

Late Maya Mural Paintings from Quintana Roo, Mexico

Nancy M. Farriss

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Arthur G. Miller

Dumbarton Oaks Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, Washington D.C.

Arlen F. Chase

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Six murals of exceptional interest were encountered during a recent survey of Maya sites in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Evidence presented here suggests that the murals are the latest to depict pre-Columbian subject matter in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Introduction

During a preliminary survey of the Maya sites of the central Quintana Roo coast in December-January of 1974-75, previously unpublished murals were encountered on a late Postclassic building that forms part of the archaeological zone of Xelha in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico. The survey was carried out under the direction of Dr. Nancy M. Farriss and supported by the National Geographic Society with the cooperation of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History. Dr. Arthur G. Miller, who has been studying the Maya mural-painting tradition on the east coast of Yucatan and its archaeological contexts, was called in to examine the murals. Arlen F. Chase, a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, assisted Dr. Farriss in the coastal survey and made the plans reproduced in Figures 1-3.

Dr. Miller determined that the Xelha murals are of particular importance to the understanding of the East Coast mural tradition. Although the existence of the murals was reported by José González Avilés in 1968,¹ no description of the murals themselves exists, much less a photograph or reproduction. Arrangements have been made to have the new murals copied by Dr. Miller's associate in mural investigation, Felipe Dávalos G., and chemical analyses of the painting technique carried out by Dr. Edwin R. Littman. Until the results of these studies are available, it will not be possible to evaluate the paintings in any detail.

Nevertheless, we feel that the Xelha murals are significant enough to Maya studies that a preliminary statement of our findings here would be useful.

The Xelha Mural-Bearing Structure

The setting of the Xelha murals is especially impressive. The mural-bearing building belongs to a group of five structures clustered around a plaza on high, well-drained terrain approximately 2 km. east of the *caleta* (small bay) of Xelha and some 15 m. south of a large, deep *cenote* (sinkhole) of extremely clear water. The plaza is located along a causeway that leads inland from the Xelha peninsula — which juts into the well-protected *caleta* of the same name — and, extending along the front of the mural building, continues west to an as yet undetermined point. The five structures are situated on an elevated platform, with the mural-bearing building assuming the most prominent position of the group, set off by its own platform extension and by the causeway passing in front of it and flanked on the other side by the near-by *cenote* to the north. The structures on the east, south, and west sides of the plaza are simple constructions, consisting of less than human-scale rooms enclosing altars. There was a large structure to the east of the mural-bearing building, but unfortunately its state of preservation is too poor for its form to be discerned. Of the five structures, the building containing the murals is the largest and most complex and has also survived in the best condition. The northeast corner of the building collapsed sometime in the recent past, but the rest of the building appears to be intact.

1. José González Avilés, "Hallazgo de construcciones y esculturas," *Stephens y el Pirata Molas y otras narraciones y estudios* (Merida 1970) 75-77.

