Art and Writing in the Maya Cities, A.D. 600–800, examines an important aspect of the visual cultures of the ancient Maya in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. During a critical period of cultural evolution, artistic production changed significantly, as calligraphy became an increasingly important formal element in Maya aesthetics and was used extensively in monumental building, sculptural programs, and small-scale utilitarian objects. Adam Herring's study analyzes artworks, visual programs, and cultural sites of memory, providing an anthropologically informed description of ancient Maya culture, vision, and artistic practice. An inquiry into the contexts and perceptions of the ancient Maya city, his book melds epigraphic and iconographic methodologies with the critical tradition of art-historical interpretation.

Adam Herring is Associate Professor of Art History at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.
ART AND WRITING IN THE MAYA CITIES, A.D. 600–800

A Poetics of Line

Adam Herring

Southern Methodist University
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A NOTE ON THE ORTHOGRAPHY

In transcribing words and expressions from the various Mayan languages, I have chosen to retain the orthography of the documentary source from which the individual citation was drawn. Though this decision results in the juxtaposition of disparate orthographic conventions and spellings, it is the case that no satisfactory comprehensive orthographic system yet exists, and new, intelligently polemical orthographies continue to emerge from the vital scholarship of Mayan linguistics. The choice to retain the orthography of the secondary source from which I draw the citation may at least impart some sense of the diversity that obtains among the Mayan languages themselves. For the transcription of Classic Mayan expressions emerging from epigraphic readings, I adhere to the style guide presented in George Stuart, “Special Supplement: A Guide to the Style and Content of the Series,” Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing 15 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Maya Research, 1987). The decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system remains incomplete, and spellings – particularly of long vowels and certain consonants – will certainly change; I have chosen simplicity over linguistic transparency, and generally follow the spelling employed in the most recent instance of careful epigraphic scholarship widely available to a public readership, Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube’s Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). (My spelling renders the postalveolar affricates ts/ts’, rather than tz/tz’: hence, ts’ib’.) Maya Long Counts and Calendar Round dates are rendered according to their Julian equivalents.

This study draws from “Maya” sources widely separated by time, region, and ethnicity; notwithstanding, I do not intend to posit or construct the notion of the Maya as a monolithic cultural entity undivided by linguistic, ethnic, and social diversity and outside the historical process. The inevitable leveling of such differences that comes with this choice represents an artificiality born of the relatively primitive state of inquiry into Maya cultural history. Rather than turn away source material that might aid in the
project to restore the Mayas’ long and diverse cultural history to modern awareness and continued inquiry, I have chosen to be judiciously inclusive of a wide variety of sources. It is my hope that prudent employment of ethnographic and paleographic sources in the interpretation of ancient material will yield a synoptic, rather than ahistorical, understanding of the larger Maya tradition.
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