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Keywords

ancient Maya, costume, adornment, body, senses

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Mobilizing the Body and the Senses: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Ancient Maya Adornment and Costume

Cara G. Tremain

Introduction

The ancient Maya were a complex civilization that occupied the modern-day countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Figure 1). Their territory is part of the larger archaeological culture area referred to as Mesoamerica, and for this reason is designated a subarea within a much larger area. The Maya subarea was not a homogenous empire, as it was composed of many independent states, ruled over by different kings and queens (Coe 1993:133; Martin and Grube 2008:6-7; Reese-Taylor *et al.* 2009). As well as referring to the culture, the word 'Maya' refers to the 31 Mayan language dialects which were (and some of which still are) spoken in Central America (Webster 2002:38). Studies of the ancient Maya are generally divided into three periods of time: the Preclassic period (2000 BC- 250 AD), the Classic period (250- 1000 AD) and the Postclassic period (1000-1540 AD).

The ancient Maya are well-known for their 'exotic' appearance, practice of body modification, and colourful and richly ornamented costume and adornment. Despite public and scholarly fascination with these aspects of their culture, there has thus far been no concise volume of work published on the subject of their costume and adornment. Due to the "destructive humidity" of the Maya subarea and perishable nature of the materials used in costume and adornment, archaeologists have had difficulty in recovering evidence of, or information about, these aspects of their culture (Schele and Miller 1986:16). Perishable organic materials commonly used

for costume and adornment included cotton, wood, skin, and feathers.

I regard costume and adornment as very similar elements with an unclear division, though the latter could include singular elements that comprised a costume, such as a belt, necklace or ear ornament. In addition, the term 'costume' as opposed to 'dress', will be used in this article in part based on ancient Maya ideology. Dress was something worn everyday but costume was worn for special occasions such as a dance or a ritual, and was thus more heavily imbued with ideological significance than everyday dress (Schele and Miller 1986:66). Costuming was far more elaborate, had a higher frequency of exotic materials (such as jade or feathers) than everyday dress, and was often portrayed in iconographic evidence (murals/figurines/ceramics/sculpture). From a Western perspective, ancient Maya iconography might be referred to as 'art', but I will not be using this reference as there is no word for art in Mayan language (Anton 1970:35). The closest translation in Yucatec Maya is *its'atil*, which means science, skill, ability, or knowledge (Tate 1993:29).

To begin to improve the body of evidence regarding costume and adornment, I am introducing a multidisciplinary method which can be employed by other archaeologists interested in researching, studying and understanding costume and adornment. I have studied and analyzed relevant ancient Maya iconographic evidence from ceramic vessels, figurines, sculpture, artefacts of adornment, and painted murals. These are both public and private examples of iconography. The public examples include artefacts of adornment worn for public ceremonies and rituals. The private examples include murals since these were painted on the interior of architecture to which only elites had access, as well as figurines, as many were specifically created to accomp-

