

# Perfumed Paradise:

Creating and Recreating the Olfactory  
Worlds of the Classic Maya

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Photography by  
Justin Kerr, K4825

Visiting most archaeological sites today is unlike what it would have been in the distant past. The Athenian Acropolis housed marble gods and stelae that dazzled not with gleaming white, but in technicolor (Abbe 2015; Brinkmann and Scholl 2010); apparently unembellished walls at Angkor Wat, Cambodia showed romping elephants and elegant palaces (Tan 2014); the hinterlands of the ancient city of Petra were not arid deserts, but blooming gardens of grape vines and pomegranate trees (Berenfeld et al. 2016); and sectoral painting, dictated by coloristic themes of particular gods and their temples, was exemplified in Tenochtitlán's Templo Mayor, a building that towered above the crisscrossing canals of Lake Texcoco, not what became the streets of Mexico City (López Luján and Chiari 2012).

Ancient Maya cities, too, are completely changed. Today's lush jungles were once largely deforested; streets and plazas now covered in mud or grass were compacted and coated with white lime plaster; bare limestone temples were stuccoed over and painted red, sometimes with mineral inclusions that would have glittered in the sunlight. Within a few short centuries, most would decay, masonry slipped and plaster deteriorated with monsoonal rains; only a few walls or buildings were left standing with intact vaults that have endured to the present (Houston in press).

Visual differences are stark, but even more so are other sensorial aspects of Maya life. Across Mesoamerica and parts of the American Southwest, many Indigenous peoples conceived of an ancient complex that the linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill (1992) called "Flower World"—a celestial place of origin and return associated with sunlight, heat, music, brilliant colors, and the fragrant aromas of flowers. This widespread concept was specifically associated by the Classic Maya with Flower Mountain, a home to gods and ancestors that also served as an ascent to the paradisaical realm of the sun (Taube 2004:69). The Classic Maya, who went to great lengths to make their world as they wanted it to be, (re)created Flower Mountain not only through imagery and symbolism employed in art and architecture, but also in the corporeal experience of courtly life. Although the ruins of ancient Maya palaces remain pungent spaces today—often with the scents of tropical rains and damp earth—in the past they were aromatic places of blooms and bouquets, sweet-smelling perfumes, and fragrant incense.

