Alberto Ruz Lhuillier: Engaging the Mind With Academic Discourse

Alberto Ruz Lhuillier: fomentando la mente con el discurso académico

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Abstract: The name Alberto Ruz Lhuillier is closely associated with the discovery of the tomb of the ancient Maya ruler K'inich Janaab' Pakal of Palenque. It was discovered in 1952, which brought him fame and admiration. He spent the next ten years of his life documenting and analyzing the discovery, but in those same years he found the energy to engage in stimulating debates that took place on the pages of books and academic journals. In this article, we summarize four of them. These controversies were not as sensational as the discovery of the elaborate royal tomb and thus were dampened by the publicity that exploded after the discovery. The controversial discourses center on two main themes: Maya epigraphy and artistic diffusion and were notable in that they were early insights. Many of their ideas are relevant even today, which is remarkable considering that they were developed in the 1950's and early 1960's, many years before the expansion of knowledge about the history and art of the ancient Maya that to which we have access today.

Keywords: Alberto Ruz; Yuri Knorosov; Gordon Ekholm; academic debate; Maya Area; 20th century.

Resumen: El nombre Alberto Ruz Lhuillier está estrechamente asociado con el hallazgo de la tumba del gobernante maya K'inich Janaab' Pakal de Palenque. El descubrimiento fue en 1952 lo que le trajo fama y admiración. Pasó los siguientes diez años de su vida analizando el descubrimiento, pero en esos mismos años encontró la energía para participar en debates estimulantes que se desarrollaron en las páginas de libros y revistas académicas. En este artículo, resumimos cuatro de ellos. Estas polémicas no fueron tan sensacionalistas como el descubrimiento de la elaborada tumba real y, por lo tanto, fueron disminuidos por la publicidad que explotó después del descubrimiento. El artículo se centra en dos temas principales: la epigrafía maya y la difusión artística. Los debates fueron notables en su época; se desarrollaron en la década de 1950 y principios de la de 1960, muchos años antes de la expansión del conocimiento sobre la historia y el arte de los antiguos mayas a los que tenemos acceso hoy.

Palabras clave: Alberto Ruz; Yuri Knorosov; Gordon Ekholm; debate académico,; área maya; siglo xx.

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Psychologists believe that when humans are intellectually courageous and are given opportunities to express themselves, there is a great benefit to personality development and learning. In academic settings, these freedoms can foster debates that produce new ideas and different ways of thinking. When suppressed, it produces the opposite effect – stagnation and timidity. The authors believe that open academic discourse was a passion of Alberto Ruz. He grew up in a family of exiled Cuban writers who elegantly harnessed the written word in the fight against imperialism, the violation of human rights, and tyranny in their Cuban homeland. It is evident from Ruz's writings and in his classroom teachings that he believed in productive disagreement and innovative thinking, as evident in the early years of the academic journal he began called *Estudios de Cultura Maya*.

At the end of 1959, after leaving his position at INAH as Director of Pre-Hispanic Monuments of the Southeast (1949-1958), Ruz began teaching at UNAM at the Institute of History (de la Garza 2001, 1). Subsequently and with the assistance of the Secretary General of UNAM, he founded the Seminario de Cultura Maya and began publishing a journal called, *Estudios de Cultura Maya*. This publication was arguably his greatest long-lasting accomplishment in Maya studies. In the introduction to the first edition of the journal published in 1961, he gave credit to the efforts of Secretary General of UNAM, Dr. Efrén del Pozo, who believed "that the study of a civilization as important as the Maya merited a university centered permanent nucleus of research and dissemination" (Ruz Lhuillier 1961, 7). Ruz also wrote that "there was a desire and hope in the Maya scientific field that one day a study center like our Seminario would be formed in Mexico"[1] (Ruz Lhuillier 1961, 7). He congratulated the University for the wisdom of organizing it and he envisioned the Seminario and the journal as a vehicle to strive for improvement at UNAM and to attract other scholars into the study of the ancient Maya (Garza, Carpizo, and Arriaga 1981).

One of the reasons for its eventual success was that during Ruz's nine years at INAH as Director of Pre-Hispanic Monuments of the Southeast he became acquainted with numerous and prominent archaeologists, both Mexican and international. These contacts served him well in getting the *Estudios de Cultura Maya* journal launched and in recruiting scholars to submit their work (Schele 2012, 88). Using a mailing list of 150 Mayanist around the world, he sent out letters informing them of the research center and asking them for academic collaboration (Ruz Lhuillier 1961, 8). Thus, he was able to build bridges between the UNAM and the most respected and knowledgeable Mayistas throughout the world. The Seminario "was finally assigned in the mid-1960s to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters" (Ruz Lhuillier 1961, 7).

The journal is still in publication today and its articles are open source and downloadable on the Internet[2] as well as existing in print form. The overall content of this

1 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by Elaine Schele.

2 https://revistas-filologicas.unam.mx/estudios-cultura-maya/index.php/ecm/index (17.12.2025).

journal includes subjects such as archeology, linguistics, ethnology, social anthropology, art history, epigraphy, iconography, and many other topics of interest to Mesoamerican academics and the public. During its lifetime, journal editors have published articles written by some of the best-known scholars who study the ancient and living Maya. For instance, Ruz published Tatiana Proskouriakoff's watershed articles she called "Historical data in the inscriptions of Yaxchilan" Parts I and II where she demonstrated that the epigraphic texts at that site had a 'historical narrative' (Proskouriakoff 1963; 1964), thus refuting the idea that the texts were not written history, as was believed by many of her colleagues, including J. Eric Thompson.

