



Images of pre-Columbian and Spanish Mexico

ROBERTO PANE

Original publication: Roberto Pane (1965) "Immagini del Messico pre-colombiano e spagnolo", in: *Architettura Problemi 1965*, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Atti del Seminario di Architettura, Felice Le Monnier, Firenze, pp. 11-19.

Translation by Valerie Magar

The following travel notes would be more coherently explained if they were accompanied by some two hundred pictures. Precisely those that I had the occasion to show to the students of the Faculty of Architecture in Florence. But since it is not possible, for obvious reasons, to repeat in print what has already taken place verbally, only a few sample-figures are published here.

I take this opportunity to add, here as in my other scholarly experiences, that my discourse arises together with the figures and their style. Such considerations could give rise to further and much broader discussions, about the possible modern relations between text and illustrations, both in the critical and creative fields; but it would be going too far beyond the limits of a mere caveat.

Roberto Pane

I am sincerely grateful to Professor Fagnoni for the affectionate words with which he introduced me, and I declare myself pleased to illustrate here my Mexican slides, the fruit of a long-awaited trip. Indeed, I must confess that one of the reasons that prompted me to undertake a second trip to the United States was precisely the opportunity I could take from it to visit Mexico, starting from California. So, I taught four months at Berkeley, in a splendid environment of nature and study; but American hospitality, California oaks and the romantic survivals of San Francisco's wooden architecture could not seduce me to such an extent that I forgot that I was intended on climbing the pyramids of Yucatan.

It is true that today any journey is made under fairly easy conditions and that there is almost nothing left materially to discover. But if one prepares oneself in time –trying to assimilate the experiences of those that have gone before– it is possible to discover endless things that others have looked at but not really seen. Surprises and discoveries are still possible for those who can relate, to an inwardness of their own culture, what is before them for the first time. Thus, I read many old and new books on Mexico; I will say more about some of them further



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View from the top of the Pyramid of the magician. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.

on, but already at this point, to introduce the discourse, I want to remind you of the description of the conquest –undertaken by Cortés between 1519 and 1521– in the chronicle written by one of his officers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo: *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*; this is the precious document of one of the most legendary feats in history. Following the conquest, Catholicism, spread throughout New Spain, would destroy the sources and monuments of indigenous civilizations. But already in the naive pages that old Bernal devoted to the memory of the youthful enterprise, one can feel the inevitable destiny that was about to be fulfilled.

Many churches would rise in the place formerly occupied by pyramids, or above them. But it would be a missionary friar, Bernardino de Sahagún, who would do an admirable job of documenting the many aspects of custom and civilization that at his time, in the second half of the 16th century, were –despite the Spanish conquest– still alive and intact. The two volumes containing his research constitute one of the most important sources of Mexican archaeology.

But of another book, still waiting for an Italian translation –although it is known as an outstanding description of Mexican customs and society in the early 19th century– is that of Frances Calderón de la Barca, an American, wife of the first Spanish ambassador and envoy in independent Mexico in 1840. The struggle of factions, life in convents, festivals and adventurous explorations in the interior regions make, of the ambassador's letters –collected later in a volume under the title *Life in Mexico*– a document of exceptional objectivity and human interest.

A mention of the tragic antithesis between pre-Columbian civilization and Catholic civilization is enough for the images of the monuments and landscape, in which that antithesis is still present today, to crowd the memory. Indeed, it can be said that it is to such an extent that it defines the modern and most intimate meanings and contrasts of Mexican culture.

Today Mexico makes every effort to locate, in its archaeological world, the legitimate foundation of an independent culture of its own, and therefore takes far more care in the restoration and study of Aztec and Mayan temples and pyramids than in the churches built by monastic orders from Spain. This may have its own partial justification from the point of view of the greater art-historical interest of pre-Columbian monuments compared to a Catholic production much more involved in folklore than in great art. Indeed, the churches of Cholula or Cuernavaca are the face of Spain, transferred to the tropics. But Mexican language and literature are still Spanish, and it is therefore tempting to conclude that –outside of the easy seductions of demagoguery– the real task will have to consist in seeking an individuality of nationhood in the diverse and current destinies, without attempting to exhume what has only art and museum interest, and can no longer revive as modern culture. Consider also that the Indians¹ number only three million, compared to a total population of about forty. And he who travels through Mexico easily recognizes, in the multiplicity of somatic aspects of the colored people, the poor survival of ancient characters; the little that remains of numerous peoples and numerous languages.

But let us now come to the images that will suggest many special observations, especially for architecture and landscape.

