

INTRODUCTION

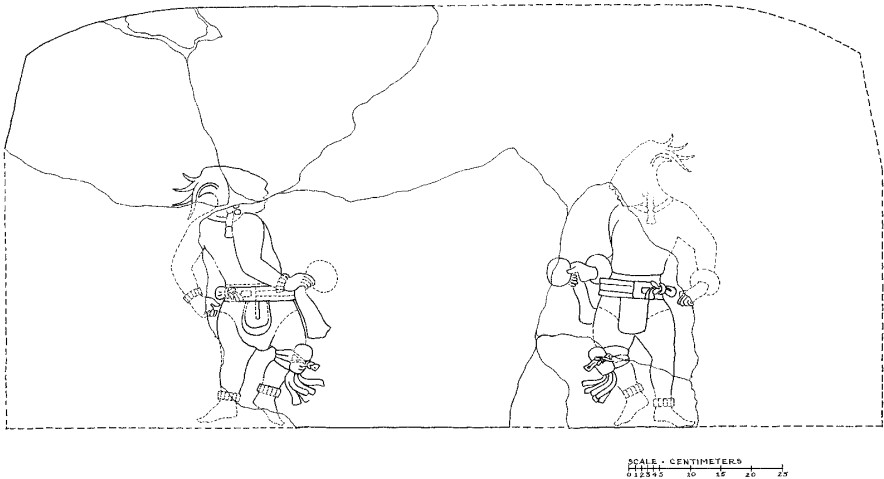
IN THE FIRST millennium A.D., the Maya civilization spread across the lowlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. By A.D. 600, the rain forests of this region had yielded to a busy patchwork of small and medium-sized cities: The irregular massing and quirky spatial geometries of Maya urbanism appeared along riverways, rose above swamps, and spread across denuded plains. Among these centers' pyramids, plazas, and palaces, fractious elites negotiated the finer points of status and power. Their speech favored archaisms and mannered vowel shifts. They admired the robust physicality that comes with eating rich food every day, at every meal. Their locution flashed with the apple green of jade inlay in their tooth enamel; their councils and banquets were renowned across Mesoamerica as occasions of stilted, refulgent civility.¹

Maya art treated ball games, binges, conquests, visions, giftings, dances, speeches, parleys, censings, robings, bloodlettings. This visual work represented and embodied dynasty, ceremony, and the chilly impersonality of official discourse among the highborn and the able. It registered minutely observed accounts of the singular ritual occasion and the sustained routine, the artfully staged peak of ritual drama and the unthinking mannerism of the everyday. So too the art posed an extended meditation on the meaning of stubborn things, fleeting situations, and creatural sensations. Maya visual work was preoccupied with the moment of physical awareness in cultural discourse, with eyes that scan, fingers that point, and bodies that move. One particular index of human physicality – the calligrapher's touch – invested Maya art of this period with many of its characteristic visual forms: Calligraphic line coursed across drinking cups, tinklers of shell and bone, temple facades, and urban landmarks, ever reshaped and reshaping as it negotiated the surfaces of cultural experience.

The calligrapher's brush provided this visual tradition with what Mayanist Tatiana Proskouriakoff described as its "pure configuration: [its] preferences for certain shapes, proportions, types of curvature, and rhythmic



1. Piedras Negras “Miscellaneous Sculptured Stone 10.” (Photo: University of Pennsylvania Museum.)



2. Piedras Negras “Miscellaneous Sculptured Stone 10.” (Drawing: Tatiana Proskouria-koff, Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum.)

changes of their arrangement.”² In its most elemental manifestation, Maya line is little more than a painted curve, a hook of pigment. It may be described as an arc or moving angle, a fluid mannerism beholden to the easy motion and shifting weight of the loaded bristle across a prepared surface. Apparent enough in the pebblelike forms and winding details of Maya glyphs, this linear signature transcends the ordered trains or stacks of hieroglyphic text to course through the art in so many iconographic guises and



3. Carved panel from El Cayo, A.D. 795. (Photo © Justin Kerr; K2879.)

freehand reinventions. The schematism Proskouriakoff described may be seen in any number of compositions from the period: Maya sculpture may defer to a pure conception of linear design, as in a carved architectural panel once fitted into an eighth-century ball court at the site of Piedras Negras (Structure K-6b), “showing two figures in action, really an incised drawing rather than a sculpture” (Figures 1, 2).³

