

“They say the world is just floating with us, like foam floats...We are just floating, rippling on the water.” — Ch’Orti’ Maya Account

FIERY POOL: THE MAYA AND THE MYTHIC SEA

Based on bold new scholarship, exhibition of ancient Maya artworks on view at the Peabody Essex Museum, 27 March 2010 – 18 July 2010

SALEM, MA — Rarely does an exhibition offer an entirely new way of viewing the art of a great civilization. *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea* does exactly that by revealing and interpreting the importance of water to the ancient Maya. Shark teeth, stingray spines, sea creatures and waterfowl appear in form and image in works of stone and clay. Supernatural crocodiles breathe forth rain, and cosmic battles between mythic beasts and deities shape this radical new conception of the Maya worldview.

Over 90 works, many recently excavated and never before seen in the United States, offer exciting new insights into the culture of the ancient Maya focusing on the sea as a defining feature of the spiritual realm and the inspiration for powerful works of art. Surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, denizens of hundreds of Maya cities throughout the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America responded to the proximity of the ocean, and the power and omnipresence of inland and atmospheric water that shaped their existence.

Fiery Pool was organized by Daniel Finamore, The Russell W. Knight Curator of Maritime Art and History at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) and Stephen D. Houston, The Dupee Family Professor of Social Science and Professor of Archaeology at Brown University. The exhibition is scheduled to travel to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and the St. Louis Art Museum.

“*Fiery Pool* is revelatory on two important levels. Its new interpretation moves us far beyond traditional views of the Maya as a land-based civilization. The show also reminds us that we are connected with an ancient, and yet still existing, civilization through the essential element of water,” said Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, The James B. and Mary Lou Hawkes Chief Curator at PEM.

At the height of its achievement between 300 and 900 AD, the Maya civilization spanned hundreds of cities across Mexico and Central America. Their culture highly-advanced in mathematics, astronomy, architecture and art, the Maya practiced a complex religion and used a refined pictorial writing system composed of more than 800 glyphs. Interpretation of this language had a role in understanding of Maya culture to that point. While today 90% of glyphs are now understood, it was only in the late 1980s that a glyph for the sea had been identified. Until this key glyph had been unlocked, the importance of the sea in Maya culture had not been fully studied or appreciated. Translated literally as *Fiery Pool*, identification of this glyph was part of a growing awareness of the centrality of the sea in Maya life that culminates in this exhibition and the companion book of the same title.

“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,” said Daniel Finamore. “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.”

EXHIBITION THEMES

This exhibition is organized in four thematic sections.

Water and Cosmos

Surrounded by the sea in all directions, the ancient Maya viewed their world as inextricably tied to water. More than a necessity to sustain life, water was the vital medium from which the world emerged, gods arose and ancestors communicated.



The panel shown (left) is an exceptional example of Maya sculpture depicting a ruler known as Tajchanahk, “Torch-Sky-Turtle,” seated on a water lily throne in the royal court, while simultaneously inhabiting the subtle, watery realm. A bubbling stream delineates the space with stylized foliage anchoring the corners. This work suggests that for the Maya, the realms of earth, sea, sky and cosmos may have been perceived as flowing into each other, rather than as distinct territories of being.

Creatures of the Fiery Pool

The world of the Maya brims with animal life, animated, realistic and supernatural all at once. Objects in this section portray a wide array of fish, frogs, birds and mythic beasts inhabiting the sea and conveying spiritual concepts. This effigy of an actual Caribbean spiny lobster (shown here) is the only



known Maya representation of the creature. The object was excavated in 2007 from one of the oldest sites in Belize, populated for over three thousand years. It dates from the turbulent early colonial period when traditional Maya life was besieged by incursions of Spanish soldiers and missionaries. A plugged cavity bearing a stingray spine, three shark teeth and two blades of microcrystalline quartz hint at blood sacrifice. The head emerging from the mouth may be the face of a Maya deity.

Navigating the Cosmos



For the Maya, water was a source of material wealth and spiritual power. All bodies of water — rivers, *cenotes* (deep, inland pools) and the sea — were united, and all could be traversed to a cosmic realm. This magnificent head is a Belize national treasure, and one of the most exquisite works discovered in the Maya world. Weighing nearly ten pounds, it was created from a single piece of jadeite, the color of which was directly associated with the sea. Likely carved in Guatemala and transported by canoe to Belize,

this sculpture is a complex depiction of a deity with the eyes of a sun god. It was found in the tomb of an elderly man, likely cradled in his arm upon burial at the sacred site, Altun Ha.

