

TEOBERT MALER: AN EMPATHETIC VIEW OF MEXICO

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The Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI) houses the papers and manuscripts of 19th century German expedition photographer Teobert Maler. They offer a wealth of insight into ancient American studies and Mexican archaeology at a time when they were developing into professional disciplines. Maler spent many a decade travelling around, researching and photographing Mexico. His photographs bear testament to a genuine interest in the country, its landscapes and its people, earning him a special status among 19th century explorers in Mexico. In light of his professional background, he painted an unusually empathetic portrait of the country, its people and antiquities, a view that is enhanced by the artistic skill and perfectionism of his photographs.

Teobert Maler was born in Rome on 12 January 1842 into a family of civil servants. His mother died before he was even two years old and he and his sister subsequently lived with their father, who Teobert mentions in his autobiography “Leben meiner Jugend” (“My younger years”) with more than a hint of bitterness. Aged 17, he left his home in Baden-Baden and headed to Karlsruhe to study engineering and architecture at the polytechnic university. In 1862 he moved to Vienna, where he worked at Heinrich von Ferstel’s architectural studio, which made a name for itself with the Votive Church and other public buildings on Ringstrasse. Two years later he travelled to Laibach, where he enlisted as a cadet in Maximilian von Habsburg’s Austro-Belgian volunteer corps. In November 1864 he left Europe and set sail for Veracruz on board the “Boliviana”.¹

Maler’s manuscripts neither explain why he decided to head to Mexico nor why he spent most of his life in the

country. His texts do, however, indicate that he held a deep fascination for Mexico which led him to stay there and spend a large part of his life exploring the country. In “Leben meiner Jugend”, for example, he mentions the ruins of Papantla and his desire to learn Nahuatl, revealing a particular interest in Mexico’s ancient history.²

As a soldier, Maler was mainly active in today’s state of Puebla, where he received numerous military awards and ultimately fought as a captain in the imperial army until news of the death of Maximilian and his generals reached the city. In 1868, after the situation in Mexico had begun to settle down, Maler set off to tour Mexico’s central states. From 1874 he travelled around the *Mixteca baja*, part of the *Sierra Madre del Sur* in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. He spent several years in this area, photographing the local population, antiquities and landscapes. He then continued his travels in the state of Chiapas where he explored the famous Mayan ruins of Palenque and conducted his first major archaeological research project. From 1868 to 1878 Maler explored large parts of central and southern Mexico and collected materials for his first scientific articles. During this period, he also honed his skills as a photographer. Maler subsequently went back to Europe, where he brought a case against the Prussian state concerning his father’s inheritance which lasted many years. In 1885 he travelled to Yucatán and settled in Mérida. Over the next eight years, he embarked on numerous extended expeditions on the Yucatán Peninsula; the photographs featured in this volume were taken during this period. Around the turn of the century, he set off on an expedition funded by Harvard University’s *Peabody Museum* to explore the area around the Usumacinta River.³



"Territorio Maya de Xkanhá – La Aguada de Sáhbecan" (between 1885 and 1893)

Maler started out as a photographer at a time when photography was being used to document all kinds of journeys – imperialist, exploratory, scientific, artistic or merely for leisure. Since its invention in 1839, photography had undergone rapid changes and improvements. It soon became the medium of choice for depicting archaeological monuments (Heilbrun 1998: 149). It was now possible to create images of monuments, glyphs and sculptures with precision and speed. The first recorded photographs from Mexico are by the Frenchman Désiré Charnay, who took these pictures during his research trip from 1857-60 (Debroise 1998: 118-119).

Even though Maler was best known for his archaeological photographs, antique monuments were not all that he documented on camera during the many years he lived and worked in Mexico. Maler's photographic works stored at the IAI's archive cover a wide spectrum, clearly demonstrating his interest in the country and its people. He often photographed local inhabitants – indigenous people from the middle or upper classes – and catered for the commercial market, generally using the standard methods of 19th century studio photography. However, he also depicted the beauty of Mexico's natural landscapes and, of course, archaeological monuments. Maler's work reflects a genuine interest in the country, its inhabitants and its cultural and historical heritage.

