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A SCULPTURED VASE
FROM GUATEMALA



LEAFLETS OF THE
MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
HEYE FOUNDATION , NEW YORK
NUMBER 1 , , , SEPTEMBER, 1919

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A SCULPTURED VASE FROM GUATEMALA

Gift to the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, by Harmon W. Hendricks, Esq.

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A Sculptured Vase from Guatemala

HE truly splendid piece of ancient American ceramic art here illustrated was found a few years ago in a tomb near the town of San Agustín Acasaguastlán, in the western part of the Department of El Progreso, central Guatemala. This region is at present occupied by people speaking Spanish, and the name of the particular branch of the Mayan family, builders of the now-ruined cities of Yucatan and Central America, who formerly lived here, is unknown.

This vase was formerly in the collection of the German Consul-General in Guatemala City, and its conservation in the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, is due to the generosity of Harmon W. Hendricks, Esq., a Trustee of the Museum, who provided for its purchase after special permission had been granted for its exportation from Guatemala by President Estrada Cabrera. It was obtained during the month of September, 1917, a piece of great good fortune for science, for a little more than three months later occurred the series of devastating earthquakes which practically laid in ruin the entire city, and there is little doubt that this precious object would have been destroyed at that time.

The vase is without question the most beautiful example of earthenware ever found in either North or South America, and it is in a class by itself as a triumph of Indian art. The decoration is sculptured, that is, the designs were probably cut while the clay was still plastic, and before firing. This type of decoration is excessively rare in the pottery of Mexico and Central America. In technique it reminds us of the great stone sculpture known as "The Turtle," at the ruins of Quirigua, Guatemala, which is only about fifty miles distant in an air-line from the place where the vase was found. It

also resembles in concept the well-known stucco reliefs of the ruins of Palenque and the beautiful carved wooden lintels and altar plates of the ruins of Tikal. These examples, and the vase, belong to the best period of Mayan art.

The striking feature of the involved designs on the vessel are the two serpents which spread around the body of the vase in undulating folds, the tails terminating at the back, their tips being hidden by elaborate masks of mythological personages. In the open jaws of each serpent are heads, the larger of which represents the Sun God, characterized by a Roman nose, and having a kind of helmet covering the forehead, bearing a four-lobed design, which is repeated on the protruding lower part of the eye; it is a variant of the glyph *Kim*, the sun sign. Opposite is a human head in the jaw of the other serpent, evidently representing a suppliant. The motive of heads and figures in the open jaws of serpents or dragon-like figures is a familiar one in Mayan art, and is a feature of the famous Calendar Stone of the Aztecs of the Valley of Mexico.

Above the two heads in the serpents' jaws is the figure of the Death God, shown by the sutured skull and the ribs. The lower part of the figure is represented as human, with flesh. On the other side of the vase, where tails of the serpents end, is another Sun God seated with the feet pressed flat against the hips. Each arm encloses a fold of a serpent. Intermingled and interlaced with the undulations of the serpents are mythological animal figures and heads, notably the crocodile, and human figures and heads, and no surface was left unadorned, featherwork and masks filling the space. This is a characteristic feature of a certain stage of Mayan culture, the artists being loth to leave plain surfaces.

The accompanying drawing shows the intricate interwoven designs spread out in a panel. At some future time a comparative study and an analysis of the import of this vessel will be made.

MARSHALL H. SAVILLE

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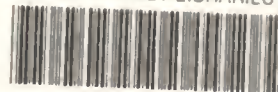
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