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Turtles in the Art and Iconography of the Ancient Maya

by **Sofía Paredes Maury, MA** (Fundación La Ruta Maya),
Rony García Anleu, M.Sc. and
Gabriela Ponce Santizo, M.Sc. (Wildlife Conservation Society)

Turtles are prominent in the art of the ancient Maya and other cultural groups of Mesoamerica. We see turtle images painted on ceramics, moulded into figurines, whistles and effigy vessels, or carved as monumental stonework. The Maya represented animals in their art for three main reasons:

- 1) Shape, being the source of inspiration for symbols and decorative figures;
- 2) As symbols of supernatural beings; and
- 3) their use as food and raw materials.



Turtle carapace used as a musical instrument. Detail from the murals at Bonampak. (Submitted by Karl Herbert Mayer and added to the article by the Editor.)

The turtle's flesh and eggs provided food, while its carapace was cut into jewelry, such as plaques and beads, ear flares, and other ornaments that were sewn onto clothing. It is worth noting that, since ancient times, the carapace is still used as a musical instrument today.

Processions with characters playing carapaces are portrayed on Maya ceramic pictorial art (at left) as well as today's Catholic Nativity parades, performed before Christmas in most Mesoamerican countries, are accompanied with drums made with turtle carapaces.

Aquatic fauna – characteristic of lakes, ponds, swamps, rivers and the sea – was a very important source of protein in ancient times. The sea provided fish, crabs, large shrimp, snails, eels,



Alabaster vase in the shape of a turtle, carved with scrolls representing the carapace surrounded by water Uluá style, Honduras, Classic Period (250-900 CE). La Ruta Maya Foundation collection (Cultural Heritage Registry No. I.2.159.39).

turtles, manatees, and even sharks, that were captured with nets or baskets. The use of hooks, as well as a kind of trident, have been reported for the ancient Maya, sometimes appearing on painted vases.

The Turtle as Sacred

Ancient Mesoamerican peoples, especially those

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Chamá style vase with a procession in which a rabbit plays a turtle carapace. Chamá, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. Late Classic Period (600-900 CE), Duke University Museum of Art (No. 1976.76).

Photo by Justin Kerr; K3040 on www.mayavase.com



Jim Reed,
Editor

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In Memoriam: Gillett Griffin: Collector, Curator, and Scholar



Gillett Griffin, curator of Pre-Columbian and Native American art, emeritus, at the Princeton

University Art Museum, died of natural causes at his home in Princeton on June 9, 2016. He was 87.

Griffin's passion for collecting began more than 60 years ago while he was a student at Yale University School of Art, where he studied painting and graphic design and earned a bachelor's degree in 1951. He wandered into a New Haven junk shop and purchased a tiny ceramic head for 25 cents. Showing it to George Kubler, a renowned professor of art history at Yale, he learned that the head came from the Valley of Mexico and dated to before 400 CE.

So began a lifetime of collecting that would later inform his scholarship and teaching. Griffin started at Princeton in 1952 as curator of graphic arts in the Princeton University Library's Rare Books and Special Collections division, a position he held until 1966.

After spending a year in Mexico – where he was the co-discoverer of cave paintings by the Olmec people, identified as the oldest paintings ever seen in the New World, dating between 800 and 400 CE – he returned to Princeton in 1967 to join the Museum at the invitation of then-Director Patrick Kelleher. Griffin steadily added to his own and the Museum's collections, and gave much of his own collection to the Museum. Griffin retired in 2005, after 38 years with the Museum.

Griffin worked with successive Museum directors to develop one of the world's most important collections of ancient Olmec and Maya art.

His trips to Mexico helped connect Princeton to several important endeavors. For example, in 1973, while serving as a guide and adviser to Princeton filmmakers Hugh and Suzanne Johnston on an expedition to film a PBS special on the Maya, he and his team rediscovered Temple B – an archetypal Maya palace structure in a dense area of the Yucatan jungle called Río Bec – which had eluded searchers since it has been lost after its discovery in 1912 (see caption above).



