

# Maya Activities & Crafts

## Transport students back in time to the world of the ancient Maya.

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### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Assemble a selection of photographs of Maya buildings, carvings and artifacts for students to look at from books and websites (see "Maya Web Resources" below.)

Ask students to come up in pairs to study and discuss the images, which can include jewelry, masks, statues, codex style books and even household tools.

Next, ask students: What do you know about the Maya? How do you think they created these works? Then launch into your Maya study with the following activities, all of which correspond to a type of artifact found throughout Maya culture.

### ABOUT THE MAYA

The Maya were one of the greatest New World civilizations. They excelled in the arts, mathematics, architecture, farming, and astronomy. The early Maya lived in villages, where they farmed corn, also known as maize. Hundreds of years later, they built vast city-states. It was during this time that the Maya made many advances. They built great structures in the ever encroaching jungle and studied the planets to create calendar systems, one of which had 365 days. And they did this all without modern technology! Maya civilization began declining around 900 CE due to drought, warfare and overpopulation. The Spanish began their conquest of the Maya in the 1500s, but the last Maya city did not fall until 1697.

### TOWERING TEMPLES

**MAYA FACT:** Temple-pyramids are an amazing architectural achievement of the ancient Maya. One of the most famous of these is the temple of Kukulkan, or El Castillo, in Chichén Itzá, Mexico. It stands about 80' high, and is 180' wide on each side at its base. Carved serpent heads adorn the temple.

**ACTIVITY:** Students can sharpen their measurement skills — and practice cooperative learning — by creating an El Castillo scale model as a class. Ask students to estimate how big the model should be in inches, based on the measurements of the original. Next, have groups measure appropriately- sized platforms out of self-hardening clay. Stack the layers as shown, adding glue between each layer, and insert a dowel in the center. Invite students to add staircases to the sides and a temple on top out of additional pieces of clay. Finally, challenge students to research how the design of El Castillo relates to the 365-day solar Maya calendar.

## MAGNIFICENT MOSAICS

**MAYA FACT:** The ancient Maya made exquisite masks from stone, wood, obsidian, bone and shell. These masks often contained many pieces of jade arranged in mosaic patterns. Maya royalty also had personal items beautifully decorated in these patterns.

**ACTIVITY:** Students can make their own intricate mosaic masks in the style of the ancient Maya! Begin by sharing some mosaic and mask examples (see “Maya Resources”), then have students draw and cut out a mask shape — with eyes, mouth, and nose — on an 8" x 10" piece of oak tag. Next, have students cut out tissue paper “tiles,” each no larger than an inch square. Show students how to glue the tiles one at a time next to each other on the mask, as shown. Once the glue is dry, invite students to share and compare their masterpieces with each other.

## AMAZING ANIMAL PENDANTS

**MAYA FACT:** Jewelry was an important part of upper-class and royal dress. Pendants shaped like animals were popular.

**ACTIVITY:** Have students, working in small groups, research animals common to the ancient Maya world (see Maya Web Resources.) Each group should find a photograph of its totem animal and record its habitat, life cycle, and the locations where it can be found today. Next, give each student a ball of self-hardening clay to shape into his or her group's animal, as shown. Encourage groups to wear their pendants as they present their animal research.

## CREATE-YOUR-OWN CODEX

**MAYA FACT:** The Maya recorded important information — such as scientific discoveries and historical records — using their hieroglyphic writing system. Glyphs were painted on pottery, inscribed into fig-bark books called codices, and carved into stone. Maya could express anything that could be spoken in glyphs.

**ACTIVITY:** Ask: “How many examples of Maya glyphs can you find on the images you’ve provided?” Then invite students to make their own codices to record an important event in their lives. For each codex, use half of an 8.5" x 11" piece of construction paper, folded like an accordion to create three surfaces. Have students draw an original glyph on each surface with colored pencils. Then have each student “read” his or her codex aloud.

## JAGUAR WARRIOR BANNERS

**MAYA FACT:** Maya rulers often waged war between city-states to acquire high-status captives, wealth and influence. Rulers wore magnificent headdresses to present an imposing image. As a sign of power, some also went into battle holding banners made from the skin of the jaguar, or *bahlam*, a powerful animal the Maya revered.

