

Alberto Ruz Lhuillier and His Insights into Art

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Abstract In 1952, archaeologist Alberto Ruz received worldwide attention when he discovered the tomb of the Maya ruler K'inich Janaab' Pakal of Palenque. Surprisingly elaborate, it brought unusual works of art to light. Due to its significance, it revolutionized concepts of ancient Maya funeral customs and he spent several years explaining and documenting them. However this did not prevent him from working on various other projects and research. Much of his academic career has been overshadowed by his great discovery. One of these not well-known contributions were his reflections and analysis of Maya art, its

history, and its iconography. He exalted and expanded upon its universal aesthetic values, its numerous styles, forms, and variety of media. This article showcases Ruz's writings, his aesthetic appreciation of art in general, and his expertise in the art history of the ancient Maya.

Keywords Maya archaeology; Alberto Ruz; Maya art; Palenque.

Resumen En 1952, el arqueólogo Alberto Ruz fue objeto de la atención mundial tras descubrir la tumba del gobernante maya de Palenque K'inich Janaab' Pakal. Junto con este monumento inusualmente elaborado se develó la existencia de otras obras de arte poco comunes. Por su trascendencia, que vino a revolucionar la manera de concebir las antiguas costumbres funerarias mayas, Ruz tuvo que pasar años explicando y documentando el hallazgo, lo cual no le impidió seguir trabajando en varios otros proyectos e investigaciones. Buena parte de su trayectoria académica se vio opacada por ese gran descubrimiento. Una de sus aportaciones poco conocidas son sus reflexiones y análisis en torno al arte maya, su historia y su iconografía. Ruz puso de relieve y extendió sus valores estéticos universales, sus múltiples estilos y formas, así como lo diverso de sus medios. Este artículo coloca en el centro los escritos de Ruz, su apreciación estética del arte en general y su experto conocimiento de la historia del arte de los antiguos mayas.

Palabras clave Arqueología maya; Alberto Ruz; arte maya; Palenque.

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Introduction

We begin our story by furnishing the reader with context. In Mexico, the name Alberto Ruz is frequently associated with the ancient Maya culture and its noble creations. This is especially the case when the subject is the Classic Maya site of Palenque, the remarkable tomb that Ruz discovered in 1952, and the physical remains of the tomb occupant that Ruz called “8 Ahaw” or “Uoxoc Ahau.”¹ Today we know his royal title and name—K’inich Janaab’ Pakal—the man who was buried in the belly of the Temple of the Inscriptions. That discovery forever dispelled the belief that the Maya pyramids were only pedestals for temples—they could also hold the burials of sacred lords; thus, Ruz had discovered the most elaborate burial chamber inside a Maya pyramid, built for the specific purpose of containing the sacred body of a king. In that regard, it was like the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. The discovery sparked a keen interest in the ancient Maya, and Ruz’s name became inextricably linked to the discovery. The tomb contained not

1. This name was derived from the first calendar glyph that Ruz saw located on the left side of the edge of the sarcophagus lid; he called him this because he knew it was a custom among the indigenous peoples of the Americas to name their newborns after the day upon which the child was born.

only the bones of the king but an important hieroglyphic inscription, a large carved sarcophagus cover and many iconographic mysteries that aroused the interest of scholars around the world. The context was also astonishing. Inside the heart of the pyramid was a long stairway winding down into a secret vaulted chamber to a tomb covered by a giant, elegantly carved sarcophagus lid in low relief (Schele 2012, 264).

Thanks to the enormous publicity given to this discovery worldwide, it opened the door to understanding the importance of funerary worship in Maya religion; the hieroglyphic inscription around the edge of the lid revealed the value of ancestry as one of the ancient Maya's fundamental principles of social organization and political order. On a more personal level, however, the discovery also motivated Ruz to begin a detailed study of the burial practices of the ancient Maya, resulting in the publication of an article in 1965, and then a book in 1968 called *Costumbres Funerarias de los Antiguos Mayas*.² Thus he became the foremost expert on the subject of Maya burial practices at the time (Fitzsimmons 2009, 2).

Ruz's Broad Interest in the Ancient Maya

The hidden and elaborate tomb he discovered and its worldwide recognition had unanticipated consequences. It overshadowed Ruz's subsequent important, numerous and unique accomplishments. For instance, during his ten years at Palenque, he supervised, excavated, studied, and restored many other buildings besides the Temple of the Inscriptions. According to Molina, the discovery of the royal tomb caused "the vast and impressive achievements of his conservation work" to be overlooked (1978, 7). Ruz was the first of the INAH's 'professional'³ archaeologists (Izquierdo y de la Cueva 1992, 33) to excavate in the Maya region, graduating from the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH) in 1942, being awarded his master's degree in 1945. Before his investigations into the ancient Maya, there were only a few other

2. Ruz's research involved a comprehensive study of grave goods, body orientation, and patterns at various sites throughout the Maya lowlands and his methods were subsequently adopted by others in studies of the ancient Maya as well as at Teotihuacan (see James L. Fitzsimmons, 2009).

