

Basic Detail Report



Monkey jar with spout

Date

ca. AD 250–550

Medium

Ceramic

Description

This Maya ceramic vessel has a white exterior with incised designs of three monkeys holding cacao pods. The monkey to the right of the tall straight spout faces to the right, while the other two monkeys face to the left. The

rim, interior, and base of the vessel are painted orange-red. The vessel shape widens from the indented base into a low, round shape, which is surmounted by a straight, wide neck and small, everted rim. The slightly angled spout rises from the vessel shoulders and is nearly as tall as the rim. This vessel shape is characteristic of "chocolate pots" and was probably used to serve a beverage made from cacao. We know from Maya paintings that ceramic vessels with tall spouts were used to prepare a cocoa (or chocolate)-based beverage made from cacao beans. Cacao was widely used and traded in Mesoamerica and was extremely valuable; its use was restricted to upper class elites, who were the only ones who could afford to consume such an expensive beverage. Specialized pottery connected with the use of chocolate began by 600 BC (the Middle Preclassic period) and continued until the time of the Spanish Conquest. Chocolate drinks were prepared by mixing ground cacao beans with other substances such as water, honey, achiote, maize, or chili peppers, and then pouring the beverage from one container into another, often from a great height, to produce a large amount of froth or foam, which was considered the most desirable part of the drink by both the Maya and the Aztec people. Small open bowls were most often used to serve chocolate drinks, although preparation of the drink was usually done in tall, narrow vases or jars; the tall, straw-like spouts on vessels such as this one may have been used to blow froth into the drink or to sip the chocolate drink. Monkeys are associated with agriculture and fertility, and because of their similarities to people, are sometimes depicted engaging in human-like activities, even in warfare. Some cultures see monkeys as the embodiment of ancestor spirits, but they are commonly hunted for food in the tropical lowlands where they are common. It is likely that monkeys were traded and kept as pets, which would account for their presence in the art of people far outside their normal range. Maya (AD 250-850) The Maya civilization was one of the premier civilizations in the New World, achieving great masterpieces of art and architecture, a sophisticated calendrical system, and a formal system of writing which has only been deciphered in the past several decades. The decipherment of Maya writing enables us to have a much more detailed view of the political machinations of this series of city-states located in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, Belize, and adjacent areas of Guatemala and Honduras than had hitherto been possible. Although the exact details of the Maya collapse in the 800's are still controversial, it appears that excessive warfare and

violence, coupled with environmental degradation and the stress of a large population, led to demise of this once-vibrant culture. Populations crashed, with survivors of the urban centers dispersing to more rural areas. Suggestions for further reading about the Maya: Henderson, John S. (1997): The World of the Ancient Maya. Cornell University Press: Ithaca. Schele, Linda and David A. Freidel (1990): A Forest of Kings: the Untold Story of the Ancient Maya. William Morrow: New York Sharer, Robert J. with Loa P. Traxler (2006): The Ancient Maya, sixth edition. Stanford University: Stanford.

Dimensions

3 3/4 x 5 1/2 inches (9.5 x 14 cm)