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## Title of Object

Vase (with monkeys)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Country:** Mexico or Guatemala

**Date of Object:** 450-700 CE

**File Created:** 4/14/2016

**Accession Number:** 2000.195

**Author of File:** K. H. Schwyzer and Meg Ubel

**Material/Medium:** Clay, pigments

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Art of the Americas

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 7/6/2016

**Culture:** Maya

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## Tour Topics

Group 1 tour, animals/birds, ancient culture, ceramics, daily life, food and drink, mythology, nature, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Mesoamerican, monkeys

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

From K.H. Schwyzer:

Describe the patterns and shapes on this vessel.

What do you think the artist is trying to say with this depiction of the monkeys?

Take a look at the other motifs on the vase. What do you think they represent?

If you were to paint a vase, what animals might you want to include in your design and why?

From Meg:

1. Take a close look at this vessel, getting as far around to the back as you can.

Describe what you see on the vessel.

What are the monkeys doing? What else do you notice about them?

Describe the designs on the top rim.

What do you notice about the background pattern? (relate to image of cacao pod)

2. Knowing that monkeys are spiritually significant to the Maya, why do you think the artist put them on this vase?
3. Notice the shape of this vase. It was likely used to make a traditional Maya drink consisting of chocolate, chiles, water and cornmeal. Why do you think the vase was made in this shape?
4. What item can you think of from our lives today that's decorated with an animal image, and what is the significance? (e.g., jersey with team mascot, turkey platter, manger scene)

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### **Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

The vase is made of fired earthenware with incised designs, painted with red and black pigments. It comes from the Yucatan area of present-day Mexico.

The vase depicts four black howler monkeys, two large and two small. One of the large monkeys holds a cacao pod and a smaller monkey stands on its back. The other large monkey balances a smaller monkey on its tail. Around the top of the vessel is a series of painted hieroglyphs. The bulk of the vase has a repeating background design of a circle with three dots inside.

The Black Howler Monkey is found in Central and South America and is the largest of the New World monkeys. The male howler monkey is one of the loudest animals on earth. They have a hyoid bone and a saggy throat which amplifies the sound. They are aptly named for their cacophonous crier (like a low-pitched growl - audio is available online). When several cry out together, at dusk or dawn, the sound can be heard up to 3 miles away. The monkey has a long prehensile tail that can grip things or hang from branches, serving as an extra arm. The monkeys live mostly aloft in the forest canopy, and eat leaves, flowers and fruits. They will eat the cacao pod, favoring the sweet gooey pulp inside and allowing the seeds to pass through, thus propagating the cacao tree. They sleep up to 15 hours a day.

The vase was used to make a traditional Maya frothy drink consisting of ground chocolate, chiles, water and cornmeal. The froth was created by pouring the drink back and forth between vessels from a height. This process is pictured on other Maya painted vessels. The tall narrow shape of the vase facilitated the creation of the froth without the drink splashing out.

The overall circle designs with three dots in the middle may be seen to represent the cacao beans.

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

The Maya civilization existed in present-day Mexico (Yucatan), Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize, starting as early as 1800 BCE. The Mesoamerican Classic Period (250 CE to 900 CE) was the "golden age" of the Maya empire. Maya civilization at that time included as many as 50 major city-states with large stone stepped platform temples, palaces and ball courts. The Maya began to decline in the 9th century. Today there are an estimated 7 million Maya living in their ancestral regions. Many

Maya continue to speak one of the Mayan dialects, wear traditional clothing and maintain traditional customs.

Interesting Maya facts:

- a. Only fully literate people in the pre-contact Americas, with a hieroglyphic writing system found on pottery, manuscripts, and buildings.
- b. Had a remarkably sophisticated calendar, with a numbering system of dots (ones) and bars (fives) used to mark time.
- c. Made painted books called codices that documented their culture, gods, beliefs, history and astrological data. No codices survive from the Classic Era, but several codices from the later Post-classic era exist and provide information about the culture.

The Maya had a complicated belief system, worshiping dozens of gods both human and animal. The Maya rulers claimed that they had lived with the gods before coming to earth to rule and that when they died they would return to their celestial homes. The Maya elite put painted vessels and books in tombs of the deceased to help them on their journey to the afterlife. The Maya believed in an Underworld with nine levels, the base of which was called Xibalba ('shee-BAHL-bah'). The world of Xibalba contained many colorful characters and required the deceased to go through many trials and ordeals before they were allowed to ascend to the heavens and join their ancestors in the afterlife.

