

The Mayas in the ancient art of Mexico

*Antonio Luna Arroyo**

International cooperation among technicians and scientists in restoring the world's art is a shining example of how nations can relate amicably to the benefit of humanity's cultural heritage. Restoration of the world-renowned monuments of Mayan culture, are a case in point. The remains of this unique Mesoamerican culture have been reconstructed in all their splendor and are now open to visitors at Chichén Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula. An area combining archaeology, history and art, it is one of the best reconstructed and integrated in the world, comparable in grandeur and beauty to the remains of golden age Greece's Funerary Stela of Athens, Tower of the Winds, Temple of Minerva, Acropolis, and Stoa of the Porch of the Caryatides. The pillar of friezes of the Temple of Chac-Mool, the Castle, the Temple of the Jaguars, and the Temple of the Warriors, lose nothing by comparison with them. Nor do Mexico's pyramids and stone mounds, such as the pyramid and Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, and the Temple of the Queen at



Chichén-Itzá: Temple of the Jaguars.

III, UNAM.

Mayan art rivals the art of ancient Egypt and Greece. Mexican and foreign specialists and institutions have contributed to reconstructing sites such as Chichén Itzá to breathtaking examples of ancient Mayan grandeur.

* Researcher at the Institute of Judiciary Studies, UNAM.

Yaxchilán make less of an architectural impression than Egypt's pyramids at Cheops, or the colossal Sphinx of Giza.

An admirable wealth of mystic expression and a sense of magic that inspire flights of creative fancy predominate in Mayan art. As the anthropologist and art critic Ricardo Mimenza y Castillo says:

The bodies of the jaguar, the mountain lion, the serpent and the toad, are extended and dislocated expressions often associated with fire, with the savage vegetation of the tropics,

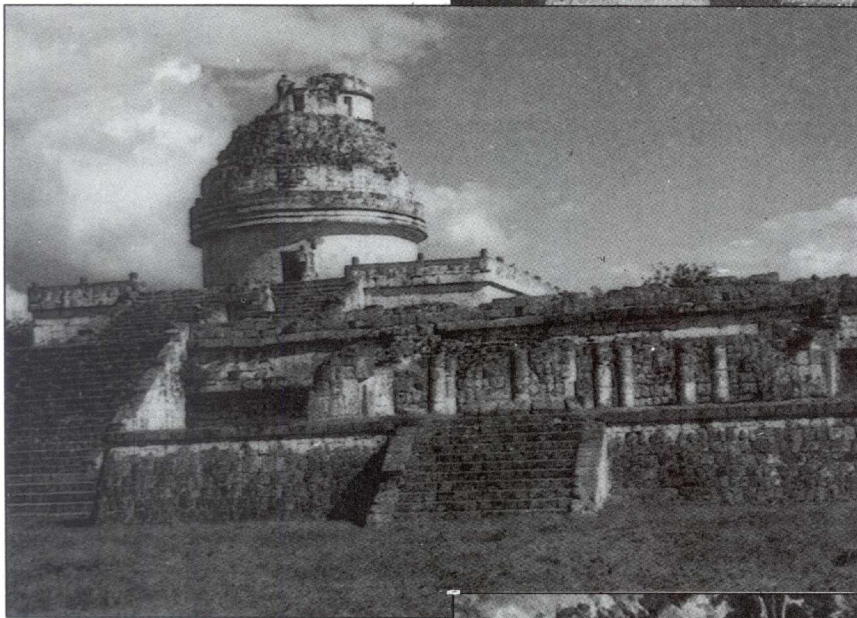


IIE, UNAM.

Chichén-Itzá: The Snail.

Renaissance and, in another vein, Mayan murals with those of the Sixtine Chapel. Mayan murals have been seen and studied by great international artists and archaeologists, and are now part of collections in the world's leading museums. Reproduced here are some of the Bonampak murals depicting the great pre-Hispanic ballet, which included high-ranking military officers and priests and inspired modern dances.

