
The Cacaxtla Murals

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The discovery of new murals in Highland Mexico with obvious Maya traits is an important contribution to our knowledge of the arts of the pre-Columbian New World.¹ The murals found at Cacaxtla in the present-day state of Tlaxcala in September 1975, are a major addition to the small number of pre-Columbian mural paintings that have survived to our time.² They present the historian of art with a number of specific questions which must be answered before we can put the murals into a meaningful context. These questions include defining the style of the painters as demonstrated in the paintings and determining the source or sources of this style.

The student of painting in pre-Columbian America is faced with almost insurmountable problems when he attempts to apply the traditional methodology of the discipline of the history of art to these murals. In the study of Old World painting, for instance, one builds up the catalogue of the works of the individual painters on the basis of the unquestioned paintings of the major masters. To the skeleton of these certain works, other works, judged on the basis of style and other criteria, are added to fill out the listing of the *oeuvre* of each master. The works of other, less well-known masters can then be related to these of the well-known masters both historically and in terms of the development of their artistic style and their place in the pattern of traits of their "school" of painting. Finally, at the outer fringes of the model and at the furthest remove from assured attributions, one places the works of anonymous masters.

Students of European art are on the right track, I think, when they attempt to reconstruct the "artistic personality" of the artist as a device for understanding the artist. Relating his work to the works of his contemporaries helps us understand what the artist is doing and why he is doing it in just that manner.

In the study of the Cacaxtla murals, however, as with all pre-Hispanic painting, it must be kept in mind that we work in a world of complete anonymity and that the amount of painting that has survived does not permit our following the patterns of the traditional study of the history of art. The one and only incontrovertible fact is that

the pictures were painted on the walls of a building in Tlaxcala.

In this essay we will examine the paintings for evidences of style that will give us clues to the place of origin of the artists in terms of their training as painters, by establishing the relation of these murals to other paintings from the Maya area and from Highland Mexico. We have to operate on a high level of generalization, dealing with style at the level of large regions rather than in terms of a more precise definition of style limited to individual artists or even individual schools. Such definitions, at present, are simply not available to us. Future studies may very well be able to define the number of artists who painted at Cacaxtla, on the basis of definitions of their individual styles. But it is too much to hope that we will ever be able to link the works of a specific artist at Cacaxtla to other painting elsewhere, be it mural or ceramic.

The Paintings

The paintings fall into two groups: the series of single standing figures and two scenes of battle. The standing figures – which we shall call the *State Portraits*, for convenience – are on sections of wall flanking the entrance to a room on the upper level of the ruins. They are placed so they frame the entrance, almost like an elaborate pair of parentheses. Another pair of figures, associated with them, is painted on the jambs or the thickness of the walls. These *Jamb Figures* seem to be of lesser importance and function as subordinates.

The other paintings show a *Battle Scene* divided (or two *Battle Scenes* separated) by a staircase. They are painted on the sloping surface or *talud* supporting a large palatial building on a lower level in the ruins than that of the *State Portraits* and the *Jamb Figures*. Thus, we assume they were painted earlier. They depict a dynamic combat with emotion-filled figures ranging from fierce fighters to pathetic dying and wounded warriors.

The State Portraits and the Jamb Figures

The style of the *State Portraits* (Figs. 1 and 2) can be defined in terms of the treatment of line, of human form, of ambient space, and of composition (see Robertson

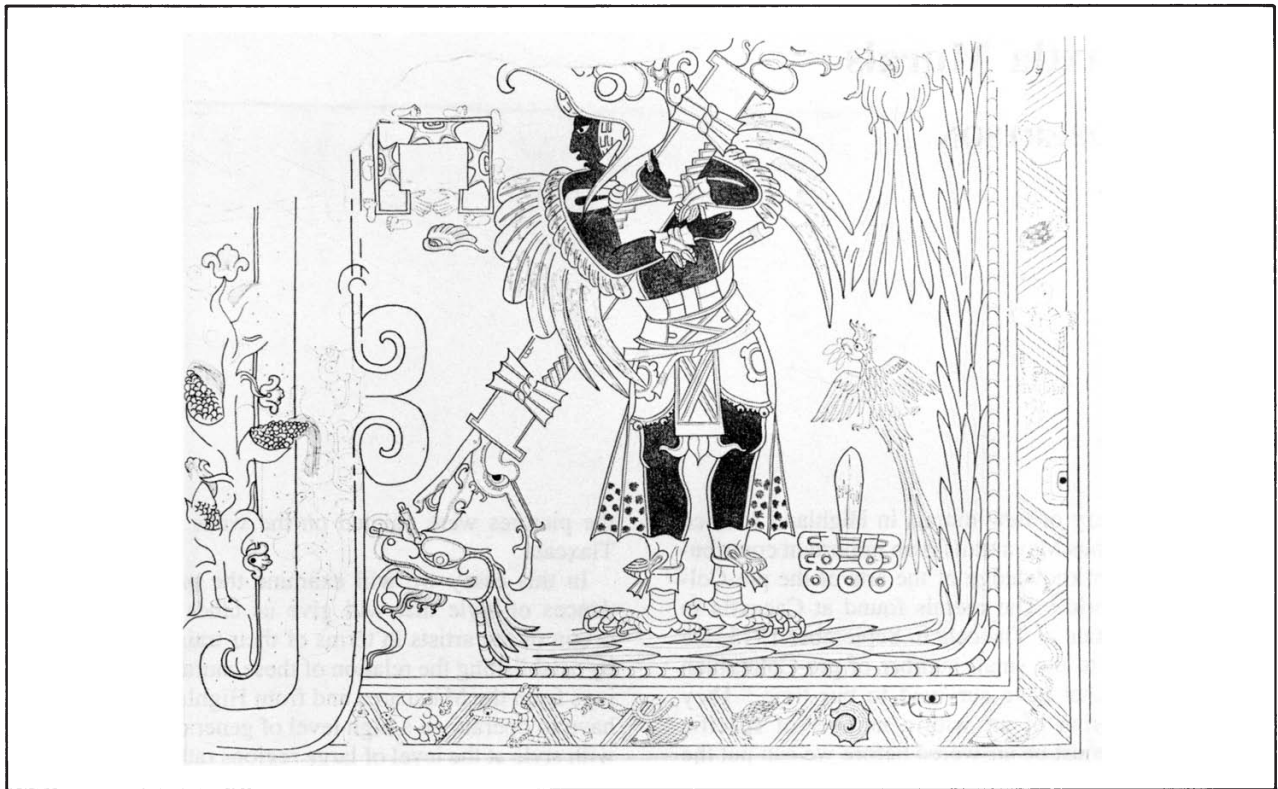


Fig. 1 Cacaxtla, State Portrait. Building A, rear wall of portico, south. Line drawing.

1959, especially pp. 12-33). The Cacaxtla painter's line, handled with great richness and variety, is thick or thin, light or heavy. Different weights of line appear in the same passage of the painting, as in the head and beard of the serpent in the *State Portrait* on the right. Perhaps more importantly, line is used to outline forms in such a manner that three-dimensionality is projected. Line, in other words, is not merely a boundary of color, a *cloison*, as it is in the Teotihuacán murals and in Mixtec manuscript painting, but it has the dynamism to create three-dimensional form. This cursive quality of line is also to be seen in Maya ceramic, mural, and manuscript painting.