3. In this case, the word "professional" refers to one trained by schools associated with INAH.



1. Alberto Ruz, in front of the Temple of the Inscriptions. Photo: Rosa Covarrubias. Archivo Miguel Covarrubias, Arquitectura Maya I, Dibujos, fotografías y recortes. Archivo Miguel Covarrubias, Colecciones Digitales. Universidad de las Américas-Puebla.

Mexicans who worked in Maya archaeology, and they did not have his training or qualifications.⁴

He was tireless in recording his discoveries and ideas, writing and publishing over 130 articles, papers, and books (Schele 2012, 10). His publishing career began in 1944 with his first article and ended with a book that was in press at the time of his death in 1979 and was published in 1981. With a keen eye and sensitive aesthetic appreciation, he studied, evaluated, and eloquently documented the aesthetic values and iconography of the ancient Maya as found in their sculptural creations. From the Copan valley, northwards towards Yucatán, and eastwards to Palenque, he studied and documented their architectural techniques and regional styles, making them a part of universal art history.⁵ He believed they should be placed at the same level and quality as the artistic works of West and East (1950).

In addition, Ruz championed the living Maya, at a time when they were often depicted as an inferior race. He worked toward protecting their material heritage so as to reinstate their importance as an advanced civilization in science and arts when others were questioning this.⁶

The Case for Ruz as an Art Historian and his Interest in Art History

Though Ruz was trained as an archaeologist, he had an innate understanding of ancient Mesoamerican iconography and the visual arts in general. It is evident in his writing that he possessed the skills of an art historian and displayed insight into understanding the visual messages that ancient art communicates. The case could be made that this understanding was unusual for a “dirt archaeologist.”

4. This statement is confirmed by a quick survey of the INAH *Índice del Archivo Técnico* (Moll 1982), a document that lists every archaeological report that INAH has in its archive. There are few reports written by Mexican Mayanists and no archaeologists certified by INAH before Ruz.

5. In addition to being the archaeological director at the site of Palenque, Ruz was given the responsibility of supervising archaeological sites in the Southwest Region, which included the states of Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatán, so for almost 10 years, he had a unique opportunity to travel and study the entire Maya region of Mexico (Schele 2012, 115).

6. For instance, Paul Kirchhoff proposed that this knowledge was imported from the Old World, along with the stepped pyramid (1946, 108).

He was born in Paris, a city of many art museums, and spent his first 18-19 years there (Schele 2012, 65). Paris has attracted artists and art admirers from all over Europe and worldwide who seek to educate and immerse themselves in its galleries, museums, public architecture and sculpture covering many hundreds of years. He lived in Paris for the first part of his life, and thus we can assume that art appreciation was an essential part of his childhood and youth. He eventually immigrated to Cuba, his father's country of origin, and from there to Mexico, but returned to Paris many times during his lifetime.

His 1945 visit to Paris came after he received his master's at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH) in Mexico. He was granted a scholarship that extended from December 1945 to October 1946 by the French Cultural Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Instituto Francés de América Latina (de León Orozco 1981; Lhuillier 1947, 2). This enabled him to establish an academic foundation for his knowledge of art history by completing courses at three French institutions. One was at the Institut d'Ethnographie, part of the Musée de l'Homme where he took a course in "American Origins". He also attended the Ecole du Louvre—where one of the courses he took was about Indo-Chinese and East Indian Champa art⁷—and the Institut des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations) where he took a class in the history of China and Japan (García Moll 2007, 9-10; Ochoa 1981, 396). This training broadened his understanding of ancient art from a worldwide perspective and gave him a unique multicultural insight that he would later use to debate with scholars who claimed that ancient Maya art and architecture were borrowed from Asia.

During this one-year Parisian stay, he had the opportunity to meet French artists and to observe the intellectual climate within which they were operating. In 1947, a few months after his return from France, he published a paper called "Problemas del arte francés moderno." We summarize its contents here as an example of his passionate interest in art; his knowledge of how social class affects art consumption, and his love of intellectual arguments and debates. In that paper, he remarks upon the many newspapers and art magazines in France that specialize in French art, indicating that the public had a strong desire for culture and a natural curiosity about art. And yet, there was an unusual relationship between the artist and the public. There were two major 'schools' of art; one left over from the previous century that painted the world as if it were

7. The Champa people were a prehistoric group that migrated to SE Asia.

a photograph, painting in the 'classical' tradition, and the other school was of the 'avant-garde' that used its imagination and senses to create forms reflecting their current reality. These two groups were antagonistic and "did not miss an opportunity to attack each other" (1947, 2). Those creating the classical variety could rightfully say that, while their public was uneducated in art theory, their admirers accounted for most of the French public. The modern avant-garde, on the other hand, had an audience that was an elite group of "esthetes, snobs and art profiteers" (1947, 2) and rightly believed that the public was simply uninformed about their work, and therefore misunderstood it.

