

TEACHER'S CORNER: MAYA ART AND WRITING

by Beverly Chiarulli



[Note: Some of the concepts in this lesson are based on lessons in *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher's Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (1993). This Teacher's Corner can be used in science, social studies, and art classes and is designed to improve skills in scientific method, synthesizing, and drawing. These lessons will engage students in using strategies such as classification, comparison, and interpretation.]

Vocabulary

Glyph: Shortened version of hieroglyph. In Maya writing, glyphs are more often equivalent to short syllables than single letters.

Pictograph: A sign that pictures a real thing.

Iconograph: A stylized symbol of a "real thing" used in a drawing or painting.

Stela: A free-standing monument, either carved or plain; often paired with "altars" or large round flat stones in Maya sites.

Stucco facade: Wet plaster, which could be carved or molded, used as building decoration. A façade is the front side of a building.

Syllabary: A set of symbols used for syllables. Maya writing is composed of combinations of syllables rather than letters. The syllabary provides a comparison of the symbols to combinations of letters.

INTRODUCTION

Maya art is found on almost everything made and used by the Maya and in every material with which they worked. Recent advances in the decipherment of Maya glyphs have shown that many of the glyphs, paintings, and sculptures provide historical records of Maya kings and their interactions with each other. One of the ways that archaeologists first were able to translate these glyphs was by comparing date glyphs with symbols that seemed to be the names of sites. Other glyphs that are often seen on stela or stone monuments are those that stand for the accession of a king, the performance of a ritual, or the capture of a rival king or lord.

Even before the Maya used glyphs to report their history, they decorated their buildings with stucco facades. Archaeologists can compare the symbols and carvings found on the facades with those later used on monuments with glyphs to interpret or decode what the Maya were trying to say with the facades. In some cases, these interpretations can help us understand why the Maya built the buildings and how they used them.

The Maya also used glyphs along with pictures on their pottery, in large paintings on the walls of buildings, and on small carved objects like pieces of shell or jade. By comparing the pictures and the glyphs and the style of the painting or carving, archaeologists and art historians can sometimes identify individual Maya artists or different versions of the same scene. Through our studies of Maya art and writing, we can better understand how the Maya lived in their ancient cities.

Through the activities below, students will experience how archaeologists use artifacts, art and writing to increase our understanding of Maya civilization.

Exercise 1:

Materials needed:

- A copy of the Maya syllabary for each student. These are available in several books such as Michael Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code* or on the internet. (A useful version is at <http://www.halfmoon.org/syllabary.html>, along with directions for using the syllabary to write names.)

- A piece of paper for each student and colored markers, pencils, or paint.

1. Our writing system uses letters representing individual sounds that are combined into words. The Maya writing system is different in that words are divided into syllables. Symbols are used to represent these syllables. In English, we occasionally use a single symbol or "letter" to represent a syllable, like when we use "a" as a word as in "a horse." For students to write their names using Maya glyphs, they must first break their names into syllables:

Kate = "ka" + "te"

Some names are more difficult, because you must add an imaginary or silent letter:

Jon = "jo" + "ne"

Some names include sounds that are not found in Maya languages, like "r." You can use the syllabary to find a substitute or you may leave that letter out of your translation, as shown in my name:

Beverly = "be" + "ve" + "li"

2. Have each student break his or name into syllables.

3. Have the students match the syllables from their names to the syllabary.

4. The syllables are then combined into blocks to form word glyphs. Examples of word arrangements are:

ka			ve
te	jo	ne	li
	be		

Have the students use glyphs from the syllabary to replace the English syllables in their own name in blocks on a sheet of paper.

Exercise 2:

Materials needed:

- A picture or transparency of a Maya pot or mural showing a painted scene and glyphs. (A good source of pictures of painted Maya pottery is the Foundation for Mesoamerican Studies Maya vase database website—<http://www.famsi.org/mayavase>.)
- A piece of paper, a small flower pot, or a piece of clay for each student and a marker or paint and paintbrush.
- Colored index cards or pieces of colored paper.

1. Brainstorm examples of symbols that are meaningful to us today. You might start the discussion by providing examples of symbols on



products. As a comparison, students could be asked to consider how symbols have changed through time. Have the students look at a dollar bill, identify the symbols, and then explain the meaning of the symbols. There are probably several symbols that cannot be interpreted, like the "pyramid with the eye."

2. Give each student (or group of students) a piece of paper, or one of the flowerpots. Ask them to create a symbol of their culture or something important in their lives. Have them draw the symbol on the piece of paper or on the flowerpot.

