



Stephens & Catherwood Revisited  
**MAYA RUINS**  
**AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME**





*Stephens & Catherwood Revisited*  
*Maya Ruins and the Passage of Time*  
September 1 to November 30, 2015

This exhibition has been made possible with generous support from the Flora Clancy Memorial Fund. Flora Clancy pursued Maya studies as a Junior Fellow in 1978–79, and particularly wished her connection with Dumbarton Oaks to be celebrated.



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Foreword by Colin McEwan, Director of Pre-Columbian Studies.  
Introduction and notes by Hannah Yang.

Cover illustrations: (front) *Castle, at Tuloom*, lithograph on stone by A. Picken, based on  
artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. XXIII; (back) Jay A. Frogel,  
*Tulum, El Castillo*, composite photograph.

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If you would like more information, please visit our online exhibit at  
<http://www.doaks.org/resources/online-exhibits/stephens-and-catherwood>

# Foreword

Colin McEwan, Director of Pre-Columbian Studies

The vivid accounts recorded by American diplomat John L. Stephens and British artist Frederick Catherwood of their pioneering journeys to long-forgotten Maya sites rank among the most celebrated of all nineteenth-century travel narratives. They were the first explorers to accurately describe and illustrate the art of the pre-Hispanic Maya of Mexico and Central America, and their richly illustrated, highly popular books introduced the ancient Maya to a world that hitherto knew little of the existence of this accomplished civilization.

Robert Bliss's reading of these early works, together with more recent scientific discoveries, sparked his determination "to see the great carved temples and strange stelae of Yucatan and Guatemala, the silent enigmatic remains of a race which had evolved a perfect calendar and bred master builders and sculptors two thousand years ago." In 1935, Bliss undertook his own journey to the Maya heartland, visiting in turn the Classic Period sites of Copan, Chichen Itza, Quirigua, Uaxactun, and Tikal. Bliss, like Stephens and Catherwood before him and countless travelers since, found an enduring fascination in contemplating Maya ruins firsthand. The experience awoke in him a deep appreciation of and passionate engagement with Maya art.

This exhibition invites visitors to embark on their own journey by weaving together three interrelated strands: first, Bliss's connection to the Maya world and his prescient avocation for collecting Maya art; second, the acquisition last year for the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library's Rare Book Collection of Catherwood's book of lithographs; and, third, the meticulously observed photography of Professor Jay A. Frogel, who has retraced Stephens and Catherwood's steps and recorded anew the vistas that these intrepid travelers captured in word and image. The superimposition of old and new imagery provides a fresh opportunity for us all to reflect on our perception and experience of times past.

## Stephens & Catherwood Revisited

Between 1839 and 1840, British artist and architect Frederick Catherwood and American diplomat and travel writer John L. Stephens first journeyed through Central America to document the ancient Maya ruins. The explorers visited Maya sites including Copan, Palenque, Uxmal, Chichen Itza, and Tulum, and they traveled together a second time to the Yucatan region in 1841–42.

Stephens, lauded as “the American Traveller,” was already a successful travel writer, having initiated his Incidents of Travel series with *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (1837), followed by *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Poland* (1838). Joining these earlier volumes, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843) document Stephens’s two voyages to Maya ruins with Catherwood. These books were accompanied by a total of two hundred engravings based on Catherwood’s original artwork.

Catherwood’s *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (1844), a copy of which was recently acquired by Dumbarton Oaks, contains twenty-five lithographed plates based on the author’s drawings of Maya ruins, as well as an introduction and descriptions of the monuments in each plate. His documentation of the Maya monuments included an architectural examination of the ruins and an objective inquiry into their origins. Catherwood used a camera lucida, a portable optical device that projects an image onto a surface, to aid in sketching the

ruins in situ with accurate perspective and precise details. Nevertheless, the illustrations are still impressions of the monuments rendered through the eye of the artist. Unfortunately, most of his original artwork was lost during a fire at an exhibition of his drawings, paintings, and artifacts in 1842.

Although Stephens and Catherwood were not the first to document the Maya ruins, they were the first to photograph them using a daguerreotype camera, during their second voyage in 1841. In the daguerreotypes taken of the ruins, portions of the monuments cast shadows, obscuring some details. In order to depict the monuments in the best possible light with accurate details, Catherwood preferred to draw the sites using his camera lucida rather than using this early photographic method. The engravers for Stephens's books, however, used the daguerreotypes along with Catherwood's original artwork as a guide. Regrettably, the daguerreotypes were likely destroyed in the same fire that damaged the exhibition containing artifacts and artwork belonging to Stephens and Catherwood.

