

# MAGAZINE OF ART

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MUSIC . . . THEATRE . . . CINEMA . . . ARCHAEOLOGY . . . PHOTOGRAPHY . . . INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

VOLUME 31

NUMBER 11

## NOVEMBER, 1938

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## THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

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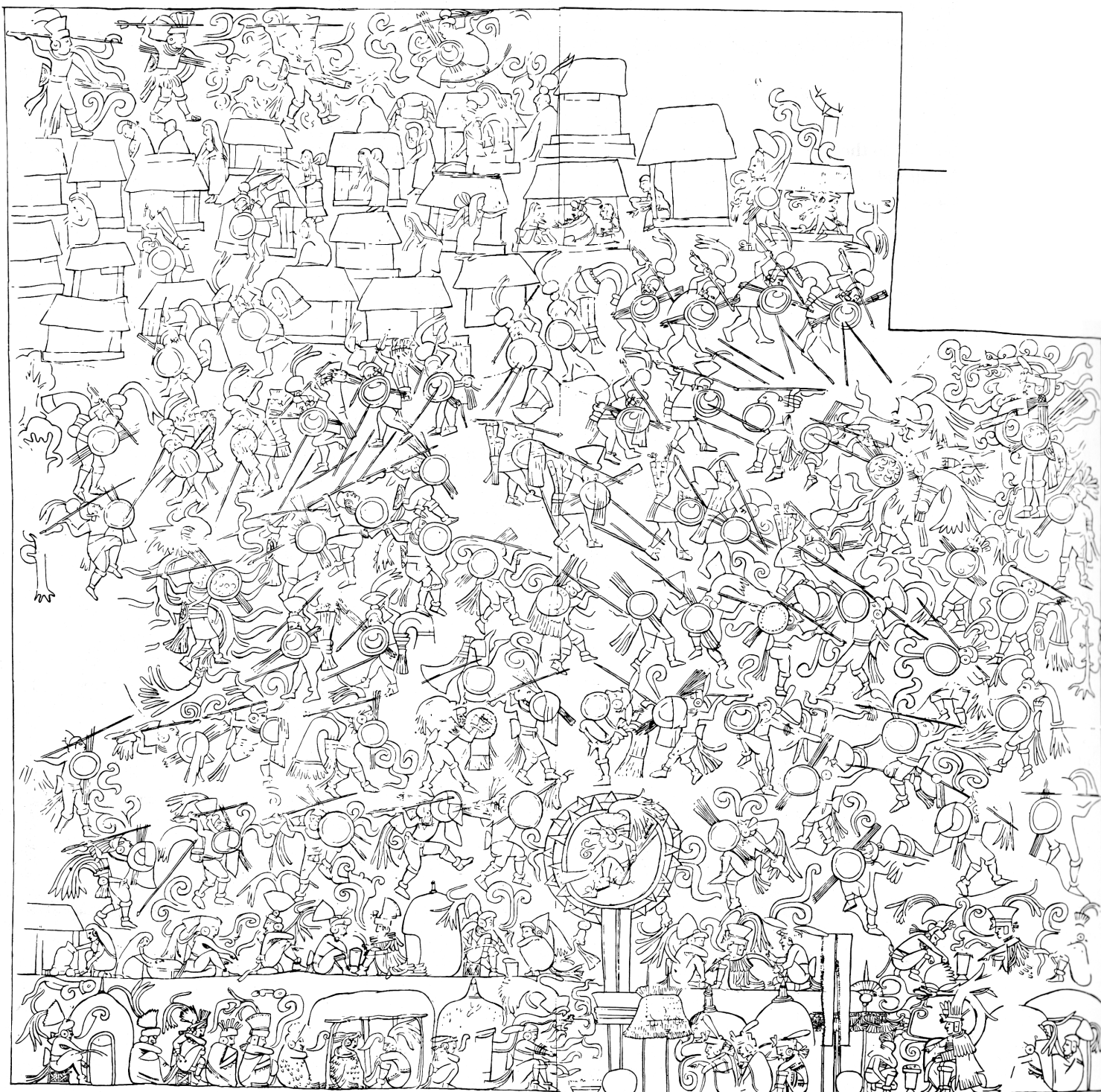


FIG. 1. "THE BATTLE," MURAL IN THE TEMPLE OF THE TIGERS, CHICHEN-ITZA, AFTER A TRACING BY THE AUTHOR AND MRS. E. H. MORRIS

## A XII CENTURY MAYAN MURAL

BY JEAN CHARLOT

MEXICAN MURALS have been much discussed. Both in their physical make-up, the true fresco technic, and in their sociological implications, they have sown seeds that fructify even unto the humblest post offices of the U. S. A. Though this movement has helped American art to a distinct and different status from the art of the school of Paris, people have been most incurious as to why it should have started in Mexico, vaguely imagine that Mexican modern art is a mushroom growth, unrelated to the traditions and monuments of its past. Mexican murals have come to mean those that have been painted in the last fifteen years and few suspect that there is in Mexico a mural tradition centuries old. Though this truly indigenous tradition had been despised through the nineteenth

century and humbled to the walls of village chapels and of wine-shops, it can be traced directly to the mural decorations of Aztec and Mayan temples.

