

Artful Adventures

# Mesoamerica

An interactive guide for families



Your  
Mesoamerican  
Adventure  
Awaits You!

*See inside for details*



# Artful Adventures Mesoamerica

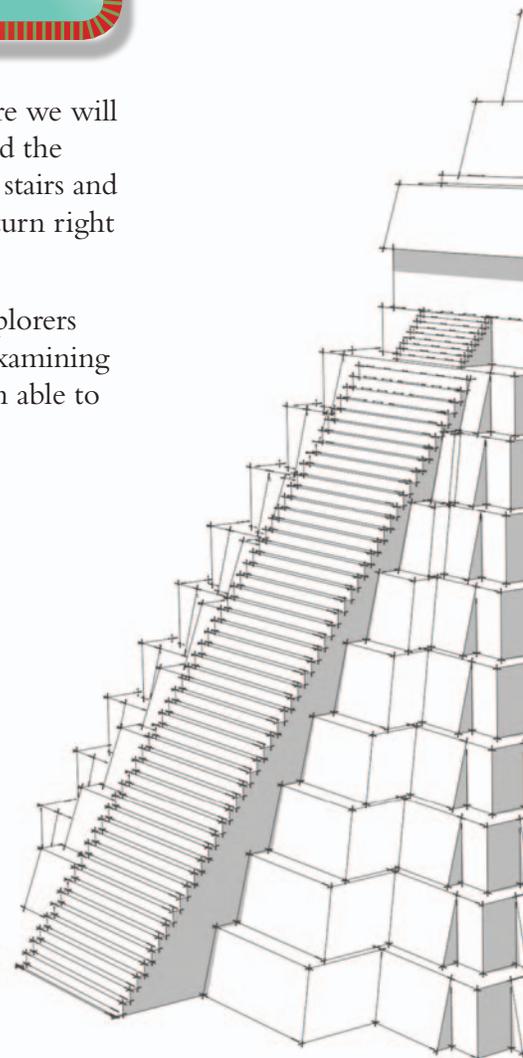


Our journey today takes us to the gallery of the ancient Americas, where we will look at objects from two ancient Mesoamerican cultures: the Olmec and the Maya. This gallery is on the lower level of the Museum. Walk down the stairs and turn right. Walk through the ancient Greek and Egyptian galleries and turn right again, into the gallery of the ancient Americas.

Between the last Ice Age and the sixteenth century, when European explorers arrived, there were thousands of distinct societies in the Americas. By examining the objects they left behind, anthropologists and art historians have been able to learn a great deal about these ancient cultures.

## OLMEC

Find the Gulf Coast area on the map (the pink/red area). This is where the Olmec peoples lived. Today this area is part of Mexico. The Olmec were one of the first great Mesoamerican civilizations and lasted from 1500 to 500 B.C.— from around three thousand to two thousand years ago! They were excellent farmers and astronomers. The Olmec were also amazing sculptors.



You will see the figure on the left as you enter the gallery.

What do you think this Olmec sculpture is made of?

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Gulf Coast, Veracruz, Mexico, Middle Preclassic, Olmec: kneeling lord with incised toad on his head, ca. 800 B.C. Stone with traces of cinnabar, h. 17.6 cm., w. 10.8 cm., d. 10.1 cm. Museum purchase, gift of Mrs. Gerard B. Lambert by exchange (y1976-21). Photo: Bruce M. White.

Many people guess clay because of the reddish color, but it is actually stone. The color comes from a mineral called cinnabar that has been rubbed onto the stone.

Walk around the sculpture. Take a look at it from different sides.

What do you think he is doing? Does his pose seem unusual?

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Some historians believe that he is in the process of changing from a man into a were-jaguar (half-man and half-jaguar). Other sculptures depict a similar figure in different stages of the transformation process. Some figures have more jaguar features than this one does.

He was probably a very important person in the Olmec society. This transformation ritual was likely part of a ceremony performed as a way of communicating with the gods or the supernatural world.

Many Mesoamerican cultures believed that people had companion animal spirits. We often see images of people depicted with animal characteristics like fangs, feathers, or wings.

If you could have a companion animal spirit, which animal would you choose?

