

## **Painting the Maya Universe Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period Dorie Reents-Budet**

Among the Classic Maya AD 250-850, painting was a primary expressive aesthetic medium. Most of this legacy has been lost because paintings were created on surfaces that have not survived; for example fresco paintings on the exterior and interior walls of Maya buildings and paintings on cloth and paper. The primary surviving example of Classic Maya painting is the pictorial polychrome pottery because of its inherent durability and the protection provided by the funerary environments in which many were placed and the deep refuse deposits common to all Maya sites. It is these paintings on ceramic that allow us a glimpse of this rich artistic tradition as well as of the highly codified elite stratum of Maya society and the historical and mythological events that sustained them.

The pictorial pottery was created as part of the increasingly complex social, political and economic developments that characterize the Classic Period. During the Early Classic Period, AD 250-550, towns grew into cities as the population coalesced due to intensified social, political and economic factors. The larger sites extended their political and economic influence over ever-increasing distances to include new resident populations, creating extensive and dynamic political hierarchies. Lineage-based power structures underlay these developments, with the subordinate seats of power in the surrounding towns being held by members of the ruling family from the dominant site. By AD 500, Classic Maya civilization was urban and hierarchical, having created complex systems on every level from common subsistence to interwoven economies, from local government to international politics, from the family social unit to intertwined hereditary dynasties.

The dominant site within a polity was the focal point for social, political and economic affairs. Myriad rituals, both private and public accompanied these, sponsored by the ruling elite. These rituals required all the trappings of prestige, including distinctive painted pottery ware for the accompanying feasts.

The painted vessels served an additional important role as social currency within the realm of elite gift exchange. For example, a ruler would bestow an important artwork on a favored individual as part of the process of securing and proclaiming their relationship. As

a recognized royal gift, the new owner could display and use the vessel as a symbol of his own status and political connections. Many of these vessels ultimately ended their pre-Columbian lives in burials as part of the funerary offerings.

One of the remarkable characteristics of Classic Maya painted pottery is the presence of painted hieroglyphic texts around their upper rims as well as within the pictorial scenes on the vessels. These texts were used as a primary design feature, as compositional devices to frame the pictorial field and to double as the rooflines and pillars of the architectural environments depicted on many vessels. The main hieroglyphic text painted just below the rim on the vessels' exterior is called the Primary Standard Sequence, or PSS. Interestingly, the PSS does not comment on the vessel's pictorial images, which run the gamut from religious ideology, cosmology and representations of supernatural to depictions of both the public, and private rituals that comprised elite Maya life and history. Instead, the PSS begins with a dedicatory statement referring to the act of painting the vase, which in turn blesses the vessel (or 'makes it proper') for its ritual use. The PSS also records the vessel's shape category and its original contents, names of the patron or owner for whom the vessel was made and sometimes concludes with the name (or 'signature') of the artist who painted the vessel.

As has occurred among other cultures, when art became a player in the arena of political power and social prestige, it took on unique visual characteristics, represented high quality work and was personalized. It was not by chance, then, that among this socially and politically active pottery we find some of the very few signed works of art from the pre-Columbian world. Yet the most important characteristic of Classic Maya pottery, which allowed it to function as, an effective symbol of political prestige was the sixth-century AD proliferation of new painting styles, as an integral feature of the polychrome pottery, reflect the cultural identity function within the political arena. Thus, by recognizing the pottery's many style groups and determining where they were created and used in pre-Columbian times, it is possible to discover political and social divisions and interaction

across these boundaries that may not be as visible elsewhere in the archaeological record. By so doing, we can look at the intricate cultural fabric of Classic Maya civilization from a new perspective.

Only recently, however, have we been able to reconstruct portions of the Classic Period painting style 'map' and connect specific painting styles or regions. This research and its results have been achieved through the collaborative efforts of scholars from the fields of art history, archaeology, and nuclear chemistry, beginning in the 1970s at Brookhaven National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, and under the auspices of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Known as the Maya Polychrome Ceramics Project and now a part of the Conservation Analytical Laboratory, Museum Support Center, Smithsonian Institution, this project combines art historical stylistic analyses of thousands of primarily unprovenanced whole vessels and archaeologically excavated potsherds with a unique set of chemical data derived from the highly sensitive technique of instrumental neutron activation analysis. This technique identifies the specific chemical compositional differences of the ceramic pastes of these objects that reflect the use of different clay resources across the Maya regions as well as within fairly small geographical areas.

