



A dignitary in full array as depicted on the south half of the painted bench that once stood in the altar chamber of the ancient temple buried in the pyramid foundation of the Temple of Warriors. Though in a style original to Northern Yucatan, many decorative details link it with the southern style of the Old Empire. It has both architectural and aesthetic value. This is a line drawing of a colored fresco as copied from the original by Ann Axtell Morris.

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## The Art of the Maya

*In 1839 John L. Stevens of New York was sent to Honduras on a diplomatic mission by President Van Buren. He became deeply interested in the ruins of the ancient cities of Middle America and visited a number of important archaeological sites in the Maya region. He was accompanied by Frederick Catherwood, an English artist and architect. In two fascinating volumes, beautifully illustrated by Catherwood, Stevens brought the fact to the attention of the modern world that a people once flourished in America comparable in culture with any race of antiquity.*

*Investigation of the cultural remains of these people in accordance with modern scientific methods began with Alfred P. Maudslay, an English explorer and archaeologist. During a period of twenty years (1882-1902) Maudslay pursued his study of the Maya with indefatigable energy. The published results of his work are of basic importance.*

*Maudslay's epoch-making study has been followed by many investigations conducted by both governmental and private agencies, among them being: the Mexican Government, the British Museum, Peabody Museum of Harvard University, Tulane University of New Orleans, American Museum of Natural History, New York, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Archaeological Society of Washington, and Carnegie Institution of Washington.*

*Under contract with the Mexican Government, Carnegie Institution began active work of excavation in 1924. During every working season since, the Institution has maintained a staff of archaeologists and assistants in the Maya field with headquarters at Chichen Itzá, Yucatan.*

*Among the members of this staff are two artists, Ann Axtell Morris and M. Jean Charlot. These artists are devoting their entire time to the making of faithful copies in color of the fragments of murals and of other forms of Maya art which have been uncovered. As a result of their work the Institution is now in possession of a rich collection of drawings, water colors and paintings in oil which it is preparing to reproduce for the use of students of Maya culture generally.*

*Although there are still many gaps in knowledge of Maya life, nevertheless sufficient data have been collected to justify certain conclusions regarding this remarkable people.*

*The following article, which is based upon the study and observations of M. Jean Charlot of Carnegie Institution, sets forth some of the deductions concerning Maya art to which the evidence points.*

SUCH expressions of the art of the Maya as have survived are to be found chiefly in the more durable forms of architecture and of stone sculpture. Of wood carving, stucco modelling, painting and pottery, only a few fragments have been recovered, for in these arts more delicate and more easily disfigured materials were employed.

