

Seeing Power: Masterpieces of Early Classic Maya “High Culture”

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LORDS OF CREATION: THE ORIGINS OF SACRED MAYA KINGSHIP, LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, 10 SEPTEMBER 2005–2 JANUARY 2006, and other venues, organized by Virginia Fields and Dorie Reents-Budet.

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Anyone interested in the visual culture of prehispanic Central America who has the chance to view this exhibition should take the opportunity to do so. Those without such access will find the catalogue an extraordinary document of the objects included, enhanced by the addition of 14 interpretive essays by leading scholars from North America, Europe, Mexico, and Central America. What distinguishes this exhibition most are the extraordinary objects included, many of them with excellent archaeological provenience. These objects are arranged to support an exploration of the origins of “divine kingship,” a concept that has long been a staple of Maya studies. The emphasis on origins of kingship leads to a focus on the earliest periods of Maya society, differentiating this exhibition from others emphasizing Late Classic Maya art that have preceded and paved the way for it. The focus on earlier Classic and Late Preclassic Maya society would not have been possible without the extensive archaeological exploration of early sites undertaken in recent

years. But ultimately this is an art exhibition, and the object selection and presentation are guided by aesthetic concerns. As a result, there is a tension in the show between objects with secure proveniences and those that, while spectacular, lack the certainty of knowledge that comes with controlled excavation.

As installed in the original venue in Los Angeles, almost 150 objects were spread over a generous space that allowed visitors to browse without being crowded and gave the individual objects enough room to stand out visually. Carefully selected graphic images reproduced as large-scale wall panels, including some shots of sites and copies of rarely seen polychrome architectural murals, gave the exhibition additional aesthetic dimensions and allowed the curators to bring into the gallery a sense of architectural volume and spatial and environmental setting, lost when objects are abstracted from their “living” contexts. The texture and color of the material used for the main text panels subtly evoked the limestone that was one of the major materials used by the prehispanic Maya, being particularly reminiscent of the limestone architectural panels at Palenque. One doorway between galleries mimicked a temple entrance from Calakmul, Mexico, one of the sites highlighted in the exhibition.

A particularly laudable aspect of this show is that texts are bilingual, and a Spanish version of the accompanying catalogue was produced. At several points, additional text handouts were available to carry around the gallery, adding deeper explorations of selected issues, a nice compromise between the desire to keep text from overwhelming an installation and the fact that visitors without much background in Maya archaeology and art history are likely

to need coaching to understand the ideas presented. *Lords of Creation* does not include an audio tour, something that I applaud, as audio tours become the norm and force visitors onto a single track through exhibits. Instead, there is an introductory video and a substantive research room toward the end of the exhibition. Together, these elements invite both visitors with little background, who can gain necessary context from the video and go into more depth where they want using the plasticized gallery texts, and those for whom Maya studies is a passion. It is not immediately obvious how younger visitors might engage with this exhibition; installed objects and cases raise many objects above the view of children, and the themes of the show are far divorced from everyday life or experiences that might create resonance for them.

What will draw visitors, of course, will not be the installation itself but the scholarship, the new ideas presented, and the opportunity to see objects of great beauty, distinction, and significance. The core theme is an exploration of the origins of Maya kingship, understood in two senses: chronological and developmental. The curators follow a long-established current of thought that suggests that Mesoamerican rulers, from the time of the first Gulf Coast Olmec societies, built their authority on claims to be sacred or divine rulers. From a chronological perspective, the focus in the exhibition is thus on the earliest periods of Maya rulership, stretching from the first records of distinguished persons in the art of the Late Preclassic Maya (ca. 400 B.C.E.–100 C.E.) through the end of the Early Classic period (ca. 600 C.E.), when many early Maya states were transformed by contacts with the Central Mexican urban center, Teotihuacan. The emphasis on divine or sacred kingship is not particularly new in Maya studies or exhibitions, but this is the first to focus on the early developmental periods. As a direct consequence, the objects included go well beyond the familiar icons of Late Classic Maya culture that have been featured in Maya exhibitions for the last 20 years, ever since *Maya: Treasures of an Ancient Civilization*¹ and *Blood of Kings*² initiated a period of major enthusiasm for Maya art exhibitions.

