

# THE MAYA VASE BOOK

## THE HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF MAYA VASE PAINTING

MARY ELLEN MILLER

As one would expect, the study of Classic Maya vase painting has followed the discovery and collection of Classic Maya pottery. That collection has generally been the result of one of two processes: one, the collection of Maya vases by private collectors and museums, and two, the excavation of vessels by archaeologists under controlled conditions. The two phenomena do overlap: some vessels excavated by archaeologists have ended up in museum collections, and some found by pothunters have been of use to archaeologists. In general, however, the conditions of the excavation of Maya pots have frequently determined the treatment they received. After the passage of long periods of time, the difference in the treatment of the vessels recedes. Finely painted pots, regardless of their means of excavation, eventually end up in museums where they are written about by art historians or by anthropologists interested in their meaning.

John Lloyd Stephens may have been the first to comment on Maya vases, just as he was the first to write and publish about so many other aspects of ancient Maya life and art. While Stephens was staying in Ticul, Yucatan, a townsman lent him a vase so that Frederick Catherwood might

draw it. At the time, Stephens regretted not being able to acquire the object himself, but after a fire had destroyed the collection of antiquities he took home to the United States, he was relieved that he had only been lent the object for examination (Stephens 1843, I: 271-275). He noted in particular the band of glyphs around the rim, which he identified as part of the same writing system he had seen at Palenque and Copan, and he also thought that the figural representation bore a resemblance to stone monuments at these places (Figure 1).



Figure 1

After Stephens and Catherwood had completed their travels in the Maya region in 1842, the Maya were avidly studied by others. Teobert Maler, Alfred P. Maudslay, and other nineteenth century explorers, however, did not encounter finely carved or painted pots at the Maya sites that they visited. Both found modern Lacandon pots in the Usumacinta ruins, and Maudslay retrieved some simple pots from a Palenque tomb (1889-1902, 5: 36). Maudslay was also familiar with the finely painted vessels from Guatemala that E. P. Dieseldorff (called J. Dieseldorf by Maudslay) was publishing at the same time (Maudslay 1889-1902, 5: 38). In the 1880s, Desiré Charnay sought Maya pots in Yucatan but finally had to accept them from another source when his own efforts to excavate some from a mound did not pan out. He had little good to say about Maya ceramics, but he did note the similarity between pots dug from a mound in Yucatan and a vessel from Teotihuacan. "The resemblance between the ceramic art of Yucatan and that of the table-land [i.e., Central Mexico] is seen at a glance. Their value as works of art is nil, but the peculiar ornamentation, common to all, cannot be over-estimated from the point of view of our theory. On examining this pottery, it is found that the potter made

the vases with reliefs, which he coloured, varnished, and baked before he gave them to a carver who sculptured devices and figures with a flint chisel" (Charnay 1888: 376, illustration on p. 375) Charnay was obviously not acquainted with the means of pottery manufacture, but he nevertheless isolated shared traits that served his theory of a shared "Toltec" heritage for all of Mesoamerica. From Charnay's time onward, studies of pottery were often used to hypothesize diffusions of culture throughout Mesoamerica.

During the late nineteenth century, many Germans came to Guatemala to establish coffee fincas, among them E. P. Dieseldorff, who acquired a ranch in Coban and shared with his countrymen Eduard Seler, Ernst Förstemann, and Paul Schellhas an interest in Maya antiquities. He collected Maya objects from farmers, laborers, and travellers. In 1892, he directed excavations at Chamá; and he built a

collection both for himself and for the Berlin museum.<sup>1</sup> He published articles on two particularly important Chamá pots, and his publication provoked essays from his German colleagues. Although Dieseldorff was interested in the archaeological context, his concern was largely for the meaning of the imagery and style of painting. He was the first, I believe, to make "rollout" drawings of Maya pots, in which the images from a cylinder vessel were extended onto a sheet of paper. With such a drawing, all the figures and hieroglyphs could be easily labelled for reference, and a narrative scene could be viewed at a glance.

The relationship of highland Guatemala to the lowland Maya was not known at the time and Dieseldorff's finds were the first to show, based on the hieroglyphs, that the Maya at Chamá had written in the same writing system as did the Maya at Palenque--much as Stephens had used

hieroglyphic writing to show relationships fifty years before. Dieseldorff used Bishop Landa's *Relación* and the *Popol Vuh* to interpret the scene and hieroglyphs on the Chamá vase (Kerr #2894), which he believed to be a scene of sacrifice attended by Ahpops. Ernst Förstemann followed Dieseldorff's interpretation of the scene and further elucidated the glyphs, noting, for example, the glyph ahau, or lord, as the fourth in the column behind figure f and probably naming him (1904: 649). Both Förstemann and Dieseldorff were struck by the fact that the pot had never been used before its interment and that it showed a scene of daily life.

