

Profane illuminations

Classic Maya molded figurines in comparative context

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The title of this essay refers to Walter Benjamin, who, writing in the context of Western capitalist expansion, delighted in ordinary objects (Benjamin 1969, 2002, 2008; Cohen 1995). He sought to capture the sensual, irrational, and surreal in examining the trivial aspects of life: the idea behind “profane illuminations” is that even ordinary objects can be stirring (Benjamin 1978, 177–92). In particular, changes in modes of production ushered in new types of visual media, such as photography and film, which were tied up in new ways of representing and experiencing the world. While Benjamin was particularly captured by changing modes of production in the early twentieth century, I turn to a pre-Columbian context, much farther away in time and space, to explore the profane illuminations of Late Classic (ca. 600–900 CE) Maya molded ceramic figurines. I argue that during this time, Maya molded figurines became ordinary objects, aided in part by the technological capability of reproduction through molds. Nonetheless, molds do not automatically create ordinary, accessible, everyday objects, and, in turn, ordinary objects are not without their own affective, spiritual, and aesthetic qualities. For the Late Classic period, ceramic figurines likely had the capacity to both passively reinforce social norms *and* stir social commentary, to illuminate some of the most common aspects of everyday life *and* invoke the alterity of spiritual and mythic realms, and to not only provoke through visual mimesis but touch emotions with their capacity for music and sound.

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Profane illuminations

In his famous essay “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin (1969, 217–51) mourned the loss of classic artistic works in the advent of mechanically reproduced art. In contrast with traditional works of art, which possess an aura on account of their unique authenticity, mass production yields multiple copies—and copies of copies—that are alienated from their original context. For him, the religious illuminations of medieval manuscripts and idols, Paleolithic cave paintings, and classical Greek sculpture gave way to mass media, which are based more on politics and exhibition value than biographical and cult value.

Nonetheless, in this same piece as well as in his other writings, Benjamin was clearly fascinated with ordinary, mass-produced objects and everyday spaces (Benjamin 1969, 2002, 2008). He was able to articulate their different aesthetic qualities and addressed the ways that they allowed a wider audience to see the hidden, conventional aspects of their lives. For example, while he argued that the conventional is often uncritically enjoyed, film, with its ability to create close-ups and to slow down or speed up time, explodes the “prison worlds” of the unnoticed, common aspects of our everyday lives in bars, city streets, offices, factories, and train stations (cf. Adorno 1991; Althusser 1971). Likewise, he spoke of photography’s role in showing, for the first time, poverty as an object of consumption. It had the potential to make poverty an object of amusement, entertainment, and distraction, but it also had the revolutionary potential to contribute to the real-world struggle against poverty. He even commented on the children’s books of his time, noting their own aesthetic qualities with their emphasis on exaggerated color, fantasy, dreamworlds, and improvisation and their reinforcement of petty bourgeoisie maxims (Benjamin 2008, 226–35). In this sense, Benjamin breaks with typical theorizing of the ordinary. Scholars have tended to either ignore the ordinary or consider it as highly subjective, particular, unnoticed, self-evident, and mundane. The ordinary contrasts with the reflexive,

critical, objectifying, and supernatural (see also Sandywell 2004; Stewart 2007). For Benjamin, ordinary objects have the potential to dialectically dance between these binaries.

In archaeology, there is increasing attention placed on ordinary, everyday practices (De Lucia and Overholtzer 2014; Hutson 2009; Johnson 2010; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Robin and Overholtzer 2015; Robin 2002). Yet, the domain of visual culture in archaeological analyses continues to reinforce the dichotomies of mundane-supernatural, passive-reflective, neutral-enchanting, and so on (Robb 2015). Iconographic and highly decorated objects are largely characterized within the realm of the sacred, symbolic, affective, and powerful—fully estranged from the ordinary and everyday. Such dichotomies also play out in the categorizations of artifacts as either prestige goods, potent in political, ritual, and social meaning, or utilitarian items, confined to function and pragmatics. I find, however, that Late Classic molded figurines speak to a type of profane illumination, where ordinary objects can objectify, affect, and evoke social commentary and, in turn, the extraordinary, powerful, sacred, symbolic, and affective can be brought into the world of ordinary peoples and experiences. Thus, before exploring the affective qualities of ceramic figurines, first I consider the roles of ceramic figurines as part of the realm of the ordinary.

Mechanically reproduced ceramic figurines in their temporal and social contexts

The height of pre-Columbian Maya molded ceramic figurine production occurred during the Late Classic period, even though mold technology was known and implemented to different degrees both before and after this period.¹ This was a time period of significant urban growth in the southern Maya lowlands when competitive city-states increased in number and size. As Monica Smith (2015) notes, the mechanical reproduction of copies through molding, casting, and stamping thrived in urban settings in the ancient world where consumer demand was high and crafts production flourished.