We gain an indirect knowledge of Mayan murals, those of the Southern school, only through the potteries painted in monumental style and the low bas-reliefs carved or stuccoed in temples, which, in their heyday were thoroughly polychromed and thus more paintings than sculptures. Frescoes proper could hardly resist the jungle dampness. But from the so-called New Empire of the North we still possess some important remains.

The Temple of the Tigers is a small edifice which dominates the ball court in Chichen-Itza, Yucatan. There players and judges probably went to pray for victory or there the victorious team received its prize. Though the national game combined some features of football and basket ball, this chapel served a similar purpose to those chapels in Spain, annexed to the arenas, where bull fighters kneel before they kill. Its age has been computed as being 20,000 B. C. by the enthusiastic and unreliable Le Plongeon who saw in its paintings the source of all Egyptian art. Hard-headed German scientists claim it to have been built but little before the Spanish conquest. It is more probably of the twelfth century, being one of the oldest monuments in this New Empire metropolis. Whatever its date, it contains most perfect specimens of Mayan painting in its inner chamber, depictions of peace and war, religious ceremonies, apparitions of the gods. Their line and color were still brilliant enough in 1842, when Stephens and Catherwood rediscovered Chichen, to make them exclaim that here was the Sistine Chapel of the Mayas.

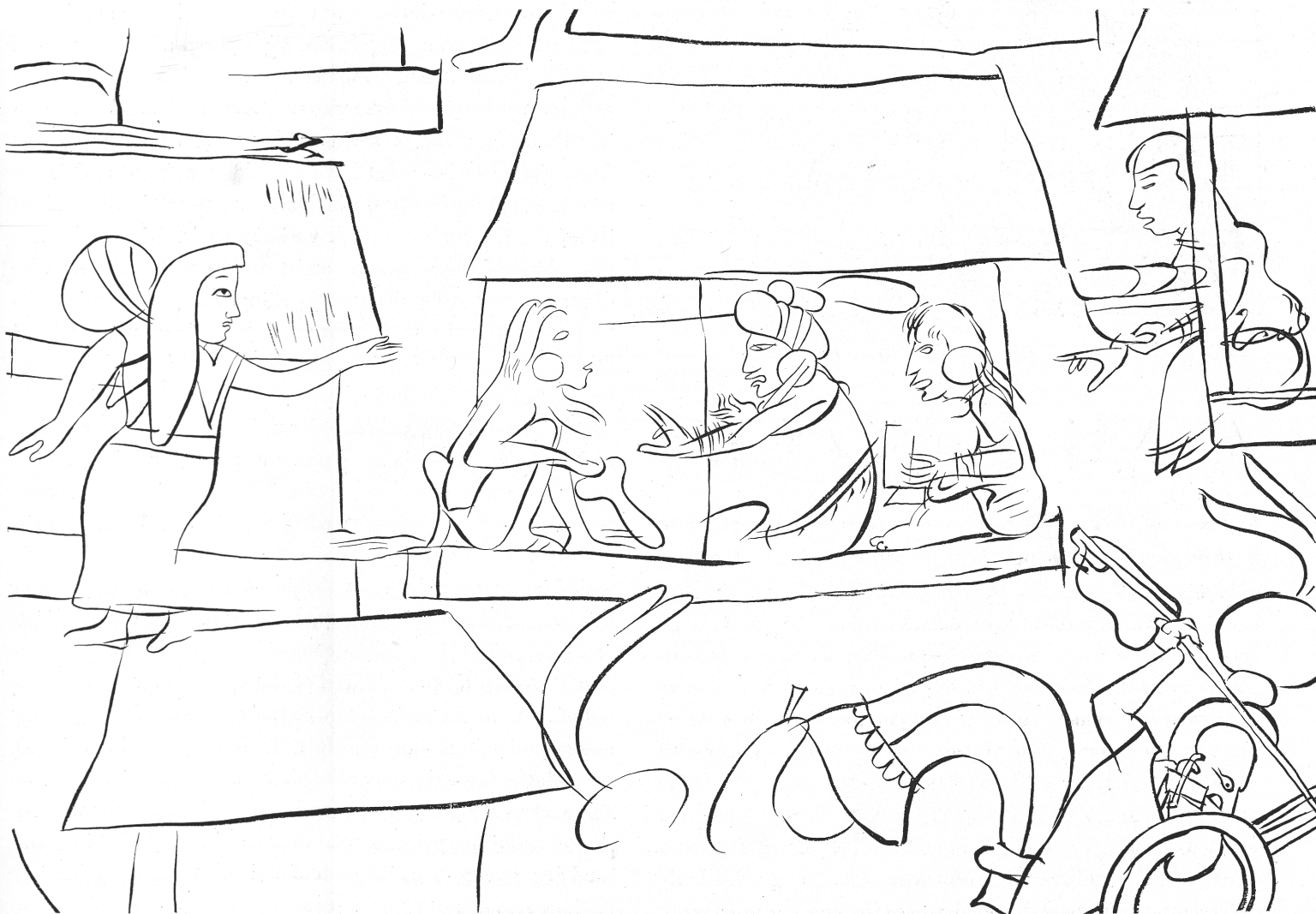
Of the seven panels which constitute the decoration, the best preserved today is at the right of the inner door. The painting has suffered to an extent. Much of the last coat of paint has flaked off, uncovering a preliminary tracing in light pink, only faintly visible against the creamy ground. Souvenir seekers have done their work of destruction, travelers have inscribed their names or scribblings since prehispanic times. Due to those conditions, a patient study through careful tracing does more justice to the work than does direct photogra-