It is in the treatment of human forms and the space that surrounds them, however, that we see the essence of these murals. In the *State Portraits*, the forms, even more than the individual lines defining them, carry the burden of three-dimensionality. The beltlike shape at the waist, as it rises and curves around the torso, shows us the plastic, modeled three-dimensionality of the figures. The belt not only follows the curve of the torso in a horizontal sense; it also outlines the hips in a powerful fashion delineating this part of the body. The legs are drawn to show the swelling of the thighs and calves, with particular care taken to indicate convincing anatomical relationships. The straps and puttees on the legs, as they bend back in space, also define the curvature of the leg to give us, in the area from the ankle up to the calf, the projection of a three-dimensional form.

Ambient space, however, is not truly delineated in these murals, for there is no object of architecture or landscape to give a measure or a spatial setting for the standing figures. A scattering of signs – signs that have led to much written discussion on the murals – seems to float on the surface of the paintings rather than existing in a true three-dimensional space. But the space containing and surrounding the figures, because of *their* three-dimensionality and plasticity, must of necessity be three-dimensional. With the *Jamb Figures* (Figs. 3 and 4), space is somewhat more clearly marked by overlapping. The feet and legs of the standing figures are painted in front of the border or frame at the bottom of the painting.

The composition of the *State Portraits* at Cacaxtla is strikingly like that of the polychromed stucco figures at Palenque (Maudslay, 1889-1902, IV). In each case there is a single focus or figure (although in some instances at Palenque there is more than one), and the figures are all isolated against a blank ground except for an occasional floating sign or glyph on the surface. The figures are enframed within elaborate borders. The proportions of height to width of the field of the stuccoes and the paintings seem to be very close, but loss of the top frame and part of the field in the Cacaxtla paintings makes it possible only to guess the original height. In both cases, however, the relation of the width of the field to the width of the frame is in a proportion of 1:7½.³ In both cases there is a swaying, almost elegant pose to the figures. The

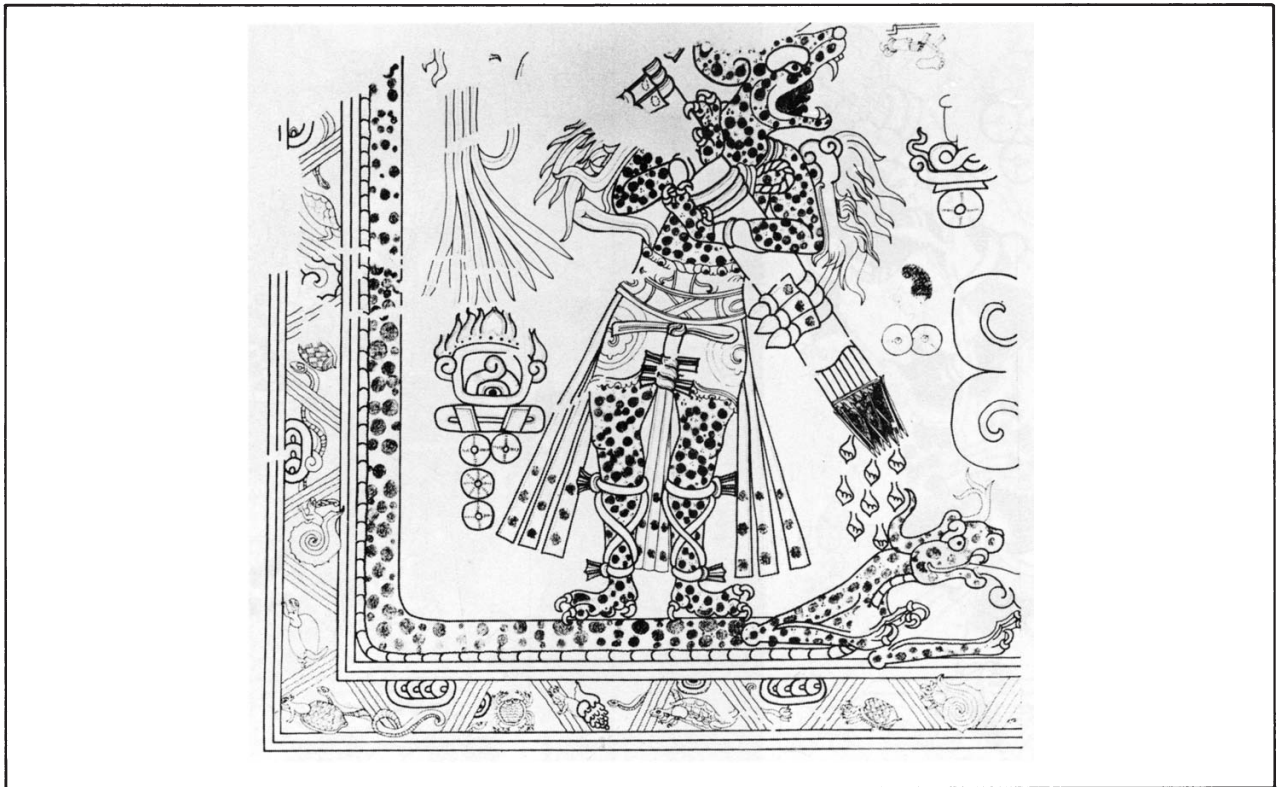


Fig. 2 Cacaxtla, State Portrait. Building A, rear wall of portico, north. Line drawing.

anatomy of the figures follows the dictates of nature in pose, in proportions, and in the statement of a third dimension. They do not stand rigid and hieratic, as most Highland Mexican figures do.

The Battle Scene

The *Battle Scene* (Figs. 5a, 5b and 7) is in some ways more unexpected than the *State Portraits*.⁴ Although the *State Portraits* have suggestions of the stucco reliefs of Palenque, we have no paintings from the Maya or any other area of Mesoamerica comparable to this great heroic painting of battle. The *Battle Scene* at Bonampak comes to mind, but there are many very significant differences separating it from the Cacaxtla murals (see Soustelle 1958; Villagra Caleti 1949; Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955; *Ancient Paintings of Bonampak, Mexico*, 1955; M. E. Miller, this volume).

The build-up of figures in depth through overlapping and the visual intensity of the Bonampak *Battle Scene* is in clear contrast with the spatially simpler Cacaxtla murals. At Cacaxtla there is essentially only a double (in some passages triple) layer of figures where overlapping is present for figures painted on only a single thin plane. Depth shown through overlapping at Cacaxtla is in terms of parts of figures or of costume, not in terms of the progression back into a space of full figures overlapping one another, as in the Bonampak mural. The Cacaxtla *Battle Scene* is like an architectural frieze or a band painted on a piece of pottery, rolled out flat; the Bonam-

pak *Battle Scene* is a wild mêlée carrying the eye back into a deep and confused space.

The Cacaxtla *Battle Scene* is most remarkable for representing such great emotional and physical stress that it even goes to the length of showing entrails falling from the bellies of figures. One pathetic warrior tries in vain to push his guts back into the body cavity (Fig. 6). On the other hand, in the same compositions there are also large serene figures presiding like deities over the strife, overlooking, even supervising, but strangely detached from the battle. They exist at a different level of involvement in the action. Physically, they do not take part in the violence seizing all others about them. Emotionally, they seem to be in another realm of existence, as though they were generals behind the lines, overseeing the battle, ordering the troops, but safe from the deadly turmoil.

