

# PAINTED METAPHORS



## Pottery and Politics of the Ancient Maya



2009

*From the rise and fall of the great Maya civilization to the Spanish Conquest and into the modern era, the history of the Maya is rich in drama, accomplishment, and pathos. For modern-day Guatemalans, most of whom have Mayan blood in their veins, this legacy is a source of great national and cultural pride.*

*Yet a legacy as rich as that of the Maya deserves to be appreciated by the entire world. In this sense, we all owe a debt to the University of Pennsylvania and its Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Penn faculty and students were among the pioneers of Mesoamerican archaeology and have a long and distinguished tradition of discovering, documenting, interpreting, and preserving artifacts from the culture's great archaeological sites. From their earliest work by Robert Burkitt in the highlands and the excavation of Piedras Negras in the 1930s, to their excavations at the great Mayan city of Tikal during the 1950s and 1960s and more recent efforts at Copan and Quirigua, Penn archaeologists have made major contributions to our understanding and preservation of the Mayan heritage.*

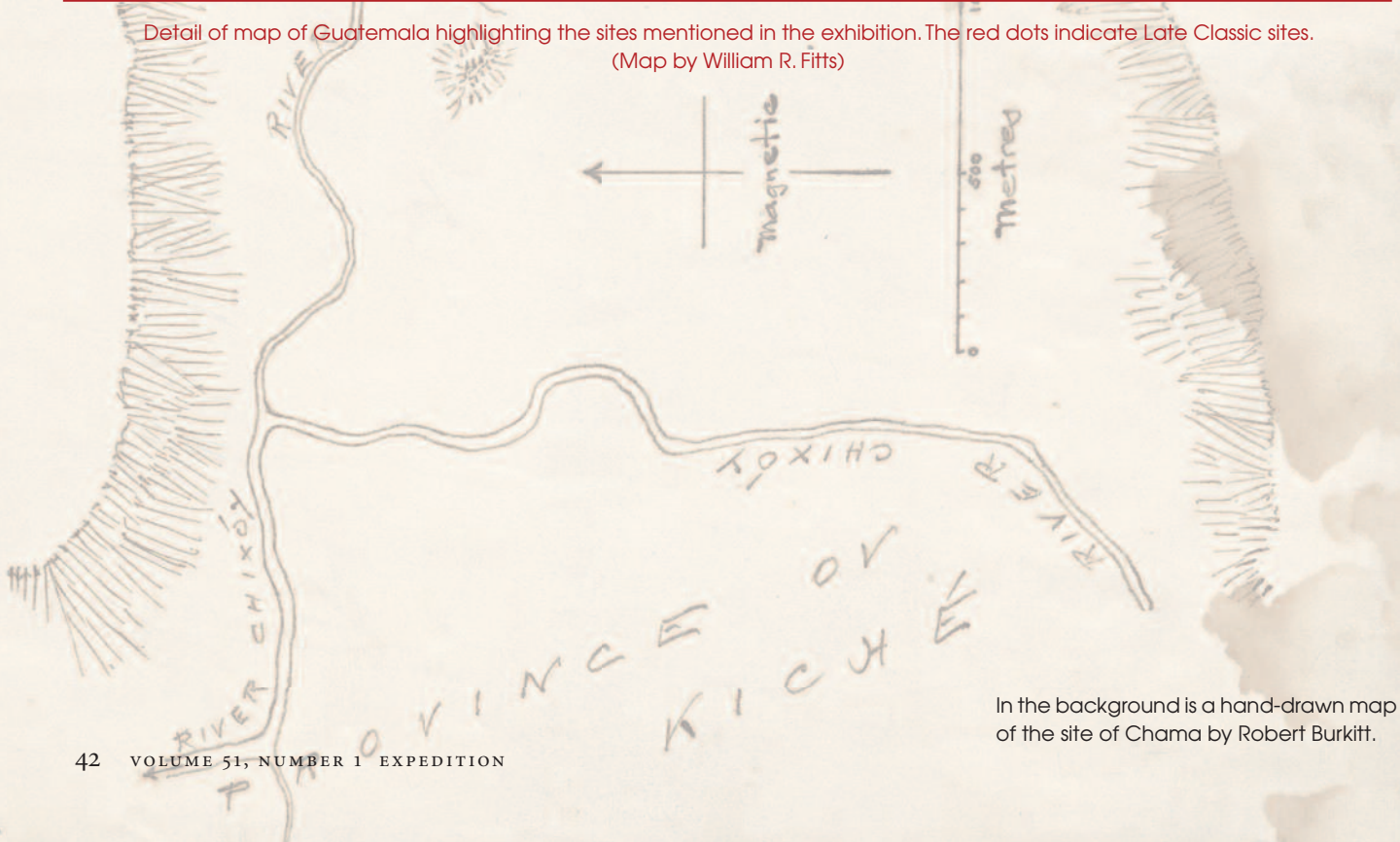
*We know that much of what the great Maya civilization created has been lost and can never be recovered. Books and artifacts that contained centuries of Mayan history were destroyed by the conquistadors and the Christian clergy who followed them. Inscribed stone and painted ceramics have no doubt succumbed in uncounted numbers to the forces of time and the jungle environment. Today, as throughout history, looters are all too often one step ahead of archaeologists in the race to claim historical artifacts.*