Maya molded figurines were not produced solely with molds but combined molding and modeling techniques

to varying extents. Even the finest ceramic figurines with modeled limbs and torsos (Type 4 in Halperin 2014) often had molded faces, and even full-figure molded figurine-ocarinas or figurine-rattles (Type 1 in Halperin 2014) had modeled bases and backs (fig. 1). These combinations of molding and modeling were quite varied (Halperin 2014; Ivic de Monterroso 2002; Sears 2016; Triadan 2007). Even on full-figure molded figurines, artisans often made small appliqué additions to headdresses or other decorative elements, such as earspools, creating only slight variations on a single figurine theme or type. These minor alterations can be compared with the addition of different colors or texts in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's nineteenth-century prints, mechanically reproduced works that used a single template but could incorporate variations. Nonetheless, my analysis here concentrates largely on the primarily molded Late and Terminal Classic Maya figurines, since they form the bulk of archaeological collections. They do not, however, form the bulk of art museum collections, which favor the rare, finely modeled ceramic figurines whose iconography and uses in the past were more closely tied to an elite male sphere of artistic skill, knowledge, and values.

In contrast, the primarily molded Late Classic figurines, such as those produced from a single full-figure mold or composite molds (e.g., separate head and body molds), are often found in fragmentary condition within domestic middens from both elite and commoner contexts, indicating that they were part of general household inventories and were ordinary enough to have been disposed of indiscriminately with other types of household trash. For unknown reasons, molded figurines were not popular in some parts of the Maya area, such as parts of northern and central Belize and the eastern Yucatán peninsula (Halperin 2014, 147–52). In other areas, however—such as throughout the Petén, along the Usumacinta River, along the Campeche coast, southern Belize, and Alta Verapaz—they are so prolific that even a single household had access to multiple copies of the same figurine (Eberl 2007, 452; Gallegos Gómora 2009; Halperin 2009, table 13.1; Horcajada Campos 2015). Figurine molds or copies of figurines from the same mold also traveled widely throughout the Maya area (Gallegos Gómora 2008; Halperin 2014, 167–74; Sears 2016). In one example, the same composite molded figurine of a ruler seated in a palanquin decorated with a patron deity (fig. 2) has been recovered archaeologically in middens from elite and commoner households from the sites of San Clemente, Tikal, and Yaxha in Guatemala, and from the sites of

1. This article treats different phases of the Late Classic period together. For a more detailed study of subtle differences in figurines between the Late Classic (ca. 600–800 CE) and Terminal Classic (ca. 800–950/1000 CE) periods, see Halperin (2017) and Willey (1972).