The "quiet, standing figure" of the western talud stands with hands crossed on his chest (Figs. 5a and 5b). He is projected in front of, or against, an outlined white background extending up to the level where it is overwhelmed by his rich and elaborate headdress. He stands facing full front. There is a slight suggestion of the S-curve of Classic Greek art in the stance of this figure. A long, pointed item of clothing suggesting a *quechquemil* hangs from the area of his neck and shoulders, reaching to the area of the navel. Standing to this figure's left is a warrior whose spearhead crosses in front of him, a spear aimed at a wounded warrior on his right. The quiet, standing



Fig. 3 Cacaxtla, Jam Figure. Building A. south jamb. Line drawing.

figure is placed on a plane just behind the fighting warriors and is thus separated from them in space, adding a bit more depth to the friezelike scene. He is also separated in a more fundamental way, for he takes no part in the action swirling around and in front of him. He stands in what we can call a monumental pose, aloof from the turmoil of the lesser men about him.

On the eastern talud is another quiet, standing monumental figure (Figs. 6 and 7), clearly related to the first, but he seems to be a bit more involved in the action going on around him. He wears the same kind of pointed, hanging garment, although its decoration is somewhat simpler. His clothing and his face show him turning to his right. His body has the suggestion of *contrapposto*, a twisting on the spinal axis. One hand is weaponless, with fingers curved back and bent toward the wrist. The other hand is partially lost, through destruction of the upper parts of the talud, but it holds a weapon, a spear that has wounded him in the cheek and that he is attempting to pull out.⁵ This figure shares some of the characteristics of the western talud figure, for both are painted with toes pointed out, a pose common in Maya monumental art but quite different from the more natural position of the feet of the other figures. The two figures differ in the details of costume, and, perhaps more importantly, in the varying degrees of richness of pose and gesture. The eastern talud figure does not have the outlined white

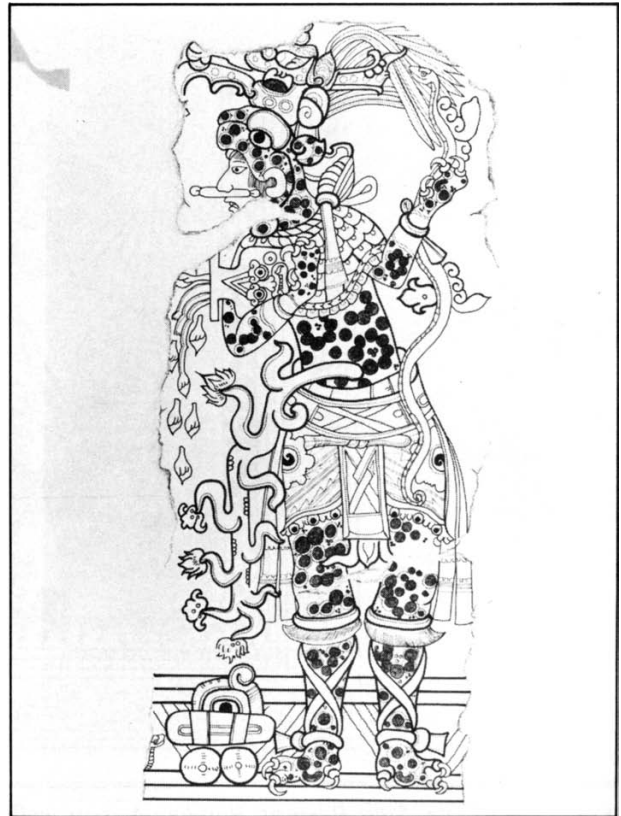


Fig. 4 Cacaxtla, Jamb Figure. Building A, north jamb. Line drawing.

background that we have pointed out for his companion on the matching talud.

So detached are these two figures from the rest of the scene that we are almost forced to seek an explanation for their presence. Are they in and of the battle, or are they spectators? One possible explanation is that they are not to be considered as part of the struggle, but beyond, over, and above it. One of them has been drawn within a border and posed against a white framed background, like a figure from a framed Maya stela. The other has a somewhat stelalike pose, but the white background with its border is missing, and he is endowed with a bit of movement, turning so that he looks to his right.

We can explain these two figures in several ways. In formal terms, they both seem to derive from polychromed Maya stelae or from other paintings derivative from polychromed stelae.⁶ Each stands on a clear and distinct ground line, in contrast with the other figures. They are placed behind and between the ordinary human beings of the *Battle Scene*, but are only secondarily actors in the struggle.

This deceptively simple answer brings, of course, other more complex questions in its wake. For instance, how can we explain the existence of paintings suggesting Maya stelae in Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala, so far from the nearest major Maya site? As one explanation, we can imagine a local ruler at Cacaxtla wanting the *Battle Scene* painted with himself included in the battle. But the artist could

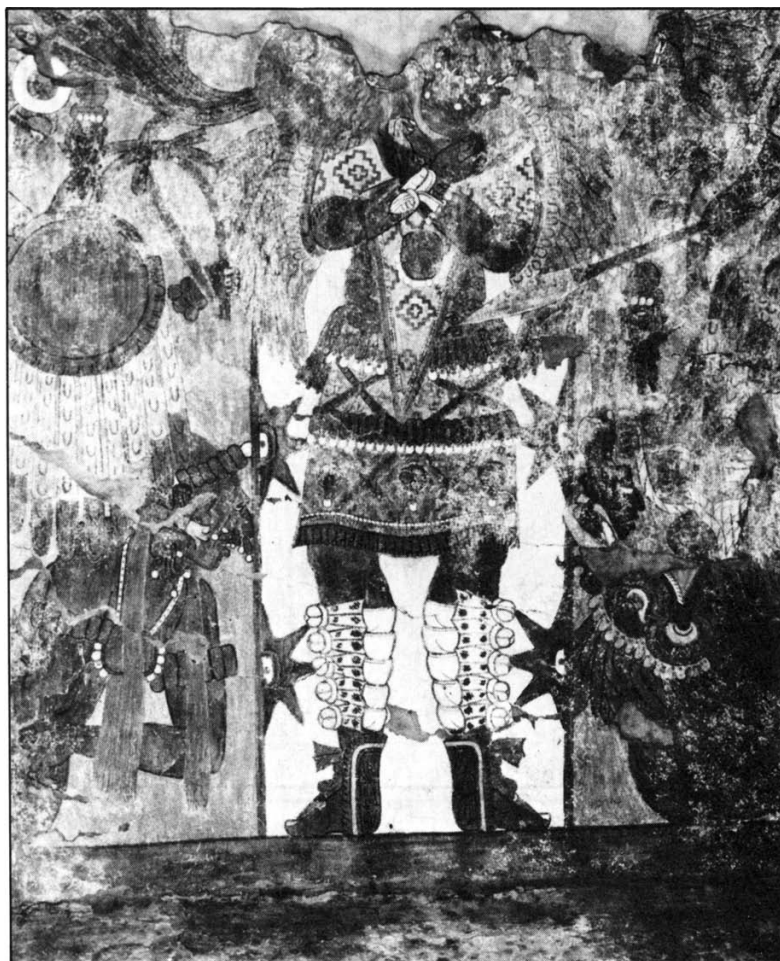


Fig. 5a Cacaxtla, Battle Scene. "Quiet, standing figure," west talud, Building B. Photograph.