*It is therefore with both gratitude and enthusiasm that I welcome the Penn Museum's new traveling exhibition, Painted Metaphors: Pottery and Politics of the Ancient Maya. More than just a unique and fascinating collection of ancient artifacts, the exhibit is a celebration of the essential roles of the archaeologist and the museum in collecting, conserving, and conveying the significance of these artifacts for viewers today. I offer my thanks and congratulations to the Penn Museum for this most valuable and timely effort.*

His Excellency Francisco Villagrán de León  
Ambassador  
Republic of Guatemala



Detail of map of Guatemala highlighting the sites mentioned in the exhibition. The red dots indicate Late Classic sites. (Map by William R. Fitts)



In the background is a hand-drawn map of the site of Chama by Robert Burkitt.

## *Painted Metaphors:*

*Pottery and Politics of the Ancient Maya* features a unique collection of Maya artifacts, including the Chama polychrome ceramic cylinders, excavated by Robert Burkitt for Penn Museum (University of Pennsylvania Museum) almost one hundred years ago. It tells the story of the ancient Maya as witnessed by the villagers in the backcountry of Guatemala's Alta Verapaz. The towns and villages of this provincial region were hubs of activity, busy crossroads of trade and pilgrimage, channeling the movement of people and ideas at the height of Maya civilization. The exhibition, from which the objects in these pages are selected, shows how life in an outlying corner of the Maya universe was affected by the political and military upheavals in Tikal and other great Maya cities during the Late Classic period (600–800 CE).

The brilliant painted scenes on the Chama polychrome vessels convey vibrant evidence of ancient Maya ritual, gods, and politics, while the other objects in the exhibition—figurines, jade jewelry, musical instruments, weaving implements, cooking pots, and projectile points—offer a window into the lives of the ordinary Maya of 1,300 years ago, whose way of life was challenged by the intrusion of people from the lowlands. The exhibit includes 20th century ethnographic pieces that point to material—and cultural—continuities between the ancient Maya and the Maya of today.

