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The Maya of Middle America

Part IV—Bas-Reliefs from the Temple of the Warriors

By

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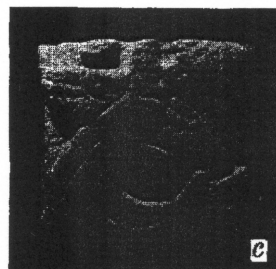
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SUCH expressions of the art of the Maya as have survived are to be found chiefly in the more durable forms of architecture and of stone sculpture. Of wood carving, stucco modelling and painting, only a few fragments have been recovered, for in these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

Originally the stone framework of the temples built by the Maya was covered with a wealth of decorative sculpture and stucco, delicately polished and treated with vivid and varied colors. The roof of the Temple of the Warriors, for example, was supported by columns of stone, each of which was made up of from eight to eleven blocks bedded, one upon the other, in lime mortar. All were sculptured on all four sides, the ornamentation being the same in its major aspects. Each base is graven to represent a composite, shieldlike device; each shaft portrays a warrior or priest, richly garbed and adorned; and upon each capital is an inverted arc from the nether side of which issues a human form in diving posture. In addition to being sculptured the columns were brilliantly painted.

These features are treated in detail by Jean Charlot in the section on bas-reliefs in the Temple of the Warriors volume. This section covers, among other elements, the polychrome bas-reliefs executed on the pilasters and columns in the three units comprising the Temple of the Warriors group of structures: the Temple of the Chac Mool, the Temple of the Warriors proper, and the Northwest Colonnade. The extracts which follow are taken from his discussion.

In the rubble fill above the Temple of the Chac Mool unrelated fragments of particularly fine sculpturing were found. A humming bird sucking a flower while on the wing is represented in a and a crested parrot in b.



THE bas-reliefs examined and illustrated in this study total 337 panels, each comprising a life-size human representation and two decorative *motifs*. An exhaustive study would have required more time and knowledge than were at our disposal, and it was therefore considered sufficient to copy and classify this great amount of fresh material, making it available to other investigators who, it is hoped, will complete the task.

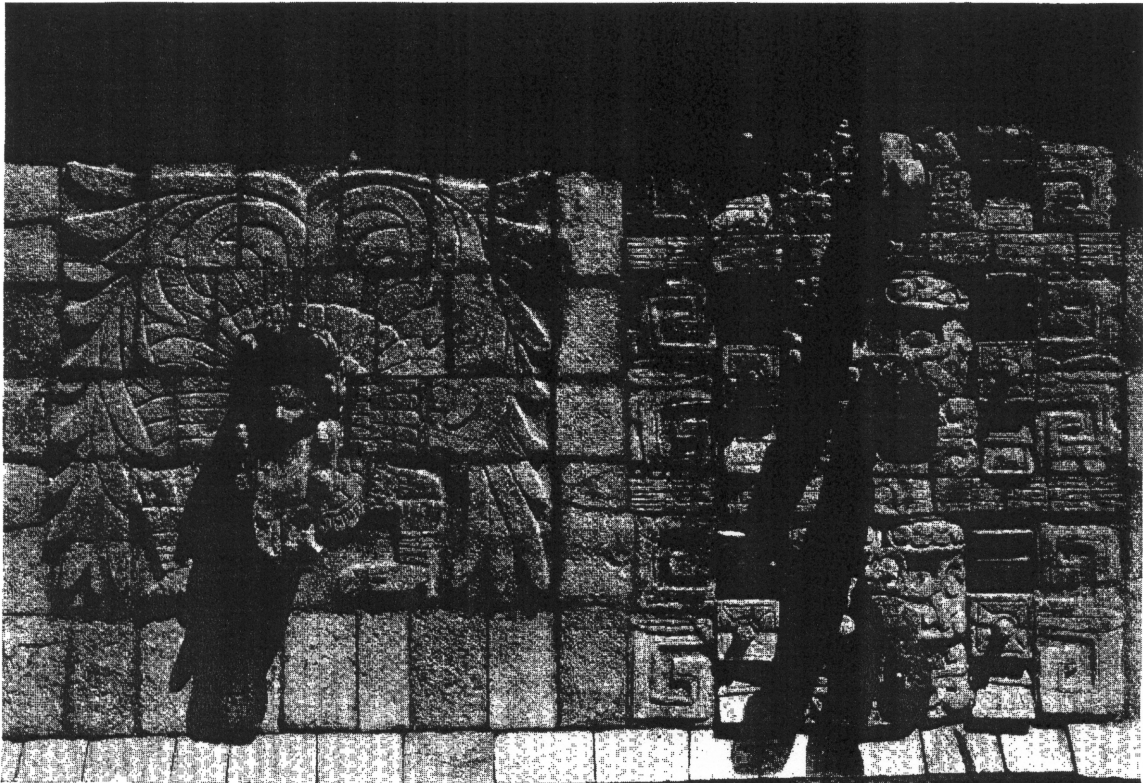
somewhat irregular, square columns.