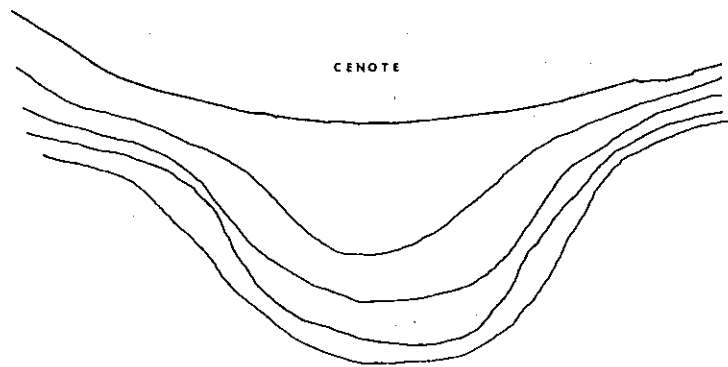
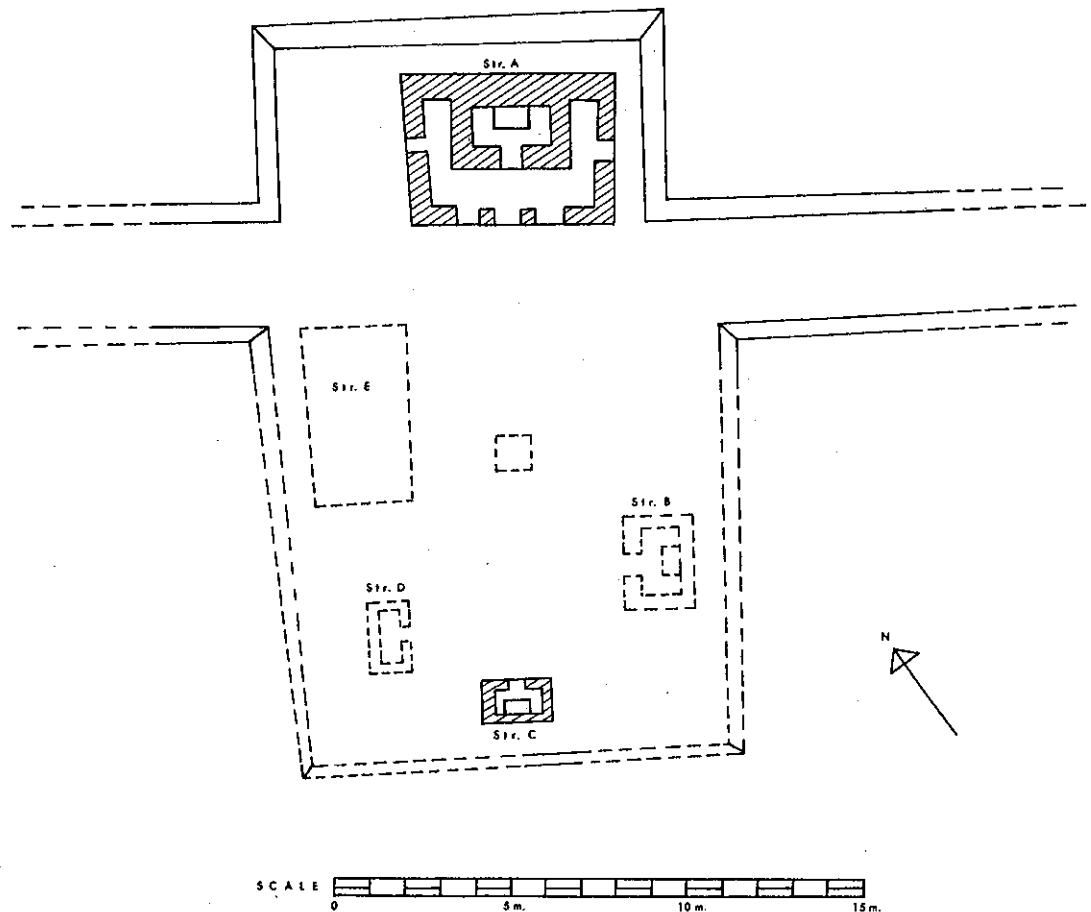


Figure 1. Plan of Xelha *Cenote* Group.



For the purposes of this discussion we are referring to this mural-bearing building as Structure A (FIGS. 1-3).

Structure A is a typical late Postclassic building of the East Coast; it is composed of two parallel, vaulted chambers creating a larger structure enclosing a smaller one (FIG. 3). The architectural characteristics of the building relate it most closely to the site of nearby Tulum, 17 km. to the south. Structure A is a reduced version, without its superstructure, of the well-known Temple of the Frescoes (Structure 16) at Tulum, and like Tulum Structure 16 contains an inner chamber with murals. In addition, Xelha Structure A shares with Tulum Structure 16 the distinctive architectural feature of an elevated terrace on three sides of and upon which the inner chamber is built (FIGS. 2-3). Finally, like Tulum Structure 16, the inner room of Structure A was

built at the same time as the enveloping shell of its outer one.