Before we take a look at Mexico City, let us observe a curious drawing: a kind of heraldic seal, sent by Cortés to Charles V, to explain the urban structure of the Aztec capital. It was presented as a lagoon city, a kind of Venice lying on a plateau, at an altitude of about two thousand three hundred meters above sea level, in the center of the island Tenochtitlán. The drawing shows the large plaza with the pyramid on which human sacrifices were performed. The ferocity of the Aztec cult, was, even then, highlighted to justify the repression and destruction carried out by the conquerors. But, for how many generations was Spain to exercise human sacrifices in the name of Christ with its Inquisition?

Now, Mexico City no longer has canals, but its entire territory reveals the presence of water at the level of the foundations of buildings, in the same way as Ravenna and Pisa. Almost all the ancient buildings in the capital appear inclined, and, as a result, their preservation requires expensive drainage and sub-foundation works; I saw some under way at the church of San Francisco and the famous shrine of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

Let us now take a look at the cityscape, seen from the top of the Latin American tower, in eight or ten slides showing all around the building and urbanistic aspects of this great metropolis. The first impression is that of a modern city, developed haphazardly and without any intention to preserve the primitive center. Thus, churches and other ancient buildings subsist only here and there as accidentally surviving episodes, that is, without any plan.

There, next to a vertical carpark, a partially tiled dome is visible on a gray wrought background, similar to that of our Capri vaults. In this clutter –certainly more chaotic than ours– it is possible, however, to recognize a type of building, the vertical carparks precisely, which we sorely need, and which is not yet present in any of our centers, while countless high-rise housing developments are.

¹ In Spanish, in the original versión.



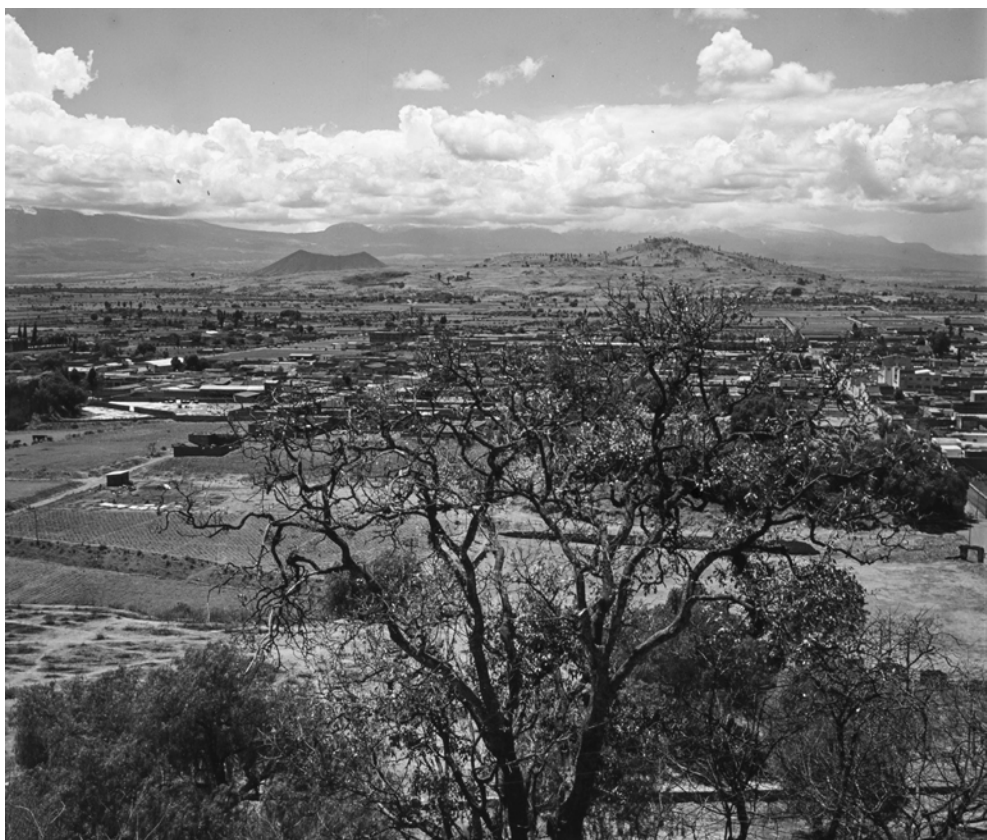
MEXICO CITY. Church of Santa Trinidad. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.

