

Maya – Revelation of an Endless Time – Introduction  
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This is the record of the things which they did ... they told of it in their own words ... the course of events was as it is written. But even when everything shall be thoroughly explained ... he who comes of our lineage will know it, one of us who are Maya men ... It was only because these priests of ours were to come to an end, but their name, as ancient as they [were] did not die out. (The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, based on Ralph Roys trans.)

Creators of one of the most brilliant civilisations in the ancient world, the Mayas built hundreds of cities covering a vast territory of almost 350,000 km<sup>2</sup>. These centres were composed of ceremonial areas (temples, plazas, ballcourts for the ritual ballgame), palaces for rulers, intricate residential complexes for noble families, houses for artists, architects, and merchants, and humbler dwellings for peasants, builders, and other members of the lower echelons of society.

These cities, some housing up to 50,000 inhabitants, revealed the extraordinary architectural and urbanistic legacy of these people. Their sculpture displayed aesthetic perfection and distinctive styles in each region, also expressed in the beautiful and dynamic artistry of their murals, along with a wealth of exquisite vessels, censers, urns, and human, animal, and deity figurines, and other ceramics, painted in a wide array of colours and designs. Many of these remains are true works of art, as well as documents of the times. Moreover, the hundreds of tombs that have been found in cities evoke not only Maya ideas concerning another existence after death, but also differences in social rank: the most sumptuous, of course, were the sepulchres of rulers.

All of these material vestiges vividly express their religious beliefs, rituals, community life, everyday customs, as well as their history. But that's not all, for they also painted codices on a mate, bark paper folded in screen fold format, and left thousands of hieroglyphic inscriptions on stone, stucco, and other materials in a complex writing system, the most advanced in all of pre-Columbian America. Their writing tradition continued long after the Spanish conquest, despite the large-scale destruction wreaked by the encounter. Some Mayas were able to keep their tradition alive in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. They produced books that preserved their history and myths in indigenous languages, but recorded in the Latin alphabet, which reinforced their deep-seated historical consciousness.

This exhibition offers a small but select sample of Maya works to show the visual creativity of these people and the heritage that they have bequeathed to all of humanity. It includes pieces from throughout the Mexican portion of the Maya area that attest to the capacity for innovation, aesthetic sensibility, and technical perfection of this exceptional culture. Efforts have been made to highlight the aesthetic qualities of the pieces, as well as their documentary significance. In other words, the pieces were not chosen solely for their beauty, expressive power, and artistic worth, but also for their importance as historical sources that speak of the peoples and periods that gave rise to them. They also convey the rich variety of styles and aesthetic achievements of ancient Maya communities. Today their descendants form some thirty ethnic groups, each with their own language and identity.

We should bear in mind that the Mayas did not create art for art's sake, nor were they driven by the pursuit of beauty. Instead, all of their creations served religious, social and political purposes. As a result, the thematic layout of the pieces based on a historical hermeneutics is intended to draw attention not only to their aesthetic worth, but also to the ways of life, socio-political organisation, historical awareness, religious beliefs, values, in sum, the worldview of the ancient Maya people as expressed through their creations.

## EXHIBITION SCOPE

The subject matter ranges from the natural surroundings to funerary rituals. In the first section, Humankind and Nature, the focus is on the remarkable connection that the Maya people had with plants and animals. People were integrated into the natural world with a keen sense of unity, which allowed them to take advantage of the bounty of their geographic surroundings for their own subsistence, while they also venerated and respected nature. In this way, they generally regarded plants, animals, and stones as incarnations of gods, whereas animals were seen as uniquely kindred to humankind for possessing an invisible impalpable spirit as well as a part of a person's soul as an alter ego. This exceptional bond that the Mayas had with nature meant they never regarded themselves as masters of the world to be used as they pleased.

The second section – Community and Daily Life – presents works that portray the multiple levels of society and activities from everyday life, which were contingent on social status. These pieces were primarily human terracotta figurines from burials, where they served as 'companions' and were associated with the professions of the deceased. They reveal ancient customs in attire, headgear and hairdos, body ornamentation, and corporal modifications for beautification, such as cranial deformation to elongate the skull into a more elegant shape.

Then the third subject, The Heart of Cities, exhibits objects that formed part of constructions in the central part of cities, especially structures for the veneration of deities. These spaces brought together temples set on tall pyramidal platforms; palaces to house the rulers and their families; playing fields for the sacred ballgame; spacious plazas for community rites; shrines; and buildings for administrative purposes.

