

# An ancient world in focus: William M. Frej's photographs of the Maya

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On July 1, an exhibition featuring William M. Frej's photographs of ancient Maya ruins opened at Santa Fe's Peyton Wright Gallery. The show encompasses 33 black-and-white photographs taken over the past three years at Maya ruins in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Yucatán, and Campeche. Frej had the digital images processed as archival chromogenic silver halide prints, some of which were then mounted on archival aluminum. Anyone who has traveled to southern Mexico will recognize many old friends hanging on the walls, like the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque or the Arch at Labná. But the show is notable for its many impressions of ruins few tourists have visited, sites such as Huntichmul, Pixoy, Xkankabil, Xkichmook, and Sabacché, the last named for a tree the ancient Maya used to make black pigment. Frej's photos give a good sense of the scrub rainforest that dominates the Yucatán Peninsula, and remind us that the most visited Maya ruins, Chichén Itzá, Tulum, and others, are constantly cleared of encroaching vegetation. The images also show how many of the ruined buildings have been reconstructed by Mexican archaeologists, for motives both scientific and commercial, to prepare them to receive tourists.

A recent arrival to Santa Fe, Frej has spent a lifetime making photographs of remote peoples and places. He studied photography in college and graduate school at Berkeley in the early 1970s, and he never stopped making images. He first visited the Southwest when he came to work with the Navajo and Hopi for the Office of Economic Opportunity, founded in 1964 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. In 1985, Frej took two years off to hike the entire Himalaya mountain range, including performing the circumambulation of Mt. Kailash in Tibet that is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and Bön. Then followed a 27-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service, with postings in Indonesia, Poland, Kazakhstan, and finally Afghanistan. He was Diplomat in Residence at the Santa Fe Institute and credits his friendship with former director Jeremy Sabloff, a Maya archaeologist by training, for rekindling his interest in the ancient Maya. Since then, Frej and his wife, Anne, have renovated a home in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, that they use as a base for photographic expeditions. Frej sees the photographs in the current exhibition as inspired by



## Calakmul

William M. Frej: Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 2016; courtesy Peyton Wright Gallery

images taken by the German explorer Teobert Maler a century ago. Over the past three years, Frej has visited 31 ruins Maler photographed. Some were easy to visit, like Uxmal. But others, such as Pixoy, required a three-hour drive and another three hours of hacking through the forest to find the site.

Since its invention in 1839, scientists and artists have used photography to make images of the world's antiquities, whether found in Egypt, the Middle East, or in the Americas. Archaeologists used photography to document their finds and European colonial officers made records of the cultural, economic, and demographic resources of far-flung empires. In the Americas, photography is intimately bound to the rediscovery of the ancient Maya. We know that within six months of Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's announcement of his invention of photography, the first daguerreotype outfit was brought to Mexico. The Austrian diplomat Emanuel von Friedrichsthal took the first photographs of Maya ruins in 1841, when he visited sites in Campeche and Yucatán. Friedrichsthal was inspired by the bestselling account *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán* (1841), written by the U.S. attorney turned travel writer John Lloyd Stephens. The British artist Frederick Catherwood accompanied Stephens, and his images of Maya ruins occupy a foundational position in the history of both archaeological illustration and in the history of the way that the Maya have been represented by outsiders. When Stephens and Catherwood set out for Mexico on their second expedition in October 1841, they brought a daguerreotype camera. Stephens writes in the subsequent *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* (1843) that the camera was a great novelty in the city of Mérida as well as in the countryside. Catherwood used it as an aid to producing detailed drawings of ancient Maya art and architecture. He also sketched freehand and used a camera lucida, a prism that projects that which is before it onto the artist's drawing paper. When they returned to New York in 1842, Catherwood used the daguerreotypes to correct his field drawings, and also to produce a deluxe set of lithographs published in 1844. Unfortunately, no Catherwood daguerreotype has ever been identified, and they are thought to have burned in a great fire that consumed the artist's panorama and studio in July 1842.