A process similar to that used for reproducing pottery decoration was adopted, which has the advantage of giving simultaneously the four sides of each column, while still preserving their unity. One angle of each column was established as an axis of development and the four faces were spread out flat. Such a procedure presupposes geometrically straight and true

faces of columns. The same technique was probably followed in all of them, from their quarrying to the last coat of paint.

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The columns were made of relatively soft limestone, as were the other architectural elements of the building, and consist of rectangular blocks varying greatly in height. Only four of the six faces of each block were carved. The other two



Detail of the Warriors façade showing the richness of its sculptured ornamentation

Reproducing the Originals

Our first concern was the obtaining of a correct and complete reproduction of the originals. Photographs, though they eliminate any doubt as to accuracy, failed to prove satisfactory. It is difficult to follow the extremely low relief of the sculptured line through the cracks, traces of roots and other accidents of weathering that mar the panels. Moreover, the necessity of color notes made photography inexpedient.

It was therefore decided to draw to scale the material considered, and the first problem that presented itself was the projection on a flat surface of the four-sided,

vertical lines, and involved a theoretical correction of the somewhat ragged sloping edges of the blocks, thus distorting slightly the width of the band that frames each panel.

The best-preserved specimens are reproduced in full color with all the details of their actual appearance. A simpler schematic method was adopted for the other panels, by which the various accidental defects caused by decay are eliminated.

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Technique of Maya Artists

Nearly all the bas-reliefs to be described in connection with each architectural unit appear on the

were left unpolished, since the rough surface helped to catch the mortar with which the parts of a column were joined. The surfaces to be sculptured were smoothed, but were not polished. Probably because of the great number of stones required, blocks with serious defects and holes or depressions were not rejected, as it was apparently assumed that the stuccoing and painting to be applied later would obliterate these faults.

Carved In Situ

The blocks were probably sent from the quarry already trimmed, to avoid useless weight, and in groups, each of which constituted

a single column. Irregularities in shaping the blocks and the imperfect measurement of the squared stones, as they lay horizontally in the quarry, are sufficient to account for the slight differences that occur between the heights of the columns in place. Some correction of initial errors was possible by varying the spaces between blocks when these were filled with mortar.

The carving proper could not begin before the stones had been thus sealed together, because of the delicate continuity that must exist between two segments of one line in passing from one block to the next. Various indications, demonstrate that the sculptor did not begin his work until the room or gallery had been roofed and the columns were actually functioning as supports for the finished arches. It would seem logical that the artist could not work freely upon his composition *in situ*, before the roughest work was concluded and the masons' scaffolds had disappeared. The junctions between blocks, which broke the continuity of the surface and thus interfered with the preliminary sketch, were smoothed over with stucco before the artist set to work; while the delicate work of relating two segments of carving in stone by stucco modeling naturally would be done only after the carving was completed.

