

Ancient Maya Art

Task 1 - Read this information about Ancient Maya art.

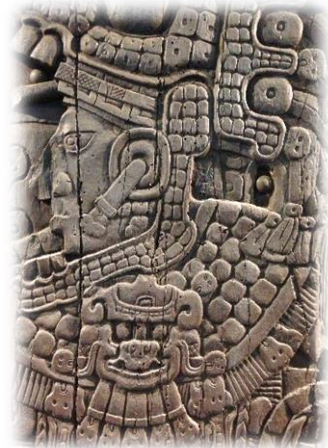
The Maya civilization existed for over 1500 years. During that time, the Maya created many works of art. The art of the Maya was heavily influenced by their religion as well as other cultures such as the Olmecs and the Toltecs. The subject for much of their artwork was the Maya kings who wanted to make sure they were remembered throughout history.

Sculpture

The Maya are perhaps most famous for their work in stone. They built many monumental structures including tall pyramids and palaces. They also made a lot of sculptures out of stone.

One popular type of Maya sculpture was the **stela**. A **stela** was a tall stone slab covered with carvings and writing. The **stela** was popular during the Classic Maya period when most major cities had **stela** built in honour of their kings. **Stela** were often located near altars. Some **stelae** were very large - the largest Maya stela discovered to date is the 'Stela E' from the city of Quirigua. It weighs 65 tons and is around 34 feet tall.

Carved column, Limestone, Mexico
Worcester Art Museum, c. 800AD



Carving

The Maya also created detailed carvings in other materials such as wood and jade. Wood can be susceptible to fire, damp and rot so, unfortunately, only a few wood carvings have survived. Despite this, archeologists believe that wood carvings were a common and very popular piece of art for many of the Maya people.

Carved wooden lintel from Tikal,
Guatemala Museum, c. 800AD

Painting

The Maya painted murals on the walls of their buildings including their houses, temples, and public buildings. The subjects of the murals varied widely including scenes from daily life, mythology, battles, and religious ceremonies. Unfortunately, due to the high humidity of the region, few of the murals have survived.



Painted Chama style vessel



Ceramics

Maya ceramics are an important art form. The Maya created their pottery without the use of a potter's wheel. They decorated their pottery with elaborate designs and scenes. Archeologists are able to learn a lot about different periods and cities of the Maya through the scenes painted or carved into their pottery.



Writing

Maya art can also be viewed in their books or codices. These books are made from long, folded sheets of leather or bark paper. The writing uses a number of symbols and pictures and the books can be considered delicate works of art.

Weaving and Feather-working

Although no materials and fabrics from the Maya age have survived to this time, archeologists can tell through their paintings, writings and carvings the type of clothes that they created. Clothing for the nobles was truly an art form. It was highly decorated and they also wore huge headdresses. Maya nobility expended considerable resources and time in crafting them. Some of the most respected craftsmen were those that wove the detailed feathered clothing for the nobility. Typically, they based their designs on one of the animals popular in Maya culture. These included the jaguar, snake, falcon and many other birds. The Maya would use

jade and other stones and jewels to adorn the designs. To top it, colourful feathers were used. These were considered a prestige item and commoners were forbidden from wearing them in public. The quetzal bird was one of the most highly coveted birds in Maya culture and was hunted for its colourful feathers. These feathers were often reserved especially for royalty though there is evidence some of the nobility wore them too.



Interesting Facts about Maya Art

Unlike many ancient civilizations, Maya artists sometimes signed their work.

Other arts included the performing arts of dance and music. The Maya had a variety of musical instruments including wind instruments, drums, and rattles. Some of the more complex instruments were reserved for the elite.

The Maya used stucco plaster to create large masks and portraits of both the gods and the kings.

The kings would often commission a work of art to commemorate events in their lives.

The city of Palenque is often considered the artistic capital of the Maya civilization. It wasn't a big or powerful city, but some of the finest Maya art has been found there.

Task 2 - Answer these questions in your home learning book:

- 1) What were the two main subjects of Maya art?
- 2) What art forms were practiced by the Maya?
- 3) What can archaeologists learn from Maya art?
- 4) Why do you think not many wood carvings have survived?
- 5) What are codices?
- 6) What was the significance of the quetzal?

Task 3 – Use what you have learnt so far about the Maya people and the examples images, to have a go at creating your own Maya design.

What might your design be used for? E.g. a lintel (carved around a doorway), stela, jewellery, mural, pot...
Will one of the gods you learnt about or made up feature in your design?
Will there be a repeating pattern?