The most remarkable ensemble, seen thus from above, is the one corresponding to the major square overlooked by the cathedral and the "Palacio Nacional." The space corresponds to that in the ancient Aztec center on which Montezuma's palace stood. For that matter, under the modern buildings of Mexico City, the ancient layout is present with the same compact continuity as in the underground of Rome.

The center of business and tourism is around the *avenida* that bears the name of Benito Juárez, the greatest proponent of Mexican freedom. His monument stands at the Alameda, a public garden a short walk from the Latin American tower. But a much larger and more varied park is on the periphery, around Chapultepec castle; a castle that houses the Museum of the Mexican Resurgence and in which all the relics seem to comment on the tragic clash between Juárez and Emperor Maximilian.

As is well known, Mexico's modern architecture boasts achievements of exceptional scale, and is such that it deserves the English attribute of "boasting" (exhibitionistic). Large commercial buildings, steel and glass structures, imposing dimensions, with no relation to the environment. But while also "boasting," the new university complex does not seem to me to fall short of its reputation, especially in the sense of spatial accomplishment. Here, as one of the most relevant facts of the local figurative culture, it should be mentioned that the urban planning and distributional design of the university buildings was deliberately inspired by the spatial

architecture of pre-Columbian civilizations. As we shall see further below, the sacred buildings of all ancient civilizations in Mexico were not designed to gather crowds of worshippers. Ritual gatherings took place in the open air, so that the structures were presented as functioning as backdrops or wings. This is vividly present in the way in which the intermediate spaces are shaped: the wide tiers of steps, the terraces at various levels, all according to a solemn and organic dimension, whose relationship to the landscape—and especially to the backdrop of the mountains as in the great Toltec city of Teotihuacán²—determines effects that are unmatched by those of our past. Similarly, the university buildings have been distributed according to a free inspiration to such concepts; so that, despite the reservations suggested here and there by certain displays of demagogic taste, the whole stands out for the presence of an organic bond, which brings to mind, by contrast, the accidental and miserable aggregations of so many American and European universities.



MEXICO, LANDSCAPE AROUND TEOTIHUACÁN. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962.
Image: AFRP, AME2.P.31.

True, the University of Mexico was all built in three years—almost the way large international exhibition complexes are done today—and so its very unified vision is bound, given the constant renewal of functions, to undergo substantial remakes. I visited in particular the School of Architecture, at which an interesting archaeological museum of pre-Columbian Mexico was organized, with models and reliefs set up by the students. But the Library was singularly deficient, and this, unfortunately, cannot but be taken as an indication for a negative judgment about the quality, and the level of the courses.

² Teotihuacán was a city predating the Toltec culture. Note by the Editor.



MEXICO CITY, UNIVERSITY UNAM. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.*

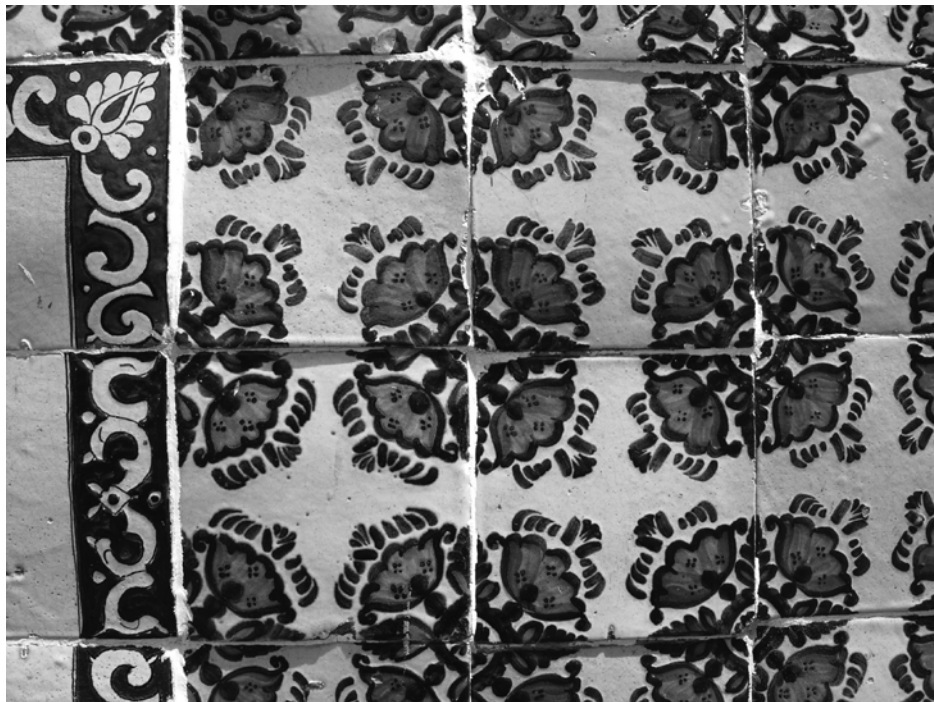
The mosaic ornaments, which cover some of the buildings –such as, for example, the best-known one in the Library, with an immense wall all covered with symbolic motifs that “stylize” ancient ideographic signs– left me somewhat perplexed. If truth be told, Mexican painting largely disappointed my expectation, both in its exaggerated ideological emphasis and in the paroxysmal gigantism that so thickly defines its scale. From time to time, I was reminded of the colossal figures of the two workers, in mosaic and relief, on cardboard by Diego Rivera; raising, for this and other reasons, a reservation of a psychological –before aesthetic– nature, I wondered if indeed such images, exaggerated and screaming, were appropriate for an environment intended for study and the objective search for truth.

