes — fancy masks, gloves, and crowns with feathers at the top.

Far below the twins' ball court, in another world called the Underworld, there lived the Lords of Death. All day long the lords heard the bouncing of the ball in the court above them. They became angry and angrier because of all the noise, and they ordered the twins to come down to their world and play their game against them. If the twins lost any of the games, they would be killed.

The twins agreed, even though the same order had been given to their father and their uncle many years before. You see, their father and his brother were also twins, and they also had liked to play ball. When they went to the Underworld to play ball, the lords won the game and killed their father and uncle.

The young twin brothers took the same path to the Underworld, went down many steep stairs, crossed fast running rivers, and pushed through trees covered with sharp thorns. There were other dangers that the lords placed before them, but the twins were always able to trick the lords and continue on their way until they arrived at the Underworld.

Each night the twins stayed in a house that the lords prepared for them. In the house of Gloom and Darkness the twins were to keep a light burning all night long, but they had to return the torch the next morning unburned. Instead of lighting the torch, the twins held up bright red tail feathers of a macaw bird that the guards thought were flames.

In the House of Knives, the lords placed sharp knives that flew around the house all night. The twins, who were told to gather four baskets of flowers for the next day, couldn't get out to pick them. Their friends, the ants, came to help. The little insects crawled out of the house, picked enough flowers from the lords' own gardens, and filled the baskets.

The lords put dangers into the other houses — the House of Cold, the House of Fire, the House of the Jaguars, and the House of Bats — but every night the twins were able to trick the lords and were ready to play ball the next morning. They played so well, that even though the Lords of the Underworld tried their best to stop them, the twins won the games. When the twins left the Underworld, they went to live in the heavens where one became the sun and the other became the moon.

People still play the game in honor of the Hero Twins. Playing reminds them that being good, clever, and brave is better than trying to win by force.



Handout: THE MAYA TODAY



Scholars:

Anthropologist at Western Washington University, James Loucky:
“The Maya in Los Angeles have gone from indigenous communities where people know each other to urban barrios where everything is driven by money and the clock.”

Sociologist at Sarah Lawrence College, Eric Popkin:
“This is not just simple process of cultural loss; it’s about how Maya culture is articulated in new ways in a different setting. There is a certain fluidity in Maya identity and the way it is transformed in a new context.”

Adult members of the community:

Musician and community activist, Virves Garcia:
“A Maya may be smiling on the outside, but without his culture, he is crying inside.”

Surrogate village elder, thirty-three year-old Lorenzo Francisco:
“So many people come here with such high hopes and suffer a shock, lose their dignity, their culture. They forget what it means to be Maya.”

Samuel Juan:
“The government in Guatemala doesn’t want us, and this government in Washington doesn’t seem to want us. Where will there be a place for us? On Mars?”

Regarding the young people:

Community leader, Antonio Marcos:
“What is crucial for us is preserving for our children the importance of what it is to be Maya.”

Father of eight children, Margarito Lopez:
“In material things, we don’t have much to leave to our children. But our culture is an inheritance we can leave them that no one can steal from them.”

Señor Lopez:
“My children now have improved horizons; they can work in an office. In Guatemala, we sat on benches on the floor – that was all we had. But here my children sit on chairs. And they can move to grander chairs. They are not limited to benches here.”

A mother, Francisca Pedro:
“Many of us parents must work all day, we come home very late, and the children are alone a lot. Maybe that’s why some children go to gangs. They lack the kind of affection we can provide to them back home.”

Young people:

Thirteen year-old Diego Ismael:
“They’re afraid the others will laugh at them [so they don’t speak their native Maya language, Kanjobal, in front of Spanish speakers].”