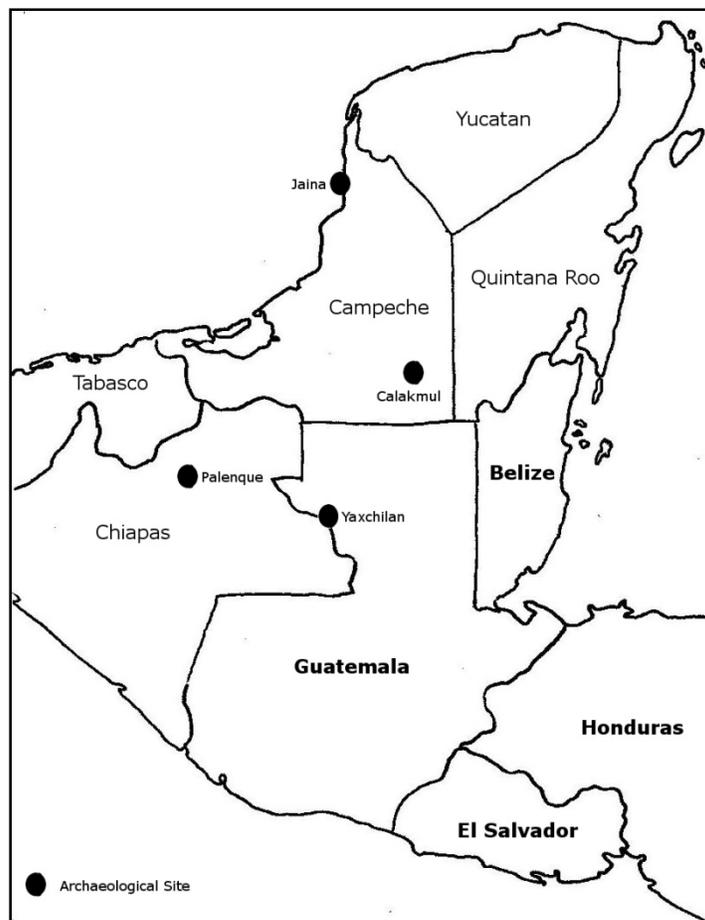


Figure 1.

Map of the Maya subarea, with archaeological sites mentioned in text.

any the dead into the afterlife and were not seen by the public. Ceramic vessels can be either public or private, depending upon the context in which they were originally used. Sculpture was either private or public, in being located in or on either the interior or exterior of buildings. Since many, if not all, of these iconographic examples were commissioned by the elite, and thus portray scenes of the elite, this paper will concentrate on the Maya elite. Additionally, it is thought that only the elites wore elaborate costumes and adornment (Sharer and Traxler 2006:88).

The iconographic evidence is combined with pertinent ethnographic evidence and the ethnohistoric account of

the Yucatán Maya by Fray Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1966). Landa was a Spanish bishop who travelled to the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico in the sixteenth century as part of the Spanish mission to convert the Maya to Christianity. Although he was responsible for the destruction of thousands of examples of Maya artwork and accounts, as well as the torture of many Maya, his account provides valuable insights into many aspects of their civilization not long after the Spanish conquest and is therefore considered a significant source of pre-Contact information (Graham 1998:29; Restall and Chuchiak 2002:664). Although his account is that of the Yucatán Peninsula, his findings are commonly agreed to be

relevant to the larger Maya subarea because of the many shared cultural aspects among the Maya.

Since archaeologists use their own senses to encode and decipher Maya iconography (sight, at the very least), I seek to address how these senses can be used to explore and better understand ancient Maya costume and adornment. I address aspects of sound, smell and touch, as well as the effect that costumes and adornment had on bodily movement. Houston, Stuart and Taube (2006:134) argued that the senses are usually not the concern of archaeologists because they do not leave any remnants in the archaeological record—however, there is iconographic evidence from ancient Maya sites for the presence of speech, scent, sight, and touch. Even though the sensations of the past cannot be retrieved, the authors believed that we can suggest senses via what we see in ancient Maya iconography. This they termed *synesthesia* (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:136-137). They also argued that because the ancient Maya communicated the presence of these senses, they would have been understood as projective. Consequently, rather than the body passively receiving, it actively reaches out to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:134).

In strong opposition to Houston, Stuart and Taube is the work of Foucault (1977:135). He argued that the body is a symbol of the social order and can be moulded and manipulated, terming it “docile”. The term implies that the body is passive, but scholars such as Adams (2007:109-110) have argued that the body is active, an argument I also favour. Consequently, I will be using the framework proposed by Houston, Stuart and Taube (2006:134) which suggested that the ancient Maya body became active when it was adorned and costumed.

The idea of moving beyond the visual aspect of costume and adornment and considering their effect upon the senses is related to phenomenology. Phenomenology promotes the physical and sensory experiences of objects and places as a way of understanding the past (Merleau-Ponty 1970; Tilley 2004). Advocates of phenomenology argue that Western cultures place too much emphasis on visual experiences and, since other cultures consider other senses to be far more important, it is imperative to move beyond just the visual (Tilley 2004:15).

I am aware of variation in costume across ancient Maya sites and that it is not wise to assume that similar costume elements from different sites and time periods have the same meaning (Tate 1993:84). Therefore, some of these findings are not valid for the entire ancient Maya population, but can nevertheless give insight into some aspects of ancient Maya culture.

