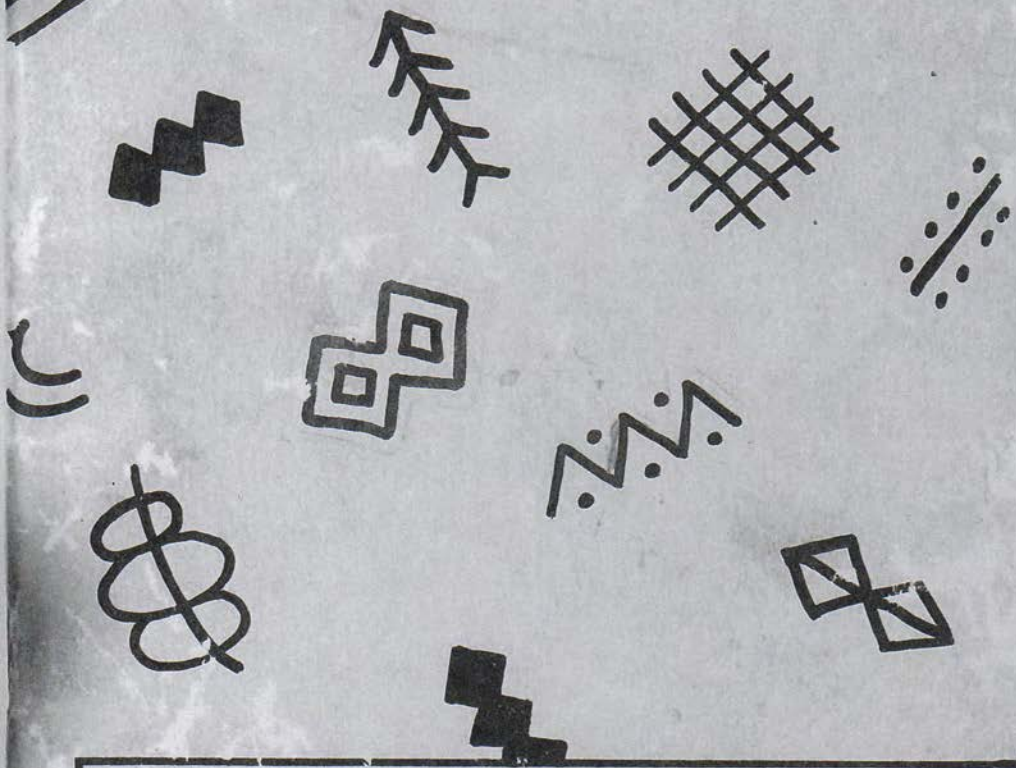
EL MUSEO



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MUSEUM OF MAN - SAN DIEGO CALIF.