Río Bec B from the edge of the jungle behind it (by John Hagenbuch: March 2006). "Raymond E. Merwin and Clarence L. Hay discovered Río Bec B in 1912. After the 1912 expedition, Río Bec B literally disappeared. During the 1930s several attempts were made by the Carnegie Institution of Washington to relocate it. New ruins associated with the site were discovered, but Río Bec B could not be found. It was finally rediscovered in May 1973 by a documentary film team from Princeton led by Hugh and Suzanne Johnston and accompanied by Gillett Griffin and Andrea Seuffert. Text by: www.mayaruins.com Editor's note: As an interesting tie-in, our IMS Webmaster Keith Merwin in the nephew of Raymond E. Merwin!

Calling Griffin "a wonderful mentor," David Stuart said that when he was a sophomore, Griffin arranged for Stuart to teach a course on Maya hieroglyphs in the Department of Art and Archaeology; Griffin audited the course. Stuart also remembered gatherings for students at Griffin's house.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on June 22, 1928, Griffin grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Griffin maintained close ties to the greater Princeton community during the more than 60 years he lived in town and was an accomplished painter and portrait artist. A retrospective exhibition, *Heads and Tales: Portraits with Legends* by Gillett Good Griffin, was mounted earlier this year (January 3–March 31) at the Princeton Public Library, co-sponsored by the Arts Council of Princeton. In 2014, the arts council mounted a solo exhibition, *The Eyes Have It*, a collection of paintings, drawings, and sketches from Griffin's field notes and diaries.

But what many of Griffin's close friends remember as most remarkable was Griffin's friendship with Albert Einstein.

A Czech refugee and fellow librarian, Johanna Fantova introduced Griffin into

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the Einstein household at a time when Griffin was 25 and Einstein was 74.

His unpretentious social ease, willingness to play at children's puzzles with Einstein himself, his sense of humor (especially puns), his interest in baroque music, all endeared him to Einstein.

Over the years, Griffin accrued many personal belongings of Einstein's – including the famous snapshot of Einstein sitting on his porch wearing fuzzy slippers, his compass, a pipe and several puzzles – which he eventually donated to the Historical Society of Princeton. 🏠

Source: From a homage by Jamie Saxon, Office of Communications, Princeton University Art Museum, at: <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu>
Submitted by Marta Barber.

Turtles in the Art and Iconography of the Ancient Maya

by **Sofía Paredes Maury, MA** (Fundación La Ruta Maya),
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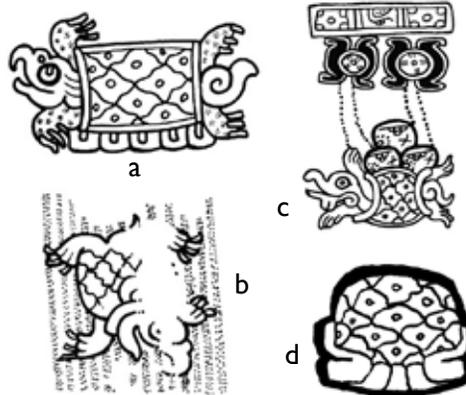
from the Maya region, had a strong relationship with nature. The center of the universe was dominated by the sacred ceiba tree or *Yaxché*, which was planted in the center of the Earth and served as a communication channel among the different levels of the universe: heaven, earth, and the underworld. The underwater world was as important as heaven and earth. It was part of the underworld to which humans could access through two main entrances: caves (including inundated caves or sinkholes called *tso'onot'*) and water sources.

Some animal species were associated with each level of the universe as well as with certain deities. Such association depended on whether their natural adaptation was aquatic, terrestrial or arboreal. Some reptiles and turtles were identified with the shape of the Earth, but also with the constellations as part of the Milky Way.

