

Alexander H. Dacuyan

SBS 348 Book Review

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### Maya Art and Architecture

What is Maya art? That was the question that Mary Ellen Miller, Author of *Maya Art and Architecture*, was trying to answer for twenty years up until 1998 when she published her book. Mary's organization of the book is as follows: ten chapters including a preface and introduction. Each chapter can be read alone as to understand specific ideals of Maya culture relating to art in some way. But it is most useful if read chronologically Because Mary makes the book flow well for understanding a bigger perspective. After reading her book in 2014 it seems as if the information is just as new if it was first presented, even though it's been almost another twenty years. This book explains in great detail much of the Maya art and architecture that dates from the early classic to the late classic period of Mesoamerica. As a student, the book captures a curiosity about Maya art and architecture that isn't very difficult to understand. With the ease of reading and understanding makes for a much more positive review. This review will discuss the book's Author, organization, content in which is being addressed and a personal opinion from a college student's perspective. With a book that focuses on Maya art and architecture it is helpful to know who and why somebody is writing about it in the first place.

Mary Ellen Miller earned her doctorate in 1981 from Yale University and was a member of the faculty for many years as the Dean of Arts. However, this year she will be stepping down from being one of the deans to pursue something else. Mary did a thesis that specialized on murals in the Chiapas region of Mexico (Miller, M. <[http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty\\_miller.html](http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty_miller.html)>.) She helped do work on the

book, *The Blood of Kings*, which was turned into one of the best documentaries about Maya culture. The reason why she wrote the book is that she simply wanted to take on a project that her idol or predecessor wanted to do. This famous person she admired so much was none other than the famous Maya expert Tatiana Proskouriakoff. Tatiana was the original researcher who started the works on art especially in the Chiapas region back in the forty and fifties and is an incredible artist as well (Miller, M. Print. Preface.) Mary followed her path and became as important in the field as Tatiana. Mary's perspective of what the book is about seems to be specifically informative and factual. Her writing suggests this book will be of a significant resource for further Maya art and architecture researchers.

Mary has written numerous publications about Maya culture, art, structures and more but this book was the first to really give a scholarly look at what Maya art is. She is also known as a specialist of the art of the ancient world (Miller, Mary. <[http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty\\_miller.html](http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty_miller.html)>.) So in regards to her background her credentials more than qualify her for this informative, detailed book. But it's not just her academic background that makes this book interesting, it is also the way it has been organized.

As the book begins, the preface introduces Mary to the reader as to why she started this book and the introduction livens up what will be discussed within the book. Mary seems to know how not to bore the reader and as you continue scanning the pages you find yourself wanting to know more. The organization flows so the reader gets information that is useful as you move into the next chapters as well as within each chapter themselves. For example, chapter four, *Materials*, discusses what why and how the Maya gathered, used, and thought of the materials needed to make the art and structures that defined them for so long. However, this information is throughout the entire book to give structure to the new concepts of art that is being discussed.

Another aspect of well-organized readings is she has used a chronological order to help understand the time period. Chapter four and five is divided into early classic and late classic periods. This helps give the reader a good reference of comparison between the different styles of art and architecture. Each chapter is also broken down into smaller bits to understand which helps facilitate learning easier. For example in chapter two, *Maya Art*, Mary gives information on the history of art, the regions where the art is found and talks about the development of understanding the art. With this supportive information within each chapter you are never left with asking more questions than getting answers from the text. The organization of the book would not suffice by its own without beautifully detailed pictures, photos, and content that is to be expected from Maya culture.

Within the guts of the book, the subject and content that is discussed is all related to art in some way. It can be historical, physical, psychological and divine. But mainly it is information that helps the reader understand what actually Maya art is, like the beginning of the paper says. The art is a mixture of Maya locations, the influence of rule, materials available at the time, regional or topographical environment and very importantly the Maya belief system. Mary has skillfully written about all of this aspect to Maya art in a way that is more laymen then technical, so even the novice of researchers can understand with ease. And when we say art, it is not limited to just the hieroglyphs and carvings, but to ceramics, sculptures and statues, structures and temples, codices, furniture, jewelry, masks, stucco walls and a more. What the reader should expect from the book is to know the important details and concepts that help shape what is called Maya art. In detail, Mary even explains many techniques that the Maya used to create the art and architecture that is over a thousand years old. In chapter four, *Materials*, the amount of information that is available is amazing. Mary describes the Maya as a mining civilization

because materials for art were so important to the people. So the Maya created jade, limestone and other types of working quarries to supply the ongoing commissioned art pieces as well as the pyramids. The information within the book also helps put in to contrast the level of technology the Maya had which was very far ahead of the time. With description and photos of many of the major cities around Mesoamerica Mary can show clearly the types of artifacts that come from each region and city. Each artifact has its own story as well and is briefly described in captions and some of the main text.

The Maya architecture is one part of the book but it is an integral part of Maya culture and art as well. The architecture can be considered art as well, however, there was a specific reason why and how the structures were built and Mary goes in to some detail about the most awe inspiring ones. An example of information about architecture is from chapter 2, *Maya architecture*: The buildings constructed were made from three simple concepts or elements that were important to the Maya. One was the little Maya house that is like many of the modern track homes we have today but on a much smaller scale. The second is the volume of a plaza or pyramid. And the last is the stairs and paths that helped introduce or emphasize the other two (M. Miller, 2014). The amount of effort and dedication to create such monuments is daunting and it is hard to see the scale of importance to the Maya, but that is one of the things that are great about this book. You get a great sense of wonder with enough information to help construct plausible hypotheses. With so much content relating to art and architecture it is not hard to realize that, put together in an organized way from a very dedicated and qualified author, the book comes together well for a college student currently taking a Maya Civilization class.

As a student, I appreciate the book's connection with the coursework that is given. After reading *Maya Art and Architecture*, I have more of an interest in the architecture over the art.

The book takes a while to read and I would estimate maybe a total of 15 -17 hours, but that's from someone who reads slowly. As for the book itself, it seems Mary Ellen Miller knows her stuff and she has made it very understandable. As our Maya learning progresses through the semester this will be an essential resource for my final project. I have learned so much about Maya Art and architecture just in this book that most of my questions from class have been answered if not all. This would probably be the first time I could recommend a book such as this because I have not had much experience reading in general. This is my first book review as well but my opinions serious and sincere. The information gathered is of an objective view of the book until my opinions are stated. Although this review could have been many more pages, what is reflected, is an observation and understanding from the reading.

Overall, the author, Mary Ellen Miller with her dynamic academic background put together a well-documented and informative piece of literature. The organization that is used from chronological order to easy to read chapters that can be stand-alone helps keep the reader on the right track with no confusion. The content and subject matter stays on topic well and can be compared and contrasted easily as well. Her perspective voices fact and passion with an incredible amount of laymen information. As a result of reading the book, *Maya Art and Architecture*, we know the answer to, "What is Maya Art?"

Miller, Mary. "Faculty." Yale University. Yale University. Nd. Web. 2014  
<[http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty\\_miller.html](http://arthistory.yale.edu/faculty/faculty/faculty_miller.html)>.

Miller, Mary E. *Maya Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1999. Print.