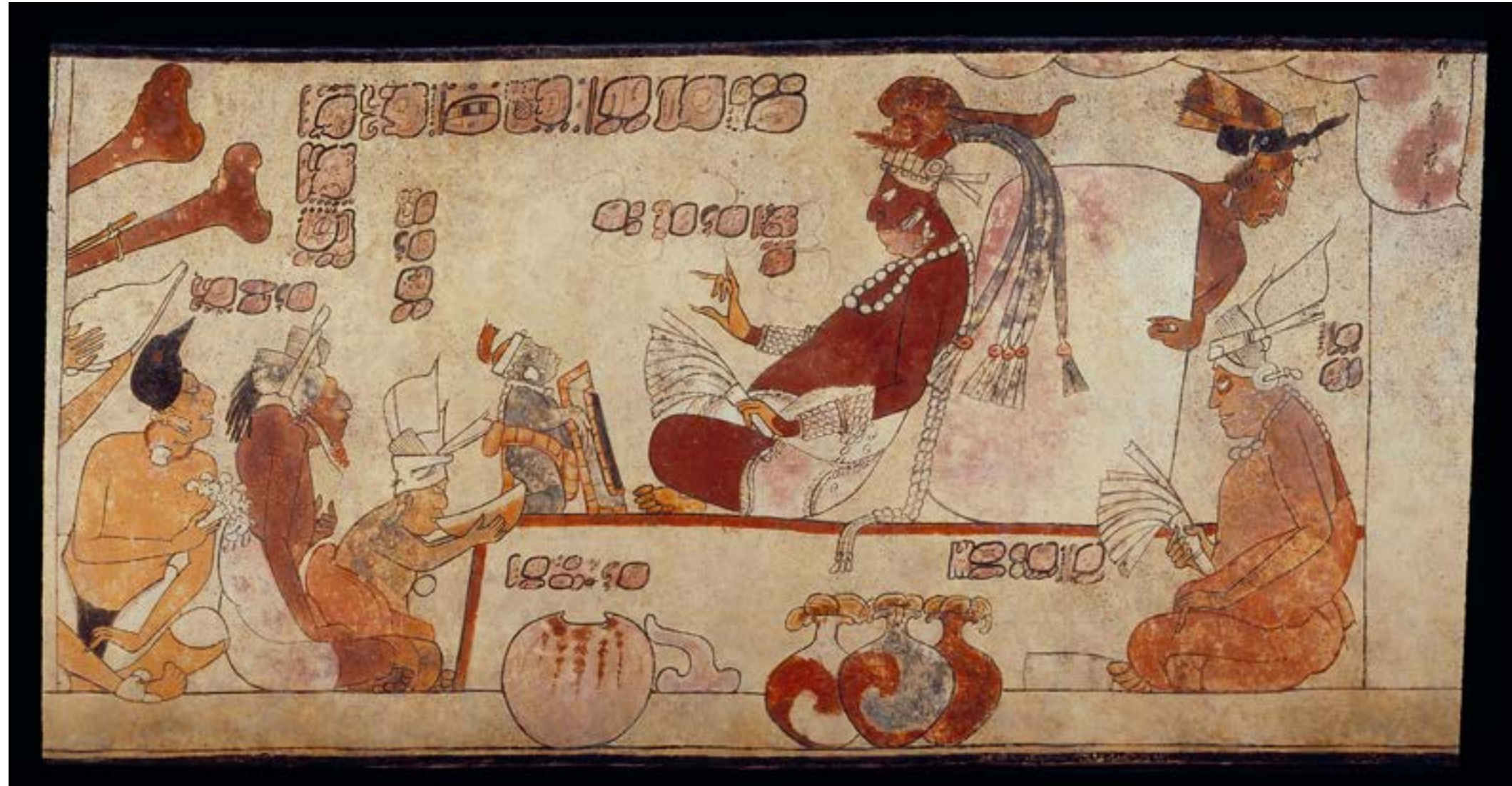
Several scenes of Classic Maya royal courts painted on pottery depict kings and courtiers holding small bouquets, usually of delicate white or yellow flowers (e.g., Figure 1). The flowers have been tentatively identified as *Cymbopetalum pendiflorum* (commonly called "earflower"), which grows

as a small tree or shrub (Houston et al. 2009:50). Earflowers are notably pungent when fresh; the dried petals are also used as a spice and added to drinking chocolate and atoles, sometimes also to pinoles and coffee (Murray 1993:43). The handheld blooms have sometimes been interpreted as Maya versions of nosegays—small bouquets that became popular when Europe was stricken by the Black Death (e.g., Houston et al. 2006: 3; Houston and Newman 2020:35). In seventeenth-century London, those handheld floral arrangements were carried whenever one ventured beyond the home, to repel (according to medical understandings of that time) the miasmatic, illness-inducing odor of death in the streets. Yet many scenes show only a few individuals grasping bouquets, while other courtiers and attendants play musical instruments or fan themselves (e.g., Figure 2). Rather than serving only to ward off or mask unpleasant scents, particularly fragrant flowers were one among many elements designed to evoke the floral paradise of the royal realm. Wind, music, and fragrance permeated the throne rooms of Maya palaces, recreating Flower Mountain for the king and those engaging with him. →



Figure 1. Two nobles, seated on either side of the ruler, hold small bouquets of yellow flowers to their noses. Photography by Justin Kerr, K4825.





➤ Such immersion blurred with ingestion. Scenes of courtly life that feature small handheld floral arrangements also often include other offerings intended for consumption, from bubbling jars of agave pulque (an alcoholic drink that might have included honey, in a jar seen just below the ruler in Figure 2, see also Figure 3) to vases of frothy chocolate and plates of steaming tamales (Figure 3), to the swirling smoke of cigars (Figure 4). It may be that the fragrant flowers are an initial “course” in an elaborate banquet, as recorded by Spanish observers for Aztec palaces of 16th-century Central Mexico (Sahagún, 1959, Book 9: 335-336). Tobacco, in particular, bridged the sensory experiences of both smell and taste. The plant was popular ➤

Figure 2. A palace scene shows one individual (at left) holding a bouquet of white flowers, while others hold small fans and musicians play trumpets. Beneath the ruler's throne, three fermenting jars of liquid are bubbling over. Photograph by Justin Kerr, K1453.