In response, Eduard Seler, writing with greater academic authority and conviction, tackled the problem of the pot (Seler 1904). He faulted the previous interpretations, and he argued, by analogy with later arts of the Aztec and Mixtec, that the fans carried on the Chamá vase characterized long-distance traders. On

1. "In Germany we possess the most valuable Maya manuscript [The Dresden Codex], and our scholars have taken the most active part in deciphering it; but, on the other hand, almost nothing has been done on the part of Germany toward collecting fresh material and promoting researches which give such rich returns when conducted on the spot" (1904 a: 640). He was dismayed that the famous Chamá vase, now in the University

Museum of Philadelphia, had been sold after its discovery to an American, "where it probably figures as one of the chief ornaments of some drawing-room" (1904 a: 639). At the time of the publication of the Gordon and Mason folio, the Chamá vase was in the Cary Collection in Philadelphia. Maudslay later noted that a Yaxchilan lintel which had been "repacked in Coban for transmission to England" had, by some mistake,

been "put into the wrong case and sent to the Museum at Berlin" (Maudslay 1889-1902, 5:2, 47). Could Dieseldorff, a resident of Coban, have sent the lintel astray in order to build the collection in Berlin for which he so much hoped? Subsequently known as Lintel 56, the monument was destroyed in a World War II bombing raid.



the basis of this identification, all fans in Maya art were long regarded as attributes of traders, and many misidentifications were made (Kurbjuhn 1976). He also--correctly, I believe--identified the basic gestures of the figures on the pot as appropriate ones for arrival, reception, and, in the case of the kneeling figure, of humble salute (cf. V. Miller 1982). He further proposed that the glyphic captions offered the "title and name of the person in question" (Seler 1904: 661). Seler also suspected that the entire corpus of Maya writing might treat astronomy (he wondered whether the pot might show Venus gods), but he found this somewhat in contradiction to the realism of this particular vase painting (Seler 1904: 662).

Such attention to the meaning and interpretation of Maya imagery and writing were the preoccupation of the German school, as we might term it, of the turn of the century. Dieseldorff continued his collecting, writing, and interpretation (Dieseldorff 1926-33), but the ideas and writings of Eduard Seler were the more prominent ones. Seler increasingly turned his attention to Central Mexico. No German expedition to excavate a Maya site materialized, and, following in the steps of

Förstemann and Seler, most subsequent German Mayanists worked on the problems of Maya writing, calendar, and iconography (cf. Beyer, Zimmermann, Berlin, Barthel, and Dütting).

Whole painted and carved pots, as well as potsherds, were first systematically collected at the major Classic site of Copan by Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in the 1890s and it is here that the history of archaeological collection and study begins. Frederick W. Putnam, director of the Peabody Museum, had already instituted a program of careful stratigraphy in North American excavations; by means of his students, this method was introduced to the Maya region. In their reports, Copan archaeologists Marshall Saville and J.G. Owens described tombs and their contents but made no attempt to determine stratigraphy or meaning; their final reports are limited to straight description (in Gordon 1896). Following Honduras government's termination of the Peabody Museum project at Copan in 1896, George B. Gordon turned his attention to the archaeology of the Ulua Valley. In his study (1898), he published rolled-out drawings and attempted to determine diffusion into the Ulua Valley of 'foreign'

Maya influences (1898: 39). His interest in the Maya, like that of his contemporary, William H. Holmes of the Smithsonian Institution, was extremely broad. He wanted to know the techniques of ancient pottery manufacture, the distribution of decorative motifs, and the meaning of iconography. We now recognize that this first large corpus of pots, some from Copan and more from the Ulua Valley, are not characteristic of Maya pottery in general.

Following the work at Copan, few systematic excavations were carried out in the Maya area for many years. But here and there, an occasional pot was happened upon. In highland Guatemala, particularly in the region of Ratlinxul, Chamá, and Nebaj, farmers, amateurs, and pot-hunters encountered a number of finely painted pots which came to the attention of collectors and scholars. The "Fenton Vase," for example, was excavated at Nebaj in 1904, whence it came into the hands of the English collector C.L. Fenton, for whom it is named.

Herbert J. Spinden submitted his dissertation, *A Study of Maya Art*, to the faculty of Anthropology at Harvard University in 1909, and it was published as a memoir

of the Peabody Museum in 1913. He studied the known corpus of Maya art, including ceramics, which he included as a nine-page subsection of his chapter, "A Consideration of the Material Arts" (Spinden 1913: 133-142). Spinden treated technique and acknowledged the usefulness of pottery in establishing a chronological sequence, but in general, he was most concerned with the representation and decoration of the pottery. His sample included the excavated pots from Copan as well as those collected for the Peabody Museum by travellers and pothunters; he also used any vessels of interest known to him in private collections. He praised the workmanship of carved and stamped wares--which formed the preponderance of his sample, of course, since those are found in Yucatan, the part of the Maya region most frequented by early visitors and where a resident population was more likely to encounter objects in mounds--but he reserved his highest praise for polychrome pottery, particularly for those examples from Chamá that Dieseldorff had published, and for other specimens that had come into the hands of the Peabody Museum.

In 1918, Thomas Gann, a British physician, published the results of his years of

excavating, collecting, and study in Belize [then British Honduras] and the southern part of the Mexican territory of Quintana Roo (Gann 1918). He himself excavated a number of fine pots, including one from Rio Hondo sometimes known as the Gann Vase (Thompson 1939, 1970; Hammond 1985), and two others from a nearby mound, one of which was published by Gordon and Mason (Gann 1918: Plate 17)--as was the Gann Vase (see below). He also bought a number of pots from the mayor of Yalloch, El Peten, who had found them some years before in what Gann describes as a *chultun*, or underground storage pit (Gann 1918: 138), but which might have been a partly collapsed tomb. Gann compared his finds to the few known published Maya pots, and he attempted to identify the figures and some glyphs on the vases with the gods sorted out by Paul Schellhas (1904); he correctly identified God D, Itzamna, for example, on one of the Yalloch pots (1918: Plate 23). He related the Yalloch pots to Naranjo, which is indeed their logical source, and he paid close attention to the patterns of wear on individual pots. Gann was an amateur archaeologist, but he was also a collector for museums, among them, the Bristol Museum, which acquired the Yalloch pots.

