

Rachael Nutt

ARTH 189, Mierse

Term Paper

Divine Skill: Maya Artists as Holy Men¹

A signature holds significance in art today, but within Mayan antiquity, this meaning is magnified. The fact that an artist would sign anything speaks to his station (I² use “his” because no female painter has been identified as of yet). The literacy of artists, proven by the glyphs adorning pottery that vary from vase to vase, alone speaks to their elevated status.ⁱ Though many forms of pottery were able to hold images, inscriptions, and signatures, the cylinder vase one of the most numerous examples of pottery remaining today, and so this is the type of pottery I will focus on.³ Simple logic tells us that since the vases had patrons, the artists must have been in contact with those who could afford commissions, and from what we can tell from the skill levels and materials needed to create these arts, these were not created by common Maya folk. This is strengthened by the fact that some identified artists were likely relatives to royalty, as they place their signatures close to royal figures on their vases or cite this lineage in the line of glyphs that identify the vase’s type, decoration, contents, and patron, called the Primary Standard

¹ The title reflects the subject and thesis.

² Personal pronouns are acceptable in order to clarify certain elements, but they are not necessary. If you are uncomfortable using them, avoid them.

³ You can tell from this statement that I will be looking at a collection of works instead of just one artwork. The sentence also references signatures, which will be one of the focuses of the paper.

Sequence (PSS).⁴ ⁱⁱ This sequence reads as a sentence that infers creation, as its beginning translates to “it came into being, was blessed.”ⁱⁱⁱ The artist’s name and lineage (if included) would be in the closure section, which holds the identity of the patron and owners as well.^{iv} Though the Popol Vuh makes a point in bringing down those who “attempt at self-magnification,”⁵ such as the god Seven Macaw and his sons,^v artists in the Late Classic period nevertheless place their names in the PSS, place self-portraits in their works, and show artists and scribes almost as visual equals to the kings or gods represented. Although the act of taking credit for a work of art does stick out amongst our collections of largely anonymous works, this may not have been as unforgivable an act as the Popol Vuh might have us believe. How could a mere person flaunt himself in this way and have his works stand the tests of time? The answer is simple: painters were not just ordinary people, or even ordinary elites. Painters pushed into the realm of the divine, and they held more religiously authoritative positions than we have previously thought.⁶

While some believe cylinder vases to be tomb offerings (since they have largely been excavated from burial sites), Reents-Budet suggests that these should instead be understood as pieces of socio-economic currency.^{vi} No matter the interpretation, we can agree that these were objects of value made for practical use (even if these were solely tomb items, they would have been capable of holding

⁴ Since I talk about the PSS often in the paper, I include a brief explanation of it in the introduction.

⁵ Direct quotes should not be included within art historical papers unless they come from primary sources (as this does).

⁶ This is the thesis statement. Since the paper is about artists—factors “outside” the artwork—it is a contextual analysis.

liquid at some point). We will start with the most basic analysis: what is a cylinder vase? In simple terms, it is a cylindrical vessel made of fired clay capable of carrying and storing solids and liquids.⁷ These vases were then made appealing through decoration such as paint, and this decoration had the ability to convey messages. In a way, Maya potters and painters succeeded where the gods had failed. In the Popol Vuh, the gods had tried to create humans using mud, but they could not think, and they dissolved in water).^{vii} Not only could earthen-formed materials hold liquid and not dissolve, but they could also be painted with beautiful, meaningful images. In this subtle way, artists could transform a common adaptation into an overcoming of obstacles that the gods themselves could not do.^{viii}

There are similarities with the gods in the art of writing as well. The very world was created with the power of words: “And then the earth arose because of them, it was simply their word that brought it forth.”^{ix} This godly affiliation with words would also explain the very first part of the PSS, which is a blessing.^x In this way, painting can be understood as creation, making objects with the power of words. In identifying the vessel type, intended contents, patron, date, and artist, the painter has used words to call the vase into being. In including their own names in this invocation, painters further extended their godlike capability.

One must also take into consideration technical skill. It is clear that these painters were quite familiar with a brush and could wield it well. One of the

⁷ This is a compositional analysis. It states the bare facts about the pieces. I use this in order to build my argument, as facts are undisputable (unlike interpretations).