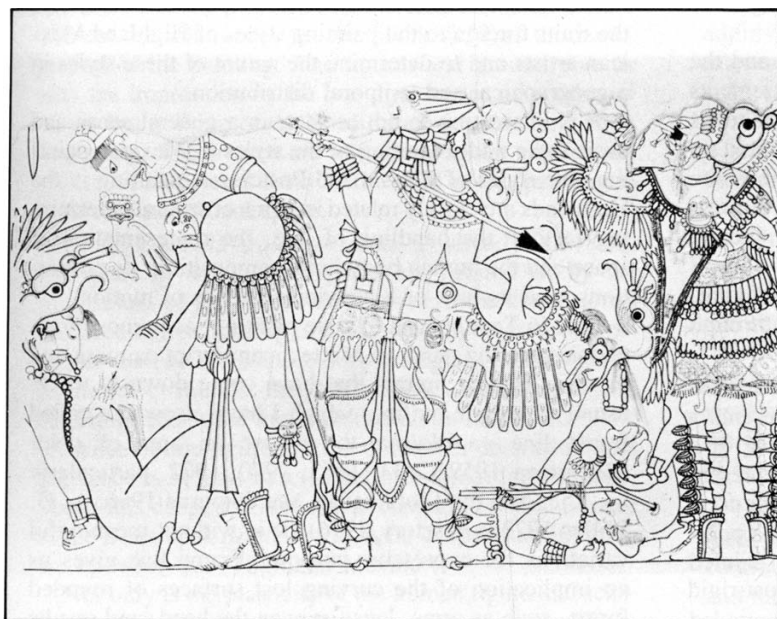


Fig. 5b Cacaxtla, Battle Scene. "Quiet, standing figure," west talud, Building B. Line drawing.

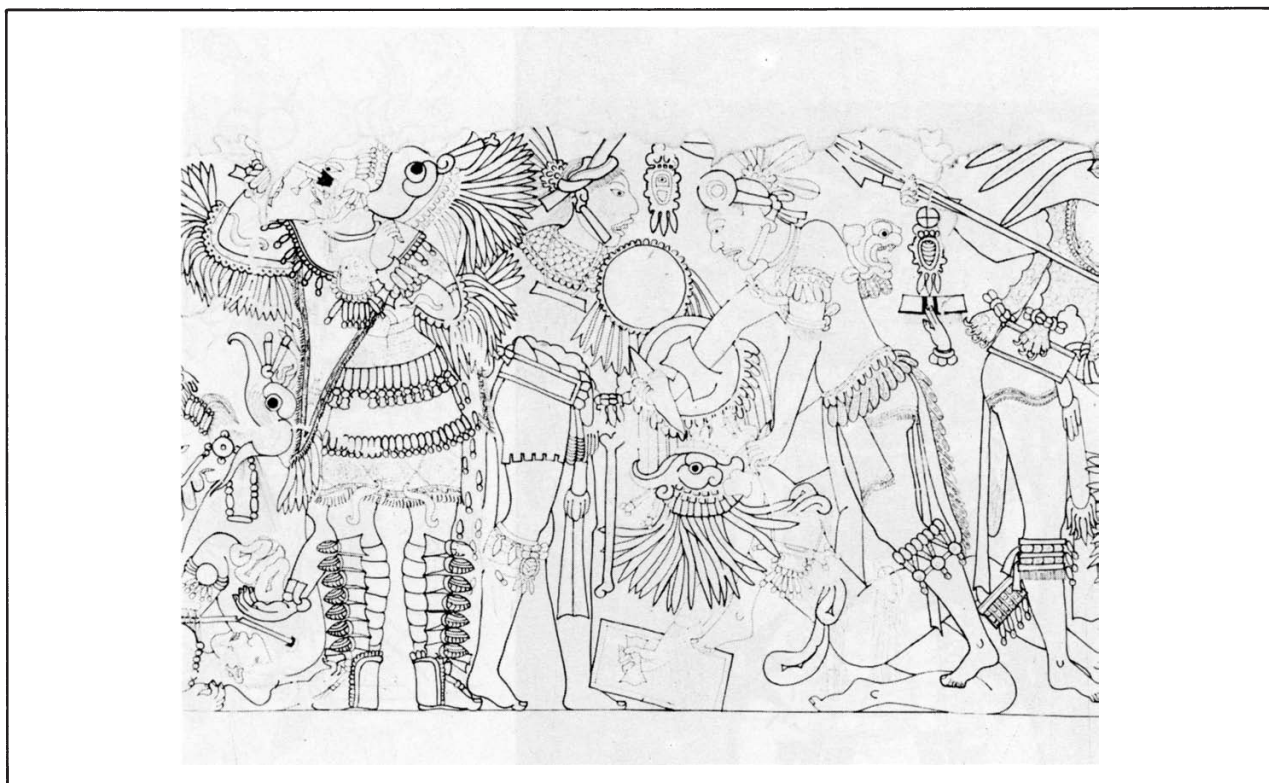


Fig. 6 Cacaxtla, Battle Scene. "Quiet, standing figure," east talud, Building B. Line drawing.

not integrate the formal portrait of a ruler into the turmoil of the battle proper. Our artist knew how to paint a formal Maya stela protrait and proceeded to do so twice, once on each talud. He painted a Maya portrait but with certain incidentals, such as the spear in the cheek of one figure to relate at least partially the formality of that figure to the suggestion of a role in the battle.

The artist used the Maya figural proportions and the Maya pose, including in it the costume and accoutrements of a noble ruler, but the figure on the eastern talud is more alive with its twisted pose. He is not painted so strictly in the guise of a frozen stela figure, and thus one can deduce that this figure represents a person alive at the moment of the battle. Differences of costume, greater and lesser degrees of richness, differing numbers of shell decorations on his legs from those of the other figure, for instance, can represent changes in costume through time or differences in rank.

Another possible but less likely explanation is that the quiet standing figure of the western talud represents a Maya stela and that the battle took place in front of a stela at a Maya site. This stela figure then would represent someone from the past who lived before the battle took place and is thus immortalized in the painting of a polychromed stela portrait. The eastern figure, not painted quite so directly as a stela figure, without the almost-rigid pose, and turning on the vertical axis although wounded in the cheek, might then represent a military leader alive at the time of the battle.

Style: Cacaxtla Contrasted with the Mexican Highlands

In order to understand the Cacaxtla paintings as paintings, not merely as carriers of iconographic messages, one can compare them with other paintings preserved from both the Classic and Postclassic periods to establish the traits foreign to the painting styles of Highland Mexican artists and to determine the nature of these styles in a geographical and temporal distribution.

It is interesting to notice that, in a general sense and basic to an understanding of the styles of Mexican painting, the styles of Classic and Postclassic painting in the Highlands are closely related in terms of several determining factors: the handling of line, the representation of space and the human body in its composition, its proportions, and its lack of a convincing sense of motion.