In 1919, the Museum of the American Indian in New York acquired a sculptured vase from Acasaguastlan, Guatemala (Kerr #2776; Saville 1919), from the collection of the German Consul General in Guatemala City. Saville noted that the "vase is without question the most beautiful example of earthenware ever found in either North or South America," a claim still difficult to dispute. He compared its carving to monumental stone and wood carving at Quirigua and Tikal, and while acknowledging its complexity and importance, he deferred "a comparative study and an analysis" for a later date (Saville 1919: n.p.). J. Eric S. Thompson later confided to Frederick Dockstader that the unusual carved vessel was surely a fake (personal communication from Michael Coe, December 1988), and perhaps Thompson's misapprehension of the pot was what condemned it to scholarly obscurity for a long time. Not surprisingly, the only serious consideration of the pot in the early twentieth century came from Hermann Beyer, who analyzed the Acasaguastlan Vase in light of the Aztec Calendar Stone (Beyer 1921).

By 1925, there were enough painted and carved Maya pots for George B. Gordon and J. Alden Mason to undertake their

three-volume corpus, *Examples of Maya Pottery in the Museum and Other Collections*, luxuriously printed folios in full color. Mary Louise Baker, Annie Hunter, and other artists made color drawings of the pots, including rollout drawings. Despite its lavish production and limited distribution, the Gordon and Mason volumes, published between 1925 and 1943, were known for many years as the standard corpus of Maya vases. That corpus included examples of the pots mentioned above--Chamá, Copan, Nebaj, Yalloch, Rio Hondo--with attention to those in other collections: the Fenton Collection, the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, and an occasional example from Mexican or Guatemalan collections. One vessel in the corpus is fake (Plate LVII), as Mason himself suspected ("of doubtful authenticity," he noted). To my eye, this fake vessel seems to be closely related to the Maya Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Ingle 1985). Conspicuously absent from the volumes were the Holmul pots, whose separate publication was in progress by the Peabody Museum (see below) and the Acasagastlan Vase of the Museum of the American Indian. Black and white line drawings were made from the color rollouts and reproduced in popular literature and in such widely read books on the

Maya as Sylvanus G. Morley's *The Ancient Maya* (1946). In the Gordon and Mason publications, no general comments were offered about Maya vases, but the very richness of the publication presented them as art, not artifact.

In 1910-11, Raymond E. Merwin had conducted extensive excavations at Holmul, Guatemala, and there he had "collected for the Peabody Museum...ceramic masterpieces of the Maya" (Spinden 1913: 141). During this era, archaeology was still equated with acquisition for a foreign museum, such as Harvard's Peabody Museum, just as ethnography was equated with the acquisition of a non-industrial society's religious and magical objects for a museum.<sup>2</sup> Merwin completed his dissertation in 1913, and then George Vaillant submitted his dissertation in 1927 on the ceramics from Holmul. Merwin's ill health delayed publication of the excavations and pots until 1932, when George Vaillant had completed their joint study. In it, Vaillant published the design he had used in the dissertation for the first sequence of lowland Maya pottery that was correlated to the Maya Long Count calendar--and thus, in turn, to our own calendar. Vaillant is better known for his work in the Valley of Mexico, but his Holmul

sequence has formed the basis for all subsequent ceramic sequences in the Maya area, even when not acknowledged by modern Maya archaeologists. Although some of the 90-odd Holmul pots are extremely interesting for their complex iconography and beautiful painting, Vaillant felt that the "pottery found at Holmul is extremely important because of its chronological implications."

But Vaillant was a museum curator (American Museum of Natural History) and collector as well as an archaeologist, so he also sought to interpret the pots in some other frame. Based on what was, by the time of publication in 1932, still a very limited sample of known Maya pots, Vaillant established three broad schools of painting: 1) Copan-Motagua, 2) Pusilha-Uaxactun, and 3) Holmul-Yalloch (Merwin and Vaillant 1932: 78-83). Vaillant made a very prescient prediction: "it might," he wrote, "be possible, through associated trade wares, to find a fixed point in

2. Diana Fane of the Brooklyn Museum has done extensive research on the methods and goals of Stewart Culin, who acquired a great American Indian collection for that museum. His goal was collection of objects, even to seize the last remaining sacred objects of an indigenous people, such as the Zuni, but his stated plan was couched as ethnography.



Mexican history, and with these external dates to work backward into a fixed point in Mexican history" (1932: 79). Starting in 1936, at Kaminaljuyu, A.V. Kidder began to excavate tombs that produced just such trade wares (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946). From the Teotihuacan-style pots he found he was able to show the simultaneity of the Early Classic Maya and Teotihuacan. It was the first concrete dating of Teotihuacan and it helped establish the attribution of Tula, Hidalgo, as the home of the great Toltec predecessors of the Aztec by showing Teotihuacan to be earlier. When in 1941 Vaillant published his great life's work, *The Aztecs of Mexico*, he followed earlier assumptions which placed the Toltecs at Teotihuacan. Alas, today he is often remembered more for such misapprehensions than for his fundamental contribution to the establishment of a Maya ceramic sequence.

