



Kimbell Art Museum presents rarely seen works and new discoveries in the first major exhibition of Maya art in a decade

Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art features nearly 100 masterpieces — including rare loans from Mexico and Guatemala — that honor divine figures of the ancient Americas.

“Mind-blowing”
— [New York Magazine](#)

“Totally riveting”
— [The New York Times](#)

“A magnificent show”
— [The New Yorker](#)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 7, 2023

FORT WORTH, TX— On May 7, 2023, the Kimbell Art Museum will present *Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art*, a monumental and acclaimed exhibition that will bring together nearly 100 rarely seen masterpieces and recent discoveries in Maya art — one of the greatest artistic traditions of the ancient Americas. Created by masters of the Classic period (A.D. 250–900) in the spectacular royal cities in the tropical forests of what is now Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, these landmark works evoke a world in which the divine, human and natural realms are interrelated and intertwined. Presented across diverse media that depict episodes in the life cycle of the gods, the exhibition offers compelling reflections on representations of the divine and new understandings of Maya creative practices and the

artist's role in Maya society. Lenders include major museum collections in Europe, the United States and Latin America, with many works on view for the first time in the U.S., including new discoveries from Palenque (Mexico) and El Zotz (Guatemala).

Maya mythology is rich and complex — to date, its cast of divine protagonists, as represented through dense iconography, has not been the focus of an exhibition. For the ancient Maya, gods were born, lived as infants, reached their peak of maturity and influence, aged and ultimately perished, some to be born anew. This exhibition examines depictions of deities and unpacks the complex imagery that revealed such godly identities and divine aspects.

"Lives of the Gods offers an unprecedented view into the world of the ancient Maya and an exciting opportunity to expand our understanding and appreciation of Maya art. These impressive loans from our esteemed collaborators from Mexico, Guatemala and international museums showcase the awe-inspiring world where the earthly and divine intersect in powerful statements about the universal order," said Eric M. Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum. "We are delighted that the Kimbell will once again present a seminal exhibition of Maya art — especially during the museum's 50th anniversary year."

Maya artists gave form to the gods in remarkably imaginative ways, through works of astonishing visual complexity and aesthetic refinement. Exquisitely carved sculptures were believed to embody divine power and presence; skillfully carved ornaments of jadeite, shell and obsidian once adorned kings and queens, symbolically connecting them to supernatural forces; and finely painted ceramics reveal the eventful lives of the gods in rich detail.

Notably, *Lives of the Gods* brings to the forefront new discoveries and understandings of Maya culture. Recent advances in the study of Maya hieroglyphs have made it possible to identify the names of dozens of artists from the Classic period, and this marks the first time in a major exhibition that any of their names will be identified on the accompanying exhibition labels. While artist signatures are scarce on ancient art across the world, Maya sculptors and painters did sign their works, sometimes prominently, on beautifully carved stone monuments and delicately ornamented vessels. *Lives of the Gods* will include four works by named individuals, as well as several examples attributed to Maya painters.

"One of the fascinating things about this exhibition is the number of works with artist's signatures or attributions — a visual record indicating that Maya artists and scribes were held in high esteem and recognized as important in their own time," said Jennifer Casler Price, curator of Asian, African and Ancient American art at the Kimbell.

"Also, to have an exhibition where nearly half of the works have never been exhibited in the United States is truly astounding. This is a unique opportunity to not only see, but to discover several iconic works of Maya art, such as the massive carved limestone Stela 51 from Calakmul, Mexico, but to

discover recently excavated works as well, like the set of five beguiling, ceramic lidded bowls adorned with animal heads from El Zotz in Guatemala.”



Additionally, *Lives of the Gods* highlights recent achievements in the conservation and preservation of key artworks, including the impressive *Throne 1* from Piedras Negras. Through a collaboration among conservators at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the government of Guatemala and other scholars, the throne underwent a thorough technical examination to understand the residual pigments on the throne and determine the nature and origin of the stone from which it was carved. Conservation treatment stabilized structural issues of the fragmentary

object, which had been deliberately destroyed in antiquity and reassembled after excavation in the 1930s. A new steel mount was created to support the throne during the exhibition as well as in earthquake-prone Guatemala to address the long-term preservation of the object. The reversible mounting technique used in the support structure provided an opportunity to correct the orientation of the throne’s legs, which recent epigraphic research had revealed were in reverse order.