Line in Teotihuacán Classic painting, as in most Postclassic painting, such as Mixtec manuscript painting and the few Mexica murals that have come down to us, is usually a simple outline, which I have elsewhere called frame line – a *cloison* to enclose an area of color (Robertson 1959:12-33; 1963; 1970; 1972, particularly pp. 255-260; for Teotihuacán, see Séjourné 1966; A. G. Miller 1973b; Pasztory 1976). It is without meaningful variations for expressive purpose. Frame line gives us no implication of the curving lost surfaces of rounded forms, such as arms, legs, or even the head, and results in figures with a static flatness, whereas the more cursive quality of line at Cacaxtla gives us the illusion of a more

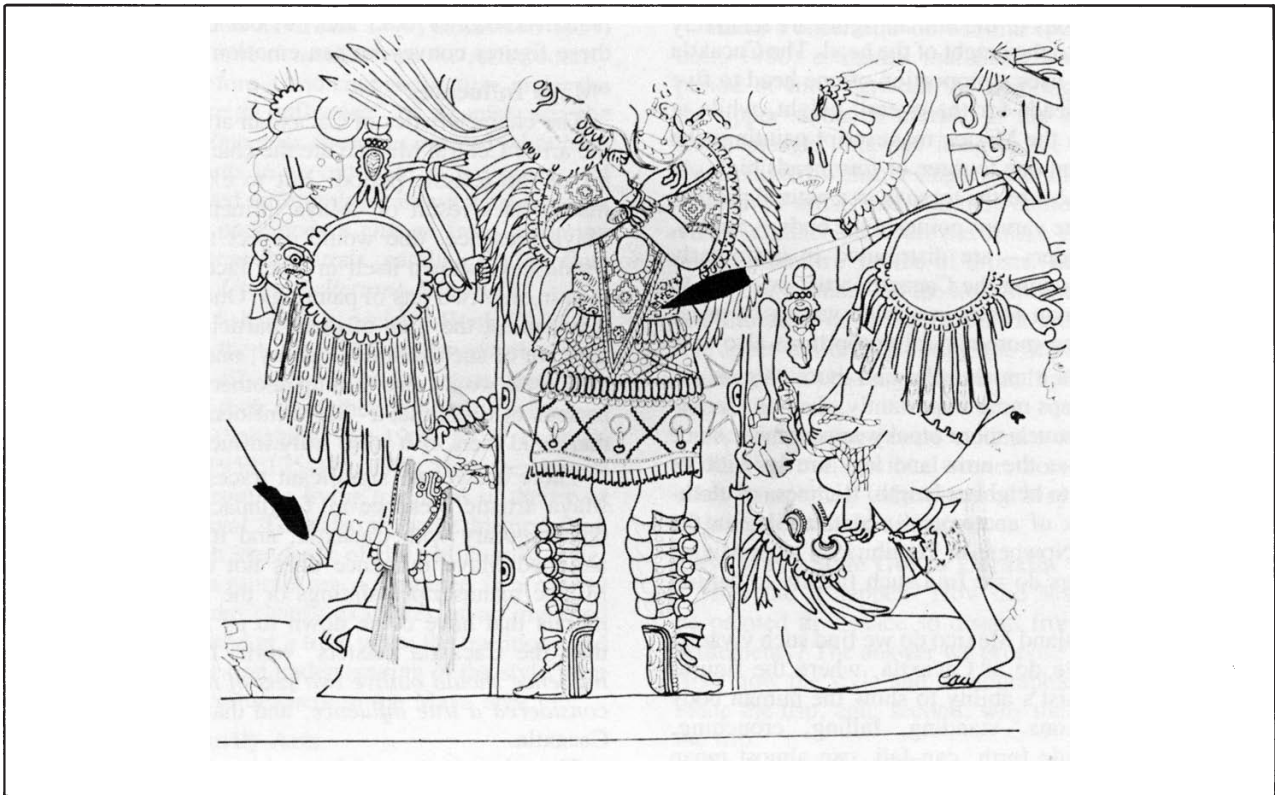


Fig. 7 Cacaxtla, *Battle Scene*. "Quiet, standing figure," east talud, Building B. Line drawing.

truly three-dimensional figure.

Similarly, space in Classic Teotihuacán and in Postclassic painting is essentially two-dimensional. It is a two-dimensional field surrounding the figures, giving no illusion of the third dimension. The figures within this space are also flat and two-dimensional and seem to float like cut-out silhouettes on the blank field of the background of the painting. The figures and ground give us only the impression of the two dimensions of width and height but nothing of the third dimension reaching back into space. The figures are as lacking in the implication of three-dimensional form as the field of the painting is in three-dimensional space.

In the *Cacaxtla State Portraits*, as already indicated, the space in which the figures are painted is, by the implication of the figures themselves, three-dimensional; the three-dimensionality of the figures, in other words, demands that we see a space deep enough to contain them. In the lower murals, the *Battle Scene*, the figures again determine the space in which the action takes place. The presence of one figure in front of another determines that the space is at least two (sometimes three) figures deep. Space this deep, shallow as it is compared with the space of the Bonampak *Battle Scene*, is far deeper than anything we know of from Highland Mexico.

Not only is the plasticity of the human figure at Cacaxtla markedly different from anything else painted in Highland Mexico in either the Classic or Postclassic periods,

but the handling of the figure is also distinct. Parts flow one into the other; the head and neck join the torso in a unified anatomical pattern deriving from nature. Cacaxtlan arms and legs flow in a convincing anatomical fashion into the body, and, because of their natural length, can assume positions and perform actions barred to the additive, unitary figures of Teotihuacán and the Mixtec manuscripts.

In contrast, the human form in both the Classic and Postclassic periods in Highland Mexico is unitary, composed of visually discrete and separable parts. The hands, the arms, the legs, all the parts of the body and of costume are, in effect, composed of distinct, practically standardized units. These separable parts seem to be taken from a series of stock forms and shapes, which can be assembled in a variety of relationships to create conceptual figures, always reserving the integrity of the various constituent parts in the confection of the finished figure. Nowhere in the composition of such figures is there the visualization of the human body – the perceptual figure which we see at Cacaxtla. There is instead always a sort of inventory of parts resulting in a conceptual figure.

These characteristics of the treatment of the human form in Classic painting of the Highlands of Mexico continue into the Postclassic period. In the manuscripts and the few mural paintings that have been preserved to us in the Mixteca-Puebla style and its larger extension, the International Style of the Late Postclassic (Robertson

1970), the proportions of the human figure are relatively short in proportion to the height of the head. The Cacaxtla artist, for instance, uses a proportion of one head to five and a half or six heads for the overall height, while at Teotihuacán and in the Mixtec manuscript paintings the proportion runs from one to three or four heads high. At Cacaxtla the thickness of the torso is in a natural proportion to the height; the various points of the body – ankles, knees, hips, shoulders – are distributed in a similarly natural manner, allowing the Cacaxtla artist or artists to manipulate the human forms in a wide variety of poses and positions. These more natural proportions also give the Cacaxtla figures a much taller and more elegant appearance. But perhaps more importantly, the non-Cacaxtla figures have a much more stocky appearance, since the torsos as well as the arms and legs are so wide or thick in proportion to height or length. Richness of clothing covers the lack of anatomical understanding in the Mixtec examples. Nowhere in Teotihuacán or in Mixtec manuscript paintings do we find such fidelity to natural proportions.