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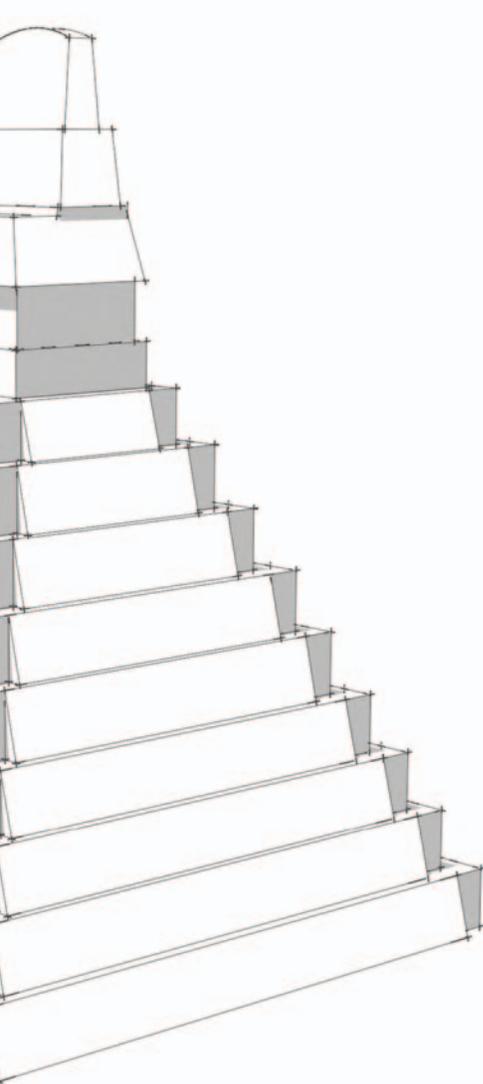
Why?

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The Olmec people did not have metal tools. This sculpture is made of very hard stone. What do you think they might have used to carve and polish this figure?

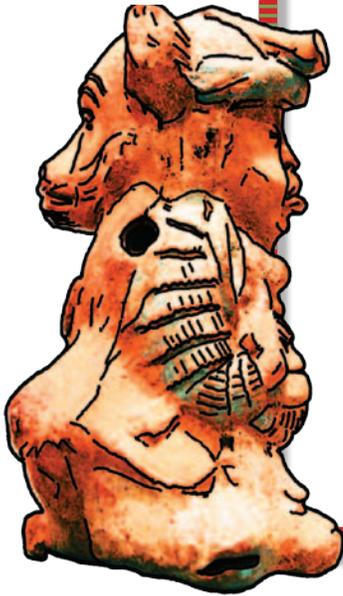
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If you guessed other rocks, you are probably right. Most likely, they also used a leather strap that they rubbed back and forth and possibly an ancient tool called a bow drill. Sand or other abrasive material would have been used to polish it. Imagine how long it must have taken to get the stone so smooth!



# Companion Spirit:

Use the space below to draw what your companion animal spirit might look like.



## MAYA

Now find the Maya area of the map (green). This area is part of present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. The Maya had city-states ruled by kings as well as a very accurate calendar, thanks to Maya astronomers who watched the movement of the planets carefully. They were excellent mathematicians and developed a complicated form of writing that people who study Mesoamerica can read. Because we can read their writing, we have been able to learn a great deal about the ancient Maya people.

No one has been able to figure out why some of the major Maya cities, like Palenque and Copan, were mysteriously abandoned by 900 A.D. Other sites, like Tayasal, continued until the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century. Although many Maya people died from diseases brought by the Spanish conquerors, there are approximately six million Maya living in Mexico, Central America, and the United States today.

Find the figure shown on the left.

The Maya thought that this woman was very beautiful. Look at the top of her head, which has an unusual shape: long and pointed with her hair in a tight bun and stepped bangs. The Maya liked this pointed shape because it looks like a corn cob. Corn was an important crop for the Maya. They wrapped babies' heads tightly with cloth, shaping their heads like this woman's. They also believed that people were made from corn dough.