The value of costume and adornment studies

It is important to study costume and adornment because such an analysis can provide valuable information about ancient Maya religion and ideology. It has been argued that clothes are not meaningless because they are used as a visual form of communication and are literally “a window through which we might look into a culture” (Arthur 1999:1). Iconography, which is used by scholars to gain information about costume and adornment, was also employed by the ancient Maya elite to visually communicate and educate the wider commoner population (Kubler 1969:48; Tate 1993:31; 34).

Adams (2007:119) argues that analysing dress and adornment requires you to imagine yourself in another person’s skin, a process that acts as a constant and important reminder of one’s own status as

an outsider. It also acts as an opposition between 'passive' and 'active' bodies, between those who wear these adornments and those who analyze them. It is important to consider that I will be analysing iconographic evidence as a Western outsider. Archaeologists who have published iconographic studies have also been aware of this, noting that "the language of Maya art is alien to us...its message aimed at people of another age...we must learn to see in a different way and to hear a different message" (Schele and Miller 1986:33). Thus, this paper aims to introduce another way in which we can look at and understand clothes and adornment.

Maya ideology

Knowledge of ancient Maya ideology is drawn from archaeology, epigraphy, ethnography, and ethnohistory (Sharer and Traxler 2006:719). An important ethnohistoric account is the *Popul Vuh*, an account of the Maya creation myth by the Quiché Maya in the highlands of Guatemala. Many of the characters and events in the *Popul Vuh* are known to have a deeply rooted past among the Maya, since images relating to these events have been illustrated in different forms of ancient Maya material culture (Tedlock 1996:16). Although the Maya creation myth varied throughout the Maya subarea, the central ideological principle remained the same. This principle stated that the world was in a constant state of change and renewal. The Maya were reminded of this daily by the birth of the sun in the east, its death in the west and its rebirth in the east. The sun was a metaphor for the constant renewal of life after death (Sharer and Traxler 2006:730). Renewal was also seen in the maize plant (the staple crop of the Maya), since it renewed itself after each harvest (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 2001:206). The ancient Maya elite sought to emulate the shape of maize in their own

profiles. Just as an ear of maize is long and narrow, tapering to a point, they altered the shape of their heads to reflect this shape using both permanent and temporary methods. A permanent method included cranial modification, whereby pressure would be applied to the forehead from an early age to alter the shape of the skull over time. Temporary methods included affixing an attachment to the nose and the manipulation of the hair into a high, narrow style, both methods which helped to create an elongated profile (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:45; Miller 1999:163). The opportunity to emulate the sacred ideology of renewal may have been a reflection of the high status of elites.

As Western scholars, we look at these practices as 'exotic', in part by denying the phenomena of our own body modifications. To achieve the stereotypical Western feminine ideal, females apply makeup, alter the colour and style of their hair, wear clothes that emphasize certain body parts, and add height using heeled shoes. To achieve the stereotypical Western male ideal, males increase their physical strength through bodybuilding, modify the length and style of facial hair, and also alter the colour and style of their hair. The existence of multiple and sometimes overlapping genders in Western society means that the above practices are not limited to any one gender and may be practiced by many individuals. Thus, these practices can be widespread and numerous. Due to their frequency and familiarity within Western society, such contortions to the body are seen as 'normal' practices (Mascia Lees and Sharpe 1992:7). In the same way, the practices of the ancient Maya would have been normal to them since they would have witnessed such sights from a young age (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:27).

The costume and adornment worn by the ancient Maya had important ideological

significance. Just as some cultural groups today wear objects that are believed to affect the wearer in some way (Rubinstein 1995:25), the ancient Maya believed that the costuming they wore would transform the wearer into a god or an ancestor, or even into the spirit of an animal (Kubler 1969:29). The application of costume and adornment has also been linked to Maya ideology, since the ‘dressing’ of bodies is seen to be similar to a final layer of “skin” that took the meaning of clothing or adornment to a different level (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:25-26).

Bodily movement

Ethnographic studies have provided evidence of how clothing and adornment affect the movement of the body. Becker (2007:76) discussed heavy wool gowns worn by males in Morocco. Their heaviness is a representation of the transition from boy to man, since males have to be physically strong enough to wear the gowns. The weight acts as a reminder that the individual is no longer a child, but bears the “heavy” responsibility that comes with adulthood. The weight of the gowns effectively restricts bodily movement. Similarly, Adams (2007:117) described *njaga* anklets worn by women in Nigeria in the 1930s and 1940s. These anklets were made of brass and were a sign of wealth. The brass made them very heavy to wear, and changed the way that a woman walked, making movement very distinctive. Adams (2007:119) proposed that such movement may have been imitated, to suggest the presence of these anklets and their accompanying wealth and societal distinction. It is unknown whether this movement was learned and conscious or unconscious.