Ruz enjoyed the exhilaration of debate and controversy, sometimes directly engaging in lively debates with other venerated scholars. Many of these debates played out in *Estudios*, but not always. Additional academic debates involved people such as Sylvanus Morley regarding Morley's division of Maya history in Old Empire and New Empire; debates with Evon Z. Vogt and his interpretation of Maya political organization as democratic; debates with Linda Schele and Peter Mathews about the age of Pakal's bones at death (see Schele 2016). There were other debates such as with George Kubler regarding the sculptural work of the Maya; with Paul Kirchhoff on origin of the Maya calendar and astronomical knowledge; and with Gordon Ekholm and Robert Heine-Geldern on Pre-Columbian Trans-Pacific contact.

Yuri Knorosov and J. Eric Thompson

In the pages of *Estudios* Ruz sometimes included non-mainstream academic approaches and interpretations often containing theoretical controversy. For example, he did not shy away from one of the biggest academic disagreements of the mid-1950's and the 1960's in the field of Maya studies – the question about whether or not the Maya script was phonetic. In 1956 in the *Boletin de Antropología Americana* Ruz published a review (Ruz Lhuillier 1956) of a paper written by Yuri Knorosov called "A brief summary of the Ancient Maya hieroglyphic writing in the Soviet Union" (1955). Knorosov was a Ukrainian Russian scholar whose writings were strongly criticized by Maya epigraphers such as British anthropologist and archaeologist, J. Eric Thompson. In that 1955 paper, Knorosov made the assertion that the script was partially phonetic along with several other proposals about the nature of the Maya script that were not mainstream. His ideas were immediately and soundly criticized by Thompson who at the time was the leading Maya epigrapher in the field. We will not go into detail about the contents of the paper or its Soviet nationalistic outlook, but instead our purpose in mentioning it is to explore further Ruz's thinking on academic discourse. Ruz believed this young man's effort deserved a "serious critical examination" (Ruz Lhuillier 1956, 77) by epigraphers and linguists, and that "Maya hieroglyphic writing is nether totally phonetic or completely ideographic, but the two paths will eventually converge toward decipherment" (Ruz

Lhuillier 1956, 77). Ruz held a very generous and magnanimous attitude toward this bright young academic upstart by writing that if this eager student who lived thousands of miles away from the Maya region wanted to help decipher the glyphs – he "should not be ignored but encouraged" (Ruz Lhuillier 1956, 78) for his efforts. Ruz wrote that. Knorosov's "enthusiasm stems from the faith that he has in science." With an almost fatherly attitude, Ruz wrote that

> [...] if a Mexican Institution invited Knorosov to come to México to study the glyphs – where they first originated and where they were used for centuries – he hoped that Knorosov would find an atmosphere of calm scientific collaboration. Thus, more would be gained by scientific collaboration and human relations than by calling him "fool" (Ruz Lhuillier 1956, 78).

As if to prepare for the Maya phonetics debate that would come to full term later, in 1963 Ruz published an article in the *Estudios* journal by the anti-phonetics scholar Thompson. This was the third time Ruz had published one of Thompson's submissions to *Estudios*, but the first time on the Maya script. In that 1963 article, Thompson specifically called out the Russian scholar by name because Knorosov had recently publish an entire book that contained what Knorosov thought was evidence of the notion that the script was phonetic (Knorosov 1963). Two years later and perhaps as a response to Thompson's rebuke of Knorosov, Ruz published in the *Estudios* journal, the first of two writings by Yuri Knorosov that supported the Russian's stance on the phonetics in Maya script (1965; 1968), thus Ruz added to the controversy and encouraged the continuation of academic discussion on the subject. And yet, the disagreements did not impact on the long friendship that he had enjoyed with Thompson.

Tula and Chichen Itza

One of the most famous historical discourses from *Estudios* was between Ruz and the Yale scholar George Kubler. Its subject was the controversy over the origins of the visual similarities of the art and architecture of the ancient Mesoamerican cities of Tula and Chichen Itza. Ruz began the academic parley by publishing an article written by Kubler in the inaugural edition of *Estudios* dated 1961, and the next year, in the subsequent edition of the journal, he published his own counter to it.

The question of why these two cities share similar art styles, motifs and architecture has never been fully answered even after 100 plus years of discussion, although recent excavations are bringing the puzzle closer to resolution. Before we share some of the details of this debate, we include some background. The two archaeological sites of Tula and Chichn Itza are positioned 1494 km (928 mi.) away from each other by land and 1130 km (702 mi.) by sea and yet much of their art and architecture appear as sister cities or neighbors. Academic and archaeological efforts have been proposed to try to understand this mystery, but the arguments between archaeologists and art historians

have raged on for 130 years (Jordan 2016, 476). The French explorer Désiré Charnay was the first person to document the visual similarities between these two cities (Kubler 1961, 47; Charnay 1888, 343). Charnay studied both European and colonial documents that were composed right after the conquest and put together the legend of the Toltec-Maya. He "was the first person to use the myth of Quetzalcoatl and the fall of Tollan as an explanation for the stylistic resemblance of the two sites" (Schele and Mathews 1998, 356). According to Coggins, Charnay believed that "the civilizing Toltecs with their god Quetzalcoatl had taken their (superior) Nahua culture to Chichén Itzá" (2002, 41).

