

MONSTER HEAD; FRAGMENT FROM ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTATION COPAN. SOUTHERN STYLE; COURTESY AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

## MAYAN ART

By JEAN CHARLOT

THE study of Mayan art and the appreciation of its monuments has been left wholly to the taste of scientists, and those precise gentlemen, being mostly interested in chronology, too often overlook its beauty to indulge in technical discussions which make the layman yawn. This may account for the fact that Mayan art, although one of the few fully ripe racial expressions the world has known, is still waiting to become a part of our common aesthetic heritage.

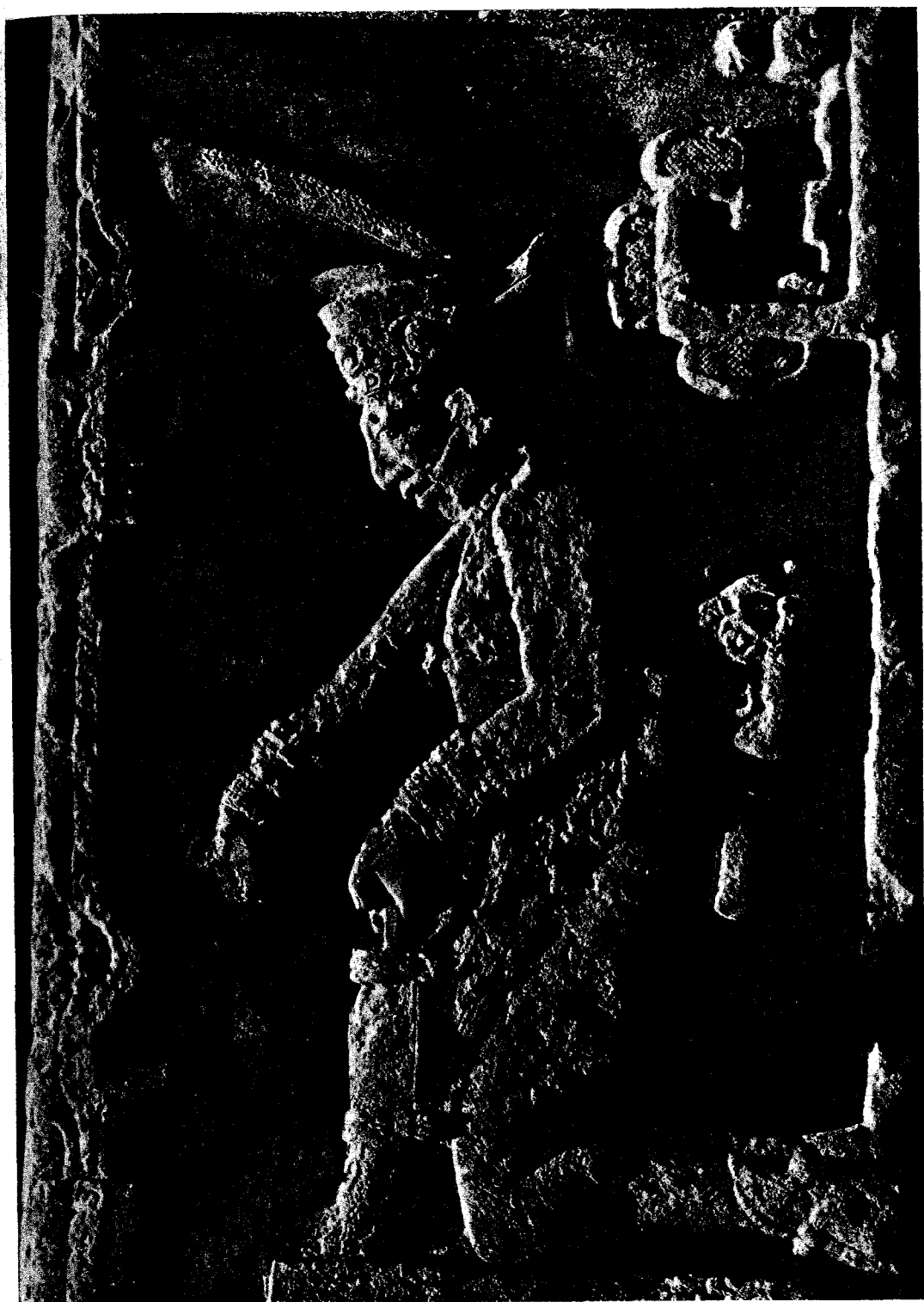
Mayan art appears more and more as a purely autochthonous growth. The much heralded Chinese or Siamese resemblances fade away as our knowledge of its style increases and its purely American characteristics are made clear. Even the die-hard fairy tale of the Mayans' being a survival of the lost Atlantis tribes is less in clash with the facts, the close connection between the art, the race, and its geographical environment, than the more commonplace theory of an Asiatic importation.

