

Book Review

**Maya Potters' Indigenous Knowledge,
Cognition, Engagement, and Practice.**

Dean E. Arnold. Boulder, CO: University
Press of Colorado, 2018. 264 pp.

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This book is a very good one. It is brilliant, even. Dean Arnold's book is ostensibly about how traditional Maya potters practice their craft, based on his fieldwork from the 1960s and framed through the lens of more recent theory. However, the book is really about art. It is not about artistic inspiration or transcendental acts of creation, but rather describes a process-oriented perspective on artistic production. The Maya potters that Arnold observed created art not by possessing a singular vision, a "mental template," that they made manifest on an infinitely plastic art form, ceramics, but rather through a long process of engagement with each step of production. Yes, they possessed an idea of what they wanted to create, but as the artistic process unfolded, the created objects acquired a life and direction of their own. The potters engaged with the environment, with a perceived landscape, with raw materials, with paste preparation, with vessel formation, and with drying and firing. The result may only vaguely resemble the artisan's original vision. This should be very familiar to anyone who has

created art, ceramic or otherwise. Artists, artisans, or even authors know that the process of production includes a thousand small, unforeseen decisions, each of which alters the ultimate outcome. There is never a single mental template, stamped like a machined cookie-cutter onto a chosen medium, but a detailed process that artists manage during production. Arnold's book is the anthropology of process-oriented, artistic engagement. It is the anthropology of art.

Arnold's central thesis is to "present indigenous knowledge of Maya potters of Ticul, Yucatán, from a perspective of engagement theory" (8). This approach involves taking his fieldwork from the 1960s and reexamining it. Engagement theory looks at the production process as a series of artistic choices constrained or affected by raw materials, technology, resources, cultural traditions and the environment itself. Arnold draws heavily from the work of Tim Ingold, and particularly from his 2013 book, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture* with strong assists from Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew. In Arnold's words, Ingold's book "matched my own experiences as a participant-observer in working with the potters of Ticul ..." and that "the potter transforms his raw material into pottery based upon his previous knowledge as well as the sensory

feedback that comes from the nature and limitations of the raw materials and from that of the entire production process” (xxvi). Arnold then proceeds to show how Maya potters make decisions at each stage, following the entire *chaîne opératoire*, from conception to finished product.

Readers should be aware that the book gets highly technical in places. This specificity is the closest thing to a flaw that the book has. To properly address the subject, Arnold has to address the chemistry of clay and other raw materials, as described by both folk terminologies and modern geology. Switching back and forth between technical and folk terms gets very confusing very quickly. The book could have used a detailed glossary of terms and writing out one’s own glossary on the book’s back cover is highly recommended. Arnold cannot avoid such technicalities, however, as the potters make their decisions based on them. Does this type of clay dry fast or slow? Does this type of wood burn smoky or clean? They even base decisions on whether the clay possesses the right kind of flavor. “Good clay,” Arnold writes, “has a salty taste” (81).

The great strength of the book is that Arnold accomplishes what he intended to do, write of the process-oriented engagement between the Maya potters and their craft. Potters make decisions, craft that stage of production, and then, based on the tactile and visual feedback from the result, prepare to make decisions on the next stage of production. The result is an artistic praxis with multiple feedback loops between object, artist, and the indigenous knowledge contained in his or her brain. Arnold does not merely tell about this process; he shows it in action, how the materials are chosen for which type of vessels, how temper and paste is prepared,

how the clay is wedged, how the vessels are dried and even how the wood is chosen at different stages of the firing process. Arnold himself intends the book to be part of a “trilogy” on the potters of Ticul, this volume being a prequel to his 2008 and 2015 volumes, *Social Change and the Evolution of Ceramic Production and Distribution in a Maya Community* and *The Evolution of Ceramic Production Organization in a Maya Community*. It works quite well as such, although one does not need to have read those books before opening this one.

The book is for anyone who is interested in or who studies Maya ceramics, either ancient or modern. It is for anyone interested in indigenous art or in the process of artistic production, either inside or outside the academy. It is for artists, art historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, for professional scholars, or a generally interested public. Indeed, the book should be required reading for anyone focused on Maya ceramics. Quite simply, in the current field, not enough scholars who study Maya ceramic art are familiar enough with the process by which the ceramic art is produced. Once, this reviewer received a pointed criticism during peer-review concerning ceramic production by someone clearly unfamiliar with the process.

Lastly, Arnold’s book points out that the scholar of art, ancient or modern, cannot wander far from the physical process of artistic production. To understand how the Maya make ceramics, one must, every now and again, physically make ceramics. This suggestion includes this reviewer, who has been too long outside a ceramic studio. After reading Arnold’s book, he will soon be inside a studio, throwing a pot, and experiencing similar artistic processes as the Maya potters of Ticul.

References Cited

Arnold, Dean E. 2008. *Social Change and the Evolution of Ceramic Production and Distribution in a Maya Community*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.

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Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. New York: Routledge Press.