In 1926, the Carnegie Institution of Washington began 11 years of systematic excavations at Uaxactun, Guatemala. To Oliver G. Ricketson, A. Ledyard Smith, and Robert E. Smith, the recovery of pots from tombs located in stratigraphic sequence to one another afforded an opportunity to provide the basis for temporal distinctions within the Classic period. The correlation

of the Maya calendar with the Christian calendar that established the years A.D. 300-900 as the Classic had been accepted, but the nature of change during that era was not known. At Uaxactun, the archaeologists retrieved hundreds of pots from tombs, burials, caches, and other offerings. In the years before radiocarbon dating, through association with dated monuments, the ceramics, too, could be given secure dates, and they could then be used, in turn, to date architecture without associated dated sculpture. Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy Sabloff have referred to this period of American archaeology as the "Classificatory-Historical Period" and have noted that its greatest concern was for chronology (Willey and Sabloff 1980: 83). Robert E. Smith studied the Uaxactun ceramics carefully, reviewed Vaillant's Holmul sequence, and named the basic ceramic periods still used today: Tzakol 1, 2, and 3 for the Early Classic (AD 250-550) and Tepeu 1, 2, and 3 for the Late Classic (AD 600-900). He clearly considered pottery to be most important as an archaeological tool for dating architecture, but he was also interested in the information yielded by vessels: "Their structure and decoration provided gauges of the Uaxactun potters' development of technical and artistic ability

during the city's long life. From paintings and carvings on vases and bowls of the later periods, when depiction of the human figure came into vogue, much was learned about the appearance of the people, their costumes, ornaments, weapons, implements, and particularly their ceremonial regalia" (1955 I: 11). In other words, Smith sought to retrieve information of archaeological and anthropological value from the pots, but he made no attempt to discuss their intrinsic meanings. No comprehensive study was ever made of the inscriptions on the pottery, perhaps because by the time of publication in 1955, both Sylvanus G. Morley and J. Eric S. Thompson had made a powerful argument that they were meaningless.

In a separate publication, "Two Recent Ceramic Finds at Uaxactun," A. Ledyard Smith discussed several Uaxactun pots of extraordinary beauty and iconography shortly after their excavation in 1931 (Smith 1932). The pots themselves included the Initial Series Vase, the Uaxactun Dancer Plate, and the Underworld Jaguar Plate, but Smith evinced no particular point of view about them other than to note that they "have much esthetic interest." Morley commented on the inscription of the Initial Series Vase,

which although in error from his point of view, seemed to him to be in distinction from most glyphs on pots, which he believed "to have degenerated into purely decorative elements" (Smith 1932: 21). Morley, as usual, although full of praise for the object ("the most important example of ancient Maya ceramics yet brought to light"), had little to say about the vessel as a work of art.

In his great, synthetic 1946 book, *The Ancient Maya*, Sylvanus G. Morley devoted a chapter (Chapter 15, "Ceramics: pottery, the best guide to cultural development") to Maya pots (Morley 1946: 382-404). In this chapter, Morley treated Maya ceramics essentially for their technical properties (shape, temper, slip) and for their value to the archaeologist in establishing chronology. Morley wrote one of the clearest explications of how pottery is useful to the archaeologist and cultural historian that has ever been written for the Maya.

However, Morley treated the nature of painting on Maya vases in a subsequent chapter, as part of "Miscellaneous Arts and Crafts," under the subsection "Painting." Few monumental paintings were known--Bonampak was only found in

1946, the year Morley's book was published--so he could write that "by far the best paintings of the Old Empire that have come to light...are the polychrome vases and bowls of the Great Period found at Uaxactun, at Holmul, and in the Chamá region along the upper Chixoy River" (1946: 415). Morley reiterated the interpretation of the Initial Series Vase of Uaxactun that he had made a decade earlier. Curiously, Morley claimed that this same Uaxactun "tomb contained other polychrome vessels of equal beauty," a claim one might well dispute, particularly based on the poorly drawn illustrations provided by Morley himself (Morley 1946: Figs. 49-51). By 1950 and the publication of his *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, Thompson had come to a conclusion that he and Morley shared, and it shaped a generation of thinking about Maya vase painting: "Hieroglyphs painted on pottery vessels appear to have been largely decorative" (1950: 27). He believed that many glyphs formed ornamental borders, and he found the "senseless mistakes of a rather singular nature" in calendrical notations proof that the "artist who painted the details was ignorant of hieroglyphic writing" (1950: 27).

In his determination of the Copan ceramic sequence from the wares collected

during the Carnegie excavations of the 1930s in comparison with the 1890s excavations, John M. Longyear III analyzed the glyphic notations on Copan pots. He suggested that the Copador pottery texts "intended at least to imitate glyphs" (1952:61) and the carved and incised pots were made by artists "not familiar enough with the glyphs to reproduce them except from a copy prepared by one of the priests" (1952: 65). He astutely noted that the Quetzal Vase from the 19th century Peabody excavations bore a rim text nearly identical to the the rim text of the Gann Vase and surmised that "one was obviously copied from the other, or both were patterned after a third specimen" (1952: 64).