*Painted Metaphors* tells another story as well, that of the Penn Museum itself, its scientific excavations, documented acquisition of artifacts, and the stewardship of its collections. Without the resources of a great research institution, an exhibition such as this would not be possible. Space limitation precludes more than just a list of the names of Museum personnel without whom the exhibit would never have gone past mere discussion: Museum Director Richard Hodges, former Directors Richard Leventhal and Jeremy Sabloff, Curator-in-Charge Robert Sharer, Museum Archivist Alessandro Pezzati, Head Conservator Lynn Grant and her skilled staff, Lead Exhibit Designer Kate Quinn and her talented team, Artist Ardeth Abrams, Project

Manager Klare Scarborough, Librarian John Weeks, and American Section Keepers Lucy Fowler Williams and William Wierzbowski. Important roles were played by Development Director Amanda Mitchell-Boyask, Public Information Director Pam Kosty, Education Director Gillian Wakely and her dedicated staff, Web Master Amy Ellsworth, and Board Member Carlos Nottebohm. Colleagues who played a valuable part in the development of the exhibit include Karen Bassie, Ellen Bell, Betty Benson, Ronald Bishop, James Brady, John Burkhalter, John Harris, Heather Hurst, Simon Martin, Mary Ellen Miller, Dorie Reents-Budet, Leon Reinhart, Erin Sears, Miranda Stockett, and Pat Urban. Students and volunteers who gave generously of their time include Greg Babinecz, Margarita Cossich, Jordan Kraushaar, Sarah Kurnick, Lisa Menendez, Franco Rossi, and Amber Weekes. I thank you all and apologize to those whose names I may have inadvertently omitted.

This exhibition in the William B. Dietrich Gallery has been made possible by a generous donation from Rohm and Haas, Presenting Sponsor. Additional support for the exhibition and related programs has been provided by The Selz Foundation, LLC, The Seth Sprague Charitable Trust, Diane vS. Levy and Robert M. Levy, A. Bruce and Margaret R. Mainwaring, and Annette Merle-Smith. Media sponsor for the exhibition is the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. We are grateful to them all.

This special insert was first suggested by Jim Mathieu, Editor of *Expedition* and Museum Chief of Staff. The illustrations are the result of the excellent eye and execution of Museum Photographers Francine Sarin and Jennifer Chiappardi. Jennifer Quick is more than a Designer and Editor, she is a valued, integral part of this and any other Museum publication and I thank her for her skills and talent.

*Elin C. Danien*  
Curator

Shamans mediated between this world and the supernatural through a unique ability to speak directly with the deities who controlled the Maya universe. Many Maya figurines were also whistles or ocarinas, used to call the spirits. Shamans were believed to have the power to transform themselves into their animal “spirit companion” (*way*). The figurine in the center is sunk deep in trance: jaguar ears atop his head and paws instead of hands foretell his complete transformation into something akin to the anthropoid jaguar on the left. The figurine on the right holds a baby jaguar, now more than half missing.



*Left*  
Pottery figurine (whistle): shaman transformed into a jaguar  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 12.7 cm  
NA11208

*Center*  
Pottery figurine (whistle): shaman in transformation  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 9.84 cm  
NA11027

*Right*  
Pottery figurine (whistle): shaman with jaguar cub  
Roknima, Guatemala  
H: 14.61 cm  
NA10977

Rituals have always commemorated important events in the life of the family and the community. Such rituals involved censers and offering bowls, frequently decorated with deity effigies. The figure of the jaguar, largest and most feared predator in Central America, was seen as a manifestation of both the Sun God and the sun at night, called the Jaguar God of the Underworld. The face on the bowl is that of God G1, one of the manifestations of the Sun God, while the lid is molded in the form of a double jaguar head. The combination of bowl and lid may have been considered as a particularly powerful vehicle for making offerings. The tall censer bears the face of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, identified by the “cruller” line that curls beneath his eyes and twists above the bridge of his nose. The style is reminiscent of censers from the region of Palenque, and may have been imported or made locally using distant models.