phy. A copy of the whole wall traced directly from the original by Mrs. E. H. Morris and myself in 1926 and unpublished up to now is the basis for the illustrations of this article. Its line matches stroke for stroke the one that the artist traced on the



FIG. 2. WARRIOR, WOMEN

Below: FIG. 3. VILLAGE WITH INTERIOR SCENE



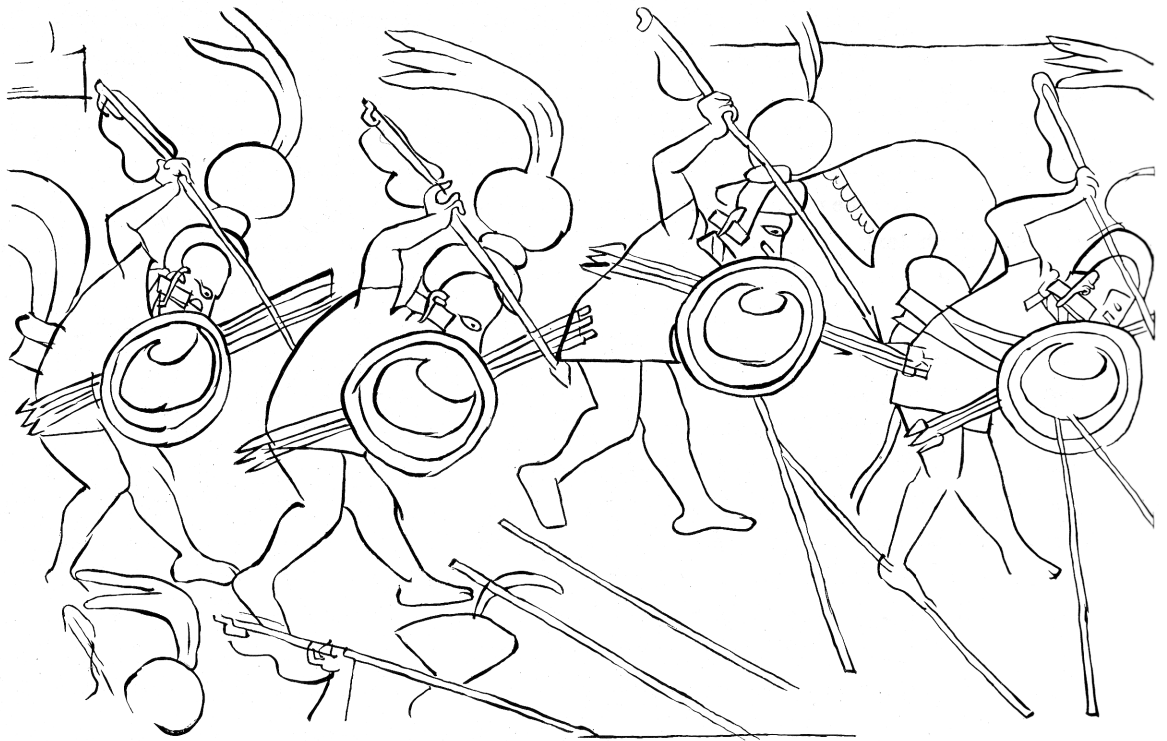
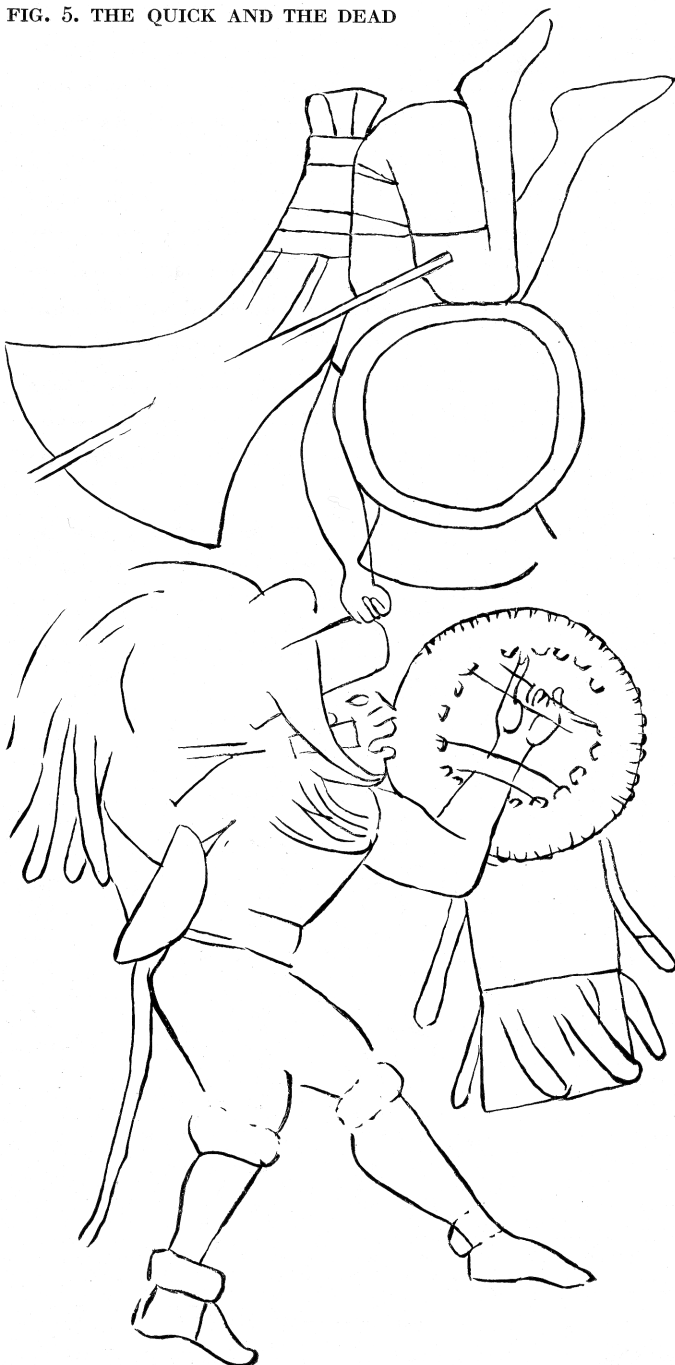