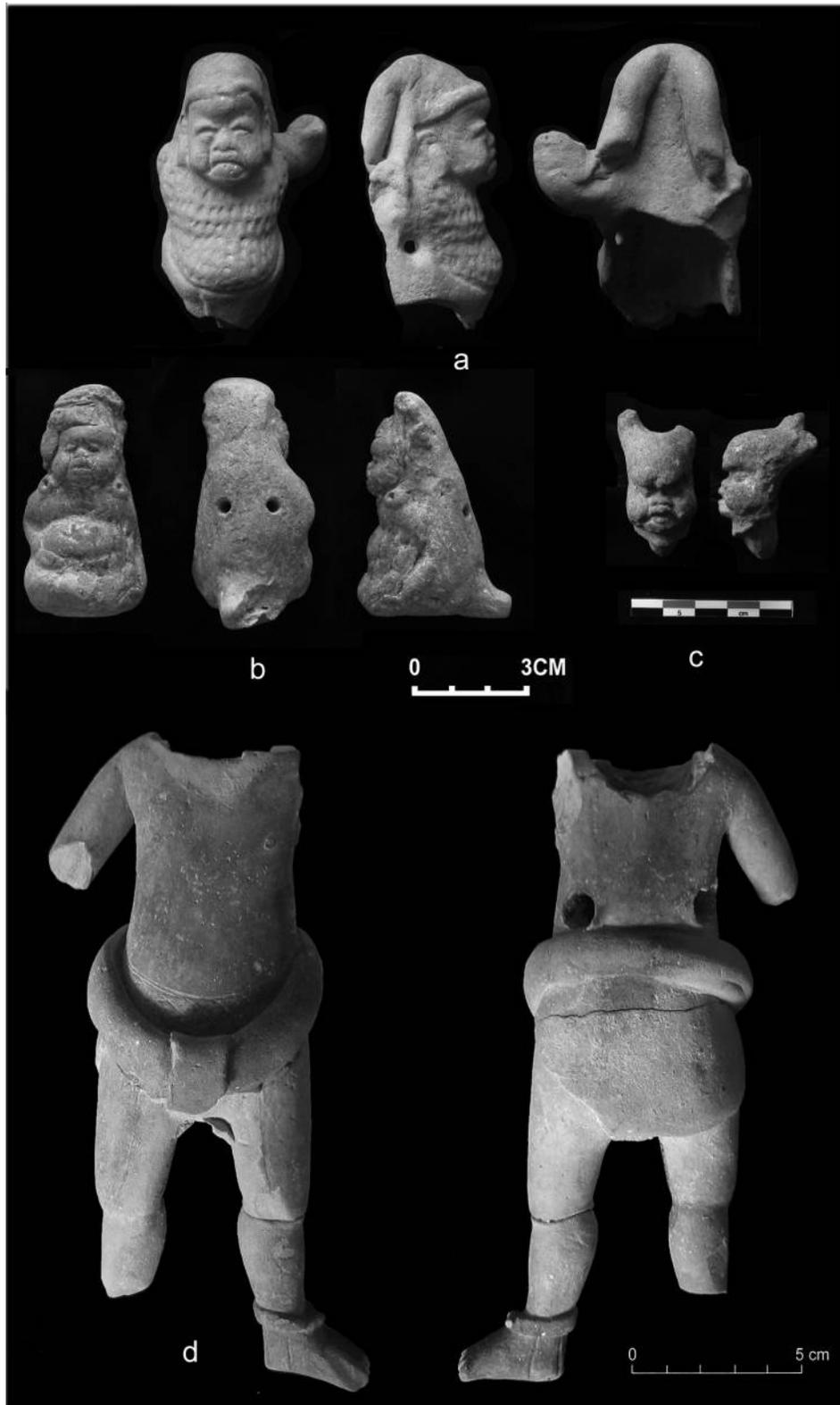


Figure 1. Variations of Late Classic figurine manufacturing combinations: (a) molded Fat Man figurine-ocarina with appliqué arms, wearing quilted warrior costume and headdress (Tikal, Guatemala, PP7TT059); (b) molded dwarf figurine-ocarina (Nixtun Ch'ich', Guatemala, NC118); (c) molded dwarf figurine head with appliqué horns and neck plug for insertion into either a molded or modeled body made separately (Tikal, Guatemala, PP7TT104); (d) finely modeled male figurine with no musical capacity (Tikal, Guatemala, Lot 68G-31a-5). Photos: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.



Figure 2. Late Classic figurines of rulers seated within a deity palanquin, each one produced from the same mold sets but recovered from different sites throughout the Maya lowlands: (a) Seven Temples Complex, Tikal, Guatemala (PP7TT213); (b) San José, Belize; (c) Tikal, Guatemala (47A/50); (d) Yaxhá, Guatemala (YXFC079); (e) San Clemente, Guatemala (SCFC198); (f) San Clemente, Guatemala (SCFC178). Photos: author, except 2b from Thompson (1939, plate 23a). Color version available as an online enhancement.

San José and Pacbitun in Belize (Cheong 2013, fig. C-4; Halperin 2014, 52–56, fig. 3.11; Horcajada Campos 2015, fig. 5-3; Thompson 1939, plate 23a).

The deposition patterns of molded figurines also contrast with those of other figurative objects during this time. Mural paintings, sculpted stone monuments, painted ceramic vessels, and wooden sculpture—among other works that depicted beings in figurative form—were largely unique productions and restricted to elite and public ceremonial contexts. In some cases, raw material choices, in addition to the image portrayed, were key in such differences in value. For example, wood may have been a particularly favored item for the most sacred of portable figurative objects (Coggins 1988, 1992; Prufer et al. 2003). The K'awiil deity (god of lightning) figurine-scepters held by Maya *k'uhul ajaw* or “holy lords” during ceremonial events were likely carved of select types of wood, and a small number of wood figurines, such as the painted and stuccoed wooden K'awiil figurines from Burial 195 in Tikal Temple 23, a royal burial, underscores their highly sacred and political potency (fig. 3c; Coe 1990, 57). As Bishop Diego de Landa remarked for the Yucatec Maya of the sixteenth century, “They had some idols of stone, but very few, and others of wood, and carved but of small size but not as many as those of clay. The wooden idols were so much esteemed that they were considered as heirlooms

and were [considered] as the most important part of the inherited property” (Tozzer 1941, 110–11). In turn, for other kinds of unique items, such as chert and obsidian eccentrics, the production process itself may have been as much if not more integral to their ritual efficacy as their symbolic and abstract iconographic reference to deities, animals, and other entities. As Zachary Hruby (2007) has argued, the production of chert eccentrics by highly specialized stone knappers was occasionally a part of the ritualized performances conducted during the dedication and erection of stela monuments. For example, in a recent archaeological discovery at the site of Ucanal, two possible misshapen chert eccentrics, perhaps unwanted by-products of the in situ production process, were found in the topsoil and collapse levels above a series of seven carefully placed eccentrics produced from the same type of chert, which were part of a dedication cache located in front of Ucanal Stela 19 in Group J (fig. 3a–b; Cruz Gómez and Garrido 2016, 28–29).