3. Ask groups of students to look at a picture from a Maya pot or painting. Have the students identify glyphs and iconographs in the picture.

4. Have the student groups look at the information that is contained in the Maya picture about the Maya life and environment. Ask them to answer the following questions about the picture:

- What kinds of clothes are the Maya wearing? What does their style of dress tell you about their environment?
- Does the picture tell you anything about the natural environment? Do you see any of the plants or animals that might have been important to the Maya?

- c. List or draw pictures of five artifacts that you see in the picture. (Artifacts are things that were used or made by people and might include pots shown in the picture, spears, bracelets, necklaces, headdresses, etc.).

Give each group of students a set of five colored index cards or a piece of colored paper cut into five pieces. (Each group should get a different colored set of cards.) Have each group write the name of or draw one of the artifacts on each card. Ask the groups to give as much detail as possible about the artifacts they choose. Collect the Maya pictures and place them on a table at the front of the room. Then have each group pass their set of cards to one of the other groups. Each group should try to match the set of cards to one of the pictures.

As a variation, the cards can continue to be passed on to the other groups, with each group removing one card from the set they pass. A set of five cards works best with five groups. Larger numbers of groups may need more sets of cards.

Exercise 3:

Materials needed:

- A roll of wrapping paper or butcher's paper
- Markers or paint and paintbrush

1. Use the roll of paper to make a large "stela" for the classroom. It should measure at least 18" x 48" or more. Have each of the students transfer his or her name glyph blocks to the "stela." You can add other glyphs to the panel. For example, the website at <http://www.halfmoon.org/date.html> contains a date calculator that you can use to translate any date into a Maya calendrical date. Leave a blank space in the center of the picture for a drawing.

2. Have the students design or draw a picture for the center of the "stela". As part of the process, have the students brainstorm about the information that might be included, such as the information they saw in the Maya paintings. They might want to include information on the school or on favorite activities. Ask the students to incorporate the symbols they developed into the drawing.

3. Create a translation of the information on the stela. It should include the information in the glyphs as well as the story shown in the picture and symbols.

Exercise 4:

When archaeologists investigate a Maya site, they do so with the permission of the government of the country in which the site is located. They carefully record information on the location and artifacts found in the excavations. They leave the artifacts in the host country, since these belong to the people and government of the country.

Many Maya sites have been "looted" in recent years. "Looting" is a term used to describe unauthorized excavations at a site in which the objective is to recover only valuable artifacts for sale in the United States, Europe, or Japan. Few records are kept of the excavations, and artifacts are scattered among many owners. Sometimes small artifacts like pottery, jewelry, and stone tools are found in these excavations, but other times large carvings or stone stela are cut into pieces by looters and sold.

Using the stela created by the class, cover sections of the stela with irregularly-shaped pieces of construction paper. These represent sections of the stela removed by looters. Or make Xerox copies of sections of the stela that can be given to groups of students to interpret. Have the class discuss how much information is lost when only part of the stela can be studied and why it is important to protect archaeological sites.

(A version of this last exercise involves actually cutting out or defacing parts of the stela. However, students who have put so much effort into creating the stela can find this to be very upsetting, so I recommend that teachers only simulate the destruction of the stela.)

Versions of these lessons were developed for a Workshop for Teachers in Maya Archaeology and Tropical Ecology held in Belize in 1997 and for several Maya Weekends at the University of Pennsylvania Museum.

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FOR FURTHER READING

Coe, Michael. 1993. *Breaking the Maya Code*. Thames & Hudson.

Coe, Michael D. and Justin Kerr. 1998. *The Art of the Maya Scribe*. Harry N Abrams.

Harris, John F., Stephen K. Stearns. 1997. *Understanding Maya Inscriptions: A Hieroglyph Handbook*. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.

Reents-Budet, Dorrie, Linda Schele, and Michael P. Fezzatesta. 1993. *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*. Duke Univ. Press.

A useful source about the looting of Maya sites is found in the reports of the Foundation for Mesoamerican Studies. The report is *Surviving in the Rainforest: The Realities of Looting in the Rural Villages of El Peten, Guatemala* by Sofia Paredes Maury. It is at: <http://www.famsi.org/reports/paredesmaury/paredesmaury.htm>

Beverly Chiarulli is an Assistant Professor and Director of Archaeological Services at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Chair of the Society for American Archaeology Public Education Committee.

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