MAYA MURALS
SAN BARTOLO, GUATEMALA

While exploring in the Guatemalan rainforest for the Peabody Museum's Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions program in March 2001, Harvard Ph.D. William Saturno made one of the most exciting discoveries in the history of Maya studies. In search of carved stone monuments, Saturno undertook an arduous journey in the Petén region of Guatemala. Arriving finally at an unnamed site, Saturno sought shelter from the tropical heat within the shade of a looter's tunnel. As his flashlight flitted across the tunnel wall, a painted face of the maize deity appeared. For more than five years following that first glimpse, Saturno's team worked to uncover the ancient paintings, and continues to explore the site.

When these extremely detailed murals were uncovered, scholars found that both the art of painting and the Maya's complex creation story, which justified the king's divine right to rule, were well-established centuries earlier than previously thought.

Like an ancient Maya book unfolded on the walls, the painted narratives spring to life in brilliant color. The North Wall mural emphasizes the agricultural cycle of death and rebirth and the symbols and rituals of kingship. The otherworldly story of creation and sacrifice serves to establish the power of the real Maya king in this world. The paintings appear above a geometric "skyband," placing both the mythic and historic action within the celestial realm of the gods.

Preservation. Although less than 5 percent of the murals had been exposed by the looters when Saturno found them, the tunnel the looters dug severely undercut the paintings, causing some painted plaster to fall from the walls. Saturno, colleagues, and conservators from the Getty Conservation Institute and the Smithsonian Institution focused immediate attention on environmental monitoring and stabilizing the walls. The murals' excavations and consolidation began only when it was clear that the environment was stable and the paintings would not be further damaged by exposure to modern environmental conditions. Conservation efforts continue today at San Bartolo, as archaeologists and conservators analyze the materials and pigments used in these exceptional early paintings, and specialists monitor the pyramid's environmental conditions.

BONAMPAK, MEXICO

Nestled deep within the forests of Chiapas, Mexico, the small Maya site of Bonampak is home to one of the most magnificent artistic creations in the Americas. In May 1946, Giles Healey was in Mexico making a film about life among the Lacandón Maya for the United Fruit Company when Acasio Chan and José Pepe Chambor, both Lacandón Maya Indians, led him and his companions to the jungle-shrouded ruins they knew to house ancient paintings. Photographs of the murals soon appeared in newspaper articles and in the pages of *Life* magazine, causing a worldwide sensation.

At the end of the eighth century C.E., Maya artists painted a masterpiece within the three rooms of a small stone masonry building—its vaults intact—on the site's acropolis. The murals of Bonampak are the most complete Maya wall paintings from the late Classic period (600–900 C.E.), and they provide an unparalleled view of courtly life and military practice among the ancient Maya, presenting an image of the world as the Maya elites chose to present it.

Before the Bonampak murals were unveiled to the world, leading scholars believed that ancient Maya society was governed by peaceful priests who dedicated themselves to maintaining the ritual calendar. But the Bonampak artists painted a different picture: one that emphasized a politically savvy and militarily accomplished society.

The Bonampak murals were painted for a private audience. Each small room can hold only a few people at a time. Further, the most stirring scenes of sacrifice and celebration could only be seen by a handful of individuals—such as the king himself—who were privileged enough to sit upon the benchlike thrones.

Preservation. Since Giles Healey's first visit to the paintings in 1946, conservators have struggled to preserve the Bonampak murals in the oppressive heat and changing humidity of the rainforest. Although Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History carried out a massive cleaning and restoration effort in the 1980s, physical challenges persist.

Continuing Traditions. Following the 1910 Mexican Revolution, a vibrant, powerful social mural movement arose in Mexico, peaking in the 1920s and 1930s. Although dozens of muralists were active, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros are considered to be *los tres grandes*, or "the three great ones," at the heart of what became known as the Mexican Muralist Movement.

The Mexican muralists dramatized Mexico's Precolumbian past and the Spanish invasion, celebrated contemporary social movements, and envisioned an egalitarian future. Their emphasis on a new, modern, "people's art" garnered international attention and inspired the Chicano Mural Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in southern California, Arizona, and Texas—and these traditions continue to influence the murals of today.

RECORDING THE MURALS

Archaeologists are using new and traditional tools to record and study these murals. In the 1990s, the Bonampak Documentation Project, led by Mary Miller of Yale, photographed every inch of the paintings in normal and infrared wavelengths, which reveals details no longer visible to the naked eye. Guided by these new images, in 2002 artists Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby completed the most accurate reproduction of the Bonampak murals to date.