A separate, but related issue was the dispute over each site's chronology, a timeline that in the past had been "based on hieroglyphic inscriptions, ethnohistorical sources, ceramic typologies, architectural styles..." (Volta and Braswell 2014, 356) all of which were tenuous. According to these same authors (2014, 360), the most popular chronological models were based in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were first expounded upon by Desire Charnay (1888), Eduard Seler (1909), and George Vaillant (1961). Until the 21st century there has not an accurate chronology for the two sites, but based upon recent excavations, these new chronologies do not match those written ethnographic accounts (Kowalski and Kristan-Graham 2007).[3]

Using the writings of those three scholars as a basis, over the last decades many other historians and academics have added their own research and opinions trying to solve the mystery of the two city's iconographic similarities. Here are only some of the questions and topics for debate that have materialized over the last 130 years: who was the iconic and legendary Quetzalcoatl that was written about in early contact and colonial times such as in the *Books of Chilam Balam* – was he a god or was he a real person that ruled over Tula (Tollan) and the Toltecs? Did he and his followers invade the Maya region and the city of Chichen Itza? Did they invade the city and impose their "Toltec iconography at Chichen Itza" upon the citizens of Chichen Itza? Was the city then ruled over by the Nahua-speaking Toltecs of Tula.

At the time of Ruz's debate with Kubler, most scholars believed that the question about the historical and political relationships between Tula and Chichen was resolved, and that any new discussion was superfluous which Ruz believed was the wrong approach. In his rebuttal (1962) to Kubler's controversial paper he tells his readers that the reason he published it in *Estudios* is that the contents of the paper reinforced his belief that scholars should always maintain a healthy degree of skepticism regarding supposed answers to enigmatic problems.

3 Also archaeologist Keith Jordan in his 2016 paper where he summarized all the latest archaeological work on the two cities entitled "From Tula Chico to Chichen Itza: Implications of the Epiclassic Sculpture of Tula for the Nature and Timing of Tula-Chichen Contact" (476) wrote "Both the Tula Chico discoveries and the new chronologies for Chichen Itza again make possible a Tula Toltec presence at the Yucatan center – not as invaders, but as elite visitors, allies and pilgrims."

> [...] in our field of concern so much still remains for us to investigate before we can present a picture. Let us not call it perfect, but rather satisfactorily congruent regarding the various Mesoamerican civilizations. Any problem, however resolved it may seem, is susceptible to modification vis-a-vis new data or different approaches. One should therefore not be afraid to submit it to new tests which will confirm or validate its conclusions (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, 220).[4]

Returning to the Kubler-Ruz debate, Kubler's *Estudios* article was entitled "Chichén Itzá y Tula" and within this extensive and detailed art history dialogue he hypothesized that the site of Tula was colonized by the Maya and that, unlike accepted scholarship, Chichen Itza was not dominated by the Toltecs (Kubler 1961, 49). Clemency Coggins wrote that the Kubler's article was "the shot that was heard around the small world of Mesoamerican archaeology, resounding still" (Coggins 2002, 41) because Kubler, a well-respected scholar was turning the world of Maya scholarship on its head by proposing that instead of the art of Tula being imposed upon Chichen Itza, he contended that the Toltecs borrowed the art of Chichen Itza and took it back to Tula (1961, 79). In effect, he was negating the position of most scholars by saying that the geographic directions of artistic influences (from Tula to Chichen Itza or vice versa) had not yet been proven.[5]

In his article, he wrote that

> Currently, all researchers accept the thesis that the Nahua-speaking Toltec of the altiplano established themselves as rulers at Chichen-Itza, and that proof of their presence is found not only in representations of figures of warriors, priests and deities of non-maya origin, but also in the use of serpentine columns, Atlantean columns,[6] buildings with colonnades of several rows, sloping wall bases, crenellated ceilings surrounded by sculpted ornamental emblems, serpentine balustrades, recumbent human figures known as Chacmool[7], censers representing the Mexican god of rain (Tlaloc), and narrative relief panels placed on the surface of flat walls (Kubler 1961, 49).

4 This magnanimous attitude toward new scholastic ideas would however be tempered considerably eleven years later at the first Palenque Roundtable meeting in 1973. At that meeting, Linda Schele and Peter Mathews proposed that the age of the bones of Pakal, who was the interred king that Ruz discovered in the belly of the Temple of the Inscriptions was 40 years older than Ruz's physical anthropologists had proposed. Schele and Mathews based their information upon their decipherment of the birth and death glyphs found on the sides of the sarcophagus lid (see Schele 2016). Ruz was not present at that first meeting and there was much speculation as to why. However, he did attend the second Palenque Roundtable, but was treated unkindly by some of the roundtable attendees when he presented his own glyphic evidence that Ruz believed debunked the interpretation that the man in the tomb was 80 years old (Schele 2012, 18).

5 He was correct from the perspective of the lack of chronology. The timelines for both sites had not yet been established and thus there were gaps in the knowledge about when the cities' art and architectural creations were made.

6 See Figures 1 and 2 for building footprints of a bird's-eye-view showing the location of Atlantean columns for both sites.

7 See Figure 3 for example of a Chacmool found at the site of Chichen Itza.

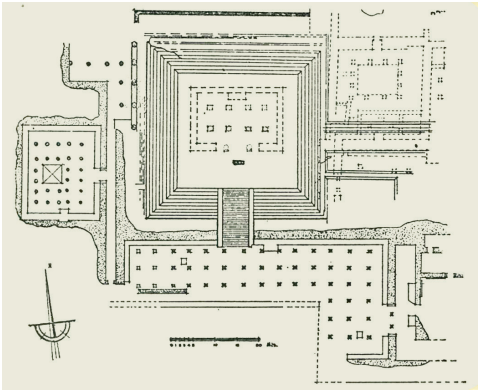

Figure 1. Tula: Map of the North Pyramid and colonnade (Kubler 1961, 48. With the kind permission of Marie A. Fulbert, Estudios de Cultura Maya).