Preliminary Sketching

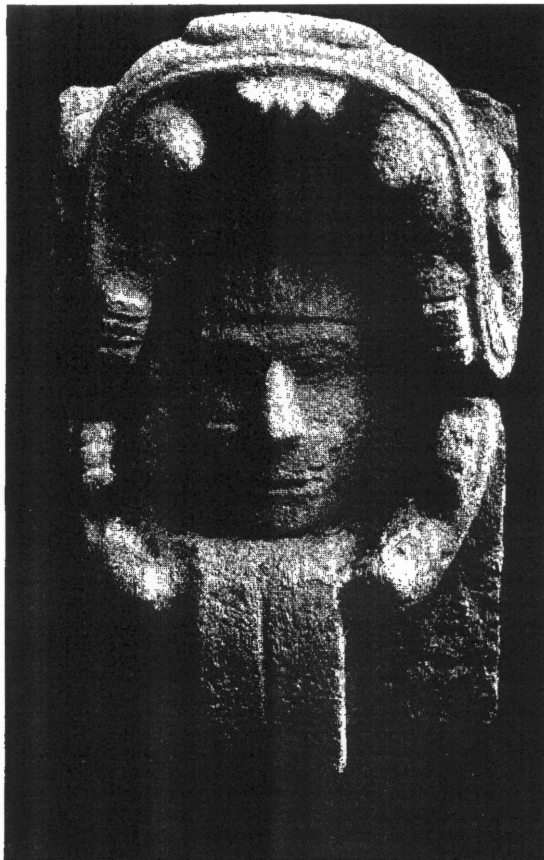
The artist began his work by dividing the column into three components—base, shaft and capital—and on each a general massing of the elements to be included in the picture was sketched with hard charcoal. Then followed delineation of details with more accurate depiction in view.

When one considers the enormous number and variety of ornaments portrayed in minute detail, and their fusion in human representations, nearly all with a strong individual stamp, some even with a name and obviously portraits, it seems impossible to suppose that the artist worked only from memory. Rather it is highly probable that work on the stone itself was preceded by preparatory sketching from living models on a more perishable material and on a smaller scale. The artist, working from such sketches, could amplify and modify as the permanent version might require.

After the subject was drawn on the stone, the carving followed. This was a process of cutting away the background from the outline, so as to silhouette the figure upon it in relief. Then the details were cut inside this silhouette. The most

important lines were made by double diagonal incisions which met in the middle, like a furrow, the sloping edges thus formed giving to the plane a suggestion of spheric modeling. Minor lines were made by one vertical stroke, while the

On columns that stood in a particularly good light or in a prominent place, the carving was finished off by polishing, so as to prepare a finer ground for color. Attempts to round the surfaces more thoroughly are rare and occur mainly



The central position of a Plumed Serpent panel in the façade of the Temple of Warriors showing a human face between a reptile's open jaws. This is an excellent example of New Empire stone carving.

lightest were simply scratched on the surface.

Though the stone is soft, it would appear from the constant hesitations in line and the irregularities of the surface, that a tool of but slightly harder material was used, probably a roughly chisel-shaped stone. A point was used to deepen the furrow and to trace small lines. Holes were prepared for incrustations, the hollow remaining unpolished in order to insure adherence. In the parts of the Temple of the Warriors where the light was bad, and especially in corners distant from the altar, the sculpture consisted of hardly more than a few scratches, partly on stone and partly on stucco, barely an indication for the painter to work upon.

in portrayals of small objects. The incrustations were probably inlaid after carving and before painting. All of them were intended as eyes. The best incrustations are of white shell with a circular hole in the middle, which was filled with a kind of tar to serve as the pupil of the eye. It seems that in some cases a cheaper material, probably white lime, was substituted for the shell.

When the carving and inlay were entirely completed, the painter began his work. A fixed scheme was followed. The background was painted dark red, the frame blue, and the objects portrayed as near their natural colors as the limitations of the Maya palette permitted.