His picture of a lagoon in the territory of Xkanhá is a prime example of how he strived to portray Mexico's natural beauty. Maler described the stunning landscape he aimed to capture as realistically as possible as follows:

Leafless and resplendent with pink blossoms, soaring high above the emerald green shrubs under a sky of azure blue, the Macuilishuatl bordered this solitary stretch of water which, lit up by the rays of the tropical sun and reflecting the manifold hues of its vibrant

surroundings, afforded such an indescribably exquisite view that my colorless photograph – no matter how accomplished – could not begin to encapsulate its magic. (Maler 1997: 257-258)

The striking quality of this shot lies in the symmetry created by the reflection in the water and the leafy trees framing the image. Even though the flowers described by Maler are barely discernible in black and white, the picture is still an excellent example of Maler's artistic aspirations as a photographer.

Towards the end of his expedition of the Yucatán Peninsula in 1894, Maler explored the independent Mayan territory of the *Pacíficos del Sur*, a group who occupied an area between the states of Campeche and Yucatán, which also included Xkanhá.⁴ Maler's accounts of traveling around this territory depicted the dangers "he faced on a daily basis [...], living in fear of being stabbed by one's own people" (Maler 1997: 267). He described his perseverance and dedication in adverse circumstances with more than a hint of pride. Despite these difficult conditions, Maler still felt enough at ease to organize a group photograph in a studio featuring General Eugenio Arana, the chief of the independent Mayan *Pacíficos del Sur*, surrounded by his men. With its painted backdrop, small pillar and ornate chair, this photograph conforms to many of the standards of 19th century studio photography. The centerpiece of the image is General Arana, the oldest man in the middle, flanked by three men to his right and three to his left, all positioned according to height. Like so many of Maler's studio portraits of indigenous people, this group photograph has all the trademarks of 19th century portrait photography. However, it differs from the anthropometric photographs of the day, which highlighted the specific features of ethnic groups, positioning them next to measuring sticks to illustrate their otherness from a scientific perspective and to em-



"General Arana" (between 1885 and 1893)

phasize the links between physical features and personal characteristics.

The picture on the following page is also firmly in the tradition of 19th century studio portrait photography. Teobert Maler's papers and manuscripts in the IAI's archive contain an oval-shaped print of this photograph and a larger print, which Maler captioned "Tomasa Santa María, bella jóven hispano-maya de Ticul".⁵ The picture is not unlike his studio photographs of indigenous women from the *Mixteca Baja* area in that Maler also focuses on his subject's festive clothing and jewelry (necklace, earrings and rings).⁶ In contrast to other studio portraits, however, this photograph's backdrop is neutral and it does not feature any pillars or chairs, leaving nothing to distract from Tomasa Santa María and her beautiful attire.

Artfully staged compositions are a trademark of Maler's photography. His manuscripts reveal how he would wait until the sun shone on a building at precisely the right angle and choose the optimum field of view in order to create an artistically composed image of a ruin instead of merely an exact reproduction. Maler would stop at nothing to capture ruins in their most enchanting light. He and his assistants often chopped down bushes and trees that obscured the view and then waited until the sunlight accentuated particular details of the ruins and their surroundings. Clouds often form a backdrop in Maler's pictures of ruins, which is all the more surprising given that he generally embarked on expeditions during the dry season. Maler liked to include clouds in his images because they created a contrast in the sky. In one of his notebooks on photographic techniques, he describes how he often manually added clouds to negatives in the darkroom to enhance the artistic effect. He created special "cloud negatives" at "different times of day" so that "they would match the main negative".⁷ This manipulation indicates how much Maler valued the artistic quali-

ties of his photographs. However, this was not his only concern: he was also careful to ensure that his images fully captured the ornate features of a stela or an interior chamber, and often used magnesium lamps to illuminate these details.⁸

The photographs included in this volume demonstrate the significance of Maler's work in a variety of ways. He was unique among the expedition photographers of the 19th century and not only for the incredibly high standards he set himself when producing his photographic work, which he viewed as art, and for his portraits of indigenous people, which were not designed to be anthropometric studies. More than any other photographer of his day, he devoted himself to exploring Mayan ruins. He spent over 30 years travelling around Mayan territory in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. He discovered more than 100 ruins and came to be one of the most important explorers and photographers of Mayan territory (Kutscher 1971: 9). American studies scholars from Maler's day, such as Eduard Seler and later Walter Lehmann, greatly valued his detailed and meticulous research of Mayan ruins and often relied on his photographs, descriptions and drawings in their own work. Maler was commissioned several times by Harvard University's *Peabody Museum* to explore the region around the Río Usumacinta and the Petén Basin (particularly Tikal), which also demonstrates his status among specialists in American studies. Maler was aware that his work was held in high regard by the research community of his day. Charles P. Bowditch, benefactor and treasurer of Harvard University's *Peabody Museums*, wrote to Maler expressing his wish to have ten explorers like Maler to complete the archaeological projects in Chiapas, Guatemala and Yucatan before all the monuments fell to ruin. Bowditch assured him that the academic community "benefited from every step [he] made and that the museum would gladly publish all of the findings of his expeditions".⁹ Teobert Maler's work still