The idea of movement being unconscious is related to the work of Bourdieu (1977), who argued that: “the structures... of a particular type of environment produce

habitus... practices... without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (1977:72). Essentially habitus is the underlying actions of the body that we regard as second nature (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2007:5-6). It is interesting to consider whether the ancient Maya associated certain types of movement with costumes and adornment, and whether they might have imitated such movements even after costume and adornment were removed.

Using iconography to gain an idea of movement can be problematic, however. Images on media such as ceramics are static, and archaeologists attempt to use such static iconographical evidence to infer a sense of movement (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:5). To overcome this problem, I suggest that the weight and material of costume and adornment can be used to infer movement. For example, ancient Maya elites are often portrayed wearing a great deal of finery. It has been suggested that “all this finery must have been heavy and awkward, necessitating cautious, measured movement to maintain balance and dignity in public ritual” (Schele and Miller 1986:67). At the site of Yaxchilán in Mexico, sculpted figures are described as having “massive thighs”, supporting the weight of the masses of feathers, ornaments, and headdresses that they wear (Tate 1993:37). This suggests that the costuming worn by the elite created slow, purposeful movements, creating a dignified air.

Costuming associated with dance is also portrayed on iconography (Figure 2). Figures in dance scenes often wear elaborate costumes with large headdresses. These are likely to have been heavy, so it is important to consider how dances would have been performed. I propose that dances were made up of slow movements, because to perform repeated movements wearing heavy costumes would have required strength and skill and must not have been an easy task to



Figure 2.
Details from ceramics illustrating dance movements.
(Left: K2360; right: K4824, both © Justin Kerr)

perform quickly. There is also abundant evidence of individuals wearing animal skins and masks for rituals and dances. As previously discussed, the ancient Maya believed that such costuming would transform the wearer into the spirit of an animal (Kubler 1969:29). Again, these animal costumes and masks appear very large and heavy, again requiring slow movements.

In addition to animal skin, the ancient Maya may have worn human skin. Landa wrote of Maya priests wearing flayed human skin from sacrificial victims: “they threw the body, now dead, rolling down the steps. The officials below took it and flayed it whole, taking off all the skin with the exception of the feet and hands, and the priest... covered himself... with that skin” (Tozzer 1966:119). It has also been suggested that human flesh and motion made divine essences animate (Houston 2006: 149), implying that the wearing of human skin combined with movement of the body was important ritually. It is unknown how such costuming would have affected movement, and whether the person wearing human skin would have taken on the soul of

the person, as with the wearing of animal skins.

As for the idea of the body being active rather than docile, there is good evidence that some forms of costume invited certain kinds of bodily movement, and that the wearing of animal or human skin may have allowed the wearer to take on a different spirit, thus becoming physically and spiritually active. Advocates of phenomenology agree that “artefacts...may become parts of bodies” (Tilley 2004:9), which further suggests that elements of costume and adornment were designed not only for visual appreciation, but perhaps to encourage active movement. The following sections discuss the ability of costume to engage the other senses including hearing, smell and touch, moving beyond interpretations that focus on the visual aspects.

Sound

There appears to have been a link between costume and sound, since costumes often included jade belts celts (elongated



Figure 3.
A figurine from the site of Jaina, Mexico, which also functions as a whistle with three pipes.
(Photograph K6095 © Justin Kerr)

pieces resembling an axe head, attached to belts) and shell tinklers (perforated olive shells sewn onto clothing)— both of which create sound. Taube (2005) tested the sound quality of jade and discovered that it has good acoustic qualities. Based on this observation, he argued that belt celts made from jade would have emitted high and sharp clinking sounds (2005:32). Shell tinklers were often attached to the bottom of costumes and would also have made sound as a person moved. Since movement would have facilitated these sounds, this suggests that costuming encouraged motion— allowing the body to become ‘active’. Jade celts combined with shell tinklers would have made an array of sounds, suggesting that costumes were constructed with the intention of being heard as well as seen.