CARLOS VIERRA, PAINTER OF MAYAN CITIES

By Wilmer B. Shields

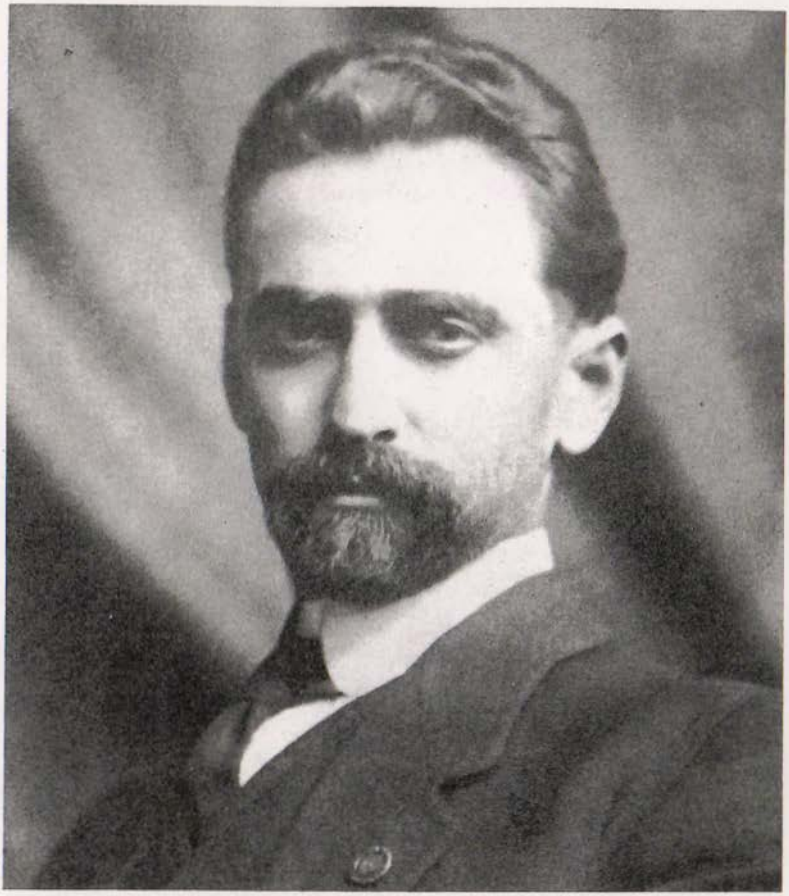
In the forty-two years since the doors of the California Building in Balboa Park (now the home of the Museum of Man) were opened to the public, thousands of vistors have had their imaginations stirred by the impressive replicas, exact in size and detail, of Maya monoliths in the rotunda. Smaller models of palaces, temples and pyramids have further stimulated wonder over an extinct race of Americans.

Many of these visitors to the California Building then have experienced another heightening of imagination. Raising their eyes from the replicas and models to murals on the walls of the rotunda they have looked, as through "magic casements," upon the very cities where the massive stones — the Great Turtle, The Dragon, the Calendar Stelae — were sacred monuments of daily life, and where the originals of the pyramids were ascended by priests and victims to temples of sacrifice. By the wizardry of an artist's brush, imaginative visitors have seemed to gaze through the solid walls of a twentieth century California building across intervening miles and years to strange buildings of another land and time.

The cities viewed in — or, by illusion, through — the murals are not seen as they were when life flowed at the full through their highways and courts, but as they appeared to Europeans centuries after the last inhabitant was gone and decay had broken the proud buildings and mantled them with tropical plants.

The sensitive visitor is likely to experience a feeling of sadness as he looks at the pictures of these lifeless cities of weathered stone under canopies of insubstantial rain-clouds. Part of this feeling will be due to the story of this vanished civilization and part to the magic of the artist. Who was the wonder-worker whose six murals are actually six windows opening onto the past? The name in the corner of the canvases can be read with difficulty and is not today a familiar one to most visitors. Time, that does not spare races of men, is still less lenient with individuals.

Forty years ago Carlos Vierra and his achievements in many fields of art were known and appreciated throughout the Southwest. When Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, the first director of the San



CARLOS VIERRA

1876 - 1937

Diego Museum, selected his fellow townsman of Santa Fe, New Mexico, to accompany an expedition sponsored by the School of American Archaeology to Central America and Yucatan in the winter of 1913-14, he was not making a random choice. He knew the man, the artist, and his qualifications.

Carlos Vierra was then thirty-seven years of age. From his father, in his young days a sailor out of the Azores, Carlos acquired a love of the sea. His birthplace, Moss Landing in California (near Monterey), made the water accessible to him in his youth and enabled him to win sailboat races in his high school days. His position as staff artist on the Salinas High School paper reveals the early budding of his second love.

After a brief course of art study under Gittardo Piozzoni in San Francisco, Vierra's first love drew him away and he shipped "before the mast" on a five-month voyage around the horn. Before the end of the voyage a serious accident occurred, which blended for him of ill and good. His chest was crushed against a spar by a whipping sail. This ended his sailing life and he again turned to art. At twenty-one he was achieving success as a marine painter when a lung ailment, probably induced by the accident, forced him to seek a dry climate. After a year alone in a mountain cabin in New Mexico, he resumed his career as an artist and helped to found the celebrated artist colony of Santa Fe.

