

# Bringing Maya Sculpture to Life



## *The Copan Sculpture Museum: Ancient Maya Artistry in Stucco & Stone*

by Barbara W. Fash (Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, 2011). 216 pp.; paperback. \$35.00, 198 color illus., 34 line illus., 35 halftones, 2 maps; Spanish edition also available. ISBN 978-0-87365-858-4

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Copan is among the most well-known, frequently visited, and extensively excavated archaeological sites in the ancient Maya world. In 1996, the Copan Sculpture Museum opened, providing visitors an opportunity to see examples of the site's most important and most impressive sculptures, architectural facades, and monuments. *The Copan Sculpture Museum: Ancient Maya Artistry in Stucco & Stone* began as a visitors' guide to the museum, but expanded into a wider consideration of the sculpture at Copan. In this volume, Barbara Fash provides detailed descriptions and iconographic interpretations of the various objects on display. She places these objects into their broader archaeological context, suggesting what questions they pose and what answers they provide about ancient Maya society. Written for the general public, *The Copan Sculpture Museum* serves as an enticing entry into the art of Copan, as a photographic atlas of the museum's exhibits, and as a model of how archaeological research can and should be disseminated to non-specialists.

Divided into 12 chapters, the book discusses the genesis of the museum, the history of archaeological research at Copan, the various thematic elements to which the exhibits allude—including warfare, the Underworld, and fertility, among others—and the involvement in the museum by the modern Copan community. The chapters provide archaeological context for a consideration of the exhibits, and the exhibits provide an entry point for chapters about various aspects of ancient Maya society.

Although never explicitly stated, several themes run through the book and are worthy of mention. The first is the importance of making archaeology accessible. Fash offers an easily understandable, extensively illustrated text about the making of a museum that brings Copan's sculpture to life. The second theme is the fragility of the archaeological record and the need for its active preservation. Through photographs, Fash documents some of the destruction that has occurred at the site since archaeological research began there in the 19th century. She thereby effectively underscores the importance of endeavors—such as the creation of the sculpture museum—designed to preserve the site and its artifacts and to protect them against future damage. The final and perhaps most important theme is the emphasis on people as the fundamental objects of archaeological inquiry and main beneficiaries of archaeological research. At various junctures, Fash emphasizes that the value of Copan's sculpture is found not in the physical stucco, stone, and clay, but rather in the insights the sculptures provide about past societies and the appreciation they inspire in, the economic opportunities they bring to, and the sense of cultural heritage and community identity they foster among, modern groups.

The stated goals of the book are to offer a detailed archaeological context for the museum exhibits, to provide an introduction to the history and culture of the ancient Maya, and to demonstrate the value of working with local communities to preserve cultural heritage. Fash achieves these goals and accomplishes much more. This publication is a welcome addition to the literature about the ancient Maya. 🏠