

## GILLETT GRIFFIN

*Interviewed March 24, 2005 at his home in Princeton, New Jersey*



Gillett Griffin served for many years as Curator of Pre-Columbian and Primitive Art at the Princeton University Art Museum. Through exhibitions, symposia, his generosity as a teacher and his genius at friendship, he has served as a catalyst to many developments in Pre-Columbian studies.

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### Interview transcript

#### Early exploration of the Maya region

O: Let's talk about the early visitors to the Maya, to the Maya world, early European visitors to the Maya world. What they were able to make of this, you know, coming into Palenque, Armendariz and Waldeck and eventually Catherwood, even before that Calderon, and sort of successively trying to make sense of this strange writing. Can you tell us a little bit about your impression of how they began to get a handle on this?

**Gillett Griffin:** One of the curious things is that Cortez on his Honduras [expedition] got very near Palenque but apparently they never found Palenque. It was only in the 1770-80's, that Del Rio was sent in by the Spanish government. And, as he put it, he left

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no stone unturned. He used gunpowder to open up things and they were looking, of course, for gold. They were sure that there would be gold at a city like this. And then an account was written and was supposed to be sent to the King of Spain, but at least two copies stayed in Belize, and one of the copies was bought by two English gentlemen. And they brought it back to London and published it in 1822, I believe.

It aroused a lot of curiosity, and the person that illustrated that was a man named Waldeck, Count Waldeck. Waldeck was over six feet tall at a time when most people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were five foot two or three. And he was left by Napoleon in Alexandria and walked across the Sahara. Apparently, an amazing man. And he was the one who had been trained as a lithographer, and so he did the lithographic drawings in that book on the Del Rio report. And became fascinated.

And then he went to Mexico. He did some stage designs. And then he went to Palenque. And he took a local girl and lived with her and did all kinds of drawings and paintings of Palenque. He was there for about a year, year and a half, I think, in the 1830s. Later on he published some of these things in a volume in the 1860s. And, as I understand it, he died of a heart attack in Paris looking at pretty ladies. Anyway, he was one of the first sort of clues that people had that there were stone cities in the jungles of Central America. And other Mexicans were sent down to look at Palenque. I don't think any of them had any idea of who built the city or anything about it. But, let's see, there were two British officers who -- Caddy and...

Q: Walker.

**Gillett Griffin:** Walker. And Catherwood and Stevens stopped at Belize on their way to Honduras and Caddy and Walker were entertaining them and said, "Why should we live here in this country? Why should we let foreigners come and find these ruins?" And they went through the jungles and came to Palenque. And Caddy made some very, very fine drawings of Palenque at that time.

Stephens and Catherwood came several months later and by that time Catherwood was very sick with malaria. And his drawings of Palenque are not as accurate as the drawings he did in Northern Yucatán, later, or of Copán earlier. I think he was probably feverish. And in fact if you look at the principal drawing of – looking toward the Palace, you see a little hill on which the Temple of the Inscriptions is. But he misinterprets it. I think by the time he got back, he had forgotten about where things were and what things were. But that inspired other people to come and explore Palenque.

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It was Stephens and Catherwood who immediately realized that this had nothing to do with Europe or the Middle East whatsoever. These glyphs were nothing to do with Syriac or Hebraic or hieroglyphs from the Egyptian world, but these were probably made by Native Americans and the Maya. And it was almost a century or century and a half before people actually agreed with them and felt that -- absolutely -- these were a remarkable testament to a great, great ancient civilization.

Q: Waldeck...

**Gillett Griffin:** Waldeck took, as I say, took a local woman and lived in-- and they called that building the Temple of the Count. But from his drawings it looks like he had a thatch roof near the Temple of the Foliated Cross. But he shows a stream coming down that mountain which is not the real Otulum [River]. In other words, he was fanciful in his own right. But I think he must have loved Palenque. I think he must have really been inspired by it. I have a wonderful book which I'll show you later of Waldeck's pictures and paintings of this.

Q: Catherwood -- how was he able to advance the, you know, refine...

**Gillett Griffin:** Catherwood was one of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century artists I believe. And he used the *camera lucida*. The image was on the paper in front of him and he could trace it. So his things were very accurate.