Mayan architecture and murals were discovered and elucidated by a

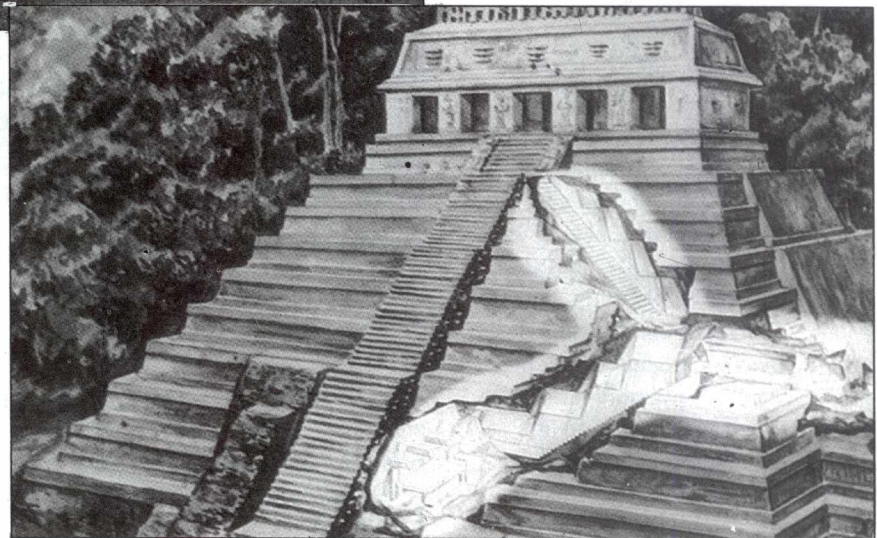


IIE, UNAM.

Chichén-Itzá: The Snail.

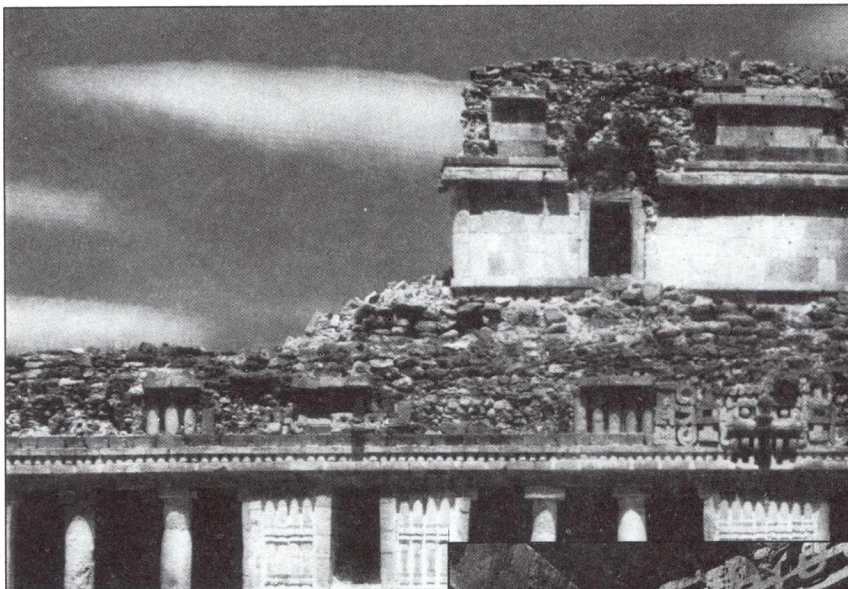
with the feathers of the most colorful and beautiful birds in the world, like nightmare visions... There are feathered serpents like mythological birds, two-headed dragons, gods with nose exfoliated or elongated like a tapir's snout, sumptuously dressed in luxurious and fantastic cloaks, resembling luxurious foliage or textiles adorned with necklaces, bars, emblems and fantastic attributes.

Other Mayan palaces are comparable to works of the Italian



IIE, UNAM.

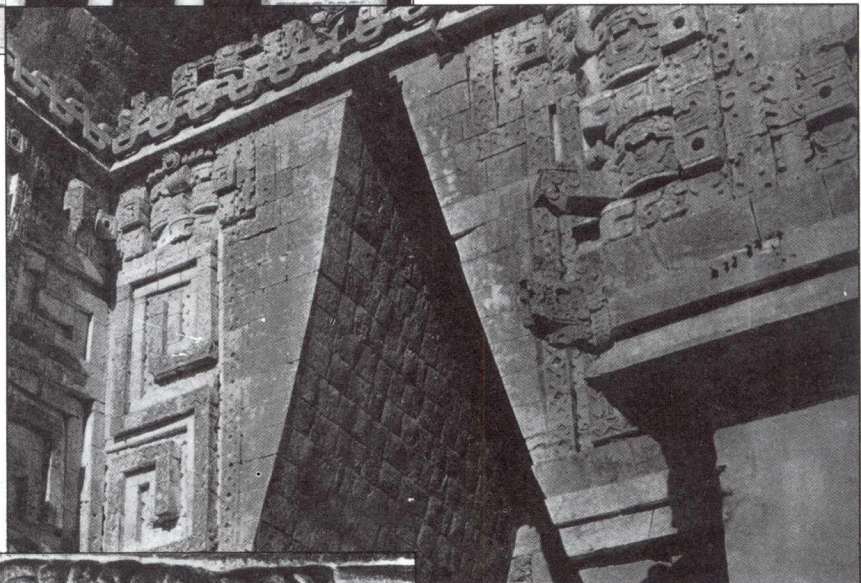
Classical Palenque: Temple of the Inscriptions.