- throughout the Maya world (Robicsek 1978): it could be smoked, ground and inhaled, mixed with lime as a chewed quid, or even ingested as an ointment rubbed over the body or a balm applied to the lips (Bye 2001:235; Houston and Newman 2020: 59). The early colonial Yucatec Maya and the related Lacandon, who consumed tobacco in pipes or as thin cigarillos, explicitly linked the delicious treat to the sniffing of sweet-smelling flowers (Tozzer 1907:142-143, 1941:106 n. 484). Ingesting certain fragrant flowers could also have sensorial effects beyond smell and taste. Jade ear flares, for example, mimic the shape of morning glories (*Ipomoea violacea*), a powerful and well-known hallucinogen (Zidar n.d). Some painted vessels depict dancers and music-makers surrounded by floating, jeweled flowers (Figure 5), explicit depictions of the beautiful, sensuous world of Flower Mountain recreated ➤



Figure 3. Two courtiers hold small bouquets of yellow flowers before the king, whose throne is surrounded by offerings of food and drink. Photograph by Justin Kerr, K1599.





- by scent and song—perhaps also by mind-altering substances (Houston et al. 2006: 269;Looper 2009:59-60). The bodies of dancers themselves were equally fragrant. Flowers were often incorporated into dancers' regalia, particularly their headdresses, while pressed or macerated roots, barks, leaves, and flowers were mixed with animal fat, vegetable excipients, or aromatic resins to create perfumed ointments and scented body paints (Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual and Vidal Lorenzo 2017: 158-159). One courtly scene (Figure 6) depicts a group of dancers and musicians readying themselves for a performance. An attendant applies red body paint to the legs of a costumed dancer, while another holds a large waterlily; the same flower can be seen in the dancers' headdresses.



Figure 4. An attendant (to the right) lights a thin cigarillo from a torch, presumably for the king. Photograph by Justin Kerr, K5453.

- Lively court scenes illustrate how the Maya made their palaces into paradises, but Flower World was not to be experienced exclusively by the living. Death, especially royal death, was accompanied by fragrance and feasting. In Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts, death is sometimes described using an expression that refers to the expiration of a fragrant white flower, the sak nikte'—possibly plumeria (*Plumeria alba*)—as a metaphor for the breath of the deceased (Houston et al. 2006: 147). Much like the scenes of dancers on painted pottery, images of floating flowers and jewels adorn the walls of Classic Maya tombs at Tikal and Río Azul and the famous sarcophagus lid of King Pakal from Palenque (Houston et al. 2006: 147), immersing the dead in the sights, sound, and scents of Flower Mountain. The royal corpses themselves were wrapped in textiles, the bundle around the body hardened with clay or impregnated with resins to solidify and preserve it (Scherer 2015: 84-89). Aromatic herbs and flowers, such as allspice leaves, were incorporated into these bundles. The body might also be coated with both dark-red hematite and bright cinnabar and the same mercury-based pigments applied to the exterior of bundles. Sweet-smelling saps of pine and copal trees were mixed



Figure 5. Dancers in elaborate costumes, playing rattles and rasps, are surrounded by images of jeweled flowers. Photograph by Justin Kerr, K4824.





Figure 6. A group of dancers, adorned with water lily headdresses, prepare for a performance. To the right, an attendant applies red (possibly perfumed) body paint to the legs of one of the dancers. Photography by Justin Kerr, K3009.

- with these paints, creating colorful, fragrant coatings to be applied to both the bodies and their wrappings (Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual and Tiesler 2020:34). Such treatments served not only to soak up fluids and mask the stench of decomposition, but also to negate the reality of death, reinforcing the king's continued presence as pleurably pungent. As in life, offerings of food and drink were prepared and placed around the dead: the same steaming tamales, frothed chocolate, and bubbling alcoholic pulque or a bark-based drink called balché. Some were also burned as offerings, served for consumption as smoke, incense, and ash.

Visiting the curated ruins of an ancient Maya city or observing a delicately painted vase in a museum vitrine can offer glimpses into life in the past, but the experience is primarily solid, dry, and visual. The Classic Maya world, especially within its royal courts, was a synesthetic swirl of complex sensorial assemblages and orchestrated olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic inputs. Paradise was not only imagined and depicted—it was experienced, by both the living and the dead. ●

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