The fourth topic, Man in the Face of Time and the Stars, is devoted to showing works related to what could be called 'scientific knowledge'. Counting time in the cosmos was one of the Mayas' foremost concerns. They regarded time as the movement of space, which responded to cyclic laws. The dynamism of spatial reality was primarily the result of the transit of a sacred entity that was the core of their world view: the Sun (k'in, which also meant 'day' and 'time'). For the Mayas, the Sun's journey was perceived in an experience shared by many peoples-as-a circular movement around earth, which included a daily and a yearly cycle. Based on their meticulous observations, Maya astronomers were able to accurately detail the Sun's annual cycle. They also calculated the orbits of the Moon, Venus, Mars, and other celestial bodies, produced a table of eclipses, and created a complex calendric system. The arithmetic base of their system was the number twenty and its multiples and for the first time in history, they introduced the value of 'zero; which was necessary for the proper workings of their positional numeration system.

The fifth area, The Ruling Elite and Their Historiography, features one of the foremost inventions of Maya civilisation, namely their sophisticated writing system. Unique in the Americas, it was a writing system in all senses of the term and was used primarily to record the major events in the lives of the ruling lineages of cities: biographies, wars, the founding of cities, and especially the rites conducted by rulers along with a specialised group of priests. Scribes wrote in the eastern Chol language, which became the language of prestige and the lingua franca of Classic Maya society. Based on a logo-syllabic system, texts were inscribed on works in stone and stucco, mural painting, ceramic, shell, bone, and other materials.

The final sections focus on the basis that gave rise to everything created by the ancient Mayas, namely their religion. Sacred Forces includes images of the pre-eminent Maya gods, Human Connections with the Gods: Rites sheds light on aspects of the most important rituals, whereas Entering the Path: Funerary Rites concentrates on customs related to the after world.

For an understanding of Maya religion, we should recall that all peoples possess a corpus of expressions that capture their experience of the sacred in their community. These expressions coincide with the particular features of their culture and their historical times; thus, each group of people has a distinctive religion, although belief systems can also have fundamental parallels. The Mayas envisaged a universe populated by sacred forces in constant interaction with humanity and that determined all aspects of existence. These energies were invisible and intangible, but they were manifested or incarnated in the celestial bodies; celestial, earthly, and underworld levels of the universe; mountains; natural forces, such as rain, and fauna such as birds, serpents, and jaguars; as well as plants, including corn and psychotropic species. Significantly, the Mayas created personified images (with a human appearance) of these sacred forces, which were not divine per se; instead they were representations of the divine. Therefore, these images cannot properly be termed 'idols'; as the Spaniards referred to them.

Among the myriad images of the sacred, we can find figures that combine human and animal features, along with conventional symbols, and fantastic beings and creatures, such as the feathered serpent, dragon, and earthly crocodile. There were also specific deities that oversaw human activities, such as warfare, trade, agriculture, and beekeeping.

According to Maya origin myths, the world was created for human habitation. In exchange, humanity was expected to worship and feed the gods, who were superhuman and almighty, but far from perfect entities. And so, the existence of deities, and therefore of the universe as a whole, depended on ritual. Based on this idea, the veneration of sacred forces was one of the priorities of community life. Prior to all rites, people conducted purification ceremonies, such as sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, and auto-sacrifice. Later, public rites dedicated to the pre-eminent gods included prayers, burning incense, chants, dances and processions. Likewise, special food and drink were prepared and bloody sacrifices of both animals and human beings were performed as a central part of the ritual.

People gave many sorts of offerings to the deities. Because the gods were unseen and impalpable, they had to be sustained with subtle matter, such as fragrances and flavours. However, their principal nourishment was the *vital* energy that resided in blood, which was released at death. According to myths, humankind was created with maize and divine blood, so in reciprocity, people had to offer their blood to feed the gods. Similarly, the blood of animals was also offered in sacrifice.

Shamanism was a private religious practice that has managed to come down to the present. Shamans acquired their powers when their spirit left the body, whether in dreams or ecstasy. Among the powers of these specialists was the ability to establish a direct connection with the gods; to access sacred regions, such as the sky and the underworld; to transform themselves into animals; and to possess extraordinary vision that enabled them to know the hidden causes of things, including illness, which they could also cure with chant, prayers, and magic incantations, accompanied by plant, animal, and mineral-based cures. In pre-Hispanic times, rulers were also shamans. They were sacred beings, not only for their descent from illustrious lineages, but also for performing initiation rites and practising ascetic rites, such as fasting, sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, and auto-sacrifice. In various images, rulers are shown in connection with shamanic rites.