Unlike these other types of portable figurative objects, Late Classic molded ceramic figurines were never part of formal caches from public ceremonial settings nor were they commonly placed in burials. For example, in the excavations of all the major buildings in the Plaza of the Seven Temples at Tikal, the vast majority of Late Classic figurines (97.5%, $n = 195$) were excavated from the

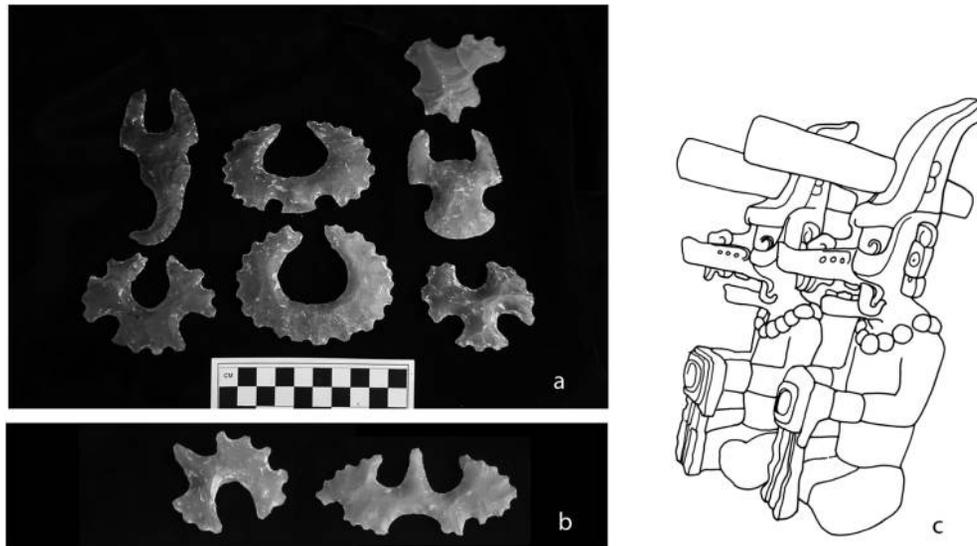


Figure 3. Figurative and abstract art from formal caches and burials: (a) chert eccentrics from Stela 19 cache, Group J, Ucanal, Guatemala, with placement of eccentrics in position as found archaeologically (note: two scorpions were found in addition to crescent and other abstract types) (UCML-22 to UCML-28, UCA01C-11-3-78), photo by author; (b) discarded chert eccentrics found in topsoil above formal Stela 19 cache, Group J, Ucanal, Guatemala (UCML-30, UCA01C-11-2-77 [left]; UCML-29, UCA01C-12-1-80), photo by author; (c) reconstruction of two of the set of four stucco-covered K'awiil figurines from Tikal Burial 195 (Schele no. SD-2025), drawing by Linda Schele © David Schele, photo courtesy of Ancient Americas at LACMA (ancientamericas.org). Color version available as an online enhancement.

southern buildings, which had become domestic buildings by the end of the Classic period. Only a few figurines were found in the excavations of the seven temples on the eastern side of the plaza, and all of these figurines were fragmentary and mixed with other trash (2%, $n = 4$; a single additional figurine [0.5%] was also found in the central plaza floor fill). Not a single one of the dedicatory temple caches contained ceramic figurines, at this site or any other throughout the Maya area.² Their recovery in burials is most prolific from the island of Jaina on the Campeche coast, although several rare cases exist elsewhere in the Maya area (Cheong 2013; Halperin 2014, 193–95; Freidel et al. 2010; Sears 2016). These burials contain the more common molded figurines as well as the rarer, finely modeled figurines, some of them arranged in scenes or ensembles.