We now return to the city to observe buildings and streets. Here is a patrician palace, late Baroque in form and all covered in blue and white majolica. It serves today as a commercial emporium –a kind of *Upim*³–, and it is fortunate because this has given it a chance to survive. Other such buildings were present here until a few decades ago, but today almost nothing remains of them. Admirable faience coverings are still present in churches; however, of a current and modern type are the arabesque ones found in restaurants and other public places: obvious derivations of the current Andalusian production. And here it may be curious to add that, on the other hand, there is great use, in modern buildings, of the vague and insubstantial coverings of glass paste tesserae: typical local production that is in fact called “Italian mosaic” here.

³ A department store in Italy. Note from the translator.



MEXICO CITY, UNIVERSITY UNAM. Rectory Tower. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962.
Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.



CASA DE LOS AZULEJOS, MEXICO CITY. *Image: Valerie Magar.*

Looking closely at the “plaza nacional,” known as the Zócalo, we recognize the Spanish and Churrigueresque imprint of the cathedral, in the redundancy and exasperated external chiaroscuro, deprived (as always in the Iberian Baroque) of that arrangement of the orders, which is a constant commitment to visibility and rhythm in Italian Baroque.

The interior, on the other hand, is, like the cathedral at Córdoba, a late Renaissance expression in which the Gothic tradition still subsists in the elongated pillars and ribs of the vaults. The sumptuous chancel of gilded wood and wrought iron still recalls the deplored custom of the churches of Spain, in which much of the nave is reserved for the clergy, with the result of breaking the spatial unity of the entire interior.

I recall, in this regard, the courageous initiative of that bishop of Palma de Mallorca who entrusted Gaudí with the interior transformation of his cathedral; he had the presbytery moved to the apse —there where it originally was— and, at the same time, provided the artist with the opportunity for an original and splendid wrought-iron and stained-glass decoration.

On the outside of the cathedral and in the background of many buildings is a beautiful reddish material of volcanic origin, sometimes used in modern factories; it is quite similar to Pompeian “cruma”⁴ and helps define a distinctive aspect of the urban landscape.

At this point, wishing to alternate between the images of building folklore and those of popular costume, I am reminded that, having arrived in the Mexican capital on Palm Sunday, I was fortunate enough to be able to photograph numerous scenes of vendors and worshippers, at the city’s churches and —a truly extraordinary spectacle— at the famous shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Indigenous women and children sat on the ground making curious objects of devotion by the ingenious weaving of strips made from palm leaves: monstrances, crucifixes, flowers, etc. But even this, although more evocative because it was offered in an exceptional setting, recalls the memory of similar and more complex products that are still popular in Spain today, for Easter festivities, and that come especially from the Alicante area.

After observing the Indians in the cathedral forecourt, I raced by car to the shrine of Guadalupe. Here I suddenly found myself among groups of pilgrims, musicians, devotees who, out of penitence, proceeded on their knees toward the church or, still on their knees, climbed the steps behind; Indians performing ritual dances, in ancient costumes; in short, the densest and most picturesque picture of popular life that I have ever happened to contemplate, and what is more, without the slightest suspicion in me of a tourist organization..., all the more so, then, that the only tourist present was me.

