

The Murals of San Bartolo: A Window into the Art and Cosmivision of Precolumbian Man

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Artistic expressions are a reflection of a culture's social, political, and ideological milieu. In the past, a mural's subject matter was suited to the purpose of the building in which it was painted. Thus its character could be conceptual, narrative, historical, ritual, religious, bellicose, cosmogonic—or, most frequently, quotidian (de la Fuente 1995:7). A common feature of all the murals of Mesoamerica is their use of flat fields of color; however, concentrations of color can produce illusions of volume, and outlines can cause the figures to stand out. Another characteristic is the absence of vanishing-point perspective (de la Fuente 1995:9).

For the Maya, mural painting expressed aspects of society both sacred and profane, principally related to rulers and gods. Diana Magaloni (1995:22) suggests that the figures in mural painting are distinguished by characteristics that convey their individuality, such as the printing of the fabrics they used in their clothing, the particular color of their skin, the size and position of their bodies, and their gestures.

Examples of mural painting have been found in different areas of Mexico and Guatemala, with dates that range from the Late Preclassic to the Postclassic. Most significant are those from Uaxactun (250 BC–AD 550), Tikal (250 BC–AD 900), Holmul (250 BC–AD 600), Yaxchilan (AD 300–900), Bonampak (AD 300–900), Dzibilchaltun (300 BC–AD 900), Coba (AD 300–900), and Chichen Itza (AD 900–1000).

The preservation of murals in a tropical climate is extremely tenuous; the instability of stucco in an environment of changing heat and humidity has left only a small fraction of what could have been an extensive Maya tradition. Added to this factor was the destruction of buildings and their images due to remodelings on the part of successive rulers, in keeping with their respective architectural programs. Such was the case with the murals of San Bartolo, which were partly destroyed by the new building now known as the Pyramid of the Paintings (la Pirámide de Las Pinturas).

Here we present a brief synopsis of the stylistic relationships to other figural scenes of the Late Preclassic, as well as the implications for the development of artistic traditions observed in early sites like Uaxactun and the splendor reflected in the paintings of Late Classic Bonampak.

Location and antecedents

San Bartolo is situated in the Ixkan river basin 8 km north of the archaeological site of Xultun, in the northeastern quarter of the department of Peten. Nearby are Uaxactun, Tikal, and Holmul, archaeological sites sharing similar characteristics of pictorial art. San Bartolo was known at first only by *chicleros* and a few residents of neighboring communities. Later, in the 1980s, personnel of the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History (among them Anatolio López), undertook the work of clearing *brechas* at nearby Xultun, as a result of which the existence of San Bartolo became known.

In 1998, Oscar Quintana carried out reconnaissance and diagnostic work in the zone, without direct archaeological intervention (Quintana and Wurster 2001:76). It was in 2001 that William Saturno and a team of investigators undertook the first archaeological reporting of the site and its murals, continuing in 2002 with intensive investigation.

The San Bartolo murals

The mural paintings of San Bartolo are located within Structure 1, also known as the Pyramid of the Paintings (Figure 1). The building is 25–30 m tall and is penetrated by four looters' tunnels, two in the front and two in the rear. The branching of these tunnels has resulted in extensive damage to the interior of the structure. The illicit tunnels in the rear penetrated deepest into the pyramid, and it was one of these that led to the discovery of the substructure containing the murals, as well as a series of previous construction phases. Furthermore, this tunnel destroyed the northern section of the substructure's wall, leaving only the upper part in a precarious condition of instability.

This section of the mural painting was found partially covered by the construction fill of the final building