Bill Saturno used a flatbed scanner to capture images of the San Bartolo murals, stitching the individual scans together to create the composite shown far left.

THE MOCHE

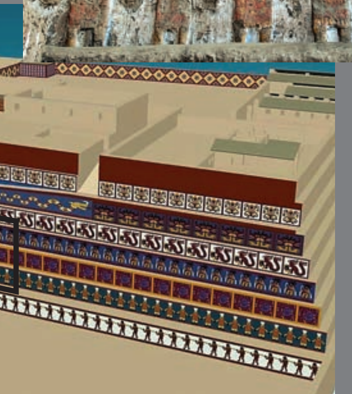
The Moche, on Peru's north coast, inherited a mural-painting tradition already more than 1,000 years old when they decorated their temple walls in the first seven centuries c.e. Murals were painted on the adobe walls of large, terraced architectural complexes called *huacas* where human sacrifices and other rituals took place. The stepped terraces of *huacas* were covered with adobe plaster or modeled in bas relief, and featured brightly painted images of gods and scenes of victorious warriors with prisoners. These colorful decorations contrasted with the brown desert sands and green agricultural fields, and emphasized the *huacas*' role as power centers that dazzled arriving pilgrims.

Moche mural traditions were discovered in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the looting of archaeological sites revealed the wall paintings. Archaeologists visiting Huaca de la Luna noted their presence, and subsequent excavations focused on exposing these wall paintings. In 1972, members of Harvard's Chan Chan–Moche Valley Project found additional murals at Huaca de la Luna. Since 1980, a Peruvian excavation project has revealed elaborately painted murals throughout this architectural complex, including murals in interior courts and on the front terraces of the temple.

Moche murals were made to impress, painted at large scale in bright, vivid colors visible from afar. In the small interior chambers, imagery was repetitive and abstract. In temple courtyards, grander themes were depicted. The most elaborate murals were placed on the front terraces of *huacas* and included larger-than-life representations of deities and mythic heroes.

Preservation. Moche temples layered new constructions of adobe bricks on top of older ones, burying earlier murals beneath the newer architecture. Over time, looting and natural events have destroyed these outer layers, but the earlier walls and rooms were preserved. As researchers uncover these earlier layers, they use chemicals to stabilize paints and plaster and take samples for further study, combining archaeology and conservation in simultaneous processes. In addition to documenting murals through photography and monitoring their condition, archaeologists and conservators have constructed roofs and other protective systems to protect the murals.

Continuing Traditions. In Peru and other Andean countries, people continued to paint murals through the Colonial period to the present day. Christian symbols replaced Moche fanged gods and marching prisoners. Following Peru's independence in 1821, mural symbolism changed again, and Peruvian national symbols were used to adorn public buildings. The ongoing discoveries of Moche murals and the subsequent increase in tourism have served as inspiration and incentive for local artists to make murals once again. Now, restaurants, gift shops, and public spaces proudly display designs inspired from the past and use many of the materials and techniques from ancient times.



CREDITS

Cover

Composite reconstruction of a wall mural in Room 788, Awatovi. PM 39-97-10/23060C.

Watercolor of the North Wall, San Bartolo. *Painting by Heather Hurst.*

Detail of painted wall relief, Huaca de la Luna, Peru. *Photo courtesy Huaca de la Luna Archaeological Project.*

Awatovi

Fragment of an original mural, Awatovi, Room 788, Wall e, Design 1. PM 39-97-10/23099B.

Detail of a drawing by Delbridge Honanie inspired by the Awatovi murals.

Moche

(Top) Detail of the façade of the Huaca de la Luna plaza. *Photo courtesy of the Huaca de la Luna Project.*

(Bottom) Reconstruction of the façade of the Huaca de la Luna plaza. *Courtesy of the Huaca de la Luna Project.*

Inside Panel
San Bartolo

Scan of the North Wall, Las Pinturas, San Bartolo, Guatemala. *Courtesy of the San Bartolo Project.*

Bonampak

Room 1 mural, Bonampak, Yucatan, Mexico. *Watercolor painting by Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby ©2002.*

José Clemente Orozco, *The Epic of American Civilization*, Panel 7, *The Departure of Quetzalcoatl*. Dartmouth College, 1932–34. *Courtesy Dartmouth College.*