Before his death in 1937, Carlos Vierra's creative development had grown in many directions, and he was recognized as an illustrator for national magazines, for his marine and desert canvases, for a superb series of mission paintings, and for the murals in the Saint Francis auditorium of the New Mexico State Museum, which he helped to complete. He planned and built his own Pueblo-style home in Santa Fe, and designed public buildings there, becoming an authority on the architecture of the Pueblos. Photography was another highly developed interest, including, towards the end of his life, aerial photography. High among his accomplishments, however, must always stand the six murals in the Museum of Man in San Diego.

One of the gaps in the story of the Maya murals is Vierra's experiences with the archaeological expedition. Sketches and notes of the six great Maya cities were made on the ground, and, with one exception, appear on canvas exactly as they did to the

eyes of the artist. The exception is Quirigua, where excavation had not proceeded as far as was indicated in the painting.

On the return of the expedition from Central America in the early months of 1914, work was begun on the murals in Santa Fe and pushed to conclusion. Vierra himself installed them in the California Building in the winter of 1914.

The murals, done in oil on canvases four by thirteen feet in size, bring out the variety and contrast of six of the principal ancient cities of Central America and Yucatan. There, in great diversity of arrangement and architectural style, are the sacred precincts of the Maya religion, for that is what these assemblages of buildings, pyramids and monuments were in Maya life. The pyramids and temples were used in frequent religious rites and the palaces were sanctuaries of the priesthood. The dwellings of the common people, as well as the residences of the nobility, in areas near the great permanent structures, were built of wood, thatch and adobe, and have left no trace.

Vierra has caught the mystery and the melancholy atmosphere of these ruined holy places partly concealed by the dense jungle growth around and on them. In subtle shades of blue, green and grey, the artist has revealed the age-old buildings and towers and pyramids; the luxuriant forest, the sluggish streams and the ever-present rain clouds. With infinite care he has brought out the structural details, the beauty of line, the richness of color in the crumbling work of long-forgotten craftsmen. Buildings and jungle and sky are blended into an harmonious interpretation of the forces of oblivion.

The subjects chosen by Vierra for his six murals are well selected to display not only the widely differing arrangements of the sacred areas but the varied architectural styles and designs. The sites selected for representation are among the largest of the many ruined Maya cities in the region extending from Honduras to Northern Yucatan. The locations also offer a variety of surrounding scenery — lowland jungles, mountain-enclosed valleys and arid uplands.

The picture of Quirigua, one of the most southern of the Maya cities, lying in the valley of the Montagua River in Guatemala, reveals more than the others the dense tropical forest by which so many of the religious centers were engulfed. It seems

See reverse side of photographs for descriptive legends. ➞

QUIRIGUA

Quirigua is located in the southern portion of Guatemala on the flood plain of the Motagua River, between Puerto Barrios and Guatemala City. This is a region of dense tropical vegetation and highly productive soil.

While not impressive architecturally, the remains of temples on terraces of red sandstone are grouped around a great plaza and two smaller rectangular courts. The site is mainly known for its numerous and distinctive sculptured stone monuments. Twelve tall sculptured stelae and four zoomorphs or animal shaped carvings have been discovered there. The largest is Stela E, an elaborately inscribed column 35 feet in total length and weighing 65 tons, being the largest block of stone quarried by the Mayas. Recorded dates at Quirigua extend from early in the eighth century A.D. to early in the ninth, late in the classical period and overlapping the occupation period of Copan.