In essence, these data function as a chemical fingerprint for the idiosyncratic mixtures of local clays and tempers created by Classic Maya potters in any one region and/or in a single workshop. By working in this multi-disciplinary environment, it is possible to identify discrete painting styles, to corroborate their group cohesiveness through stylistic and chemical similarity, and to suggest a geographic location for the workshops, where the vessels were created based on chemical similarity of the group with archaeologically excavated sherds.

An example of the project's research is the so-called Holmul-style pottery named for the archaeological site of Holmul, Guatemala, where vessels painted in this style were first excavated in 1911. Today, hundreds of Holmul-style vessels are known although most have no archaeological provenance. A red-and-orange-on-cream palette with small amounts of an opaque black slip highlighting parts of the imagery and a restricted number of specific iconographic themes characterizes all. The style is also characterized by subtle variations in pictorial compositional features

and paint quality, suggesting production in many workshops and for a wide range of consumers among the Classic Period population.

Chemically, many Holmul-style vessels can be divided roughly into two groups, one associated with the site of Holmul and the other with Naranjo, both located in eastern Guatemala near the modern border with Belize. However, the corpus includes many vessels whose stylistic features and chemical compositional profiles are divergent from these two groups, suggesting production at other sites in this general region whose workshops were creating their own local interpretations of the Holmul-style.

A new group of stylistically and chemically distinct Holmul-style pottery recently has been found at the site of Buenavista del Cayo, Belize. Archaeologists Jennifer Taschek and Joseph Ball have discovered a palace residence that includes extensive refuse piles of thousands of sherds and nearly whole vessels and sherds indicate they probably were produced locally, perhaps within the palace complex itself. The pottery is notable for its lower quality painting, characterized by simpler pictorial compositions and less attention to figural details, and fewer readable hieroglyphic texts than are found on the vessels in the Naranjo and Holmul groups.

Interestingly, Ball and Taschek also excavated from an elite burial at Buenavista an exceptionally fine example of Holmul-style pottery. The Buenavista Vase, as it is called, provides an outstanding example of the wealth of information provided by an archaeologically excavated art object analyzed in tandem with data from the Maya Polychrome Ceramics Project.

The hieroglyphic text painted on the vase states that it was made for Lord K'ak Til, ruler of the powerful site of Naranjo, located 35 kilometers west of Buenavista. The chemical profile of the vase also points to the Naranjo area as the location of the workshop where this fine vessel was created. Its discovery in a royal burial at Buenavista seemingly proclaims socio-political bonds between the two sites. These bonds are not recorded on Naranjo's carved stone monuments, and Buenavista's stelae are too eroded to recover any of their original historical information. Therefore, the Buenavista Vase is our only surviving documentation of historical connections between these two sites. The archaeologists'

careful documentation of the context in which the vase was found provides an unparalleled wealth of information, which is enhanced by the vase's stylistic, hieroglyphic and chemical analyses. If this vase had been looted and come onto the art market without archaeological [provenance, and in spite of all analyses and research, we would have lost forever this unique and fascinating piece of the historical puzzle of the Classic Maya.

Through such examples as the Buenavista Vase, 'Painting the Maya Universe' seeks to educate the public about the tragic and irreplaceable loss of human history and the world's cultural heritage when some art objects are ripped from their archaeological context and illegally circulated on the international market.

Pre-Columbian Maya elite painted pottery opens a window into the highly codified and rich culture of the Classic Period. The vessels' expressive imagery and unparalleled mastery of low-fire polychrome pottery painting distinguishes itself as a unique artistic and technical achievement. This ancient imagery gives faces to the powerful women and men of Maya society and to the individual artists whose works preserve the pageant of human history and the most fundamental beliefs of this great civilization. Aesthetically and symbolically, these vessels are reflections of Maya culture and are the personalized expressions of the individuals who created these paintings on ceramic in response to Maya society's particular needs. The vessels were used as elite service ware, as social currency, as symbols of status and power, and also as treasured items of ideological importance to be placed with the honored dead. 'Painting the Maya Universe' seeks to reweave the fabric of the social and political contexts in which this pottery functioned during the first millennium AD by focusing on the details of imagery, hieroglyphic texts, painting styles and technological features that provide keys to Classic Maya culture. As Lucy Lippard has said, 'Archaeology is not the only valid method of gardening in graveyards'. Here even the dead can speak, at least to the extent that words and images, painting styles, and aesthetics find fruitful ground in our eyes and minds.