Out of the Maya tombs

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Out of the Maya Tombs, an award-winning documentary from Night Fire Films, dives into the worlds — plural — of Classic Maya vases. These mesmerizing objects, once interred with the most elite members of ancient Maya society, detail local political histories and supernatural events, and reflect a mastery of line and colour by the artists who painted them. As such, they have engendered immense interest on the part of archaeologists, art historians, and art collectors in bringing them ‘out of the Maya tombs’. The documentary, in a real sense, is more about the complexities that arise out of these largely foreign desires and the real effects they produce locally, particularly in the Department of Peten, Guatemala, than it is about the objects themselves. The producers enlist the help of many experts — archaeologists, art historians, anthropologists, collectors, dealers, curators, and even looters (huecheros) — to tell this story. “For each,” they say, “these vases have a radically different value and meaning.”

Overall, this is a beautiful film that succeeds in conveying a topic that is as interesting as it is complicated, without sacrificing clarity or precision. The objects are expertly illustrated and those interested in seeing truly spectacular images of ancient Maya masterpieces will not be disappointed. The footage of the many vases included in the film is stunning, and, along with the expert commentary provided, manages to bring to life the often enigmatic scenes on these vessels. The viewer will not be befuddled with jargon, nor are the issues overly simplified. Characters are highlighted using animation, making complex shapes and attributes easy to identify, while their actions are described. Through the narration, their personalities become legible and millennia-old dramas feel close. The imagery is brought to life on the screen. In one sequence, the Maize God appears to dance as dozens of painted plates flash across the screen.

Though not the sole focus of this film, more traditional art-historical topics, such as style and iconography, are also considered. Viewers are introduced to the diverse arts of the ancient Maya and particular regional styles. Those not already familiar with the ancient Maya may be confused by the chronology, the personages, the political geography, and some of the other historical details mentioned, as these are not wholly contextualized in the film — that is not its purpose. The film shines a light on methods through which art historians and archaeologists study these vessels, if not necessarily providing an encyclopaedia for how to understand their detail. In addition, the documentary’s experts reveal aspects of their own methods for studying Maya vases: scientific, iconographic, ethnological. We learn about style, issues of provenance, looting, and so on. Viewers gain a comprehensive view of the myriad issues surrounding these durable, coveted pieces of Maya art. Nonetheless, the director has managed to capture some unparalleled views of Maya vases, returning to them the animacy they held in their indigenous contexts.

The film’s greatest strength is its breadth. Its view of Maya vases is comprehensive and multifaceted. As mentioned, the producers assembled an impressive array of commentators, who each bring to bear their specific expertise on the subject. Refreshingly, we hear from Guatemalans as often as we hear from foreigners, and these local contributions bring an
immediacy to a subject often treated only in the abstract. Unlike many other documentaries that explore Maya art and archaeology, this one considers the modern history of the region, particularly the Department of Peten, Guatemala. We learn how the harvesting of chicle acquainted rural Peteneros with both the natural and cultural resources of the landscape, and how this local knowledge was used to advance both archaeological research and the illicit looting and subsequent sale of antiquities. It deftly demonstrates how the fleeting presence of large archaeological projects, growing interest in Maya vases on the art market, local economic precarity, and a heightening armed conflict drove the looting that ransacked the Peten in the 1970s and 1980s. Interviews with the huecheros themselves, as well as Dr David Matsuda, an anthropologist who worked with them, round out an in-depth and multifaceted discussion of looting that similar documentaries rarely even approach. The film helps to contextualize the reality of local Peteneros, who found ways to let their ancestors sustain them through the pottery they produced. At the same time, it highlights how dealers and collectors exploited these situations for their own gain, funding an enterprise that siphoned material culture out of its homeland.

The film grapples with difficult and contentious topics, such as the study of looted objects, without trying to resolve them. In this way, viewers are introduced to these debates and given plenty of information with which they can develop their own opinions. Someone with an active interest in the Classic Maya will come away a more complete understanding of how these ancient works of art intersect with modern politics. As such, this film is relevant to people interested in ancient art and archaeology anywhere, not only in the Maya region.

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