Princeton Vases (fig. 1)⁸ by Moʻ-n Buluch Laj, for instance, shows mastery of line and slip usage. This is called a *wahy* vase, which shows dancing shamanic figures.^{xi} Nine figures in clusters of three (two curled up, superimposed but in separate spaces, and one standing to their left) dance and look at each other. Glyphs label and separate them; they read left to right,^{xii} which prompts the viewer to read it in the same direction. The standing figures touch the glyphs in their dancing, creating a sense of movement and immediate presence as well as taking full advantage of the vase's tall shape. The animals and shamanic figures that are not standing create diagonals communicating that the scene is tumultuous: a bird with a snake coiled around it angles itself down, a jaguar-man rears back, a near-naked humanoid figure seems to tilt himself to view one of the dancers. Slip is thicker in the center of broader portions of the figures' bodies, which conveys depth. Simply put, the slip is thicker where the body is thicker. We see this especially in the dancing, upright figures in this Princeton Vase (fig. 1), as the thighs and torsos of the standing figures are darker where the slip has pooled.⁹ Justin Kerr interprets these figures as the Hero Twins with Water Lily Jaguar, God A, and Eagle.^{xiii}

The Holmul Dancer Vase (fig. 2) of Ah Maxam is likewise artistically superior to other vases of its region in its use of line, space, and detail. Three dancers, their bodies bent in dance, wear elaborate costumes of feathers and curling forms. Each of the three dancers and their three accompanying costumed dwarves, situated on

⁸ Figure numbers refer the reader to images mentioned within the paper. Without figure numbers, it may be difficult to find the corresponding image, even if it labeled.

⁹ This is a more traditional compositional analysis. I explain *how* the artwork achieves the effects that it does by describing it with art historical terms.

their right, have been rendered with excruciatingly delicate detail, fine lines alternating between dark red and lighter orange slip. The positioning of the figures' bodies, too, is impressive,¹⁰ with torsos leaning forwards, bent knees and elbows, and one heel raised slightly higher than the other to convey movement. There is a certain fluidity in their bodies that cannot be found in other pieces. The fact that they are bent in such dynamic poses means that this is a snapshot—these dancers could not stay still like this, and so the viewer understands that they are in the midst of high levels of activity. The richness of the detail allows for very little free space on the vase. The feathers, back-racks, and costumes fill the vase and even appear to go beyond the space available as their tops tuck behind the PSS.

One of the ways by which we can infer that artists were elites of considerable standing is by their self-presentation in vases. In some cases, it is as straightforward as making an artist or a scribe the subject of the piece. Methods of accomplishing this are to include placing portraits of painters and scribes into vase scenes, showing supernatural characters as painters and scribes, and signing the artists' names on the work (the placement of said name is also important). One such piece where this representation is evident on multiple levels is that from the Pasión River Region in Guatemala. This vase (fig. 3) shows three figures: a lord and two attendants. The leftmost attendant stands below the horizon line, the attendant in the middle sits on the horizon line, and the lord sits on a raised platform, looking on at his companions. The seated attendant is likely an artist, due to his simple cloth

¹⁰ This entire paragraph is mostly compositional analysis, but I control how the reader views it with the elements that I highlight.

headdress with a paintbrush stuck in it.¹¹ The high status of the artist is shown in the painted scribe's posture and gesticulation, which echoes that of the lord. Though the lord is physically higher, both scribe and lord sit cross-legged with their right hand slightly raised. In addition, the scribe is placed higher than the standing attendant and closer to the lord, who seems to look directly at the scribe. The fact that the artist signed his name (Groan Bat)^{xiv} behind the lord when there were other spaces available for such a set of glyphs is another indication of status.^{xv} This is important because as the viewer follows the line of movement of the attendants' heads, they see the artist's name directly behind the lord's head. Just as the lord is elevated, so are the glyphs, which suggests that the artist has a similarly lofty status.

Another instance of self-reference appears in MS0176 (fig. 4), where the artist has included a portrait of himself bent over a codex at the end of the PSS and also within the scene painted on the vase. [SECTION OMITTED]

Maya gods and supernatural figures are also portrayed as scribes and artists. [SECTION OMITTED]

Beyond the realm of self-identification is that of knowledge, and the Vase of Seven Gods (fig. 10) is a prime example. Here we see seven seated figures, six facing right and one facing left, reminiscent of a court scene. There does indeed seem to be some sort of conversation, as several figures raise their hands and arms in gesticulation. The seventh figure, identified as God L by his bird headdress, cigarette, and elderly appearance, sits on a platform draped in jaguar fur, meant to

¹¹ This is a brief iconographic analysis. We know the figure's identity because of the symbols.

be the jaguar throne stone, one of the three hearthstones that formed the world. Behind him is the *ikatz*, or burden, a bundle meant to represent the importance and strain of his position, and on the roof above him lays a crocodile.^{xvi} In a space vertically separated by glyphs are six other seated figures, also gods. The gods' names are as follows, moving from top left through bottom right: God Sky, God Earth, God Nine-Footsteps, God Three-Born-Together, God Ha-techi, and the Jaguar Paddler.^{xvii} An embellished register horizontally separates these gods, who do not appear to have any sort of raised seating.