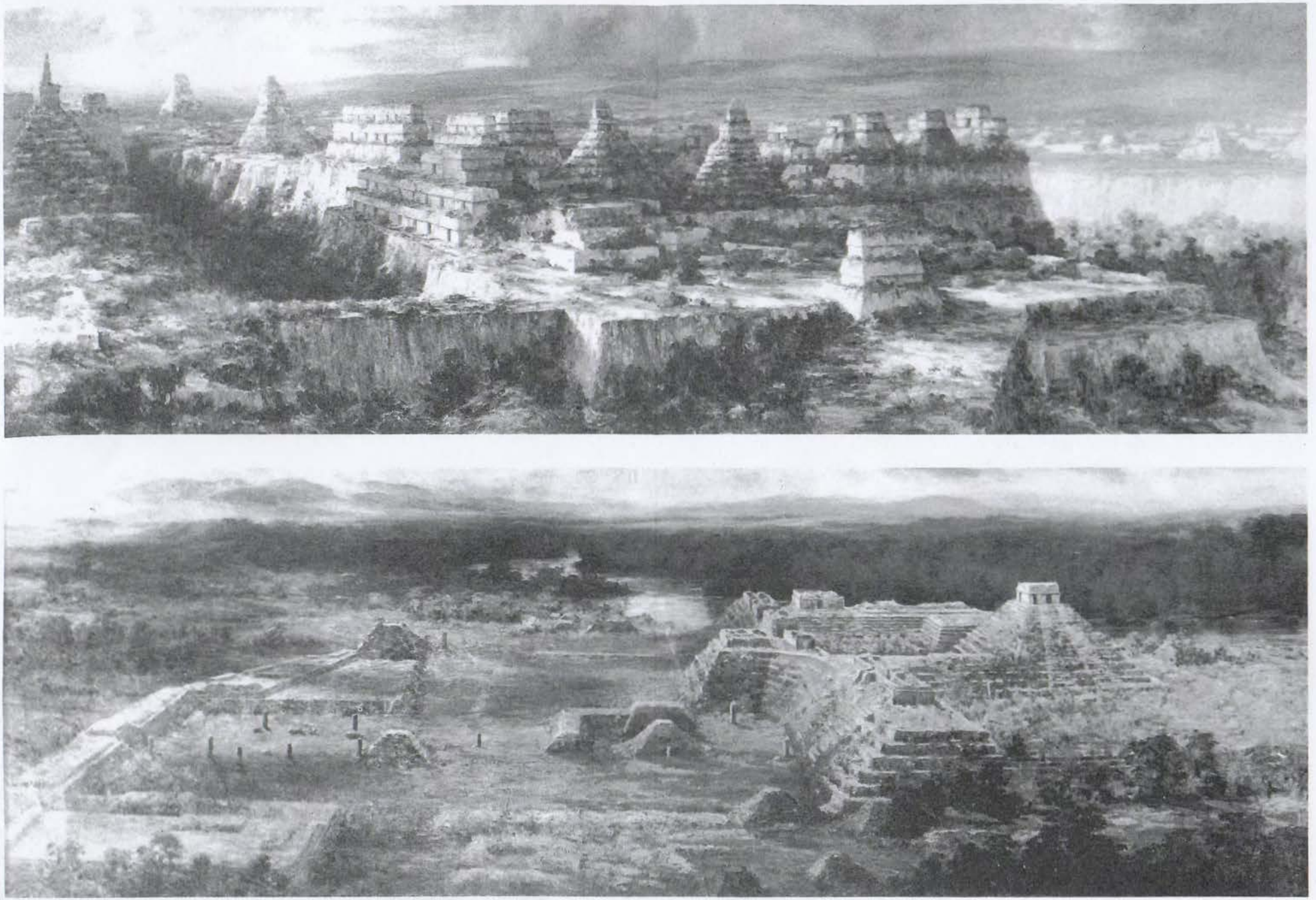
Quirigua seems to have derived much of its artistic inspiration from Copan, although it has a distinctive style in the treatment of its stelae. Zoomorph P is said to be one of the finest of aboriginal American sculptures and has no counterpart elsewhere in design or execution. Replicas of a number of the larger Quirigua stelae are on exhibit at the San Diego Museum of Man, including the large Stela E and Zoomorph P. The latter is a massive seven foot high boulder shaped monument. It bears a date inscription indicating the year 795 A.D.

PALENQUE

Palenque lies in the state of Chiapas, southern Mexico. It is a classical Mayan site with recorded dates indicating occupancy during the seventh and eighth centuries A.D.

Palenque is outstanding for its refinement in design and artistic execution. Elaborate modeling of humans, animals and deities in stucco and delicate architectural details of symbolic significance characterize the structures. One of the buildings, the Temple of the Cross, contains a tablet which bears in low relief a cross symbol that has aroused speculation as to its possible Christian source, although it is unquestionably aboriginal Mayan in origin. In terms of design and delicate detail in bas relief sculpture, Palenque stands forth outstandingly among Mayan cities.