Lords of Creation opens with a consideration of the roots of Maya kingship, which the curators trace to the Gulf Coast Olmec. Visitors are greeted by a monumental, three-dimensional

stone sculpture from La Venta, Mexico, an extraordinary example of an anthropomorphic sculpture in the round from the Olmec heartland created in the Middle Formative (ca. 900–400 B.C.E.). Two other pieces of monumental stone sculpture are also presented, one a disk-shaped sculpture attributed to the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (dated ca. 600–300 B.C.E.), the other a stele from Kaminaljuyu, near modern Guatemala City (ca. 200–50 B.C.E.). These three sculptures span the period from the earliest Gulf Coast societies that created monumental sculpture to the beginnings of the lowland Classic Maya tradition. These striking objects frame expectations for the remainder of the exhibition that are somewhat misleading, suggesting that monumentality and stone sculpture will be major emphases.

Instead, throughout the following rooms, the story of Early Classic Maya rulership is illustrated primarily at a smaller, at times intimate, scale, through items of costumes worn by rulers and objects used in courtly life. Extraordinary pottery vessels and carved bone, shell, and jade objects make up the bulk of the exhibition. After the introductory section, there is no attempt to present a chronological narrative. Even there, objects are not segregated on strict chronological grounds but rather are grouped thematically. So throughout the exhibition, objects from earlier Olmec sites are juxtaposed with those from Late Preclassic and Early Classic Maya sites, a presentation that suggests direct development of Maya visual culture and concepts of rulership from Olmec roots.

The sections that follow the introduction consider the relation of the ruler to the cosmos, identify a series of supernatural patrons of rulers, describe the religious duties of the ruler, explore royal portraiture, and propose that certain objects were “personal instruments of power” for rulers. While all these sections seem to be closely related to the theme of rulership, its origins and its nature, a discussion of “The Origins of Writing” interrupts the emphasis on the person of the ruler. The sections that follow, including a recapitulation of contemporary ideas about royal feasting with extended discussion of the use of cacao, and a presentation of “International Relations,” especially the role of Teotihuacan in the development of Early Classic Maya kingdoms, are less original and move away from the unifying discussion of the

¹ Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985.

² Schele and Miller 1986.

divine or sacred ruler. The narrative returns to the person of the ruler with a consideration of "Death and Apotheosis," evocative of the culmination of the earlier *Blood of Kings* exhibition in a similar discussion of the transformation of the ruler in death.

Many of the objects that give substance to these topics are extraordinary. While Late Classic Maya polychrome cylinder vases, with their narrative scenes of mythology and courtly life, have become visual commonplaces, the Early Classic orange-slipped pottery, carved blackwares, and polychromes featured here are much less widely known. A tall vase of a complex shape with faceted surfaces in polished red-orange, from a burial at Tikal, Guatemala (cat. no. 105), is striking for its unusual size. From a tomb at Copan, Honduras, comes a modeled effigy of a deer lying on its side (cat. no. 106) that originally contained a food made with chocolate beans. A dish from excavations in Tikal's Mundo Perdido complex (cat. no. 67), with a lid carved in low relief, fired brown-black, shows the profile of a ruler wearing an elaborate mask and jewelry. A lidded polychrome dish excavated from a tomb at Holmul, Guatemala (cat. no. 140), is a beautiful example of the use of painted plaster to create a new figural image covering the original imagery. Described in the catalogue as fields of color, the painting on the plaster of the lid in fact depicts "two profile heads wearing elaborate green earspools and bead ornaments" that "may represent corn cobs as the decapitated head of the personified maize plant."³ Some of the most striking objects in the exhibition depict images related to those on figural pottery through inlay of jade and other stones on shell backings. A pendant from a tomb at Copan (cat. no. 143) is identified as an image of the Principal Bird Deity, a green-feathered mythological character whose feathers are here represented by inlays of jade. A pectoral ornament from a burial at Dzibanche, Mexico (cat. no. 65), formed from a single bivalve shell shows an image of a seated lord. Set into the shell, are tiny pieces of jade, forming the parts of the represented figure's costume that correspond to what would be full-scale jade ornaments on a living person. Dark gray-black iron pyrite pieces represent the bands of the figure's headdress and the black spots on his jaguar-skin kilt and the jaguar-skin cushion on which he sits.