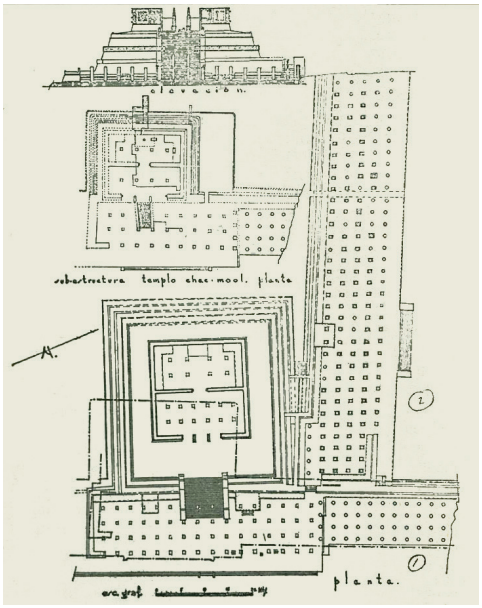

*Figure 2. C*hichen Itza: Map of the Temple of the Warriors and columnades. (Kubler 1961, 48. With the kind permission of Marie A. Fulbert, Estudios de Cultura Maya).

He believed that the Maya had been the receiver of warlike Toltec art styles, and yet he labeled their city of Tula a "frontier garrison" of Chichen Itza (1961, 64).[8] His theory about what those influences might have been, and in which direction they went, was based on a stylistic chronology of architecture and sculpture of the period that had been classified at Chichen Itza as 'Toltec,' but his method of using style to determine chronology was out of necessity, not due to its accuracy.[9] This was because relative

8 Based upon recent archaeological excavations, it appears that Toltec art and architectural styles arose much earlier than was previously thought due to evidence uncovered at Tula. Archaeologist Guadalupe Mastache and her team have found sculptured reliefs of reclining figures and other 'Toltec' art styles during their excavations at Tula Chico in contexts that are earlier than their parallels at Chichen Itza. Keith Jordan wrote "Given the 'striking similarity' (Jiménez 2010, 5) of the sculpture of Tula Chico with its Tollan phase successors, it is clear that significant aspects of the Tula art tradition had developed by the Epiclassic (Mastache *et al*. 2002, 65). This has important implications for the nature and timing of the relationship of Tula with Chichen Itza" (Jordan 2016, 470).

9 One of the most important arguments against many of Kubler's 'evidentiary' claims was a point that Kubler himself had used against other scholars in the past – that using style as proof of cultural influence was too subjective to establish chronological sequence.

dating was not known for either site at the time that he wrote the article (Coggins 2002, 41). Kubler used logic and reasoning to try to identify which of the two sites had date-preference over the other. Excavations at Tula were turning up art forms and motifs that were consistent with the second and third phases (set out by Tozzer 1961 [1941], 47) of the Chichen-Itza Toltec visual influence. He reasoned that "there is nothing in Tula that corresponded to the early periods of Toltec art at Chichen-Itza This suggested to Kubler that Tula was rather a colonial outpost of Chichen-Itza instead of the opposite (1961, 49).

Figure 3. Chichen Itza: Chacmool sculpture, today in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México City (By Ziko van Dijk, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=41824914).

He also stated that to decide upon the dates for his "chronology," he used Spinden's (Kubler 1961, 64) Maya calendar correlation (now outdated), instead of using the generally accepted one that was formulated by Goodman, Thompson, and Martínez[10] (Coggins 2002, 41) so his dating sequence was 260 days off.

Perhaps his most controversial proposal was that the Tula chiefs "brought ideas rather than objects and artisans [to Chichen Itza], and eventually acquired an art form from their Maya subjects. Over time the Mexican ideas[11] they brought to Chichen Itza became dressed in Maya forms and were later implanted in Tula" (Kubler 1961, 49). He thought he saw evidence of its antecedents where forms were mixed and infused with images at Early Classic Period sites such as at Teotihuacán, in the Central Peten and at Kaminaljuyu that appeared before the development of what was thought of as Tula Toltec. The implication is that what art historians had labeled as 'Toltec' did not originate with the Toltecs.

In his section concerning architecture, again his main emphasis is on stylistic sequence. He explained that he used Tozzer's research into the architectural sequence of the principal building groups (Kubler 1961, 47). He attributed the Caracol and the substructure of the Castillo (600-1000 AD) to the early first period and traced several of its architectural forms to the Maya past, associating the substructure of the Castillo with the structure E-VII Sub of Uaxactun. The second or middle stage (948 - ca. 1145 AD) he corresponded to the Temple of Chacmool, the Temple of the Warriors and the Castillo, which display the cosmopolitan

10 Both methods (Spinden's and Goodman, Thompson, and Martínez's) try to correlate the Maya calendar with the Gregorian calendar, the calendar that has been in use in Western civilization since 1582.

11 Referring to Central Mexico.

features of Teotihuacán and Monte Albán. He named the third as 'late' (1150-1260 AD), where he places the Ball Court, the Mercado, and the Temple of the Warriors.

