



Elsie Montiel

*The Cantón Palace*  
Yucatán's Regional Anthropology Museum

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Rubén Vázquez

Fragment of an incense-burner, necklaces, beads and other ornaments from different parts of Yucatán.



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The god Hu Nah Yel.

What must not be missed is the wealth of jade necklaces, pendants and other ornaments that were part of the offerings found in Chichén Itzá's sacred *cenote* (sink hole) during the first explorations there.

an attic, it is located on Mérida's main avenue, Montejo Boulevard, testifying to its eclectic style and the technical advances that introduced iron, stained glass and marble into the construction of public buildings and the new mansions erected at the end of the nineteenth century.

It was built as a family residence for conservative General Francisco Cantón Rosado, supporter of Maximilian's empire and governor of Yucatán between 1898 and 1902. Cantón later supported General Porfirio Díaz and played an important part in the long Caste War against the Mayan rebels in the southern part of the peninsula.

General Cantón occupied his new house in the last years of his life. On his death, it passed to his widow and son who, with time, had to give it up to the local government. Today, it is the only public building on Montejo Boulevard.

The Cantón Palace is not only witness to and a disseminator of the peninsula's ancient history, but also more recent events. Once in the hands of the state government, it became the Fine Arts School. Then, in the 1940s, it was turned into the Hidalgo Primary School, and the principal and his family lived in it to take care of it; the attic was the dormitory for students boarded there.

Visitors to the Museo Regional de Antropología de Yucatán (Yucatán Regional Anthropology Museum) shift between two eras. One is represented by the imposing building that houses the museum, the Cantón Palace, an irrefutable symbol of the "sisal fiber episode." Sisal fiber was dubbed "green gold" because, between 1880 and 1920, it was the basis for colossal fortunes in the region. U.S. demand for it for mechanized agriculture led the Yucatán countryside to be covered with *agave* plants. The wealth it produced transformed what had until then been the sober, colonial city of Mérida into one of the last century's most modern, beautiful capitals. It was in this period that the Cantón Palace was built.

The other era the visitor enters is determined by the museum's collection: the pre-Columbian past. The Mayan culture's marvelous legacy on the peninsula was disseminated worldwide by Stephens and Catherwood in the first half of the nineteenth century, to the amazement of any and all who took a look at its history. Even today, it is a culture that marvels those who look at its vestiges or study its intellectual achievements.

#### THE CANTÓN PALACE

The Cantón Palace is undoubtedly one of the city's emblematic buildings. Imposing, with two stories, a basement and



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Room with items related to trade.

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Case displaying several Mayan gods.



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A piece by Manuel Mendive in the temporary exhibit on the second floor.



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Hall with a Chac Mool from Chichén Itzá at one end.

In the early 1950s, it was the official residence of the governors of Yucatán as well as the guest house for the president and other illustrious visitors.

At the end of the 1950s, it became the headquarters for the Yucatán Institute of Anthropology and History and the Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona Library, specialized in Yucatán history. It was then that it first housed the museum in the basement, which had been moved from place to place before that. In 1980, the main floor became host to an exhibit of the museum's permanent collection.

Years later, the upper floor was used to give courses in what would later be the Yucatán Autonomous University School of Anthropological Sciences' majors of archaeology and social anthropology.

#### THE PERMANENT EXHIBIT

Visitors enter the museum through a vestibule that was originally the family dining room. A walk around the ground floor gives you a taste of important issues in Mayan culture. The description of the environment in which the culture developed, a plain with little cultivable land and without surface water sources, is particularly interesting.

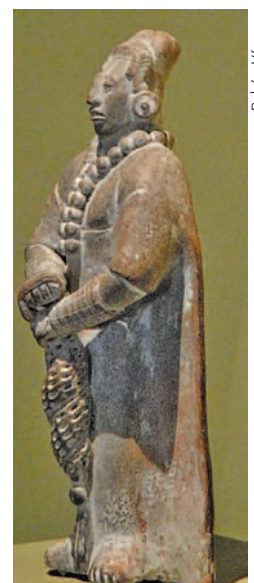
The exhibit examines the Mayas' physical characteristics, aesthetic ideas, production, trade, writing, calendars, war, funeral customs, world view, rites, offerings and architecture, displaying groups of significant artifacts recovered and interpreted for an entire century by archaeologists and epigraphers.

The museographic design for both displaying the collection and facilitating a view of the building includes two axes along which the main medium- and large-scale sculptures are displayed.

Following the passageway after the vestibule, you can enjoy, for example, the works involving two extremely important topics: jaguars and the serpent. The jaguar was one of the most venerated and oft-represented animals in Mesoamerica. Among the Mayas, its skin was used as part of the rulers' wardrobe: they are often seen sitting on thrones sculpted in the form of a jaguar, like in the case of Chichén Itzá, displayed in the museum. Jaguars are also depicted on friezes, stone standard-holders, clay figurines and ceramic vessels.

Serpents were also very important in the ancient peoples' mythology and world view. Several different representations have been found in the Mayan area, the most noteworthy of which is the Plumed Serpent, K'uk'ulkan, known in central Mexico as Quetzalcóatl, the combination of a rattlesnake and a bird, associated with water and the god of the wind, Ehecatl.

