

# The Boston Globe

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE | APRIL 4, 2010

## ART

### A new view of the Maya

Peabody Essex exhibit throws light on Ancient culture's connection

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Rarely does an exhibition come along and fundamentally change our entire understanding of an ancient civilization. "Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea," a new exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, does exactly that. It's exciting not only because it's full of beguiling imagery and extraordinary objects — from trumpets carved from conches to engraved stingray spines used for bloodletting — but because it's important. Walking through it, you can't help but share the sense of discovery that the curators who organized the show must have experienced as they planned it.

The result is not, as with most exhibitions, a prepackaged view that illustrates a long-established view with perhaps a tweak of fresh research here and a newly uncovered drawing there. It's a fundamentally new idea.

The Maya, as we already knew, developed the first sophisticated written language in pre-Columbian America and for centuries thrived in what is now Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and parts of Mexico. Until recently, scholars tended to focus on the urban aspects of Maya society — its inland cities surrounded by jungle, its impressive architecture — and on the sensational prevalence of human sacrifice and bloodletting in Maya religion.



Above: a soccer-ball size piece of jade depicts the head of a god.

But for some years, researchers have begun to suspect that our understanding of the Maya worldview had a big hole in it. In trying to fill it, they have uncovered a cosmology that sees the world as a turtle in a blazing basin of water — a basin that was once a pool of blood in which gods and sharks fought battles. They have had to come to grips with supernatural crocodiles that breathe forth clouds that bring rain, and stingrays, seabirds, sharks and spiny oysters that exercise supernatural powers.

Whatever else it suggests, this vision does not sound like the invention of a landlocked people. And sure enough, when you look at a map, you quickly see that the Maya were surrounded on three sides by seas: the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.



Above: A limestone panel features soldiers and two royal figures, with the king wearing goggles and a headdress made of seashells.

And yet few Maya sites uncovered by archeologists were actually on the coast; images of sea-going vessels were rare, and it was only recently that scholars discovered, in the sophisticated pictorial writing system of the Maya, a glyph for "the sea."

In other words, until recently, the significance of the sea and of water to this extraordinary culture had been mostly overlooked. Organized by the museum's own curator of maritime art, Daniel Finamore, and Stephen Houston, a professor of social science and archeology at Brown University, "Fiery Pool" presents a radically altered picture.

The show is the product of more than five years' preparation. It builds on transformative new research over the past three decades, and boasts loans from major museums in the United States, Honduras, Belize, Mexico, Guatemala and Britain. (It will travel to the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas and the Saint Louis Art Museum after its showing in Salem.)

According to Finamore in the press release: "Everywhere we went in Mexico and Central America, we consulted with Maya specialists, sharing with them our theory that the sea and water were actually central to the Maya, even those who lived far inland. Many artistic motifs actually called this out but no one recognized it before. These conversations inspired people to show us things that they otherwise wouldn't have, objects recently excavated and never published that might fit the theme."

Handsomely installed against richly colored walls, the show occupies a series of connected galleries at the Peabody Essex. The visual language of the Maya — linear and stylized, tightly compacted, and seemingly allergic to straight lines — can be hard to parse. So magnified diagrams of important motifs to do with the sea and water are reproduced on some walls, making them easier to recognize. And a few unobtrusive and inventive touch and video screens help clarify aspects of the Maya worldview embodied in the objects.



Above: effigy vessel of a spiny lobster is the only known representation of a lobster in Maya art

You can best get an idea of how intelligently and lucidly the show has been installed if I describe a series of objects in the gallery that is built around the theme of the mythical creatures of the "fiery pool."

First we see a lidded vessel decorated with spotted, long-beaked water birds occupying a space between two rows of shells. A small, nearby touch screen demonstrates how these shells likely reference the marine shells — emblems of the sea — that were sewn into clothes and, during dances, would have added a jangly, percussive sound suggestive of crashing waves.

Near to this is an extraordinary limestone panel with two royal figures, in magnificent regalia, and a series of soldiers, all carved in relief. The king wears goggles and a headdress made of sea shells. Adorning his chest is a particularly important type of shell, that of the spondylus, or spiny oyster (it recurs throughout the show).

A neighboring display lays out dozens of these spondylus shells, fastidiously engraved with writing and punctured with little holes for sewing them onto clothes. Seeing them makes it easier to imagine the jangly sound they'd make on clothes. But what is most striking about them — and obviously not apparent in the limestone carving — is their pink and red color. They were associated, it turns out, with blood: with menstruation, with bloodletting, and with the peculiarly Maya vision of a primordial sea of blood. They signified authority, and their hard, impervious quality conjured the watery connections and power of the mythical War Serpent.

The imagery on some nearby plates (including one with an extraordinary rendering of a snarling fish) along with their rich red color, also suggest connections with blood rites. But most beguiling of all is the small sculpture — an effigy vessel — of a spiny lobster. It's the only known representation of a lobster in Maya art.

Inside its open, toothy mouth you can see the face of a man (perhaps a deity). Its corrugated shell contains a hole — once plugged — leading to a cavity that contained a stingray spine, three shark teeth, and two small blades. All of these, which are displayed alongside, suggest not only connections to water but to the offering of human blood in rituals of self-sacrifice.

So, even from this rudimentary description, you can see how each piece of the display sends out web-like threads to the objects nearby, and it all accumulates to a worldview that is as imperiously full-throttled as it is surprising.

Indeed, what is striking about the worldview that emerges is not simply the connection with the sea, but the way imagery and beliefs about the sea seem impossible to divorce from other forms of water, such as rain, rivers, and lakes, and from other elements, including the wind, the air and ultimately the earth.

A key piece appears toward the end of the show: it's a beautifully preserved panel with exquisitely carved writing that describes a king's pilgrimage to the sea. Its meaning, which does more than any other object in the show to back the curators' thesis, was only recently unlocked, and it is thrilling to hear them explaining it on a video screen.

There are other marvelous pieces: Don't miss the sculpture from the British Museum depicting a bloodletting rite; the conch that has been carved into a trumpet with delicate inscriptions in pink; the colorful mural from the Mexican Temple of the Warriors depicting a bustling port, or the soccer-ball size piece of jade carved into the head of a god.

This last weighs almost 10 pounds. It was discovered in 1968 in Belize, and was buried with a man who had it cradled in his arm. Its very color seems to argue a connection with the sea. Unsurprisingly, it is one of Belize's most prized national treasures. It even appears on bank notes beside the face of Queen Elizabeth II.

#### ART REVIEW

**FIERY POOL: The Maya and the Mythic Sea**  
At: Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, through July 18.  
978-745-9500, [www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)