There was much discussion and debate in contemporary French Modern art circles about a rift that developed between modern art and the French public. The Paris weekly *Les Lettres françaises* surveyed artists, writers, and the public in their paper during this time, asking, "Is there a divorce between art and the public? Is there a divorce between art and reality?" (1947, 2). Ruz wrote individual summaries of thirteen famous and not so famous artists who responded to the survey. He offered his point of view, advice, and the pros and cons of each argument. We highlight one such writer/artist named Jean-Richard Bloch, who observed that enjoyment of culture and art is usually dominated by the elite. Still, Bloch stated that in the case of Mexico, the muralist Diego Rivera was able to turn that around. This was because Rivera encountered members of the younger generation in the Mexican government appointed after the 1910 Mexican Revolution who were open to the idea of using mural painting as a type of social work for change. With those same ideas in mind, Ruz concluded his paper by writing

The flourishing of mural painting in Mexico after the 1910 revolution should serve to illustrate and guide the French experience. For a people recently liberated from the remains of feudalism, for millions of Indians and mestizos to whom the land they had cultivated for centuries for the descendants of their conquerors was returned to them; for the workers of [the haciendas /the mines] and the factories, who for the first time received a humane treatment, a mode of artistic expression full of simplicity, vigor and color was born: the Mexican fresco mural. It developed like language in a child, out of organic necessity, because mankind needs to tell other men what he feels and what he thinks, what he loves and what he hates, what he fears and what he hopes for. (Ruz 1947, 5)⁸

8. All translations are by E. Schele, reviewed by Christopher J. Follett.

With this statement, he endorses the essence of Mexican muralism: it was designed to consolidate Mexican identity by establishing links with pre-Hispanic art and the ancestral roots of the country.

In addition to Ruz's passion for art and its ability to create change, he also had a fine eye for iconography and we present it as an example of his knowledge of art history. Here, we offer a summary of his description of the large and intricately carved lid that sealed the top of the sarcophagus of the tomb of the Classic Maya king K'inich Janaab' Pakal (mentioned above). He discovered it in 1952 and since then, many art historians have taken their turn at interpreting the scene in the carving (Stuart and Stuart 2008, 174-175; Schele and Mathews 1998, 110-117; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993), but it is essential to remember that Ruz was the very first scholar to study and write about the lid. When he and his crew found the chamber and its large carving, they thought the tomb was a secret sanctuary with an altar. This was because the lid sat upon a monolithic block and at first they had no idea that the block had been hollowed out and held the king's body. During the few months between the discovery of the chamber and the moment when his crew raised the sarcophagus lid, Ruz wrote and published three different articles about what he had found. One of his most elaborate descriptions of the iconography of the lid (he wrote about it several times) comes from the one published in *Cuadernos Americanos* (Ruz Lhuillier 1952). Because he thought it functioned as an altar, he believed the low relief carving expressed ancient Maya religious beliefs. He immediately saw that the style of the motifs used in the carving matched other sculptures at Palenque, as well as those at other Maya cities—especially the cruciform object that formed the center of the scene, which he noted was also present in the Tablet of the Cross and the Foliated Cross also at Palenque. He gave his iconographic interpretation of the image and its message of the cycle of life and death in prose of great beauty. It is evident from his descriptions and observations that he had studied the writings of the earliest Maya art historians such as Herbert Spinden (1913), Eduard Seler (1901-1902), Charles Bowditch (1910), and Teobert Maler (1901-1903) and incorporated their ideas into his own. But he also read and studied many others that came after them, as can be seen in his art history bibliography from the book *El pueblo maya* (1981, 333-334). Regarding the carving, he brings forth considerable insights that still hold true today, elements such as

the band of hieroglyphics of the stars, which serves as a framework for the composition as the sky is to human existence; the monster of the earth, symbol of the

fatal destiny of all that lives; the cruciform motif, which is sometimes a tree and sometimes the maize plant; finally a bird, which depending on the case may be a macabre vulture, a macaw as a solar representation, or the quetzal. (Ruz Lhuillier 1952, 159)

He believed that the central figure in the carving was being sacrificed, and in return for that sacrifice, a tree of life or a shaft of corn was sprouting, represented by the cruciform—the axis of the image and an object of worship. He noted that the central figure seemed to be falling backward into the jaws of the “earth monster” below. At this point in time (Ruz Lhuillier 1981), he did not know that the identity of the figure on the lid was the same as the individual that he would later discover buried under it. He sincerely admired the artist who composed and carved the central figure—in perhaps the artist’s own image, as can be seen in this passage:

As for the human figure, it bears the peculiar stamp of the Palenque art style, a product of faithful observations of nature, of an absolute technical mastery and of a subtle sensitivity. Despite the dramatic symbolism of the scene, the future victim does not cease to be a man of flesh and blood that the artist drew and carved with love, recreating himself in his creation, translating in flexible and elegant lines his own delicacy and tenderness, his deep human sympathy (Ruz Lhuillier 1952, 163)

In addition to sharing his interpretation of the scene, he also described it in terms of its composition, form, symmetry, and beauty, all sensitive observations from the eyes of a man with knowledge of visual art concepts. He showed how it was divided into overlapping horizontal planes and demonstrated its visual balance. He described how the curved lines of the snake “impose their rhythm, their palpitation of tropical life, exuberant and sensual” (1952, 162). He then placed the object in context, believing that it was an altar where perhaps human beheading took place, in particular because “two beautiful heads modeled in stucco and painted red”⁹ were found under the altar (1952, 162).¹⁰

9. Later it will be proposed by Merle Greene Robertson (1984, 32) that these heads represented Pakal as a teenager and as an adult and were once part of the stucco decoration of one of Palenque’s buildings.

