



ARCHAEOLOGY

Humor in Indians' Carving Is "Delightful Surprise"

A MASTERPIECE of ancient American art portrayed with a sense of humor!

This discovery from ruins of a Mayan Indian city in Guatemala is intriguing archaeologists, who call it a "delightful surprise."

It appears that America's most highly civilized Indians, the Mayas, were not afraid to satirize themselves and their leaders as they looked in public meetings. Sculptors and painters usually pretend that important occasions go off smoothly, with everybody on his dignity. This Indian sculptor knew otherwise, and dared to play lightly with such a scene, even though his stone art was to adorn the doorway of a lovely and dignified temple.

As a result, modern America can see for itself what it might have suspected, that American audiences over a thousand years ago included the whisperers, the man who pokes the fellow in front, the speaker who mumbles and turns his head. They are all there, portrayed by an unknown sculptor in a scene that some critics have pronounced the finest known specimen of Mayan art in stone.

When the stone lintel was discovered at the ruins of Piedras Negras by an expedition of the University Museum of

the University of Pennsylvania, the carving was badly worn and damaged, but its beauty and importance were evident. Six dates on the lintel in Mayan hieroglyphics were read by Dr. J. Alden Mason of the expedition, and none was later than Dec. 2, 757 A.D.

Now, an attempt to reconstruct the sculpture has been made, by extending in a drawing the broken-off lines of human figures to show what the Indian group was doing in the picture. Marred as it is, the scene retains many cues to poses and costumes that an expert eye can visualize in their original complete state.

Miss M. Louise Baker, an artist with long experience in archaeological art, was asked to work out the problem.

Presenting her drawing, now finished, in the museum's bulletin, Miss Baker vividly points out amusing touches in the Indian's work.

"Two of the trio," she writes, referring first to the left hand group, "forgetful of the occasion, are entirely absorbed in their own argument, while the third, indignantly bracing himself upon outspread feet, gives a vicious bump with his hip (breaking his own obsequious pose for the moment), demanding attention.

MAYAN HUMOR

Although intended for use over the door of a temple, this stone carving pokes fun at public audiences, not so different then from those listening to political speeches this fall. Standing at the left are the inevitable whisperers engrossed in their own argument and the man who reproves them with a nudge of the hip for attention. Seated at the left is the man who pokes his neighbor with a request for information. The neighbor cranes his neck to see over the feather headgear ahead. The deaf man who pulls his ear out to hear better is seated at the right. Notice the toying with beads and tassel.

"The seated figures are very human in manner and detail. The left dignitary gently pokes the friend in front to ask what it is all about. The friend, willing to accommodate, vainly tries to peer over the intervening mass of feathers, bracing himself on his foot, in his effort to see—a taut neckline giving the cue.

"The next man complacently toys with his tassel, his sleek round body oozing contentment. The fourth in line is a lean, capable young man, to whom the chief is evidently directing his words and attention. The fifth, the patriarch of the row, has slumped in the shadow of his master, his fan arrested in mid-air. The sixth, holding his vase upon his knee, absent-mindedly fingers his beads.

"The last man, and the only one whose face was not completely destroyed, has lost interest after a fruitless attempt to hear and his hand has probably dropped from cupping his ear to toying with his ear-plug. (*Turn page.*)

"The group on the right was the most difficult. An attachment for a foot was finally discovered, proving that four figures instead of three were filling the niche. The comparative height of knees gave evidence that two boys, a youth, and a grown attendant comprised the party. Anatomically, it is impossible to group them otherwise."

The lintel is of buff-colored limestone, 24 by 49 inches. The poses of the figures, which have been called by Dr. Mason "Greek in quality," are praised by Miss Baker. The clothing, and the objects held by the Indians, are so exquisitely shown in details that they add to modern knowledge of the ancient Mayan civilization. Even the fingernails on the hand of the chief are perfectly shown in the original, which Miss Baker declares "must be seen to be appreciated."

Science News Letter, August 22, 1936

The artillery plant is so called because of its trick of shooting its seed.

METEOROLOGY

Flights to Study Adverse Polar Weather Conditions

SYSTEMATICALLY and with pains-taking care, Soviet scientists and engineers are tapping the secrets of the frozen Arctic to learn what pitfalls await plans to establish aerial transportation through its far-flung Siberian terrain, its Pacific borders and eventually to reach North America.

The 10,000 mile flight from San Francisco to Moscow via the polar route which was recently started from the United States by the two Soviet airmen, S. Levanevsky and Victor Levchenko, is no mere stunt flight as were some of the trans-Atlantic crossings in the post-Lindbergh era.

With instructions from the Moscow home office, the Soviet pilots frankly

are seeking the "worst" weather the Arctic can offer. If they arrive home safely, the U.S.S.R. will have highly valuable first hand data on the possibilities of Arctic flight.

What few people outside of professional navigators seldom realize is that the shortest route between Moscow and Chicago, for example, is across Polar regions. The Moscow-San Francisco trip would be shortest by going directly over the North Pole.

Although it has yet received little mention, other Soviet aviators unofficially broke, late last month, the world's long-distance airplane record with a non-stop flight of 5,825 miles. Remaining aloft nearly 56 and one-half hours, pilots V. P. Chkalov, G. F. Baydukov and navigator A. V. Belyakov took their heavily-laden, single-motored ANT-25 plane under adverse weather conditions from Moscow to the tiny island of Udd on the Siberia Coast just west of Nikol-aevsk-on-Amur.

Deliberately they flew out over the Barentz Sea and the Arctic Ocean for more than half of the flight.

While the distance covered exceeds the record of 5,657 miles made by the French aviators M. Rossi and P. Codos in 1933, it cannot be entered as official because it was not in a straight line. Take-off and landing points alone are considered in the records. But, after all, the Soviet pilots were seeking knowledge of Arctic conditions, which is more important than records.

Science News Letter, August 22, 1936

A new variety of wheat known as Number 19 has been developed at Cornell University's experiment station, and is pronounced high in yield and very satisfactory in baking tests.

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