Likewise, in the section concerning sculpture he organized a general dating sequence of early (10th century AD), middle (11th century AD) and late (12th century AD) based chronologically on Herbert Spinden (Kubler 1961, 47). To the first phase, he corresponded early reliefs such as the circular stone carving of The Caracol; to the middle period belong the panels of the columns, the benches with processions of figures; and finally, regarding the late period reliefs of the ball court he assigned to the late period. Kubler concluded his study as follows:

> Its history [of the Maya-Toltec style] represents a revival of classical Maya art along with the eclectic use of foreign themes such as the profiles of the terraces and the plans of the pyramids which reflect many ancient forms of the Peten Maya, Monte Albán and Teotihuacán. "Toltec" Chichen reproduces traditions from all Mesoamerican antiquity (Kubler 1961, 64).

He proposed that "there is nothing in Tula that corresponds to the early periods of Toltec art at Chichen-Itza. This suggests that Tula was rather a colonial outpost of Chichen-Itza instead of the opposite" (Kubler 1961, 49).

The Ruz rebuttal

Ruz published his reply to Kubler's radical proposals in the very next volume of *Estudios de Cultura Maya* (Ruz Lhuillier 1962) with a piece called "Chichen Itza y Tula: comentarios a un ensayo" (Ruz Lhuillier 1962). Ruz agreed with most of Kubler's ideas, but he emphatically rejected others. He addressed some of the traits Kubler discussed that backed up Ruz's own proposals, but also added observations that he thought Kubler left out that could have lent credence to some of Kubler's own claims (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, 211).

All the following items Ruz considered as purely Toltec innovations, but he stated that they were not mentioned by Kubler:

> [...] the great hallways with columns or pillars at the foot of the pyramids, the sloped benches with reliefs of warriors and a cornice with a feathered serpent, the alfardas with intertwined serpents, the representations of eagles and jaguars eating hearts, the "man-bird-serpent" symbol, the pectoral in the shape of a geometrized butterfly, the headdress with a bird in front, the warriors' tezcacuitlapilli, the atlatl and the curved sword, the standard-bearers. For all these themes, it would be difficult to find non-Toltec archetypes and even more difficult Mayan archetypes, so they can be considered as truly Toltec inventions (1962, 217).

Here is a partial list of the architectural and artistic items that Ruz considered in his rebuttal: Feathered serpent columns, columns with warrior portraits on them, colonnades, prowling jaguars, talud-tablero architecture and something that he called *almenas* which are attached to rooflines. One broad point that Ruz made is that non-Maya artistic forms found at Chichen are not necessarily Toltec. He pointed out that many of the traits that scholars classify as 'Toltec' were invented in other places such as Teotihuacán,

and that they eventually made their way into the Maya area. Kubler expressed the same idea by labeling this unusual art as "cosmopolitan" (Kubler 1961, 77). More specifically, Ruz notes the following imported Teotihuacan traits such as the astronomical orientation of buildings, architectural design such as the talud-tablero, roof ornaments, the iconic feathered serpent, the procession of thirsty carnivores (jaguars or coyotes), and the ceramic vessels with representations of Tlaloc. He disagreed with Kubler's assertion that the round Caracol has a Maya origin, arguing that it could be from the Huastecs (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, 212) where round buildings are frequently found. He believed that some artistic traits arrived from the Atlantic coast such as fine orange ceramics and possibly 'plumbate' ceramics from the highlands of Guatemala (1962, 217). He also considered the fact that many of the art conventions seen at Chichen were much earlier than the Toltec period and came from other places such as Oaxaca, the Peten, and the Puuc region.

Ruz summed up his assessment of the Chichen-Toltec period by explaining that it was a continuation of the art of various time periods of Mesoamerica that came from the traditions of the Puuc, the Peten, Oaxaca, and of Teotihuacan. They were subsequently changed by the Toltecs, with the artistic elements continuing to change as they spread to other locals (1962, 218).[12]

And now we discuss the mystery of the Chacmool sculptures found at both Tula and Chichén. Kubler described the stone carved Chacmools as "reclining male figures [that] lie perpendicular to the axis of the doors with their heads usually facing a patio or public square. The also carry a plate or vessel on their belly, held with both hands" (Kubler 1961, 65).

Ruz's description of the Chacmools was vastly different. He described the carvings as being recumbent figures in a "state of equilibrium" (1962, 209) and believed that they resembled a hieroglyph found at Palenque that appears twice on the Table of the Foliated Cross and once on the Palace Tablet. "Its face has a big-nosed god and volutes or flames coming out of its forehead and is a god.[13] It sits straighter than the chacmool but has feet and elbow resting on the ground" (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, 209). He wrote that even though the Chacmool resembled the Palenque glyph (1962, 215): "In reality we do not pretend that such a glyph (which does not appear as we know in Yucatán) has served as a model for Toltec artists to conceive the idea of a reclining man's sculpture, since we could not even imagine how such a motive would have come to them. Such

12 More recently, Geoffrey Braswell and those of his team, provide solid arguments (mainly ceramic chronology and carbon 14) for this borrowing of tradition, arguing that the "Toltec" part of Chichen Itza which they characterize as displaying "The International Style," was a Postclassic phenomenon that was popular between 950 and 1050 AD (Braswell, Paap, and Glascock 2011; Braswell and Peniche 2012, 258; Volta and Braswell 2014, 372). Boot believed that the artistic Teotihuacán styles of these two cities suggests "that for a part (sic) [period of time] Chichen Itza may have functioned as a kind of 'style donor' to Tula" (2005, 269). This idea is very similar to the views of Kubler.