FIG. 4. WARRIORS IN ACTION

Below:

FIG. 5. THE QUICK AND THE DEAD



wall before covering it with an opaque pigment now gone. It does not show the picture as it was when finished but as the first draft which was to be amended and illuminated later. As is the case with most sketches, although it has not the perfection of the completed work it shows more spontaneity, makes us commune more intimately with the mind of the artist.

The technic employed is complex: the wall itself was of carefully squared and joined stones on which a first coat of rather rough-surfaced lime was spread. On a second coat, polished as paper, the preliminary sketching was done in true fresco. The brushes must have been long, pointed and fat as are the Japanese brushes, which alone can explain the flexibility of the line and the quick variations of thickness. In this first phase of the work, the artist sought rather the balance of masses than a detailed story-telling. It must have been to him something of a daub, as great chunks of wall were covered at one sitting. The brush, vigorously wielded, has left many spatters of the too liquid tone, most visible on the lower areas. The line is of a very pale madder red, of transparent quality, and includes corrections of posture, anatomical indications under the garments, changes of mind concerning accessories. When the line had been traced, the background was filled in with *terre verte*, also in fresco, and the local colors of people and objects were lightly sampled in a water color effect. When this part of the work was dry, another technic was put into use. The painter instead of using a liquid color changed to a pigment of much body, a kind of thick tempera which admitted of more depth and variety of tone; over the fresco proper was spread this new set of colors of a density and intensity of enamel, the most conspicuous being a cerulean blue, a mauve and a Veronese green. Those and also a thick gouache whiter-than-lime mixture were spread over the frescoed wall in absolutely opaque coats a sixteenth of an inch thick. The adhesion to the wall was not as perfect as that of the different coats of

lime to the stone, so that much of it has now peeled off, uncovering the preparatory sketch. The last step in painting consisted of filling in the details on those colored silhouettes, inventing new lines where the first one had been lost and, where it was still to be seen, interpreting it freely with black. The result is most original: the pigments play not only through color but also through texture, transparent or opaque, albeit some of the frescoed part remained uncovered, especially in the backgrounds. The painter having massed in his composition in the first sketch, could in the last rendering go to the extreme detail without losing the balance of masses.