The exhibition is organized thematically, following the arc of the lives of the gods and their place within a cosmological framework. The first section of the exhibition, “**Creations,**” will present mythical episodes related to the origin of the world. On August 11, 3114 B.C., before the advent of cities and writing in this part of the world, inscriptions tell us that the deities “were set in order,” and the gods placed stones in mythical locations. Maya kings replicated these divine actions at celebrations marking the ends of calendrical periods, each calculated at regular intervals from 3114 B.C. Featured here will be the Kimbell’s pair of elaborate censer stands (ca. 690–720, probably from Palenque), adorned with stacked masks that portray gods with both human and animal elements. During religious rituals, gods rested on these stands, which were thought of as their embodiments.

“**Day**” will explore the balance between the gods of the day, such as the Sun God K’inich, and the nocturnal gods like the Jaguar God in the section “**Night,**” to follow. The sun was associated with life-giving forces, and rulers who identified closely with this power would often add the title K’inich to their name. Many deceased kings were portrayed as glorious new suns rising in the sky, overseeing their successors’ performance of royal duties. Equally imposing and dignified, Maya artists created imaginative and terrifying images of nocturnal deities. Jaguars — who figure prominently in imagery of the night gods — are powerful nighttime hunters in the Maya area, and therefore jaguar gods and goddesses all displayed an aggressive, warlike personality. There were also beautiful and often

suggestive nocturnal deities such as the Moon Goddess, who was sometimes identified in texts as the sun's wife or mother, represented in various narratives on vessels throughout this section.

The “**Rain**” section will feature depictions of two important and interrelated gods — the powerful rain god, Chahk, and the god of lightning, fertility and abundance, K'awiil. Rain gods were venerated throughout the Maya region, and acts of appeasement to them were, and still are, critical for the well-being of communities. A highlight will be a tripod plate (7th–8th century) that depicts Chahk waist-high in water, with the Maize God emerging from a waterlily in the depths below and celestial beings hovering above him.

The section on “**Maize**” chronicles this god's life, death and rebirth through an assemblage of stunning and inventive masterpieces. The Maize God represented the beauty of the Maya staple crop and is often depicted by Maya artists as an eternally youthful, graceful being. The Maize God was also associated with two of the most valuable items in ancient Maya economies — jade and cacao. Episodes from the Maize God's mythical saga appear on some of the ancient Americas' finest ceramic vessels.

“**Knowledge**” will delve into the work of the scribes, who spent long years learning the intricacies of Maya writing and employed hundreds of signs in varied combinations, which can be seen throughout the exhibition — including on an exquisite vessel depicting two scenes of an old god instructing young pupils from the Kimbell. Only four of the books created in the pre-Hispanic period have endured to the present day, but texts that survive on relief sculptures and delicately painted ceramics provide a resource for understanding Classic Maya alliances, conquests and spiritual beliefs.

The final section, on “**Patron Gods,**” will include a striking series of works depicting kings and queens taking on various aspects and attributes of the gods. Maya artists created monumental sculptures to celebrate events and depict the perceived connection between rulers and the gods. Freestanding slabs known as stelae stood in the large plazas of Maya cities, and some of these sculptures bear the signatures of sculptors. Also on display will be a remarkable lintel — a horizontal support spanning a doorway — made of zapote wood. There are few Maya works carved in wood in antiquity that survive to the present day, and this lintel represents a celebration in the wake of the victory of Tikal (and its king Yihk'in Chan K'awiil) over rival Naranjo.

The extraordinarily rich array of exceptional sculptures, vessels and precious ornaments in the exhibition demonstrate the intimate relationship between Maya royalty and the gods, underscore the role of religion in the establishment and maintenance of Maya political authority and are a testament to the imaginative and technical virtuosity of Maya artists.

Lives of the Gods continues the Kimbell's dedication to collecting and exhibiting objects that tell the stories of cultures from around the world. The exhibition follows the Kimbell's history of important presentations of ancient American art, including *The Blood of Kings: A New Interpretation of Maya Art* (1986), *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea* (2010–11), and *Wari: Lords of the Ancient Andes*

(2013). Additionally, four objects from the museum's permanent collection — a pair of impressive censers stands and two intricately painted vessels — are part of this landmark exhibition.