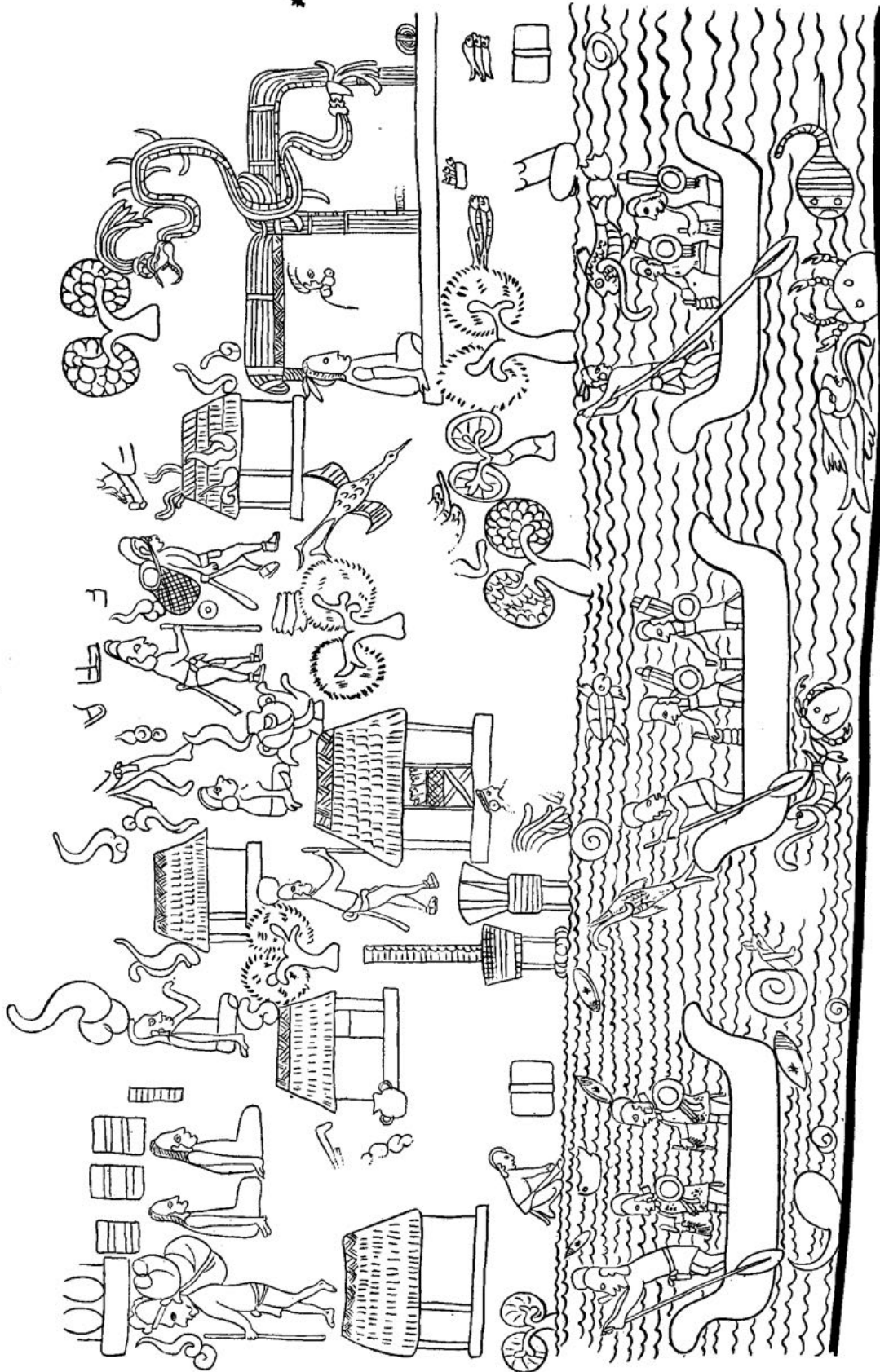
Originally the stone framework of the temples built by the Maya were covered with a wealth of decorative sculpture and stucco, delicately polished and treated with vivid and varied colors. Even in their present state of decay these temples

stand as noble tributes to their builders. Although still impressive, yet, stripped as they are of much of their embellishment, they may be likened to the crushed and scattered and whitened bones of once-living organisms.

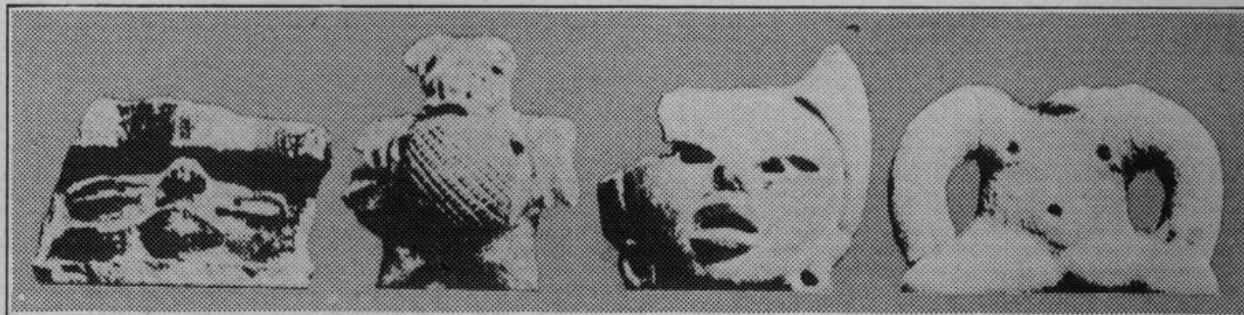
It is the task of the scientist to reconstruct from study of the remains the more exquisite though more perishable expressions of the Maya mind and to bind together such architectural, sculptural, pictorial and ceramic fragments as may be had into the beautiful and consistent whole which once obtained.