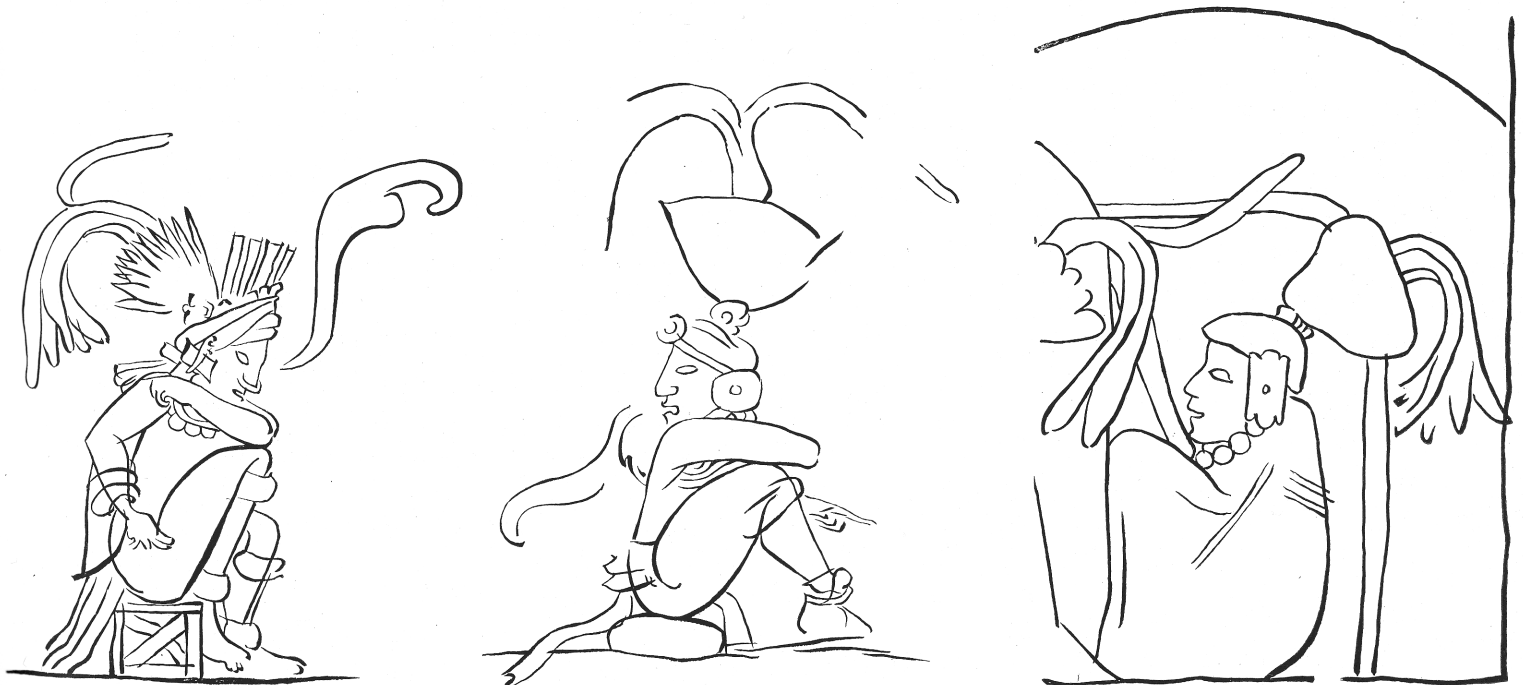
Between the floor and the level of the painting proper a decorative dado was painted, representing Atlas-like figures upholding the lower edge of the picture, amidst water lilies and fishes silhouetted against a dark blue ground. The painting proper is square in shape, covering an area of a hundred square feet. It stops at the left in the northeastern corner of the room; at the right it butts against the stone jamb of the door, on which is sculptured and polychromed a standing warrior. The lintel of this door, a beam of hard wood, cuts deeply into the square itself. The subject matter is that of a battle being fought on a field which spreads between the raised tents of an army and the thatched roof houses of their foes (fig. 1). The composition divides itself naturally into three bands, the upper one being the village, drawn as a background to the fight. The men have gone to the battle, the women busy themselves with provisions for the warriors, a few old men and women squat on the ground or on roofs unmoved by the goings-on around them (fig. 2). One warrior is seen inside, the *atl-atl* or spear thrower held in hand, either coming from or going to the battle (fig. 3). An important looking elder person, in which one would be tempted to recognize an in-law, seems to criticize his action strongly, sitting between the soldier and a young woman, probably his wife, who offers him a drink from a cylindrical jar. The eternal triangle is suggested by a good looking girl, a neighbor, who signals him from behind the back of the other two, with an offer of food in her lap. To the left a woman with a load on her back, going towards

the front lines, turns towards the group and beckons an adieu. The artist has strongly emphasized the architectural quality of the houses so that at a distance the human incidents become plastically negligible. The verticals and horizontals of the buildings still mark this whole upper part of the picture as static. This area stops at the lower line of the door lintel, a proof that the artist made his story-telling subservient to its architectural surroundings.