Birth to Rebirth

The final section of the exhibition addresses the cyclical motion of the cosmos as the Maya experienced it. The sun rose in the morning from the Caribbean in the east, bearing the features of a shark as it began to traverse the sky (it only had these features in the early morning). Cosmic crocodiles exhaled storms and battled with gods of the underworld. This elaborate censer (shown right) portrays a deity central to a creation myth from Palenque, Mexico. Water curls on his cheeks and shell ear ornaments linking him to the rain god, Chahk, speak of his connection to the watery world. A shark serves as his headdress topped by a toothy crocodile. From this censer, ritual



smoke curled through the city of Palenque, suffusing it with scent and mystery.

PRESS PREVIEW

TUESDAY | MARCH 23, 2010 | 9:30 - 11:30 AM

Breakfast, preview and exhibition tour with Daniel Finamore, The Russell W. Knight Curator of Maritime Art and History at PEM and Stephen Houston, The Dupee Family Professor of Social Science and Professor Archaeology at Brown University. Please respond to Whitney Riepe, whitney_riepe@pem.org or 978 745 9500 x3228.

- **For interviews** with curator Daniel Finamore, please contact **April Swieconek** at april_swieconek@pem.org or 978 745 9500 x3109
- **Press images** are available upon request by contacting **Whitney Riepe** at whitney_riepe@pem.org or 978 745 9500 x3228.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea by Daniel Finamore and Stephen D. Houston is available for purchase in the PEM Shop or online at www.pemshop.com. For a reviewer copy, please contact Whitney Riepe at whitney_riepe@pem.org.

EXHIBITION EVENTS

SATURDAY | MARCH 27, 2010 | 1:30 PM

FILM SCREENING | *LOST KINGDOM OF THE MAYA*

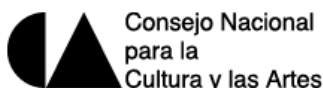
SATURDAY | MARCH 27, 2010 | 3:00 PM

PRESENTATION | DR. GEORGE STUART, FAMED ARCHEOLOGIST AND MAYA EXPERT

Join renowned Maya expert Dr. George Stuart as he reflects upon the role of the sea in the Maya world. Dr. Stuart was a major figure at the National Geographic magazine for nearly forty years and participated directly in a number of the most pivotal archaeological investigations of the past fifty years, including field work in the Maya ruins at Dzibilchaltun, Balankanche Cave, and Cobá. He has produced a series of outstanding works that have become classic descriptions of the ancient Maya including *The Mysterious Maya*, *Lost Kingdoms of the Maya*, and most recently *Palenque: Eternal City of the Maya*.

IMAGES ABOVE (TOP TO BOTTOM)

- *Panel with a seated ruler in a watery cave*; AD 795; Cancuen, Guatemala; Limestone; 22 5/8 x 26 ¼ x 3 inches (57.5 x 66.5 x 7.6 cm); Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes – Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City; Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum © Jorge Pérez de Lara.
- *Lobster effigy circa*; AD 1550; Lamanai, Belize; Clay and paint; 2 ¾ x 8 ¼ x 3 in (7 x 21 x 8 cm); National Institute of Culture and History, Belize; Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum photograph © Jorge Pérez de Lara.
- *Sculpture of the Jester God*; AD 550-650; Altun Ha, Belize; Jadeite; 5 7/8 x 4 3/8 x 5 ¾ (14.9 x 11.2 x 14.8 cm); National Institute of Culture and History, Belize; Photograph courtesy National Institute of Culture and History, Belize.
- *Incense burner with a deity with aquatic elements*, AD 700 – 750; Palenque, Mexico Ceramic; 46 ¾ x 22 ¼ x 7 7/8 inches (118.5 x 56.5 x 20 cm); Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes – Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Museo de Sitio de la Zona Arqueológica de Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, 10-604759; Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, photograph © 2009 Jorge Pérez de Lara.



EXHIBITION CREDITS



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Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this exhibition do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the U.S. Department of Education.

ABOUT THE PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

The Peabody Essex Museum presents art and culture from New England and around the world. The museum's collections are among the finest of their kind, showcasing an unrivaled spectrum of American art and architecture (including four National Historic Landmark buildings) and outstanding Asian, Asian Export, Native American, African, Oceanic, Maritime and Photography collections. In addition to its vast collections, the museum offers a vibrant schedule of changing exhibitions and a hands-on education center. The museum campus features numerous parks, period gardens and 22 historic properties, including Yin Yu Tang, a 200-year-old house that is the only example of Chinese domestic architecture on display in the United States.

HOURS: Open Tuesday-Sunday and holiday Mondays, 10 am-5 pm. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

ADMISSION: Adults \$15; seniors \$13; students \$11. Additional admission to Yin Yu Tang: \$5. Members, youth 16 and under and residents of Salem enjoy free general admission and free admission to Yin Yu Tang.

INFO: Call 866-745-1876 or visit our Web site at www.pem.org.

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