In the midst of all this I sensed, with extreme clarity, how curiously the primitive rituals of the pre-Columbian world and the Catholic rituals of Nueva España had mingled through the generations. But in this sense it is significant to recall that, in the early days of the conquest, Our Lady appeared to a poor Indian boy; so that, revealing herself through him directly to the indigenous people, she could quickly become the object of proud devotion. Recalling the episode and the countless images reproducing the painting of Our Lady, the witty writer I mentioned above recounts the following episode. She was in Guadalupe and, conversing with a priest, carefully observed the original painting; and the priest, as if in great confidence, “Do not believe, however, Madam, that this portrait of Our Lady is a true resemblance. She has appeared too seldom for one to be able to recall her face accurately.”

At the large but unremarkable church of Guadalupe stands one of Mexico’s most remarkable monuments: the Capilla del Pocito,⁵ with a dome covered in blue and white majolica tiles; but this, too, unfortunately, is a more or less severely dilapidated building for the reasons already mentioned; and here, too, at the time of my visit, complex restoration work was in progress.

⁴ A type of volcanic stone found in Pompeii. Note from the translator.

⁵ Chapel of the Small Well.



MEXICO CITY, CAPILLA DEL POCITO. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962.
Image: AFRP, AME2.P.31.

Numerous other slides I devoted to aspects of folk life, and especially to dancers. Among them a boy surprised me by his resemblance to the famous Palenque warrior, the celebrated stucco head that was exhibited in Rome, years ago, along with so many precious terracotta and stone sculptures—a true treasure trove of artwork that still travels across the world at the initiative of the Mexican government. But what really drew my attention was the similarity—and I would even say the somatic identity—between the Mayan sculptures and the modern Maya, whom I encountered at the pyramids in Yucatán.

Having seen the shrine of Guadalupe, let us now return to the city to go browsing through its many and contrasting aspects. I had read well-known accounts about an important cloister in the Merced, and although I had managed to locate it on a tumultuous and grimy market street, I could see no outward sign announcing its presence, as is normally the case with us. At last, a poor wooden doorway was pointed out to me: the cloister, not inferior in decorative program to the richest of the Spanish 17th century, was located—almost clandestinely—beyond this anonymous entrance; it confirmed the state of neglect in which Catholic monuments are in, compared to archaeological ones.

The Ministry of Education is also housed in a large cloister with several floors, adjacent to a church, the interior of which has been adapted—not unbecomingly, actually—as a public library. Moving here and there in this building, and noticing that no one was paying attention

to my presence, I climbed, by means of a ladder, to a roof terrace, and photographed –finally up close– one of the typical domes, with symbols and letters of majolica on a wrought-iron background. On my way out of the Ministry I found, sitting on the sidewalk, a young Indian woman, brightly dressed and holding a baby; in front of her was a bunch of bananas, rather shabby, which the woman hoped to sell. I thought of offering her something for her to be photographed, but she declined with a simple, proud gesture; and so I photographed her secretly from behind.

Mexico City is full of popular markets, some of them of a poverty that has something surrealist about it. Thus, in the one in Tepito, I saw for sale a pair of glasses with one crystal, a single glove, and so on: the most incredible objects, seemingly useless. But in the midst of it all, I wished in vain that I could buy and take away pieces of rustic pottery, dishware painted in vivid and splendid colors, since air travel does not allow the transport of such merchandise. Then, here are the fruit stores: the papaya, the mangoes, the giant pineapples. But the stores that most tempt passersby of all conditions –from the women of the people to travelers– are those of goldsmiths. Mexico, as everyone who visited the remembered exhibition in Rome knows, still boasts a rich handicraft production, despite the sophistications imposed by the modern economy of mass production, which tends to eliminate all individual accents. Add to this the wide availability of precious materials: from Taxco silver to turquoises, topazes, lapis lazuli, and the more common –and for us rare– pieces of obsidian.

Let us now turn to some aspects of what every traveler to Mexico is led to contemplate with greater curiosity and attention: the archaeological environment and its monuments.

If I consider it from the point of view I have already mentioned –that is, that of spatial architecture– one can say that the most extraordinary ensemble is that of Teotihuacán, the immense Toltec city, a few miles from the capital. When, in the 14th century, the Aztecs conquered the region, they encountered on their way a city, dead, not very different from the one that offers itself to our eyes today: a collection, as far as the eye can see, of pyramid ruins and terraces with steps, against the backdrop of mountains. This city, whose historical events are still largely unknown, extended over a radius of about eight kilometers, and thus comprised a built-up area no less extensive than that of the largest metropolises of our time.

The urban landscape of Teotihuacán is dominated by large expanses of masonry, sloping walls, sharp edges of plinths, stepped pyramid remains; in short, an accentuated sense of pure geometric form, the relationship of which, with the outline of the mountains and the almost always cloudy sky, is of a suggestive, dramatic quality that has no comparison. We often speak of landscape settings in a sense that smacks fatally of aestheticism, inasmuch as it no longer responds to an intimate need for life. One needs to see Teotihuacán to feel to what extent man may have consistently identified with nature.