The signature forms of calligrapher’s line often threads through more technically diversified sculptural composition, undergirding imagery with an alliterative logic of visual order, or patternization: In a panel carved in A.D. 795 in the Usumacinta polity of El Cayo, sidebars contain double columns of elegant glyphs, their forms an intricate complexity of incising, bevelling, and stone polishing (Figure 3). Here as in other visual compositions of the period, the fluent syntax of line refuses to blend fully into any or-

ganizing representational conceit. Graphic formalism organizes the hieroglyphic writhing of the little god in the protagonist's right hand, the delicate pinch of her left hand's thumb and forefinger, a headdress whose cascading quetzal feathers turn and fold in striking imitation of the rolling traverse of the calligrapher's bristle brush.⁴ It is to be seen in the grand form and in the curling edges of a contemporary eccentric flint from the Maya lowlands, a glassy stone worked in the likeness of the calligrapher's scrolling brushwork (Figure 4).⁵ Indeed, the signature of calligraphic brushwork commonly appears in media either foreign or inimical to brush and ink: jade carvers, embroiderers, and blade workers mimicked brushwork's serpentine fluency in their arts, knap by knap or stitch by stitch.

Maya art's sinuous visual asides and unthinking Morellian details quickened a staid art of dynasty and ritual: The calligrapher's whiplash described gum lines, ankles, and navels, the creases and furrows of palms and brows, the roofs of mouths, rooflines that set buildings off against the sky. Indeed, the pictorial art reveals that brushwork was the not simply a consequence of artistic technique; rather, Maya calligraphic line operated as an organizing schema of vision and cognition. Mayas' visual habits and prepared perceptions disposed them to recognize likeness to the brush's traverse and fold in the drape of slaves' bodies across stairways, in drifts of cigar smoke, in the clouds of the Milky Way.⁶ It was the shape of mist seeping from cave mouths, fire and steam rising from braziers, the swirl of porridge in the bowl. Thoughtful Maya eyes saw it along the dark surfaces of obsidian mirrors, in plant sprouts and waving banners, in the curved beak of parrots, in the folds of bellies and armpits. It furnished the labile cultural and visual morphology by which the contours of experience were evoked in art, and the cultural prism through which they were perceived. As a "sensory order" – a set of perceptual habits and a stylistic manner in art – calligraphic formalism provided the contemporary Maya visual tradition with the indexicality of the painterly facture mark, the symbolic value of the cultural frontispiece, and the charming, irreducible identity of the monumental eye-catcher or the work seated in the hand.⁷

In urban centers across the southern Maya lowlands, the signature of brushwork offered an expansive discourse of cultural and power. This calligraphic formalism met the eye in myriad contexts: in prospects through expansive city spaces, in crabwise glances across narrow audience chambers, in the tattooed features of smooth-faced Maya aristocrats. Of course, it would be an oversimplification to say that line and the linear idiom in art



4. Maya eccentric flint, seventh or eighth century A.D.
(Photo © Justin Kerr; K2822.)

posed a consistent presence in the Maya visual tradition. Local preferences subdivided the larger visual tradition of the Maya lowlands, while at individual centers of artistic production, the character of visual work could shift markedly from decade to decade. But even with the fragmentation and dispersal of the tradition's works, what is remarkable is the unitary character of this linear idiom – across media and from one production center to the next – as well as its constancy both as a source of expressive devices and as a fund of meanings that might be tapped through these motives' deployment in the visual arts.

In attending to this visual tradition's extraordinary products – manuscript and ceramic painting, sculptural compositions, and filigreed architectural works – modern scholarship makes ample and admiring notice of Maya art's signature graphism: "The governing impression," art historian George Kubler noted of Maya art, "is of an art of linear contour, transferred

from painting in order to secure more permanent effects.”⁸ Kubler’s observations ring true to the look and feel of so much Maya art; they are amply confirmed by instances of carving that preserve calligraphic guidelines laid down on prepared surfaces as a template of design.⁹ What awaits detailed consideration, however, is the larger cultural problematic implied in this formalism’s play across the Maya cities’ panoply of cultural expectations, artistic media, and perceptual contexts. For the delicate tracings of the brush across the hard surfaces of Maya art is no simple tool mark or accident of the artistic process; the visual schematism so apparent in this visual tradition was itself an artifice, a cultural *trompe l’oeil*, and a graphic allegory of the Maya cities’ quickening social energies.¹⁰

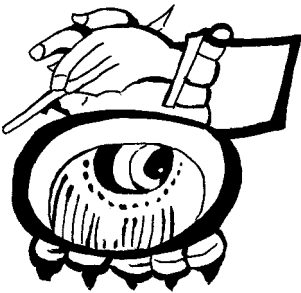
This book offers a cultural history of the patternwork that flowed from the painter’s “operational synergy of tool and gesture.”¹¹ It explores this graphism as a cultural construct, following the transposition and migration of this signature visuality across the visual media of the lowland Maya cities. In seeking to particularize the significance of Maya line’s varied interventions in and realizations as the material culture of the lowland Maya cities, the book brings forward the cultural modalities of perception, artistic praxis, and moral valuation comprehended and embodied by this visual work.¹² Its analysis arcing across the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and urbanism, the study addresses a sequence of widening perceptual settings; the inquiry moves from the bounded enclosure of the manuscript page, to the sidelong visual attention of the ancient Maya palace, to the restless urbanism of the Maya city. The book is then not so much a study of Maya calligraphy as it is an analysis of the materiality of signs and the specificity of visual attention in Maya cultural experience, an inquiry into the poetics of line in the lowland cities.



