Mayan Art & Architecture

Art

The earliest Mayan artists were primarily focused on religious themes. At this time, the Mayans depicted such activities as human sacrifice, warfare, daily life, and religious rituals with startling realism. All of the great Mayan cities created great sculptures. Sculptors produced amazing images of mythological creatures, deceased rulers, deities, and supernatural animals. Lords and rulers were attired in elaborate headdresses, costumes, and jewelry. Mayan sculptors preferred to work with limestone. However, they also worked with trachyte, sandstone, wood, and clay. They did this with nothing more than stone tools and wooden mallets.

Ceramics were equally important to the Maya. They used a crude device that rotated between the potters feet called a kabal. One of the first ceramic styles was called Amyan. Amyan style ceramics were believed to have been developed in the Guatemalan highlands around 1,000 BC. These first designs were very simple and one color. They made whistles the shape of animals as well as cooking pots and drinking vessels. Then between 300 and 700CE the Mayans excelled in ceramic development. These ceramic styles were called Tzakol and Tepeu. They are characterized by a variety of jar, bowl, plate, and vase styles. During this period the Mayans mastered a variety of decorative techniques including polychrome painting. The Tzakol and Tepeu ceramics are considered to be the most beautiful pottery made in ancient Mesoamerica. They were primarily decorated in animal deities, grotesque monsters, nobles and priests, and scenes of human sacrifice, in the colors of orange, yellow, and red.

The narrative quality of Mayan ceramics carried over into the murals that once covered the interior walls of Mayan palaces and temples. Murals have been found in a multitude of locations. The most dramatic of these are the fabulous frescoes at Bonampak in Chiapas, Mexico. Murals treated a wide array of subjects in very realistic terms. From this great detail archaeologists have been able to learn a great deal about costumes, musical instruments, religious rituals, warfare, and methods of human sacrifice.

Architecture

The Maya Architecture, as well as their art, has been called the richest of the New World because of the great complexity of patterns and variety of media expressions. Limestone structures, faced with lime stucco, were the hallmark of ancient Maya architecture. Maya buildings were adorned with carved friezes and roof combs in stone and stucco. With large quantities of limestone and flint available, plaster and cement were easily produced. This allowed the Mayans to build impressive temples, with stepped pyramids. On the summits were thatched- roof temples, known as "Triadic Groups".
All the Maya cities were carefully planned in an East to West orientation and with the major Temples forming a perfect isosceles triangle, as has been documented in the Preclassic Mirador Basin as well as the Classic cities like Tikal, Yaxhá, Nakum, etc.

The Classic pyramids at Tikal, in Guatemala are turned to face one another, and the rooms which are built at the top of the pyramid have depressions in the stone walls that serve as amplifiers of the voice which are broadcast in all directions. At the top of the pyramid the Ahaw acquired god-like qualities. The design of the Mayan architects is expressed in its fullness. Due to the stone resonators, the voice of a person at the top of one pyramid, speaking at a normal volume, can be heard by another person standing at the top of another pyramid some astonishing distance away. The finishing touches of Stucco gave the surface its full potential in the effect of reflecting and transmitting the sound waves.

In contrast to Egyptian pyramids, to which they are often erroneously compared, Maya `step pyramids` served numerous functions besides mortuary ones, and were constructed not from large, solid stone blocks but from smaller, cut stone blocks on top of a rubble-fill core. Also, new temples would often be built on top of older ones, encasing the older architecture within.

Without metal tools, (They used Obsidian), beasts of burden, or even the wheel the Mayans were able to construct vast cities across a huge jungle landscape with an amazing degree of architectural perfection and variety.

They were noted as well for elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, including temple-pyramids, palaces, plazas and observatories known as "Group E" after the Uaxactún complex.

Another matchless feature of the Mayans was the use of colorful murals. It is also noted that most of the Maya cities were built by being divided into quarters by two avenues which cross-cut each other at right angles. Roofs were flat and made with cedar beams overlaid with mortar. The walls were plastered and painted with great gods and other mythological features, such as the Pre-Classic San Bartolo murals.

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