

Cincinnati  
Museum Center

# *Maya: The Exhibition*

## Maya Chocolate Drinking Vessels

We may think of Chocolate as just a sweet treat, but for the Maya it was an important part of celebrations and religious rituals. The drinking vessels they used were richly decorated.

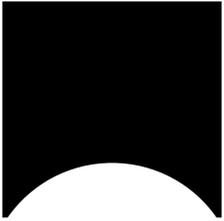
The Maya believed chocolate was a holy or sacred substance and that cacao trees were the trees of the gods. According to Maya beliefs, chocolate contained the sap or lifeblood of the tree, because cacao pods grow straight out of the tree (rather than off its branches like you may have seen with apple or orange trees).

The chocolate they drank wasn't sweet at all. Without sugar, chocolate is very bitter. (If you have any, try some dark chocolate or a small taste of unsweetened cocoa powder. It's not what we're used to at all!) They would mix in corn starch to make the drink frothy and add a variety of spices like red pepper, vanilla and allspice.

There were many ways chocolate vessels could be decorated. They could be brightly colored and have intricate designs. The glyphs, the Maya form of writing, would often be part of the design and tell us what the cup was for and who owned it.

Archaeologists have even found chocolate vessels as far north as Utah. They were made by the Pueblo and show how widely chocolate was traded! (These chocolate vessels are decorated with geometric designs, such as lines, squares, diamonds and triangles.)





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### Option 1

#### **What you need:**

- Styrofoam cup
- Mechanical pencil
- Crayons

Option 1 mimics a style of decoration that uses “slips” to create a two color design. The artist would make the vessel out of one color of pottery and then apply a thin layer of another color (the “slip”) over top. When the artist cut into the top layer, they would reveal the second color underneath.

To make this style of vessel at home, you can use a Styrofoam cup. Use a mechanical pencil (without the lead) to carefully etch your design into the surface. Then lightly rub a crayon over the top and your design will be revealed!

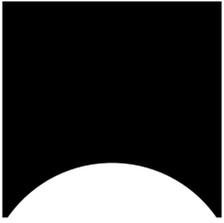
### Option 2

#### **What you need:**

- A plastic cup (preferably with flat, straight sides)
- Paper
- Scissors
- Tape
- Coloring supply of your choice

Option 2 can be used to duplicate the painted designs. You can use a cup and a piece of paper for this style. A plastic cup with straight, flat sides works best. Wrap the paper around the cup, tape it in place, then cut off any extra paper at the top and bottom. Then you can use any crayons, markers or colored pencils to create your design.

We’ve included some examples to use as inspiration – but you can also create your own design!



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### Examples:

Left: Maya, Guatemala or Mexico, Mesoamerica. 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Right: Maya, Mexico, Mesoamerica. 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Both from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Find out more: <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/maya-drinking-cup>



Anasazi [Pueblo] pottery, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Natural History Museum of Utah.

(Black and white plaster designs on pottery, originally blue, green and turquoise pigments would have been used to add additional color.)

Find out more: <https://nhmu.utah.edu/blog/2016/08/04/cacao-chaco-canyon>



Ceramic Drinking Cup with a Mythological Scene. Lowlands, Guatemala. 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century CE.

National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Guatemala.

On display in *Maya: The Exhibition*.