"Tomasa Santa María, bella joven hispano-maya de Ticul" (between 1885 and 1893)

plays an important role in Mayan research today. Maler's photographs and descriptions are the only remaining sources on many monuments that were destroyed by the climate, vegetation or deliberately by human hand (Prem 1997: XiV-XV).

The story of how a large part of Maler's papers and manuscripts came to be at the IAI in Berlin is an interesting and convoluted tale that would go beyond the scope of this article.¹⁰ Other European institutions such as the Museum of Ethnology in Hamburg, the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and Lippe Regional Museum in Detmold also house pictures, texts, drawings, letters and other objects from Maler's papers. Furthermore, Harvard University's *Peabody Museum* is home to an album of small portrait photographs and also owns numerous other photographs, letters and manuscripts from Maler's three expeditions funded by the *Peabody Museum*. In Mexico itself, however, there are surprisingly few photographs and texts, which is all the more striking considering that Maler bequeathed over 1,000 of his photographic negative plates to the *Museo Nacional*.¹¹ The *Instituto Cultural de Yucatán* houses three photo albums featuring photographs of Mayan ruins on the Yucatán Peninsula, which were undoubtedly part of Maler's plan to produce an atlas of Yucatán.¹² The IAI has an unparalleled collection comprising a vast number and huge range of original prints of ruins, people and landscapes, negative plates, manuscripts and plans. They make it possible to reconstruct the incredibly productive and artistic life and work of this enigmatic character and are an invaluable resource for exploring the history of Mexican archaeology and photography. They illustrate the body of work produced by a 19th century explorer, photographer and traveler with a boundless fascination for his host country.

¹ For details on Maler's biography, see Teobert Maler, "Leben meiner Jugend", volume A73 Teobert Maler, collection of manuscripts, transcripts, Museum of Ethnology, Hamburg (hereafter cited as Maler's papers & manuscripts, MoE, Hamburg); Annual Report of the School of Engineering, academic years 1859/60 + 1860/61, 448/1637 + 448/1638, Grand Duchy of Baden, Administration of the Polytechnic University, Karlsruhe State Archives. For details on Ferstel, see also Schorske 1981: 40.

² Maler, "Leben meiner Jugend", 22-24, Maler's papers & manuscripts, MoE, Hamburg.

³ Ibid. 67-68. For later biographical details, see Teobert Maler, "Fortsetzung meiner Selbstlebensbeschreibung, Aufzeichnung von Merkwürdigkeiten, u.s.w." in "Teobert Maler: MS. PENINSULA YUCATAN I. Descripciones de las Ruinas antiguas de la civilización Maya," bequest Maler, Papers & Manuscripts, IAI Berlin.

⁴ The *Pacíficos del Sur* were former Mayan warriors who opposed the continuation of the Caste War and supported peace talks with the Yucatecan government. The government of the two states of Campeche and Yucatán granted them a certain degree of autonomy, which was heightened by the secluded location of their settlements (de Castro 2001: 1-2).

⁵ According to Ian Graham, Tomasa Santa María was a young woman from Ticul with whom Maler is thought to have fallen in love (Graham 1997: XLI).

⁶ For a detailed analysis of these photos, see Leysinger 2008: 156ff.

⁷ Teobert Maler, "Fórmulas de Fotografía. Tullantzinco 1867. Th. Maler," bequest Maler, Papers & Manuscripts, IAI Berlin.

⁸ Teobert Maler to Charles P. Bowditch, Tenosique, 1 May 1898, Box 7:9, Peabody Museum Archive, Harvard University.

⁹ Bowditch to Maler, Boston, 18 July 1905, bequest Maler, Papers & Manuscripts, IAI Berlin.

¹⁰ For an analysis of how Maler's papers & manuscripts found their way to the Ibero-American Institute in Berlin, see the epilogue to my dissertation (Leysinger 2008: 371-380). In a recently published article, Durán-Merk and Merk point out that Teobert Maler's will was not properly executed after his death (Durán-Merk/Merk 2011: 339-357).

