

**Wall Panel: *Royal Woman***  
**Mexico: Maya, A.D. 650-750**  
**Dallas Museum of Art, Foundation for the Arts Collection,**  
**gift of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark**

**About the Artist**

Some historians believe that the Maya society may have been divided into three classes: a ruling elite group, the commoners, and an artisan class. This artisan class was composed of people who worked full-time in various occupations that provided skills and services. Artists were probably part of this group and lived close to the political and religious centers.

Maya sculptors used stone tools and perhaps wooden mallets to carve the limestone used for many of their works. They often carved panels showing important people: gods, rulers, priests, and powerful men and women. The artists paid much attention to detail, usually filling the spaces between the figures with glyphs and decorative details.

**About the Art**

The wall panel, a low-relief sculpture, is made of limestone, stucco, and paint. The surface of the panel is filled with detail, leaving very little empty space around the forms. It was made during the Late Classic Period and shows the figure in the typical profile position that is common in much of Maya art. The figures are often shown with elaborate costumes and jewelry. They are sometimes depicted with servants seated on thrones or being carried on litters.

The panel probably was used beside a doorway in a Maya temple near the Usumacinta River in what we now call the Mexican states of Chiapas or Tabasco. The area is referred to as the Southern Maya Lowlands. The woman carved in the panel is Lady Bolon-k'an, a patron of the temple and a powerful noble woman who was important in ritual festivals. By the act of being there, she sanctifies that object and place.

Though scholars have not as yet deciphered their full meaning, glyphs on the panel indicate that Lady Bolon-k'an is presiding over an event. Because her face is shown in profile, we know that she was a noble lady.

In the vertical column of glyphs on the right hand side of the panel, the bar with four dots below it is the number nine, and the round shape above the bar and dots is translated as precious. Therefore, in English we can say her name is "Lady Nine Precious."

Her costume includes a collar, a skirt with a criss-crossed pattern, sandals, jewelry, and a belt. The areas decorated with small circles probably represent polished jade beads. Because of her clothing, her headdress, and the scepter she is holding, we know that she is performing an important ceremony for communion with her ancestors. The panel has a

mysterious, sacred, and magical quality.

### **Additional Information**

Limestone, because it was plentiful, was the most common material used for Maya sculpture. When first cut, limestone is relatively soft and easy to carve. After it has been exposed to the atmosphere, it becomes much harder. The carved pieces were usually painted with a dark red paint possibly made from an oxide of iron obtained from anthills, which were plentiful in the forests. Blue was the second most common color used. Most of the colors have worn off the sculptures we see today, but on some pieces a trace of the original paint can be found. Scholars feel that because paint fragments can be seen on this piece, it was probably on an interior wall or doorway protected from the weather.

### **About the Time and Place**

The ancient Maya lived in what today are parts of Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador. Their civilization was spread over 200,000 square miles that encompassed rainforests and plains.

The Maya civilization was primarily agricultural. Crops of maize, beans, squash, peppers, cotton, and fruit were grown. Cotton was important for use in the beautiful textiles which were woven there and widely traded.

As soon as their babies were born, Maya mothers placed them in a cradle with their heads compressed between two boards so that after two days their foreheads would be flattened and sloping back in what was thought to be a beautiful shape. This sloping forehead is noticeable in many of the Maya works of art that show figures in profile.

Crossed eyes were another feature the Maya thought was beautiful. Mothers would hang small balls of resin on hair that fell between their childrens' eyes so that they would focus on the tiny ornament and develop this unusual characteristic. Ears, lips, and noses were often pierced to hold ornaments, and front teeth were sometimes decorated with patterns. Some skulls have been found in which the teeth have decorations of inlaid jade.

The use of a written language is one of the characteristics of a highly developed civilization, and the Maya system of writing is considered to be one of their most significant accomplishments. They were able to keep records of important events and information about their lives over a period of time. As scholars are able to determine the meaning of the glyphs, or symbols, we are able to learn more about the lives of ancient Maya and about what was important to them.

The glyphs, which are sometimes quite elaborate, are a type of picture which can represent a word, an idea, or a group of words. Glyphs can be found in many of the stone carvings and on many of the ceramic vessels scholars study today. Even a few ancient books, called codices, still exist showing this elaborate written language. Decipherment

has been slow and complicated as many scholars and historians have worked to unlock the information recorded there.