We come now to the battle proper which covers two-thirds of the whole picture. More than a hundred soldiers are engaged in individual combat or roam in small aggressive bands (fig. 4) under the command of two chieftains, each being silhouetted against the coils of a plumed serpent, his own tribal god. The multi-colored implements, the bodies of burnt umber carry well against the light *terre verte* of the field. The soldiers display round shields and long javelins. One of them is dead with a spear through his thigh (fig. 5). Though the scene is one of extreme agitation from near, the more one recedes from it, the more a kind of secret order emerges.

The artist has played a masterly game of geometry, using as units the circle which is the shield and the straight line which is the spear. Both elements dovetail into a series of pyramiding forms, the lower ones more obtuse, the higher ones sharper. All those diagonals surging upwards from the outside towards the center bring a compositional order the more admirable for using as its means the very excess of action depicted. Each individual drama cooperates into constructing this ideal pyramid which is the hidden goal of the artist. Only two men hold lances horizontally and those are placed at equal distances from the horizontal middle, substantially at the place where the Golden Sections would be, a unique proof of the universal esthetic appeal of this venerable proportion. Rows of trees on both sides of the battle field chart its topographical area as being identical with the actual area of the picture.

This most dynamic battle scene is sandwiched between the architectural presentation of the village already described at



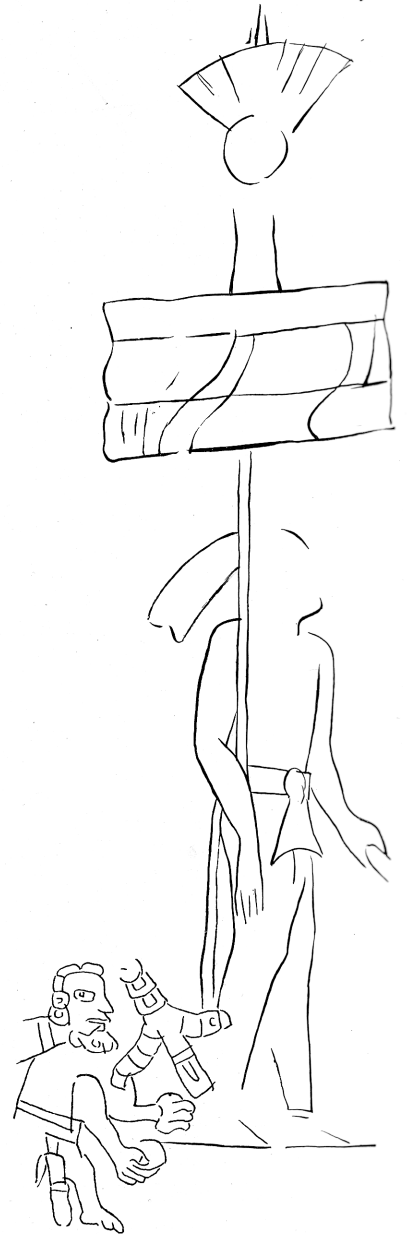
FIGS. 6, 7, 8. "AMONGST SEMI-SPHERICAL TENTS, MARTIALLY ADORNED WITH FEATHER STANDARDS, CHIEFTAINS ARE QUIETLY SEATED..."

the top, and a corresponding strip of static content which is both the lower part of the picture and its intended foreground. Amongst semi-spherical tents, martially adorned with feather and canvas standards, chieftains are quietly seated, engrossed in negotiations (figs. 6, 7, 8). It is again a calm composition, plastically speaking the counterpart of the village, its immobile personages accentuating the extreme action of the fighters. Boldly rising from this lower part far into the very field of battle, two unusually high standards are topped by an apparition of the senior god (fig. 9). He presides at the negotiations from his abode, a solar disc fringed with resplendent rays. Due to its religious import, this vision is the spiritual climax of the picture, but also through the artist's choice of the long, straight banners tipped with the concentric circles of the sun motif, it proposes and amplifies the two plastic units which recur in opposition all through the picture, the straight line and the circle, the spear and the shield.