*Left and right*  
Pottery offering bowl and cover  
with traces of paint  
Chipal, Guatemala  
Bowl H: 15.8 cm;  
D at rim: 24.1 cm  
Lid H: 19.2 cm;  
D at base: 24.3 cm  
NA11540/41

*Center*  
Pottery censer: Night Jaguar  
effigy  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 36.5 cm; D: 26.3 cm  
NA11235

Burkitt found these objects in a small alcove off the large main chamber of a cave. He dubbed the alcove the “Porcupine place,” for the creature who had made it his den. The deity head is that of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Smoke from incense burned in the bowl would have curled out of the lattice headdress and wreathed around the vessel. The animal effigy, which sent the smoke skyward from its open mouth, may represent a porcupine with quills upraised.



*Left*  
Pottery censer: deity, with red, white, and blue paint  
Sepacuite Valley, Guatemala  
H: 22.23 cm; W: 17.15 cm; D: 14.6 cm  
37-12-44a, b

*Right*  
Pottery censer: animal, with red, white, and blue paint  
Sepacuite Valley, Guatemala  
H: 15.24 cm; D: 9.525 cm  
37-12-43a, b

The urn, decorated with a bat hanging by outstretched wings, was found buried under a block of stone and perhaps originally contained an offering to the powerful Earth Lord. The bat head on the large urn fragment is surrounded with spikes, a symbol of the ceiba tree, which has such spikes when young. Bats, inhabitants of caves, the openings to the Underworld, are frequently portrayed as supernatural beings, an appropriate symbol for offerings and burials.



*Left*  
Pottery urn fragment  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 31.75 cm  
NA11446

*Right*  
Pottery urn with bat appliqué  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 36.2 cm; Dia: 45.72 cm  
NA11323

Elite groups, even in such out-of-the-way regions as the Chixoy River Valley, marked their elevated status with elegant clothing, ceremonial weapons, and jade or obsidian beads and pendants, such as those shown below on the right and indicated on the figurine. In his role as shaman, a ruler might have used the translucent qualities of the crystal blade for divining.



Pottery figurine (whistle):  
courtier with staff and  
ceremonial blade  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 18.415 cm  
NA11352

Crystal blade  
Chipal, Guatemala  
L: 10.1 cm  
NA11465



Top  
Jade carving  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 2.54 cm; W: 4.76 cm  
NA11480

Bottom  
Beads from jade and stone  
necklaces  
Chipal, Guatemala

The pottery in which feast foods were served was no less elaborate than the food itself. Macaws are frequent decorative images, recalling an episode in the *Popol Vuh*, the highland Maya creation myth, in which the Hero Twins use their blowguns to attack and best the pompous false god named Seven Macaw. The vessels themselves are sometimes given fanciful form. The ubiquitous “duck pot” used for cooking is here elaborated into a rodent shape that more resembles a shoe (see p. 55), and would have been used as elite ware. A relationship with the powerful city of Teotihuacan is suggested by the presence of the slab-footed cylinder vessel, the iconic pottery shape of that all-important central Mexican site. Such a connection would add to the prestige of the local elites.



Left  
Pottery cylinder with 3 slab feet  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 17.145 cm  
NA11175

Center  
Polychrome footed dish with  
macaw design  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 10.16 cm; Dia: 27.3 cm  
NA11555

Right  
Pottery effigy shoe pot  
Highland Guatemala  
H: 15.9 cm; W: 21 cm; L: 33 cm  
37-13-197

Cacao was a trade item, a symbol of wealth, and an important beverage in rituals, as it was believed to be one of the foods the gods bestowed on the Maya. Cacao trees could grow in the climate of the Chama Valley, and the wealth they brought helped the site achieve importance. Spouted pitchers are among the earliest vessels (*ca.* 600 BCE) to reveal traces of theobromine and caffeine, two of the many elements in cacao. The figure on the censer has cacao seeds (beans) covering his arms, and his hand holds a cacao pod. This one was found in a burial, where no doubt the beverage was to provide sustenance to the spirit of the dead.