Recording the Murals

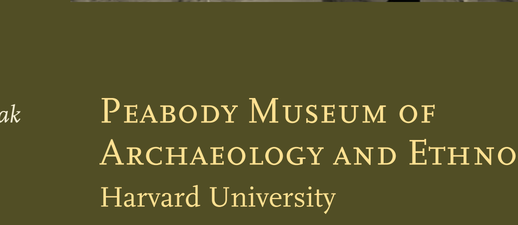
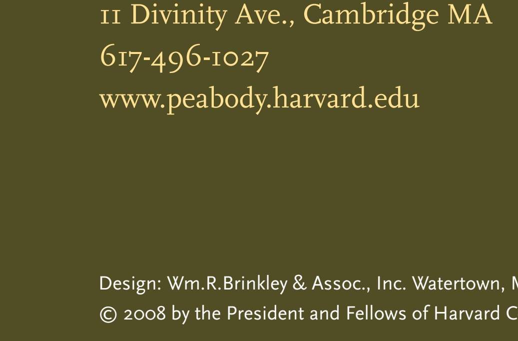
(Top right) Heather Hurst at work on the painted reproduction. *Photo courtesy Mary Miller, Bonampak Documentation Project.*

(Center) Gene Ware, right, and Stephen Houston, at back, photograph the mural in infrared. *Photo courtesy Justin Kerr, Bonampak Documentation Project.*

(Bottom left) William Saturno, San Bartolo Project Director, assisted by Jessica Craig, captures a flatbed scan of the mural. *Photo courtesy of William Saturno.*

Back Cover

Photo (ca. 1938) of an Awatovi Expedition member recording murals found in a *kiva* (Room 788, Left Wall, Design 8) prior to removal. PM 2004.1.123.1.96.

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STORIED WALLS

MURALS OF THE AMERICAS

Throughout time and around the world, people have painted the walls of their homes, palaces, tombs, temples, and government buildings with an array of scenes and designs expressing artistic as well as social values.

The painters who adorned these walls left stunning visual accounts of some of the most significant and enduring stories of their times—stories that insist upon being read, even now, centuries after their creation.

Storied Walls examines the meanings and social uses of these paintings, the history of their discoveries and investigations, and ongoing efforts to preserve and restore these fragile painted surfaces.

AWATOVI

The ancestors of the Hopi of northern Arizona were village-dwelling farmers, who lived for centuries in small, egalitarian communities. Like the Hopi today, they performed ceremonies in partially underground rooms called *kivas*. The Pueblo peoples of the southwestern United States used and continue to use *kivas*. Beginning in the fourteenth century c.e., a few villages began to paint dramatic murals on the walls of their *kivas*. The murals depicted people, supernatural beings, and objects that related to the ceremonies that took place in the *kivas*. In these ceremonial rooms, the images in firelight would provide a strong sense of place and a connection with the supernatural. After ceremonies, the walls might be replastered, whitewashed, and then repainted; some walls were replastered more than 100 times. Abandoned in 1700, the village with its *kivas* and murals decayed and was buried with windblown sand.

In the 1930s, the Peabody Museum launched a major archaeological expedition to Antelope Mesa. To their surprise, archaeologists found that many layers of murals of 14 different *kivas* had survived at Awatovi and the nearby prehistoric village of Kawaika-a. The expedition devoted considerable effort to recovering and studying these murals and other aspects of the lives and environment of the people of Antelope Mesa. Twenty-one sites were investigated and tens of thousands of artifacts were recovered.

Preservation. If found today, the Awatovi murals would be left intact and on site, but at that time, scientific practice was to relocate them. The Peabody team developed an ingenious method of removing these murals, which were painted on thin layers of white kaolin clay that covered walls plastered with adobe mud. They glued cloth to the mural and then peeled it from the wall. The peeled mural was then attached to a board, and the glue holding the cloth was dissolved to remove the cloth. Only mural layers found in very good condition could be preserved in this way. Of more than 240 surfaces that had some paint on them, parts of just 16 were preserved. The remaining mural layers were carefully drawn and photographed.

Continuing Traditions. The painting of murals on *kiva* walls declined from its peak in the 1400s and 1500s, but mural painting has been revived more recently as public art. Hopi artist Fred Kabotie has painted murals on the walls of visitor centers at the Grand Canyon and at the Petrified Forest in Arizona. He and several other Hopi artists were commissioned to recreate one of the Awatovi murals displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1941. More recently, Lomawywesa (Michael Kabotie), continuing in the tradition of his father, teamed with Hopi artist Coochsiwukioma (Delbridge Honanie) to create a mural inspired by the Awatovi murals for display at the Museum of Northern Arizona.