The recognition of such patterning was ultimately important to Maya vase painting studies, but for the meantime, the discovery seemed to fuel the notion that the glyphs on pots were not readable. "Certain glyphs were much favored by the decorators of pottery and are repeated over and over again," wrote Thompson in the introduction to his 1962 *A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* (1962: 15). "It is surely significant that among the glyphs particularly favored by potters and copied from one pot to another are the monkey, a fish and a bird, glyphs easily recognized by

the illiterate" (1962: 16). Thompson also considered what he interpreted as errors in the inscription of the Initial Series Vase from Uaxactun to be evidence that the painter did not work from a manuscript or drawing. He believed there to be "several errors in details of glyphs which show the artist's ignorance of his subject and which could hardly have appeared had this been a careful copy of a priest-astronomer's drawing" (1962: 17).

In general, Thompson paid very little attention to Maya pots. Having decided that their glyphs were of no value, he had little concern for the painting, carving, or imagery, and he was known to condemn various vessels as forgeries. One vessel, however, struck a resonant chord: the Gann Vase, which seemed to him to illustrate a Kekchi myth he had recorded about the moon's betrayal of the sun (1939). He repeated his thesis about this pot throughout his life (cf. Thompson 1970).

Starting in the 1940s, art historians began to pay attention to Maya vases. In 1943, Pál Kelemen wrote that "one of the greatest artistic achievements of the Maya was their painted pottery," and he was particularly interested in the ability of pots to

tell a story (1943: 177). He lamented the undeciphered glyphs on Maya ceramics. He considered overall composition, noting that the Initial Series Vase displays "splendor, dignity, and movement" and the Chamá Vase "radiates tension and displays more action than is usually depicted..." (Kelemen 1943: 180). In 1944 Salvador Toscano wrote in a similar vein and drew attention to what he called the "realismo pictórico maya" (Toscano 1970: 159). José Pijoan drew largely historical conclusions about Maya pottery (e.g. that "Old Empire" refugees must have taken any fine Maya pots to the highlands) (1946: 438). Like Toscano, Paul Westheim, too, was drawn to the more simple life shown on Maya ceramics ("están ausentes los dioses"), in distinction to the stone monuments, which were thought at the time to show priests or gods (1950:239). George Kubler first suggested in 1962 that Maya pots reflected a lost "coeval school of manuscript illumination" (Kubler 1962: 171), a notion that was revived later by Michael Coe and others (Coe 1973; Robicsek and Hales 1983, 1988). He believed that "Maya painters of this period also transferred the pagination of book-like compositions to pottery surfaces" and noted that the form of the cylindrical vase reinforces the "re-entrant

composition" (Kubler 1962: 171). Terence Grieder submitted a dissertation on the formal qualities of Maya vase painting in 1962, and in a published article, he discussed the representations of space and form on the pots (1964). He attempted to study forms without analysis of their meaning, a difficult task under any circumstances.

This flurry of writing by art historians treated an essentially unchanged corpus. The body of Maya pots published by Gordon and Mason, Merwin and Vaillant, and Smith had been fixed by World War II. It was essentially this pre-war corpus with additions from Tikal and Altar de Sacrificios that Marta Foncerrada and Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz treated in their 1979 catalogue.<sup>3</sup> Postwar excavators turned first to less elite settlements and were preoccupied with settlement pattern and daily life. Archaeologists, from 1940 to 1960, essentially ceased to discover fine Maya pottery because they were no longer finding the tombs of the nobility nor even the tombs of other wealthy persons. In fact, despite the discovery of one of the greatest Maya tombs, that of King Pacal, in the

3. *They described their corpus as the pots with archaeological provenience, but for some unstated reason, they omitted the Seibal pots.*



Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque, many archaeologists, particularly in Mexico, began to say that Maya lords were not buried in pyramids at all. Archaeology of the great cities languished. When a single, significant pot was published by Frans Blom—who suggested that its imagery could be interpreted in light of the tale of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh* (1950)—it was completely ignored.

In turn, the “new” archaeology necessitated greater use of pottery for mechanical purposes. “Recently, with a shift in interest to smaller, presumably domestic or rural sites that are devoid of monuments or great architectural endeavors, ceramics have assumed a more important role as indicators of time” (Smith and Gifford 1965: 498). Ceramicists became specialized practitioners of archaeology, and usually one such specialist was included on every major excavation. “A detailed knowledge of ceramic developments is necessary for a proper evaluation of such phenomena [i.e. connections with Central Mexico, diffusion, migration] and their place in the broader outlines of Mesoamerican prehistory” (Rands and Smith 1965: 95). As an outgrowth of such specialized ceramic studies, James and Carol Gifford founded the journal *Cerámica de Cultura Maya et.*

*al.* in 1961 at Temple University as a clearinghouse for the nomenclature used for Maya pottery. Interestingly enough, for the first eleven years of publication, *Cerámica* usually featured an unprovenanced work of Maya art on the cover, despite the fact that said work was never discussed in the issue; in 1972, policy apparently shifted, and all subsequent covers featured archaeologically excavated vessels.