Central(?) lowlands, Maya area, Mexico or Guatemala, Late Classic, Maya: kneeling noble woman holding a lidded jar, A.D. 650–750. Ceramic with polychrome slip, h. 28.9 cm., w. 15.4 cm., d. 22.5 cm. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (2005-65 a-b). Photo: Bruce M. White.



The painted designs on this woman's cheeks were probably intended to represent her breath, which the Maya believed was a person's spirit, or life force. If you look carefully you can see a hole through the front of her nose, where a nose bead or tube once was. The paint on her cheeks might also be decorative extensions of this bead or tube. She has a painted necklace and she probably once had earrings.

Note that her face is painted red and white, as if she were wearing makeup. The Maya, like many cultures, valued personal ornamentation, things they wore to decorate their bodies. The ornamentation a person wore told others which family he or she was from and how powerful they were.

Can you think of examples of personal ornamentation people wear today?

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Do these things tell you anything about the person's culture or the groups they are associated with?

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Nakbé region, Central lowlands, Maya area, Petén, Guatemala, Late Classic, Maya ("Codex" style): The Princeton vase, A.D. 600–800. Granular gray-buff ceramic, mineral inclusions with orange-red and brown-black slip decoration, h. 21.5 cm., diam. 16.6 cm. Museum purchase, gift of the Hans A. Widenmann, Class of 1918, and Dorothy Widenmann Foundation (y1975-17). Photo: Bruce M. White.



## MAYA CYLINDER VESSELS

Find this vessel in one of the freestanding cases. Look at the side of the vessel that shows the scene depicted in the image on the left. The figure in this scene is a god of the Underworld, sitting on a throne in a palace. We call him God L. He is very old and has no teeth.

An owl is perched on the top of God L's hat, which has owl feathers as well as feathers from the quetzal bird, which are coming from the owl's tail. The Maya loved quetzels for their bright, colorful feathers and long tails. The Maya would catch live birds, pluck their tail feathers, and let them go.

God L is tying a bracelet on the wrist of the woman in front of him. The Maya would have thought that this woman was very beautiful. Look at the top of her head. Does the shape and long flowing hair remind you of the Maya woman we looked at earlier?

Can you find the rabbit under God L's throne? He is writing something. What do you think he is writing?

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Walk around the vase to the right and find the image shown on the left.

This woman is pouring liquid from a vessel that looks just like this one. What do you think she is pouring?

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Did you guess chocolate? You are correct!

Mesoamericans were the first people to make chocolate. They did not eat chocolate bars; they drank chocolate.

Making chocolate is not easy. It is made from the pods of the cacao (kah KOW) tree. The pods of this tree have seeds that can be made into chocolate. The Maya would roast the seeds, grind them into a paste, and mix the paste with water, chili peppers, cornmeal, and other ingredients.

The last step in making the chocolate is shown on this vase. The woman is pouring the chocolate back and forth between a cup and a pot, which made the chocolate frothy.

How do you think Maya chocolate would taste?

**bitter**

**sweet**

**spicy**

**syruy**

We think of chocolate as sweet, but the Maya did not have sugar cane to farm and make sugar. They did have honey, which they would mix with their chocolate.

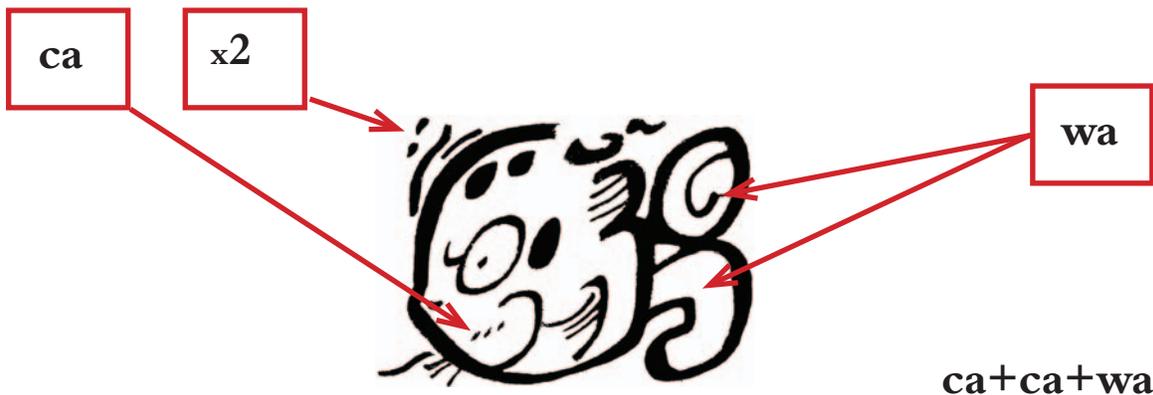
Do you think you would like Maya chocolate drinks? Why or why not?