Stephens's and Catherwood's books and exhibition piqued an avid interest for the ancient Maya world among a broad nineteenth-century American public. The objective documentation style helped to dispel prevailing beliefs that the monuments were influenced by East Asia or connected to an unknown race from the Old World, and to promote a view that the monuments were produced by indigenous native peoples of that region. Catherwood's illustrations and Stephens's narrative accounts are still encountered by both amateurs and scholars studying the Maya, and have inspired others to travel or document the Maya monuments further.

In the nineteenth century, many Maya ruins were largely abandoned, languishing in a state of decay due to the weather and overgrowth of trees. Stephens and Catherwood felt compelled to both document and preserve the sites they visited, believing that the sites would become "indistinguishable heaps of ruins" by the end of the century. Stephens purchased the Copan site for \$50 from the landowner with the idea of creating a "national museum of American antiquities" by shipping the ruins back to the United States in pieces. Fortunately, the monuments could not be transported by river, and sustained conservation efforts of the ruins in recent decades allow them to be fully appreciated by visitors today.

## Maya Ruins and the Passage of Time

In 1998, Professor Jay A. Frogel, intrigued by the accuracy of Catherwood's illustrations, began "The Stephens and Catherwood Project" to photograph the Maya ruins at the same vantage points as engravings found in Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*. He superimposed Catherwood's engravings over his contemporary photographs of Maya ruins. The photographs illuminate the engravings and colorize the images in certain sections and not others, thus exposing the losses that have occurred at the ruins. These composite photographs are a visual narrative of the sites' histories, revealing the journey of the ruins from past to present. They display the deterioration of the ruins, what remains from the past, and how the sites have been modified.

This exhibition and booklet present a selection of Catherwood's illustrations matched with composite photographs by Frogel. Accompanying these images are excerpts from Stephens's and Catherwood's books that reveal general observations from their journeys and insights into the ancient Maya ruins and civilization. By pairing Stephens's and Catherwood's images and text with Frogel's composites, the books and photographs are integrated and reframed within a narrative on the passage of time.

## Illustrations

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# Palenque, Mexico

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The ruins of Palenque are the first which awakened attention to the existence of ancient and unknown cities in America.

Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*



*General View of Palenque*, lithograph on stone by A. Picken, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. VI.





Jay A. Frogel, *Palenque, The Palace*, composite photograph. Superimposed: *Palace at Palenque*, engraving from Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, vol. 2.

# Copan, Honduras

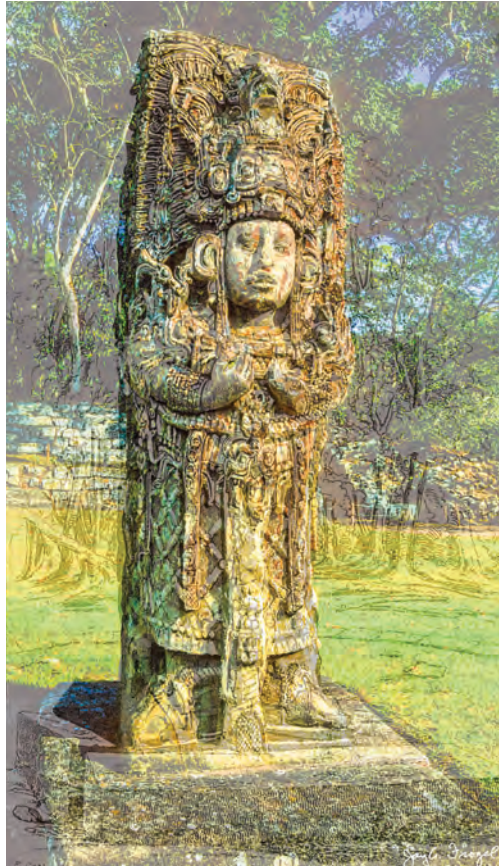
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It is impossible to describe the interest with which I explored these ruins. The ground was entirely new; there were no guide-books or guides; the whole was a virgin soil. We could not see ten yards before us, and never knew what we should stumble upon next.

Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*



*Idol, at Copan*, lithograph on stone by A. Picken, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. I.



Jay A. Frogel, *Copan, Front of Stela H*, composite photograph.  
Superimposed: No. 1, *Stone Idol, front View*, engraving from Stephens,  
*Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, vol. 1.

