

News Hour Extra Lesson Plan: ANCIENT MAYA: KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ART

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/art/maya_6-07.html

Background, Activities and Critical Analysis

By Kathleen Heady

Subject(s)

Art, Art History

Estimated Time

Two 45 minute class periods.

Grade Level

9 through 12

Objective

In this lesson the student will explore the Maya culture, and our knowledge of it through art, architecture, and the heritage of modern Maya people.

- * Students will analyze pieces of art from Maya exhibit.
- * Students will examine glyphs that form the Maya system of writing.
- * Students will read about ancient Maya culture and how we have learned about the Maya through their art.
- * Students will develop an understanding of Maya daily life through writing and hands-on activities.

Background

Although the height of the Maya civilization ended over a thousand years ago, we are only now learning the details of their lives as we learn to read their written language, which has survived on stone carvings and other ceremonial and household objects. From AD 650-800, Maya kings and nobles living in the tropical rain forests of what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize, reached a peak of artistic expression and naturalism unequalled in the ancient New World. Archaeologists continue to uncover new finds, and epigraphy scholars, who decipher ancient inscriptions, continue to decode more of the glyphs that tell the story of the Maya.

The descendants of the Maya still live in southern Mexico and Central America, where many still retain characteristics of their ancestral cultures. Additionally, two of the most common foods of the Maya, which were also significant in their spiritual belief system, are foods we still enjoy today -- corn and chocolate.

An exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., entitled "Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya," highlighted the height of the Mayan civilization with an extensive display of sculpture, ceremonial and practical objects, many of which were seen in the United States for the first time.

The exhibition included stone sculptures, ceramics, masks, and other works from the ancient Maya royal court. Using examples from the ancient Maya cities of Palenque,

Toniná, Yaxchilán, and Bonampak, among others, "Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya" examined political and religious power in the royal court, which served as the central force in the life of each city.

The exhibition was organized into several areas: the hierarchy and relationships of kings, queens, and other members of the court; representations of the Maya gods and their counterparts in real life; the roles of royal women; warfare, warriors, and captives; and the Maya political world expressed through works of art. The exhibit focused especially on the city of Palenque, the most comprehensive example of an ancient Maya court known to us today.

Procedure

Lesson One: What We Know and How We Know It

Just as archaeologists dig for artifacts, we will "dig" through information to learn about the Maya.

1. Have students read or show the streaming video of the following Online NewsHour transcript:

Mayan High Life http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june04/mayan_05-13.html

2. Then ask students to explore the following Web sites to gather information about the life of the Maya people (If students do not have access to the Web, print the following pages in advance):

* Go to this link to see latest archaeological finds:

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/05/0504_040505_mayamasks.html

* Start here to see examples of Maya art and artifacts:

<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/mayainfo.htm>

* Use this list to "dig" and answer study questions:

http://www.historylink101.com/1/mayan/ancient_mayan.htm

<http://www.ancientsites.com/aw/Post/261968>

<http://www.jaguar-sun.com>

<http://www.mesoweb.org>

3. After examining the resources above, give students the handout and ask them to answer questions individually or with a partner.

* Lesson one student handout (Printer-friendly PDF)

* Lesson one teacher key (Printer-friendly PDF)

4. After gathering information about the Maya culture, students should think about how they can interpret the factual knowledge they have acquired about the Maya, to answer broader questions about their art and civilization, as an archaeologist would use his finds to provide a general picture of a civilization. Some possible broader questions include:

Who held the power in the Maya civilization?

What goals and values were important to the Maya?

How did various aspects of the culture connect to each other: religion, recreation, government, food production, etc.?

Lesson Two: What Does It All Mean?

1. Have students visit the virtual version of the Mayan exhibit at the following Web site: <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2004/maya/lifeatcourt.htm>

2. Now that the students have some knowledge about the Maya, engage them in a class discussion in which they answer some or all of the following questions. (Alternatively, they could discuss the questions in small groups.)

3. To end the class, the teacher along with a few students, can prepare a Maya Chocolate drink for everyone to try.

Recipe

- * Grate 1 oz. unsweetened baking chocolate into a cup or mug.
- * Add a little boiling water and stir until melted.
- * Then add a little cinnamon, or, to be authentic, some chili powder.
- * Fill the cup with boiling water.
- * Using a "molinillo," or whisk, stand it upright in the cup and rub the whisk briskly between your hands to make the chocolate foam.

(This is the way the Maya would drink chocolate but students may want to add some sugar and milk to suit modern tastes.)

Extension Activities

Extension Activity I

Students could be assigned to research and report on these topics:

1. Maya of today. Who are they? Where do they live? What connections do they have to their ancestors, and what are their problems in today's world?

2. Learn about the science of archaeology. What kind of education is needed to become an archaeologist? What is it like to work on a "dig?"

3. Research another ancient civilization of the Americas. What similarities do they have with the Maya? What differences?

Extension Activity II

Working with art or English teachers, students might do an interdisciplinary project.

1. Try writing some historical fiction. Write a short story set in the ancient Maya civilization. Be sure to make it historically accurate.
2. Create a short diary or scrapbook of daily life.
3. Create a poster showing art, writing, or some other aspect of Maya civilization.
4. Create a map of a Maya city.
5. Design a visual representation of a "ball game."
6. Copy a glyph on poster board and include explanation.
7. Draw a Maya sculpture or other piece of art, or model with clay.