At the end of the passageway, the Tabi monolith is visible from the



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Representation of the goddess Ixchel. ▶



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Intentionally deformed skull with jade-incrusted teeth, from Jaina, Campeche.

entryway, with its marvelous scene of two hunters returning from the hunt with their prize, a deer.

Undoubtedly, one of the things that most attracts the eye of visitors of all ages is the custom of intentionally changing the body. In the Mayan case, this includes different kinds of deformations of the skull; teeth that are filed or incrustated with jade; induced squinting; or facial scarring. All these lead the visitor to think about different cultures' aesthetic values, yesterday and today.

In recent years, in response to a public increasingly interested in understanding the past and viewing the new discoveries of archaeological projects, the number of pieces has practically doubled, reaching almost 1,000. Among the



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Incense-burner found in Mayapán depicting the god of writing.

recently included pieces is a striking effigy incense-burner found in Mayapán depicting the god of writing with all his attributes: a paintbrush held in one hand and in the other, a conch shell fragment, used to prepare pigments. He is also carrying a bag of copal, and wears a monkey mask, the patron animal of scribes.

In the same showcase are writing instruments: fine, delicately decorated bone needles and stiletos, found in Oxkintok.

Visitors often stop for several minutes in this room in their effort to understand the Mayas' 20-based number system and way of measuring time.

Three years ago, an offering found in the tomb of *Ukit Kan Le'k Tok*, the Lord of the Talol Kingdom, who erected the Acropolis and the main monuments still on view at Ek' Balam, the capital of this Mayan region, was placed in the next room, dedicated to death and funeral customs. The offering is one of the richest of the northern part of the peninsula: it includes jade, alabaster and fine ceramic pieces; imposing obsidian and flint knives; pearls and a small gold frog, perhaps brought from what is now Costa Rica; as well as delicate work in shell depicting cacao beans, deer, shrimp, flours and geometric figures. Outstanding among the shell work are small skulls, some with articulated mandibles, whose delicacy is testimony to the importance of the person the offering is for. Other pieces are a scepter with glyphs alluding to the monarch, a fish pendant and a cup on which can be read "cacao drinking cup of Ukit." Another pendant shows a deformed face that is believed may have been the monarch himself, since physical anthropological studies have shown that he had a disease that may have caused this deformation. Also of interest is the key stone that closed the funeral chamber itself, depicting the young god of corn, but whose mouth has a defect, allowing us to speculate that it may have been the king depicted as a god.

Another topic that has developed greatly in recent years is the Mayan world view. In



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Two-piece shell mask from Chichén Itzá.



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Fragment of an incense-burner from Mayapán.





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The Cantón Palace is located on Mérida's main avenue, Montejo Boulevard, testifying to its eclectic style and the technical advances that introduced iron, stained glass and marble into the construction of public buildings.

the three showcases dedicated to this, the visitor gets to know a little about the Mayan universe, traversed by a cosmic tree, the *ceiba*, whose branches reach skyward, while the trunk remains on the earth and its roots sink into the underworld, the place where the dead go and where life emerges anew.

The second showcase displays Mayan gods like Itzamná, the main deity; Hunab Yel, the god of flowering corn, whose birth in Mayan myths is the first act of the new cosmic era; Chaac, the god of rain; Kawil, the god of rulers; Kinich Ahau, the god of the face of the sun; Ek Chuah, deity of traders; Ah Puch, god of death; and Ixchel, god of fertility and flooding, who takes the form of a young Moon goddess, Uh Bak, or of Sak Bak, the Knitting Lady. Finally, this case presents examples of another long-lasting belief: the *aluxes*, a kind of mischievous sprite, that even today peasants bury in their corn fields for protection.

The third showcase displays examples of representations of deities from Central Mexico found at different sites in the Mayan region, particularly at Chichén Itzá and Mayapán. Incense-burners with the effigy of Tláloc, the Central Highlands god of storms, or of Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent, and Chicomecóatl, the goddess of corn, show the intercultural relations between the Mayas and other peoples.

At the end of the other passageway is the Chac-Mool figure from Chichén Itzá. Another smaller Chac-Mool from the same archaeological site is exhibited in the part of the museum dedicated to stone production.

As you move forward, you find yourself before Stelae 26 and 3 from Oxkintok, as well

as the great ballgame ring from the same site, with its hieroglyphic inscriptions of the dates corresponding to A.D. 713 or A.D. 714, allowing us to pinpoint it in the late classical period of the Mayan culture.

What must not be missed is the wealth of jade necklaces, pendants and other ornaments that were part of the offerings found in Chichén Itzá's sacred *cenote* (sink hole) during the first explorations there. After the jade pieces, the visitor is transported again to the twentieth century. The imposing Carrara marble stairway that leads to the top floor once again brings us back to the era of the sisal fiber bonanza. Upstairs are the rooms for temporary exhibits. There, you will find displays of part of the museum collection dealing more in depth with some of the themes of the permanent exhibit, or with new issues, like the finds from specific projects in Mayapán or Ek' Balam, or with all of the archaeological works being carried out in Yucatán.

At times, itinerant exhibits of other cultures are also on display, whether from Mexico or abroad, which, like the Central Highland deities or the pieces from other regions imported by traders indicating the relationship between the Yucatán Mayas and other Mesoamerican peoples, make the museum a space for exchange and dialogue. **MM**

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An *alux*.



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Fragment of a lintel on Chichén Itzá's Temple of the Jaguars.

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Admission: Mex\$41

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