A fine example of New Empire stone carving. The representation of a human head or figure issuing from a serpent's mouth is many times repeated both in painting and sculpture in most of the later New Empire structures at Chichen Itzá.



Maya village life at the seashore. A drawing of the reproduction in color of a painting originally executed on an inner wall of the Temple of the Warriors. Fragments of this mural were found in the temple debris by the excavators. After these were pieced together into a consistent whole, Ann Axtell Morris of Carnegie Institution made a faithful copy in color. It is offered as an example of the art of the New Empire period which was characterized by interest in depicting scenes of every-day life and people in dynamic attitudes. The original mural was about 9 feet high and 12½ feet wide.



Clay models, called figurines, found in the floor of the plaza upon which the pre-Maya pyramid at Uaxactun was erected. These figurines, while not identical with archaic figurines from other localities, possess certain archaic features and others that are distinctly Maya.

### Principal Art Periods

Generally speaking the art products of the Maya region fall into three great phases or periods.

The oldest, the so-called archaic phase, comprises a wealth of small, clay models mostly representing human beings of familiar aspect. The technique employed in the creation of these is of the simplest. The figures consist merely of pellets of clay stuck together, squeezed with the fingers, and pierced with holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth. These objects are found embedded in what seems to be the oldest earth deposits and though undated are, doubtless, in some cases, at least, of real antiquity.

The appearance of the second type coincides broadly in date with the beginning of the Christian era. It is a product of the Maya of the Old Empire region, that is of Guatemala and Honduras where the Maya lived before migrating northward to Yucatan.



The Maya country. The shaded portion represents the principal area of the Old Empire region. During the fifth to seventh centuries A. D. the region of the Old Empire was abandoned. For reasons unknown the people migrated to Yucatan founding there the New Empire. By the time of the coming of the Spaniards Maya culture was on the decline.

This type can be traced from its rougher beginnings in stone at Uaxactun, through the classical achievements of Palenque, Piedras Negras and Copan towards the exuberance of its later flamboyant style as expressed at Quiriqua, a Maya city in Honduras near Copan. The height of achievement of this second style was reached during the fourth century A. D.; its decline set in during the sixth century.

This period left us many bas-reliefs and stelæ (monolithic stone monuments), a quantity of fallen fragments of decorative sculpture, and a few admirable examples of painted pottery. The subjects dealt with are more symbolic in character than naturalistic, and throughout, the treatment is pervaded with the dignity of strong religious feeling. Responsive to the complex social hierarchies which obtained at the time, the artists depict the people as wearing most complicated and varied garments and ornaments.

### The New Empire Period

The third period has been called the North Maya or the New Empire period. The greatest achievements of this period are to be seen in Uxmal and Chichen Itzá. While this type retains some of the characteristics of the Old Empire style, yet incorporated in it are to be found what seem to be Toltec and Mexican importations. However, through this blending of foreign and indigenous elements a quality of genuine originality is attained.

This period has left us examples of stone and wood carvings which show as a rule less mastery over the material than the carvings of the Old Empire period. Perhaps its most important contributions are its illuminated manuscripts, three of which are known, and its monumental paintings to be found on both the outside and inside of temple walls.

The subject-matter of this third period, in so far as it deals with religion and with the upper classes of the social order, is treated more simply than in earlier periods. The voluminous feather head-dresses and the elaborate masks, for example, decrease in size and complexity. On the other hand, much interest is shown in depicting scenes of everyday life and people represented as being in dynamic attitudes. The zenith of this period was probably reached during the tenth and eleventh centuries A. D.