THE ANCIENT MAYA referred to their brushwork as *ts’ib’*. No less than the word’s percussive, glottalized consonants, the expression is itself an ancient fixture of the Maya cultural tradition. In the colonial and modern periods, ancestors of the modern Mayan word *ts’ib’/★c’ihb’* were in currency in almost every known Mayan language spoken across southern Mesoamerica. Indeed, the term’s broad distribution suggests to linguists both the word’s widespread importance among individual Maya communities and its deep history in Proto-Mayan, an ancestor Mayan language spoken forty-two cen-



5. Maya polychrome vase, Tikal region, after A.D. 600. (Photo © Justin Kerr; K772.)



6. Detail drawing of the *ts'ib'* glyph shown (left of center) in Figure 5.

turies ago.¹³ The word *ts'ib'* is found in numerous inscriptions from the ancient Maya lowlands; one of its most eloquent instances appears on a vase painted in the region of Tikal after the turn of the seventh century A.D. (Figures 5, 6).¹⁴ The glyph that expresses the term in this text employs an unusual collocation of logographic and phonetic graphemes: a hand holding a brush (**TS'IB'**) poised over the phoneme **b'a**, hence **TS'IB'-b'(a)**, to render a variant of the Classic Mayan word *ts'ib'*.¹⁵ Though the painter's hand as a glyphic allograph of *ts'ib'* is unusual, the text's depiction of the painter's hand is consistent with other representations of the calligrapher's tool. The brush appears as a wooden or bone stylus with a gathering of fiber bristles lashed to its end or stuffed in its hollow core. The hand grasps the brush near the middle of the handle, in a light, pinching grip – the wrist broken back, two to four fingers engaged, the weak fifth finger often floating clear.

As a term of art among the lowland Maya cities, *ts'ib'* referred most often and most pointedly to a form of calligraphic visuality, a particular visual idiom by which the Maya submitted the world's surfaces to the rationalizing logic of human pattern and cultural meaning. *Ts'ib'* translates only with difficulty, for the scope of its meanings was considerably more broad than the individual terms we scholars posit as its translation. The English language provides several cognates: “line,” “stripe,” “painting,” “drawing,” “brushwork,” “design,” “inscription,” “patternwork,” “writing.” “*Ts'ib'*,” note

two distinguished scholars of the Quiché Mayan language, “refers not only to writing in the narrow sense, but to figures, designs, and diagrams in general, whether they be drawn, painted, engraved, embroidered or woven.”¹⁶ In its adjectival form, *ts’ib’* alludes to the visually complex surface. As an active verb, it refers to the act of linear designation, and as past participle in the passive voice, to those forms that result from the work of linear signing. In its broadest sense, *ts’ib’* was less a category of description than a catchall category of visual comprehension, a protean term that cast the prolixity of visual experience in terms of an eloquence of line. By means of *ts’ib’*’s various linguistic forms, the Maya described fundamental deeds and forms of culture and cognition; perhaps “illuminate,” with its various semantic inflections and material translations, offers a term from the European cultural tradition with a similarly broad reach of cultural suggestiveness, though wholly different in connotation and sensibility.

Scholars are well aware of the polysemous Maya concepts of *ts’ib’* – painting, line, and writing; they point out that this understanding was in fact common to several of ancient Mesoamerica’s “literary” traditions. Thoughtful epigraphic scholarship has pointed out the complications this lexical slippage entails for scholars seeking lucid and resilient definitions of ancient Maya “writing” and “hieroglyphic literacy.”¹⁷ In seeking to recover and interrogate native classifications of “writing,” such work constitutes an important and intellectually consequential effort; it may be argued that this scholarship also observes and reinscribes the parameters of writing and language set by the Western linguistic tradition it seeks to critique. A more recent body of revisionist scholarship, meanwhile, looks to broaden the criteria by which anthropologists identify “writing”: The scholarship of “alternative literacies in the Americas” compellingly demonstrates the semiotic intricacy of various semasiographic systems and mnemonic devices (central Mexican pictography; Incaic quipus).¹⁸ Working in the linguistic and philosophical tradition of Saussure and Derrida, this work prefers to enlarge and catholicize definitions of “writing,” and so submits indigenous universes of cultural signification to the exacting logocentrism of the mid-twentieth-century academe.