Maya scribes elevated the creation of hieroglyphs to an important art form. Scribes were referred to as "royal artist-scribes" in the Maya language and came from the Maya elite. The verbs "to paint" and "to write" are the same word in most Maya dialects. It was believed that the supreme god Itzamna invented writing and then taught the secrets of his invention to a few other gods, including a rabbit, twin monkey-men and an old god Pawatun. These gods then passed the skills on to carefully selected humans from the elite class. The howler monkey gods were divine patrons of the artisans, especially scribes and sculptors (see Wikipedia). They often are pictured holding paintbrushes and writing.

Monkeys played an important role in Mesoamerican art. To the Maya, the monkey is a divine creature, prominent in myths, such as the underworld and creation of early man. The monkey, in this case the howler monkey, can effortlessly come and go between the ground and the highest point in the rainforest, symbolizing the connection between the earthly and the divine. Monkeys in the Mayan area of Mesoamerica play a critical role in cacao, breaking open the pods to suck out the sweet gooey pulp(which tastes like lemonade) casting away the bitter seeds. A typical pod contains 20 to 50 beans.

Chocolate is derived from the cacao tree, a tropical plant that thrives within 20 degrees of the equator. The trees flower, the flowers are pollinated by insects, and mature cacao pod fruits are produced about 6 months later. Cacao pods are about 7 to 14 inches long, yellow-orange in color when ripe, and contain seeds (cocoa beans) in a sweet gooey pulp. The pods are hand-harvested with machetes, cut open and beans/pulp removed. The beans are fermented and dried. They are sent to a processing plant where they are roasted and ground into the cocoa that we know and love.

This vase was used as a tall mixing vessel for cacao, water and chilies in order to create a chocolate drink. The drink was then poured into smaller chocolate pots for consumption. The Maya drank chocolate on a daily basis, but their version of chocolate was spicy, not sweet. Today, cacao seeds are fermented, dried, roasted and ground into unsweetened chocolate.

From the Penn Museum: “Monkeys figure frequently in Maya art and folklore. For example, the Maya creation myth, the Popol Vuh, tells of early, unsuccessful attempts to create humans from things other than corn. After the creator gods failed to form people out of mud, they tried making them of wood, but the behavior of these ‘humans’ was so inappropriate that the gods changed them into monkeys as punishment. This theme also appears in the Popol Vuh when the older half-brothers of the Hero Twins are transformed into monkeys as punishment for their behavior toward their younger siblings.

Monkeys, however, were also portrayed as scribes, artists, sculptors, musicians, and patrons of the arts. They are reflections of ourselves, not quite human, yet illustrating some of the best and worst human traits. They are mirrors of human behavior, associated with excesses of pleasure, intoxication, gluttony, and lascivious behavior.”

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Playful and mischievous black howler monkeys encircle this vase, with juveniles taunting their mothers who hold cacao (chocolate) pods. Rodents, birds, and monkeys in the Maya area of Mesoamerica play a critical role in the propagation of cacao, breaking open the pods to suck out the sweet gooey pulp and then casting away the bitter seeds. The circle with three dots motif in the background may represent cacao seeds. For human consumption, cacao seeds are fermented, dried, roasted, and ground, much like coffee beans, into unsweetened chocolate. The ancient Maya combined chocolate, water, and chilies in tall, cylindrical vases like this one, then pouring the contents into smaller vessels like the chocolate pot also in this case to create a frothy beverage.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies: <http://www.famsi.org/>

Wikipedia, Howler Monkey Gods: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howler\\_monkey\\_gods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howler_monkey_gods)

Mayan creation myth, chocolate, and connection to monkeys:

<http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/a-ritual-vessel-in-a-maya-cave/>

Monkey information: <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/howler-monkey/>

Information on the cacao plants: <http://www.worldagroforestry.org/>

Photo of seed pod cut in half:



Photo of Mayans mixing chocolate, from a vase (from The Princeton Vase, [http://research.famsi.org/montgomery\\_list.php?allSearch=JM03214](http://research.famsi.org/montgomery_list.php?allSearch=JM03214))