The façade of Structure A is also typical of the late Postclassic architecture found on the East Coast. The exterior shell of the building is fronted by two columns topped by square capstones; and directly above the capstones, forming the upper façade, is a simple, double moulding extending entirely around the structure. The smooth, flat surface between the two mouldings was originally painted, although only fragments of this paint remain today.

The massive masonry roof is also typical of late Postclassic construction. However, the vault construction of Structure A is not diagnostic of that final period of architectural history of the Maya, since vaulted construction appears contemporaneously with flat ceilings

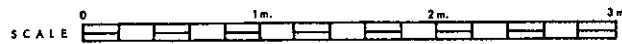
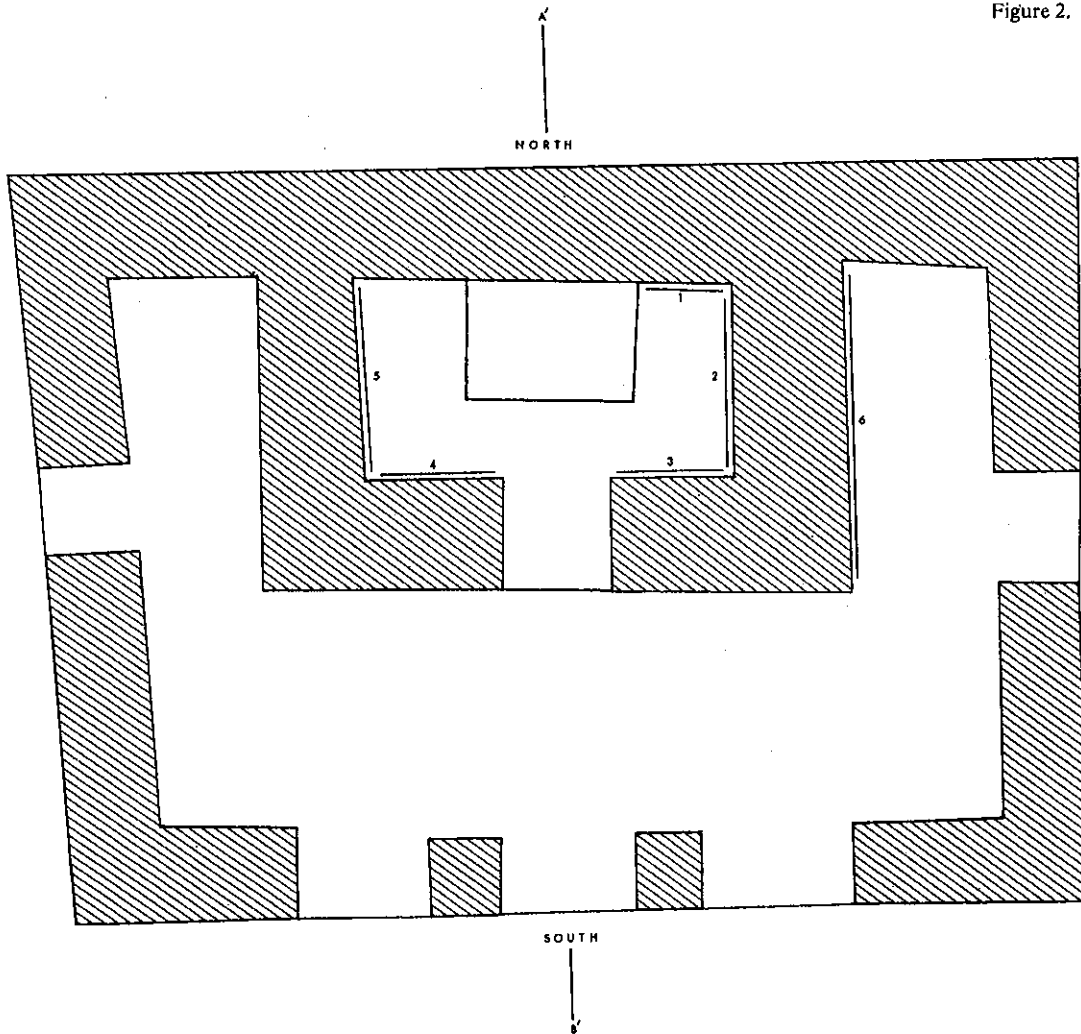