But here the thought that I most like to communicate, among all those that the forms of this civilization, unknown to me, have suggested to me, is the following: if, on the one hand, these symbols and their language are unknown to us, it is also true that they confirm –beyond any possible and original communication between men– the common universal yearning for transcendence and, as a conduit to it, the common search for aesthetic form. And this, *indeed only this*, is the link that exists between us and the mysterious pre-Columbian world of Meso-America.

In the two centuries of their rule over the plateau, before the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs surrounded these ruins, already almost as mysterious to them as to us today, with superstitious respect. Thus, returned to nature, they were covered with earth and greenery, and only a few decades ago, have they been the subject of rediscovery and extensive restoration by the National Institute of Anthropology and History. I must say, however, that the substantial remaking of

the ancient walls –so typical for the use of various volcanic materials inserted into the mortar, according to a naive design– appears entirely legitimate, even in comparison with the rigorism of our conceptions of restoration. If one thinks of the importance of the geometric vision, which I have mentioned, one understands that it had to be recomposed, where it was needed. The primitive renders of stucco and color, intended to accentuate and enhance these masses in a way we cannot imagine, no longer exists, and it could not have been remade.

From the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, I photographed the horizon and then, at my feet, the diagonal structure, marked by the alignments of the gray stones. The only figurative image, all the more contrasting with the environment because of the repeated sequence of snake heads, protruding in the round, is the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl, leaning against an older one. And here it should be noted that factories executed after radical historical changes, produced by exoduses, revolutions and conquests, are superimposed or juxtaposed with a brutality whose evidence appears perhaps even greater today than it once did, because of the process of disintegration that uncovers the structures as the coverings yield to the action of external agents.



MEXICO, TEOTIHUACAN. View of the landscape around the Pyramid of the Sun. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.*

As it happens six or seven hundred kilometers further south, in the Mayan temples of Yucatán, Guatemala or Honduras, the serpentine heads and shells, the symbol of water, show numerous traces of color in this northern Teotihuacán; and therefore it can be said that color was everywhere the predominant element of the composition.

Departing from the capital, in the direction of Cholula, I traversed a landscape fabulous for its variety of aspects and for the surprise produced when seeing the vegetation and the very light of the sky change as one ascends or descends, sometimes by a few thousand meters in a short space of time. I have seen here and there images of a rustic Spain transferred to the tropics: next to a white church, with a yellow tiled dome, the red flowers of what in California they call “the coral tree;” so in Cuernavaca, as rich in hotels as in abandoned churches.



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View of the Governor's Palace. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.N.39.*



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. Fragment. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.N.40.*



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View of the Nunnery Quadrangle, detail of the frieze. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.N.38.*



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View of the Pyramid of the Magician. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.*

But a longer stop is worth making at Cholula, a primitive Aztec center at over three thousand meters, later the seat of religious orders that populated the wide valley with churches and convents. Here the major church stands on the terrace of the largest pyramid. From the parvis one enjoys the clear light of the great altitudes, and far away, among white clouds looming like round stones against the background of the sky, one can see the volcano called Malinche, the name of the Aztec woman who was a friend of Cortés and a valuable tool in the conquest of Mexico. The overlay of Catholic civilization on pre-Columbian civilization is felt more vividly in Cholula than elsewhere, as the contrast between primitive structures and churches is not even partially obliterated by aspects of present-day life. The road that climbs around the pyramid, to reach the churchyard of the major church, uncovers below the village as a whole, dominated by the vast convent of St. Francis, now almost abandoned. The churches no longer officiated, number many dozens; and yet they correspond only to the beginning of those three hundred and sixty-five that the religious orders proposed to build.

While Cholula is a typical example of Spanish layering, on a pre-existing urban plot –and this is according to the more widespread story of post-conquest settlements– the city of Puebla is a Spanish center that was built “ex novo,” rich in buildings of environmental taste, churrigueresque churches and majolica tiles. A center that would be exceptionally welcome and welcoming, even today, if the most intrusive advertising, did not abuse its every prospect, with such indiscretion that it surpasses even Italian examples. Here, in fact, Mexican and U.S. signs compete with each other, while, in other more remote places, such as in Yucatan, the rivalry is limited to the two American products that are known “all over the world,” namely: CocaCola olé! Only Pepsicola!

