



The Chixoy River winds through the highlands of Guatemala, between the mountains on the west and the sloping hills on the east, and leads down to the lowlands and the great cities of the ancient Maya. During the Late Classic period (700-900 C.E.), the towns and villages along this river were hubs of activity, busy crossroads of trade and pilgrimage, channeling the movement of people and ideas at the height of Maya civilization. Penn Museum's upcoming traveling exhibition, *Painted Metaphors: Pottery and Politics of the Ancient Maya*, presents a fascinating picture of ancient Maya life at a time when traditional highland villages such as Chamá were altered by the intrusion of people from the lowlands who had fled socio-political upheavals in Tikal and the other great Maya cities.

Penn Museum's exhibition, scheduled to open in April 2009 and then travel to six venues over the next three years, will feature its unique documented collection of Chamá polychrome vessels from the Chixoy River Valley of Guatemala. The sudden introduction of a lowland style of ceramic painted cylinders, decorated with narrative scenes, provides strong artistic evidence of outside influence in this region. The exhibition will include other objects, such as figurines, jade beads, musical instruments, weaving implements, and projectile points, to reveal a compelling story about how ordinary people lived and survived drastic change more than 1200 years ago.

The interpretive goal of this project is two-fold: 1) to recreate the history of the Maya people during this period through engaging displays of museum artifacts; and 2) to frame the history within another story, that of the Penn Museum itself, its documented acquisition of collections, and its stewardship of cultural resources. Exhibition themes include the Maya gods, rituals, ruling classes, warfare, daily life, crafts, trade routes and pilgrimages—as well as the history of modern science, archaeology, and museology. Thus, the exhibition integrates the public interpretation of an ancient culture with the more recent history of collecting and stewardship, demonstrating:

- The unique quality of exhibition objects drawn exclusively from the Museum's collections;
- The importance of provenience, as documented by Penn Museum excavator Robert Burkitt's detailed field notes and letters and, by implication, the loss of knowledge when material is looted and no contextual documentation is available;
- The critical role of museum stewardship, since additional excavation, inscription translation, and scientific analysis were required before public interpretation could take place;
- The invaluable work of conservation specialists in preserving ancient artifacts through the use of modern scientific techniques and stabilization materials.

Thus, *Painted Metaphors: Pottery and Politics of the Ancient Maya* celebrates the resilient spirit of the ancient Maya people in the face of socio-political turmoil during the Late Classic period, and highlights the value of museums in preserving ancient artifacts and interpreting cultural heritage for today's public audiences as well as for future generations. The painted scenes on the Chamá polychrome vessels provide modern visitors with pathways to understanding ancient Maya rituals, gods, and politics, while the objects of everyday life offer glimpses into the lives of ordinary Maya people affected by the actions of the elites. The inclusion of selected 20th century ethnographic objects and photographs illustrates cultural continuities between the ancient Maya and the Maya of today, encouraging visitors to draw historical analogies that aid our understanding of the relationship between the past and the present. The public impact of the exhibition will be further enhanced through the use of bilingual displays, educational materials, a companion book, and web resources. In addition, the presentation of public programs such as lectures and guided tours at each exhibition venue will bring scholars together with widespread public audiences, including Hispanic populations interested in Latin American cultural heritage. In all, *Painted Metaphors* invites comparison between our world and that of the ancient Maya, celebrates the common humanity of people present and past, and honors the dignity with which ordinary women and men have always coped with extraordinary times.