The bowl and cylinder shown at center top and bottom had traces of both theobromine and caffeine when vessel residues were analyzed by Dr. W. Jeffrey Hurst of the Hershey Foods Technical Center. When found, the bowl with the incised undulating serpent contained an obsidian blade. In Maya iconography serpents symbolize rebirth and regeneration, yet for the Maya who live along the winding Chixoy River, the river is equated with Ikbolay, the fer de lance, the most feared snake in Guatemala. Spider monkeys, such as the one portrayed on the cylinder, will raid cacao trees and eat the sweet pulp inside the heavy pod. Cacao was poured from pitchers like that on the right into cups some distance below to create the desired head of foam.



*Left to right*

Pottery effigy censer  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 37 cm; D: 31.8 cm  
NA11537

Pottery bowl, incised  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 10.8 cm; Dia: 17.8 cm  
NA11216

Pottery cylinder, incised  
and painted  
Senahu, Guatemala  
H: 17.8 cm; D: 10.8 cm  
NA10835

Pottery spouted pitcher  
Kixpek, Guatemala  
H: 27 cm; D: 29.2 cm  
NA11604

Although texts are rare in the highlands, individual glyphs or pseudo-glyphs, such as those on two of the vessels in the photograph, were common decorative motifs on the pottery of the region during the Late Classic (600–800 CE). The large graphic element on the cylinder may be the syllable *b'i* enclosed within blank affixes that, if completed, might have given the glyph a lexical meaning.



*Left*  
Pottery cylinder, with slip and paint  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 18 cm; D: 15 cm  
NA11068

*Center*  
Pottery bowl, with slip and paint  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 12.7 cm; D: 15.87 cm  
NA11069

*Left*  
Pottery jar, with slip and paint  
Kixpek, Guatemala  
H: 21.6 cm; D: 14 cm  
NA11607

The clashes in the Guatemalan lowlands during the Late Classic reverberated in the highlands; the unrest is reflected in figurines, like that from Roknima, and in other objects, where warlike motifs become increasingly common. The effigy figure on the vase wears a costume and shield customary in Central Mexico, one of many lines of evidence for large movements of populace during the Late Classic and beyond. The Chipal warrior figurine is ready to dispatch his victim with what may be an obsidian knife, one of the common weapons of the region. The figurine on the left carries a club and a decorated shield. His face peeks out from the open beak of his raptor headdress.

*Left*  
Pottery figurine (whistle): warrior with club and shield  
Roknima, Guatemala  
H: 16.5 cm  
NA10976

*Center*  
Pottery figurine (whistle): warrior with captive  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 15.0 cm  
NA11571

*Left*  
Plumbate ware cup with warrior effigy  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 18.2 cm; D of cup: 12.3 cm  
NA11531





**M**ore ritual than sport, the choreographed ceremony of the Mesoamerican ballgame recreated scenes from the *Popol Vuh* in which the Hero Twins compete in a ballgame against the Gods of Death. The ruler took the role of one of the Hero Twins, playing against the captured enemy ruler who was preordained to lose and to be sacrificed. Although the style of the large figurine recalls the Jaina figurines of Yucatan, it was excavated at a site on the Chixoy River.

When the game was played for sport, betting took place on a large scale, and great wealth might be lost or gained. Although only the rules of the 16th century Contact period game can be verified, some of the Late Classic rules can be extrapolated from figurines, architectural elements, and murals. The figurine with the smaller ball would have played by the rules used on the Pacific Coast; the larger ball is similar to balls used in the Peten, as seen in Classic era pottery, sculpture, and murals.

*Left*

Pottery figurine fragment: ballplayer with large ball

Cahabon, Guatemala  
H: 10.9 cm; W: 9.53 cm  
NA10942

*Center*

Pottery figurine (whistle): ballplayer

Roknima, Guatemala  
H: 19.3 cm  
NA10975

*Right*

Pottery figurine fragment: ballplayer with ball

Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 10.16 cm  
NA11351



**M**usic has always been an important part of Maya life. Quantities of pottery flutes, whistles, and ocarinas are found at every site. Drums, made of more perishable materials, are less commonly found. The placement of the mouthpiece on the now headless figurine/whistle is unusual, occurring at the front instead of the rear of the figure. The bowl features a tiny figure playing a flute, and at the rear, a small jaguar head. The open mouth of the anthropomorphic headdress is the mouthpiece of the flute figurine.