Schele, Freidel, and Parker have identified this as a scene from the Popol Vuh, the Mayan equivalent to the book of Genesis, when the gods convene to build the world. More specifically, they believe this to be set in a place called "Black-Is-Its-Center," but Michael Carrasco is of the opinion that this describes the gods themselves rather than their location.^{xviii} The subject matter is refuted by the *tz'ak* glyph, which translates to both "to bring into existence" and "to put in order."¹² Regardless of grammar, this scene is placed before the world came into being, and so it makes sense that a black background communicates a pre-creation setting.

Glyph usage aside, we are clearly dealing with a knowledgeable artist—somebody who knows Maya cosmology and can manipulate the vase so that it conveys a sense of time and place to the viewer. Every bit of space is used, and even seemingly small symbols, such as the bundle behind God L's back, carry weight. Such is the saturation of detail and meaning that it is impossible to "read" this vase at a

¹² Art history uses very diverse sources. Linguistics, for example, comes in handy in determining the exact setting of this vase.

glance. If understanding this vase takes time, then creating such a vase would require even more time and energy. What we have here is an artist who has had extensive training with this material. Even though the elite were literate, there is not much information on their religious training. We do know that in the Yucatan region, priest-secretaries guarded the knowledge of literacy in combination with history, and that throughout Maya lands, members of the upper classes would learn both writing and some form of art.¹³ Reents-Budet suggests that the Popol Vuh was originally recorded in images such as this one by artist-scribes.^{xix} Due to the extensive knowledge of glyphs, history, and artistry shown in this vase, it would not be outlandish to suggest that this artist had an authoritative position in Maya religious society.

The Vase of Seven Gods and two other of Ah Maxam's attributed works, the Water Lily Vase (fig. 5a) and The Holmul Dancer Vase (fig. 2), brings in another interesting theory presented by Reents-Budet. [SECTION OMITTED]

Between the technical skill, religious knowledge, and authoritative self-representation, Maya artists were clearly highly valued members of society. The combination of all those things including their associations with the gods pushes this identity into a holier frame being.¹⁴

¹³ This is a contextual analysis: studying the environment outside the artwork that may affect what the artwork contains.

¹⁴ The conclusion briefly sums up the paper's argument.

Bibliography¹⁵

Freidel, D.; L. Schele; and Parker, J. *Maya Cosmos*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993

Just, B. *Dancing Into Dreams*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2012

learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/palenque/history/mythology.php

onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/ap3a.1998.8.1.71/epdf

research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=791

Reents-Budet, D. *Painting the Maya Universe*. Los Angeles: Duke University Press, 1994

Tedlock, D. *Popol Vuh*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996

ⁱ D. Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe*. Los Angeles: Duke University Press, 1994 pg. 56

ⁱⁱ Reents-Budet pg. 65

ⁱⁱⁱ Reents-Budet pg. 109

^{iv} Reents-Budet pg. 128

^v Tedlock pg. 77

^{vi} <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/ap3a.1998.8.1.71/epdf>

^{vii} D. Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 pg. 68-69

^{viii} onlinelibrary.wiley.com

^{ix} Tedlock pg. 65

^x Reents-Budet pg. 109

^{xi} B. Just, *Dancing Into Dreams*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2012 pg. 131

^{xii} Just pg. 135

^{xiii} http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=791

^{xiv} Just pg. 177

^{xv} Reents-Budet pg. 51-55

^{xvi} D. Freidel, L. Schele, J. Parker, *Maya Cosmos*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993 pg. 68

^{xvii} Freidel et al. pg. 69

^{xviii} <http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/palenque/history/mythology.php>

^{xix} Reents-Budet, pg. 57

¹⁵ The bibliography, just as in most Chicago/Turabian citations, is done in alphabetical order.