10. As of writing, it is unknown if the lid was ever sampled for the remains of blood that might have been shed upon it.

His Other Observations about Art and the Artist

In the book *El pueblo maya*, published after his death, Ruz included a separate chapter on the “Art of the Ancient Maya” and their cultural aesthetics. He outlined the difficulty of explaining a phenomenon that involves multiple and competing variables found in Maya history and its social and cultural constructs, including local geographic features within their living environment. Changing his scope from the macro to the micro level, he addressed how these factors impact the individual artist: “the creative disposition of the artist is not born from nothingness nor is it of divine origin; it is rather conditioned by the individual circumstances in which the artist has had to live” (Ruz Lhuillier 1981, 205).

This is a rather pragmatic approach to explaining how individual artists developed their aesthetic viewpoint. He continued that pragmatism when, in the same chapter, he described art as a social product that concerns the whole global humanity from which it is born. He also discussed how the production of art economically binds the social classes together and how the working majority produced items for the consumption of the elite minority. “Thus, the artist is utilized by the ruling class so that he may contribute to the maintenance of the system and the intensification of its power”¹¹ (Ruz Lhuillier 1981, 206), and the economically poor majority become tools to be manipulated by the elite. And what were the subjects and themes of that art? He wrote that Maya art was simultaneously “religious and profane” (1981a, 206) because the art and architectural themes were about the gods and their veneration, thus pleasing the divinities, but at the same time, they were meant to glorify and advance the chiefs and lords.

These later insights were expressed very differently, in both writing style and content, than in his earlier works where he elegantly described the impetus and purposes of Maya art, such as in his 1950 article “Universalidad, singularidad y pluralidad del arte maya” and in several editions of his book *The Civilization of the Ancient Maya*. For instance, in the latter work, he idealistically explained that “artistic creation has its own laws that act behind the will of

11. More recent theories about the status of Maya artists and scribes suggest that they may have been part of the elite due to the importance of their work for the power of that elite and that some may have even been born into the elite class. This idea reinforces the contention that they had a stake in intensifying that power.

expression” (Ruz Lhuillier 1970, 84). He acknowledged that this individual and expressive will is “greatly constrained by ideological norms, but [that the former] would explain the fantasy in the composition and detail, the freedom and subtleness of line, the elegance of movement, the delicate sensibility of form” (Ruz Lhuillier 1970, 84).

Scholars who Influenced Ruz’s Thinking about Art

Ruz was a certified archaeologist, educated and working in Mexico, but had no formal qualifications as an art historian. However, he was very well-read and, in addition to the experiences mentioned above, his understanding and viewpoints regarding the subject of art were nurtured, we believe, by a number of authors and colleagues whose influence prepared him for art history debates with other scholars. For students of Mexican archaeology and art history studying in the early 1940s, several prominent scholars stand out. Their books, either written in or translated into Spanish were widely assigned, read, and circulated in Mexican schools as the best available about Mesoamerica at that time. Names such as Wilhelm Worringer, Roger Bastide, Paul Westheim, Miguel Covarrubias, Salvador Toscano and many others stand out. The ideas and theories of these men are reflected in Ruz’s writings, lectures, and academic classes.

The German erudite art historian Wilhelm Worringer distinguished himself in intellectual thought in France and Germany during the time in which Ruz was growing up in France. According to Ovando (2009, 147), Worringer believed that the different “cultures have a *will to form* [italics added by authors] that express their particular psychology and are determined by their relationship with nature. Each culture finds expression in a formal language that fits its situation.” The term “will to form” was invented by Worringer to signify the creation of abstract art, the opposite of creating naturalism in images, an act he called the “will to art.” Worringer was best known for his 1906 dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* that was published as a book and is referenced by scholars today. In it, he sets forth the idea that two basic aesthetic impulses relate to art. One was the will to abstraction seen in the art of early people which was revived in modern times. The other creative urge he called “empathy”; that empathy causes humans to create art that looks like a window on the world. This kind of art was perfected in Western Europe during the Renaissance and was used very little in the

Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Worringer believed that abstraction (as opposed to empathy) was the “spiritual imperative,” an urge that comes from deep within our minds. “The urge to abstraction is the outcome of a greater inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world...” (Worringer 2014, 15).

This urge to abstraction is seen repeatedly in the art of the ancient Maya. Early in his career, Ruz, as a Mayanist, began to see this phenomenon in their art and took note of the distorted images representing the living jungle environment and its creatures (1950, 14). These images convey a twisted spiritual turmoil and unrest in the viewer. In his view, these physical artistic forms were a psychological expression of the spirit, and he believed the act of creating art was a way for the individual artist and sculptor to “flesh out his yearnings and desires” (1950, 14). In his subsequent writings, particularly regarding his years of work at Palenque (1949-1958), he excavated and wrote about the Palenque artists’ psychological need to create sculptural art. This was also the case with other sites in the Maya area and Ruz strove to analyze and understand the direct causal relationships between nature and art, even in artistic styles.