The Maya discourses of line, visual experience, and visual representation allow the various motives of visuality in this Mesoamerican tradition to be placed in firmer relation to cultures of visual attention and artistic praxis. They describe a visual culture that operated beyond mere obedience to the universalized practices of vision and guiding first causes that are un-

examined articles of faith in twentieth-century anthropological archaeology. The indigenous terms of art found in the colonial documents and more recent decipherments of ancient texts do not provide a ready definition of writing that might be employed to interpret works of the Mayas' pre-Columbian cultural history. Indeed, they cannot do so, if only for the fact that they are culled from sources separated by date and context (sixteenth-century Pokom towns in the Guatemalan highlands, seventeenth-century Yucatec villages of northern Yucatán, twentieth-century Tzotzil *municipios* of Chiapas). It is rather that the contours traced by the Mayan-language sources disclose the Mayas' recognition of line/pattern as a pole of visual interest and a proper means of cultural signification. They reveal that in this Mesoamerican tradition, "painting," "representation," and "writing" – visual work, visual representation, and visuality put to work for linguistic ends – constituted discrete if overlapping domains of signification. They disclose a dimension of complexity in the Maya visual tradition as undercharacterized in the literature of anthropological linguistics as it is unexplored in the literature of Maya epigraphy and art history.

This book thus explores the following argument: In the cities of the ancient Maya lowlands, a more focused semantics of *ts'ib'* lay at the heart of this expansive sensibility of line and pattern. In this historical context, *tsi'b'* referred to a particular idiom of calligraphic painting, and to the calligraphic habit of mind that it accompanied.¹⁹ At once an expression of visual description and an ascriptive term of culture, *ts'ib'* registered the presence of an apparent device of visible artifice, a poetics of line. Its signature pattern of brushwork shaped the way the Maya elite went about seeing, and so too it was built into the things they saw.²⁰



LONG AFTER THE demise of urban civilization in Central America's southern Maya lowlands, sixteenth-century Europeans discerned the weathered traces of script on large stones strewn about the region's abandoned cities. Among the living Maya they saw beehives and cakes of perfumed soap emblazoned with the marks of noble Maya owners. They noticed glyphs tattooed into the hollows of Maya necks, onto the palms of hands, the balls of thumbs, and the soles of feet.²¹ Or so colonial sources attest, in brief and fragmentary asides to visual phenomena, social practices, and material goods now irrevocably lost. Europeans even imagined their own bodies similarly

disfigured, an image they addressed with telling expansiveness: The era's Spanish chroniclers held a morbid fascination for the story of one Gonzalo, a Spanish sailor whose capture by Yucatec Maya in the 1510s had led to "his face and his hands [being] worked" with the Mayas' strange marks and signs.²²

Among the various indigenous writings Europeans encountered in the Maya area, that witnessed in painted manuscripts impressed them most. By dint of their own cultural habits and predispositions, Spanish observers were able to comprehend and describe this form of writing with acuity and unfeigned admiration. Accordingly, it was this, the book-borne manifestation of Maya writing – rather than those other, more alien marks and signs – that came to characterize the broader Maya visual tradition in the reports of early European observers, as well as in the writings of baroque humanists, Enlightenment *philosophes*, and nineteenth-century philologists that followed.²³ This cultural order of books provides the scholarly basis of the present study and also, to an important extent, the object of my inquiry's critique. As much as those manuscripts provide Maya studies with a principle of cultural order – as the bearers of a unified body of Maya knowledge and the guiding first causes of Maya cultural endeavor – the very importance of Maya books in the scholarly literature tends to circumvent sustained inquiry into their relationship to Maya cultural practice more generally.

The books of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica were "screenfold codices," long sheets of gessoed bark paper, accordion-folded and bound between ornamental covers of wood. They were costly, visually sumptuous works, compendia of bright, precisely rendered signs on luminous pages. Ancient Maya representations of their books show them thick as a hand is wide, their covers trimmed in jaguar pelt. In the sixteenth century, Mesoamerican bark-paper books joined feather mantles, jewels of semiprecious stones, seed-dough idols, and other New World exotica in the wonder cabinets of Europe's humanist princes.²⁴ By the seventeenth century, the panoply of Mesoamerican oddments had lost much of its interest, but the native books continued to be consulted by privileged European intellectuals. These books' hieroglyphs, histories, and calendars were the stuff of searching inquiry and elaborate theorizing. Designs found on their pages were intermittently copied and disseminated through the European culture of print. After the turn of the nineteenth century, dime museums and public shows purveyed the New World's indigenous cultural oddities to an eager public; in the same years, explorers and naturalists published accounts of their trav-