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The Hidden Kingdom

I am an artist, a professional painter who, for as long as I can remember has also pursued a serious interest in the cultures of ancient Mesoamerica particularly those of the Maya and the Aztecs. For some reason, I have always considered this interest to be only marginally related to my work as an artist preferring to think of it rather as part of a wider interest in ancient cultures in general. That my artistic world should come together with the world of these fascinating civilizations and produce an insight important to both still somewhat surprises me but that is what happened.

It had its beginnings like all things in art with an observation and after that with a kind of haunting intuition, a feeling that behind this art's powerful expressive qualities, its good taste and extraordinary technical skill there was something else determining its overall look. I had felt this particularly strongly when I stood before that wonder, the Governors Palace at Uxmal overwhelmed with a sense of its many harmonies and dynamic balance and again when at the University of Pennsylvania museum I had the chance to study some of the great stucco from the Maya city of Tikal. It seemed strange to me that works of such visual complexity should produce in me the most pronounced impressions of exquisite balance and quiet, classical stability. I found the same qualities in the paintings on Maya ceramics and even in the shapes and proportions of ~~these~~ ^{the} vessels themselves, the same kind of control in spite of the often dramatic and emotional nature of the art. ~~It was as if the Maya had a secret knowledge of the principles of classical architecture and sculpture which they had learned from the Greeks and Romans.~~

These musings ~~were~~ ^{ended} always with the same two questions: Was there in this art some unseen organizing principle beyond my knowing? and What was it about Mayan art and architecture that made it look so classical?

This was a mystery and one which I had no way of even approaching until as an art student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia I was given a copy of the recently published book The Painter's Secret Geometry by Charles Bouleau a work which ~~explained~~ ^{explained} the many systems of compositional geometry which for centuries had been such an important part of the artistic process of the arts of Europe. I learned it and made its lessons an integral part of my own artistic thinking and practice.

This was in the middle 1960's.

Then in 1968 my twin brother Stuart bought a small maya painted vase badly eroded on one side but on the other ~~there~~ was a rather complete panel painting of an old priest. One idle afternoon I happened to glance at this painting from across a room and in an instant was jolted from my reverie by what appeared to be the unmistakable evidence of geometry at work. I decided to make a tracing ~~of the painting~~ so as to have a flat, two dimensional image to work with and then began a search for the compositional system organizing it. I spent an extraordinary amount of time with these efforts subjecting that small painting to every European scheme I had studied, but each attempt only seemed to add to a sense of growing confusion caused ironically by too many partial successes. In my concern for finding the correct system I had focused too intently upon ~~the~~ technical problems losing sight of the fact that behind each of these ^{European} structures lay an important philosophical idea. Without this vital connection a complete understanding of pictorial geometry was impossible. Years had passed since I had first studied the subject and many more would pass before I would again ^{recall} ~~remember~~ this simple truth. Instead I would content myself with just playing with the problem superficially and from time to time looking for geometry in other precolumbian art. I found plenty of evidence but also the same frustrations when I tried to work with it, always ending these sessions by gathering up my notes and drawings and putting them away to gather dust.

As the years passed my primary interest in these ancient cultures shifted from the maya to the Aztecs and for the first time ^{before} I had a comprehensive documented view of an entire civilization. Finally I could study a religion in detail, its philosophical principles as represented by the functions of the gods as they moved in and through each other and of how they were affected by time and space in the form of an established structure created from ancient ideas about the nature of the Cosmos. This was a wakeup call and the reminder of ~~the truth~~ an almost forgotten truth.

From that point it didn't take long to realize that this Cosmic structure might be the ^{philosophical} foundation for a system of compositional geometry and that this system was the one I had ~~been seeking for~~ ^{been seeking}.

Someone once observed that the religion of ancient Mesoamerica was like a theme and variations in music. The reason for this was due almost entirely to a shared concept of ^{that} a cosmic structure. It gave orientation and ^{coherence} ~~was the basis~~ to a plethora of gods, significant astronomical events, and the earth's daily and seasonal passages of the sun. ~~It was~~ intimately connected with the all important myth of Creation which gained its first meanings from this structure, it became a model for man's creative efforts whether that happened to be a pattern for social structure or that of a temple ~~complex~~ complex or a city plan or a painted pot. Artistic expressions ^{were} sacred in nature and being so could not be separated from ~~that~~ ^{both and} the sacredness of that greater structure which gave them meaning. Furthermore, because of the completeness and exclusivity of that cosmic structure ^{and its meaning}, there was no possibility for any other system to co-exist with it.

I have seen the ancient greek ~~and then discovered the golden section~~ ^{when someone worked} golden section applied to precolumbian art ~~where someone worked~~ ^{all was done} it with one of those gigantic Olmec stone heads. ~~It was~~ ^{it was imposed} with what appeared to be satisfactory results, in spite of the fact that ~~it was imposed~~ ^{it was imposed} upon a drawing copied from a photograph with all of the special distortions that implied, instead of from a plan of the head as he should have. Even Linda Schele in her book *Maya Cosmos* wrote that maya architecture was designed by laying off increments of standardized measurements and then she explained the old carpenter's trick of ~~laying off~~ ^{drawing out} the golden section with a few simple operations ~~of~~ a string and marker. The maya may well have employed these techniques. They are after all universal ^{known} the world over, but what she described was measurement not design. Just because the mechanics of the golden section were used to create a convenient and pleasing shape, did not mean that a design imposed upon that shape had any further relationship with it. The philosophy that engendered the golden section and rationalized its interrelated proportions for the greeks would have had no relevance for the maya or the aztec or for any other native Mesoamerican artist or architect. The fact that it had worked seemingly so well only served to highlight the difficulties of the search. So me that search had ended when finally I had made the connection

between the ancient Mesoamerican principles of cosmic structure and a two dimensional schematic transposition of that structure into a workable system of compositional geometry. Subsequent experiments with many different art~~istic~~ works from several of the great precolombian american cultures proved the presence and ingeniousness of the system and the power of the philosophy behind it. And yet I realized that I had only opened a door, only taken a first step. I knew that an entire world of meaning lay ahead of me if only I would take another.

and yet I realize that this is only a first ^{process} ~~step~~ ^{in a complicated story} and mostly a technical one at that. We know that very meaningful religious ideas went into the creation of this influential structure and that it is probable that these meanings carried over from the structure into the art itself. These peoples never did anything without a meaningful intent in spite of how we wish to stress what we interpret as their scientific accomplishments.