Late Classic (ca. 600–900 CE) deposition patterns are not very different from those of modeled figurines during

the Middle (ca. 1000–300 BCE) and Late Preclassic (ca. 300 BCE–300 CE) periods.³ Like the Late Classic examples, Preclassic Maya modeled figurines are also frequently found in domestic middens, strewn together with cooking vessels, lithic debitage, and other household debris and are often considered to have been part of domestic rituals (Arroyo 2002; Guernsey 2012; Moholy-Nagy 2003; Willey 1972). Beyond obvious differences in imagery and technology, one subtle difference between the two time periods is their fragmentation. In my analysis of figurines from the Plaza of the Seven Temples at Tikal, it is only the Middle Preclassic figurines that appear to have been intentionally broken. Not a single intact head was recovered among the forty-three Preclassic figurines. All of the heads were broken in halves or quarters in places of the strongest structural bondage of the ceramic figurine. Likewise, many of the body parts were broken at thick parts of the waist, rather than at the joints where

2. As a point of contrast, during the Early Classic period a Teotihuacan-style modeled ceramic figurine containing many small molded figurines inside it was formally placed within a ceramic vessel as part of a dedicatory offering located within a public building at the site of Becan, Mexico (Ball 1974; Bonnafoux et al. 2011).

3. Ceramic figurines, however, declined in popularity during the Late Preclassic period and were extremely rare in Terminal Preclassic and Early Classic period contexts (Arroyo 2002; Guernsey 2012; Moholy-Nagy 2003; Willey 1972).

breakage would most naturally occur (fig. 4). Similar patterns of what appears to have been intentional fragmentation have been noted by Julia Guernsey (personal communication with the author, 2014) with regard to the Middle Preclassic figurines from LaBlanca, Guatemala; by Prudence Rice (2015) with regard to the Middle Preclassic figurines from Nixtun Ch'ich, Guatemala; and by Lisa DeLance (2016) with regard to Middle Preclassic figurines from Cahal Pech, Belize. Drawing on fragmentation theory (Bruck 2006; Chapman 2000), these authors argue that we should think of their breakage not only in terms of ritual termination but also in terms of enchainment, the creation of new social and sacred relationships through fragmentation. In contrast, little convincing or systematic evidence for the purposeful fragmentation of Late Classic figurines has been presented to date, since breakage patterns often follow the points of structural weakness (such as the neck).

During the Postclassic period (ca. 1000–1521 CE), many figurines continued to be produced with molds,

but they were produced in smaller quantities than during the Late Classic period and appear to have had more specialized uses (Halperin 2017; Masson and Peraza Lope 2011; Rands 1965; Smith 1971). Thus, the implementation of mold technology did not automatically result in “mass” production and popular consumption as in earlier times (see also Lopiparo and Hendon 2009). For instance, at the site of Tayasal, Guatemala, figurine to ceramic sherd ratios are much smaller in Postclassic contexts than Late and Terminal Classic contexts with the exception of Postclassic structure T247, a shrine located at some distance from other Postclassic domestic structures. The majority of molded Postclassic figurines from the southern Maya lowlands depict either elite females in formal ceremonial garb and headdresses or female deities, in contrast with the modeled Postclassic figurines of male figures and animals (Halperin 2017, 525–29, table 3). Many of these molded Postclassic figurines in the Maya area and elsewhere in Mesoamerica may have been part of curing rituals and components of medicine bundles or divining

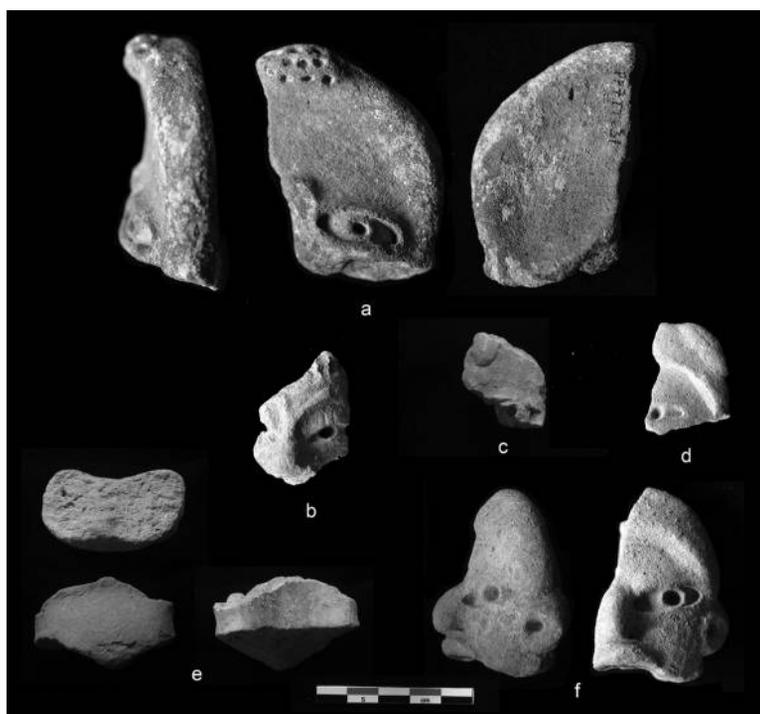


Figure 4. Fragmented Preclassic figurines from Tikal, Guatemala, with breakage zones in structurally strong parts of the figurines: (a) head (PP7TT031); (b) head (PP7TT037); (c) head (PP7TT0218); (d) head (PP7TT038); (e) torso (PP7TT214); (f) head (PP7TT026). Photos: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

kits (Klein and Lona 2009; Halperin 2017; Overholtzer 2012; Smith 2002).