Many of the marine animals were also for sacrifice. It has been demonstrated that the term "*u-can*" ("his offering") appears in the Dresden codex associated to glyphs for turtle, iguana, fish, deer and wild turkey representations (Bricker, 1986: 289).



Turtle-shaped figurines. Note the markings on the back that simulate natural shell designs. The ceramic figurine belongs to the collection of La Ruta Maya Foundation while the shell figurine was archaeologically excavated in Tikal and has the *Lamat* sign of the planet Venus. Photo by Justin Kerr; K4880 in www.mayavase.com



Turtles in the Madrid Codex: a) Swimming turtle (page 17); b) Turtle falling with rain (page 13); c) Celestial turtle (page 71).

d) The Classic Maya glyph for turtle: "*Ahk*". Drawings by Marc Zender, 2005.

Archaeological studies have reported the discovery of bones of different species (including turtles) in caves, tombs, and hidden offerings or caches placed under stairs, doors, or monuments.

In Maya cosmology, both heaven and earth were "carried" by the *Bacabs*, in charge of supporting the Earth plane, and the *Pahuatuns*,



Life-size ceramic turtle, from La Ruta Maya Foundation collection (Reg. No. 1.2.144.618).

the ones holding the heavens. In both cases, they are represented as old gods, (God N) appearing either with turtle or conch shells, interchangeably (below left).

Both turtles and snails were associated with rebirth or life while the turtle shell was a specific metaphor for the land separating the sky from the underworld (Hellmuth, 2011).

Turtles in Nature

There are 8 species of sea turtles around the world, 5 of which are present in Guatemala: Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*); Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), and Olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), all victims of hunting, over-exploitation of their eggs, and pollution. On the other hand, in the northern part of Guatemala dwells the white turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*), also known as Central American River Turtle.

The Central American River Turtle is the only living species of



Examples of God N, or *Pahuatun*, in the figure of an old god with turtle shell. L) The plate (Reg. 1.2.144.384) and R) figurine (Reg. 16.2.5.69) are from La Ruta Maya Foundation collection.



Inspiring Achievements of Visual Communicators

Chiapas: Sounds of Time: The Tzeltal Maya in Black and White by Pedro Tec

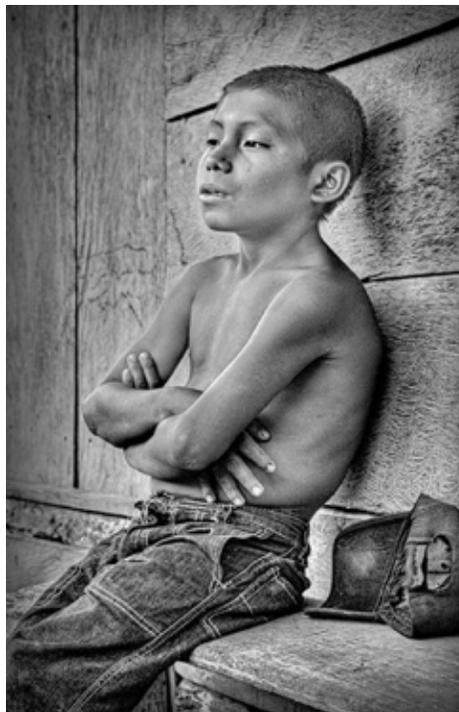
Editor's note: There's a lot I like about Facebook, most notably, inter-connectedness and inspiration. Friends of friends is how I ran into my new buddy Pedro Tec. By his own admission, this young award-winning artist looks at the past, is conscious of the essence of life, and plans for the future. His creations tell stories; they are poetic; they convey deep emotion. The photographs on this page were exhibited during July 2016 at La Universidad Autonoma de Yucatan in Merida (see poster below). The images are part on an ethnographic study of the Tzeltal Maya who survive in small communities in the mountains around Ocosingo.



Toasting coffee in your kitchen is a traditional affair in Chiapas.



