

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:



BIG IDEA

The Maya were one of the most important early civilizations to develop in Mesoamerica.

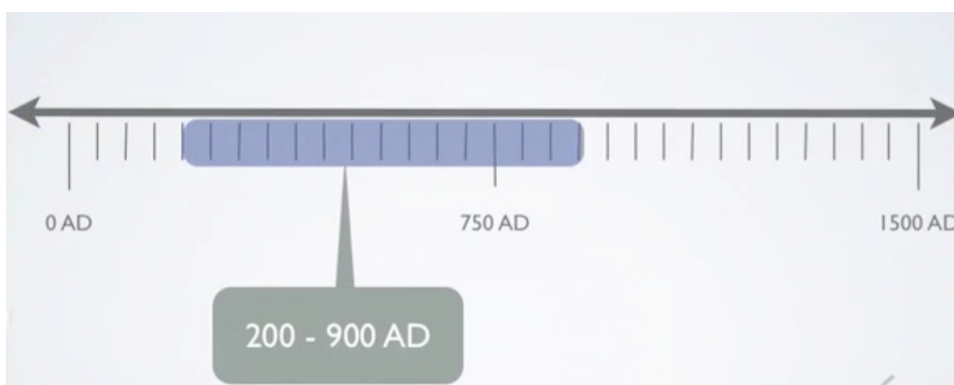


DID YOU KNOW

The word Maya is both a noun and an adjective used to describe anything about the Maya culture. The word Mayan is the name for the language spoken by the Maya.

1. Time Period and Location: The Maya

The art and architecture from today's lesson extends from about 200 to 900 AD, as shown in the timeline below. The Maya civilization largely covered portions of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, where modern-day Cancun 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. Mayan **hieroglyphs** have been difficult to decipher. We know that at some point the civilization began to develop city-states, which were autonomous entities with hereditary rulers. Religion and

politics were tightly intertwined. Architecture and artwork projected the power of the rulers.

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, it appears to be depicted as warlike. This depiction is in contrast to the views of the mid-20th century, when the Maya were thought to be much more peaceful. However, important components of their religion included human sacrifice and sacrificial rituals and ceremonies, in the belief that the gods were satiated through the spilling of human blood. Now we know that human sacrifice and self-mutilation were very common throughout the Maya culture.



TERM TO KNOW

Hieroglyphs

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

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 descriptions



TERM TO KNOW

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 the Middle East, but feature a projecting crest 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.

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



Temple I at Tikal

200-900 AD

Guatemala

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 **stele**, just as in the Middle East, was a way of advertising to the public. Here is an image of a stele featuring a ruler nicknamed Ruler A:





Stele from Tikal

200-900 AD

Guatemala

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, and 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 terra-cotta, 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

Late 7th century AD

Palenque (Mayan City), Southern Mexico

Lord Pacal was a powerful ruler also known as Pacal the Great. Below is his image.





Portrait of Lord Pacal

7th century AD

Palenque (Mayan City), Southern Mexico

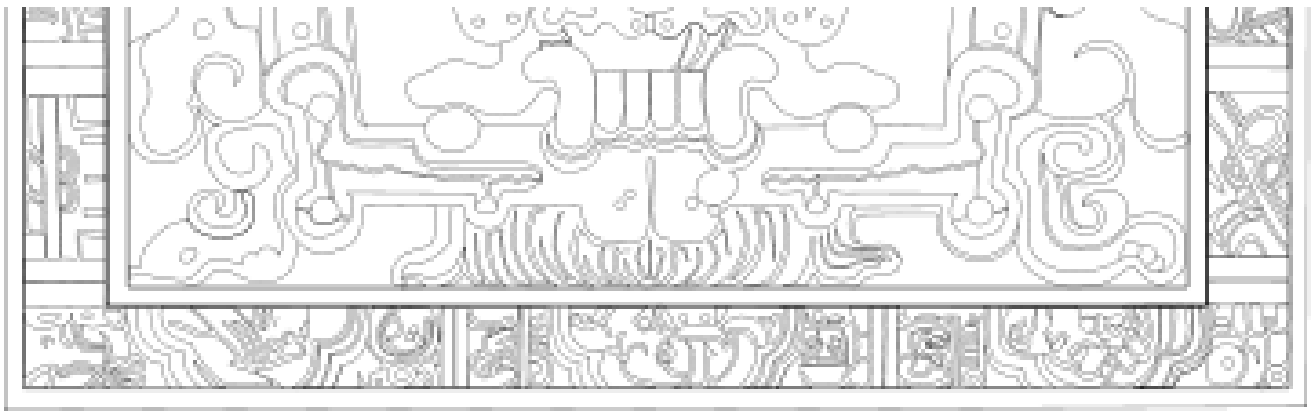
This portrait sculpture of Lord Pacal from the seventh century realistically depicts the Maya aesthetic ideal, which includes:

- 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.

Finally, here is an image of a **sarcophagus lid**:





Sarcophagus lid from tomb of Lord Pacal

Late 7th century AD

Stone

Palenque (Mayan City), Southern Mexico

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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TERMS TO KNOW

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Corbel Vaults

The simplest type of vault, involving step support systems.

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

Portraiture

An artistic likeness of an individual.

Relief Sculpture

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

Roof Comb

The construction that tops a pyramid in monumental Mesoamerican architecture decorated with iconography of the Mayan culture.

Sarcophagus

A stone coffin, often decorated with sculpture.

Stele

A slab of stone or terra-cotta, usually oblong, carved.