

# Splendor in the Dust

Palenque's dazzling examples of Pre-Columbian art are ravaged by El Chichón's fine, voluminous ash

By CHERYL SIMON

Researchers at the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute at Palenque, Mexico, used to fret that visitors would harm the priceless artifacts in the ancient Maya city. "We would say, 'If we could just stop the tourists from putting their hands all over, and from climbing all over things, the monuments would be safe,'" says Tulane University art historian Merle Greene Robertson, an expert on pre-Columbian art.

Now, that concern has paled as the silent ruins respond to the ravaging forces of industry and nature. Two and a half years ago, researchers watched as a tar-like residue built up on the ruins as pollution from oil refineries pervaded the Chiapas Province. Deep pits began to form in carved and sculpted limestone that had survived, nearly unblemished, for more than 1,000 years. Then, last spring, the volcano El Chichón erupted (SN: 5/15/82, p. 326; 8/21/82, p. 120), dumping tons of ash as fine as talcum powder onto the regal monuments. When the rains finally doused the arid countryside, the ash washed away. But as the ash and water solution streamed off of the monuments and ornamental sculptures called friezes, it scoured the stone with Ajax-like zeal. It eroded the limestone carvings and erased the last traces of pigment so critical to interpretation of some of the finest examples of Pre-Columbian art.

"There is nothing you can do. Once the paint is gone, that's it," Robertson says. "The color all had a meaning, so it is very important not only to see the details, but to see what colors those details were."

In the Maya world view, color had "extremely deep meanings," says George

Stuart, an archaeologist with the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C. "They equated the colors with the world directions—east was red, west was black, and so forth—so that when you see a Maya sculpture, painting somehow reflects a deeper meaning. The trouble is that we have so little of it that survives because the color is mostly worn off."

Not all the Maya ruins in the area were affected. Some were shielded from the ash by thick canopies of trees. Others were spared because prevailing winds carried the volcano's debris in another direction. Even at Palenque the damage is uneven. The scouring is most noticeable on slanted surfaces that collected the ash; vertical surfaces probably will not show the effects of the ash for some time, Robertson says.

Palenque, the westernmost of the great Maya cities, exemplified the cultural achievements of the Maya civilization during the Classic Period, which lasted from A.D. 250 to 900. In the past seven years, Robertson has taken upwards of 25,000 photographs of the city's rich display of pyramids and temples, stuccos and friezes. If there is a bright spot in the grim events that have befallen Palenque, it is that the photographic survey was almost complete when El Chichón erupted. After six weeks of trying to work while the materials in the research center's archives and library acquired a maddening film of volcanic dust, Robertson gathered the photos and fled to San Francisco. "It would have been disastrous if this had happened earlier," she says. "I would not have been able to do what I'm doing."

The first of six volumes of the photographic survey will be published this spring by Princeton University Press. □



*Explorer John Lloyd Stevens, in his journey to witness the legendary Maya ruins in Southern Mexico in 1839, described the Palace at Palenque (top) as "unique, extraordinary, and mournfully beautiful." Last April, the ash from the volcano El Chichón covered the structure like a thick blanket that filled every crevice (above). Before the eruption, considerable red pigment, an important element in Maya art, was visible in the sculpture on a slanted wall of the Palace's Eastern Court (right). When the rains mixed the ash with water, the pigment and some surface detail were scoured away (far right).*



Photos: M. Robertson