L) Montoya with her child and dog. C) Maria sits solemn on her outside patio. R) An old mountain man. The Maya site of Tonina is near Ocosingo.



L) Precious Ch'ulel carrying one of her younger brothers. C) Young boy from the Zapatista community in Hidalgo. R) Poster for Pedro's exhibition: Chiapas: Sounds of Time (continued on page 6)

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a family whose other species are already extinct and there are only fossil records of them. It is listed in Appendix II of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) and among the Top 25 turtle species in the world at risk of disappearing soon.

Northern Guatemala is an important region for the conservation of the White Turtle, a species highly threatened, especially by illegal



Perhaps the most notable turtle in Maya studies is featured on the so-called "Resurrection Plate". The Maize God (Hun Nal Ye) is resurrected by his sons Hun Ahaj and Yax Balam. The original plate is Kerr #1892, and in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA. See www.mayavase.com/codex.pdf. This beautiful rendition is by modern artist Patricia Martin Morales. Together with her father and husband, they create museum-quality reproductions of ancient Maya sculpture and polychrome ceramics in their studio-restaurant named Los Ceibos, in Muna, Yucatan. (Note: This image and the two featuring Karl Herbert Mayer were added by the Editor.)

Fundación La Ruta Maya is the only private organization in the Mesoamerican region that has as its mission statement to recover archaeological objects that were removed from the country illegally in past decades, with the purposes of repatriation to Guatemala. The Foundation also receives donations from independent sources in Guatemala. La Ruta Maya Foundation is responsible for the custody and management of more than 3,000 Precolumbian artifacts, duly registered with the Registro de Bienes Culturales, IDAEH, as National Cultural Heritage. The entire collection is accessible for research to scholars and students, as well as to the general public, through temporary exhibitions organized each year in Guatemala. The collection is also available on loan to national and foreign museums and exhibitions. See: www.larutamaya.com.gt or www.facebook.com/larutamaya

White Turtle
(Central American River Turtle)
in Laguna Lachua. Photo by WCS.

hunting, as local people consider it a gastronomic delicacy and are eager to pay hundreds of quetzals for a few pounds of meat.

The National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) is working with members of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the University of San Carlos, La Aurora National Zoo, FAE Foundation, ONCA and La Ruta Maya Foundation on the "National Strategy for the Conservation and Management of the White Turtle in Guatemala" in order to support and expand the conservation actions towards this threatened species. Although it was abundant in the past, its distribution is restricting very fast. For example, it was not until 2015 that its existence was confirmed at Laguna Lachua National Park and Lake Izabal.

You can support this species by not consuming its meat. The management and research of this species is an activity that demands

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Decades ago, our good friend Karl Herbert Mayer swam with Green Turtles in Isla Mujeres.



Recently, Karl Herbert Mayer explored the storage rooms of La Ruta Maya Foundation with Sofía Paredes Maury as his personal escort.

List of the most prominent turtles of the Mayalands noting water turtles of the rivers, lakes and swamps (bajos):

- Central American River Turtle, *tortuga blanca*, *Dermatemys mawii*
- Furrowed Wood Turtle, *Rhinoclemmys areolata*
- Mexican Snapping Turtle, *Chelydra serpentina*
- Narrow-bridged Musk Turtle, *Claudius angustatus*
- Northern (Mexican) Giant Musk Turtle, *Staurotypus triporcatus*
- Red-eared Terrapin, Mesoamerican Slider, *Jicotea*, *Trachemys scripta*
- Scorpion Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon scorpioides*
- Tabasco Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon acutum*
- White-lipped Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon leucostomum*
- Creaser's Mud Turtle, *Kinosternon creaseri*
- Yucatan Box Turtle, *Terrapene carolina*

Compiled by Dr. Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR, Guatemala
Explore www.maya-ethnobotany.org and www.maya-ethnozoology.org

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resources and time. If you are interested in learning how to help, check out the following link:
www.wcs.org/our-work/places/latin-america

Turtles were important for the ancient Maya. Let's protect them today.