The layman tends to regard this art as just another of our many American tribal expressions. He does so with the paternal condescension with which the civilized appreciates any savage culture, since Parisian aesthetes

started the Negro art fad. But on the contrary, if one possesses an aesthetic flair and a sense of the fitness of respect, one will approach Mayan art much in the same way that a learned Occidental studies Chinese ink paintings or Japanese poetry, considering it as something more subtle than the similar products of our own present-day era.

Its stylistic cycle follows the universal scheme. It started from archaic forms to culminate in a genuine classical purity, then, through the overripe excesses of baroquism, vanished together with the civilization that had given it growth. Just before the end, a reaction of purism or neo-archaism gave birth to some of its most exquisite monuments.

A choice between the diversified wealth of its remains is mostly a question of taste, and taste is a very personal affair. Here again the archaeologist, innocent of aesthetic training, looms as dictator, and the public, taking his word for granted, knows and admires most the monuments typical of later rococo times. Lovers of virtuosity for its own sake, can well take pride in the decadent *dentelles de pierre* of Quirigua and in the late works of other sites, all of them unsurpassed in the history of monumental sculpture for their confusing



THE SOWER. DETAIL FROM A STELA IN PIEDRAS NEGRAS

A masterpiece of classical restraint. Courtesy Dr. Morley, Carnegie Institution of Washington.



#### MONOLITH KNOWN AS THE GREAT TURTLE, QUIRIGUA

An animal representation showing the abstract-baroque style at its best. Southern style. Courtesy American Museum of Natural History.