The first exploration of the site was made by Captain Antonio del Rio in 1737. Subsequent explorations were conducted by Waldeck, Stephens, Maudslay and Holmes, and recent important excavations have been directed by Alberto Ruz. Discoveries from 1949 to 1951 led to the finding of an elaborate tomb under the floor of the Temple of Inscriptions. This was a most significant discovery in that this tomb is one of the most elaborate found in the Mayan area and seems to have had the temple built to contain it, a practice very rare among the Mayas. The tomb contained the bejewelled skeleton of a man in a massive sarcophagus with a carefully fitted stone cover.



TIKAL

Tikal is the largest of the known Mayan ruins. It is situated on a limestone plain to the northeast of Lake Peten in the Peten district of Guatemala, a region of intensive development by the classical Mayas. Its inscriptions indicate that Tikal was continuously occupied for a period of 400 years from the fifth to the ninth centuries, A.D., throughout most of the Mayan classical or "Old Empire" period.

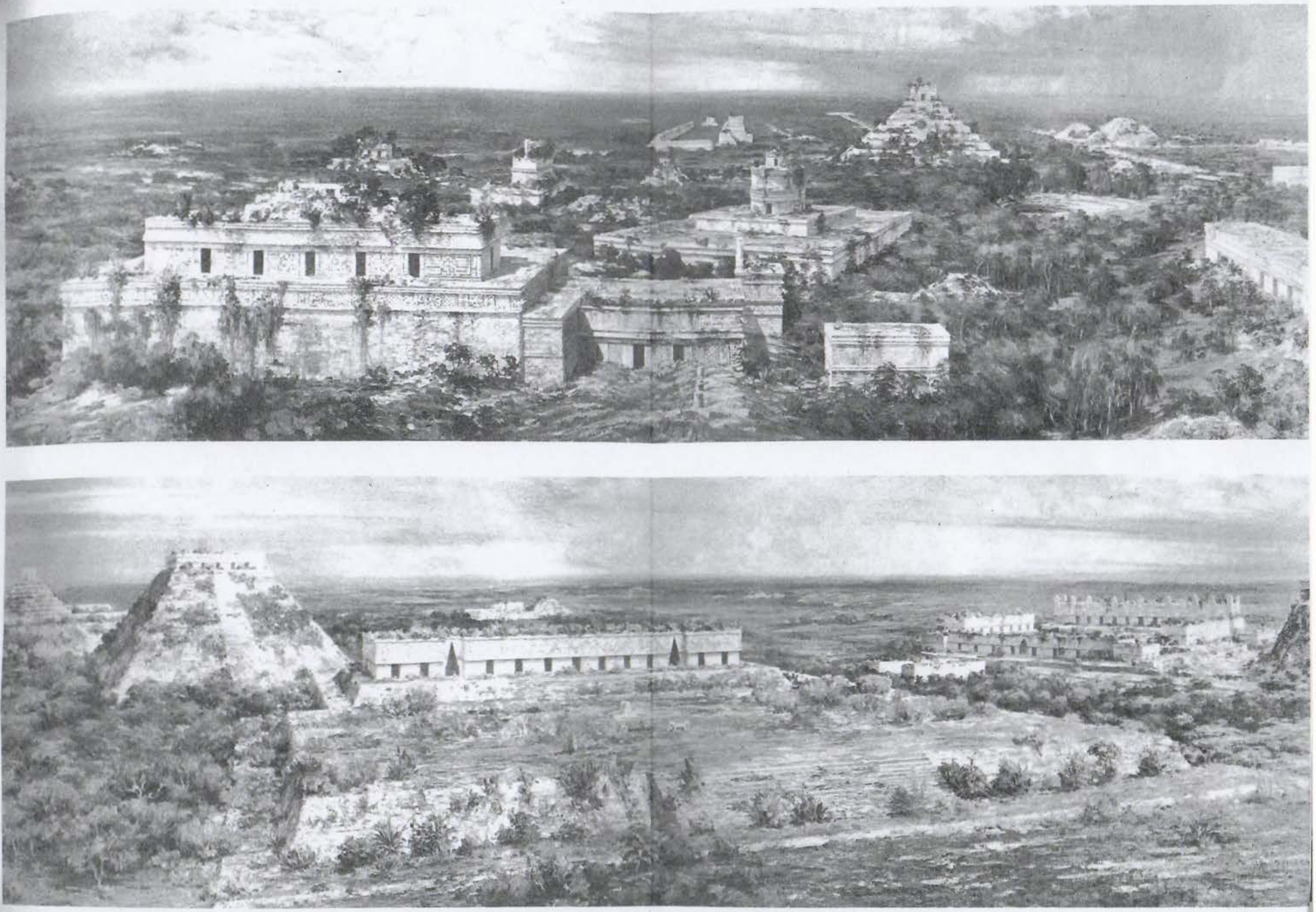
The massive walls and tall structures of Tikal, along with a distinctive architectural style, make it outstanding among the great Maya ceremonial centers both as to size and importance. One of its temples, together with its base, reaches a height of 229 feet, being the tallest of all Mayan structures. The walls of Tikal buildings are so thick that about seven-eighths of their floor space is consumed in wall construction, which has made for good preservation of the edifices.