Sources and further reading:

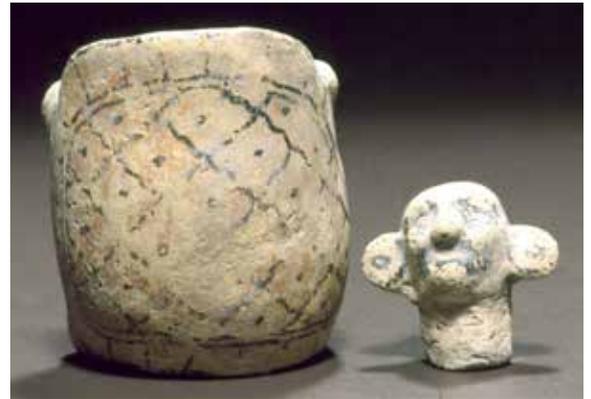
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Three dimensional clay object, God N? in turtle carapace. Photo by Justin Kerr; K2980 in www.mayavase.com
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2016 IMS Feature Presentations

September 21 • 8 pm: A New Look at Stephens and Catherwood
 – with IMS Webmaster **Keith Merwin**.

October 9 • 8 pm: What's New at Homul
 – with **Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli**, of Tulane University.

November 16 • 8 pm:
Kaxil Kiuc: Turning a Maya Site into a Center of Studies
 – with **Dr. George Bey**, of Millsaps College.

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Inspiring Achievements of Visual Communicators

Unpublished Photographs and a Few of My Favorites by Pedro Tec continued from pg. 4



Titled "La Virgen Apócrifa" (The Apocrypha Virgin), this beautiful image of a young woman in traditional dress from Zinacantan, Chiapas won Pedro a first place award in a show sponsored by the Mexican Alumni Association of the U.S. and the Embassy of Foreign Affairs of the U.S.



This image reveals Pedro's experimentation with light and shadow, and layers of texture. A new direction; this is one of his favorites.



A dignified participant in the procession of the town's patron saint, St. Barnabas, in the Yucatec community of Ixil. In the moment that the saint passes, everyone is enveloped by bouquets of flowers, traditional weaved and embroidered cloth banners, and candles.



Young girl selling flowers in a market in Chiapas.

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TEMPLOS Y DIOSSES MAYAS

ESDRAS CASTILLO BALTAZAR CASTRO EDUARDO FUSTER SANDRA HERBER EMILIO SEGURA JUAN OSORNO PEDRO TEC

BIBLIOTECA 08 / 07 / 2016 18:30 hrs.

Happening now in August, Pedro Tec is part of a group exhibition in the library of INAH Yucatan (The National Institute of Anthropology and History) in Merida. Next month, we will feature some of Pedro's exquisite photos of ancient Maya sites. Befriend him on his Facebook site.

Go to: www.facebook.com/pedro.tec

INAH Finds Water Tunnel Under Pakal's Tomb in Palenque

Archaeologists have discovered an underground water tunnel deep beneath the 115-ft-tall stepped pyramid known as the Temple of the Inscriptions that houses the tomb of the ancient ruler Pakal that sits at the heart of the structure.

The stone tunnel runs directly under Pakal's tomb, which is around 25 feet beneath the surface. It measures approximately two feet across and two feet tall.

INAH archaeologist Arnoldo González, who led the excavation, said carvings on a pair of stone ear plugs found in the grave said a god "will guide the dead toward the underworld, by submerging (them) into water so they will be received there". There was an allegorical meaning for water – where the cycle of life begins and ends.



Above) Archaeologists began excavating in 2012 in front of the steps leading up the pyramid to the Temple of Inscriptions after ground penetrating radar revealed anomalies under the ground that they feared threatened the structure. Instead they discovered the stone tunnel, carefully covered with three layers of stone. At right) The view from a robot equipped with cameras of part of the interior of the two-foot-wide tunnel. It is thought water once ran through the tunnel from an underground spring. It may have been built to carry the spirit of the ruler Pakal the Great to the underworld.



