

Periodic Interview Series: Merle Greene-Robertson
Interviewed by Ed Barnhart, December 2003.

Ed Barnhart: Let's begin with where you were born.

Merle Greene-Robertson: I was born in Mile City, Montana. Mile City was a little cattle crossing in the road. Evidently my parents were just passing through there, because they didn't live there very long. Actually I grew up in Great Falls, Montana. When I was a freshman in high school, we moved to Seattle, Washington. But we had a summer place on Lake Fire in Glacier National Park. I got to climb the mountains all summer. I've always loved the mountains and the jungle.



EB: As an artist and art historian, what is art to you?

MGR: This is a hard question. When I was doing part of my MFA at the University of California, Berkeley, I took a course called the Aesthetics of Art from a professor from Oxford. It was the best course I ever took in college. We argued this point every time we met. I'd say that art evokes a response that aesthetically is more meaningful than what you would ordinarily feel, whether you're looking at Renaissance art or Northwest Coast Indian art or the art on the piers at Palenque. I always look at architecture, and that's what struck me first at Palenque. The impact of the portraits of the people on the piers is overwhelming.

EB: Who is your favorite artist?

MGR: Of course I appreciate all kinds of art, modern art, Renaissance art, primitive art, or whatever you want to call it. I don't think anything is really primitive art; I don't go for that title. I like Miró, Leger, Matisse. But I have a special liking for Bruegel. I'll go out of my way, to another country, to see a Bruegel. There's just something about the life that he captures, and the history of that particular time, early Flemish before the Inquisition, that intrigues me. Unless you know the background, why, you'd look at his paintings and think they're like Hieronymous Bosch. A lot of people think they're weird, but they really intrigue me.

Merle Greene-Robertson

Born in Mile City, Montana

***Director of the Pre-Columbian
Art Research Institute***

***In 1973, organized the first
Palenque Round Table***

***Received the Award of the
Aztec Eagle from the Mexican
Government for her
contributions to Maya Studies***

EB: Well, another complex topic: What do you see as the role of art in the development of a civilization such as the Maya?

MGR: In the first place, to be a civilization there has to be art. A group of people living wherever is not a civilization if there isn't some art. There are other things that they have to have, but art is one of them. And if they have no art at all, then they haven't reached the stage of being a civilization. But can you think of any group of people living anywhere in the world that has no art of any kind?

EB: No. But is it a chicken and egg relationship? Did civilization inspire art or did art inspire civilization?

MGR: That's the thing. Do you like what you know or do you know what you like? It's the same thing.

EB: Can you talk a little bit about the archetypes, or dominant symbols, in Maya art?

MGR: Well, there are all kinds of basic symbols that evolve into something else. Take God K for instance. You see one of the very early God K's at Tikal, the serpent-footed God K. Then you see him again in the tomb of Pakal where all the figures on the wall are holding the God K manikin scepter. All they needed then was the head and the staff. Then you see God K's on the North Palace. By then they've gotten rid of everything but the head. Over time, it wasn't necessary to show the entire figure. If I were to take a picture of you, for example, just a picture of your eyes, I bet your wife would know that it was you. It's not necessary to show your entire head or your body.

EB: So, as the image evolves through familiarity it can be recognized from even a small part of the whole.

MGR: Right.

EB: How did you become interested in Maya art?

MGR: That's a little easier question. I became interested in the study of Maya art all of a sudden. I had been going to the art institute in San Miguel de Allende, and one weekend a friend of mine and I decided to go to Tikal because we had never been there. So we packed a small suitcase and off we went for the weekend. Well, this other girl got off the plane, saw a snake, and got right back on the plane. That was the end of it. She didn't even see Tikal. But a little snake wasn't going to bother me. I fell in love with Tikal immediately. I fell in love with the jungle. It just so happened that they needed an artist

there. School could wait. I stayed. I only had a few tee shirts and shorts, but I did bring my watercolors and oils.

I loved the jungle. It never frightened me, never intimidated me. There were no trails or anything back in 1961. I'd go off on my own up a trail made by ants. Some of those ant trails were two feet wide, so you didn't know if it was a real trail or the ants. When I'd come to a fork in the trail, I'd turn around, make a sketch of what I saw, and then go on. I'd keep making sketches so that when I turned around to go back, I'd just look at my sketches and see which way to go. I never got lost. But what made it so special was that the art seemed to be growing right out of the environment. It was just exploding out of the jungle. It wasn't something that had been put there. It seemed to belong.

EB: You've done wonderful work with the rubbings of the carved monuments. What inspired you to develop this technique?

MGR: I was at Tikal, working on the South Acropolis, photographing the friezes on the buildings, and I thought, "You know, we really ought to record some of these monuments in some way besides just photography." Peter Harrison, the archaeologist, was going into Guatemala City to buy supplies, so I said, "Get a couple of bed sheets." So Peter brought back bed sheets. And I decided to do a rubbing of Altar Five. They had just uncovered it. Peter helped me tie stones around the edges of the sheet and anchor it down so it was taut across the whole altar. Then I got out my oil paint and with my thumb, I did what you would call a rubbing in oil of Altar Five. You couldn't do a rubbing of it today because the altar was left out in the rain and wind and sun for so many years that you can barely see the carving. It's in the museum now, washed completely white and eaten away. Anyway, that was the beginning.