*Left*

Pottery ocarina: female figurine, head missing

Roknima, Guatemala  
H: 9.6 cm  
NA10980

*Center*

Pottery flute with anthropomorphic headdress

Cahabon, Guatemala  
H: 21.6 cm  
NA10944

*Right*

Pottery bowl with traces of paint

Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 8.6 cm; Dia. 10.8 cm  
NA11470

This frequently published vessel may illustrate the impending death of a local lord who defied a group of newcomers from a low-land city, some of whom observe his humiliation. The figure on the right in the rollout is identified as the “Chak Ahaw,” or young lord, a designation frequently used for the heir to the throne. The black-painted figures facing the kneeling victim may symbolize the Maya deities known as God L and God M, whose domain includes warfare, death, and protection of long-distance traders.



Polychrome cylinder  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 23.5 cm; D: 15 cm  
38-14-1  
Rollout painting by M. Louise Baker



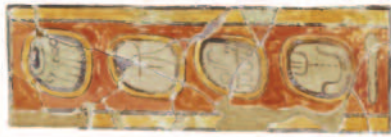
The three day-name glyphs to the right of the elite figure indicate that he is on a three-day journey. His jaguar skin-covered mat, royal seat of the ruler, is carried by the retainer immediately behind him, while the dog to be ritually sacrificed walks beneath the litter. At least five other vessels are known to echo this scene, suggesting the importance of the occasion and the desire to proclaim it widely: a pictorial “newspaper headline” heralding the arrival of a new ruler.



Chama polychrome cylinder  
 Ratinlixul, Guatemala  
 H: 21.2 cm; D: 18.5 cm  
 NA11701  
 Rollout painting by M. Louise Baker



The bat, Tzotz or Zotz, symbolizes many things. It is the emblem of the great Maya city Copan; a metaphor for sexual prowess; the name of a highland Maya group (Tzotzil); a character in the *Popol Vuh*; and a symbol of the Underworld. Small wonder that the image is frequently used as the unique dramatic element on Maya pottery. On the left, M. Louise Baker's painting of the vessel on the right includes the two glyph panels.



(Top)

Chama polychrome cylinder: bat, with  
crossed bones on wings  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 20.3 cm; D: 16 cm  
NA11184  
Painting by M. Louise Baker

Chama polychrome cylinder: bat, with  
death eyes on wings  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 19.7 cm; D: 18 cm  
NA11222  
Rollout painting by M. Louise Baker



Costume and masking are important elements among the Maya today, as they were in antiquity. Here an individual is costumed to represent a rabbit, identified in other contexts as the scribe of the gods. The fragmentary nature of the vessel allows only a hint of the lost figure on the other side of the offering basket: part of a plumed headdress, three fingers in a graceful gesture, an elbow and knee with the markings of one of the Hero Twins. Is this part of an unknown episode in the *Popol Vuh*? A negotiation between two costumed rulers? The enigmatic scene still defies explanation.



Chama polychrome cylinder: rabbit and fragmentary figure  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 16.6 cm; D: 15 cm  
NAT1185  
Rollout painting by M. Louise Baker



The figure on the right sports a jaguar head as part of his imposing headdress, and is clearly the most important personage in this scene. He is seated in front of an upended mat covered with jaguar skin; across an overflowing offering basket, he faces two figures whose garb and posture suggest lesser status. Hummingbirds, metaphors for war and for sexual activity, suck nectar from the flowers. The two glyphs prominently displayed, *bu pah*, can be understood as meaning “splitting,” or “dividing.” This may be a negotiation to divide power or wealth, with the presence of the hummingbirds suggesting that a marriage alliance is also being discussed.



