

DAUGHTERS of the EARTHLORD
MAYA WEAVING

While the toad sings at the mouth of the Earthlord's mountain cave, the Earthlord's daughters prepare cotton, which will be transformed by a bolt of lightning into rain clouds. The scorpion is introduced into their midst to prick the lightning into action. The cotton huipil, perfectly animated, draws the power that brings life-sustaining rain.

Daughters of the Earthlord
Jeffrey Jay Foxx

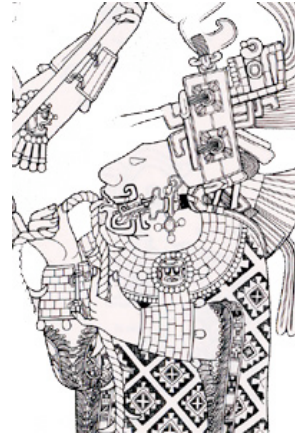


Maya Weaver
Jeffrey Jay Foxx

For centuries, it had been believed that the culture of the Maya was lost. Their hieroglyphic books, except for a few sent to Europe as "curiosities," were destroyed by the Spanish conquest. Even earlier, their great cities had collapsed their temples and palaces had fallen into ruins.

However, distinctive costume, a mark of communal identity, still flourishes among the Maya in

Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico. It constitutes a cultural memory reaching back to the period of the classic Maya cities.



Detail Lintel 24 Yaxchilan, Mexico
The British Museum
Drawing Linda Schele

There, royalty were depicted in stone wearing garments with the same patterns that women still weave today. Research by Walter F. Morris Jr. an independent scholar has revealed that Maya women, weaving on simple backstrap looms, have continually worked with designs that express an ancient Maya mythology.

Walter F. Morris Jr. dispels the notion that the Maya people are a lost culture; reflecting not only his own view but also conclusions from recent work in anthropology. Only in the past twenty years, has research been conducted in Chiapas.

While archaeologists, assisted by a few Spanish texts written after the conquest, have attempted to reconstruct the history and mythology locked within the hieroglyphic codices and carvings, anthropologists have explored the daily life, rituals and art of the contemporary Maya.

ART AND ARTIFACTS

Archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence demonstrate the tremendous economic value of cloth throughout Mesoamerica since the Classic period. Lengths of cotton cloth, carved and polished greenstone beads, beads of red spiny oyster shell, measures of salt, and cacao beans, were used as units of economic exchange and tribute during the Classic period in the Maya Lowlands. (Schele 1990)

A cylinder vase from the San Acasaguastlan Region, Guatemala (File No. K558) illustrates the use of cloth as tribute. A royal captive with quetzal feather headdress kneels in submission before a ruler wearing a spangled headdress with water lilies. Two attendants that stand behind the captive hold armloads of batik print cloth. There are also two bundles of cloth draped on the throne of the seated ruler. The cloth is being presented to the enthroned ruler as a bounty of war or a tribute offering. (Reents-Budet 1994)



Vase with Detail of Attendants
San Acasaguastlan, Guatemala
File No. K558 Justin Kerr

Written accounts such as Hernan Cortes' first letter to King Charles V of Spain indicate the importance of cloth in Mesoamerica during the Post-Classic. During the first encounter of Hernan Cortes and the Aztecs, the Spanish conqueror was presented with gifts, which were carefully recorded and itemized in Spanish accounts. These items included gold and silver jewelry, two native books (codices), gold dust and gold nuggets, two enormous wheels, animal skins, and elaborate textiles. (Ananwalt 1981)

Cosmology and Weaving

Weaving has played an integral role in the lives of the Maya, communicating their personal identity, their heritage, and their ideological beliefs. In pre-Columbian times, only the elite classes could own or wear ornately woven cloth and clothing. Today, weaving has become a cornerstone in the economic survival of both households and villages. Although cultural contact has influenced many of the techniques and materials used in weaving, it has not eliminated the ancestral cosmology and symbolism still found in weavings throughout Guatemala and Mexico.



Jaina Figurine Weaving
Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico

Linda Schele suggested that this Jaina figurine excavated on Jaina Island in the early 1960s is Ixchel rendered with a backstrap loom. In her right hand she holds a batten, for tightening threads; at the edge of the cloth, the heddles, which hold the threads apart and allow for easier work, are the sticks at the end of the loom with their attachment to the tree stump. (Miller, 2004)

Although the cosmology of weaving was established in pre-Columbian times, its importance and vitality can still be seen in modern weavings. The symbolism woven into these fabrics tells a story of Maya history. It speaks to the informed observer, communicating the importance of the tradition and beliefs of these people.

Pre-Columbian and Contemporary Textile Design Motifs

A culture's symbolic imagery is subject to change with the course of time as well as with the influences of outside forces. One of the most significant outside forces that drastically altered Maya textiles is the Spanish Conquest, which brought about the invasion of Western life into "traditional" Maya culture. The rather recent intrusions of tourism and commercial markets have also influenced both the technical and aesthetic traits of Maya textiles. In spite of the omnipresent changes that have occurred over the last millennium, the Maya of today continue to weave and embroider some of the same design motifs that have been popular since the Classic period (AD 150-900).