Nowhere in Highland Mexico do we find such vivacity of movement as we do at Cacaxtla, where the figures demonstrate the artist's ability to show the human body in complex positions – standing, falling, crouching. Cacaxtlans can stride forth, can fall, can almost moan in their death agonies. They are truly expressive in a way that figures in Highland Mexican paintings never are. All the while, the figures are presented in an anatomically convincing fashion and follow canons of proportion typically Maya, in sharp contrast to the short stubby cut-outs of the Mexican Highlands.

Being additive and unitary, the Mexican figures do not have the flexibility of movement and motion that we see in the Cacaxtla figures. In properly Mexican figures arms project into space, and feet are placed in the show of a stance of walking, but the artists pay little or no attention to natural anatomy.⁷ Arms project to show relationships between figures but, like the feet and legs, give us signs, not images, for motion. Heads in profile, like the other parts of the body, demonstrate no implication of either motion or emotion. There is no thought, as one looks at the body in such paintings, that the figure was moving before you looked at it and will continue to move when you take your eyes away. This is what we mean by the implication of movement, and this is what one sees in the Cacaxtla murals. There is, of course, no actual movement in a painted figure, but Highland Mexican figures seem to be in a state of frozen movement, whereas in much Maya painting figures seem to be caught, as it were, in the midst of an action.

Nowhere in Highland Mexico do we find such emotional intensity portrayed as we do in the *Battle Scene* at Cacaxtla. In addition to their frozen, hieratic quality Mexican paintings have a strange emotionless quality. None ever shows human characteristics of love, sorrow, or happiness. The nearest one comes to sadness, for instance, in all Mixtec historical manuscript painting is a stylized sign for water – a tear – on the cheek (Codex

Nuttall 1902, 1975:83 and 84) but in no other way do these figures convey human emotion.

“Maya Influences”

The characteristics of Cacaxtlan art that are foreign to the art of Central Mexico are the characteristics of Maya art of the Classic period. But to explain the Cacaxtla murals as a result of “Maya influence” rather than of Maya presence, one would expect that such influence would have shown itself in other facets of Cacaxtlan art than in only two sets of paintings. One would also expect it to outlast the time of these particular paintings. Since they are of such stunning quality, one would expect that their style would also turn up at other places and at other periods of time, that a “Maya influence” would not stop there and then, if it were truly influential.

There are yet no significant traces of a high level of Maya artistic presence in Teotihuacán either before or contemporary with Cacaxtla, and it is certain that the assumed Maya influence does not carry over into the Mixtec manuscript paintings or the few Mexica period murals that have come down to us from a period later than the Cacaxtla masters' work. In other words, *an influence should outlive two sets of murals, if it is to be considered a true influence*, and that did not happen at Cacaxtla.

There is a demonstrable continuum in terms of artistic style in Highland Mexican painting running through the Classic and Postclassic periods and lasting right up to the Spanish Conquest. The Cacaxtla artists without doubt break into this continuum, but it is important to remember that they left no other contemporary impact. They derived from nothing before and left no trace behind in the Mexican Highlands.

The Cacaxtla Murals: Examples of True Maya Style

At Cacaxtla the quality of draftsmanship is so high and the understanding of how to paint the forms of costume and other incidentals and the rendering of human anatomy so well understood that we must suppose these paintings were done by an artist or artists who lived at a time when the Maya Classic style of painting was still flourishing vigorously (ca. A.D. 900). These are done in no “revival style” as paintings attempting to recreate the lost past of their artists, relying on archaeological or antiquarian investigations and interests. Were they to have been painted at a remove in time from the living tradition they represent, they would give evidence of a falling from the high standards of excellence of the Classic style and its traditions.

As a demonstration, let us consider a potential parallel in Mexican Early Colonial manuscript painting. The *Codex Borbonicus* was painted when the high style of pre-Hispanic Aztec manuscript painting was still remembered and cultivated and shows the traits of the courtly associations of its artists (*Codex Borbonicus* 1974; Robertson 1959:86-93). The *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, however, painted a generation or even two after the Spanish cultural conquest, shows the disintegration and erosion of the high style of pre-Hispanic manuscript paint-

ing (*Codex Telleriano Remensis* 1899; Robertson 1959: 107-115). *Codex Borbonicus* shows us the Aztec courtly manuscript style before it had changed in time under the impact of the “foreign influence” of Spanish art; the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* shows us instead what happens when one paints in an old style in the process of dying out, or, phrased differently, it shows what happens when a high style undergoes a change from a foreign influence. The Cacaxtla murals parallel *Codex Borbonicus* rather than *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*.

In the works of Sahagún, especially Book IX of the *Codex Florentino*, there are clear evidences of a conscious “Aztec-revival” style where the artists attempt to paint in the style of their forefathers trying to revive past and dead traditions (Sahagún 1950-1969, pt. X, book IX [1959]; Robertson 1959:175-176, 178). Here they betray their own remove from the living traditions of their past in this nativistic revival. They also show the drastic falling away from the high standards of the old courtly style. Surely the Cacaxtla murals are not painted in a revival style. Rather they are clearly examples of an imported courtly style, imported at a time when the traditions and the basic knowledge and understanding of the style were still alive and well somewhere in the Maya area.

Cacaxtla: The Courtly Arts

We consider the paintings of Cacaxtla to be examples of the courtly arts of the Maya transmitted to the non-Maya area of Cacaxtla. “Courtly arts,” a phrase we take from the study of the history of European art, refers to what one considers in anthropological terms to be the arts of the ruling elites. Our definition of the courtly arts is that they are created by artists patronized by the courts, that is, by the groups of rulers. They are characterized by an excellence of technical skill in terms of their own aesthetics and their elaborate and often recondite iconographical content. In the case of Cacaxtla, the paintings are, by their very location, courtly. They flank entrances and stairways leading into the palatial, even regal buildings of the site.

Other examples of European courtly arts are more non-public and use rich and rare materials – silver, gold, silk, pearls, and precious stones – the paintings, sculptures, and bibelots of the ruler and members of his court. For the New World, Aztec and Mixtec manuscripts, gold jewelry, feather mosaics, carved bone, and jade immediately come to mind.

Having established that the Cacaxtla murals are high examples of courtly art, an explanation of how they came to be painted at this particular site is surely called for. If the painters existed in the ambient of courtly society and patronage, then we must assume relations between the rulers of Cacaxtla and high levels of patronage in a Maya city or cities. We must assume that there were Maya centers in close enough contact to have sent painters to Cacaxtla or that Cacaxtla was in close enough contact to have requested painters be sent to them. We posit that Maya artists actually worked on the walls and taluds of Cacaxtla.

Marta Foncerrada de Molina (personal communication, 1980) estimates that there was a relatively short period of time between the paintings of the lower and the upper suites of murals. If the length of time were short enough, one can imagine the two sets of murals were painted within a single generation by a single artist or team of artists and that they demonstrate a strong and viable contact between the rulers of Cacaxtla and the as-yet-unknown source of artists. In any event the first painter or painters did the lower murals, the *Battle Scene*, and the same or another artist or artists worked later on the upper building painting the *State Portraits*. George Kubler (1980) has suggested a multiplicity of artists working at Cacaxtla.

As of now there is no evidence of other appearances of Maya art on the local scene, nor do there seem to be other compelling indications of Maya presence in terms of pottery or other artifacts.

