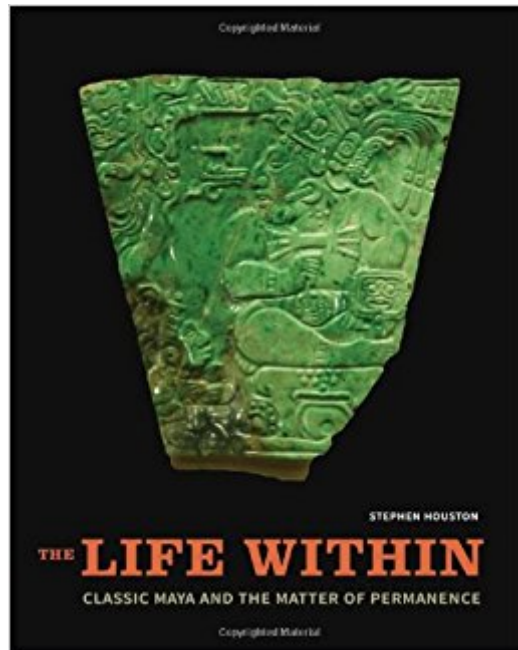


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# The Life Within: Classic Maya And The Matter Of Permanence



## Synopsis

For the Classic Maya, who flourished in and around the Yucatan peninsula in the first millennium AD, artistic materials were endowed with an internal life. Far from being inert substances, jade, flint, obsidian, and wood held a vital essence, agency, and even personality. To work with these materials was to coax their life into full expression and to engage in witty play. Writing, too, could shift from hieroglyphic signs into vibrant glyphs that sprouted torsos, hands, and feet. Appearing to sing, grapple, and feed, they effectively blurred the distinction between text and image. In this first full study of the nature of Maya materials and animism, renowned Mayanist scholar Stephen Houston provides startling insights into a Pre-Columbian worldview that dramatically contrasts with western perspectives. Illustrated with more than one hundred photographs, images, and drawings, this beautifully written book reveals the Maya quest for transcendence in the face of inevitable death and decay.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Houston strives for deep understandings of Maya thought that allow us to see large-scale truths often overlooked. His unusual approach to materiality in ancient Maya culture will be pioneering.”  
—Andrea Stone, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Andrea Stone)  
“A major contribution to the study of the ancient Maya and an important intervention in the growing body of scholarship about materiality.”  
—Claudia Brittenham, University of Chicago (Claudia Brittenham) Winner of the 2014 American Publishers Awards for Professional and Scholarly Excellence (PROSE) in the Art History & Criticism category. (PROSE

Beautifully written and illustrated, *The Life Within* is the first full study of the vitality and materiality of Classic Maya art and writing and the quest for transcendence and immortality.~ Â

Over the past century and a half many hundreds of books have been written about the ancient Maya, but there has never been anything like this one, a masterful and brilliant study of the relation between the material world of the Maya and their own mental constructs. Only someone with Houston's hieroglyphic expertise and artistic sensibility could have written such a study. Eloquently written and beautifully illustrated, I recommend it to everyone interested in the intriguing and sophisticated civilization of the Maya.

The latest monograph from the leading specialist on Maya Archaeology and Epigraphy explores the worldview and aesthetics as revealed by beautiful objects made and used at the courts of Ancient Maya lords and nobles. Building upon Houston's previous research (including his contributions to "Ancient Maya Art at Dumbarton Oaks"), this volume offers three interconnected essays on how Maya artists and artisans classified, transformed, and ensouled various materials, particularly stone and clay. As in other Houston's publications, the Ancient Maya material also serves as means to address a number of theoretical and methodological questions. The discussion is scholarly yet accessible and the extensive endnotes will satisfy more academic readers. Visually, the book is a real treat with close to a hundred superb illustrations. "The Life Within" is a must-read for professional and amateur Mayanists as well as all students of past and present indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica. An engagement with materiality is one of popular trends in archaeological method and theory and this volume will be of interest to any scholar practicing the approach.

Here we have a discussion of the Maya Indians and their notions of spiritualism, especially their animistic practices. To the Maya, the stone, bone, wood, and ink you made art with had life-like qualities, and you could call on these qualities to invest your art with life. He gives many examples drawn from ancient Maya artworks, including carved hieroglyphs, written texts, painted pottery, and so forth. Some of the concepts and discussions in this book have sparked my own creativity, and I plan to write stories with Mayan spiritual beliefs. The book is well written and is written for the lay person, with a sprinkling of scholarly concepts to raise the tone a bit and challenge the reader. There are lots of pictures to illustrate the concepts, and the book is a pleasure to look at. This could

easily be your first book about the Maya, but even if you've read many Maya books, this one will give you some ideas to think about. Recommended.

Houston's voice is condensed but elegant, almost poetic and his insights are profound. He convincingly argues that the ancient Maya believed that, in the process of making, the universal animating spirit was channeled by the maker into the object being crafted. But he goes one step further, suggesting that the maker is also formed and transformed. If the definition of a human is "a primate who makes things out of matter," then this process truly defines who we are, and all cognition develops from this interface with the world of matter. By making material things we materialize our thoughts in a constant process of being and becoming. As a practicing artist for most of my life, and now a Maya art historian, Houston's meditations ring true.

1/4 of this book is Notes and Index. Have read over 75 books on Maya and this one is pretty much an opinion filled snooze fest. Half the read I was "what the hell are you trying to say?" Sorry Houston, it kind of sucked.

Splendid new book. Great bookseller!

I bought this book believing it is the classic book on the Maya. And I was not disappointed. This book contains significant color images as well as detailed drawings of Maya artifacts.

Stephen Houston is a well-respected scholar and the author of a dozen key books on Maya archaeology, epigraphy and art • e.g., *Classic Maya Place Names* (1994), *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture* (1998), *Royal Courts of the Classic Maya* (2001), *The First Writing* (2008), *The Classic Maya* (2009), *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea* (2010) and *The Shape of Script* (2012), to name only several of the most salient. All of them are well worth reading for anyone interested in how we know what we know about Classic Maya art and writing. But for my money, this well written and beautifully illustrated book tops them all, for it presents the researches of a true pioneer in the study of Classic Maya materiality. Twenty-five years ago, Stephen Houston (along with co-authors Karl Taube and David Stuart) began the study of the folk classification of Maya pottery (and related objects that the Maya labeled with their emic designations, and referenced and framed in ways deeply revelatory of their significance). These

authors demonstrated that the Maya categorized their material remains in manners at once foreign to Western approaches yet nonetheless accessible to us in the form of ancient writing, in the symbolism embedded in their iconographies, and in the material remains and patterns inherent in architecture, ceramics, site settlement and more besides. Houston's approach has both matured and deepened over the years, and this tour-de-force revisits the topic of Maya materiality with the perspective of a scholar who has both contributed to and benefited from the ongoing decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing and art. It should be on the bookshelf of every serious student and interested amateur.

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