Figure 2. Plan of Xelha Structure A.



on the East Coast during the Phase 3, or Terminal Postclassic phase of the East Coast sequence.

A gallery around the inner building of Structure A on the south, east, and west sides is accessible through the columnar façade entrance to the south and through side entrances on the east and west. The inner building shares the rear, north wall of the outer building, to which its east and west walls are attached. Inside the inner chamber much of the space is occupied by a recently looted altar, which is also attached to the rear, north wall and which is another typical feature of Late Postclassic architecture.

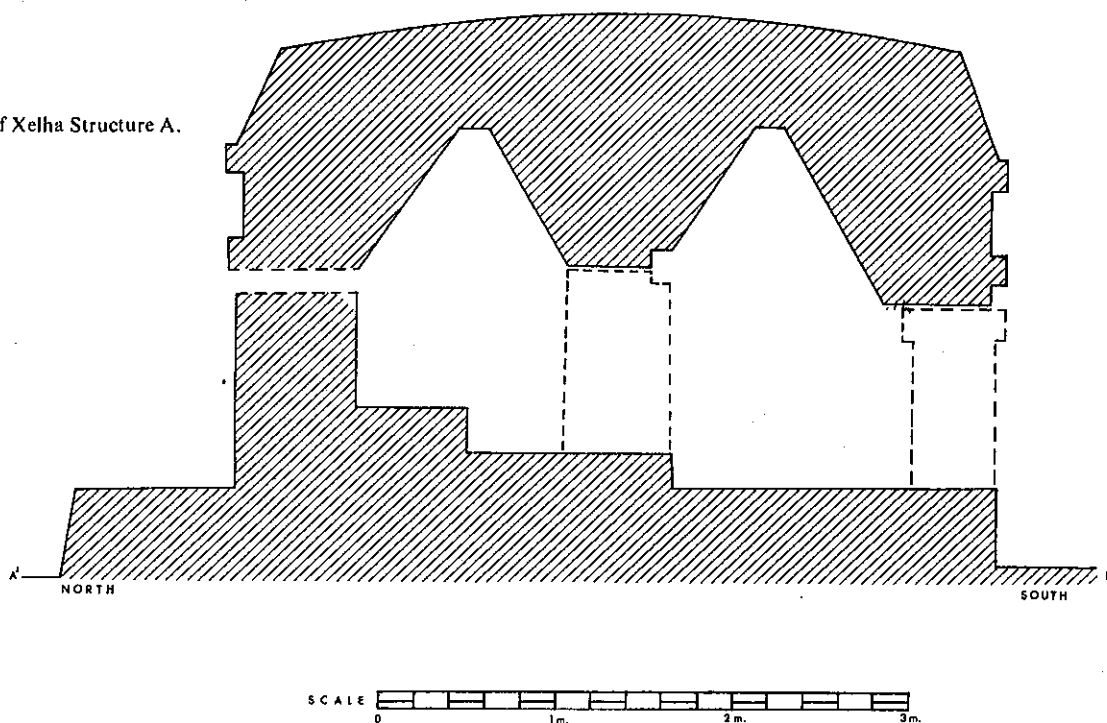
The Structure A Murals

Mural paintings survive on the interior walls of the inner chamber and part of the outer walls of Structure

A. It is the relatively dry and lightless condition of this chamber that has produced the best environment for the preservation of painting in a building that was originally doubtlessly painted throughout. Despite the relatively favorable conditions of the inner chamber, its mural design is not entirely clear, and that of its outer walls is even less distinct. Nevertheless, we were able to identify the style and some of the iconography of these very important, though fragmentary, examples of late Postclassic Maya mural painting.

