
*Divinity in everyday life Maya culture*

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| **Introduction**  |
| This pendant is from Guatemala and is part of the Eskenazi Museum of Art’s collections. The pendant is under two inches tall, but monumental in its presence and complex in its significance. This beautiful example of Maya lapidary work depicts K’inich Ajaw, the Maya sun god. It is carved of jadeite, a material considered most valuable by Pre-Columbian es, and depicting a deity from the complex Maya pantheon. The pendant was most likely part of a necklace—perhaps the central element in a string of jade beads—or worn hanging from a belt. Maya men and women wore jewelry made from a variety of materials. Still, pieces carved from jadeite were especially favored by priests and royalty for the prestige and the life-affirming symbolism associated with the material.Maya rulers, particularly in large ceremonial places, often commissioned monumental art to celebrate their authority and connect themselves with their patron gods, reinforcing the dynastic and religious links that defined their reign. Upon death, kings and queens were often deified, equated with the sun and moon gods, and represented in royal iconography with sun-like features, such as the T-shaped teeth that are part of the sun god’s pendant depiction. This pendant is a testament to the cultural reverence for divine power and the prestigious role of the ruling class in Maya society.Maya artists created monumental sculptures and smaller representations to honor significant events and highlight the close relationship between rulers and the gods. Small personal items like pendants and jewelry also played a crucial role in this cultural expression. These delicate ornaments, often carved from jade- a rare and highly valued material prized for its color and durability- were worn by royalty and nobility. The intricate designs on these pieces not only showcased the wearer’s elevated status but also often depicted deities and symbols associated with divine power, reinforcing the wearer’s connection to the gods. The inscriptions and imagery on such personal adornments linked rulers to cosmic events and underscored their divine authority, especially during key moments like accession ceremonies. By adopting God-like names and symbols, rulers performed rituals in which they embodied deities, wearing their sacred attire and insignia. Kings and queens were particularly devoted to honoring their patron gods- local manifestations of major deities associated with their dynasties and cities. Through both monumental and personal art, the ancient Maya reinforced the sacred bond between their rulers and the divine. |
| **Indiana Standards Connections:**S.2.1 – Define culture and identify the material and non-material components of culture. E.S.2.1 Students investigate the origins of various ethnic and racial groups, examining the historical influence of cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic contexts on those groups.5.1.1 Identify and describe early cultures and settlements that existed in North America prior to contact with Europeans. 6.1.1 Summarize the rise, decline, and cultural achievements of ancient civilizations in Europe and Mesoamerica.6.3.4 Describe and compare major cultural characteristics of regions in Europe and the Western Hemisphere.GHW.1.1 Use maps, timelines, and other geographic representations to identify and describe the location, distribution and main events in the development of culture hearths in Asia, Mesoamerica, and North Africa. | **Compelling Question(s):** Who were the ancient Maya? What can we learn about the ancient Maya from the Sun God pendant?How were Maya gods represented in art and in other objectsHow does the use of material culture such as jewelry or monuments express authority, social hierarchy in different civilizations?        |
| **Lesson Objectives:**Students will learn about the ancient Maya civilization while recognizing the living descendants of this culture. Through the close observation of the Sun God pendant, students will make connections between the motif, material, and design and the symbolic meaning of the pendant. Additionally, they will learn how art can be used as a tool to reinforce power, identity, and divine authority. Finally, students will reflect on how personal adornments like this pendant reflect social hierarchies, religious beliefs, and the relationship between rulers and deities. |
| **Materials**  |
| Articles and resources for background information  * [Sun God Pendant  W2W Website](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/sun-god-pendant.html)
* [Maya Archaeologist: Maya Gods and Goddesses](https://www.mayaarchaeologist.co.uk/school-resources/maya-world/maya-gods-and-goddesses/)
* [Google Arts & Culture Who are the Maya?](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/who-are-the-maya/UgUB_-wO79BgJA?hl=en)

Museum collections with similar objects* [Metropolitan Museum of Art Sun God (K’inich)](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/820329)
* [Kimbel Art Museum Lives of the Gods Divinity in Maya Art](https://kimbellart.org/maya-gods)
* Kimbel Art Museum exhibit’s didactics:
* <https://kimbellart.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/LOTG%20didactics%20ENGLISH%20PDF.pdf>
* <https://kimbellart.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/LOG-Guide-English-FINAL.pdf>

YouTube Video* [The Maya myth of the morning star](https://youtu.be/Z2vzrQWny_c?si=ye-kvlZfzrGSNA6A)
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| **Learning Plan**  |
| **Activities** 1. Begin by showing the students the image of the Sun God Pendant in the W2W [website,](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/sun-god-pendant.html) and other similar Maya items representing deities in museum collections (some resources are provided above). Ask students to make inferences about these items: What is it made from? From what part of the world is jade found? What is depicted? What do they think this item is used for? What might the pendant represent? Does it seem heavy or light, brittle or hard? Who would use the pendant and for what purpose? Students may observe the green color and smooth texture, noting that the pendant represents a human face with demon-like features, seemingly heavy and hard. **Emphasize that the jade object is a pendant used by high-ranking ancient Maya people.**
2. Guide the discussion on ancient Maya civilization, highlight the importance of religion, social structure and art in everyday life of Maya culture.
3. Describe the pendant’s representation of K’inich Ajaw, the sun god, and its use by Maya nobility to reinforce their power in society. Reiterate the use of sun-like imagery such as the T-shaped teeth connected the rulers to the divine and reinforced their authority.
4. Visit some of the websites provided above to introduce students to Maya worldview and their pantheon.
5. Show students the YouTube video on the [The Maya myth of the morning star](https://youtu.be/Z2vzrQWny_c?si=ye-kvlZfzrGSNA6A) to present a different representation of the sun god and its importance in ancient Maya worldview.

Break students into small groups to discuss the Maya Sun God pendant based on the teacher’s discussion of Maya culture.Worksheet questions:* Describe the pendant. What symbols are used to represent the Maya sun god?
* How might the wearer of this pendant be seen by others in Maya society?
* Why do you think the Maya used jade to create personal adornments for royalty?
* What connections do you see between the rulers wearing these symbols and their role as divine figures in society?
* How do you think art and jewelry influenced how people viewed their rulers and their gods?

Ask each group to share their answers. Allow them to compare their ideas with their classmates and refine their thinking on the role of art in reinforcing authority and divine status. |
| **Assessment Suggestions**  Evaluate student participation in class discussion and in the discussion groups.Review the completed worksheets for understanding the pendant’s cultural significance and symbolism. |
| **Extensions**  Students can research other Maya gods and list their main characteristics; What is that god responsible for? What motifs are associated with them? How do you think ancient Maya represented that divinity? |