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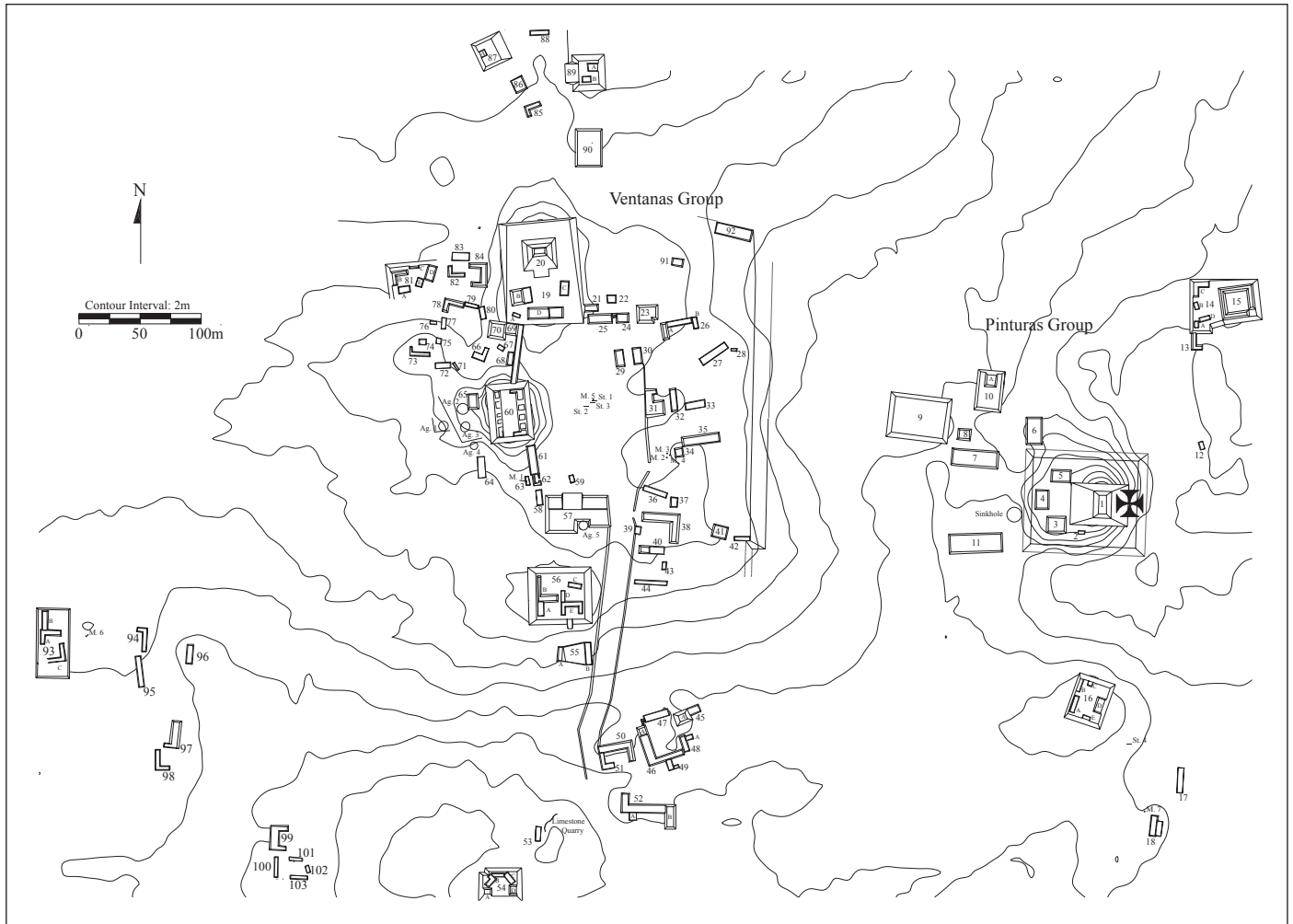


Figure 1. Map of the San Bartolo archaeological site showing the location of the Pinturas Group, the building complex in which the murals were found.

phase. The only visible section of the painting was 1 x .6 meters in extent. The dating of this architectural feature was based on the associated material and a stylistic analysis of the painted figures, leading to a placement between 100–200 BC, in the Late Preclassic period.

In 2001 a short visit to the site resulted in the recording of the paintings then visible and an assessment of the stability of the building housing them. In the current 2002 field season a program of investigation, salvage, and conservation has encompassed multispectral photography, analysis of stucco, and monitoring of heat and humidity within the pyramid. The murals owe their preservation to the covering of stone, lime, and mud that constituted the fill of the pyramid containing them. They still present vivid colors in tonalities of white, red, black, and yellow-ochre, preserving delicate details as if they were executed yesterday.

Description of the murals

The visible part of the north-wall mural of Structure 1

displays a scene which includes at least nine figures. All are standing or kneeling on a plain border or band which contains in its lower part many designs and geometric elements painted in black, red, and yellow-ochre (Figure 2). The scene is dominated by a standing male figure who walks toward the left of the viewer, looking over his shoulder at two kneeling female figures behind him. Beyond these two, there is evidence of at least two more standing figures. To the left of the central figure we see a kneeling male figure with a blackened face, who seems to be holding an object above his head, which in turn is grasped by the hands of the central figure. From this object emerge volutes and a type of plant. To the left one can distinguish another kneeling figure, who is still mostly covered by fill (Saturno et al. 2001).

