

A tribute to the 'Greeks of the New World'

Mayan exhibit visits Natural History Museum

By Hunter Drohojowska

The Mayans are one of last mysterious lost civilizations, and that captures people's imagination," said Jon Freshour. "They reached a pinnacle of artistic and intellectual achievement in their architecture, their astronomy, their hieroglyphics, and then by 950 A.D., their civilization was pretty much defunct."

Freshour, 47, is the registrar traveling with the exhibition "Maya: Treasures of an Ancient Civilization," which opens Saturday at the Natural History Museum.

The mystery of the Maya certainly captured the public's imagination when the show opened in Manhattan last April at the American Museum of Natural History, where it drew 22,000 visitors per week.

Although the Mayan exhibition is labeled the "largest and most comprehensive in North America," it is less a blockbuster than a jewel box of marvelous pottery, figurines, jewelry and carved stele.

Pre-Columbian scholar Charles Gallenkamp, who will arrive for Saturday's opening, organized the show, selecting the 257 pieces mostly from museum collections in the Yucatan states of Mexico and in Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. Meanwhile, Freshour and Charles Rozaire, the curator of Pre-Columbian art at the Natural History Museum, were unpacking crates, greeting each object as if it were a Christmas gift.

On the walls of the installation are large black-and-white photographs of the ruins of Mayan palaces and pyramid temples from such sites as Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Palenque, names which may be familiar to tourists of the Yucatan, and from less accessible excavations such as Tikal in Guatemala and Lubaantun in Belize.

The exhibition opens with the Pre-Classic period from 2000 to 300 B.C. and includes seated female effigy vessels, carved stele, jade and shell necklaces, pottery and a stone figure from Guatemala made between 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. As rounded as a baby with his hands crossed over a plump tummy, it was probably influenced by the sculpture of the Olmec tribes in what is now Central Mexico. "We were really lucky to get that piece," enthuses Freshour. "That's one of the rarest of objects owned by the Guatemalans."

The objects and architecture from the Classic era, from 250 to 900

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.



Jon Freshour, left, registrar of the exhibition "Maya: Treasures of an Ancient Civilization," and Charles Rozaire, curator of Pre-Columbian art at the L.A. Natural History Museum, inspect one of the limestone sculptures in the show that opens here Saturday.

A.D., earned the Mayans the reputation of being "the Greeks of the New World." Their cultures were contemporaneous and equally sophisticated though obviously different. Although the Mayans didn't use the wheel, said Freshour, they certainly knew about it and had toys with wheels.

"They used the concept of zero in their mathematics," continued Freshour, "which neither the Greeks nor the Romans had, and which wasn't introduced in Europe until the Middle Ages. Their calendar system was more accurate than ours, too."

The Mayans developed an advanced system of hieroglyphics that still has not been deciphered by archaeologists. It is thought that they were a society of elite intellectuals who studied astronomy and mathematics. They supported a class of accomplished artisans producing evolved forms of pottery and carving. They built a system of roads but had no beasts of burden and no metal. For centuries, they lived as a peaceful, agrarian society. "What is amazing is that they developed as they did in such an inhospitable area, where it is hot, humid, hilly, where the jungle is so defeating."

Freshour points out an early classic tripod vase from the Becan site in the Yucatan etched with the elaborate serpentine Mayan designs. Sitting in the pot is a hollow figure that was found filled with a cache of smaller figures all from the area of Teotihuacan some 500 miles to the west. "This is important because it is one of the first pieces found that established the Mayan had mercantile trade with other peoples," said Freshour.

This contact with other tribes can be seen in the etching and carving on later pottery, sculpture and architecture depicting foreign deities such as Chac, with its long

nose and wide-set eyes, a rain god adopted from the Toltecs.

The Post-Classic period from 950 A.D. to the Spanish conquest in the mid-16th century hints at reasons for the mysterious decline of the Mayan civilization. Rather than a single cause for the disruption of such a successful society, archaeologists today are inclined to believe it was a combination of factors. The most significant could be that contact with other tribes through trade brought new ideas, especially from the warlike Toltecs. A dramatic *chacmool* from between 800 and 900 A.D. was probably used in human sacrifice, a Toltec tradition. This reclining figure of carved stone bears a plate on its belly for offerings, possibly human hearts. (The *chacmools* of Mexico are said to be the inspiration for English artist Henry Moore's sculptures.) Carved or painted images of skulls were also likely influences from the Toltec *tzompantli* or a rack holding the skulls of sacrificial victims.

The influx of new concepts may have upset the existing balance in the society. Freshour says, "The Mayan youngsters' interest in the elite, in religion began to wane. They split up into different principalities and began warring. The elite class lost power. Cities got very large — 50,000 to 70,000 people — it became difficult to bring in food from the outlying areas so it drained the working people. These could be a few reasons for collapse."

The study of the Mayans is called "active archaeology" since so much of their culture is still open to exploration. The first account of the Mayan ruins was published in 1841 by traveler and lawyer John Lloyd Stephens with illustrations by the English artist Frederick Catherwood. But archaeologists are still making discoveries. Freshour points out three effigy vessels from Guatemala that were found just three years ago.

With such items discovered weekly in new sites, there is concern among archaeologists about rampant plundering. In the exhibition catalog there is a written protestation against the looting of excavations and the illegal sales of Pre-Columbian art on the international market. Although Mexico and the other Central American

nations all have stringent laws against such acts, unguarded archaeological sites are often plundered, the objects sold in secret to foreign collectors. To expose the seriousness of the problem, part of the exhibition includes work destroyed by vandals and forgeries. One stele, having survived centuries in the jungle, had its delicate face partially sheared away by thieves trying to saw away its back making it lighter to transport. Other photographs show a stele that was broken into pieces and taken out of the country. It was recovered and reassembled and is included in the exhibition but missing a portion that is now in the collection of a Texas museum.

"Mayan stele are what we would term pages in a history book," explained Freshour. "They are put up 1-2-3-4-5 in a specific context. Removing one is like tearing a page out of a history book. That's what we're trying to tell people."

The selection of objects in the exhibition was made in accordance with the 1970 UNESCO convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Pieces were chosen from national holdings, registered private collections in Mexico, and pieces accessioned before 1970 into American or Canadian public collections. Although it limited the scope of material in the show, it provided a focus for an often neglected issue. "People think there's no difference for archaeologists between having an object in a U.S. museum or at the original site but context of these things is important," added Freshour.

He nods toward a couple of posters from Belize with the slogan: "Your heritage should not be our souvenir! ... Then ours should not be yours." Next to a picture of a Belizean sneaking away with the arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty is an American tourist surreptitiously buying a Mayan figurine — just like those in the museum.

"Maya: Treasures of an Ancient Civilization" opens Saturday at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 900 Exposition Blvd., L.A., and continues through Nov. 10.