The epigraphic revolution set in motion by Yuri Knorosov (English publication 1968), Heinrich Berlin (1958) and Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960, 1963, 1964) initially had little effect on the study of Maya vases. Unlike the stone monuments, the vases did not seem to relate dynastic sequences of the sort Proskouriakoff had documented for Yaxchilan or Piedras Negras; the known corpus of 1960 did not include pots with the prominent emblem glyphs Berlin had isolated. The vases, then, continued to be thought of as the work of illiterate artists. After the discovery of the now-famous Altar de Sacrificios pot, R.E.W. Adams believed it to bear illustrations of gods and their celebrants parallel to those Thompson had described in the Bonampak murals (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955), with ceremonies in “honor of the Tepeyollotl-

like god” (1963:92). But by 1971, when Adams published the complete inventory of Altar ceramics, he had identified the texts and figures as those of historical persons who attended funerary rituals (Adams 1971). This appeared to be the first major breakthrough in interpreting the inscriptions on Maya pottery.

Beginning with the 1960s, museums and collectors, particularly in the United States, but also throughout the world, acquired great numbers of Maya vases that had not been previously known. The Museum of Primitive Art (now incorporated into the Metropolitan Museum of Art) acquired its famous pot in 1969; Dumbarton Oaks built its collection of fine pots in the 1960s and 1970s. Almost all Maya pots of this era travelled the trail of the art market: they were generally looted from their contexts and by the time they reached the United States, it was frequently difficult to determine their places of origin.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the decade, few of these pots had been published and only one had received scholarly treatment, the Museum

4. A given provenance may at times have been attached to a piece to make it more valuable; in other situations, a dealer may have cautiously refrained from offering such information.

of Primitive Art Vase, now known as the Metropolitan Vase (Foncerrada 1970). Two exhibitions of the early 1970s ignored the 'new' objects: neither the Metropolitan Museum of Art's blockbuster *Before Cortés: Sculpture of Middle America* (Easby and Scott 1970) nor the Center for Inter-American Relations' small exhibit, *The Art of Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Graham 1971), considered a single example of the new corpus.

In 1970, Michael D. Coe began work to help organize an exhibition on ancient Maya writing at the Grolier Club. "While mounting the exhibit, and especially while studying the texts that occasioned it, it became quite clear that the focal point of the catalogue should be the large number of painted and carved funerary vases which were brought...together for the first time" (Coe 1973: 5). Once the Grolier exhibition, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (April 20 to June 5, 1971) closed, following the established tradition of vase studies, Coe had each Maya pot "rolled out" by an artist. He noted that the "subject matter of this pottery, and the hieroglyphic texts painted or inscribed upon it, have been generally ignored by archaeologists and art historians" (1973: 11). He considered the new corpus of Maya pots in light of the

previously known material, and he drew some astonishing conclusions. Coe suggested that much of the imagery on Maya vases derived from a long-lost corpus of Classic mythology, of which the tales of the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh were but a small fragment,<sup>5</sup> and that this imagery was particularly given to funerary ceramics because of their very nature: they formed a "book of the dead," carried to the Underworld by the deceased noble. Narratives and scenes thus previously thought to illustrate daily life (the Chamá Vase, for example) could be re-interpreted as scenes relating to the gods and the Underworld. Coe hypothesized that two gods in particular, God N and God L, were the ruling lords of the Underworld, because of their frequency; he also noted the striking absence of a number of gods, among them, Chac, the Maize God, God D, and God K (Coe 1973: 14-15).

But perhaps most strikingly, Coe took a new and comprehensive look at the inscriptions on Maya pots, particularly the rim texts, among them the two similar ones previously identified by Longyear (see above). In direct contradiction of

5. As noted above, Frans Blom had already linked a single Maya vessel to a tale from the Popol Vuh.

Thompson, Coe argued that the texts were indeed meaningful, and that the pattern Longyear recognized was widespread, with both geographical breadth and chronological depth. Coe called this highly patterned text the "Primary Standard Sequence" (Coe 1973: 18) and suggested that it was the "glyphic form of a long hymn which could have been sung over the dead or dying person, describing the descent of the Hero Twins to the Underworld..." (Coe 1973: 22). Coe identified a hitherto unrecognized school of Maya vase painting as the "Codex style"<sup>6</sup> (Coe 1973: Plates 42-46) and proposed that masters of manuscript art painted these pots, transferring images in black or brown line from codex pages to the cream-colored surfaces of Maya cylinders.

All in all, *The Maya Scribe and His World* revolutionized the study of Maya pots, and arguments soon surfaced among archaeologists and art historians: Should a corpus of looted pots be studied? Did legally excavated pots really have the same Primary Standard Sequence (Coggins

6. *The Metropolitan Vase* (Coe 1973: Plate 44) had already been published in Thompson 1970, Plate 14, and by Marta Foncerrada (1970), who recognized its magnificent quality and unusual style.

1975: 525)? Were not some of the scenes on Maya pottery illustrations of mundane life (Gifford 1974; Kubler 1977; Paul 1976; Reents and Bishop 1985)? Up until publication of *The Maya Scribe*, Maya pots had been thought to conform to the pre-1960 paradigm of Classic Maya history: the Maya were a pure, noble race who dwelt in a time of theocratic peace, ruled over by priestly timekeepers and sky-watchers, who guided the illiterate through agricultural rituals on their occasional visits to vacant ceremonial centers. Epigraphic work by Knorosov, Berlin, and Proskouriakoff had already established that the Maya lords were dynastic warriors who chronicled the stuff of their own lives on their monuments: birth, accession, marriage, warfare, and death. But study of the pots, if thought about at all, had lagged far behind.