Other photographers followed Catherwood, perhaps none as important as Alfred P. Maudslay and Teobert Maler. Maudslay (1850-1931) was an upper-class British traveler who made the documentation of the ancient Maya ruins and carved monuments his life's work. Beginning in 1881, he returned again and again to Mexico and Central America, taking large-format photographs on glass negatives. By the end of the century, he amassed an archive of thousands of photos, drawings (made principally by Annie Hunter), maps, and plaster casts of ancient Maya sculptures. When these were published (1889-1902), their accuracy and quality were such that they aided the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing.

Maler was one of Maudslay's contemporaries and rivals in the game of photographing the Maya ruins. Born in Rome to German parents in 1842, Maler studied art and architecture, moving to

Vienna in 1862. When the French Emperor Napoleon III set up Maximilian of Habsburg as Mexico's emperor in 1864, Maler joined other Austrian volunteers who traveled to Mexico to support the regime, and to fight against the legal government, led by the Mexican president Benito Juárez. After Maximilian's defeat and execution in 1867, Maler stayed on in Mexico, and by the middle of the 1870s, he was taking photos of pre-Columbian ruins. Between the mid-1880s and 1909, Maler traveled the breadth of the country occupied by the ancient Maya. For much of the period he worked for Harvard University's Peabody Museum, and his images and maps illustrated groundbreaking documentary studies of the ruins of Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, located on the Usumacinta River that divides Mexico and Guatemala. Maler settled in Yucatán in 1885, first in the village of Ticul, and then later in Mérida, where he died in 1917. Maler visited hundreds of sites Maudslay never saw, and his photographic record complements the British explorer's. Many of the sculptures he documented no longer exist, having eroded beyond recognition. Beginning in the 1960s, others have been destroyed or dismembered during widespread looting of ancient Maya ruins that continues to the present day.

Santa Fe has had a long romance with pre-Columbian antiquities, and in this respect Frej is in good company. Given the city's proximity to significant Ancestral Puebloan ruins like those at Chaco Canyon or Bandelier National Monument, and to large populations of Native Americans, it is no surprise that the City Different has a long history of archaeological and anthropological photography. Add to that a long list of commercial photographers who amassed archives of images of Native Americans, picturesque views of New Mexican villages, and burros, many burros. With the founding of the School of American Archaeology of the Archaeological Institute of America and the Museum of New Mexico, in 1907 and 1909 respectively, institutional imperatives drove photographic campaigns. Santa Fe's own Jesse Nusbaum made thousands of photographs of the Ancestral Puebloan ruins of the Southwest, as well as others related to School and Museum projects in Mexico and Central America, notably at Quirigua, Guatemala, and Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, Mexico. And in 1929, Charles Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh shot aerial photographs of ruins both in Yucatán and in the Southwest. A selection of the Southwestern photos is currently on exhibit at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, paired with contemporary images of the same sites by Adriel Heisey. In the business of photography of ruins, a blurry line separates documentary and fine art. The images of many photographers like the Lindberghs, Maudslay, or Maler, who never considered themselves artists, are now included in gallery and museum exhibitions, and their work is part of a broader conversation on the history of representing other cultures, whether living or dead. Many of Maler's photos evince a keen sense of composition, though they are always shot to convey maximum information. Maler also made a specialty of composite prints of stone sculptures, useful when the original monument was broken. He would shoot the fragments and assemble a new negative, showing the sculpture as it might have looked before it was shattered by time. Frej's images of ancient Maya ruins and objects show a similar mastery of composition, and situate his work firmly at the fine-art end of the taxonomy.

His photo of a pyramid at the city of Calakmul focuses on the staircase, with no other identifying characteristics, reducing it to a geometric compositional element, balanced by three dramatic clouds. Another image is a detail of a ceramic portrait from the city of Palenque. The object is one of a large series of larger-than-life-size portrait on incense burners. This one is a portrait of one of the kings of the city, probably Kan Bahlam II, who ruled AD 684-702. The ancient Maya were one of the few New World peoples who developed an interest in portraiture as likeness that approximates western notions, though they always showed their rulers as youthful. ◀