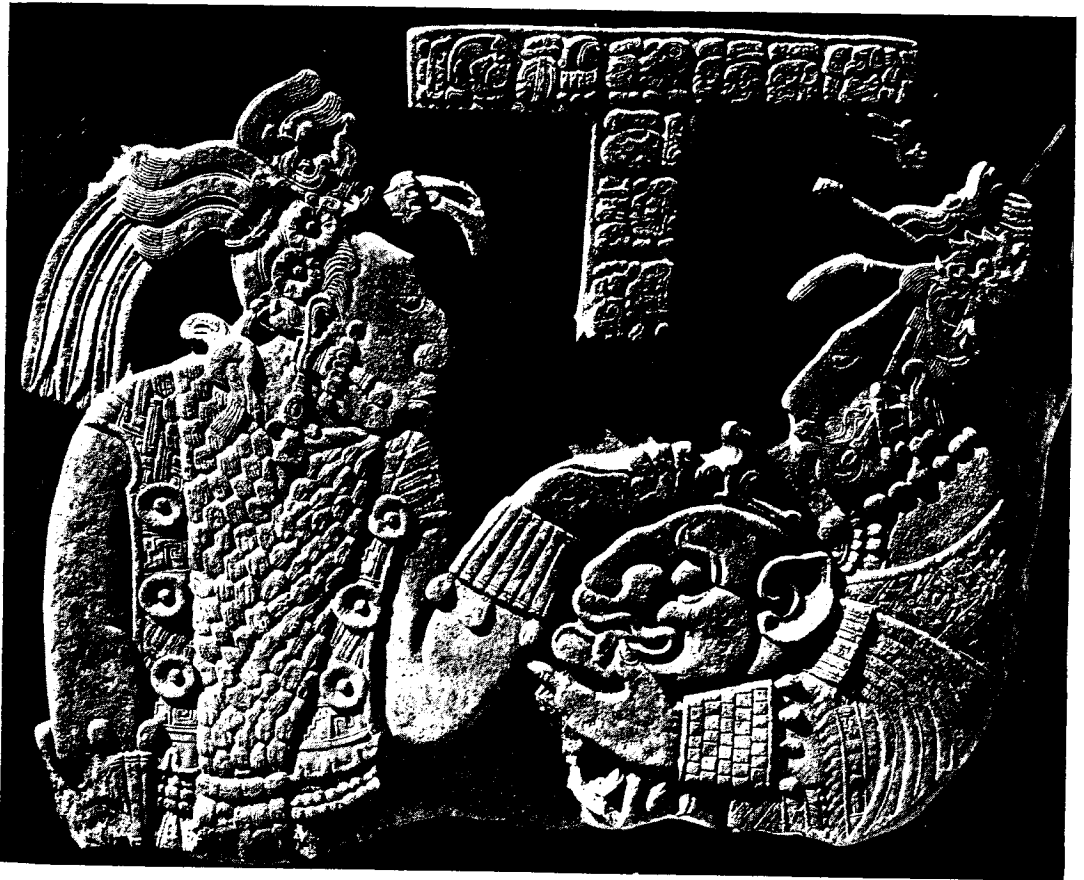
amount of carefully worked details. Through decorative spirals, volutes, and curves, men, animals, monsters and gods intertwine their bodies in competition with the surrounding tropical exuberance. By a sort of artificial mimetism, chunks of stone are made to look like corners of a jungle. Let the imagination surround them again with hordes of chieftains and priests in heavily embroidered gowns with their god-masks, weapons, and ceremonial staffs, and you will not fail to enthuse both theatrical managers and "nouveaux riches." Here indeed were splendors that put to shame even a Roxy.

But Mayan life and Mayan thought were not only this gorgeous pageantry. Their classical manifestations are less luxurious but wealthier in human values. A sober taste guided the authors of the "Beau Relief" of Palenque, and some eight hundred years later the fresco painters of Chacmultun and Chichen Itza. On plain backgrounds, personages clad in peplum-like garments move

with elegant, over-refined gestures, their slim bodies elongated to the utmost. The artist, as the Greeks had done before him, attempts to summarize his philosophy in the choice proportions of the male form, and stakes all on the human body. But in these works palpitates a spirituality that clashes with the Greek athletic ideal that gave such a rustic health to both men and gods. The quasi-morbid attitude that those reliefs immortalize is still the appanage of modern Mayans. How such languid-looking adolescents were able to build and to keep in working order the complex machinery of their civilization is more understandable for those who have seen Mayan masons lift with lazy gesture, and carry on their heads, weights under which one of our strong men would stagger. In the whole field of Mayan monuments, this group of art works stands the closest to us, being endowed with a psychological flavor that links it closely to our own anthropomorphic habits of thought.

But in the Mayan scheme of things, man was far from playing the dominant role. He was a well-nigh useless addition to a universe in which planets, stars, and an innumerable and complex host of gods moved in orderly fashion. To live his life without crossing the way of those mysterious beings was man's main concern. Hence the priest controlled all. The metaphysical subjects proposed by the priesthood to the hired artist were, by a happy accident or a racial affinity, exactly those that befitted his gift. The Mayan artist was most interested in abstractions. The use of line, volume, and color for non-descriptive, highly intellectualized purpose, was as natural with him as an objective fidelity is to the camera. As a result, this art stands as one of the wealthiest mines of theological motives and plastic abstractions the world has ever known.