With the recognition of both the greatly expanded corpus and the new light in which they could be examined, a world of interpretations was opened through the study of Maya vases. A good many more notions about the Classic Maya were overturned through recognition of the rituals depicted on Maya pottery. Although identified as a bloodletting pot by Thompson (1961), the Huehuetenango

Vase (Kerr #496) was used by David Joralemon as the point of departure for an identification of the widespread practice of penis perforation (1974). Based on images from Maya ceramics, Peter Furst and Michael Coe brought the Maya practice of ritual enemas to attention in 1977 (Furst and Coe 1977). Nicholas Hellmuth has focussed on the representations of gods (Hellmuth 1987), and the ones first thought by Coe to be absent from the pots have been identified (e.g., God K in Robicsek 1978; the Maize God in Taube 1985; Chac by Stuart, as cited in Schele and Miller 1986, and God D in Hellmuth, n.d.). Hellmuth described other grisly rituals (Hellmuth, n.d.). Coe went on to identify the gods and patrons of writing, the Monkey Scribes, half-brothers to the Hero Twins (Coe 1977). Coe also published other corpuses of Maya vases that had previously not been known: in 1975, he examined the Dumbarton Oaks collection and in 1978, he wrote the catalogue to an exhibition at the Princeton University Art Museum (Coe 1975 1978; see also Coe 1982), *Lords of the Underworld*.

The exhibition, *Lords of the Underworld: Masterpieces of Maya Ceramics*, also introduced a new technology to the study of Maya vases: the rollout camera. The

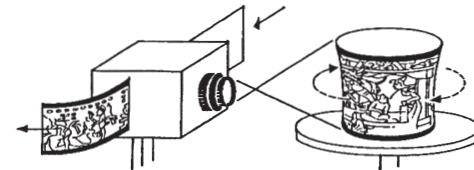


Figure 2

Dumbarton Oaks corpus had been rolled out in life-size color drawings, but in the year of its publication, 1975, Justin Kerr began to use his rollout camera, a machine he first hypothesized constructing in 1971. In 1975 he made his first successful rollout photographs with the camera he designed and built, some of which were published in "Lords." Although the diagram (Figure 2) suggests a simple machine, the principle has only been used by others twice, once by the National Geographic Society, (see, for example, Stuart 1975; Stuart and Stuart 1977, endpapers) and once in Europe, for Lin Crocker (Berjonneau et al 1985).<sup>7</sup> Kerr rollouts have been made for many subsequent volumes (Coe 1982; Robicsek and Hales 1981, 1982; Schele and Miller 1986; Parsons et al 1988) and widely repro-

7. Others may have been devised for photographing Greek vases. The British Museum, for example, was able to rollout the Fenton Vase (Kerr #2894), perhaps with a camera invented for other works.



duced in others. In general, the rollout camera has made the draftsman's rollout obsolete, but Hellmuth, for example, has continued to commission drawings of Maya pots (Hellmuth 1976; Clarkson 1978), and some archaeologists continue to have drawings made of the vessels they excavate.

In the 1960s, archaeologists returned to the excavation of major ceremonial architecture at Tikal and Altar de Sacrificios, and a new archaeological corpus of Maya vases began to be assembled (W. Coe 1967; Coggins 1975; Adams 1971, 1977). Clemency Coggins successfully constructed a narrative of the Classic kings at Tikal that was based on art, archaeology, epigraphy, and whole tomb lots, including many pots. In the 1960s and 1970s, David Pendergast and Norman Hammond, among others, recovered Maya pots from Altun Ha, Nohmul, and other sites (Pendergast 1979, 1982; Hammond 1985). Susannah Ekholm recovered an enormous garbage dump or ceremonial cache filled with broken pots and figurines at Lagartero, Chiapas, in the late 1970s (Ekholm 1979). In the 1980s, the Guatemalan government directed extensive excavations at both Tikal and Uaxactun (see, for example, the *Mundo Perdido*

material in Clancy et. al. 1985). R.E.W. Adams has also directed excavations at Rio Azul (Adams 1986). Diane and Arlen Chase have recovered fine pots in the Peten, at Santa Rita, and now, at Caracol (A. Chase 1985; Chase and Chase 1987). Under the successive direction of Gordon R. Willey, Claude Baudez, William T. Sanders, and now William L. Fash, Copan has been the site of renewed archaeological investigation. Finely painted Maya vases have been recovered and studied from all these and yet other sites (Rice and Sharer 1987). Independent ceramic sequences, based in large part on the Holmul and Uaxactun findings, have been devised for these two sites, and some new terminology offered, although in general, most depend on the chronologies and typologies established by Vaillant and R.E. Smith.

Along with many of the pots with archaeological context, a single archaeologically excavated pot (Figure 3) has been singled out as one of the greatest masterpieces of Maya vase painting. It is the "Altar" Vase (Adams 1977; Schele 1988), which was found in a minor burial associated with a major tomb at Altar de Sacrificios. Perhaps no other single Maya vase has been the subject of such disputed interpreta-

tions. Adams first read the texts on the Altar Vase in 1971 as identifying the person in the tomb and the attendants at funerary rites. Following a placement of



Figure 3

the calendar round date on the pot, he determined that one of the protagonists might be Bird Jaguar the Great of Yaxchilan, whose glyph he believed he had identified, and whose emblem glyph surely does appear on the pot. As art historians and some anthropologists began to rethink the implications of the scenes and texts on painted pots in general, including the unproven corpus, many archaeologists dogmatically supported the Adams interpretation of the Altar Vase (Hammond 1982; Morley and Sharer 1983), even going so far as to redraw and reposition the glyphs to make the argument

more believable (cover of Henderson 1981). For many archaeologists, a line against looted pots had to be drawn, and by following the Adams interpretation, they positioned themselves on the side of the line with those who did not use such pots, regardless of the correctness or incorrectness of the reading of the glyphs.