The link to sound can also be seen in figurines from the site of Jaina in Mexico. Many of these figurines wear elaborate costume and adornment and also functioned as musical instruments (Figure 3). Musical instruments manufactured by the ancient

Maya were part of rituals and performances alongside elaborate and exotic costume and adornment (Healy, Rodens, and Downe 2006:23), further emphasizing a link between sound and costume. It has been argued that sound and music were essential components for supplication of ancient Maya deities (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:255; 267; Taube 2004:78), which may explain why elements such as jade celts and tinklers were attached to costumes. Perhaps sound was equally, if not more, important than the visual aspect of costume because of the association to the deities.

Smell

There may have been a strong relationship between the sense of smell and the wearing of costume and adornment. The ancient Maya may have used flowers, herbs and copal (aromatic tree resin) to perfume the body. Although remains of burnt copal have been recovered from various ancient Maya sites, there is no firm archaeological or iconographic evidence for the use of



Figure 4.

Reenactment of an ancient Mesoamerican ceremony in Mexico City, illustrating the wearing of costume and perfuming the body with incense.

Photograph by author

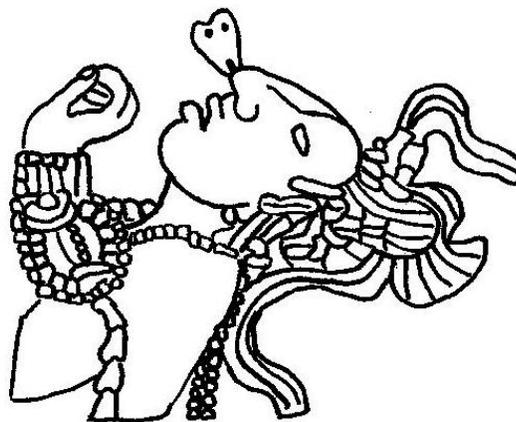


Figure 5.

Example of a nose attachment (the elongated horizontal piece atop the nose) from the Sarcophagus of Hanab-Pakal.

(Based on Schele and Mathews 1998:116).

copal as a bodily perfume (Coe 1988:231; Coggins and Shane III 1984:130). There is, however, written evidence from Landa, who described the offering of incense to idols: “and they returned to the worship of their idols and to offer them sacrifices...of incense” (Tozzer 1966:75). He also portrayed the Maya as being “great lovers of perfumes”, employing “bouquets of flowers and odoriferous herbs” as their perfume (Tozzer 1966:89).

Heightening the sense of smell through the use of perfume may have been a widespread practice in Mesoamerica, and incense is still used in modern renditions of ancient Mesoamerican ceremonies (Figure 4). Comparatively, the Somali people use frankincense and its perfumed smoke to perfume the body (Akou 2007:19) so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the ancient Maya may have burnt copal and used its resulting smoke to do the same.

Houston, Stuart and Taube (2006:141) argued that smell was closely associated with courtly life in ancient Maya culture. Therefore, smell may have been used to conjure images and associations of nobility. The relationship between smell, adornment and nobility is further emphasized in the nasal attachments worn by the ancient Maya. The sarcophagus cover of Hanab-Pakal, the ruler of the site of Palenque in Mexico, clearly illustrates a nasal attachment¹ intended to change and enhance the overall shape of the nose (Figure 5).

Such attachments provide an enticing suggestion that the ancient Maya had a concern with adornment and smell, and an example of a site ruler wearing such an attachment further implies that smell may have been associated to the nobility.

The importance of smell and scent for the ancient Maya might be explained by Taube’s (2004:72-73) study of the relationship between the breath and scent.

He argued, rather than consuming food, ancient Maya deities consumed breath and aroma. Thus, aroma was intimately linked to the deities and aroma itself operated as a symbolic and spiritual sensory experience. Additionally, Houston, Stuart and Taube (2006:141) have argued that jade ear ornaments often resembled living flowers, suggesting the presence of scent and perfume. As well as relating to the idea of an active body (because the body is thought to be wearing living, active flowers), this further demonstrates a link to the sense of smell and suggests that costumes may have been constructed with the intention of being smelt or giving the impression that they could be smelt.