13 Scholars now know that this 'curious' figure is Unen ('baby') K'awiil, one of the three Palenque Triad gods.

a peculiar sculpture may well be a Toltec creation, whose inspiration is unknown but perhaps related to the deity Quetzalcoatl."

Like Ruz, Kubler believed that they were "outside the Maya tradition," but unlike Ruz he was not willing to say they were Toltec and instead that their origin was unknown. He believed however that "they accompanied the Toltec dispersion [after leaving Chichen] and appeared in Michoacan, Costa Rica and Veracruz, possibly connected with ritual drunkenness." Later in that same article, he inferred that they were associated with human sacrifice (Kubler 1961, 76).

For reasons mentioned above and many more not listed here, Ruz wrote that he could not accept Kubler's belief that "Chichen's Toltec period constitutes 'a renaissance of Maya classical art', nor that Chichen was 'rather a creator than a receiving center'" (1962, 218). Ruz emphasized that the interactions between the cities of the Yucatán and Tula were much more complicated than a situation where as Kubler contended, Tula was "a colonial outpost of Chichen-Itza."

Artistic influences from the Old World – diffusion from the West

Another of Ruz's robust academic disagreements was with the Mesoamerican scholar Paul Kirchhoff centering on Kirchhoff's diffusionist ideas about how the Old World influenced Mesoamerica. Ruz expressed his opinion about these ideas in the first edition of his book *La civilización de los antiguos mayas* (Ruz Lhuillier 1957). He was well acquainted with Kirchhoff since he was a co-founder of Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History. Kirchhoff also held a professorship in the graduate division of anthropology at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Riese 2021) and served on Ruz's master's degree academic committee.

In that same 1957 edition book[14] Ruz outlined two main critiques of Kirchhoff's diffusionist theories. The first was Kirchhoff's belief that the astronomical and mathematical knowledge of the Maya was encountered in a "true cultural vacuum," therefore that it must have been imported from the Old World (Ruz Lhuillier 1957, 21).[15] He based this opinion in part, upon one very faulty assumption - that the Maya civilization, its calendar system, and astronomical knowledge appeared "suddenly" and were according to Kirchhoff "already fully developed, just like the entire Maya civilization" (Kirchhoff 1946, 101-102). Today, Maya scholars may find this statement absurd because we now know a lot about the long history of the development of the Mesoamerican civilizations due to scientific advances in archaeology and epigraphy. Early monuments with calendar dates have been found that date back before the time of Christ, and because of the epigraphical

14 In total, nine editions of this book have been published, the last of which was in 2000.

15 Kirchhoff's exact words were that the Maya "existencia tiene lugar en medio de un verdadero vació" (Kirchhoff 1946, 101-102). English translation: their "existence takes place in the midst of a true vacuum."

record evidence, we know that the calendar system became more sophisticated over time – the Maya perfecting the Long Count calendar used in the lowland Classic Period.

The other main idea that Ruz challenged was Kirchhoff's proposal that the stepped pyramid and the practice of placing royal tombs inside them was like those of Egypt and China (Kirchhoff 1946, 108). Ruz's discovery of the tomb inside the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque in 1952 gave fodder to those who believed in this Old-World borrowing, however he stated that those were separated from Mesoamerica by barriers of geography and time (Ruz Lhuillier 1957, 21). One of the most unsubstantiated arguments about the Mesoamerican temple pyramid proposed by Kirchhoff was that it stood for the symbol of the universe (Kirchhoff 1946, 108). Ruz countered with a precocious discourse, since it was written in the early 1960's, before ethnographic accounts that confirmed the idea that the hill was more likely a representation of

> [...] the sacred mountain, the Olympus, on which the gods lived, a concept that might well have originated among people who lived on plains or plateaus, surrounded by mountains made inhospitable either because they were volcanoes or covered by forest, but from which descended creeks and rivers, sources of life and prosperity; in the same way the hill penetrates into the sky whence came the winds, rains, storms, the lightening, and in which the heavenly bodies traveled. Thus, the hill was the site par excellence of the supernatural forces and its veneration by a multitude of peoples is not accidental (Ruz Lhuillier 1963, 21).

Artistic influences from Southeast Asia – diffusion from the East

The last academic debate example we will cover is the one between Ruz against scholars Gordon Ekholm and Heine-Geldern with their contention that the similarities between Maya artistic iconography, sculpture, and architecture to those of continental Asia were explained by contacts with the people of the Malaysian Peninsula, Indochina and Indonesia. These intellectual disagreements began in 1950, very soon after Ruz began his excavations at Palenque in 1949.

By the 1940's Ekholm was well-recognized by Mesoamericanists as an archaeologist who studied the Huastec culture. He was hired by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in 1937 and had been trained at Harvard in Mesoamerican anthropology and archeology. By the late 1940's and 1950's he become very involved in the Palenque excavation project carried out by Ruz. At the museum, one of his duties was secretary-treasurer for the Institute of Andean Research, an agency housed at INAH. At the request of Nelson Rockefeller, that institute became the pass-through organization for funds from Rockefeller's foundation to Alberto Ruz for his excavations at Palenque. Because Ekholm administered the funds, a very close working relationship developed between them, with Ruz sending progress reports to Ekholm. Both Ekholm and his boss Alfred Kidder were tasked with checking the progress of the project. Even though Ruz and Ekholm had academic disagreements, they worked well together on the Palenque project.