The great boom in the number of Maya vases excavated both legally and illegally has led to a need on the part of all scholars for systematic documentation of the corpus. In 1970, Nicholas Hellmuth began to photograph all Maya vases in Guatemala, many of which subsequently appeared on the art market. He sold copies or partial copies of his archive to the University of Texas at San Antonio (cf. Quirarte 1979), Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. He has continued to build his archive and has slowly begun to publish it (1987, 1988). Justin and Barbara Kerr have kept a record of every Maya vase they have rolled out, and in this volume they have now begun to publish the corpus in the order in which this photographic record has been made.

One of the problems of an expanded corpus, particularly one without archaeo-

logical provenience, is the identification of fakes. Maya pots have been forged for many years. Even a vessel in the Gordon and Mason corpus appears to be fake (Plate LVII), and many others have been published over the years (Dwyer and Dwyer 1975, Plates 25 and 26; Von Winning 1978; Clancy et. al. 1985, Plates 77). Increasingly skillful forgers have become adept at copying real Maya pots, but it is usually just such copying that gives away their art. Forgers are less likely to draw accurate glyphic texts. Perhaps an even greater problem is over-restoration (Taylor 1982), in which a perfectly authentic pot is heavily repainted. Maya hieroglyphs are the least likely part of the painting to be retouched, but even archaeologically excavated pots are not immune to repaint (e.g. Clancy et. al. 1985: Plate 95). The Kerr corpus frequently includes rollout photographs of Maya vases in various states of restoration, but to avoid great repetition, only one version of a given Maya pot will be published.

In 1978, with support from Brookhaven National Laboratory and the Smithsonian Institution, Ronald Bishop, Dorie Reents, and others began to study the ceramic wares of both provenienced and unprovenienced pots, in the hopes of discovering, through analysis of trace elements,

their origins (Bishop et. al. 1982; Bishop et. al. 1985). Although it may be many years before large-scale results are known, the study promises greater knowledge of unprovenienced wares and, with the provenienced pots, an understanding of Maya trading patterns.

Meanwhile, the corpus has continued to expand (Tate 1985; Couch 1988; Berjonneau et. al. 1985; Schele and Miller 1986; Clancy et. al. 1985; Parsons et. al. 1988). Battle lines continue to be drawn about the legitimacy of studying one pot and not another (e.g. Klein 1988; Schele and Miller 1988). Princeton University Press has just issued a volume that focuses on the study of Maya vases and their iconography, and yet more chilling revelations about the Maya will probably be forthcoming (Benson and Griffin 1988). Private collections age and become part of the public domain (e.g. Coe 1982; Couch 1988). Ongoing archaeological projects continue to yield new works. Through careful examination of the corpus, scholars are now beginning to recognize individual hands within schools of painting (Kerr and Kerr 1988; Schele and Miller 1986). The Kerrs have identified three painters, the Princeton Painter, the Metropolitan Painter, and the Fantastic Painter,



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who all work in "codex" style, and they first recognized the Master of the Pink Glyphs, although they now believe that the Pink Glyph pots may be the work of several painters in the same workshop. In 1975, Clemency Coggins noted that the pots of Tikal Burial 116 had all been made by the same individual, but that each vessel had then been painted by a different person (Coggins 1975). Much other work can now be done on the styles and hands of Maya painted ceramics, particularly as the published corpus grows.

Some of the most promising research now underway on Maya pots regards their hieroglyphic texts. In the 19th century, Stephens, Dieseldorff, Förstemann, and others recognized that an understanding of Maya vases and their imagery would come in tandem with the decipherment of their glyphic texts. In 1979, Peter Mathews identified the phrase "u tup," or, his ear-spool (Mathews 1979) on an Altun Ha flare. With this "name-tagging" as a model, Stephen Houston and Karl Taube have recently shown that many Maya plate texts, at the end of the Primary Standard Sequence, read "u lak," or, his plate, followed by the name and titles of the ruler (Houston and Taube 1987). David Stuart has now gone on to identify the

glyph for cylinder vase, and he has shown convincingly that many pot rim texts, including part of the Primary Standard Sequence, read something to the effect of: "Here it is written, on this vase, used for cacao; his writing, So and So, the Scribe, his title, of this place" (Stuart 1988). What is particularly exciting about this decipherment is that it reveals the use and patronage of the vessel. Stuart has also read the glyphs identifying both painter and carver of painted and carved Maya vases (1987). For the first time, we now know the names of Maya scribes and artists. It is perhaps in these recent glyphic studies that the greatest breakthroughs in the studies of Maya vases are being made, and it is perhaps through such glyphic studies that art historians and archaeologists may find some common ground.

George Kubler suggested additional avenues of inquiry. Michael Coe, George Stuart, Ed Kamens, and Justin and Barbara Kerr all read early drafts of this essay and gave me thoughtful advice.

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