Artisan identities

The seemingly ordinary nature of molded Late Classic figurine production is also highlighted by its technical nature and the workshop contexts in which archaeologists find Late Classic figurine molds. It is generally recognized that mold technology required very little skill, as just about anyone could press clay into a mold, even children. While clay acquisition and processing, the making of the mold, and ceramic firing were tasks that required considerable experience and knowledge, the tasks of molding could be undertaken by highly trained artisans or apprentices, children, and low-skilled workers (Arnold 1985, 1999).

In addition, while many finished figurative objects were produced in royal palaces and elite households, molded figurine production occurred in both elite and non-elite household production contexts (Ashmore 2007; Becker 2003; Halperin 2014, app. 5.7). At the site of Motul de San José, molded ceramic figurines were likely made alongside finely painted polychrome vessels in an elite ceramic production workshop or workshops located near the royal palace (Halperin and Foias 2010). My recent excavations at the site of Ucanal in 2016 have also uncovered molded figurine and monochrome vessel production (Tinaja Red and Infierno Black types) at a small Terminal Classic (ca. 800–950 CE) commoner household (Group 133; Halperin et al. 2016). Debris from these artisans included five figurine molds, burnishing pebbles and tools, unfired figurines and vessels, and raw pigments (fig. 5a). Unlike the palace



Figure 5. Debris from ceramic production workshop in commoner residential group, Group 133, Ucanal, Guatemala: (a) unfired ceramic vessel fragments (Tinaja Red) (UCA08A-6-2-365); (b) iron oxide for making pigments (UCA08A-6-2-365); (c) unfired figurines (UCA08A-6-2-365); (d) stone polisher (UC-ML-001) (note: the scale bar also applies to a, b, and c); (e) stone polisher (UC-ML-014); (f) stone polisher (UC-ML-013); (g) ceramic figurine molds. Photos: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

excavations at Motul de San José, where full-figure molded figurine-ocarinas and finely modeled figurines were found mixed with the ceramic production debris, no finely modeled figurines were found at Ucanal's commoner ceramic-producing household.

Although the ceramic products of the commoner household from Ucanal were not necessarily destined for the most sacred of purposes or contexts, it is clear that ceramic production and the material essence of clay itself were highly valued among the inhabitants of these

households. For instance, excavations within the structure (Structure 133-4) adjacent to the ceramic production debris uncovered a burial of a child between four and six years old (fig. 6). The child was buried seated inside an unfired red-slipped bowl (Tinaja Red type), an unusual find in the Maya area and probably a product of this same ceramic-producing household. The child wore a necklace containing small jade and marine shell beads. The fact that a small ceramic bead was among the beads of precious raw