### Steps in Orderly Development

The Old Empire period seems to have been the greatest of the three periods in respect to artistic values. From this period a wealth of original sculptures has been preserved. Among its products progressive steps in the development of the sculptor's technique and in the broadening range of his æsthetic ideals can be discerned. Indeed, a succession of steps in these matters is so evident that Dr. Herbert J. Spinden of Harvard University, in an analysis of Maya art, as exemplified at Copan in Honduras, proposed a chronological order for the carved monuments found at this site which he based upon mode of execution.

At a later time Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley of Carnegie Institution verified the accuracy of Spinden's arrangement by an independent reading of the hieroglyphic dates inscribed upon the monuments themselves, many of which Dr. Morley deciphered for the first time.

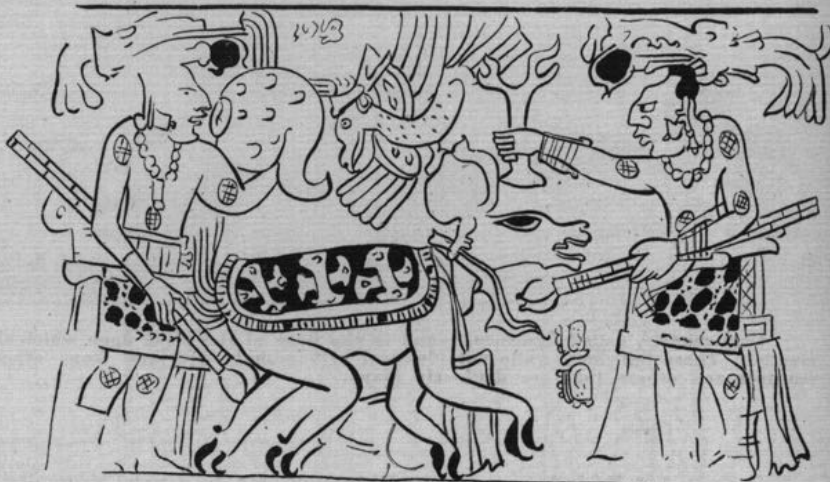
Probably this procedure could be duplicated at sites equally rich in sculptured documentation like Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, Guatemala. While it is thus possible to determine the steps of orderly sequence in artistic development at given sites, the correlations and the art interchanges between site and site remain a puzzle. Moreover,

there are places like Palenque, with its delicately modelled stucco figures, which seem to stand apart from the general current of the art of the period.

