

Book Review Essays

Uncommon Ground

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Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period. Dorie Reents-Budet. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994. 382 pp.

Classic Maya artists painted vases that, as Dorie Reents-Budet declares, “give faces to the powerful men and women of Maya society as well as to the individual artists whose works preserve the historical moments and most fundamental beliefs of this great civilization. Here even the dead can speak, at least to the extent that words and images, painting styles, and aesthetics find fruitful ground in our eyes and minds” (p. 29). Ground indeed, uncommon clay, is what ceramic artists have always used to shape their vision of the world. Archaeologists excavating the ground embracing the Maya past have been looking at painted sherds and pots for generations, primarily from the vantage of typological chronology. In this book they are challenged to look and think again about their common ground with art historians, linguists, anthropologists, and other Mayanists.

Most of the really fine painted Maya vessels available for study have been pillaged from buildings in sites, wreaking havoc on them in the process. Anxious to condemn the looting and discourage collecting, some experts have used all available means to suppress the study of looted pots. Others, such as Michael Coe, have insisted that the knowledge potential in Maya pots can aid our insight into the civilization. So the subject has been a battleground for years, pitting well-intentioned scholars against each other. Dorie Reents-Budet trained as an archaeologist before turning to art history; with her collaborators, Ronald Bishop, Barbara MacLeod, Justin Kerr, Virginia Fields, and Joseph Ball, she presents the case for a multidisciplinary approach that both confronts and transcends the debate. The result is not only intellectually courageous, but a compelling, eloquent, and beautiful work of scholarship.

The book is organized into seven chapters, each comprehensively illustrated with color photographs of the artifacts and accurate line drawings of glyphic inscriptions on them. In chapter 1, Reents introduces the craft of pottery painting, making a detailed technical and aes-

thetic brief for the products as fine art (see Figure 1). She further outlines the exciting prospects for tracking the production and distribution of painted vessels as “social currency” in the complicated world of Maya political hierarchies. Her clear and coherent narrative challenges, on the one hand, the ethnocentrism of art historical traditions categorizing Maya ceramic art as primitive, and, on the other, the antielitism of archaeological traditions categorizing ceramic art as an irrelevant distraction.

In chapter 2, Reents discusses the world of the artists themselves as revealed in images and texts on the vessels. The Maya master artists actually signed their works on special occasions, and they also declared the patrons who commissioned them. The word *itz’at* described a great artist, but was also used as a title for the gods responsible for the creation of the world. The centrality of art to Classic Maya religion and politics is shown by the elite status of great artists, some of whom were members of royal families.

Chapter 3 focuses on the functions of the painted vessels. Obviously containers, a range of solid and liquid foods were served in them on state and ritual occasions—beverages made with cacao were a clear favorite. In earlier studies, Michael Coe suggested that painted and inscribed vessels were primarily mortuary furniture. That function is confirmed for some vessels by inscriptions and by the common final deposition of many in graves. The



Figure 1
Dorie Reents-Budet. Photograph by Les Todd.

use of vessels in feasting and gift-giving among the living is perhaps even more important, however, because it can document political and social relationships within and between communities. Virtually all studies of Maya societies confirm the centrality of formal meals to public ritual events. Reents affirms the antiquity of this tradition and outlines its archaeological potential.

Chapter 4 is a major statement by sociolinguist Barbara MacLeod and Reents on the inscriptions of the painted vessel tradition. The most common kind of text is what Michael Coe called the "Primary Standard Sequence." MacLeod posits five sections for this: a presentation that bespeaks the blessing of the surface or the writing; a surface section, which describes the painting or carving; the vessel type section, which generally identifies the pot or plate as to shape; the contents section; and the closure section, which names the patron and sometimes the artist. Some also have historical texts referring to individuals and events. Vessel inscriptions can contribute to knowledge of regional variability in dialects and to the definition of regional styles.

Reents, Bishop, and MacLeod present an exposition on styles and workshop locations in chapter 5. One of the major stumbling blocks to working with looted artifacts is the lack of provenience data. Through neutron activation analyses of vessels and sherds, and other material investigations over 15 years, Bishop and Reents have amassed information on dozens of Maya styles and located many of them in specific regions and sites. This information is fundamental to their study of the pottery as social currency.

In chapter 6, Reents surveys the themes of the art: scenes from mythology and cosmology, and social, political, and military events. The discussion is current and

informed by iconographic analyses now being conducted throughout the world. It shows the effective communication network scholars have developed in the study of Maya art. Reents offers interesting new initiatives through the tracking of groups of vessels commissioned by particular historical individuals. She also makes significant contributions to the analysis of animal iconography on the vessels.

In the concluding chapter, Reents passionately denounces the looting that produced the corpus of painted vessels at the heart of this book. More important, through collaboration with Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek, she writes a remarkable parallel analysis of a Maya masterpiece, the Buenavista Vase. First, she describes it as she would a looted vessel, using all of the technical and analytical resources in the book. Then she describes it in light of the scientifically documented archaeological context discovered by Ball and Taschek in their research in Belize. The comparison drives home two facts: (1) the vessel is intrinsically a source of valuable information about the Maya past; and (2) the archaeological context provides unimaginable precision and depth as well as unpredictable correction of misinterpretation. Both archaeologists and collectors can learn from this object lesson.

This is a basic contribution to Maya studies and an exemplary affirmation of the power of multidisciplinary research. No doubt the controversy over the status of looted artifacts and those who study them will continue to rage. The answers to the problem of looting will come not out of studied ignorance of the art, but rather out of work such as this, which tries to cast light on both the art and its contexts to raise public consciousness as to the priceless value of both. ■

Abandonment as a Settlement Strategy

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Abandonment of Settlements and Regions: Ethnoarchaeological and Archaeological Approaches. Catherine M. Cameron and Steve A. Tomka, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 201 pp.

Research on prehistoric abandonments has emphasized the mystery of vanishing societies and dramatized the causes of their demise. Cameron and Tomka turn this approach on its head, arguing that abandonments are common strategies of land use for many contemporary and prehistoric societies. Their edited volume explores the theoretical models and the analytic tools necessary to examine abandonment processes in this new framework.

They bring together ethnographic, ethnoarchaeological, and archaeological research.

When abandonment is recognized as a settlement strategy, it becomes integral to understanding human land use in several ways. First, abandonment is reframed as population movement that can occur at different spatial scales. As Cameron discusses in her introduction to the volume, abandonments may impact areas as small as activity loci and as broad as regions. Research at these varied scales requires different theoretical models and analytical tools. For this reason, the volume is divided between site-focused and regional studies. Second, abandonment may occur at different temporal scales and at different rates. People may leave a locus seasonally, for a few years, or permanently; this abandonment may be