Interpretation and comparisons

The Late Preclassic period (250 BC–AD 250) represents a very important moment in Maya culture, an era of transformation and internal change which brought



Figure 2. Detail of Heather Hurst's rendering of the San Bartolo North Wall mural. The highlighted area corresponds to the figure that accompanied the original publication of the present article (Urquizú and Hurst 2003), showing how much of the mural had been revealed at that time and documented by the project artist.

about the flowering of civilization (Valdés 1990:23). Among the different artistic forms employed in the Maya Lowlands for symbolic representation are full-figure depictions of figures in standing, reclining, or seated pose. These were realized in different materials such as modeled stucco, mural painting, and portable objects of carved jade and limestone (Valdés 1990:24).

Freidel (1985) and Schele (1985) have contributed studies on the use of color and its significance during the Preclassic and the Classic periods. Red was the first to be employed, immediately followed by black. With the addition of cream color, these were the most common on facades of the Late Preclassic. In addition to these colors, rose, grey, yellow-ochre, green, and orange have been reported to a lesser degree (Valdés 1992:28).

The San Bartolo paintings follow an established canon for Preclassic figures depicted in stone monuments, carved objects, and other mural paintings found at Tikal and Uaxactun. Valdés (1990:25) mentions that at both sites the paintings are located in palaces of the era's governing class, such as Structure 5D-Sub10-1 of Tikal. In Tikal's North Acropolis, figures are depicted in profile and ornamented with earflares, bracelets, and belts tied on the upper arms; one arm is raised and all figures are surrounded by volutes (Figure 3a). Seated figures sharing the same stylistic features are also depicted on the internal walls of Burial 166 of the North Acropolis. The paintings of Uaxactun are located on the

facade of palace structure H-Sub 5, painted in red on a white background.

The style of the ornamentation and wardrobe, as well as the positions of the figures in the San Bartolo scene are also similar to carved objects such as the Dumbarton Oaks pectoral and the Leiden Plaque (Figure 4). The figures wear headdresses and bracelets on their wrists and ankles, as well as jewelry with large beads including necklaces and ear flares. Another interesting aspect is the rounded lines of the thighs and hips, as well as the strokes that show creases in the flesh. The positions of hands and feet are stylistic indicators; the treatment of the hands is a Late Preclassic tradition. This style is reflected in a jade plaque from an unknown site in northern Peten (Coe and Kerr 1998:Plate 25), as well as sculpted figures in stucco discovered in Structure H-Sub 10 at Uaxactun (Figure 3b). The hands have thumbs stylized with a distinctive curvature evoking the figures of Kaminaljuyu Monument 65. All of the figures of the mural display this characteristic. Valdés (personal communication 2002) indicates that the kneeling female figure in the lower part of the scene is marked by a possible error on the part of the artist, who seems to have painted two right hands.

There are two styles in the position of the feet on the San Bartolo mural. The central figures and the women present a fluid line with a notch which defines the toes and a pronounced curve for the arch. On the other hand,



Figure 3. Figures surrounded by volutes: (a) detail of mural from Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st, North Acropolis, Tikal (drawing by Karl Taube after W. Coe 1990:Fig. 32a); (b) detail of stucco facade from Building H-sub 10, Uaxactun (drawing by Karl Taube after Valdés 1987:Fig. 6).

the standing figure behind the kneeling woman has four distinct toes and a gentle curve of the arch. This style is reflected in Tintal Stela 1 (Justeson and Mathews 1983, cited by Valdés 1990:41), in the modeled stuccoes of Uaxactun, and in Stela 1 of Nakbe. On this stela can be seen knots, bracelets, anklets, and masks which, together with the position of the figure, all relate to the murals in this artistic tradition.

A possible mask in the mural of San Bartolo can be compared to the Dumbarton Oaks pectoral, which probably dates to AD 120 (Figure 4a). Here we see a ruler with a possible mask, with one arm extending down and the other gesturing upwards. Both figures have bare shoulders, while the standing figure at San Bartolo is more slender than the one from Dumbarton Oaks. The figures have jewelry in common, including fine adornments with beads and bindings on the upper arm.