A rite of special significance for rulers was the sacred ballgame. Its importance is suggested by the fact that all major cities have playing fields within ceremonial areas where bas-reliefs depict players in action, while ball court markers display sacred figures and mythic scenes. The symbolism of the ballgame was not limited to Maya culture but was shared throughout Mesoamerica. Fundamentally it dealt with the notion of the struggle of opposites essential for the existence of the cosmos. This is

revealed in several myths that refer to the conflict between luminous celestial entities and the dark forces of the underworld, or else the struggle of the Sun versus the Moon and the stars. In this way, the game played by rulers and other high-ranking individuals served as a ritual to propitiate the movement of the celestial bodies through sympathetic magic, which was tantamount to bringing about the existence of the universe or re-enacting creation itself.

Funerary rites, which are evoked in the section called Entering the Path, as the Mayas colloquially referred to death, are the final topic. The idea that the spirit survived the death of the body shaped complex funerary ceremonies. Unlike Western conceptions, the final resting place of the soul in the beyond did not depend on an individual's conduct on earth, but rather on the way he or she died, which was ultimately determined by the gods. The most common netherworld was Xibalba, located at the end of a journey through the nine levels of the underworld, which the spirit could reach after travelling a long and dangerous path on which it could die. At the end of the path, the spirit reached the place of eternal rest. However, on certain occasions it could return to the realm of the living and participate in rites with its descendants, an event rendered in a number of works that show the deceased individual's portrait as a living presence. Today this idea remains widespread among a number of Maya peoples.

As a result of these beliefs, the Maya deposited an array of objects in tombs, including recipients with food and water, figurines depicting people, deities, and animals, along with personal ornaments. Sometimes a sacrificed dog accompanied the deceased, for its spirit was believed to guide its master on the path. In the case of the burial of a ruler or a member of his family, men and women were sacrificed to serve the deceased on his journey.

The tombs of rulers stood out for their lavish funerary furnishings. Precious ornaments made of jade and other materials bedecked the corpse; a jade bead was placed in the mouth of the deceased to symbolise the spirit and to ensure immortality. In many royal burials, including that of K'inich Janahb' Pakal of [Palenque](#) and those of [Calakmul](#), the visage of the ruler was covered with a mask created from highly prized materials, predominantly jade. These masks were intended to replace the fleeting face of the deceased with a portrait that defied destruction. They were also intended to absorb the personality of the great lord, magically preserving it from death. The mask fixed the ruler's spirit and protected it from the evil that laid in wait on his path to his final dwelling place.

## ON MAYA ARTISTIC VALUES

Maya visual creations can be equated with what Western society refers to as art. It is an exceptional and striking art form that responds to the creative skill and extraordinary sensibility that the Maya were able to express in all their works. However, we should not forget that beauty, one of the ideals we often summon when speaking of art, is relative. As all things human, the concept of beauty is historical; it does not exist as such on its own, apart from the beholder.

Nevertheless, certain levels of sensibility seem to be shared by all human beings, things that touch the same fibres of the soul cross-culturally. They make it possible for a beautiful object to elicit in a viewer a feeling of elation, an indescribable and even irrational emotion, far from any concrete purpose, because it rushes directly to the senses, skipping the intervention of thought. It triggers in human spectators a certain sui generis feeling today understood as aesthetic emotion. Nonetheless, the beautiful object rises in our estimation, not solely for its immediate effect on the viewer, but also for the epiphany that it is a revelation of something more. It embodies the vital interests, the sensitivity, and the ideas that the artist attempted to project to those who contemplated the piece. As an expression of the creator's intention, it becomes all the more important to know the artist's identity. If we can delve into other dimensions that go beyond the sheer beauty of an object, such as its historical context and the underlying values of society at that time, the work acquires greater

meaning, beyond mere aesthetic pleasure. It takes on a significance that is both emotional and intellectual. In fact, it assumes exceptional historical significance, because it invites us on a journey to other times involving other human dimensions, other ways of envisioning the world and life itself, those of the people who created it.

Elucidating the multidimensionality of an art work should be the aim of all museums and all exhibitions. From there arises the need to include, in writing, what science has revealed about these works, so that this exhibition can be a comprehensive revelation, not only of aesthetics, but also of other eras and other worlds.

Concomitantly, the exploration of ancient Maya knowledge and the aesthetic appreciation of these vestiges afford a rare and vital glimpse of the values of a select group of exalted individuals from the past. They have much to offer to enrich our own ideas, as they remind us of the heights of human potential in the quest for excellence that can be achieved by a community in time.