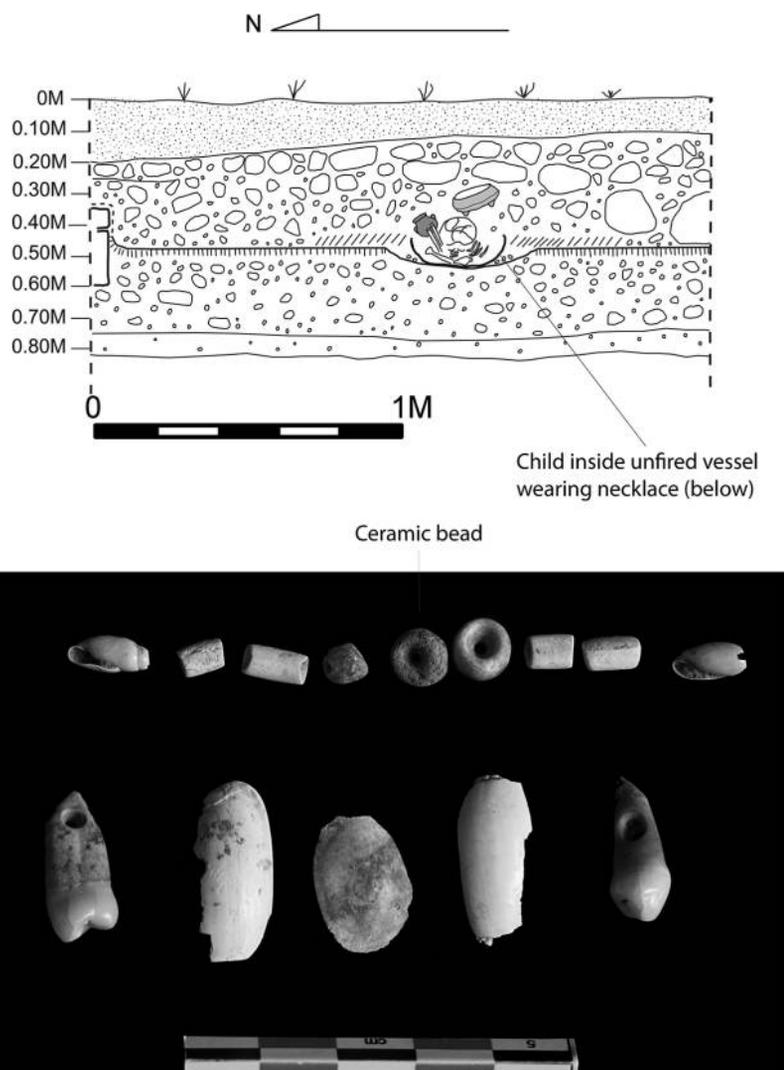


Figure 6. Child burial from commoner ceramic-producing household (Group 133, Ucanal, Guatemala). The child was placed inside an unfired ceramic vessel (above) and wore a necklace with ceramic, jade, marine shell, and freshwater shell beads. Drawing and photo: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

materials suggests that clay, too, was highly valued, even if only among this particular household, whose members would have drawn on it as a source of identity.

Profane illuminations of the Late Classic period

Despite their quotidian status, molded figurines of the Late Classic period could delight, affect, and invoke spiritual realms. As Walter Benjamin pointed out for other mechanically reproduced works of art, ordinary mimetic images can paradoxically defy the uncritical gaze by being taken out of their original context, disrupting the more fixed relationships between people and objects. A profane illumination helped produce a sense of disembodiment and a way of seeing the ordinary as extraordinary and the extraordinary as ordinary. The dispersion, inversion, and displacement of images arguably helped one critically think about a subject in a new light.

As noted earlier, some of the figures depicted in Late Classic Maya molded figurines represented the key participants of public royal ceremonies, state pomp, and festivals, such as the *k'uhul ajaw* bedecked in ceremonial finery, ballplayers, musicians, and masked characters. As such, they brought these sacred and fantastical personages into the everyday domestic contexts of not just Maya elite families but of farmers and common people alike (Halperin 2009, 2014; Laporte 2008; Willey 1972). Such forms of disembodiment, alienation, or displacement allowed common people to participate in the history making, myth telling, and gossip that sprung from these figures.

The composite palanquin figurines offer one example of how such displacement occurred (fig. 2). The experience of seeing the living ruler propped inside a decorated and bejeweled deity palanquin occurred only during momentous historical events, such as period-ending ceremonies or war celebrations. These events were carefully orchestrated affairs and memorialized through text and image in monumental contexts, such as stone altars and wooden lintels at the top of temples (Freidel and Guenter 2003; Martin 1993; Taube 1992, 68–74), wherein the images shared in the animate essence of these beings, extending spiritual and royal personhood to carved stone and wood (Houston 2014; Houston and Stuart 1998; Just 2005). Yet the widespread dissemination of molded ceramic figurines may have shifted the intimate relationships between these elite and sacred individuals and their mimetic copies. Through their ubiquity, molded ceramic figurines had the potential to passively reinforce the sacred and political

authority of those portrayed. Through their miniaturization and displacement, however, they also had the potential to destabilize their own power and call sacred authority structures into question, as Benjamin argued for photographs of poverty.

At the same time, figurines also brought everyday, conventional aspects of people's lives into the light as subjects of reflection (Joyce 1993, 2000). One recurrent subject among figurine collections is a youthful woman with child, a theme rarely seen in monuments (for an exception, see Piedras Negras Stela 3). Similar to film, which Benjamin (1969, 2008) argued to have broken the "prison worlds" of conventional life by showing the ordinary at different tempos and visually close-up, woman-child figurines brought the notion of motherhood to the fore as an object of reflection and contemplation while simultaneously normalizing it as a self-evident aspect of everyday life (fig. 7). In contrast, intimate father-child relationships of Classic Maya families remained largely absent in visual discourses.