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Have you noticed the shapes around the top of most of the vessels in these cases? These are Maya glyphs, or writing. Instead of using an alphabet the Maya wrote with pictures called hieroglyphs. Some of the pictures represent whole words, while others represent a sound or a syllable.

This glyph, for example, means cacao.

Can you find it on any of the vessels in the cases?





The writing on this vase tells us what is happening in the scene. The glyph directly above this scene tell us that the vase held chocolate from the corn tree. Corn was the most important plant for the Maya: they depended on it for food and believed that all good things came from corn. Chocolate that came from corn was highly valued. The writing also tells us that the person who owned this pot was named Bird Quetzal and that he was from the south.

Remember that God L's hat has an owl and quetzal feathers—just like the name of the person who owned the pot!

## Writing Activity:

### NUMBERS

The Maya wrote their numbers using a dot for 1 and a bar for 5. Zero was a shell shape.



0



1



4



6



19

Try writing your phone number using the Maya method.

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# THE BALLGAME



Ancient ball court of Monte Albán, in the Oaxaca region of Mexico. Photo taken by Bobak Ha'Eri, December 2005. English Wikipedia.

Find the case at the end of the gallery that has objects related to the Mesoamerican ballgame. The people of Mesoamerica played an early team sport, the ballgame. Both the Olmec and the Maya played a version of this game.

Because they made balls for this game from rubber, the Mesoamerican ballgame would not have been possible without the rubber tree. The size of the ball seems to have varied from location to location.

How many figures holding balls can you find in this case?

This is a Maya ball court from a place called Monte Albán. It is shaped like a capital letter "I." The long central alley is where the teams played the game. We think that the goal of the game might have been to get the ball past the other team, or possibly to hit stone carvings that were placed along the side of the alley. We do know that players were not allowed to use their hands.

Can you find a small object in this case in the shape of a ball court?

Although they didn't touch the ball with their hands while they played, many of the players in this case are holding a ball in their hands. Perhaps at the beginning of the game one player would throw the ball down on the ground to start the game.

Find this ball player in the case.

The ballgame was dangerous! The ball was heavy and could even break bones. The players had to wear special gear for protection.

Can you think of ballgames we play today that have special protective gear?

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West Mexico, Colima, Mexico, Late Preclassic: figure of a standing ballplayer wearing a mask, 300 B.C.–A.D. 300. Ceramic, h. 28.5 cm., w. 15.2 cm., d. 14.3 cm. Gift of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951, to honor Gillett G. Griffin (y1990-16). Photo: Bruce M. White.

Find this yoke in the case.

A yoke was part of the ballplayers' uniform; it would have been worn around the waist for protection. This one is made of stone, which would be too heavy to wear in a real game. The yoke also isn't nicked the way it would be if it had been worn in a game. Maybe it was worn in a special ceremony or was given as a trophy to the winner of a game.

Can you think of a game played today in which the winner receives a trophy that looks like a piece of equipment used to play the game?

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Gulf coast, Veracruz, Mexico, Late Classic, Classic Veracruz: ceremonial ballgame yoke, A.D. 600–900. Granite with traces of red pigment, h. 12.0 cm., w. 37.0 cm., d. 40.5 cm. Museum purchase, gift of the Friends of The Art Museum in honor of the sixtieth birthday of Gillett G. Griffin (y1988-12). Photo: Bruce M. White.



# THE HERO TWINS PLAY BALL

The ballgame was more than just a game for the Maya; it was a ritual based on their beliefs. Some Maya myths have survived in the Popol Vuh, a text that tells the Maya story of creation.