³ Joyce and Shumaker 1995, 28.

All these objects, and many more, have rich specific context due to their recovery in controlled, professionally recorded archaeological excavations at sites like Calakmul, Tikal, Altun Ha, and Copan. These well-provenienced objects are juxtaposed with others that have only general regional-level attributions. Given the absence of any discussion of looting or of the international trade in antiquities in the exhibition or catalogue, the fact that this mixture of the well-provenienced and unprovenienced or stylistically attributed forcefully poses the question of mode of acquisition must be unintended. The exhibition invites a close consideration of how necessary provenience is for belief in the kinds of extraordinary, one-of-a-kind items featured here.

Writing recently about the development of connoisseurship in the study of precolumbian art from the 19th century to the present, Jane McLaren Walsh notes that "the 'eye' of the connoisseur might also be described as an appreciation of a particular beauty, a look that is appealing to one person's individual aesthetic sensibilities."⁴ It is through the application of such a trained eye that objects without provenience can be assigned likely regional and chronological attribution, a procedure that has become commonplace for Late Classic Maya art, where formats and content of artworks are fairly standardized. The same is not the case for the early periods during which Maya cultural, political, and social concepts were being formed.

Most disturbing is the realization that many of the securely provenienced objects included in the exhibition might be questioned because of their unique features, if they lacked archaeological context. The carved blackware dish with four effigy feet from a tomb at Calakmul (cat. no. 149) would seem unlikely were it not for the documentation provided by its excavation, which also allows us to associate it with other materials. The lack of provenience for a similar vessel attributed to the Maya lowlands (cat. no. 138) provides no decisive basis to trust in its authenticity other than the eye of the connoisseur. If the figurine from a tomb at Yaxuna (cat. no. 116) did not have excellent provenience (including direct association with the body of a young woman dressed in exceptional jade jewelry) it might not have been recognized as genuinely Maya. The elaborate modeled, seated figure atop the lid of a tripod

⁴ Walsh 2005, 17.

cylinder attributed to Guatemala (cat. no. 63) is so out of scale with the vessel on which it sits that it raises the same kind of doubts, but here we lack the archaeological provenience that settles the case for the Yaxuna figurine.

Walsh notes that, as a consequence of dependence on the individual curatorial eye as the basis for authenticating objects without archaeological provenience, “the problem of unique works of art, unprovenienced ‘masterworks’ remains . . . what is striking is the number of objects in both the private and public realm that have no apparent iconographic or stylistic counterparts from known archaeological contexts. . . . Yet, despite and at times because of their individuality, they are considered masterpieces . . . these ‘masterpieces’ seem often beyond suspicion or criticism.”⁵ Here we have an exhibition full of masterpieces with secure provenience, commingled with others lacking such security. It would be interesting to see what kind of interpretation could be based solely on the objects with exemplary provenience, and what ideas would have to be set aside or reexamined.

Indeed, the core concept of sacred or divine kingship itself might require rethinking, with or without such a restriction of source materials to those with secure context. Despite its centrality to the exhibition, the theme of sacred kingship is not as clearly defined as might be desired. The study room included in the show attempts to sketch out a global context for sacred kingship (the term used in the catalogue and exhibition title). The contributors to the catalogue, including the curators, often use the term “divine kingship” interchangeably with sacred kingship. As defined by the curators in their introductory essay, Maya rulers embodied “a system of governance known as divine kingship, a phenomenon found among ancient civilizations throughout the world,” based on the fact that art “portrays human rulers in the guise of deities, especially the Maize God, proclaiming their sacred and secular authority to bring agricultural fertility and abundance to their communities.”⁶ The curators write, “cosmic power constitutes a key criterion of divine kingship, which is characterized by the capacity of rulers to interact with supernatural powers, to intercede on behalf of the human

population.”⁷ The view of Maya rulership that they present is compelling, but it is fair to ask what relationship it actually has to a broader anthropological concept of divine kingship that might have been relevant in Maya society.