When I came back the next year I brought a bunch of rice paper. You know, some of the bas-reliefs are several centimeters deep. I managed to find big sheets of rice paper that were made by a family in Japan. This rice paper would give when it was wet and still not tear. It would go deep and still hold its shape.

First I would tape the paper onto the monument. Then little by little I'd ease it in with a little water. Then I would take a cloth—at first I was using my husband's handkerchiefs, but I found that those little wash cloths that American Airlines had given me, whole stacks of them, worked better—and I'd tamp the paper into the monument until it got into every single little crevice of the stone. Then I'd wait until the paper was almost dry. I could tell by putting the back of my hand on it if the paper was ready to apply the ink. I had these little ink pads of thick sumi ink, which I got in Chicago. I would use a pallet knife and spread it across a piece of aluminum. Then I'd make a ball out of a wad of cotton, wrap a square of Chinese silk around it, and then dab it into the ink and onto the paper. If the paper is too wet, the ink will go straight through and onto the stone. If it's too dry, the ink won't even go on. So you just have to know and you have to practice on something that doesn't matter or you'll wreck the monument. After it's all finished, you let it dry and take it off.

The measurements of the rubbings were always exactly the same as the monuments. And unlike a photo, a rubbing never lies about the direction that a monument faced. Of course I still did drawings with a pen. But after the three years that I worked there, I ended up doing rubbings of every single monument at Tikal.

EB: How many rubbings have you made to date?

MGR: Probably about four thousand.

EB: Some of your most recent work involves documenting the recently discovered murals in old Chichen Itza. Can you talk about that a little bit?

MGR: Yes. It's the Casa de los Falos and still not open to the public. The Casa de los Falos is big, it's long, and the whole length of the building is painted. All along, in sections of about a meter, there are vines that move like frets, across and up, across and down. And there are underwater plants and underwater flowers and little humming birds diving into the flowers. And then, about every three meters, there is a human figure. These figures have the head of a bird or the head of an owl and they are holding onto the vines that twine from the roots at the base. The whole mural shows rebirth, repeating over and over again.

On the front of the building, up in the second register, are figures dressed in all of the paraphernalia used as tribute. This is telling us something that we suspected, but had no evidence for. We knew that Chichen Itza was the most prominent site in the Yucatán Peninsula and that people came there from other areas, but now we know it was for political more than religious reasons. The murals show all the different trade items people were bringing: fancy pectorals, jade wristlets, jade anklets, jade headdresses, quetzal feathers.

Around the corner are portraits of the Bacabs, who hold up the world. The primary god and the secondary Bacab are both standing with their legs apart, the knife pointing down towards the penis, and there is a sacrifice. The blood is dripping into blood bowls between their feet. The next section shows them offering the bowls of sacrificial blood to the gods. It is really something. We've found over 250 Bacabs now at Chichen Itza. We know there's more.

EB: At Chichen Itza we seem to have two different kinds of art. Some of it is narrative, is telling a story, and then some things, such as the columns in the Temple of the Warriors, seem more like a repeating motif.

MGR: All those sixty columns in the Temple of the Warriors have figures on all four sides and at the base of the columns are composite figures which are part human and part serpent with long bifurcated tongues, bird claws, and bird feathers on the headdresses. It's the same on the East Colonnade and the North Colonnade. It looks as though that's the part that neophytes carved, and as they improved they would be allowed to work on the main part of the figure. But the best carving is done on the head. So we know that the

main artist, the one who was better than the rest of them, got to do the head. But there are so many of them, and so much building going on at the same time that we know it must have taken a tremendous amount of what we would call money. Of course they didn't use money then, but they used the same thing, labor, and whatever else it takes to corral all this stuff and get it together. Ed Kurjack, and the other archaeologists who have been working at Chichen Itza for so long, feel that one of the things the nobles did in order to get the wherewithal to put up all the architecture and all the columns is what people do today: when you want somebody to donate money to build a museum or ballpark, you name a building or a room for that person. We think that's how they got the work done, because all the portraits are different. If somebody put up the wherewithal to build a column, then he would have a portrait of his ancestor or himself carved on a column.

All of the figures on the north side are facing the prisoners, who have their hands bound with rope. On the south side all of the figures are facing the prisoners, too, except the one row next to the prisoners, who are facing their own people. It looks as if they didn't trust their own people; they needed to watch them even more carefully than they did the prisoners. It's very unusual.

EB: That's fascinating, because I was giving the colonnade as an example of a motif, and you have just described the narrative within it.

Now, switching gears again, what are your current research and publication goals?