Lives of the Gods is a partnership between the Kimbell Art Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the exhibition is on view through April 2, 2023. The Kimbell hosts the second and final presentation of this landmark exhibition during its 50th anniversary year of celebration.

DATES

May 7–September 3, 2023

CATALOGUE

A lavishly illustrated catalogue, published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press, will accompany the exhibition. This engaging title introduces readers to the complex stories of Mesoamerican divinity through the stunning carvings, ceramics and metalwork of the Classic period.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

The exhibition is organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Kimbell Art Museum.

The exhibition was initially conceived by James Doyle, Director of the Matson Museum of Anthropology and Associate Research Professor, Pennsylvania State University, and was organized at The Metropolitan Museum of Art by Joanne Pillsbury, Andrall E. Pearson Curator of Ancient American Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, with Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Yale University, and Laura Filloy Nadal, Associate Curator, also at the Met. At the Kimbell, the exhibition is organized by Jennifer Casler Price, Curator of Asian, African and Ancient American Art.

SUPPORT

The exhibition is supported in part by the William and Catherine Bryce Memorial Fund, the Texas Commission on the Arts and the Fort Worth Tourism Public Improvement District. Promotional support is provided by American Airlines, NBC5 and PaperCity.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Admission to *Lives of the Gods: Divinity in Maya Art* is \$18 for adults, \$16 for seniors, K–12 educators, students and military personnel, \$14 for ages 6–11, free for children under 6 and \$3 for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients. Admission is half-price all day on Tuesdays and after 5 p.m. on Fridays. Admission to the museum's permanent collection is always free.

The Kimbell Art Museum is open Tuesdays through Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Fridays, noon–8 p.m.; Sundays, noon–5 p.m.; closed Mondays, New Year's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For general information, call 817-332-8451.

ABOUT THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM

The Kimbell Art Museum, owned and operated by the Kimbell Art Foundation, is internationally renowned for both its collections and its architecture. The Kimbell's collections range in period from antiquity to the 20th century and include European masterpieces by artists such as Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini, Velázquez, Vigée Le Brun, Monet, Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse; important collections of Egyptian and classical antiquities; and the art of Asia, Africa and the ancient Americas.

The museum's 1972 building, designed by the American architect Louis I. Kahn, is widely regarded as one of the outstanding architectural achievements of the modern era. A second building, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, opened in 2013 and now provides space for special exhibitions, dedicated classrooms and a 289-seat auditorium with excellent acoustics for music. For more information, visit kimbellart.org.

IMAGES

Sak[...] Yuk[...] Took' and Sak [...] Yib'ah Tzak B'ahlam (Maya, active 8th century). *Stela 51*. Calakmul, Mexico, 731. Limestone, Overall w/ concrete base: H. 11 ft. 7 in. x W. 64 9/16 in. x D. 31 7/8 in. (353 cm x 164 cm x 81 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura– Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (10-80365; Public Registry 1AMA00361848)

Whistle with the Maize God emerging from a flower. Mexico, Late Classic period (600–900). Ceramic, pigment, H. 8 1/8 in. (20.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979. (1979.206.728)

Monument 155 (Captive impersonating jaguar deity). Red Altar, Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, ca. 700. Sandstone, H. 22 7/16 x W. 18 1/8 x D. 4 5/16 in. (57 x 46 x 11 cm). Museo de Sitio de Toniná, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura– Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (10- 588895; Public Registry 1AMA00366979)

Codex-style vessel showing the rebirth of the Maize God. Structure II, Tomb 1, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 650–800. Ceramic, pigment, H. 6 1/8 in. (15.5 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, SECRETARÍA DE CULTURA.-INAH.-MEX.-Reproducción Autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

K'in Lakam Chahk and Patlajte K'awiil mo[. . .] (Maya sculptors, active 8th century). *Throne 1*. Piedras Negras, Petén, Guatemala, 8th century. Limestone, W. 78 3/4 in. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala.

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PRESS KIT

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