For instance, he noticed that the Yucatecan aesthetic favored a design in keeping with nature, one that reflected the environmental landscape. “The unbounded plain invited the construction of low elevations, in which lines and planes run parallel to the ground: the aridity of the vegetation was mirrored by expanses of bare wall; the need for worship and ornamentation was restricted to the cresting and later to the frieze” (Ruz Lhuillier 1950, 19). Ruz believed the same about the art found in Copán and Quiriguá, where “the surface of the stone was subjected to the limitless lyricism of the sculptor while participating in both the stylistic influence of the natural environment and in the ideological overlay of the social environment” (Ruz 1950, 18). In that same document and writing about those same two sites, he stated: “Stifled by the jungle and dogma, the artist subconsciously translated into stone the nightmare of his existence, trying to forget it by creating the precious entanglement of details that he sculpted and combined with marvelous skill” (1950, 18). The ideas held by Worringer seem evident here in that he also believed that spiritual fear of the physical world, its disorder and capriciousness was very much alive in early humans, and it led to the creation of the first art. It was a “fear of the unknown and the unknowable” that not only created the first gods, but the first artistic expression (Worringer 2014, 131-132).

Ruz's multidisciplinary approach to art, combining nature and social factors, resonates throughout his works. In a series of lectures at the Universidad de Oriente in Cuba in 1957 that were later made into a best-selling book (referenced previously), called *The Civilization of the Ancient Maya*, he maintained that

To seek the causes that oriented an art in a given direction and gave it its own essence is a difficult and dangerous task that involves the problem of the very genesis of artistic expression, a complex problem of multiple unknowns, for which many solutions have been proposed but which nevertheless continues to escape the nets of investigation (1970, 82).

However, at the end of his career, he moderated this idea, writing that scholars now have a better grasp of “the artistic phenomenon”, and his new opinion was that art is “the product of a union of complex factors which embrace the historical, the social, the cultural and geographic aspects as determined by each people” (1981, 205).

Another of Ruz's multidisciplinary academic critiques was regarding the concept of geographic determinism. This now discarded principle emphasizes geographic factors and the physical environment as the most critical influences on how a civilization develops as opposed to many other factors. More specifically, the geographic location of societies and states was thought to be the main determinate factor in how those entities would develop. In the past it was used to justify the colonial domination of non-European peoples. In his book *El pueblo maya*, that was published after his death, he referenced the ideas of the twentieth-century French/Brazilian sociologist and anthropologist Roger Bastide, who believed that if the word ‘determinism’ could be applied to a culture's development of art, it would most likely be sociological determinism (Ruz 1981, 205), which encompasses many variables. He also explained that

The geographic means provides only the artist with the materials and, occasionally, the landscape, the flora and fauna as models or climatic conditions which are favorable to certain motivations. There is no doubt at all that historic, more than geographic, conditions influence the artistic creation (1981, 208).

Perhaps the Mexican scholar who had the most significant influence on his early career and on his ideas about pre-Hispanic art was the artist, art historian,



2. Alberto Ruz with Mary Todhunter Rockefeller to his right and an unidentified female to her right in Palenque with the Temple behind. Photo: Rosa Covarrubias. Archivo Miguel Covarrubias, Arquitectura Maya I, Dibujos, fotografías y recortes. Archivo Miguel Covarrubias, Colecciones Digitales. Universidad de las Américas-Puebla.

ethnographer, and archaeologist Miguel Covarrubias and his American wife Rosa, although more often we find references to Paul Westheim and Salvador Toscano in Ruz's early works. We do not know when Alberto Ruz first met Miguel Covarrubias, but he may have met him through two avenues. One was through their mutual affiliation with a Mexican organization called the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR)¹² (Schele 2012, 77). We know that both Ruz and Covarrubias were members of LEAR (Barrera 1999, 176) along with other creative and well-known artists such as Diego Rivera, André Breton, Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo. When Ruz first migrated to Mexico from Cuba in 1935 (Schele 2012, 76),¹³ he became part of a group of cultural and intellectual

12. Ruz's name appears on its membership list.

13. According to Ruz's son, Ruz and his wife Calixta Guiteras were told by the Batista regime of Cuba to leave the country due to their anti-government political activity. See E. Schele dissertation for a more comprehensive background on this subject.

exiles and artists living in Mexico City (Ruz Buenfil 2010). During the 1930s and 1950s, the couple were at the center of a Mexican artistic milieu similar to the innovative and well-known communities in Greenwich Village in the United States or the Left Bank in Paris. Their interests were diverse and ranged from topics such as history, food, literature, archaeology, modern Mexican art, and indigenous Mexican folk art. They had collected folk art and other artifacts, particularly ancient Mesoamerican art for many years (Williams 1994).