Similar knots can be seen at San Bartolo and in the examples previously mentioned, appearing on the knees and ankles of the figures as well as in the back part of the belts of the San Bartolo figures. The figures in the scenes wear jewelry with large beads seen from a frontal perspective, while the figures themselves are seen in profile. The Dumbarton Oaks figure wears the typical skirt-like loincloth of the nobility, whereas the San Bartolo male does not. The women in turn wear the familiar skirt that comes to the knees, with a wide waist and ornamental belt.

In describing the mural from a technical point of view, the first observation to be made is that the scene is carefully painted. The black outline is strong and picks out the figures delicately. There are fine lines that define in detail the ornamentation of the jewelry and the composition of the textiles of the women's skirts. All of the areas have been carefully filled with red, leaving a white border to give emphasis to the depth of the elements. The composition, line, and application of color are all very controlled.

Heather Hurst considers that the artists who painted this mural could have also been sculptors or carvers. The use of a continuous

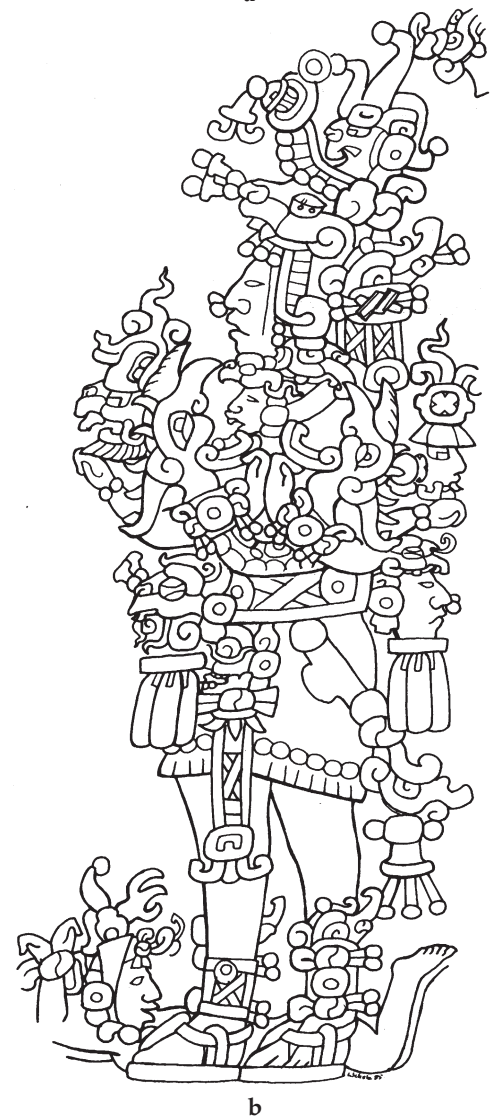


Figure 4. Details of the Dumbarton Oaks pectoral (a) and the Leiden Plaque (b). Drawings by Linda Schele.

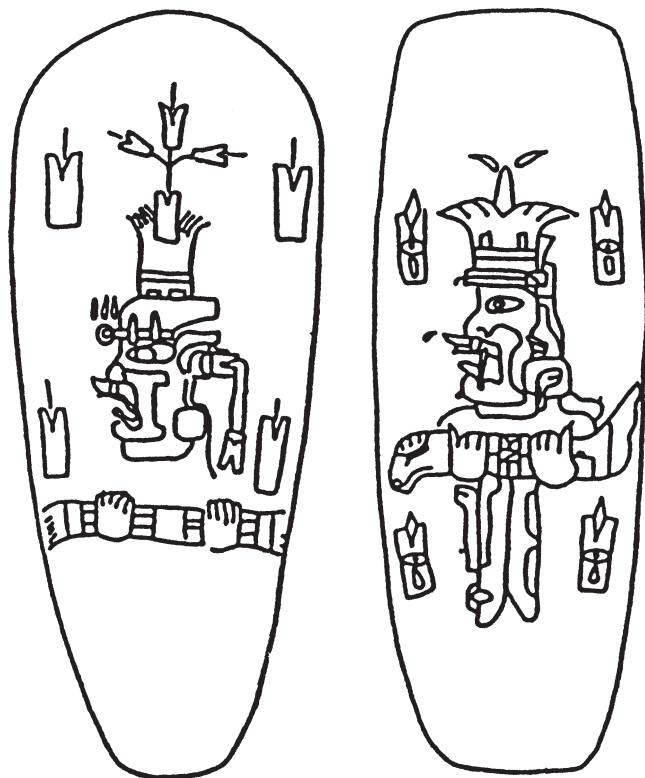


Figure 5. Río Pesquero celts. Drawings by Linda Schele, courtesy of David Schele.

and firm line seems more from the hand of a carver than the loose lines that can be observed in Classic-period painted ceramics. Hurst, citing Mary Miller, thinks that the Bonampak murals were painted by artisans who were also sculptors. This proposal is based on a comparison of the style and composition of the hands and feet of the Bonampak scenes with Yaxchilan Stela 1.