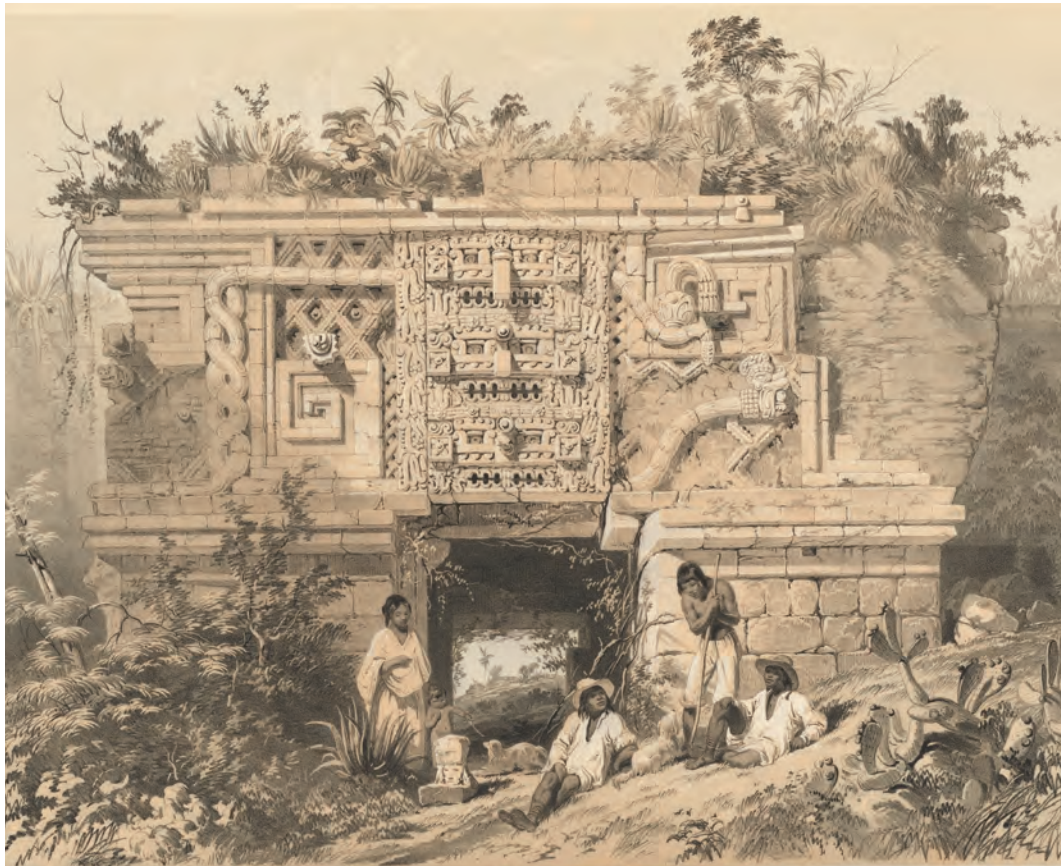


# Uxmal, Mexico

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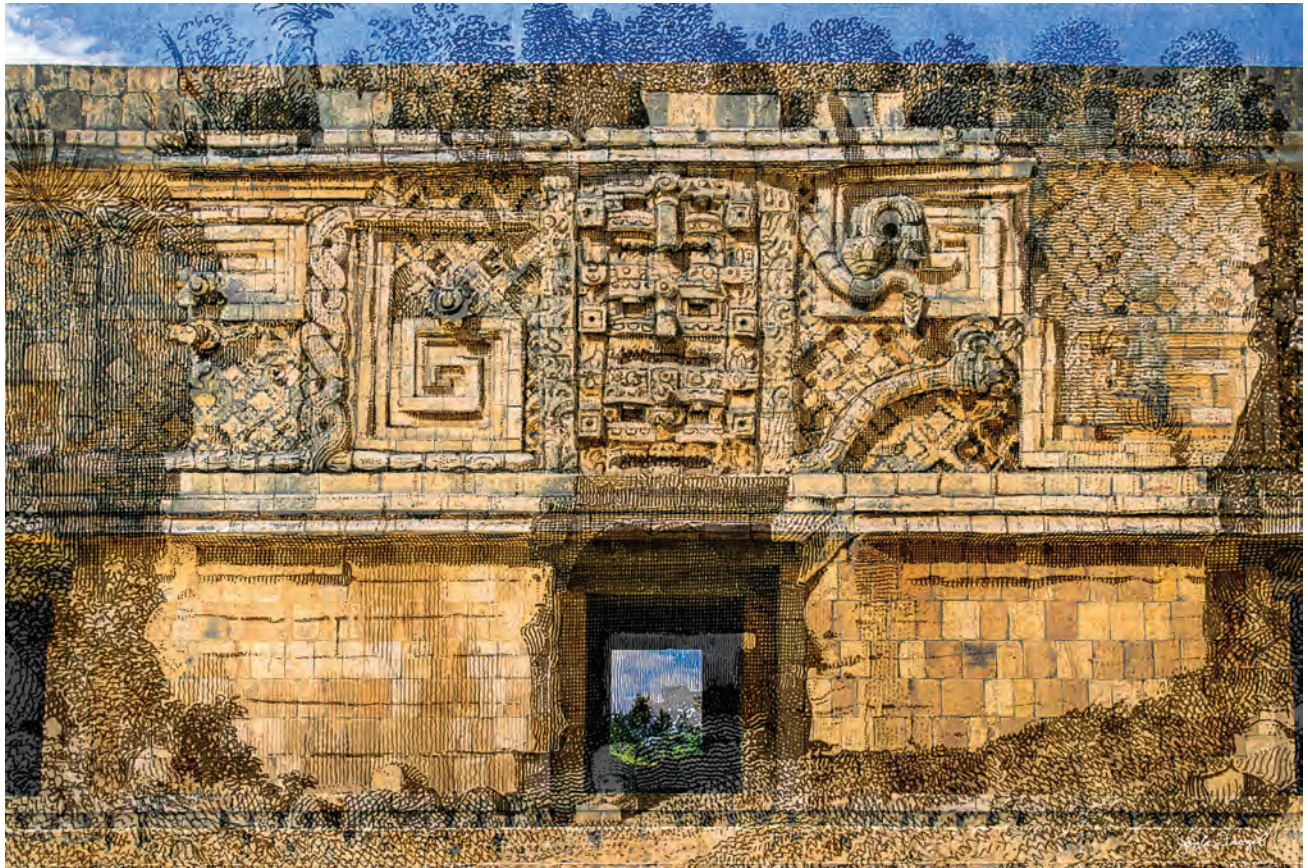
We now come to the ruins of Uxmal, in Yucatan, which, for their vast extent, their variety, and being for the most part in good preservation, may claim precedence in this Province of any other remains of antiquity. They impressed my mind at the first glance with the same feelings of wonder and admiration . . .

Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*



*Portion of a Building; Las Monjas, Uxmal*, lithograph on stone by A. Picken, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. XIV.





Jay A. Frogel, *Uxmal, Entwined Serpents on Facade at the North End of the West Building, Nunnery Quadrangle*, composite photograph. Superimposed: *Portion of Western Building, Monjas, Uxmal [Entwined Serpents over a Doorway]*, engraving from Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 1.



## Labna, Mexico

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We were permitted to see these decaying, but still proud memorials of a mysterious people. In a few years, even these will be gone; and as it has been denied that such things ever were, doubts may again arise whether they have indeed existed. So strong was this impression that we determined to fortify in every possible way our proofs.

Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*



*Gateway at Labnah*, lithograph on stone by J. C. Bourne, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. XIX.



Jay A. Frogel, *Labna West or Interior Side of Gateway*, composite photograph. Superimposed: *Interior of Gateway at Labná*, engraving from Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2.



# Chichen Itza, Mexico

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It is true there are mishapen [*sic*] mounds, so utterly destroyed that they might belong to any time or any people. . . . The roots of trees and the tropical rains are the chief elements of destruction, and daily and hourly is the work going on. Another century will hardly have elapsed, before the whole of these interesting monuments will have become indistinguishable heaps of ruins.

Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*



*Eglesia, Chichen Itza*, engraving by Rolph, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Stephens 1843, vol. 2, facing p. 296.





Jay A. Frogel, *Chichen Itza, The Iglesia*, composite photograph. Superimposed: *Eglesia, Chichen Itza*, engraving from Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2.

# Tulum, Mexico

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They rise like skeletons from the grave, wrapped in their burial shrouds; claiming no affinity with the works of any known people, but a distinct, independent, and separate existence. They stand alone, absolutely and entirely anomalous, perhaps the most interesting subject which at this day presents itself to the inquiring mind . . . who were the peoplers of America?

Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*



*Castle, at Tuloom*, lithograph on stone by A. Picken, based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from Catherwood 1844, pl. XXIII.





Jay A. Frogel, *Tulum, El Castillo*, composite photograph. Superimposed: *Tuloom Front of the Castillo*, engraving from Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2.

## Volumes Referenced in Quotations

Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (London: Vizetelly Brothers, 1844).

John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841).

John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843).

## Illustration Credits

Lithographs from Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (London: Vizetelly Brothers, 1844). Courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University.

Engraving based on artwork by Frederick Catherwood, from John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843). Courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University.

Composite photographs by Jay A. Frogel.





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