Because of its remote location, Tikal was explored later than most Mayan sites. Maudslay's account of 1881 gives the first detailed archaeological information about the area and this was based on a short visit of a few days duration. Carved wooden lintels of sapote wood in good state of preservation were of great interest to Maudslay. These, most of which were removed and taken to European museums, depict designs, human figures and glyph sequences in precise and skillful carving which is second to none throughout the world in excellence of technique.

COPAN

Copan, the most southerly of the major Mayan sites, is in northern Honduras, near the Guatemalan border. It is on the banks of the Copan River, a tributary of the Motagua, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The site is 1700 ft. above sea level, being of higher altitude than most of the great Mayan ceremonial centers. Although formerly a region of heavy forestation, the area now is one of low vegetation as a result of extensive timber cutting.

Descriptions of the site were meager and inaccurate until 1839 when the explorations of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood resulted in descriptions, drawings and plans that stimulated the interest and imagination of many Americans and Europeans concerning the "lost cities" of Central America. Systematic archaeological mapping was carried out at Copan in 1885 by the English archaeologist Alfred Percival Maudslay, and this he carried further with excavations in 1894. In 1934 the Carnegie Institution of Washington began an excavation and restoration program in the course of which a regional museum was built at the neighboring village of Ruinas de Copan. The ancient center, which was occupied from the middle of the fifth century A.D. to the beginning of the ninth, was the primary seat of astronomical learning of the classical Mayas. Also the monuments demonstrate outstanding skill and design achievement in the field of sculpture. Copan today is a national monument of the Republic of Honduras, maintained as a place of archaeological interest to lay and scientific visitors.



CHICHEN ITZA

Chichen Itzá was the most important religious center of the Post-Classical or "New Empire" Mayas. It is located about 100 miles from Merida in northeastern Yucatan. The site lies on the flat bush covered expanse of the Yucatan peninsula and is well provided with water by two *cenotes* or natural reservoirs.

Chichen Itzá consists of a large complex of buildings representing two major building phases. It contains seven ball courts, including the largest of these in Middle America, and a unique round astronomical observatory known as the Caracol. Other outstanding features of the architecture are a pyramid-shaped temple, the Castillo, the Temple of the Warriors, and the Court of a Thousand Columns.

Chichen Itzá was at first a provincial city of the Classical Mayan period during the sixth and seventh centuries, A.D., after which it was abandoned for some two and a half centuries. It was reoccupied and saw a second period of activity from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries during the Post-Classical "New Empire." The architecture reflects the two periods in style, the first being more purely Maya and the second showing Toltec influence in the pyramid-shaped structures such as the Castillo and the Temple of the Warriors. These are believed to have been designed by architects trained in the Valley of Mexico, but built by workmen who were Yucatan Mayas.