Chama polychrome cylinder with three figures  
 Chama, Guatemala  
 H: 19.1 cm; D: 21.8 cm  
 NA11221  
 Rollout painting by M. Louise Baker

Although the Chama polychromes seen on the preceding pages mark a change in pottery tradition, heralding a change in rulership, there seems to be no break in the materials and lives of the ordinary people of the Chixoy Valley, suggesting that the incursion was relatively peaceful. Cooking pots, the ubiquitous *ollas*, were made as they always had been; the one shown below is the classic large Mesoamerican *olla*. The figurine on the right holds another version. The practical “duck” or “shoe” pot is found throughout Mesoamerica. The toe of the food-filled vessel would be placed in the hot coals. When the food was cooked, the still cool handle allowed for easy removal.



*Left*  
Pottery shoe pot  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 14.61 cm; L: 20.3 cm  
NA11511

*Center*  
Pottery cooking pot  
Chipal, Guatemala  
H: 38.1 cm; D: 33 cm  
NA11380

*Right*  
Pottery effigy figure:  
woman with pot;  
slipped  
Highland Guatemala  
H: 25.4 cm; W: 19.1 cm  
37-13-200

The containers used for meals and storage are an indication of the nature of a Maya household. Although utilitarian, these dishes have an intrinsic style that suggests an awareness of the larger world, and perhaps a pride of ownership.

*Left*  
Pottery bowl with basket design  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 6.35 cm; D: 10.8 cm  
NA11240

*Second from left*  
Pottery jar with fluted body  
Kixpek, Guatemala  
H: 14.61 cm; D: 12.7 cm  
NA11603

*Second from right*  
Pottery lidded jar with ceiba  
spikes  
Ratinlixul, Guatemala  
H: 10.2 cm; D: 11.4 cm  
NA11678

*Right*  
Pottery bowl with lattice ring foot  
Chama, Guatemala  
H: 15.9 cm; D: 19.1 cm  
NA11227



The lives and careers of two extraordinary people are honored in this exhibit: Robert J. Burkitt, whose detailed field notes, photographs, letters, and excavations are the basis of the exhibit; and M. Louise Baker, whose watercolors were the first to capture the beauty and record the detail of the Chama polychromes. She was recognized as the finest archaeological artist of her time, and today her rollouts of the painted scenes on the Chama polychromes provide a unique aesthetic experience for visitors to the exhibit.



**Robert J. Burkitt** (1869–1945) accompanied George Byron Gordon to Copan in 1895 for Harvard University's Peabody Museum. Gordon went back to Harvard to complete his doctorate, but Burkitt never returned to the United States. Years later Gordon, then Director of Penn Museum, persuaded Burkitt to roam the Guatemalan highlands exploring Maya sites for the Museum. Burkitt's association with the Museum lasted from 1912 to 1937, and the archaeological and ethnographic objects he sent to the Museum form the greatest part of its superb collection of highland Maya material. As a self-taught linguist he searched out and was the first to record some of the many highland Maya languages. Very few photographs of Robert Burkitt are known; this one was taken at the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1891.

Pach Brothers (Cambridge, MA)

**M. Louise Baker** (1872–1962) was an independent artist at a time when women who opted for a career instead of home and family were extremely rare. She was the resident artist at Penn Museum from 1908 until failing eyesight forced her retirement in 1936. In 1930 and 1931, just shy of her sixtieth birthday, she was sent by the Museum to Mexico, Guatemala, France, Germany, Denmark, and England to create her inimitable paintings of Maya pottery in museums and private collections. Her reputation was such that she was sought by archaeologists worldwide to paint their discoveries. In many cases, her paintings provide a precise record of material that has since deteriorated or been lost. This photograph shows her at work in Guatemala City in 1931.