MGR: Well, to tell the truth, I'm getting tired of writing. We're supposed to be getting out another volume on the sculpture of Palenque. It is supposed to contain all of the figurines from Palenque, including everything that is in other parts of the world, like the pieces in Madrid and in different collections that went to Rome. I've seen all of them here so I *know* where they came from. Wiggie Andrews and I spent one whole summer going to museums and galleries all over Europe looking for stuff. I've got file cabinets full of photographs, 850 photographs, and all the data and drawings of everything.

EB: Would you discuss your role in the first Mesa Redonda?

MGR: Well, we were sitting out here on the back porch having a beer one night—Linda Schele, Gillette Griffin, David Jorelamon—and we said, “Wouldn't it be a great idea if we could get everybody who is interested in Palenque to come here and just exchange ideas? And so we made up a list of all the people we could think of whom we thought would be interested: George Kubler, Bob Rands, Floyd Lownsbury, Donald Robertson, my mentor at Tulane, and so on. When I arrived home in September, the telephone was ringing before I could even get my jacket off. It was Mike Coe and he said, “Merle, let's have it this Christmas.” This was September! Okay, I called everyone up, nothing formal about it, and I told them what we were going to do. Some people stayed in little hotels across the street. Mike Coe and his three kids and Don Robertson and his two kids stayed in hammocks upstairs. I took the stuff off the wall in the kitchen so we could show slides in there. And we kept a pot of coffee on the stove so people could help themselves.

There were no fees, everybody just paid for their own expenses. So that's how it got started. That was in 1973.

The first year we had thirty-five people, but then Mexico City and the University of the Americas heard about it. Students started coming down and pretty soon we had to move the meeting. Then everybody decided they wanted to be home at Christmas, so we started holding it in June. Then we had it every other year. It was a lot of work. It would take all year to put something like this together. I had to have committees for getting this, that, and the other. Bob Laughlin came down from San Cristóbal several times and brought the Indian theater group to perform. The people of Palenque had dances. The town was really proud of having this thing here. That went on for twenty years until I decided, "I've done it enough now, it's a lot of work." So I turned it over to Mexico.

EB: Why did you settle in Palenque?

MGR: Well, because I was down here so much. Although I was teaching in the States, I would get away whenever I could. And then I got involved in so many projects that required financial help that we decided to go through the rig-a-ma-roll of setting up a non-profit here, the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute. Eventually my husband and I built a house, and when Bob retired, we moved our stuff down here. We expected to be here forever. But it didn't turn out that way. When Bob died, we buried his ashes here in the cemetery.

Then there was the eruption of El Chichonal volcano. Everybody in Palenque, even the mayor, left town, except for me and Moises Morales. I was in the middle of writing all these books, so I couldn't just leave my research here. And so I stayed. The ash was all over everything in the house. We only had one tank of water. We just used it for drinking. We had nothing to wash with. I got so much ash in my ears and in my lungs that I knew I had to get out and find a place where I could finish my work. My son David said, "Why don't you come to San Francisco?" So I moved there and that's where I've been ever since. *When I'm there.*

But I have so many fond memories of my times in Palenque. At Christmas here in Mexico, everything is over at midnight on Christmas Eve although the adults stay up until umpteen hours. And then everyone sleeps on Christmas Day. Well Bob and I thought, "Gee, we should do something about this." So we decided to have a brunch on Christmas morning, starting at eleven o'clock. We must've invited seventy-five people and thought that maybe they'd show up around one o'clock. Well, people started coming at ten! When the food ran out, people went home and came back with more. They brought their guitars and sang and played music until nine o'clock that night. The next year, we said, "Are we gonna have that party again?" Of course!

Then there was Chenchó Guzman. He worked with me from the time I first came here. I remember climbing up on the roofcomb of the Temple of the Sun and finding that there were Bacabs holding up the sky bands. Chenchó would hold the ladder and there I was, clear up on the roofcomb. I could lean way back and draw those things knowing that he

would never let me fall. Chencho's family and the Morales family were then like part of my own family.

EB: Now here is a fun question we ask everybody we interview here in Palenque. Where, in your opinion, is Kan Balam buried?

MGR: Well, ha, everybody is probably going to give you a different answer, but, it's someplace in the Temple of the Cross. It's built on bedrock, but it's not all one solid piece. I don't know where exactly, but someone's going to find it. They'll get enough sophisticated instruments to see things that we can't see now.

EB: Because of all of your work preserving ancient art, the Mexican Government gave you a very high honor. Could you tell us about that?

MGR: That was the Award of the Aztec Eagle, which is the highest award given by Mexico to a non-Mexican. The ceremony was at the Palace in Mexico City and attended by all of the officials from INAH [the National Institute of Art and History]. It was really wonderful. They had a big reception afterwards and then another reception and dinner at Silvia Treva's house. All my family came down, my children and the grandkids, and everybody from Merida and Chichen Itza came too. I was overwhelmed to tell you the truth.

EB: Thank you Merle, it was wonderful talking with you.