Their house in Tizapán, now a suburb of Mexico City, became a central gathering place for international personalities, writers, and artists, including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Leon Trotsky, John Huston, and Langston Hughes. Rosa was famous for her delicious meals and lively parties (Williams 1994, 133-138). Another famous and frequent visitor to the Covarrubias's house was Nelson Rockefeller. In 1940, Rockefeller, the president of MoMA at the time, convinced Miguel to spearhead the production of a Mexican exhibit for the Museum of Modern Art. Miguel called it "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art." He and Rosa were instrumental in this production and Miguel was able to use his many connections to important people in Mexico to make the exhibit a success. During the process of putting the exhibit together, Rockefeller, Rosa and Miguel became very close. Rockefeller seemed to be especially charmed with Rosa and thus began a correspondence that lasted over twenty years. "It became a correspondence of affection and confidences" (Williams 1994, 113). Later, Miguel and his wife, Rosa Covarrubias, would become an important force in securing the funding for Ruz's excavations at Palenque in the late 1940s and 1950s, which we will explain in more detail below.

Miguel Covarrubias was a multifaceted, gifted personality and one of "Mexico's most influential artists and scholars" (Coe 2001, 278) in the 1940s. He had an impressive impact on all early Mesoamerican academics, through his best-selling books such as *Mexico South* (1946),¹⁴ *The Eagle, the Jaguar and the Serpent* (1954) and *The Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (1957). These writings fostered and educated a generation of Mesoamerican scholars, including Alberto Ruz. They also helped to foster tourism into Mexico from the neighbor to the north by romanticizing and popularizing the 'Mexican mystique.' Coe

14. It should be noted however that many Mesoamerican academics labeled his works as romantic. According to Williams the implication that they were "romantic" meant "unscientific—perhaps because the material was so readily understandable, appealing to the senses as much as the intellect" (1994, 165).

believed him to be ahead of his time in his “profound understanding of Olmec art.” Because he was an artist, he was able to synthesize images and motifs of these ancient people into a cohesive understanding of how they influenced other contemporary cultures over time. He firmly believed in the Olmec civilization’s primacy and dominance of the Gulf Coastal Plain and advocated its role as the ‘mother culture’ of all other Mesoamerican cultures, although other scholars have challenged this assertion of late. The Olmecs are however the first large-scale civilization in Mesoamerica.

Because of Covarrubias’ ability to parse out artistic form, he appears to be the first Mexican scholar to characterize a Mesoamerican style through studying this ancient culture. As mentioned previously, Covarrubias was also an archaeologist, and his first excavation work was with Olmec specialist Matthew Stirling in the Mexican Gulf Coast, and later, in 1942, he began the supervision of his archaeological project in Tlatilco, as a site having what appear to be Olmec artifacts. These experiences lead him to characterize ‘Olmec’ as an art style after systematically studying drawings and photographs of the exhumed pieces and those in private and public collections (Medina 1976, 18). At the First Round Table of the Mexican Society of Anthropology in 1942 he discussed the Olmec problem, characterizing and establishing the evolution of this style. He also proposed that hieroglyphic writing was born with the Olmecs.

In addition to his fascination for Mesoamerican art, Covarrubias, the romantic, saw the indigenous peoples of Mexico as exemplars of the ‘noble savage’ and believed that their social problems stemmed from “the contamination of modern society” (Medina 2015, 15). He looked for and wrote about the exotic in Mexican indigenous culture—to make it public so that it could be preserved, especially in its expression of human creativity and plasticity. “He gave indigenous art, and all ‘primitive art’, a universal status” (Medina 2015, 15).

Ruz strove to do the same, but in a more practical sense—by emphasizing the physical restoration of the cities of indigenous people’s ancestors. He wrote in 1944:

the reconstruction of a city that reemerges, liberated from its shroud of rubble and healed of its wounds, is not merely a restitution in a material and sculptural sense. By salvaging from oblivion and death the treasures of a vanished civilization, we restore to the memory of its creators and their descendants the accomplishments that they attained and which later generations ignored or vilified (Ruz Lhuillier 1944, Izquierdo y de la Cueva 1987, 57).

He believed that archaeologists could erase the ravages of time by rebuilding the ruins of ancient cities, thus also restoring significance to their living descendants and bringing “the corpse of a city back to life” (Ruz 1944 in Izquierdo 1987, 57). Even at the end of his life Ruz continued to believe that archaeology could be used to restore pride and hope to the first peoples of the Americas; this is evidenced by the last line in his posthumous book *El pueblo maya*. “A light of hope has begun to appear on the horizon for the indigenous peoples of America. Among them, the Mayas, anguished and impatient, await their hour” (1981, 325).

Ruz's Classification of Maya Art Styles by Geography

For illustrative purposes, ‘artistic style’ can be defined as a set of characteristics existing in art and architecture that can be grouped on the basis of similarities in visual and physical manifestations such as motifs, color, texture, composition, form, structure, etc. Styles can also be broken down by geographic location when superimposing those similarities across landscapes.