Besides the fragments of plain blue paint evident throughout the building, there are two distinct mural painting styles associated with Xelha Structure A. The best represented style is found in varying states of preservation decorating the five inner wall surfaces of the small interior chamber. (FIG. 2). The murals have

Figure 3. Elevation of Xelha Structure A.



been numbered in the manner used by Miller in a recent publication;² clockwise, with Mural 1 representing the north wall, the largest surface, measuring 2.11 m. in width and 1.04 m. in height; Mural 2, the east; Murals 3 and 4, the south wall, which is divided into two parts by the entrance into the inner chamber; and Mural 5, the west wall.

The painting decorating these interior walls originally covered the vertical surfaces up to the vault spring. Of the five painted surfaces inside the inner chamber, Mural 2 is in the best state of preservation; Murals 3-5 have good traces of figurative mural painting on them; but Mural 1 is a very small painted fragment at the east end of the north wall. Large amounts of broken plaster with paint still adhering have broken off from the five painted surfaces and have accumulated on the floor of the chamber.

Style

The style of these interior wall paintings of the inner chamber falls into what Robertson has described as the "International Style" of the late Postclassic.³ There are many busy black and blue lines on a plain blue ground,

so arranged as to betray a sense of *horror vacui* on the part of the artists who executed the design. Although the poor light conditions and fragmentary state of the paintings made study difficult, it was evident that elaborately dressed, confronting figures are shown. Usually these are in pairs of one seated and one standing figure, facing and gesticulating to each other, and framed by twisted-cord borders, in much the same manner as the murals decorating the interior of Tulum Structures 5 and 16.⁴ Also like the Tulum paintings, the murals of the Structure A interior room are composed of three registers, the center one of which depicts the confronting figures. Although the upper register is not yet clear enough to distinguish, we were able to determine that the lower register is separated from the middle one by a jaguar belt band, a design that occurs in the Tulum Structure 5 mural as well. In fact, composition is not the only stylistic trait that relates these paintings of the inner chamber of Xelha Structure A to those of Tulum Structures 5 and 16. The colors are similar: black and blue lines on a blue ground. And the manner of delineating the figures with many parallel black and blue lines, creating a net-like effect on the blue ground, is similar at both Xelha and Tulum.

2. Arthur G. Miller, *The Mural Painting of Teotihuacan* (Washington D.C. 1973).

3. Donald Robertson, "The International Style of the Late Post-Classic," *Verhandlungen des XXXVIII Internationalen Amerikanistenkongresses 2* (München 1970 77-88).

4. Arthur G. Miller, "Archaeological Investigations of the Quintana Roo Mural Project: A Preliminary Report of the 1973 Season," *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility 18* (Berkeley 1974) 137-148; fig. 1.

Yet the Xelha murals are not exact stylistic replicas of those in Tulum. There is a relative crudeness of style, which is notable, first of all, in the quality of the painting, decidedly inferior to that of the related paintings of Tulum Structures 5 and 16. The black and blue lines are less controlled than at Tulum, and the black lines themselves are thicker, averaging a clumsy 6 cm. in width on a relatively small painting surface, while those at Tulum average a delicate 2.5 cm. on a larger painting surface. From what was determined of the proportion of the confronting figures in the middle register at Xelha, a sophisticated sense of rhythmical proportion, so evident at Tulum, was lacking. The headdresses, for example, are far out of proportion to the body at Xelha in comparison with those at Tulum. In general, the Xelha paintings betray an awkwardness and general ill-at-ease character, as if artists were trying to imitate a painting style that was by its nature beyond their own artistic training, tradition, and general level of sophistication. It is for this reason — the derivative, imitative aspect of the Xelha painting style — that we feel certain that these Xelha paintings were executed by artists influenced by, but not of, the Tulum painting tradition. We are sure, therefore, that the Xelha paintings are later than those of Tulum, although we are not yet in a position even to speculate about how much later.