The ballgame plays a significant role in the Maya story of creation. Two important people in the Popol Vuh are the hero twins, Hunahpu (pronounced Who-naa-poo) and Xbalanque (pronounced Shh-ba-lan-kay). They were also the greatest Mesoamerican ballplayers. They even beat the gods!



*The Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, were excellent ball players. Unfortunately, the noise of their incessant games disturbed the gods of the underworld. Irritated, the gods sent a messenger owl to summon them to the underworld. Every day the twins played ball against the gods, just managing to hold their own. A good thing since a loss would cost them their lives!*

*Each night they faced other dangers in the houses where they slept: the Dark House, Razor House, and Jaguar House. They escaped with cunning and the help of forest creatures—until the night in the Bat house, where snatcher bats flew. The boys slept inside the tubes of their blow guns for protection, but Hunahpu stuck his head out too soon and a bat took it off. The next day, the gods used Hunahpu's head in the place of the ball. Xbalanque was able to trick them, however, and reunite his brother's head and body. In the end, it was the gods who lost the game.*

# Labeling Activity:

Below is a ballplayer in full uniform. See if you can label the different pieces of his uniform by filling in the blank boxes with the words in bold below.



Caption: Jaina, Northern lowlands, Maya area, Campeche, Mexico, Late Classic, Maya: ballplayer figurine, A.D. 600–800. Ceramic with traces of blue pigment, h. 34.2 cm., w. 17.8 cm., d. 11.8 cm. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund, in honor of Gillett G. Griffin on his seventieth birthday (1998–36). Photo: Bruce M. White.

**Sash**

**Jade necklace**

**Loincloth**

**Bracelets**

**Yoke**

**Anklets**

**Bird headdress**

You can find this ballplayer figurine in the wall case on the right side of the gallery. He wears a spectacular bird headdress painted a brilliant blue and set into a crown of feathers. These headdresses might have been used to distinguish one team from another or one player from another.



Thank you for joining us today to explore the art of Mesoamerica. Don't forget to stop at the information desk to collect a sticker for your Artful Adventures Passport. We hope that you enjoyed your visit to the Princeton University Art Museum and that you join us for another Artful Adventure!

On the following pages you will find suggestions for ways that you can continue your Mesoamerican Adventure at home:

## Art Project: Making a Maya Chocolate Pot

**Supplies:**

**Construction paper or cardstock**

**Colored pencils**

**Tape**



Take a piece of construction paper or card stock and fold it in half length-wise. This will be the outside of your pot.

Make up a short story for your pot. It can be a story that you create or you can use a favorite story that you already know. You can tell your story in words first: write it on a piece of paper or have a grown-up write it for you.

Now choose three scenes or characters from your story to draw on your pot. Divide the folded paper into three sections and draw your three scenes or characters.

When you are finished, roll the paper into a cylinder and tuck one end into the other. Tape the two ends together.



# Suggested Reading

## ***Miro in the Kingdom of the Sun*, by Jane Kurtz and David Frampton (woodcuts)**

In this folktale a young Inca girl succeeds where her brothers and others have failed, when her bird friends help her find the special water that will cure the king's son.

(K-3)

## ***Aztec, Inca, and Maya*, by Elizabeth Baquedano**

This book chronicles the history, beliefs, and everyday lives of the ancient Aztec, Inca, and Maya peoples.

(Gr 3-5)

## ***Amazing Maya Inventions You Can Build Yourself*, by Sheri Bell-Rehwoldt**

This rich resource combines historical facts about the Maya with entertaining and educational craft projects (Gr 3-6).

## ***National Geographic Investigates Ancient Inca: Archaeology Unlocks the Secrets of the Inca's Past*, by Beth Gruber and Johan Reinhard (consultant)**

Photographs and illustrations pepper this informative guide to recent archeological finds and what they tell us about the Inca.

(Gr 3-7)

## ***Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*, by Charles C. Mann**

This study of Native American societies is adapted for younger readers from Charles C. Mann's best-selling *1491*. Turning conventional wisdom on its head, the book argues that the people of North and South America lived in enormous cities, raised pyramids hundreds of years before the Egyptians did, engineered corn, and farmed the rainforests.

(Gr 6+)

All of these books can be found in the children's section of the Princeton Public Library.