The Great Palace of the Sun.

multitude of US and European archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists who descended upon Mexico full of admiration and enthusiasm. Ellie Faure, a leading historian and critic of French contemporary art, observes in his work *Ancient Art*, that:

Archaeology has sought and found the original sources of this culture, determined its kinship, related works and schools, and



Uxmal: the nun's quadrangle.

government archaeologists discovered and restored the Castle, the Inner Temple, the Temple of the Jaguars (the Ball Court), and the Temple of the Bearded Man, in addition to other buildings and sacred cenotes.

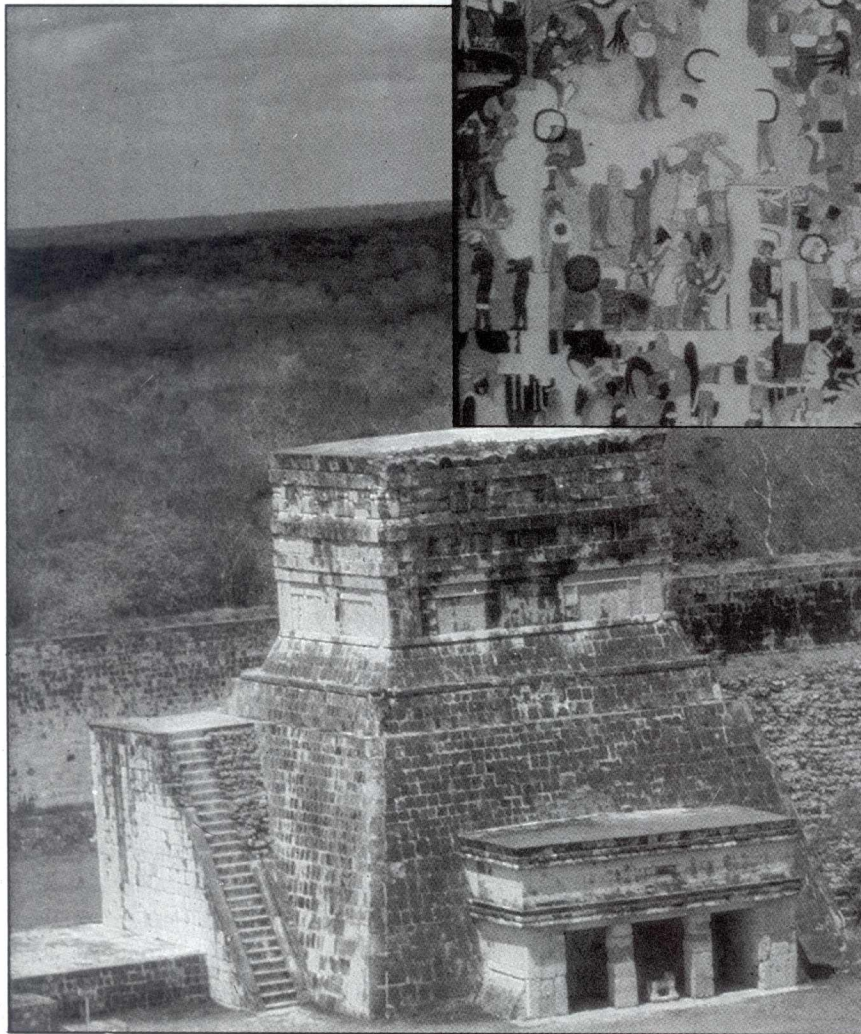
Other university groups have collaborated with their Mexican counterparts: the Middle-American Research Institute, Tulane University; Harvard University; and the Museum of the City of Bristol, England, which now owns the mural paintings from the interior of the upper Temple of the Jaguars, copied by the English artist Adela C. Breton. The University of



Yaxchilan.

Alberta financed the mapping of the largest buildings, as well as ink and water-color drawings of other lesser structures that are important because of their beauty. But the most systematic work done to date, in more than twenty volumes, with articles in English and Spanish, is that of the Center for Mayan Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Interest in Mayan art and archaeology and the insights and discoveries revealed by researchers in many fields continue to fascinate people all over the world. As recently as November-December 1991, the Leiden Museum of Ethnology presented an exhibition of Mayan art entitled



Chichén-Itzá: Temple of the Tigers and Jaguars.



Chichén-Itzá: Battle scene (detail), Temple of the Jaguars.

"Splendor of a Great Civilization." A foreign correspondent at the opening reported that "the Exhibition Hall was full within half an hour".

Bibliography

- Castillo, Ricardo Mimenza. *El arte y la cultura mayas*. Mexico, Ediciones de Estudios Mexicanos, 1943.
- Estudios de Cultura Maya* No. 11, 1987.
- Faure, Ellie. *El arte antiguo*. vol. 2. Buenos Aires, Editorial Poseídon, 1940.
- Palacios, Enrique Juan. *Guía arqueológica de Chichén Itzá*. México, 1935.
- Soustelle, Jean. *El arte antiguo de México*. Barcelona, Editorial Juventud, 1969 