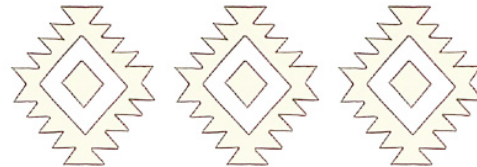
Maya Weaving with Birds
Photograph Linda Kreft

Although Classic period textiles are scarce due to poor preservation conditions, images on polychrome ceramics, lintels, stelae, and wall murals reveal design motifs used in textiles. See Maya ceramics with rollouts showing textile tribute. (Kerr 5764, 2780, 6059 and 5940)

The most common design motifs from Classic and contemporary times derive from natural surroundings and geometric patterns that symbolize natural phenomena such as hills or snakes.

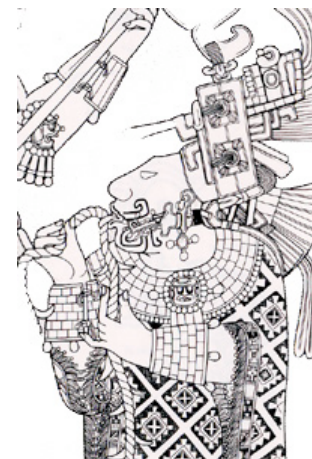
Contemporary design motifs, however, include a greater percentage of "natural surrounding" motifs than in the past. These motifs include a multitude of flora and fauna native to Guatemala and Mexico.

Spiny Star Design



The spiny star design (as it is termed by Walter F. Morris Jr.) is a geometric motif formed by an equilateral diamond outlined by "stairs" in the form of triangles. (Morris 1984)

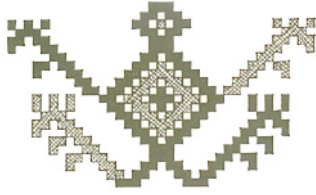
Sky Band



Detail Lintel 24 Yaxchilan, Mexico
The British Museum
Drawing Linda Schele

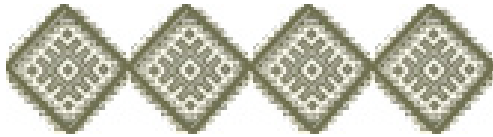
The sky band is another motif that is found in both contemporary and Classic Maya textiles. It is a long band composed of a series of rectangular glyphs representing celestial bodies. The ancient Maya used this symbol to act as bases, platforms, or thrones on Codex style vases. It is thought to have personified the snake that formed the frame around the Maya world (Miller 2004). This motif is noticeable along the sleeve edges of the huipil on Lady Xoc of Lintel 24 and Lintel 26 from the site of Yaxchilan.

Toads



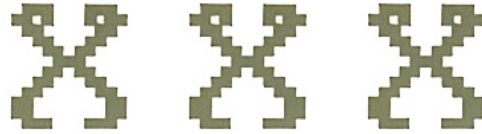
Depictions of toads are common in Maya textiles. Past and present, these animals are associated with rain and fertility. In the Maya Lowlands, the coming of rain is announced by the emergence of toads and their croaking sound. As Chip Morris explains "while the toad sings at the mouth of the Earthlord's mountain cave, the Earthlord's daughters dutifully fluff cotton which will be transformed by a bolt of lightning into rain clouds." These amphibians are said to be the guardians of the rain god's cave. (Morris 1987)

Diamond/Universe/4 Corners



The diamond shaped design may be the most common design theme in both contemporary and Pre-Columbian times: "technically and aesthetically it is simple to weave or embroider. The shape of the diamond represents the quadrilateral Maya world characterized by its distinctive four corners. Each corner represents one of the four cardinal directions: east, north, west, and south. Inside the center is another smaller diamond or geometric shape that represents the sun. Classic period depictions of this motif are shown on the huipils of Lady Xoc from Lintel 24 and Lady 6-Tun from Lintel 15 of Yaxchilan. (Schele 1990) They are also found on the edges of textile offerings in the polychrome vase in Nebaj Style (Coe: 1978) and the clothing of elite members of society painted on vases. (No. 717, and No.2772 Kerr 1989)

Crosses/XX's



Morris claims that the crosses portrayed in the textiles of Magdalena, Chiapas represent the four corners of the earth, thus representing the four cardinal directions. (Morris 1987) Crosses are also seen to symbolize the world tree with its branches and roots transcending the layers of the universe. In many modern Maya villages, the cross contains protective powers and is placed at crossroads or at sacred areas of the natural landscape. (Bassie-Sweet 1996) A high status woman in a Classic period vase (File No. 1563) also wears a huipil with plain crosses; it lacks the diamond shape that often surrounds them. (Kerr 1989)

