

The Ancient Maya. By Sylvanus G. Morley. Stanford University Press. California, 1946. 520 pages, 95 plates. \$10.

This fat book is beautifully illustrated with photographs and diagrams that confront the ancient Maya with the living Maya who tills today the harsh Yucatan soil. It gives us a knowledge and a respect of both. Dr. Morley is a great specialist, whose enthusiasm for his subject orchestrates into a unity of mood the many facts assessed. The volume manages to review most of the available evidence concerning a civilization as strangely complex as that of any lost Atlantis. It adds clues and parallels taken from the present folklore of the descendants of ancient kings, warriors, and pagan priests, who, stripped of the paraphernalia of plumes, jewels, and embroideries that clothed their ancestors, still retain a regal courtesy and sophisticated manner.

Dr. Morley's personal interest is primarily with chronology, with the finding and refining of a correct correlation between the Mayan and Christian calendars; and yet this book rightfully comes under the scope of an art review because the maze of evidence through which the researcher wades before attributing a date to a stela, interpreting a codex, or rebuilding a ruined temple, is mostly a conglomerate of art objects. Even though the codices be filled with mathematical and astronomical computations, each letter and each figure is a pictorial glyph pregnant with esthetic values. In the Mayan texts, painted or sculptured, reigns the unmistakable Mayan profile, with hanging lower lip, beak nose, and receding forehead, retaining humanistic content despite the strange markings that identify each personage as a sound or a number.

This strongly characterized standard of human beauty is as far evolved from nature and as noble as the Greek, and bespeaks an ideal as rich. It is also to us more mysterious and poignant, because while we still partake of Greek literature and philosophy and can appreciate hellenic marbles against this framework of thoughts, the only spokesmen left for the ancient Maya are their plastic remains. The physical bulk of building stones and the grooves chiseled out of hard jadeite are our only approach to the understanding of a people whose inclinations were mainly metaphysical.

When the *conquistadores* crossed through the Yucatan jungle in the sixteenth century, Mayan ruins were already half-digested by the stone-eating flora. For a few more centuries Mayan cultural witnesses remained secretly stored in this giant deserted green-house, to emerge in our day as a timely esthetic revelation.

Mayan art is well appreciated from the peculiar vantage point

of our modern art. It puzzled rather than excited its Victorian discoverers, being an art form totally disdainful of beauty as they understood it, innocent of the concept of Italian perspective and of the muscle parade known as anatomy. So zealous were the Mayans in their belief in their own peculiar ideal of beauty that artists were called to produce it not only in stone but in living flesh. With a set of planks and a twist of rope they tampered with the new-born to force its growth along the lines of slanting forehead and elongated skull that alone seemed beautiful.

Mayan art passes through a complete stylistic cycle, from archaic to baroque. It is only in its last gasps of life that it approaches the anecdotal or the photographic. At its height it was wilfully abstract. As social arrangements increased in complexity, as the means of execution were enriched—an important consideration for men working in a Stone Age—the Mayan artists dealt increasingly in abstractions. Through sheer sophistication, the proportions of the human body became as unrealistic as those of an African fetish. Limbs and torso were hidden under a vine growth of symbols and ornaments. The face itself, modeled already after an unnatural ideal, hid under a mask even more removed from nature, perhaps beastlike, godlike perhaps, but notably lacking in those safe standbys of occidental art, the speaking mouth and soulful eyes. As Mayan art reaches its peak of grandeur in the eighth century A.D., in a blaze of geometric forms blended with the writhing frozen flames of an acute baroque, not even a toehold is left for the two Victorian art standards, ideal beauty and photographic realism.

The great stelae still standing cannot any more be read according to what theogonic content was woven into them by their builders. But with the fading out of the stiff theocracy that commissioned the works, the personal message of the artist is released from its official bondage in a purer form than before. Our epoch feels unusual kinship with the point of view of the Mayan sculptor. Modern art has also shed the fetishistic cult of the "form divine," and even though the artist does not attempt any more to impose his plastic ideal on living beings and by surgical means, deformations are again held in high esteem. Abusing of the present day's unfamiliarity with the gods and godlings that crowd the Mayan pantheon, surrealists too have made it a field day of interpreting the many striking symbols along most subjective if unorthodox lines.

Better than an art treatise confined to a single theme, this book illustrates how art becomes the common denominator of the many pursuits of man in any highly evolved culture. After having read the carefully factual relation and consulted the plates that clarify a custom or check a date, the sensitive reader would do well to wash his mind of all previous connotations and to look again at the plates to receive this time only the artist's message. Despite the diversity of mediums, periods, and subjects he will thus familiarize himself with an undercurrent, the spirit of Maya, that vies in power and in depth with the best of Greece and of China.

—JEAN CHARLOT.