¹¹ Jorge Enciso to the director of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, Mexico City, 4 December 1917, Vol. 26, Exp. 36, f. 133-36, Archivo Histórico del Museo de Antropología, Mexico City.

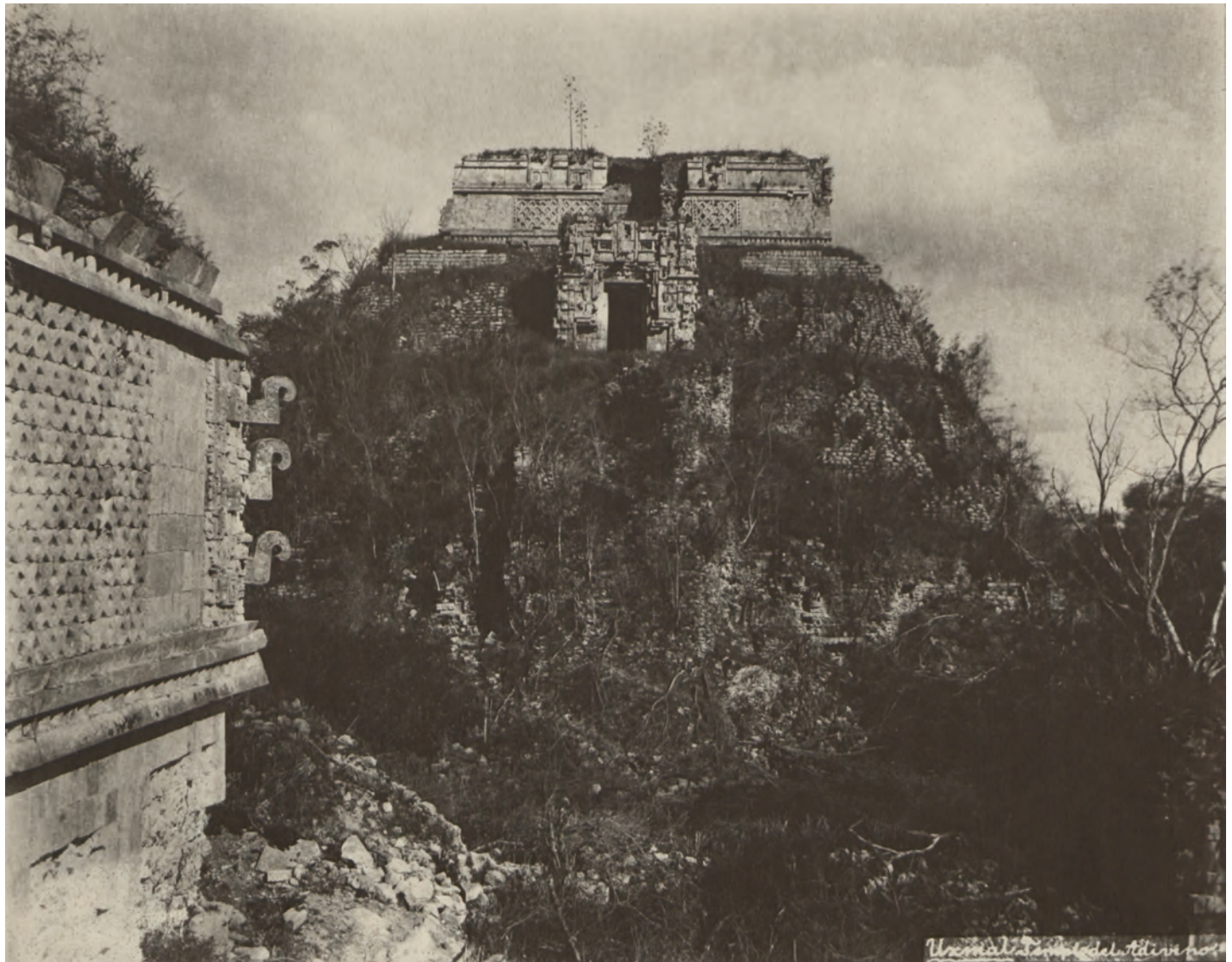
¹² Maler planned to compile the photographs, plans, descriptions and drawings of Yucatán into a major atlas, which would be called *Gran Atlas de Antigüedades Yucatecas* (Leysinger 2008: 218ff.).



"Chichén." "El Templo mayor. Lado occidental" (between 1885 and 1893)

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"Uxmal. Templo del Adivino" (between 1885 and 1893)