UXMAL

Uxmal was one of the four major ceremonial centers of the Puuc or hill region of northern Yucatan, the others being Kabah, Sayil and Labna. Within this area a distinctive style of architecture developed along with a religious and political unification. Uxmal emerged through the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, A.D., as a foremost center of architectural development of the Post-Classical or New Empire Mayan civilization. Within it the Puuc architectural style took the form of buildings with plain lower façades surmounted by elaborate relief panels composed of many previously carved and fitted stones. The Nunnery quadrangle at Uxmal provides splendid examples of the skillful and highly aesthetic use of the complex but orderly and impressive mosaic façades. The Palace of the Governor, however, has been considered by Morley and others the most magnificent building of ancient America. This structure is 320 ft. long, 40 ft. wide and 26 ft. high, covering with its supporting platform, an area of five acres. The style of architecture embodied in the Uxmal buildings is quite different from that of Chichen Itzá, which shows strongly its inspiration from the Valley of Mexico in its pyramid shaped structures and extensive use of serpent motifs. The middle of the fifteenth century saw the abandonment of all the large centers of northern Yucatan. Uxmal seems to have had a sudden evacuation rather than a gradual loss of prominence.

to have come into prominence by the sixth century A.D., but it has no written history, nor even tradition, to tell the story of the graceful temples on the massive terraces of red sandstone. Though less impressive architecturally than the other cities of the murals, in sculptured monuments it demonstrates high development. The larger replicas in the rotunda of the Museum are from Quirigua, the originals of which stand in the Great Plaza and the Ceremonial Court, conspicuous in the painting.

Copan, another of the southern cities and also among the earliest, lies near the Guatemalan border in Honduras. It is only thirty miles from Quirigua, though separated from it by a range of mountains. Unlike most of its sister cities, Copan was not built in the lowland forests. It is situated among hills of two thousand feet elevation. A Spanish explorer wrote to his king in 1567 about "the ruins and vestiges of a great population and of superb edifices of skill and splendor." The buildings referred to by the explorer and the wide surrounding plain come out strongly in the mural. To be noted also is the magnificent stairway of the chief pyramid.

Tikal in Guatemala, another early city (founded between 436 and 534 A.D.), is the largest of the six portrayed by Vierra. The principal buildings, mainly temples surmounting pyramidal bases built on three terraced hills, extend over an area of approximately a square mile. The whole forms in the painting a shadowy green foreground against the mauve of the ancient pyramids and temples and the blue-grey tropical sky.

Palenque, in Mexico near the Guatemalan border, like the southern cities, Copan and Quirigua, flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era. Cortez passed without seeing it in the 1540's. Partly freed of concealing vegetation when Vierra sketched it, Palenque offers a magnificent aspect of disintegrating grandeur.

Chichen Itzá, in the northwestern part of the peninsula of Yucatan, was one of the largest and most important of the past classic cities. The main ruins cover an area at least a mile square, with minor structures extending several miles beyond the center.

Architectural monuments of Chichen Itzá (all to be seen in the mural) are the Pyramid of Sacrifice, Place of a Thousand Columns, Ball Court, Temple of the Tigers and Temple of the High Priest's Grave.

Also in Yucatan is Uxmal, in some respects more magnificent than the great religious center of Chichen Itzá. It contains probably the finest example of Maya architecture of the later period. Here, too, Toltec elements are to be noted in the architecture and sculpture. The upper zones of temples and palaces are loaded with ornament and tracery, and façades of vast extent are lavishly decorated with conventionalized motives.

By 890 A.D. the last classic Maya city had ceased to erect stelae and elaborate edifices. In the southern Maya area, six centuries of pyramid building, of amazing temple construction (without knowledge of the true arch), had come to an end. In the years that followed, the dwellers in and around these sacred cities had wholly abandoned them, for reasons still open to surmise. A thousand years washed out the dazzling white and red of stairways, walls and floors, melted the stucco and adobe, loosened the chiseled stones. Grass, vines and trees grew over the finest work of Maya craftsmen and artists.

This is the guise in which Carlos Vierra brings these untenanted cities into seeming actuality in his six great murals on the rotunda walls of the Museum of Man.