Though we possess many precious remnants of Mayan murals, this is the only composition which has come down to us whole. Its geometric scaffolding, the elasticity of the symmetric themes and moreover the ease with which all calculations efface themselves to let us enjoy the vivaciousness of the story-telling make of it a model composition comparable to the best of whatever age or country.

Art historians would have a tough time trying to fit this mural within the iron corset of their classifications. In its absence of modeling, of cast shadows, of atmospheric perspective, it differs from our own realistic school, being closer to the conventions of the Near East. But the landscape suggested by the simplest means, a few trees, some waving lines to suggest a hilly ground, is a mere device, a pedestal to make more prominent the human body displayed in many attitudes. This lack of interest in natural spectacles, this focusing on man, shows a very different mental state from that of the Orient. It leans to the Greek, whose line drawings on vases are also stylistically very near to the drawing of our muralist. But

we lack here the godly postures that man strikes in Greek art; here the keen observation of familiar details, the good humor and quick action remind one, in spite of a different plastic language, of a Flemish picture à la Bruegel. Mayan art defies any label.



*Right:*  
FIG. 11. PROBABLY INCISED ON THE MURAL BY AN ARTIST OF A LATER SCHOOL WAS THE SQUATTY GRAFFITO MAN BELOW



FIG. 10. WARRIORS SPRINTING. TWO OF SIX POSITIONS OF AN ACTION "FILM"