How Maya Style Got to Cacaxtla

How did it happen? How did Maya murals come to be painted in a place so distant from the nearest Maya settlements? The answer we propose comes in two parts: first, how the style and iconographic details could have made the trip, and, second, why the artist himself made the trip.

Frank Sanders (1977) has recently published evidence, based on the study of Merle Greene Robertson’s rubbings, that the Maya sculptors of Seibal used patterns in making low-relief sculpture. These patterns could have been made of paper, leather, parchment, or even cloth. Paper is the most likely, since parchment or leather would have been unwieldy to handle, and hides of even the largest mammals of the Maya area would have been too small to use unless pieced together. Cloth has too much of a tendency to stretch and to warp, distorting the design.

Arthur Miller (1973b:32-35) has similarly demonstrated the use of patterns in laying out the murals of the Classic period at Teotihuacán, although he does not specify the materials he thinks were used in making the patterns.

Merle Green Robertson (1975, especially p. 451) has shown the use of wooden molds and patterns in laying out the medallions of the Palace at Palenque. She postulates the use of a more portable paper or hide pattern for some of the polychromed stucco pier figures at the Temple of the Inscriptions and the piers of the Palace.

Architectural mosaics from the Puuc area and from Mitla present us with circumstantial evidence beyond mere supposition that patterns with almost mathematical precision were used in laying out mosaics in these two areas in the Classic and Postclassic periods.

We do not propose that the murals of Cacaxtla were made entirely from patterns, but we do propose the possibility that some sort of a collection of patterns could have been brought by artists who worked at Cacaxtla from their place of origin in the Maya area.

If this supposition be correct, then patterns of the type used at Seibal, at Teotihuacán, and at Palenque could

have been carried by Maya artists to Cacaxtla as cartoons for completed paintings, as *aide-memoire* sketches, or as models for complex details of costume or iconographic details. This would parallel the European practice of the Late-Gothic architect Villard de Honnecourt and the Renaissance painter Jacopo Bellini, who had notebooks filled with ideas as memory banks and collections of iconographic and formal motifs to be drawn upon when needed. needed.

Forms and shapes and even separate elements of a complex iconography can be carried physically as patterns, but one must remember that artistic ideas can also be carried in the mind, that memory of earlier training and experiences can be as efficient a vehicle for transmitting ideas and even details as the physical, tangible pattern.

We must also remember an important fact in this consideration of the possible use of patterns. If sketches or drawings made by one artist working in his own personal style are used by another artist working in another personal style and coming from a separate and distinct tradition, the result is likely to be a series of misunderstandings of both form and content. The Chinese Pagoda at Kew in England and the famous design of the "Blue Willow Plate" show us how ideas, motifs, and techniques of the architect or the draftsman suffered a sea change. No one would ever doubt their Englishness nor attribute them to Chinese artists. Other examples are abundant – Van Gogh's use of Japanese prints, Frank Lloyd Wright's use of Maya decorative themes – all showing the differences between authentic style and derivative style. On these grounds then we affirm that the murals of Cacaxtla are the authentic work of Maya artists, not painted in a derivative style.

We must remember too that when an artist moves with patterns in hand, ideas in the mind, or both, he can transfer a style intact. When patterns move alone, without the artist who made them or who at least understands them, a style does not move intact. Perhaps in the latter case the patterns or models could be considered to serve as the vehicles for the transfer of a "foreign influence," not of a style.

Having demonstrated the movement of a style, we must answer the next question. Why did an artist or artists belonging to Maya courtly circles make such a move? The Maya artist could have made the move to the north and west of his own volition; possibly there was no work for him at home, but there was at Cacaxtla. Or he could have been sent to Cacaxtla by his own ruler to work for the ruler of Cacaxtla. Or the ruler of Cacaxtla could have sent for him. These possibilities hinge on the recognition by Cacaxtlans that his abilities and skills as an artist were superior to those of their own local artists. Since we have already established the paintings as examples of courtly art, such intercommunication between Maya and Cacaxtlan rulers would not be unexpected. We can assume that the rulers functioned not only as patrons but even played roles in the scenario and iconographic content of the paintings.⁸

The chronology of Cacaxtla remains an unsolved problem. If the murals were painted late enough (or early enough), they could represent the work of Maya artists dispersed by troubles at home in connection with the factors that brought about the "Maya Collapse."

It is interesting to note that in the history of the art of the New World during the whole Colonial period, no first-rate, highly recognized European artist ever came to the Americas on his own volition. After all, if a man is successful, rich, and recognized as a major artist in Seville, Lisbon, Paris, or London, why should he brave the risks and uncomfortable chances of a transatlantic voyage to come to an uncertain future here? And why should the comparable Maya artist go as far afield as Cacaxtla from a Maya center where he was surely functioning in his society as a powerful artist of the highest rank?

We can formulate the principle that *successful artists seldom if ever move to another place on their own volition when they are highly recognized at home*. There are times, of course, when recognized and established artists do move, and it turns out that in general these moves are made upon the request of some potential patron of power and wealth. We think of Leonardo da Vinci called to the Loire Valley by Francis I of France, of Bernini brought to Paris by Louis XIV to design the royal palace of the Louvre, and Michelangelo working in Rome for Pope Julius II. We can also call to mind Jan Van Eyck and Peter Paul Rubens, artists who on occasion even played roles in international diplomacy. In all these cases the religion was the same, the journey not excessive, and the language similar if not the same. However, the example of Florentine *pietra-dura* workers who worked on the Taj Mahal is another interesting case. Here there was a difference of religion, a long and arduous journey, and an alien language.

The Italians in Russia

In the history of Russian art we find a more striking parallel to the case of Cacaxtla and its Maya artist or artists. Here we have the phenomenon of rulers who imported foreign artists and foreign styles, which left only a transitory impact on Russian art, followed at a later period by an example of a true foreign influence which changed the art of the country and dominated it.

The Tsar Ivan III, Great Prince of Moscow, married the Greek princess, Zoë Palaeologa, niece of the last Byzantine Emperor, ward of the Pope.⁹ She was reared in the Vatican and was thus quite well informed about the developing art of the Italian Renaissance. She arrived in Moscow in 1472. Soon after, her husband sent emissaries to persuade Italian artists and craftsmen to come to Russia to erect churches and palaces and to teach his own people. This is a clear example of courtly interaction and its effect on the arts.

In the year 1471, the Tsar had commissioned two Russian architects, Miskin and Krivtsov, to build in the Moscow Kremlin a new masonry church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin, to replace an earlier wooden

one. An earthquake in 1474 brought down the walls of the new church, and it lay in ruins. The Tsar then called in a renowned Italian architect and engineer, Aristotele Fioravanti from Bologna, a sometime papal city, to design and rebuild his new church, because the Italian was known to be more skilled in masonry construction than his own local people. The Bolognese architect arrived in Moscow in 1475 and was ordered by the Tsar to repeat the general *ordonnance* of the Church of the Dormition in Vladimir, of which the Moscow church was to be considered the mightier successor. In other words, the courtly patron invited the foreign architect because of his greater skill and also called the tune, as it were, in terms of certain specific aspects of the design of the building.

Is this not like Cacaxtla? An artist from an area of greater artistic skill paints a picture (rather than building a church) in his own style, but takes orders from the patron as well. He puts in Highland Mexican glyphs and signs but leaves out things of no interest to the patron, things that he would naturally have put in such a painting had it been painted in the Maya area – Maya calendrical and name glyphs – putting in, instead, those from the Highland traditions of his patron.