The exterior east wall of the inner chamber of Xelha Structure A exhibits a trace of mural painting which we have designated as Mural 6. The style of this mural is markedly different from that represented in the inner room in that no lines are used; instead, rather large areas of flat color are arranged on a flat, relatively empty ground. More colors are used than in Murals 1-5: cerulean blue, ochre, two reds, plain white, and purple make up the fragmentary figurative motif that is visible.

Whereas the interior paintings of the inner chamber of Xelha Structure A relate to those of Structures 5 and 16 at Tulum, the outer wall painting of this inner chamber relates to the murals of Tancah Structure 44⁵ and particularly to that of Tancah Structure 12.⁶

A description of the wall painting inside Xelha Structure A would not be complete without mention of a form of painting — whitewash — that is present there and which, although not technically a painting style, is significant by its absolute lack of or negation of style. Traces of this whitewash cover the interior paintings of the Structure A inner chambers. There is no question that it was placed over the paintings, but the time inter-

val between the use of the figurative painting and the subsequent whitewashing cannot as yet be determined.

Iconography

The subject matter of the Xelha Murals 1-5 cannot yet be understood to any significant degree, simply because the images are not yet fully visible. For now we can see that what is shown are three registers, including an upper sky band, a middle earth scene, and a lower underworld. The same iconographic pattern is repeated at Tulum in Structures 5 and 16.⁷ The significance of such a tripartite arrangement has been discussed by Miller elsewhere.⁸ Suffice it to state here that such an iconographic cluster is a typical Maya painting formula which is at least as old as the Classic period.

We can at present say more of the iconography of Mural 6. What is depicted is a Diving or Descending Bee, the *Ahmuzencab* of the Codex Tro-Cortesianus.⁹ Pages 103-106 and 108-112 of the Codex depict *Ahmuzencab* figures that are quite similar in style to the one shown in Xelha Structure A. The significance of this iconographic theme of *Ahmuzencab* takes on some clarity when the orientation of the painting on Structure A is considered: the painting faces east. Miller has elsewhere described the relationship between a bee or wasp and the planet Venus as *Xux Ek* (Wasp Star) depicted on the murals of east walls at Tulum.¹⁰ The evil and unlucky associations of both the easterly direction and the planet Venus are included in the meaning of the descending bee of Mural 6 at Xelha. We feel certain that the belief in Venus as *Xux Ek*, particularly during the first five days of that planet's heliacal rising as Morning Star, is at least part of the significance of this painting at Xelha.

Concluding Remarks

The discovery of previously unknown mural paintings at Xelha promises to shed new light on the stylistic

5. Miller, op. cit. (in note 4) figs. 4-5.

6. Arthur G. Miller, "The Mural Paintings in Structure 12 at Tancah and in Structure 5 at Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico: Implications of their Style and Iconography," *Atti XL Congresso Internazionale degli Americanisti* 1. (Genoa 1973) 465-471; fig. 1.

7. Miller, op. cit. (in note 4) fig. 1.

8. Arthur G. Miller, "The Iconography of the Painting in the Temple of the Diving God, Tulum: A Tentative Hypothesis," *Religion en Mesoamérica. XII Mesa Redonda*, Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología (Mexico 1972) 329-333; idem, "The Iconography of the Painting in the Temple of the Diving God, Tulum, Quintana Roo: The Twisted Cords," *Mesoamerican Archaeology: New Approaches*, ed., Norman Hammond (London 1974) 167-186; fig. 1.