It is believed that the Early Preclassic was a time of transition to a social system with a stratified hierarchy emphasizing the ruler or king (Freidel 1995; Schele and Miller 1986). Changes occur in monumental architectural programs, with works of public art such as the stucco facades of Cerros, Uaxactun, and Nakbe. This reflects the growing complexity of life in Maya society and the elite class (Schele and Miller 1986:104). Public art promoted a social reality in which the king was at the center, aligned with powerful gods in a symbolic composition that generated social cohesion.

In some cases these rulers adopted already established symbols in order to legitimize their royal authority. In the mural of San Bartolo, the whole scene is centered on the Maize God, with his Olmec features, the maize leaves which sprout from his head, and the distinctive pectoral that he wears. Maize cultivation attained its importance as a basis of society during the Preclassic period (Miller and Taube 1993:58). Instruments used in the cultivation of maize took on

a ritual importance, as seen in the caches in which Olmec celts have been found. Rain and maize were the elemental forces of the Olmec world, central to ritual contexts in the Early and Middle Preclassic periods.

For the Late Preclassic a complex ideology of maize and rain culminated in a series of symbols that were inherited by the Classic-period Maya (Joralemon 1971; Taube 1995). Karl Taube (personal communication 2002) describes the San Bartolo mural as the Preparation of the Maize God. The male in the center could be wearing a mask of the Maize God or he could be the god himself. In this activity he is assisted by three or four women, two on either side. Elements of this scene are similar to an incised jade celt found in Río Pesquero on the Gulf Coast of Mexico (Figure 5, left). The celt shows the head and the hands of the Maize God holding a scepter. Taube has identified this scepter as quetzal plumes, symbolizing the new growth of the plant. In the mural, the white floor represents a dias where the figures interact, providing an emphasis to the two central figures. Valdés (personal communication 2002) thinks that this could be a ruler of San Bartolo participating in a ritual personification of the Maize God.

On the Río Pesquero celt, this deity shows four symbolic leaves of the maize plant growing from his head. The artist of the San Bartolo mural depicts the Maize God at the center of the scene marked by the four kneeling women. Heather Hurst thought at first that the mural artist was making an effort at perspective. He seems to have been unable to show the women as if they were kneeling around the central figure, so therefore he stacked them vertically. However, Hurst thinks that the mural represents the same ritual symbolism that Kent Reilly describes—in reference to another celt from Río Pesquero (Figure 5, right)—as the Olmec image of Creation: a quadripartite arrangement that defines the four points of the earth with the center symbolized by the growing maize plant (Reilly 1986, 1995; Schele 1995).

There are many other examples of the quadripartite arrangement associated with the Maize God and Creation. Taube has also found a strongly quadripartite nature for the Olmec rain god. For example the black color and the red elements behind the central figure of the San Bartolo mural are symbolic of rain clouds. Taube suggests that these features are an early rain-associated symbolism which developed into the Jester God of the Classic period (Taube 1995:99). The pectoral worn by the central figure terminates on the underside in beads representing raindrops. Taube has observed this feature in Tres Zapotes Stela C and in a rock carving from Chalcatzingo dating to the Middle Preclassic. As rain and maize are indissolubly joined, the associations of rain, maize, clouds, and fertility were invoked by the ruler through personification in order to take on a crucial role in the continuing

agricultural cycle.

The role of the women in this mural is uncertain; the gesture of the figures seems to be one of offering to or honoring the central figure. Kneeling is a birthing position on Olmec painted vessels. The bare breasts and rounded hips evoke fertility. A fertile woman and a growing maize plant substitute iconographically in the symbolism of the quadripartite creation.

The San Bartolo mural is one of the earliest in the Maya pictorial tradition, with unique characteristics but also a symbolism employed throughout Mesoamerica. The Maize God can be observed as a continuing thematic topic in artistic representations down through the time of the conquest.

In conclusion, it is hoped that in future field seasons we can count on more evidence that will permit us to extend, test, or refute these findings and with this expand our understanding of the cosmology of the Late Preclassic Maya as reflected in their artistic expressions.

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