The simplest and presumably oldest forms of human representation (stela 8, Naranjo) are realistic, with a trend to caricature. The conception, however, soon widens with the growing ability and ambition of the stone worker. The representation loses its naturalistic appearance, anatomical proportions become distorted, and the wealth of complicated garments and ceremonial ornaments climbs, vine-like, over the human figure, humbling it to the role of a mere peg for symbols. The features remain visible for a time, as the last objective spot amidst this wealth of abstractions, then disappear in turn under a fantastic mask, thus depriving us, the modern onlookers, of even this last refuge for our too strictly emotional appreciation of art. Thus the typical Maya monolith was an encyclopaedia of dogmatic knowledge. Once an accumulator for religious energies, it is now,



FRAGMENT OF BAS RELIEF FROM YAXCHILAN: SOUTHERN STYLE

The photograph, taken in a strongly diagonal light, emphasizes the relief that is in reality very low. An elaborate polychrome was an essential part of such technique. Courtesy American Museum of Natural History.

with its meaning mainly lost, still a foyer of plastic ardor.

That a process of depuration modified natural forms into a highly divergent pattern is in many cases evident, the link being as brittle as that between a Picasso picture and a guitar. But another group of art forms must have been born directly from the mind of their makers. Theirs is a more radically abstract language than any of those used by modern artists, and baffling indeed for the



JEAN CHARLOT: SKETCH OF TERRA COTTA STATUETTE

This piece is six inches high, from the island of Jaina. It typifies the Mayan ideal of human beauty. Similar modeling technique was applied to monumental art (stucco reliefs at Palenque). James Collection, Merida

scientist who attempts to pin down some objective model from which such symbols could evolve. One of two groups of equally serious explorers saw a parrot in a detail of stela B, at Copan, the other group, an elephant!

An individual may create a new pot shape or decorate a vase for his own egotistic satisfaction. But the impulse that gave birth to the temples and major sculptures of the Mayas was the collective urge that seizes whole crowds and makes them build as one, be they Athenian Greeks or Gothic Frenchmen. This social art, now that its society has vanished, remains in an enforced idleness

amidst its jungle surroundings. As a modern recognition of its utilitarian origin, Indian hunters still make sacrifices of deer and burn copal in wooden spoons at the feet of the carved stelae. Even the white man recognizes dimly that no purely aesthetic appreciation will do it full justice. He tries to complete the picture by scanning the other remains of this civilization, tries to read its written text and discover the spring that caused those monuments to surge as an answer to the need of the people. About a fifth of their hieroglyphics have by now been deciphered, but most of these texts happen to be merely arithmetic, dealing with astronomical computations, the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets. This very lack of sought-for sentimental corollaries is illuminating. The backbone of the art, the mental scaffolding the Maya priesthood offered to the artist so that he could clothe it with his own aesthetic passion, is mathematical. Numbers, being measure and rhythm, are poetry in a sense, but poetry accessible only to a few. In order to attract crowds it must be clad in less metaphysical garments. This was the role incumbent upon the Mayan artists, sculptors, modelers, and painters. They made this dry, if noble, dogma partake of the richness of the landscape, yet not following it in its disorder, but creating a human tropic of new shapes and meanings. Stela 11, in Yaxchilan, perhaps the most impressive conception ever attempted in sculpture, shows that the artist fully understands his rôle; here trembling worshippers kneel before a shrine. A miracle happens and the god appears, a frightful god indeed. Behind the divine mask magnificently carved, the artist reveals to us, and to us only, the profile of the priest who impersonates the god. He is a dry, shrewd, scientific person, wholly disdainful of the tremendous sensation that his disguise creates.

The more plebeian art objects are teeming with a wealth of grinning gods, old gods, black gods, and even among them the ambiguous beauty of the Maize God. Thus did the artist grind food for popular sentimentality, something to cling to when one ignores mathematics and yet needs a faith and a morale.



STELA II, YANCHILAN. SOUTHERN STYLE