In both cases, the distance the artist traveled was great; the religion was different, and so was the language. The motivation for the invitation was similar – the needs of a distant place with an admittedly lower level of artistic and technological skill. In both cases we have a foreign artist working in what to him must have seemed a peripheral or provincial area so far as his art – architecture in the one case and mural painting in the other – was concerned.

The later history of the art of Russia seems to consist of what I would consider a series of waves of “foreign influences” (Hamilton 1975:175-232). In the eighteenth century a succession of Italian architects inundated Petrograd (alias Leningrad). At this time the foreign influence was truly a lasting influence. Quarenghi, Rastrelli, Rinaldi, and even a Scotsman, Cameron, changed the architecture of Russia. They represent a massive foreign influence to such an extent that the Baroque style they imported and the ensuing Neoclassicism made Russian architecture truly a part of the international styles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After this overwhelming wave of foreign influence Russia architecture has never again been outside the orbit of European architecture.

There is no evidence that Cacaxtla or the Central Mexican Highlands ever became part of the orbit of Maya art once the Cacaxtla muralists left. The stelae figures, for instance, do not seem to lead to either other paintings of stelae or stelae of the Maya type being erected in the Mexican Highlands.¹⁰ This is the difference between the effect of a visiting artist and truly enduring foreign influence.

One could be pilloried for suggesting that a dynastic marriage brought a Maya painter or painters to Cacaxtla, especially since there is no evidence either for or against

such a marriage. Therefore, I will not propose a foreign marriage to fill out the fifteenth century Russian parallel. We must remember, however, that such a possibility is not improbable in terms of Mesoamerican practice. The Codex Xolotl (Dibble 1951), for instance, also from Highland Mexico, shows that the Chichimecs learned from the Toltec ladies they married how to cook meat, grow their food, arrange their hair in Toltec fashion, wear white cotton garments, move out of their caves, and build houses. The Chichimecs were not at all above accepting this foreign influence from their more civilized neighbors and Toltec in-laws and the wives of their parvenu marriages.

Is it not likely that the rulers of Cacaxtla were also eager to take advantage of the superior artists who lived south and east of them and thus, like the fifteenth-century Russians, resorted to importing them? We can say on the basis of what has been published of the archaeology of Cacaxtla that the Cacaxtlans were not influenced by their cultural betters and that, unlike the Chichimecs who became Toltecized, the Cacaxtlans never became Mayanized.¹¹

Conclusion

The Maya sites, like Cacaxtla, were rich and complex. One expects interactions between them to occur on several levels if they are direct neighbors, but such interactions can take place even at relatively great distances. Such interrelations can occur in the buying and selling we call trade, the military interactions we call war, what we would call diplomatic relations, and, of course, at the level of religion, whether they share a single religion or each has its own religion. Interaction at the level of trade can be documented by remains of pottery and other imperishable artifacts found in the reciprocal sites. Interaction at the level of war, diplomacy, and religion is more difficult to document. How, for instance, would one document the religious interaction of Protestant England and Catholic Spain in the sixteenth century on the basis of only the artifacts likely to come to light in an archaeological excavation?

For the study of history, of religion, and of iconography, the Cacaxtla murals take on a greater importance, now that we have established the fact that they were painted by Maya artists. The only parallel to Cacaxtla coming to mind is the Quetzalcoatl Pyramid of Xochicalco with its clearly Maya-style sculptures, but it also has no forerunners nor any known progeny.

The Cacaxtla murals allow us to document these interactions on a human scale and at a human level rather than merely in terms of hypothetical broad, massive historical movements of peoples and ideas, sweeping across space, ebbing and flowing like tides through Mesoamerica toward the end of the Classic period. One of the potential weaknesses in such cosmic hypothetical interpretations of archaeological history is that the human carriers of change are lost. There are no heroes of culture, no great artists. In such interpretations there are no men who do things of their own free will. Actually there are

no men. History is merely a series of movements, disembodied, without people, without blood, and without humanity. Cacaxtla allows us to introduce the man as artist into the processes of history. Since the Cacaxtla murals were painted by Maya artists and not by a disembodied "Maya influence," we have been able to introduce human beings into the creative processes of the Late Classic period.

Notes

¹ I wish to thank the archaeologists Diana López de Molina and Daniel Molina for the courtesy they extended to me and a group of North American professors I was leading on a field trip in January 1977. This field trip was made in connection with a National Endowment for the Humanities program, Fellowships in Residence for College Teachers, "The Art of Pre-Columbian and Colonial Latin America," held at Tulane University, under my direction, during the academic year 1976-1977.

An early announcement of the finds at Cacaxtla was "El Mural de Cacaxtla," *Tiempo: semanario de la vida y la verdad*, tomo LXVIII, num. 1753, Mexico, 8 de diciembre, 1975, pp. 56-59. The first scholarly publications recording the discovery of Cacaxtla were: Abascal, Dávila, Schmidt, and Z. de Dávila 1976, and López de Molina and Molina 1976. Other scholarly publications include: Foncerrada de Molina 1976b, 1978a, 1978b, 1979a, 1979b, 1980; López de Molina 1977, 1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1979c; Molina 1978, 1979; Lombardo de Ruiz 1979; Melgarejo Vivanco 1979; and Kubler 1980.

² For Maya painting, see Quirarte 1964; Kubler 1975 [1962]; Toscano 1944; Cohodas 1978. For Teotihuacán painting, see Séjourné 1966; A. G. Miller 1973b; Pasztory 1976.

¹¹ No evidence of Maya pottery survives at Cacaxtla, a strong supporting datum for our explanation of moving artists rather than, for instance, a Maya trading post or Maya *barrio* at Cacaxtla.

³ I want to thank Merle Greene Robertson for this calculation.

⁴ Although referred to in the singular from now on in this essay, there may be two battles represented; see above. The first popular publication of the Cacaxtla Battle Scene was in *Tiempo*, Mexico, 25 de octubre, 1976, p. 5ff. See also Foncerrada de Molina 1978a, and López de Molina 1977.

⁵ Foncerrada de Molina clarified this detail for me during conversations at the Cuarta Mesa Redonda de Palenque, June 8-14, 1980. This is the only concrete relation, slight as it is, that either of the "quiet, standing figures" has to the battle raging before him.

⁶ The great compendium and study of Maya stela sculpture still remains that of Proskouriakoff 1950. Haberland 1953, is a prime source for the study of individual iconographic motifs in their geographical distribution.

⁷ A single exception to any general statements about the style of Teotihuacán painting is the "Earthly Paradise" at Tepantitla. See Pasztory 1976; A. G. Miller 1973b.

⁸ In any event, these Maya artists, being courtly painters, should not be mistaken for a Maya equivalent of the itinerant New England limner of our Colonial period, who was essentially a folk or popular artist.

⁹ All references to fifteenth-century Russian art derive from Hamilton 1975. Here, see pp. 130-137.

¹⁰ If this interpretation be accepted, then the Cacaxtla stela figures take on greater significance. They give us clues to the polychromy of Maya stela.

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Fourth Palenque Round Table, 1980

**General Editor
Volume Editor**

**Merle Greene Robertson
Elizabeth P. Benson**

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