In 1985, Gillian Feeley-Harnick, in a major review article cited in the exhibition catalogue, noted that discussions of divine kingship can be traced back to the work of James Frazer at the turn of the 19th century.⁸ Feeley-Harnick characterized divine kingship as a “metaphor” that allowed early 20th-century European scholars to “explore questions about rationality and legitimacy in government, epitomized in the transformation of murder for personal gain into sacrifice for the common good.”⁹ At the core of the anthropological concept of divine kingship is thus something not openly addressed in this exhibition: a myth of succession in which the old ruler is killed by his successor, setting in motion a cycle of violence contained by ritual. Exploration of this line of analysis in relation to the investment in funerary rituals and monuments evident in Maya sites might lead to a fruitful reconsideration of the literature on “the king’s two bodies” and the way that elaboration of rituals of death and burial serve the political ends of successors, not those who they ostensibly commemorate. It could also lead to discussions of the transformation of the king into a stranger that might be pertinent to the adoption of objects of Teotihuacan style or origin in the last part of the Early Classic.

The long persistence of divine kingship posited in the exhibition, and its proposed coherence, also are problematic. Within a few decades of Frazer’s original proposals, ethnographers working in what he suggested was the central area for divine kingship, Africa, “called into question the absoluteness of divine kingship in conceptual, sociological, and historical terms. There is no absolute sovereign: ‘the king’s power and authority are composite . . . their various components are lodged in different offices.’”¹⁰ In Africa, the examples of this phenomenon were relatively recent (having developed within a few hundred years) and were in the process of transformation under colonial rule. While the history of prehispanic

⁵ Walsh 2005, 17–18.

⁶ Fields and Reents-Budet 2005, 21.

⁷ Fields and Reents-Budet 2005, 24.

⁸ Feeley-Harnick 1985, 273.

⁹ Feeley-Harnick 1985, 275.

¹⁰ Feeley-Harnick 1985, 276 (citing Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940, 11).

Mexico and Central America is of course distinct, it was no less dynamic than that of Africa and Europe. This raises the question of how historical developments that took place over millennia changed the nature of rulership from its first formulations in Gulf Coast Olmec polities to the emergence of Maya lowland kingdoms in the Late Preclassic.

It should also give us some pause in the 21st century to be using still a framework developed under a much less complex anthropological view of human social order. In Frazer's time, it was reasonable to posit that divine kings unified society through their claims to ensure the rebirth of earthly fertility and cosmic order. Today, an anthropological perspective would require us to ask how such claims were effective, or even under what conditions they failed. Working solely from the artworks through which rulers presented their own ideologically charged claims will always tend to persuade us that these claims were accepted, when in fact we cannot know how they were received or even how widely they were disseminated.

Using the terms first proposed for comparative analysis of ancient states by Baines and Yoffee,¹¹ this exhibition is an extraordinary presentation of largely unknown masterworks from the high culture of an Early Classic Maya inner elite. It illuminates notions of cosmic order offered as bases for their legitimacy by that inner elite employing reserves of wealth to promote the production of these masterworks. It does not tell us much about the actual politics or ritual practices through which elites engaged the broader population, let alone how commoner men, women, and children contributed to the reproduction of society. Baines and Yoffee argue that most of the "high culture" that archaeologists and art historians study was probably directed toward other elites and unlikely to have been known to or to have influenced the lives of most people in ancient societies.¹² To the extent that the artworks in this exhibition represent an ideology

that underwrote ancient Maya rulership, it is an ideology whose main identifiable audience is an intimate group: those people who could share in the feasts whose special nature was marked by the elaborate serving ware created for them and be dazzled by the living body of the ruler arrayed in the fantastic costumes of rare materials, crafted by specialists, that make up this exhibition.

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¹¹ Baines and Yoffee 1998; see also Richards and van Buren 2000.

¹² Baines and Yoffee 1998.