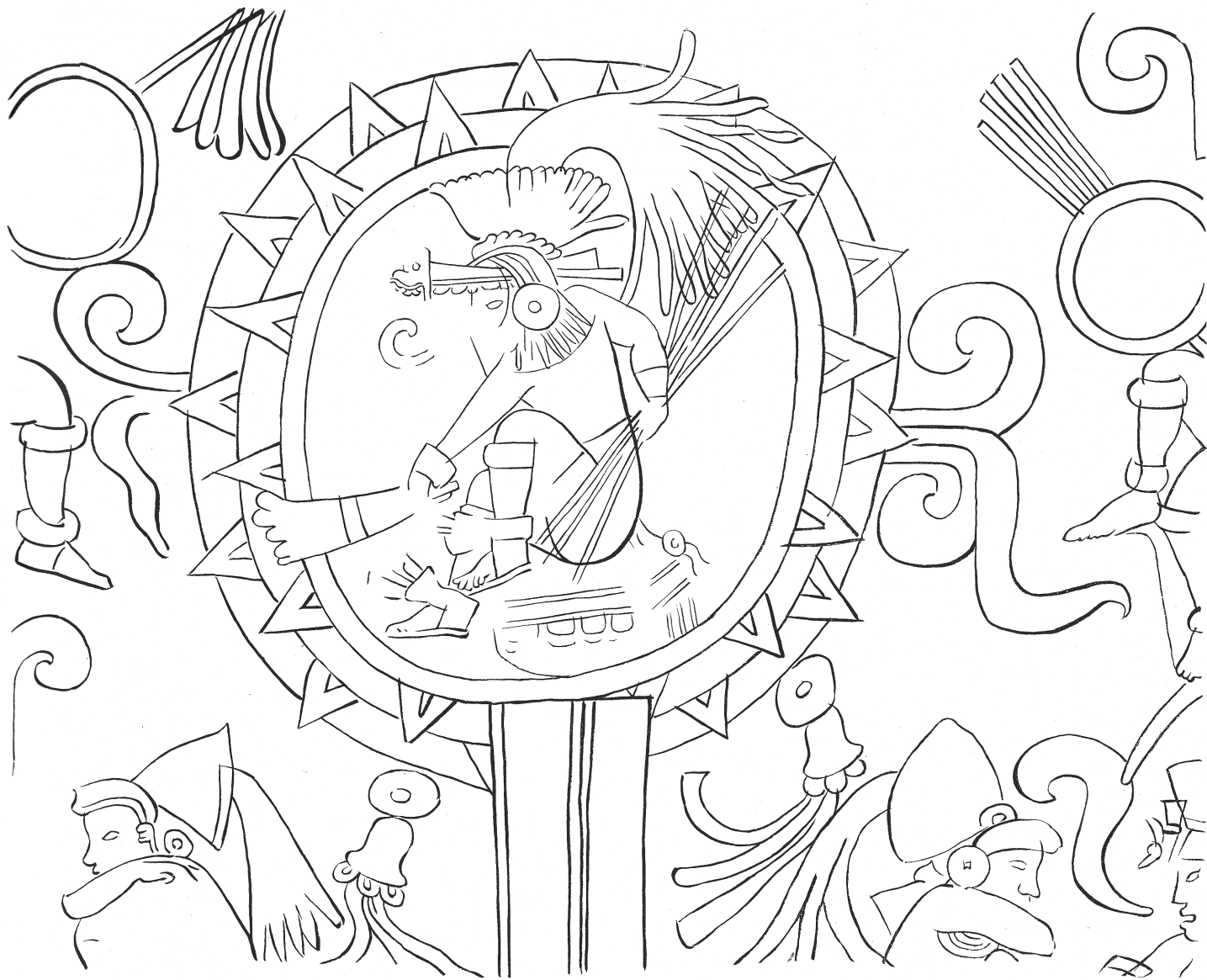


FIG. 9. APPARITION OF THE SENIOR GOD WITHIN THE SOLAR DISC

The human figures heaped so generously on top of each other suggest recession in space no more than do Egyptian bas-reliefs, but while the Egyptian would at least have them all of the same size, here, the more they recede the more they increase in scale, a most unusual effect to an eye trained, as ours is, in the postulates of Italian perspective. The chieftains in the foreground, drawn directly over the dado, are less than half the size of the warriors that are to be seen behind the houses of the village, perhaps a mile off in space. This puzzling feature is yet a proof of the scientific care that the artist took to fit his mural to the problems of architecture and point of view. The room is narrow enough so that a man squatting as one was intended to do, would find those lower personages on his horizon line and close to his eyes, but would get a more and more diagonal view as his eyes moved up the wall. The increase in size of the personages at the top is corrective of such a condition, and gives a squatting man the illusion that all people depicted are the same size. Similar optical correction to an intended shape has been found by Dr. Spinden in another temple, its principle being an elongation of the verticals. It was the same problem that confronted El Greco in some of the narrow chapels of Toledo and it called for a similar solution.

To the narrowness of the room is also due the choice of a minute scale, the figures averaging some ten inches high,

which carries well at close range. The only exception in the chamber is on the opposite wall, a central panel facing the door which would be seen through the succession of rooms and even from the other side of the court. Only two figures are painted there, and those of a heroic size, again a logical solution of another problem in point of view. The painter was also interested in the illusion of movement (fig. 10): a file of warriors in action are in reality the same man seen through different phases of one gesture, as happens when we look at a cinematographic film unrolled. The time that the eye takes to move from one posture to the next equals the actual time needed for the bodily shift.

The "canon" of human proportions is similar to the late Greek, there being six or seven heads to a body. However, the art fashions of the time must have been as quickly changing as ours, for this elongated appearance which we identify as "refined" gave way within a few generations to a different one which we see displayed in the neighboring Temple of the Warriors. There the painted people, as in much Negro sculpture, have a height of some four heads to the body, which to us seems "primitive" or "barbaric." Was it one of the adepts of the new school, incensed by what he thought was an absurd elongation in the older fresco, who went so far as to scratch into the beautiful painting the figure of a little fellow which exemplified the new art? (fig. 11). If so, the layman of the

(Continued on page 670)

## A XII CENTURY MAYAN MURAL

(Continued from page 629)

time must have deplored the lack of respect that youth showed for the art of such a recent yesterday, and grumbled in front of this squatty *graffito* that painting was not any more beautiful but ugly, that art was going to the dogs.

In the case of the Mayas this gloomy talk came true. The "little people" painted in the Temple of the Warriors seem to have been among the last shows of vitality within Chichen-Itza. When the Spaniards entered Yucatan early in the sixteenth century, not only Mayan art but Mayan might had crumbled, and the jungle had reclaimed the city.

• • •

FOR THOSE who are interested in going further into the subject, I append a list of works or manuscripts which have treated of this particular painting:

- Stephens and Catherwood. *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. New York, 1843. (Reproduces a few details.)
- Le Plongeon. *Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx*. New York, 1896. (Reproduces a few details.)
- A. P. Maudslay. *Biologia Centrale Americana*. London, 1889-1902. (Two color reproductions of details, one in black. It is the first try at integral reproduction.)
- Th. Maler. *Tracing of the Whole*. 1898. (Unpublished, as far as we know.)
- E. H. Thompson. *Water Colors of the Mayas*. Am. Museum Journal II, No. 9, p. 91. 1902.
- A. Breton. *The Wall Paintings at Chichen Itza*. (Original water color copies in the Peabody Museum. 1904.)
- H. J. Spinden. *A Study of Maya Art*. Cambridge, 1913. (Reproduces a photograph and some details.)
- M. A. Fernandez. Copy of details reproduced in the Mexican review, "Ethnos." Originals in the National Museum, Mexico City. 1923. (Respects much more than the precedents the esthetic of the original.)
- Willard. *The City of the Sacred Well*. New York and London, 1926. (Copy of a tracing after Maler.)
- W. Lehmann. Copy of details. Unpublished. 1926.
- G. Oakley Totten. *Maya Architecture*. Washington, 1927. (Reproduces the copy by Miss Breton.)
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