But in spite of the publicity dictatorship, Puebla draws many visitors, especially for one justly famous chapel: that of the Rosary. If the preciousness of imported Baroque are generally united by the rustic and naïve accent that the hand of the Indian craftsman gave them, the Capilla del Rosario, with its gilded stucco dome, is an Iberian gem that could be found, with less surprise, in a church in Seville.

Another town, even more popular with tourists because it is closer to the capital, is Taxco, the center of silver mining. It stands in a valley and is full of stores in which the most varied junk ever manipulated with that metal is sold.

Guidebooks speak of Taxco as an enchanting place; it probably was, but today it is dominated by that typical prissiness that has sweetened and cloying the most celebrated places in European tourism. Here one can feel the faux contemplative and artistic isolation, within the framework of nature; something very similar to the setting of Taos, New Mexico, which I visited with real disgust a dozen years ago. In Taxco, there is also a beautiful 18th-century church, rich in stucco. It was elevated as a vow to the Virgin, by a Spaniard who more than any other had succeeded in making money by quarrying silver from the mountains with the toil of the natives.

But the ancient, most prestigious setting is that offered by the Mayan cities of Yucatan: Palenque, which must always be defended from jungle encroachment, at least in its major monuments, then Uxmal and Chichén Itzá. I have had the opportunity to visit only the last two; but it is my fervent wish to see Palenque and to push on to the other Mayan territories, to Honduras and Guatemala, where in other lesser-known centers, this great architecture is renewed in peculiar forms, while repeating similar patterns and structures. I think of the Caribbean Sea coast, where the city of Tulum overlooks, with all its monuments parallel to each other and a wall enclosing the city, landward. Copán, in Guatemala, is also a great destination that was revealed to the world as early as 1840, through the descriptions and drawings of some explorers. But still to be discovered and freed from the vegetation of the tropics are many dozens, perhaps a few hundred unknown cities.



MEXICO, TAXCO, SANTA PRISCA. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962.
Image: AFRP, AME2.P.30.



MEXICO, YUCATAN, CHICHÉN ITZÁ. El Caracol (Observatory), detail. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.N.31.*

Since nothing more is possible here than to report a few impressions and comment on a few pictures, I would like to mention two recent books from which one will be able to draw quite a wide range of information. A review of all the pre-Columbian architecture of Meso-America is the one published in English by the publisher Penguin, whose author is Prof. Kubler, of Yale University; then there are numerous studies, published in Castilian, by the Mexican Institute of Anthropology and History. But, an excellent synthesis, which I particularly recommend to you, for an essential knowledge of Maya architecture, is the one compiled by the Swiss Henri Stierlin: *Architettura Maya*, published in Italian by the publisher "Il Parnaso."

My slides of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal meanwhile allow the most important types of structure, recurring more or less throughout the Maya civilization, to be made quite evident. It should first be noted that the extraordinary preservation of these buildings is due to a reconstruction by anastylosis, made modernly possible by the total abandonment in which these factories were left for about a millennium; that is, after they had either been permanently disrupted, or no longer used for their primitive functions following revolutions and exoduses.

Modern restorers have found the stones of the facing, partially lying at the foot of the masonry masses, and have had to do nothing more than recompose the ancient fabric; certainly a very delicate task, but one of sure result. The wall thickness consists of what we call *opera incerta*, or sack work, to which is grafted a facing of stone blocks, already skillfully laid flat, or in various projections, so that geometric reliefs, masks, squares, etc., could be executed in the work. And what most surprises an exercised eye is precisely the exact prediction of the ornamental registers, in an impeccable recurrence that sometimes takes place over hundreds of square meters.

The interior rooms—generally rectangular and never large in size—are covered with triangular-section vaults that immediately suggest an analogy with the false vaults and dome of Greek antiquity. But this is an affinity and not a structure, for even when the squared stones with a sloping face or stepped, and that is, like inverted staircases, collapsed, the inner wall mass—forming the structure of the vault—remained standing. The vault is thus realized by the cohesion of a tenacious cement mortar—a real concrete—and not by perfectly squared blocks, and with horizontal joints, as in the Greek Tholos.

On the other hand, the blocks never reach dimensions similar to those of our Pelasgian walls, or the squared parallelepipeds of Greek structures. Consequently, since it is not possible to execute in stone, and since the system of the radial ashlar flatband is not known either, the lintels are made of wooden beams: a strangely deficient solution when one considers the splendid magisterial nature of the vestments. Moreover, this deficiency is confirmed precisely by the collapses that, as a result of long abandonment, were caused precisely by the unraveling of the wooden parts while the carved parts retained their reliefs, and here and there even the stucco coverings. With the collapse of the lintels, the parts overlying them also fell, and therefore the modern restorer first had to put new wooden beams back in place and then reassemble the texture of the stones.

