Lesson Plan: Sport as Social Ritual
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 4-6
Estimated Time: Two class periods

Lesson Objectives
• Become familiar with the sport that became a social ritual in ancient American cultures, examining its importance
• Begin to understand stone-carving techniques
• Promote an understanding of how contemporary sports have acquired importance within modern American culture

Key Terms
• ballgame
• Maya culture
• cosmic
• hieroglyphs
• hacha
• relief
• plaza
• yoke
• eroded

Instructional Materials
• Posterboard
• Colored paper
• Magazines
• Markers or tempera paint
• Glue
• Pencils or colored pencils
• Sketchbooks or journals
**Procedures**

- Teachers should read the interpretive text accompanying the Mayan *Ballcourt Panel*. (For more information on the Mayan ballgame, see Books and Media.)
- Discuss with students the game and its significance within Mayan culture. Show them the Art Institute’s *Ballcourt Panel* and help them place it within a cultural context.
- Discuss the role of sports in contemporary life. Suggested questions include:
  - What sports do you participate in?
  - Are there any similarities between the games you play and the Mayan ballgame depicted here?
  - What special clothing is worn for protection or to show team membership?
- The Art Institute's *Ballcourt Panel* served as a decoration for a stairway at an actual ballcourt. Have students use posterboard, colored paper, markers, and pictures from magazines to design a wall panel relating to a contemporary sport. Encourage them to provide historical information about the sport, show a particular moment of victory, or depict outstanding players. Allow them to use both words and images just as the hieroglyphs in the panel identify players and offer dates and game highlights.

**Evaluation**

Base evaluation on participation in class discussion; comprehension of the significance of sport in Mayan and American culture; and quality of creative and written work.

**Follow-Up:**

Just as this panel decorated a public ballcourt in ancient times, similar carvings may be found on modern buildings. Ornamental architectural details tell us much about the history of buildings, people, and activities. Ask students to look around their school and neighborhoods for carvings on the outside or inside of buildings. Have students complete an oral or written report that describes the images they have seen and explains their possible relationship to the building.

**Glossary**

**ballgame** (*n*)

Ballgames were played by Native Americans who lived throughout the Americas, from the southern United States to Paraguay. The rules of the game seem to have varied from site to site over time. Ballgames were not only played for sport but were also used as a means of solving disputes and prognosticating important events. The ball was made of solid rubber and weighed about seven pounds (three kg). Players wore protective padding.
cosmic (adj)

of or relating to the material universe outside the earth; a theory that accounts for the natural order of the universe, such as the placement and movements of stars and planets

eroded (adj)

the condition of being eaten or worn away; destroyed by slow consumption

hacha (n)

Spanish term for axe; a basic Mesoamerican tool made of chipped or grooved stone. From the time of the Olmec, hachas were made in many shapes and sizes and used as sacred symbols of rank, authority, and religious significance. Mayan hachas were actually flat stones carved in the shape of profile heads, animals, or skulls, and displayed at ritual ballgames. They were called hachas only because of their overall axelike form.

hieroglyphs (n)

characters based on recognizable, representational shapes used in a system of hieroglyphic writing; a system of writing mainly in pictorial characters

Maya; Mayan (n; adj)

Mesoamerican Indians who lived in southern Mexico, Guatemala, northern Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador and developed one of the greatest civilizations of the western hemisphere. At its height (250 B.C. - A.D. 900), Mayan civilization consisted of more than 40 cities, each with a population from 5,000 to 50,000 people. These political and religious administrative centers formed independent, shifting alliances with much evidence of war, though they shared a common culture. In this way, they were similar to the competing Greek city-states of the 5th century B.C.

The Maya are renowned for their innovative methods of agriculture, monumental stone buildings and pyramid temples, gold and copper works, and system of hieroglyphic writing. The Maya also developed highly sophisticated calendars and astronomical systems. Historical records are still being deciphered from the hieroglyphic inscriptions and royal figures depicted on commemorative monuments known as stelae.

By the time the Spaniards conquered the region in the early 16th century, most of the Maya were village-dwelling farmers who practiced the religious rites of their ancestors. Modern Maya-speaking people can be found in rural areas, raising crops of corn, beans, and squash and living in communities organized around central villages.

plaza (n)

a public square in a city or town
relief \((n)\)
a piece of sculpture that features a molded, carved, or stamped design that stands out three-dimensionally from the surface

yoke \((n)\)
large, u-shaped stone, often elaborately carved and thought to be a ceremonial imitation of the protective padding worn by players in the Mesoamerican ritual ballgame

Illinois Learning Standards
Social Science: 16-18
Fine Arts: 26-27