

History of Painting at Bonampak

From Gardner's Art Through the Ages, 12e



The vivacity of the Jaina figurines and their variety of pose, costume, and occupation were reinterpreted in two dimensions at Bonampak (Mayan for “painted walls”) in southeastern Mexico. Three chambers in one Bonampak structure contain mural paintings that record important aspects of Maya court life. The example we reproduce (FIG. 14-11) shows warriors surrounding captives on a terraced platform. The figures represented have naturalistic proportions and overlap, twist, turn, and gesture. The artists used fluid and calligraphic line to outline the figures, working with color to indicate both texture and volume. The Bonampak painters combined their pigments – both mineral and organic – with a mixture of water, crushed limestone, and vegetable gums and applied them to their stucco walls in a technique best described as a cross between fresco and tempera.

The Bonampak murals are filled with circumstantial detail. The information given is comprehensive, explicit, and presented with the fidelity of an eyewitness report. The royal personages are identifiable both their physical features and their costumes, and accompanying inscriptions provide the precise day, month, and year for the events recorded. All the scenes at Bonampak relate the events and ceremonies that welcome a new royal heir (shown as a toddler in some scenes). They include presentations, preparations for a royal fete, dancing, battle, and the taking and sacrificing of prisoners. On all occasions of state, public bloodletting was an integral part of Maya ritual. The ruler, his consort, and certain members of the nobility drew blood from their own bodies and sought union with the supernatural world. The slaughter of captives taken in war regularly accompanied this ceremony. Indeed, Mesoamerican cultures undertook warfare largely to provide victims for sacrifice. The torture and eventual execution of prisoners served both to nourish the gods and to strike fear into enemies and the general populace.

The scene in structure 1, room 2, depicts the presentation of prisoners to Lord Chan Muwan (FIG. 14-11). The painter arranged the figures in registers that may represent a pyramid's steps. On the uppermost step, against a blue background, is a file of gorgeously appareled nobles wearing animal headgear. Conspicuous among them on the right are retainers clad in jaguar pelts and jaguar headdresses. Also present is Chan Muwan's wife (third from right). The ruler himself, in jaguar jerkin and high-backed sandals, stands at the center, facing a crouching victim who appears to beg for mercy. Naked captives crowd the middle level. One of them, already dead, sprawls and the ruler's feet. The lower zone, cut through by a doorway into the structure housing the murals, shows clusters of attendants who are of inferior rank to the lords of the upper zone. The stiff formality of the victors contrasts graphically with the imploring attitudes of the victims. The Bonampak victory was short-lived. The murals were never finished and shortly after the dates written on the walls, the site seems to have been abandoned.