Photos on www.dailymail.co.uk by EDA.

Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli, an archaeologist now at Tulane University who was not involved in the dig, said: "I believe that building a tomb over a stream certainly does fit with the

belief that water and water bodies were entrances to the underworld."

Source: Condensed from an article by Richard Gray for *MailOnline*, published 7/25/2016 at: www.dailymail.co.uk. Submitted by Mike Ruggeri. 🏰

Upcoming Events at the IMS:

IMS Programming Note:

In our Maya studies, we have learned that the Maya (ancient and modern) adapted well to change in order to survive and transcend. In that spirit, we will sync our monthly schedule with that of Miami Dade College, and we will suspend our public lectures for July and August. *We shall resume in September!*

Sept. 21 • 8 pm: *IMS Feature Presentation*
A New Look at Stephens and Catherwood – with IMS Webmaster **Keith Merwin**.

October 9 • 8 pm: *IMS Feature Presentation*
What's New at Homul – with **Dr. Francisco Estrada-Belli**, of Tulane University.

Nov. 16 • 8 pm: *IMS Feature Presentation*
Kaxil Kiuc: Turning a Maya Site into a Center of Studies – with **Dr. George Bey**, of Millsaps College.

All IMS events will take place in Room K-413 at Miami Dade College – Kendall Campus. That's Building K-4, Room 13. See map on www.mdc.edu

Upcoming Events and Announcements:

September 17: *PCSWDC Symposium*
Divine Kingship: The Political Ideology of Pre-Columbian Rulers

– Theme of the annual symposium of the Pre-Columbian Society of Washington DC. This year, the Society explores important connections between the sacred and the political manifestations of rulership in the Pre-Columbian world. Speakers include Simon Martin, Takeshi Inomata, Brian Bauer, Lori Boornazian Diel, Patrick Hajovsky, and Luis Jaime Castillo. At the U.S. Navy Memorial & Naval Heritage Center, Washington, D.C. Info at: www.pcswdc.org/symposium2016/

Sept. 29 – Oct. 2: *MATP Conference*
10th Annual Maya at the Playa Conference – This year marks the tenth anniversary of these popular Maya meetings. The program is now taking shape and many of the presenters are listed on the website, among them: Stanley Guenter, James Stemp, Harri Kettunen, Cameron Griffith, Arlen and Diane Chase, and Marc Zender. Jaime Awe, PhD, of the Belize Valley Archaeological

Reconnaissance Project and Northern Arizona University, will be the 2016 lifetime achievement honoree. At the Flagler County Government Services Building, Bunnell, FL. Special discounts: 4-Day Lecture Pass at an Early Bird rate of \$210 through 9/1. After 9/1: \$240. IMS members are eligible for a \$20 discount. This can be used in addition to the Early Bird, so you could get your pass for as little as \$190! Use code: *ims* To register online, go to: www.mayaattheplaya.com/

October 17-22: *Wayeb Conference*
Hierarchy and Power in the Maya World – This year, the 21st Wayeb European Maya Conference will take place in Moscow, Russia. There will be 3-1/2-day workshops and a 2-day symposium. Some of the invited speakers include: Tomás Barrientos, David Stuart, Nikolai Grube, Stephen Houston, Takeshi Inomata, Simon Martin, Alfonso Lacadena Erik Velásquez, and Alexander Safronov. Get more info at: www.wayeb.org/conferences/events/emc_now.php



IMS EXPLORER

Join the **Explorer-ation!** Scholar or not, we welcome submissions from IMS members and other Maya enthusiasts. Share what interests you with others. All articles and news items for the **IMS Explorer** should be forwarded to the newsletter editor at: mayaman@bellsouth.net