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September 11, 2006

R. Tripp Evans

Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination, 1820–1915

Austin: **University of Texas Press**, 2003. 224 pp.; 64 b/w ills. Cloth \$45.00 (0292702477)



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For many scholars, the historiography of their own fields is a late-career feat, arrived at after decades of slow rumination—George Kubler’s *Aesthetic Recognition of Ancient Amerindian Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) comes immediately to mind. This slim volume, by contrast, is the reworking of a dissertation (Yale, 1998). Its five chapters are written with vigor and freshness, and while they lack the intellectual heft of Kubler’s work (though this could be said of most works in the field), they offer an easily accessible introduction to some key nineteenth-century writers who tried to make sense of the ancient history of Mexico, largely through direct encounter with surviving ruins.

The book takes the form of five thematically linked essays, arranged in rough chronological order. The first chapter summarizes the lack of knowledge about pre-Columbian peoples at the end of the eighteenth century, a lacuna fitfully addressed by the Spanish Bourbon kings who sponsored field surveys of the ancient architecture of New Spain (as Mexico and Guatemala were known). The most extensive of these was that of Captain Guillermo Dupaix, who along with the artist José Luciano Castañeda surveyed important sites, some of them Maya, over three years, 1805–7. A key question that Dupaix tried to answer, as did others who followed in his footsteps, was the relationship of the extraordinary sculpture and architecture he encountered to Old World models. The impassioned (if not half-mad) Frenchman Jean-Frédéric Maximilien de Waldeck would take up the same question in Dupaix’s wake, seeing parallels, if not direct influence, of Egyptian architecture and sculpture.

Chapter 2, the meatiest in the book, deals with the US American John

Lloyd Stephens, whose travels in Mexico and the Yucatan, accompanied by the British artist Frederick Catherwood, yielded the immensely popular *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843). These two books, in Evans's words, made "accurate information concerning Mexico's pre-Columbian past . . . available to Americans in a readable and inexpensive format" (45). Evans argues that Stephens's agenda was both scientific (in its careful rendering of sculpture and architecture in drawings and photographs) and imperialistic. Stephens believed pre-Columbian monuments to be a broadly American (read US) patrimony, a stance that allowed him to hack up and ship off artworks (he also tried to buy Copan, Quirigua, Palenque, and Uxmal), thus saving them from the neglect suffered at the hands of their local proprietors. Such sentiments, Evans contends, helped the thousands of US armchair tourists who read Stephens and Catherwood's work to think of Mexico as potentially their own, and thus support the Mexican-American war, in whose aftermath the US annexed half a million square miles of Mexican territory. While there's little hard evidence to support this contention, Stephens and Catherwood's work is nonetheless the most consequential one treated in Evans's book, due to its broad reach among a nineteenth-century public and its opportunistic imperialist impulse.

Chapter 3 deals with Joseph Smith and his view of the pre-Columbian past in *The Book of Mormon*. Chapter 4 treats Desirée Charnay, "a French explorer working under American patronage" who published in 1862 a folio of photographs that were "the first widely available photographic images of the ancient Mesoamerican monuments" (105). These photos, Evans contends, conveyed a "radical sense of authenticity, seemingly divorced from artistic subjectivity," which, in turn, "increased [the] audience's sense of interpretive agency" (110). The final chapter explores the antics of the French-English couple, Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon, whose own tendencies toward "going native" were propelled by their belief, disseminated in both "histories" and fiction, that Alice was the reincarnation of the ancient Queen M'oo of the Yucatan. Even the most credulous Americans failed to find much interest in Augustus's wild-eyed ramblings about the origins of Freemasonry among the Maya; his written works languished. His one shot at redeeming his tattered reputation has since been lost: the exacting paper-molds he made of Maya architectural sculpture were sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1882 and have since disappeared.

Since its assembled cast of characters is often so beguiling, it is easy to overlook some of the book's shortcomings. One is Evans's easy

acceptance of “accuracy” as the standard by which archeological and artistic works should be judged; although Foucault is cited in the bibliography, epistemology is largely a dead letter. While Evans sets out to show how his chosen writers fill the “historical tabula rasa” (2) that was ancient America, he seems to hold onto the idea that these writers served only as placeholders until that tabula could be filled with “certifiable, historical information” (2)—presumably by modern scholars. While the amount of data—archeological, linguistic, artistic—that we have today about pre-Columbian America would stagger these nineteenth-century writers, I cannot claim that in capturing and representing the pre-Columbian past we “moderns” are any less constrained by reigning ideologies than our forbears, and the “certifiable, historical information” of today may be perceived quite differently by our own progeny.

The title of the book is a catchy one, and its exegesis lies in the subtitle, but neither of its promises are completely fulfilled. Presented through the eyes (and writings) of a few subjects, “Mexican antiquity” is seen as a history of fragments, or a litany of wrong answers. Striking to me, however, was that many of the questions that these blinkered nineteenth-century observers asked are *still* the ones we ask today. When were the Americas peopled? (And the ways that Native American Indians choose to answer makes the question particularly germane today.) Is there a fundamental, discernable unity among Mesoamerican cultures? How do we make sense of what is, even today, a very fragmentary past? Since the “American Imagination” of the second part of the title is, in fact, the imagination of two Mexicans (Dupaix and Castañeda), two-and-a-half Frenchmen (Waldeck, Charnay, Augustus Le Plongeon), two-and-a-half Brits (Augustus Le Plongeon again, Catherwood, Alice Le Plongeon) and two US Americans (Stephens and Smith), the book offers us only limited access to nineteenth-century US American culture, and I would hope this would be a vein of intellectual history that Evans considers mining in future work. The exception is the chapter on Stephens. While it may paint Stephens’s imperialism with fairly broad strokes, it does set his work in the context of the larger US “Indian Problem,” drawing particularly instructive parallels between his project and that of his contemporary George Catlin, who worked among American Indians in the US. Crossing the Rio Grande is unusual among scholars of nineteenth-century America, and Evans does it with ease.

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