At Uxmal is one of the major buildings of the Maya civilization, the so-called Governor's Palace, from the 9th-century: 98 meters long, with 20 vaulted chambers and a sculptural frieze running across the entire front; the two recesses, corresponding to the major entrances, constitute the only variation in rhythm, while the uninterrupted sculpture of the frieze contrasts with the smooth pillars of the basement. The building, accessible by a wide flight of steps, dominates the landscape around it, framing impressive perspectives, especially toward the great pyramid, known as the Pyramid of the Magician. But the greatest surprise is produced by the chiaroscuro effects of the reliefs, in which stylized masks—a motif eternally recurring in this architecture—alternate with the geometry of the backdrops.



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View of the Governor's Palace. Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962. *Image: AFRP, AME2.P.31.*

As I have mentioned, here we feel that the predominant task of the architect was to define the outdoor spaces and the most favorable visibility and reading of the great friezes. The gatherings, rituals, and sacrifices—in the same way that we have observed in a very distant and different environment, which is that of Teotihuacán—are carried out on the large open spaces, by means of framing cleverly arranged as the levels vary.

The buildings, intensely chiaroscuro and colored against the background of the sky, have monotonous interiors, with walls lacking prominences and often poorly and badly lit, because, almost always, light comes only from the entrances.

Perhaps the grandest testimony, in all of Yucatán, is what is offered, also in Uxmal, by the interior of the so-called Nunnery Quadrangle: a true religious theater, formed by a very large courtyard, between four buildings and wide front steps. Here a large feathered serpent gathers all the decoration of the most representative fountain and marks an important variation from the reliefs of the Governor's palace, due to the more pronounced chiaroscuro of some of the statues in the round. But, at this point, indulging that need for comparison that invariably resurfaces in us, whenever we find ourselves in the presence of entirely new images, I must say that Maya sculpture has renewed in me the memory of Romanesque sculpture: certainly the only one that, in European civilization, provides an analogy with the formal taste of the Yucatán reliefs; for both are very rich in chiaroscuro variations despite their constant subordination to a tonal register; but in the Romanesque, the naturalistic and descriptive element prevails over any geometric scansion, sometimes reducing it to an approximation, all the more vital in that it is, precisely, naive images of nature. In Maya reliefs, on the other hand, geometry is constant recurrence, a consistent symbol of the mathematics of astral movements. Not for nothing is this the sculpture of the people who have, more than any other of antiquity, known astronomy.

In Chichén Itzá, the biggest surprise is a visit to the pyramid of El Castillo; here researchers who explored the interior of the pyramid in the early part of this century were the first to discover a steep flight of steps and to penetrate, by means of it, a cell left intact by the last Mayan priests.

I, too, climbed to the gloomy shrine, almost suffocating along the steep and very damp staircase of the primitive pyramid; on reaching the top I saw the statue, lying on the threshold, of a great Chac Mool, in whose dish, held symmetrically in his hands, were laid the hearts torn from the victims of sacrifice. In the middle of the cell was visible the sacred jaguar, all covered with jade.

At Chichén Itzá it arouses keen interest to observe here and there traces of stucco coatings and a few surviving hints of color. The stucco attenuated, blunting it, the sharp prominence that the chisel had carved in the stone; at the same time, the layering of the stucco filled the interstices that separated the ashlar and thus nullified the sense of construction; finally, the color intervened, very vividly, accentuating the visibility of the figurative symbols to the detriment of pure chiaroscuro values, namely those values that, precisely, are the only ones that exist today.

With a delay of many decades from the discoveries and surveys of archaeologists, Toltec, Aztec, Mayan and other peoples' architectures have become part of the general reviews of the great architectures of all times; indeed, they can be said to have become the subject of manuals even for our West.

But beyond the few reflections that an overview allows us to make, the greatest experience we are given to grasp is the one I have already mentioned: the certainty of the common pursuit of the artistic image as a religious symbol. In this awareness we thus find the testimony of a common humanity; and it is only this awareness that succeeds in mitigating the sense of anguish, produced in us by the endless presence of works and testimonies whose secret will perhaps never be fully revealed to us.

*



MEXICO, YUCATAN, UXMAL. View of the Nunnery Quadrangle, Photograph by Roberto Pane, 1962.
Image: AFRP, AME2.P.31.