Robert Heine-Geldern also worked for AMNH and was an art historian and ethnographer, with a solid and prestigious academic career prior to arrival in the United States from Vienna (Kehoe 2016, 111). He managed the museum's Asian studies activities, since his research emphasis was on the art and archaeology of Southeast Asia; however, he was a dabbler in the art of Mesoamerica. He was heavily influenced by the Viennese diffusionist school. "Its main postulate is that man has little inventiveness, and this is concentrated in certain civilizing foci from which culture has been defined" (Azcona 1984, 140). Because they both had seen visual similarities between the arts of Southeast Asia and the Americas, they began to collaborate in fine-tuning their mutual beliefs that there was contact between these two civilizations before the arrival of the Europeans. They became some of the leading scholars to publish on this subject.

It was through these lenses that they presented their ideas at the XXIX International Congress of Americanists held in New York in 1949, organizing a session called "Cultural connections between Asia and pre-Columbian America." The paper they presented was entitled "Significant parallels in the symbolic arts or Southern Asia and Middle America." According to Douglas Fraser different diffusionist scholars favored a variety of evident – Heine-Geldern and Ekholm used "art forms, particularly ornament and technological processes" (1965, 455). They cited Mesoamerican motifs as being like those of Hindu Buddhism, particularly in Mexico and the Maya area. Particular motifs in question were "the lotus, the makara, the Kirtimukha, the cosmic tree, gods standing on crouched human figures, Atlantean figures, and the so-called diving god" (Heine-Geldern 1950, 351). They compared iconographic motifs of the Amaravití culture of India and Buddhist paintings of east Asia with that of Chichén Itzá (lotus flower), with the Palenque Tablet of the Foliated Cross, with the Chacmultun site frescoes in Yucatán, and with the Bonampak frescoes in Chiapas. They concluded that people traveled from Cambodia to the Americas bringing their ideas and art, even before the Europeans (Heine-Geldern and Ekholm 1951, 302).

Concurrently with the International Congress that year, Ekholm and Heine-Geldern curated an exhibit at AMNH called "Across the Pacific" where they displayed a series of supposedly transpacific parallels. Because of the publicity generated by the exhibit and the lectures, there it stirred up interest in these ideas and Ekholm received many "invitations to lecture and prepare papers on the issue" (Kehoe 2016, 111). In a paper entitled "Universality, singularity and plurality of Maya art" that Ruz published in 1950, about a year after the exhibit and conference, he questioned the methodology of scholars who were simplistically and visually comparing motifs from two different cultures as proof of contact. Interestingly however, in his book *La Civilización de los Antiguos Mayas* published seven years later, he opened the door for the possibility of influence from the islands in the south Pacific writing "The influences proceeding from Melanesia and Polynesia must have been purely accidental and of slight transcendency" (1957, 30).

No doubt that by late 1949 Ruz had learned of the conference, the exhibit, and of its popularity and perhaps that is why he wrote his paper referenced above called "Universality, singularity and plurality of Maya art." In it he agreed that Maya art "resembles in the deepest of its essence the art of the East," but he explained the similarities between Oriental and Maya art as "spiritual relatives" and not due to cultural diffusion experienced from contact (1950, 3)

He believed that the relationships were a

> Kinship that was born probably from the adaptation of ethnically related men to geographically similar environments that developed on a parallelism at once biological, psychological and ecological, and that throughout the complex elaboration of social structures, flourished in creations full of surprising analogies (Ruz 1950, 11).

During the years 1951 and 1952, Heine-Geldern and Ekholm continued to spread their theories regarding transpacific contact in publications such as Sol Tax's edited book *The civilizations of Ancient America: Selected papers of the XXIX International Congress of Americanist* and in the journal *Tlatoani,* a publication of the Sociedad de Alumnos de la Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

It is interesting to note that in a 1953 article published in the *Saturday Evening Post* Ruz looked back upon the discovery of the Palenque tomb and referred to the similarities that it might have with tombs of Southeastern Asia, Cambodia, and Indochina. He stated that soon after the discovery, there were rumors that the person in the tomb "might have been Cambodian"[16] (Ruz Lhuillier and Mason 1953, 95).

A year later, in an edited book called *Asia and North America, Transpacific contacts*, Ekholm published another related article called "A possible focus of Asiatic influence in Late Classic Cultures of Mesoamerica." In that article written by Ekholm only, he attempted to define his study parameters writing that for his topic he was confining himself to the Classic Period of Mesoamerica and geographically to the western border of Chiapas, Tabasco or Campeche,[17] which spread its influence on other parts of Mesoamerica.

Just as he had done in previous writings with Heine-Geldern, he used formal visual elements and motifs to try to detect 'Asiatic patterns' using them as proxies for transatlantic contact. Next, he created a list of formal visual elements as in previous joint papers with Heine-Geldern, such as the trefoil arch, sacred trees, tiger[18] thrones, etc., and then using Asian example images, comparing them to those found in Mesoamerica. Most of the Mesoamerican examples he cites are the Classic sites of Palenque and Post Classic Chichen Itza, Tula, Chenes/Puuc region and a couple of Aztec.

16 Years later Ruz wrote (1970, 25) that "When Dr. Heine-Geldern visited Chichén-Itzá in the company of the author, upon seeing these elements in the Castle [Castillo] he discarded any idea of similarity with the aforementioned Asiatic motifs."