Rather than conform to the canonical orders and values inherent in stone monuments, painted murals, and painted cylinder vessels, with their fixed narratives and hierarchical relations between different figures, ceramic figurines had the potential to disrupt these orders, stimulating improvisation and imitation. Their isolated and portable nature allowed them to be arranged and rearranged in multiple combinations, only some of them permanently fixed through interment as ensembles or figurative scenes in burials (Freidel et al. 2010; Halperin 2014, 195–97; Sears 2016, 225). Some figurines possessed removable headdresses, also underscoring the practices of movement and rearrangement. Likewise, ceramic figurines of grotesque and supernatural characters make reference to a seemingly endless array of spiritual figures, ritual clowns, spirit-companions, and spooks (Halperin 2014; Willey 1972, 1978; Taube and Taube 2009). Some of them, such as dwarves and Fat Men, quite clearly imitate esteemed royal figures, wearing their costumes and holding the same accoutrements (fig. 1). These figures, with their squat stature and fat, deformed bodies, were not kings and noblemen, yet in their imitation of them, they skirted a fine line between mocking jest and esteemed emulation. Such fine lines between the embedded meanings of mimicry are not unlike José Guadalupe Posada's popular prints of *calaveras* (skeletons) in early twentieth-century Mexico. These prints were grave reflections of war, death, and ancestors, but they also featured satirical characters that made fun of soldiers, government officials, and



Figure 7. Woman and child figurines: (a) Yaxha, Guatemala (YXFC066); (b) Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala (MUNAE14407). Photos: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

high-status ladies (Barajas Durán 2009; Tyler 1979). Unlike the public bronze relief sculpture of the same era, the disposable printed broadsides were sold on the street for pennies and had a humorous side that exposed and stirred the sentiments of the masses. As Rhonda Taube and Karl Taube (2009) have suggested, the Fat Men, dwarves, monkey-like characters, and other grotesque spiritual figures represented through ceramic figurines were a source of social commentary that made fun and pushed the boundaries of human ideals. Some of the more familiar figurine characters (such as the Fat Man, dwarf, woman and child, ruler, and market woman) may not have referenced a particular person or spiritual entity *per se* but were animated with meaning through the telling of folktales and their reenactments in festival performances, much like the Maya folktales and dance-dramas performed today in the highlands of Guatemala and Mexico (Bricker 1973; Hutcheson 2009; Taube and Taube 2009). Such performances and tales make reference to the more official and sacred narratives of state and church but enjoy an improvisational and

informal quality not unlike the carnivalesque and *commedia dell'arte* of early modern Europe (Bakhtin 1984; Lawner 1998).

While the visual aspects of molded Late Classic figurines are striking, they also affected the senses through sound. Molded figurines, unlike most of the finely modeled figurines, functioned as instruments, such as ocarinas, whistles, and rattles. In this sense, they came alive through human breath and movement. They do not appear in representations of official musical ensembles found in mural paintings and on painted polychrome pottery (Miller 1988), and this absence suggests that they had more informal roles in smaller-scale rituals, such as in households or in caves. It seems likely that they were played by children, especially tiny bird whistles, which are smaller than most figurines and would be uncomfortable to play for an adult. As a probable part of more impromptu entertainment or fanfare during large-scale ceremonies, they may have functioned as the “voices” of the masses that added the essential sonorous component of a festival, alongside the

smells of foods, the colors of banners and costumes, and other sensory dimensions (Halperin 2014, 203–7). Music production has the potential to cue particular emotions, transport one to other worlds (either ludic or spiritual worlds), or even thoroughly annoy through raucous din (their numerical ubiquity suggests that multiple people could have played them at once in an uncoordinated fashion). The more informal and accessible nature of these figurative instruments would likely have reinforced a variety of emotional states.

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During the Late Classic period, mold technology facilitated the birth of a new form of popular culture in the Maya area. Molded ceramic figurines became ordinary objects through their production by both skilled and unskilled artisans, in their repetitive frequency, and in their widespread accessibility. Nonetheless, molds did not automatically create ordinary, accessible, everyday objects. Over time, molded female figurines took on a new “aura” as specialized ritual implements during the Postclassic period, perhaps related to curing, divination, and well-being, and outside the Maya area molded figurative objects had their own enchanting and sacred roles (Bourget 2016; Donnan 2003; Weismantel 2004). However, the production of figures during the Late Classic period using the less valued raw material of clay did not necessarily entail a void of meaning at the expense of function and efficiency. Excavations of the commoner household at the site of Ucanal reveal that clay formed an important basis of the family’s identity as artisans. And for both elite and common people, molded ceramic figurines were part of a lively production of profane illuminations wherein the ordinary could be seen anew and the extraordinary could be made into the ordinary. These objects were, however, distinct from other figurative media reserved for key ceremonial occasions in their flexibility in arrangement, their capacity for certain types of sounds, and their more broad-ranging subject matter. And it was their flexibility, disposability, and mobility that allowed them to play on, and dance between, the ordinary and extraordinary, two realms so often kept apart in archaeological discourses.

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