Ruz worked for INAH from 1947 to 1958 and during those years, he made some very keen observations on the styles of Maya art and architecture. He was living in Mérida at the time (Ruz Buenfil 2010), holding two job titles: the first as Director of Archeological Investigations in Campeche (1947-1948) and the other as Director of Pre-Hispanic Monuments of the Southeast (Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatán). While fulfilling his duties, he became very familiar with the art and architecture of each of the Maya sites in his jurisdiction, and he began to see patterns. He grouped the art works based upon how each artistic and architectural form at individual sites displayed similarities to other sites and noticed that this corresponded with geography. He noted that one of these styles belonged to the lowland humid jungles of Guatemala, Belize and Chiapas and the other to the “low hills, scrubs and semi-arid plains”; within the latter geographic style, he identified two sub-styles (Ruz Lhuillier 1963a, 83).¹⁵ Later, as will be revealed below, he established more formal

15. When Ruz began teaching at UNAM in the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature in late 1959, he adopted in his lectures the grouping of the Maya cities in artistic styles based on the architecture and sculpture in units with some formal integration. Each class lecture was devoted to this subject (Izquierdo y de la Cueva 2023, personal communication).

and extensive geographic divisions of styles; he also continued to be fascinated by the fact that, while sharing the same worldview, the same science, technology, and spiritual beliefs, the ancient Maya had, contemporaneously, developed different regional styles.¹⁶

In his 1970 English edition¹⁷ of *The Civilization of the Ancient Maya* (1970, 85), he laid out examples of those similarities by geography, giving examples primarily from locations in the “brushlands, and semi-arid plains of northern Yucatán” and only one—Palenque¹⁸—from a place that might be regarded as located in the humid jungles. Examples he cited from the brushlands and semi-arid plains of northern Yucatán were Uxmal, Kabah, Sayil, Labna and Chichén-Itza. Generally, Maya buildings were the same but with variations. For instance, he observed the use of columns in these northern cities, but none in the Maya lowlands. The Maya architects consistently used the roof comb at Palenque and in the lowlands, but it was not always used in the Maya buildings of northern Yucatán. Among the Puuc hills, a distinctive art style developed that was later named Puuc after this geographic region. One of its main traits was the use of stone mosaics on external walls to display geometric patterns as well as the grotesque faces of the Maya rain god Chaac. That style spread to other parts of Yucatán, for instance to Chichén Itzá and Uxmal where Ruz identified three buildings as phases of Puuc architecture: early Puuc: Temple of the Three Lintels of Chichén Itzá; Transitional Puuc—The *Iglesia* at Chichén Itzá; and, as the pinnacle of the Puuc style, the Nunnery at Uxmal (Ruz Lhuillier 1963b, 87). Ruz also mentions the existence of the feathered serpent motif at Uxmal—a god associated with the city of Tula in central Mexico. He believed that it was added later after the completion of the building due to the Toltec influences that ‘reigned’ in northern Yucatán (1970, 89).

This organization of Maya architecture into regional styles is a concept that had been around for several decades, and one of the best examples is the work that the Mexican architect Ignacio Marquina completed in his monumental work called *Arquitectura prehispánica* (1951). Its classification considers

16. In his 1981 book *El pueblo maya* he proposed that “the stylistic differentiation revealed by the artistic manifestations in the different regions of the Maya area supports our view of a territory divided into autonomous states” (Ruz 1981, 54).

17. Also, in previous and later editions.

18. Palenque is considered by some to be a borderland since it sits on the edge of the boundary between the highlands of Chiapas and the flatlands of the Gulf of Mexico and near the lowland Usumacinta River area.

the distribution of buildings, building systems, decoration, and in general all those elements whose variation is marked from one region to another. In organizing the data on Maya architecture into groups, Marquina studied their most obvious and common formal elements. The groups that he established were a) El Petén; b) The eastern part of Honduras; c) From Comalcalco to the foothills of Chiapas; d) The margins of the Usumacinta; e) The southern part of Campeche; f) The eastern region of Campeche; g) The eastern coast of the Yucatán peninsula; and h) The northern part of Yucatán (Marquina 1951, 506).

Another important scholar who studied Maya architecture and mapped the geographic distribution of its formal elements was H.E.D. Pollock (1965, 1980). From the 1940s to the 1980s, he refined and mapped this distribution.¹⁹ Like Marquina, he also organized them into regional styles, giving each area a name designation that roughly corresponded with both Marquina and Pollock's. Subsequently, Ruz adopted something similar. In his 1981 *El pueblo maya*, a book published two years after his death, he classified the Maya region's architecture again into two broad categories, this time based upon periods. Petén, Motagua, Usumacinta, Palenque, Río Bec, Chenes, Puuc were designated as belonging to the Classic Period Maya; for the Postclassic Period, he listed the regions of Chichén Itzá, Mayapan and Tulum (Ruz 1981, 220).

He expanded greatly on this topic of 'styles' (*El pueblo maya* 1981) and took a drastically different approach to describing and explaining 'style' than Marquina or Pollock. His approach was a comprehensive look at the complex factors of history, society, culture, and geography and how those factors impact the individual artist. He also addressed the themes of Maya art and how it primarily served the ruling class's interests. From that same book, we find a remarkable passage about how art was expressed and how its form and style were perpetuated. He believed that Maya artists were required to follow the traditions taught at official art schools established for each regional center, where they learned what was acceptable to that regional state.