17 However, many of his Mesoamerica examples are Post Classic.

18 In reality, these are jaguars, not tigers.

When comparing similar side-by-side images – one from Mesoamerica and the other from Asia – he wrote that the comparison is most appropriate when the dates are close and/or if the Asia example is dated earlier, inferring that the art motif idea began in Asia and was transported to Mesoamerica. There are at least two flaws with applying his methodology. The first is that, in the early 1950's, chronology in the Maya area was not well established by epigraphers and archaeologists. The second problem is that even though he attempted to date all his images, many are not, so the examples make his arguments less believable. Furthermore, now that we have good chronology for Palenque, many of his dated Asian examples were made after the Palenque examples, so if there was influence in those cases, it would be in the reverse.

Ekholm listed at least 22 different image examples of art and architecture that he believed that the ancient Maya civilization acquired from Asiatic peoples. We will only list a few here and include Ruz's rebuttal from his book *La civilización de los antiguos mayas*.

The use of columns

Ruz stated that columns were created all over the world, with people observing the utility of the tree trunk to hold up architecture. He wrote that "They are easily explained without [...] Asiatic influence since the use of the column was common in Mexico from the earliest periods in Oaxaca and later in Teotihuacán" (Ruz, 1957, 24).

Columns in the form of serpents and the cult of the feathered serpent

Upon closer inspection, Ruz says that it is revealed that the so called "snakes" in the Java architecture, are not really columns and snakes at all, like what is seen at Chichen. Instead, these are "monstrous heads of 'kala'." At the bottom are "makara heads," zoomorphic animals that are both elephant and fish. When Dr. Heine-Geldern went to Chichen with Ruz, and looked more closely at the serpent columns, he discarded the idea that these had any similarity to those in Java. Ruz also mentions Ekholm's suggestion that the serpent god Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan also had its origins in Asia. Ruz states that even though its highest popularity happened in Mexico during the late period, he believed that it began in the Classic period of the Maya and Teotihuacan. He writes "The deification of the serpent is easy to understand in regions where this animal abounds; the fear inspired by the deadliness of its poison, and in spite of its fragile aspect, the silence and quickness of its movements all suggest a supernatural power" (Ruz 1957, 27) to early peoples.

The use of the corbelled arch

The first use of it found in Mesoamerica (at the time that Ruz wrote this) was in a tomb discovered at Tikal dated at 220 BCE which was centuries before the building of Angkor Wat, which vastly decreases the probability that the technique was borrowed

from SE Asia. Both cultures created these vaults at a steep angle due to the need to drain off the tropical rains quickly.

The trilobate arch

Ruz stated that this is also an isolated trait in Maya archaeology and "would best be attributed to the imagination of the Palenque builders, to their tendency toward the complication of forms, and above all to their taste for curved lines" (Ruz 1957, 25). See Figure 4 for an example that Ekholm used to try to make his point about the similarities of these arches. Ruz then points out the same trilobate design is found on the lid to the tomb he found in the Temple of the Inscriptions, and it frames human heads. See Figure 5 for images of these frame designs as drawn by Linda Schele.

Thrones in the shape of 'tigers'

Ruz dismisses this diffusionist idea quickly writing that these thrones as well as sculptures of seated tigers or lions, should not be surprising in civilizations that knew such animals, and in fact, are not confined to Mesoamerica and Asia (Ruz 1957, 26).

Lotus vines and blossoms

Ruz wrote that the lotus has such a long and flexible stem, with large leaves and solitary beautiful blossoms. It is no wonder that the artists of Egypt, India, Palenque and Chichen Itza used them as long and graceful decorative motifs.

We conclude this particular debate by quoting from Ruz's 1970 English edition of his book *La civilización de los antiguos mayas*:

> Beneath the likeness of forms, hidden among the similarity of rhythms, in the midst of the affinity of symbols, and in spite of the insurmountable barriers of space and time, a tie of blood and spirit links the greatest achievements of American and Oriental art […]. Product of the fascinating environment of the tropics in which man dreams or trembles, enervated by the heat or shaken by fevers, terrified by the supernatural forces unleashed in storms, floods or earthquakes, frightened by the vicinity of wild animals and the hidden threat of reptiles and insects with mortal poison, bewitched by the dazzling light of the deserts and savannas or by the mysterious penumbra of the jungle, Oriental art reflects the restless confusion, the sensual exuberance of nature and its effects on the spirit of man, the fear of invisible and omnipotent powers that move all around, the desperate surrender of his will to the whim of the gods (1970, 27-28).

Summary and conclusions

This paper contains summaries of four example debates initiated by Alberto Ruz – one related to Maya epigraphy and whether it was phonetic or logographic and then three others regarding artistic diffusion. It was his intention to generate academic discourse among scholars about controversial scholastic issues in the world of Mesoamerican art and archaeology in the service of scientific progress. For instance, in the case for Maya

glyphic phoneticism, he had intentionally 'rattled the cage' of Maya epigraphy which helped to contribute to the script's eventual decipherment.

The four writings surveyed in this paper were all published before the explosion of knowledge about the history of the ancient Maya that came about in the 1960's and early 1970's.[19] At the time they were written and assessed/debated by Ruz the ideas were relevant fresh and new. While some of the proposals are now outdated, others remain current. These early academic debates also give us a window into the thought processes of their authors and reveal Ruz's love of a good academic argument.

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19 For our purposes, we mark this explosion breakthrough as one that began with three writings by Tatiana Proskouriakoff published in the 1960's where she demonstrated that the Maya inscriptions contained the historical narratives of the kings and queens of the ancient Maya and their cities (Proskouriakoff 1960; 1963; 1964). This was followed by the 1973 Palenque Roundtable where scholars were able to trace the births and deaths of the city of Palenque's kings as written in the carved inscriptions.

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