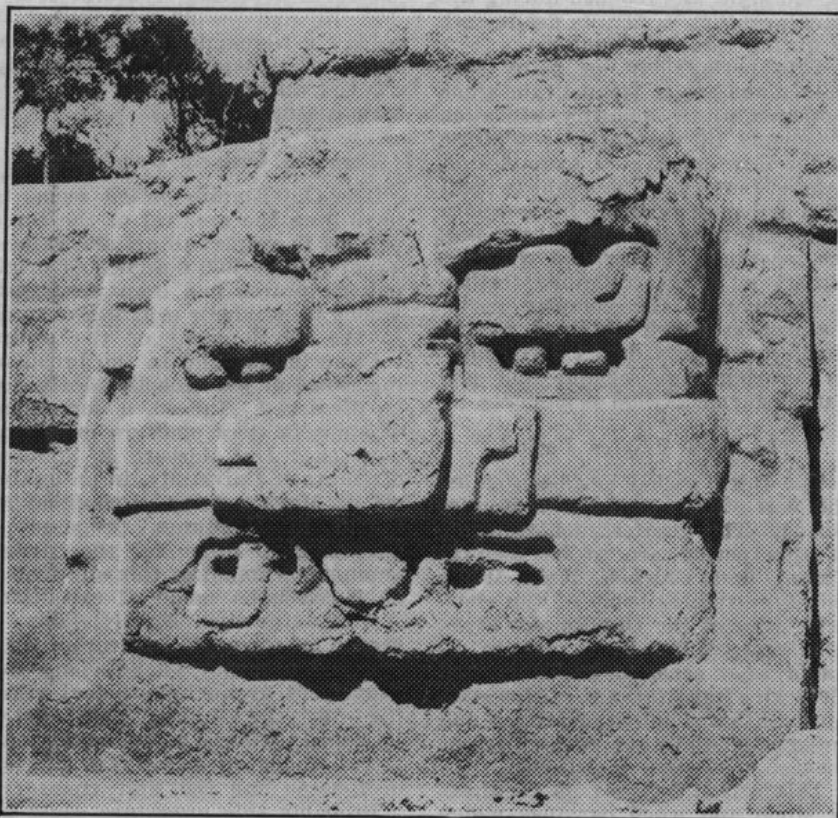
#### Paintings of Heroic Size

Based upon the general customs of the people, it is believed that all of the Old Empire sculptures were once elaborately covered with paint although only a few vestiges are left. Presumably painting also was used by itself and monumental frescoes doubtless once covered the temple walls. Of these originals nothing is left or at least nothing has as yet been discovered. However, as is the case with certain examples of Greek art, the lost paintings can be studied through the work of minor painters who took their inspiration from their masters.

Designs on vases of which the Chama vase or the Camara vase (see illustration) are examples, give an impression that links them



Design from the Camara vase found in Northern Yucatan. The decoration has characteristics which fix it as an example of Old Empire art. It is thought that such representations recorded in clay reflect the type of mural decoration in vogue during the Old Empire period.



During 1928 Carnegie Institution archaeologists found that a temple pyramid at Uaxactun, Guatemala, completely concealed an ancient pre-Maya pyramid, probably the most beautiful example of ancient American architecture that has come down to us. The summit of the ancient pyramid is reached by four stairways, each flanked by colossal masks of fine lime stucco, the upper pairs representing grotesque human heads, the lower pairs representing serpents' heads. There are eighteen masks altogether, each about eight feet square. This is a picture of one of the masks representing a human head. These masks are a transition both in technique and concept between the Archaic and Old Empire periods.

with known low-reliefs like the tablet of the Cross from Palenque which is colossal in size. Mural paintings in the Maya temples of the Old Empire period, though of heroic dimensions, must have been closely related in drawing and color to vases of this type. Minor arts such as feather work and work in textiles are elaborately depicted by carvings on the Maya columns but no examples of these arts themselves have been recovered.

#### Attitude Toward Nature

A striking characteristic of the artists of this Old Empire period is their pronounced tendency to create abstract shapes, which are wholly unrelated to the world of nature, such as monsters and dwarfish creatures having animal features. The latter figures constitute the so-called "grotesque" gods, though it was doubtless far from the thought of Maya artists to suggest that comic qualities were attributes of the divinities of the time.

The artist of the period of the New Empire had lost much of this love for imaginative creation and for conventional style. He was a keen observer of nature and a realist in its portrayal. Of the hundreds of representations of the human figure which have been uncovered in recent excavations in Yucatan there are few that do not convey the thought that here were subjects "sitting for their pictures." In fact, portraiture may be said to be the distinguishing characteristic of the art of the New Empire period.

### Discovery of Transition Types

These three art periods, then, the archaic, the Old Empire, and the New Empire, have been definitely recognized by archaeologists; so also their relative place in the time-scale has been generally agreed upon. Yet, until very recently, the transition of one art-style into that next succeeding it has remained a mystery, for no example which could be assigned with confidence to a connecting period had been found.

However, in 1928, much to the gratification of students of Maya culture, examples of both transitional periods were uncovered under well-defined stratigraphical conditions. Indeed, this was one of the principal achievements of Carnegie Institution during 1928, in its season's work in Yucatan and Guatemala. That is to say, art-objects were laid bare that seem to be hybrids between the archaic and Old Empire styles, on the one hand, and between the Old Empire and New Empire styles, on the other.

### Ancient Stucco Pyramid

The first of these discoveries, exceedingly important from the viewpoint of the archaeologist, has to do with the uncovering by Carnegie Institution of an ancient stucco pyramid at Uaxactun, situated in the northernmost department of the Republic of Guatemala.

It was here that 2000 years ago or thereabouts the inhabitants built a temple pyramid which is perhaps the most beautiful example of ancient American architecture that has come down to us. Indeed, its harmonious proportions, its pleasing silhouette, its dignified bearing, its dazzling white finish, make it one of the most satisfying pictures of the past to be found anywhere in the world.