Touch

Finally, the texture of costuming and adornment creates a desire to “touch” and “feel”. The most obvious example of the creation of some form of texture among the ancient Maya was the practice of scarification and tattooing. Tattooing involves pigment being added through intentional breaks in the skin while scarification does not involve any pigment; tattooing also may or may not create a scar. It is important to be aware that the ancient Maya may not have considered a strict division between the two, and perhaps they overlapped in meaning and symbolism. Although there is no archaeological evidence for these practices, in part because human remains do not survive well in the tropical climate of the Maya subarea, there is iconographic evidence (Figure 6), and ethnohistoric information from the account of Landa. He wrote that “they tattooed their bodies, and the more they do this, the more brave and valiant they are considered” (Tozzer 1966:91). The account is a good indication that these practices were associated with bravery and courage.

Elsewhere, it has been argued that tattooing and scarification might have been a privilege of persons of noble blood (Thompson 1946:19). This highly visual form of adornment would have served as a strong reminder that the body could be manipulated through cutting the skin, but, because the body was active, it would heal itself. This may have been a visual process of renewal of the body; cutting the skin 'killed' the skin and its healing was its 'rebirth'. Tattooing and scarification may have been limited to the elites due to the practices' resemblance to the death and rebirth of Maya deities, a show of divine power that the elites would have coveted for themselves as a symbol of their importance in society.

Touch also was involved in the application of paint to the body, 'dressing' the body through direct treatment to the skin. There is strong evidence for the use of body paint from various iconographic images in the Maya subarea, such as those found on ceramics (Figure 7), as well as from Landa's account: "[they] had the custom of painting their faces and bodies red...they thought it very pleasing" (Tozzer 1966:89). Landa also discussed the practice of using blue paint for sacrificial ceremonies: "the victim...having smeared him with blue...they brought him up to the round altar...and his officials had anointed the stone with a blue color" (Tozzer 1966:118). It is well documented that blue was the colour associated with sacrifice for the ancient Maya (Sharer and Traxler 2006:668). It has been suggested that body paint could have been applied using an organic pigment which could be removed with water, yet when mixed with resins stayed on a sweaty body (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:23).

It may be possible, as is suggested with tattooing and scarification, that the practice of applying paint to the body was

restricted to Maya elites. Ethnographic evidence from Nigeria has illustrated that *uli* painting (a black-line body art) among the Igbo women allows females to manipulate how others look at them (Adams 2007:116). This practice could have been employed by ancient Maya elites as a method of associating themselves with the deities or to heighten their status. However, in opposition to the idea that only elites used body paint, is the evidence from murals at the site of Calakmul in Mexico, which reveal images of merchants and non-elites wearing face-paint (Vargas, López, and Martin 2009: 19247). Therefore, body paint may have been used for different occasions and by persons of differential statuses with these differences symbolized by specific colours or designs.

Conclusion

Understanding the past requires us to go beyond common assumptions. The lack of information about ancient Maya costume and adornment provides an opportunity to go beyond assumptions of how these cultural elements affected both the wearer and the spectator. Considering that "knowledge is the sensuous, sensing and sensed body in which all experience is embodied" (Tilley 2004:4), a move beyond visual analysis, to one where the body and the senses are considered, is essential to improving our knowledge of the ancient Maya.

The framework proposed by Houston, Stuart and Taube (2006:134) has been used to illustrate that the ancient Maya body became active when it was adorned and costumed. This affected bodily movement in some cases, and perhaps even resulted in actions of 'habitus'. A consideration of the senses of sound, smell, and touch has illustrated that costume and adornment affected more than one type of sensory experience, and may have been



Figures 6 and 7.

(6: Left) Figurine with facial scarification from the site of Jaina, Mexico (Photograph K2821 © Justin Kerr). (7: Right) Detail from ceramic demonstrating the application of body paint. (Photograph K1373 © Justin Kerr).

created to be seen, heard, smelt, and touched. Further studies will continue to contribute towards this important aspect of ancient Maya civilization, allowing a ‘mobilization’ of the ancient Maya from the static images they left behind.

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Notes

¹Robertson (1983:61) argued that this attachment might have been made from bone.

Photographic Images

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