9. *Codex Tro-Cortesianus (Codex Madrid)*, *Codices Selecti*, Vol. 8 (Graz 1967). Introduction and summary by F. Anders.

10. Arthur G. Miller, "The Maya and the Sea: Trade and Cult at Tancah and Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico," *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Cult of the Sea* (Washington D.C. 1974 in press); idem, "West and East in Maya Thought: Death and Rebirth at Palenque and Tulum," *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque: The Art, Iconography and Dynastic History of Palenque* (California 1975).

history of East Coast Maya mural painting. The best represented of the two painting styles evident in the Xelha Structure A murals is closely related to the paintings of Tulum Structures 5 and 16. It is clear that the Xelha mural painters used the Tulum paintings as models. The other of the two painting styles at Xelha is related to the style known from Tancah.

Because it has been suggested elsewhere that the painting style of Tulum Structures 5 and 16 is intrusive¹¹ and because the mural painting style of Tancah Structures 12 and 44 have been described as relatively indigenous to the area,¹² we feel that we can hypothesize at this point that we have at Xelha in the form of mural painting traditions both a reflection of intrusive culture in Mural 1-5 and a local one in Mural 6.

Accepting Miller's hypothesis that the intrusive Tulum style represents Phase 3 in the Postclassic sequence of the East Coast, the Murals Nos. 1-5 of Xelha Structure A, stylistically derivative from Tulum, represent the latest paintings of pre-Columbian subject matter on the East Coast and indeed on the entire Yucatan Peninsula. And when one considers that these latest paintings were subsequently covered over with whitewash, the question arises as to whether or not this overpainting was done by the Maya. There is documentary evidence of early Spanish occupation of the East Coast, including specifically the Xelha area. Archaeological evidence exists in the form of a Spanish chapel in Xcaret¹³ and Tancah¹⁴ and Spanish ceramics and sculpture from the Tancah Structure 44 excavations.¹⁵

It is possible that the whitewash of the Xelha Structure A interior was done by or under the orders of Spanish Christians who reused the Maya building or simply wished to blot out what they considered idolatrous representations. It is also possible that the whitewashing is of more recent origin and with little or no ideological connotations. A Phase 3 Postclassic Structure at Playa del Carmen, to the north, was occupied ten years ago by a couple as a *casa chica* (love nest); the lovers whitewashed the interior in an attempt

to make the old building more liveable. Although the date of the whitewash at present remains unknown, there is no question that the underlying paintings represent the last mural expression of pre-Columbian culture in this area, before the native tradition became modified by European contact.

Nancy M. Farriss, Associate Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, received her Ph.D. degree from the University of London in 1965. She has worked in Mexican colonial history and in marine archaeology at Port Royal, Jamaica, and other sites in the Caribbean, and is currently engaged in research on pre-Columbian and colonial culture contact in Yucatan.

Arthur G. Miller, Research Associate at the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, received his Ph.D. degree from Harvard University in 1969. His fieldwork includes excavation at Seibal, Guatemala, research on the mural paintings of Teotihuacán, Tulum, and Tancah, and a three-year excavation of the site of Tancah, which he is currently completing.

Arlen F. Chase is currently working for his Ph.D. degree in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His field work includes experience in eastern Arizona and the Petén and Izabal regions of Guatemala.

11. Miller, op. cit. (1974 in note 10).

12. Miller, op. cit. (in note 6 and 1974 in note 10).

13. I. V. Andrews, E. Wyllys and Anthony P. Andrews, "A Preliminary Study of the Ruins of Xcaret, Quintana Roo, Mexico," *Middle American Research Institute Publication* (New Orleans 1975 in press).

14. Miller, op. cit. (1974 in note 10).

15. Arthur G. Miller, "Archaeological Investigations at Tulum and Tancah, Quintana Roo, Mexico: A Progress Report of the 1974 Season," *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Facility* 22 (Berkeley 1975).