

Paul Coremans, daily companion

Mariana Pascual Cáceres*

*Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural
Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This issue reproduces a letter written on July 1965 by Manuel del Castillo Negrete, director of the then *Departamento de Catálogo y Restauración de Patrimonio Artístico del INAH*. It is addressed to Harold Plenderleith, director of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (known as ICCROM for its acronym) and, from the first lines, refers to the sudden death of a certain mutual friend. It is a letter written almost a month after the death of Paul Coremans, chemist, founding member and first director of the Royal Institute for the Study and Conservation of the Artistic Heritage of Belgium (KIK-IRPA) from 1957 until his death on June 11, 1965.

In it, Del Castillo lets us see his feelings for the death of his colleague and friend while commenting on the development of a series of tasks that today are relevant to the history of conservation of Mexican cultural heritage. Manuel del Castillo describes the bureaucratic activities and staff shortages while expressing part of the nature of the association of the three men, namely, the installation of the first interdisciplinary laboratory in Latin America for the scientific study of cultural heritage, with support and funding from UNESCO and the Belgian government. This link would be inscribed in the work carried out by UNESCO at the world level as part of technical assistance programs for the conservation of cultural heritage, of which Mexico was a member state.

The letter is yet another example of the importance of the partnership between Manuel del Castillo Negrete, Paul Coremans and Harold Plenderleith during the 1960s. It narrates the plans for the inauguration of the laboratory in October of that year, the setbacks in the delivery of a six-year work plan to the Mexican government and the return of a member of the training given by Robert Sneyers in the KIK-IRPA (collaborator of Coremans who upon his death would succeed him as the second director of the center).



In the activities that he narrates, we recognize how the work, observations and recommendations, fruit of the missions that both Plenderleith and Coremans carried out in Mexico in 1964, accompanied by Manuel del Castillo Negrete, became concrete.

For his part, Coremans wrote his UNESCO mission report: *Bonampak Mayan Wall Paintings*, in which, from his experience with the *Departamento de Catálogo y Restauración del Patrimonio Artístico*, he expressed a very favorable opinion of the Mexican government and the INAH, recognizing Mexico as one of the few countries where "...the government has understood that the fate of cultural heritage is linked, not to variable names of administrative offices or advisory commissions, but to the intrinsic activity of a single executing body, well-structured and provided with means of action"¹.

Coremans included a section aimed at offering a one-year scholarship from the Belgian government for a Mexican student to become familiar with the scientific research methods carried out at KIRK-IRPA, in order to encourage in "the INAH of Mexico" the creation of an interdisciplinary Central Laboratory for scientific research and diagnosis of cultural heritage (Coremans 1964).

Coremans' work was transcendent in that it promoted the scientific development of conservation and restoration, in Mexico and other regional centers around the world. The scientific and training structure proposed for the creation of specialized laboratories for the conservation of cultural heritage that combined the interdisciplinary characteristics of restoration was recognized throughout the world.

What Manuel del Castillo refers to in the first paragraph of his letter when he says "...we have been living for a long time with two companions present on a daily basis: Coremans and Plenderleith. I hope that his work will continue at the level to which he took it, as a tribute to his memory", is the crystallization of the hard work and common goals of three institutions, which in Mexico gave way to a professional climate that promoted great international scientific and academic activity, around the incipient development of a professional field unique in Latin America. This amalgam of objectives also resulted, in 1967, in the signing of the technical assistance agreement between the Mexican government and UNESCO, through which the *Centro Regional Latinoamericano de Estudios para la Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales México-UNESCO* was created. The result was the constitution of a unique space that simultaneously housed the communities of practice of the discipline, both professionally and formatively, nationally and internationally.

Paul Coremans was not present to see the laboratory begun in 1965, which was officially inaugurated in January 1966 under the name of "Paul Coremans", a name proposed by Manuel del Castillo Negrete as a tribute.

In the letter published here, Del Castillo highlights the human, generous and hardworking nature of the one he considered his friend, with a gratitude that is noted when he requests that the new center be named after him. This gratitude was sincere and without a doubt mutual, product of the empathy and encounter of wills on which a committed collaboration was founded.

¹ Translated from the French by the author.



It is enough to read the last lines with which Paul Coremans closes his report of the mission to Bonampak in 1964:

Mr. Castillo Negrete greeted me when I got off the plane and we hardly left each other until we returned. In the meantime, he was my friend of thought and action, never fatigued by a foreign expert always asking for information. At the end of this report, I would especially like to express my deep gratitude (Coremans, 1964)².

Thus we see how, from the beginning of their relationship, the gratitude between the collaborators was mutual and as deep as it has been the fruit of their work together.

Monsieur Castillo Negrete m'a accueilli à ma descente d'avion, et nous ne nous sommes plus guère quittés jusqu'à l'heure du départ. Entretemps, il fut mon compagnon de pensée et d'action, jamais lassé par un expert étranger toujours en quête d'informations. En fin de rapport, je tiens à lui exprimer tout particulièrement ma vive gratitude.



Paul Coremans

Figure 1. Paragraph on the report about the mayan Wall paintings from Bonampak.
Image: Coremans, 1964.

*

²Translated from the French by the author.



References

Coremans, Paul (1964) *Les peintures murales Mayas de Bonampak* [pdf], available in: <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000007631?posInSet=9&queryId=2758dac6-87b8-4ad1-94c1-7f301ff7df26>> [accessed on September 20, 2019].

KIK-IRPA (2019) *History of IRPA* [online], available in: <<http://www.kikirpa.be/EN/112/306/History.htm>> [accessed on September 20, 2019].

