Maya people, Guatemala, Petén

Tripod Plate with Rain Serpent
Late Classic period, Tepeu 2 phase, 700–830
Ceramic with polychrome slip
3¼ × 13¼ × 13¼ in. (8.3 × 33.7 × 33.7 cm)
Gift of Lawrence J. Cassard, M.D.
1989.11.4

Mayan tombs of the elite were replete with offerings of jade, shell, and pottery, some of which may have been used for a funerary banquet. Banquets included goblets for a foaming chocolate drink, bowls for the maize porridge called atole, and plates, such as this one, for cornbread tamales. Some of the painted images on these vessels represent royal banquets presented during the life of one of the participants and occasionally show such serving pieces being used. Other painted images show the supernatural world, such as the two examples from the Harn collection illustrated here. Before the decipherment of the painted hieroglyphs on many vessels, some believed that the sole subject matter of the painted pottery referred to the underworld to which the tomb occupant would go.

The profile deity head painted inside the bottom of the plate may represent a Mayanized version of the Mexican rain god Tláloc. Earlier studies by Francis Robicsek and Donald M. Hales in The Maya Book of the Dead illustrate ten black-and-white “codex”-style goblets with the type II Tláloc head containing a lower jaw. The flaring inside rim of the Harn tripod alludes to the flaring feathers of the mythical moan bird, with its alternating orange and spotted-white clumps. Skillful overlapping of the orange slip creates the illusion of overlapping feathers with darker edges, in contrast to the black painted borders defining alternating clumps of white spotted feathers.