The aesthetic conservativeness is so evident that it is much easier to classify Maya art by provincial styles than by chronologic stages, in spatial rather than temporal terms. Each one of these styles establishes and respects through time a certain aesthetic language, rigid formal conventionalisms. When, at a particular site, the art

19. His 1980 book was primarily an architectural encyclopedia of styles and characteristics of one region – the Puuc.

historian believes he recognizes a tendency to successive changes, at the moment of trying to define a stylistic evolution, the features that present possible modifications are, in reality, of slight importance, and the traditional continues to predominate throughout the centuries (Ruz Lhuillier 1981, 207).²⁰

He analyzed the geographic styles based on art media such as sculpture, painting, ceramics, lapidary, feather working, gold, silver-working (terminal and post classic), music, song, theater, and literature. His coverage of the subject of Maya art was wide in its scope and detailed, far too extensive for us to cover in this paper. We will highlight here only his reflections on what he called the “Historical Factor” where he laid out parameters of what he saw as the influence of other Mesoamerican civilizations upon the art of the Maya (Ruz 1981, 207). From southern Veracruz and Northern Tabasco came the influence of the Olmec in the form of the medium of the stele, the stele and altar and the motif of the jaguar. He speculated that the practice of recording chronological information was most likely developed in Oaxaca, and from there, it spread to the Maya area several centuries before the Classic Period. Also from Oaxaca came the advancement of hieroglyphic writing and its use in marking history (Ruz 1981, 207). Many years later, the influence of Teotihuacan came in the form of its rain god. The city of Kaminaljuyu was also influenced by that same grand city as seen in its use of technology, art styles, and motifs. He thought this might indicate the presence of leaders from that “great metropolis,” or perhaps they were economically and ideologically connected (Ruz 1981, 208).

Final Considerations

In this paper, we acknowledge the tremendous contribution that Alberto Ruz made at Palenque, including his explorations at the Temple of the Inscriptions and its famous tomb as well as the supervision of other archaeological work completed at Palenque and in the Yucatán Peninsula. However, what we have mainly featured in this article is Alberto Ruz’s contributions toward the knowledge of the history of art and more specifically, to that of the ancient Maya. These contributions took place during the early years of research into the art

20. Maya scholars even today remark upon the conservative nature of ancient Maya art, for instance several presenters at the 2018 Mesoamerican Meetings in Austin.

history of the ancient Maya, more specifically in the mid 1940s to the early 1960s. His work on this subject has not been broadly acknowledged and is not well-known to scholars, who think of him only as a professional archaeologist. In that role and in his role of art historian, he approached his work in an interdisciplinary manner with consideration to the environment, the geology, epigraphy, the climate, material availability, the different architectural styles, art medium, cultural milieu, economic factors, colonial documents, and the work of those scholars that had gone before.

We have highlighted Ruz's works in several ways. We have outlined examples of his enthusiasm, his broad interest, and his background in the subject of art. For example, while studying in Paris in the mid 1940s, he published an article about the clash of the two major art 'schools' in Paris, one 'classical' and the other avant-garde with the latter having a following of "esthetes, snobs and profiteers" (1947, 2). To transform that small following into one of the masses, Ruz suggested in his published paper that his compatriots learn from the art of the Mexican muralists. The avant-garde muralists of Mexico had also been looked upon as non-mainstream artists until Diego Rivera was able to recruit young and newly appointed members of the Mexican government (appointed after the 1910 Mexican revolution) who were open to the idea of using mural painting as a type of social work for change (Ruz, 1947, 5). He also acknowledged the ability of art to effect change in other ways, such as archaeologically restoring ancient Maya cities as a tool to show the world the greatness of the ancestors of the Maya, thus increasing the social standing of the living Maya.

We have also included Ruz's²¹ (1952) iconographic description of the expertly carved sarcophagus lid that he discovered in the tomb of K'inich Janaab' Pakal to illustrate his sensitive eye, his knowledge of the religious beliefs of the Maya and his understanding of Maya iconography. He included a formal analysis of the visual elements displayed on the lid with the sensitive observations as seen by a man with knowledge of visual art concepts, and used his virtuosic abilities with the written word to communicate them to the reader. He interpreted the scene as representing the cycle of life and death, the consuming earth monster, and the elements framing it as a 'skyband' with astronomical elements. He was also sensitive to the artist who carved it, writing that "it was artfully drawn and carved with love" (1952, 162).

21. Many art historians have had their chance to write about this carving, but Ruz was the first. He also wrote and published additional interpretations after writing this 1952 description.

Ruz always postulated three concepts of Maya art, ideas that gave title to his often cited²² article of 1950, “Universality, singularity and plurality of Maya art”. As the title implies, it refers to how forms in Maya art had parallels with other peoples’ art, and yet was unique. Consequently, he believed that

the peculiar flowering of Maya art does not float in a vacuum, nor does the Meso-american stem that supports it—part of the rich continental foliage—but rather, in a molecular continuity, [that] connects to universal art, very close to one of its most powerful branches, oriental art (1950, 10).

To be clear, he did not believe that the similarity of Maya art to the art of Asia was due to contact or borrowing—instead he described them as “spiritual cousins”, both having developed in jungle environments where both peoples imitated nature in their fantastical forms. On the other hand, he also insisted in all his writings that Maya art had features common to those in the lands of Mesoamerica outside the land of the Maya, as well as the entire continent. ♣

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