This pyramid, 85 feet square at the base and 25 feet high, was ascended by four stairways, one on each face. Colossal masks of fine lime stucco, the upper pairs fashioned in the likeness of grotesque human heads, the lower pairs after the manner of serpents' heads, flank these stairways and, like grim sentinels, guard the approaches to the holy region above.

Time passed. Probably during the years that marked the beginning of the Christian era the inhabitants, for reasons unknown, transformed this original structure into a typical structure of a later period, not by destroying or remodelling it, but by covering it over with new material fashioned in the newer style and completely concealing it.

### Scientific Importance

In the hearting of the early pyramid the excavators found a human skeleton and a variety of clay pots containing such articles as seeds, shells, dried gummy materials and a lancet of obsidian. Excavations in the floor of the plaza which the pyramid faces and upon which it sets disclosed also fragments of redware dishes and a number of human and animal figurines made of clay which are distinctly of archaic type.

The scientific importance of this

discovery relates to the fact that the concealed pyramid is pre-Maya in character while the covering pyramid is of Old Empire type. It is significant also that it was found not only in the earliest Maya city known but also in the very earliest part of the city.

M. Charlot is of the opinion that the grotesque masks which embellish this pre-Maya temple, fashioned as they are of plastic lime stucco, represent a transition step, though perhaps not the only one, from the



A stone figure originally ornamenting the front of the columned approach to the stairway leading up to the Temple of the Warriors. It is about three feet high, carved in full round, and is perhaps the finest example of stone portraiture thus far found at Chichen Itzá. From a photographic reproduction of a charcoal drawing by M. Charlot of Carnegie Institution.

crude modelling in clay of the archaic period to the elaborate stone sculpture of later periods.

The technique used in modelling the masks was identical with that employed in the making of archaic figurines. However, while the subject matter of archaic figurines shows mainly a tendency towards a familiar realism these masks are treated in a more abstract way and with a marked feeling of religious intensity that foreshadows the classic Old Empire creations in that field.

#### **From Old Empire to New Empire**

During the same fruitful season of 1928 Carnegie Institution workers made a corresponding discovery suggesting the long-sought connection between the Old Empire and New Empire periods.

Replacement work on the Temple of Warriors at Chichen Itzá, Yucatan, was rapidly nearing completion when it was discovered that its pyramid base also concealed parts of an earlier temple. Centuries ago the builders of the later structure, while demolishing portions of the older temple, filled up and cov-

ered over other portions. Thus, one section of the original structure, the south portion containing two chambers, has been preserved in its entirety.

From the debris the shattered pieces of a magnificently painted stone bench, originally occupying a place in the sanctuary of the older temple, were recovered and fitted together. Evidence afforded by this bench is cited by M. Charlot as suggesting that in respect to its art elements it stands as a connecting link between the Old Empire and the New Empire period.

#### **Maya Art Distinctively American**

On this bench, for example, rows of dignitaries appear in profile, their faces originally turned toward the altar. The artist depicted their dresses, ornaments and accessories in the greatest detail, which details are partly reminiscent of Old Empire style.

The shields, having the peculiar shape and design of a face with lolling tongue, carried by the personages, remind M. Charlot of the shield in the center of the well-

known Palenque bas-relief of the sun, also of the Old Empire period.

Then the head-dresses and face masks of the long-nosed gods are similar in all respects, M. Charlot suggests, to those portrayed in the Dresden Codex, the oldest known Maya manuscript or book, which would appear to be a New Empire copy of an older document, the original of which is lost.

Finally, M. Charlot adds, the treatment of feathers on hat and back, the elaborate staffs, and the lavish use of shells and beads, call to mind the carvings on Old Empire monuments.

In summarizing his observations on the art of the Maya M. Charlot concludes:

"Our newly gained archaeological knowledge enables us to form a more unified view of Maya art as a whole and, in spite of the obscurity which still obtains at many points, to see it as a purely indigenous growth rooted in the very soil in which it fructified so beautifully. In it we have an important contribution to the world's aesthetic achievements which is distinctively American."

## Carnegie Institution of Washington

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