Zig Zag



The Zig Zag motif can be seen without accompanying iconography or with geometric shapes in the remaining empty space. Plain zig zags like those huipils are said to symbolize "cerritos," little hills or "path of the snake." (Morris 1987)

The discussion of snake symbolism in Maya iconography is quite extensive. Above all, the serpent is found to personify the sky. In fact the words "sky" and "serpent" are often used interchangeably as they are viewed as the same thing. Zigzags are also said to represent lightning or the path taken by Maya priests as they climb up the steep temple steps. (Schevell 1985)

The technology and methods of weaving on the traditional backstrap loom are complex and involved. Great patience, skill, and dexterity are needed to produce these incredible textiles. Men participate in weaving primarily by working with machinery and techniques introduced by the Spanish in the 1600s. Their clothing, like that of the women, shows the

unique and village-specific color and design combinations found in each of the indigenous villages throughout Chiapas and Guatemala.

These two geographic regions lie adjacent to one another in the valleys of contiguous mountain ranges. Today, the territory is divided by indigenous language groups and modern political boundaries. In ancient times the competition created by intense trade and commerce with other Mesoamerican cultures was a cause for major hostilities between these separate Maya groups. The war and uprisings that have been a curse in these regions for at least 2,000 years, continues to plague this magnificent land even today.

Woven Voices: Textile Traditions of the Highland Maya

<http://www.anthro.fsu.edu/wovenoices/precolombian/precolumbian.html>

Florida State University
Department of Anthropology
Dr. J. Kathryn Josserand

ACTIVITIES

Art • Technology • Geometry

Read the cultural background, history, geography, and mythology of the Maya. Resources can be found in magazines, books, pictures, and in particular this website.

<http://www.anthro.fsu.edu/wovenvoices/precolumbian.html>

Read the book, *Angela Weaves A Dream: The Story of A Young Maya Artist* by Michele Sola and Jeffrey Jay Foxx. This story and others of the Maya culture, passed from generation to generation, are also portrayed through the artistry and vision of the people's great weaving tradition. In the villages of the Chiapas Mountains of southern Mexico, the women and girls' card and spin cotton and wool, then dye and weave cloth on their handmade looms. This story presents a portrait of this art through the eyes and hands of a young Maya girl.

Under the guidance of her grandmother, Angela tirelessly practices the seven sacred designs that will help her "tell" her story. Each night visions of the stories of her ancestors and their world intertwine themselves within her dreams. She prays for the perfect design that will not only demonstrate her technical ability but also express her connection to and understanding of her people and their spiritual heritage.



Maya Design Motif

Photograph Linda Kreft

Art

Have students compare the designs in the story to the mythology that they represent. Look at weaving design motifs of the Maya. Graph or draw the abstract design motifs of the traditional Maya. Build a backstrap loom and create a weaving in the style of the Maya.

RESOURCES

Castaneda, Omar S. *Abuela's Weave*. New York, New York: Lee and Low Books Inc. 1993.

Foxx, Jeffrey Jay. *The Maya Textile Tradition*. New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers. 1997.

Malarcher, Patricia. *Daughters of the Earthlord*. American Craft Magazine. February/March 1988.

Morris, Walter F., Jr. *Living Maya*. New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1987.

Sayer, Chole. *Arts and Crafts of Mexico*. San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books. 1990.

Schevil, Margot Blum. *Maya Textiles of Guatemala*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press. 1993.

Sola, Michele. *Abuela Weaves a Dream: The Story of A Young Maya Artist*. New York, New York: Hyperion Books for Children. 1996.

Greenfield, Patricia Mark. *Weaving Generations Together: Evolving Creativity in the Maya of Chiapas*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press. 2004

INTERNET LINKS

Woven Voices: Textile Traditions of the Highland Maya

<http://www.anthro.fsu.edu/wovenvoices/precolumbian.html>

Textile Art of Chiapas Maya

<http://www.smm.org/sln/ma/duty.html>

Weaving and Textile Arts of the Maya Today

<http://www.jaguar-sun.com/weaving.html>



Maya Wearing a Huipil
Jeffrey Jay Foxx



Woven Textile
Jeffrey Jay Foxx



Backstrap Loom
Jeffrey Jay Foxx

GLOSSARY

Huipil

A traditional textile (dress) worn by Maya women.

Context: the huipil is woven in two rectangular pieces that are stitched together. The designs around the neck and along the sleeve edge identify the town of the woman wearing the huipil.

Textile

A cloth or fabric.

Context-The huipil is a traditional textile of the Maya.

Backstrap Loom

A specific type of looms used by a weaver. Context-.A Maya backstrap loom stretches behind the wearer's back and holds one end of the loom. The other end is attached to a pole, tree, or a hook at some distance from the weaver.

Spindle

A wooden pointed dowel pushed through a flat wooden or clay cylinder.

Context-Spindles come in two sizes, a small one for spinning strands of yarn and a larger one for spinning several strands together.



Spindle Whorl Bead
Jeffrey Jay Foxx