The painter did not, however,

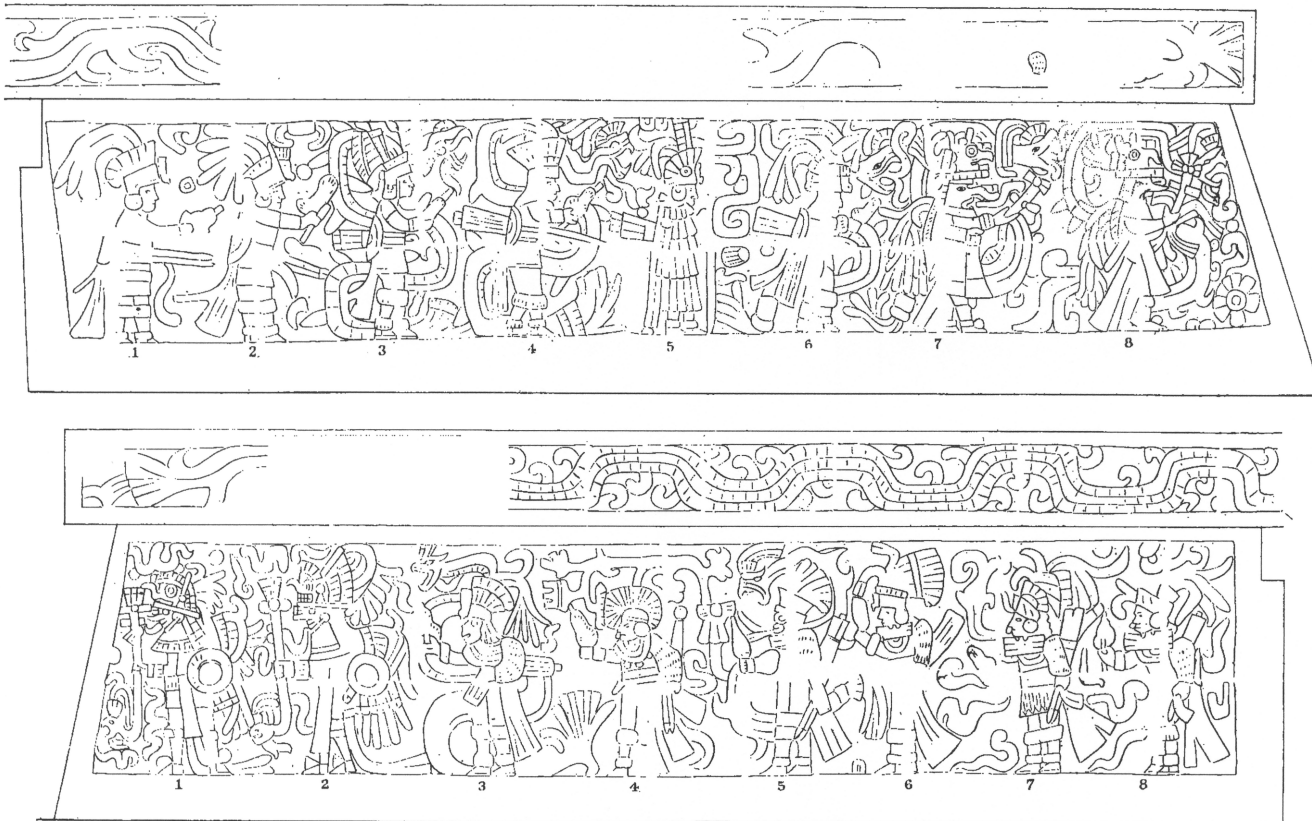
adhere slavishly to the line made by the sculptor. It is interesting to note that he followed it freely, and often ignored it entirely. In some cases, he changed the proportions of the objects in the painted version, apparently for no other than an aesthetic purpose; in others, he added objects or completed parts forgotten by the sculptor.

These variations between carving and painting on the same surface are sometimes so marked as

to point to a conflict, and would indicate that painter and sculptor were two separate individuals.

The entire work of painting, laborious as it seems, was reattempted from time to time, though not so often as the exterior decoration of the temple. While in the Chac Mool Temple there is only one coat of paint, thus bearing testimony to the short use of the structure, numerous coats are still in place in the Warriors Temple and the Northwest Colonnade.

Seventeen can be counted on the dais of this colonnade. Some incrustations were buried under this process of successive repainting (dais, North Colonnade) and preserved until revealed by the disappearance of some of the coats of paint after exposure. Painted eyes were found in one such instance, concealing the original incrustated shell eyes, thus demonstrating that the existence of the latter had been forgotten by the time the last coats of paint were applied.



Near the foot of the stairway which leads up to the Warriors entrance, a stone platform was uncovered measuring seventeen feet in length, fifteen and a half feet in width, and a little more than two feet in height. Serpent figures lying head to head with a bowl of incense between and with human heads emerging from their mouths are carved on the cornices. Two files of gaudily bedecked human figures, proceeding from the back of the platform, one on each side, converge at the front center, where, between the leaders of the procession, stands a bowl of incense. All were brilliantly colored. The upper drawing shows the figures on the west side, the lower, those on the east side.