**ACTIVITY:** Invite students to become academic “warriors” with their own jaguar banners! Host a confidence-boosting march before a standardized test, challenging class project, or assessment period. First, show students how to measure and cut out a 10" circle of oak tag. Tape a straw to the back of the circle for use as a handle. Have students decorate their banners by glueing pieces of spotted animal-print material (available at fabric and discount stores) onto the front of the oak

tag. Students may also glue strips of ribbon or fabric along the bottom edge. Next, ask small groups of students each to brainstorm their own special “fear-vanquishing” chant, and nominate a spokesperson. The spokesperson then leads the chant by reciting the words first and having the group repeat them.

## BIRTHDAY POTTERY

**MAYA FACT:** Maya artists crafted beautiful pots, urns, vases, goblets, plates, and jars with painted images and glyphs.

**ACTIVITY:** Students can make their own Maya vases with special painted glyphs that represent their birthdays. Start by having students use one of the calendar conversion tools in the resources (below) and enter their birth date. The converter will give them the Maya name and glyphs for that day in the Tzolk'in calendar. To create each vase, flatten a piece of self-hardening craft clay (with a diameter of about 4") into a base. Coil more pieces of clay into 8 “snakes.” Place the first coil around the base, then stack each additional coil on top. Blend with moist fingers inside and out. Before the clay dries, add a glyph with acrylic paint.

## MODERN MAYA PEN PALS

More than six million Maya descendants still live in the Yucatán Peninsula. Many of these modern Maya incorporate the customs of their ancestors into their daily lives. To learn more, invite students to write letters to Maya children c/o the Maya Education Foundation. Send letters in Spanish to Armando J. Alfonso Utrilla, Rt. 106, House 076, P.O. Box 38, S. Woodstock, VT 05071-0038.

## MAYA FEAST

**MAYA FACT:** The Maya ate lots of different foods — including peppers, beans, squash, and fruit — but every meal included corn. Maya women made cakes by grinding corn kernels into *zacan*, a thick dough, cooked on an earthenware griddle called a *comal* held above an open fire by three hearth stones.

The Maya also made salsa from tomatoes, chili peppers, onions, and juice from sour oranges. They called this spicy mixture *Xni Pec*. For the *Hanal Pixan* festival — also known as the Day of the Dead — the Maya prepared a large meal of *zacan* stuffed with meat, beans, and chili peppers wrapped in cornhusks and steamed. Today, this food is known as tamales. And did you know that the Maya loved chocolate? They grew cacao trees and ground the beans into a fine powder which they mixed with water. They added vanilla, honey, and a variety of ground chili peppers to make a spicy chocolate drink. Only royalty drank this beverage.

**ACTIVITY:** Invite your students to a Maya feast! It's easy to buy corn-flour tortillas, but more fun to make them as the Maya did. See "Maya Feast Recipes" (link below) for a quick how-to. As students are munching, read aloud *The Corn Grows Ripe*, by Dorothy Rhoads (Puffin, 1993). If you have more time, check out the recipes for salsa, tamales, and chili chocolate drink for a full Maya banquet to complete your Maya unit. Remember to take a poll after everyone samples the chili chocolate; then challenge students to calculate what percentage of the class liked the drink and what percentage did not.

## WEB RESOURCES

**Maya vase photo archive:**

<http://www.mayavase.com>

**Mystery of the Maya - Canadian Museum of Civilization:**

<http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/maya/mminteng.shtml>

**Simple graphic Maya calendar conversion tool:**

<http://users.hartwick.edu/hartleyc/mayacalendar/mayacalendar.html>

**Comprehensive calendar conversion tools:**

<http://www.pauahtun.org/Calendar/tools.html>

**Maya Ruins - a photographic tour of Maya sites:**

<http://mayaruins.com>

**Maya feast recipes:**

<http://www.scholastic.com/browse/subarticle.jsp?id=3172>

**Images of the Maya: traditional woven textiles from the highlands of Chiapas.**

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/maya/default.htm>

**MesoAmerican Art: lush and evocative photographs of Maya sites and people.**

<http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/bevans/mesoamerican/index.html>

**Images of mainly Maya stone tools from the World Museum of Man collection.**

<http://www.worldmuseumofman.org/mayan2.php>