After the first trip, they both came back racked with fever. And they were in New York for a while and Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, had gone to Paris to learn from Daguerre the old business of the Daguerreotype. And he came back and opened up the studio in New York and offered to teach any young artist the Daguerreotype. Free, I believe. And he taught Catherwood. And Catherwood went back and, if only their place hadn't burned, we would have the earliest pictures taken in Mexico, in 1842 or whatever. Not of Palenque but of Uxmal and Chichen and all kinds of places. But his drawings are accurate, because he was tracing them on the paper through the *camera lucida*.

Both Stevens and Catherwood had written guidebooks and travel books of Russia and Syria and all kinds of places. And they knew from Egypt and Syria that these glyphs were nothing at all like the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, or Cuneiform. All of these things are being studied in Europe and being deciphered. And they had common sense enough to realize that these were totally different, and they also realized that they were probably made by the ancestors of the people who were doing the work on these ranchos,

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the Maya. And so they were a good century, century and a half ahead of everybody else and instantly recognizing these qualities about glyphs and the depictions.

Daguerre, the inventor of photography, had a diorama in Paris and that had just burned before Samuel F. B. Morse arrived and Daguerre was devastated. All of his earliest pictures were burned up. Stevens and Catherwood when they came back to New York, they published almost immediately, in London and in New York, their adventure in Chiapas and Central America and Yucatán. And that book became an instant bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic. And they had the common sense to see that these ruins were not built by people from the Near East but were built by the local inhabitants, the Maya. They also built a diorama and it caught fire in New York. And Stevens went down and saw a beam, carved beam, from one of the sites, glowing in embers. It was really destroyed. And probably all the photographs that Catherwood had taken were destroyed also.

Q: If you can jump forward, you get Maudslay <inaudible>. Is there anything you want to say about this?

**Gillett Griffin:** Maudslay was an amazing man. He was sort of a British CIA agent. And he was stationed in Central America. He got fascinated with the Maya, and he went to all of these places, Palenque, Tikal, Copán. And got the local Indians to cut down the trees, and he took extraordinary photographs of the ruins and the sculpture and the glyphs and he took impressions of the glyphs also. He discovered the City of Yaxchilan. And he took lintels and stuff from certain buildings in Yaxchilan back to Britain. His work is the basis of a lot of modern technology. When the people who worked on glyphs were just beginning, they were using Maudslay's photographs. The great tragedy was that his volumes, which were part of a huge edition, were burned in a blitz in London in the 1940's, the bomber blew up the warehouse. So they were very rare documents, now. But he had the foresight, he had a wonderful woman named Annie Hunter. She did the lithographic sketches of the glyphs on the stelae and that kind of thing. Maudslay must have been an extraordinary individual.

Q: Let's move forward into the era of people that you knew personally. You knew Tania Proskouriakoff.

**Gillett Griffin:** I met Tania Proskouriakoff several times. And I didn't know her very well, but the first time I met her was at a meeting on the Olmec at Dumbarton Oaks. And she was a Mayanist, and didn't like the idea that Mike Coe was claiming that the Olmec were earlier than the Maya. She also was an amazing person. A great architectural

draftsman. And her drawings are still hauntingly powerful and wonderful, of great sites. She was also very much of a feminist. And she didn't like the idea that all the stelae were gods and that-- she was sure that there were rulers and ruler's wives and that kind of thing. And so she went about looking at Piedras Negras stelae. And putting together the fact that these are probably the rulerships of certain kings and they were going to include a birth date, a day of accession, and a death date. And so she sort of was the first person to solve that problem.

## **The origins of his own involvement with the Maya**

Q: Let's move up to your own involvement in the Maya. How did you first become involved with things Maya.

**Gillett Griffin:** Well I was fascinated by-- I took a course with George Kubler. What happened was -- I can show you at another time -- I bought a little broken head, very crude broken head from a junk shop in New Haven, going to get a cheap haircut. And somebody in my class, they said, "Take it to George Kubler." And I had never heard of George Kubler. I took it to George Kubler and sat in on a three-hour class in which he showed many, many photographs of ancient ruins in Mexico and Peru. And talked about Maya and showed all kind of slides of art objects and sculpture. And that hooked me. He looked at the little head I bought and said, "Well, I can't be absolutely sure, but I'd say it's probably 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Valley of Mexico." And I thought, gee, for a quarter, that's not bad.!

And so I sat in on the rest of his course and he talked a lot about the Maya. And a lot about the Inca and so forth. I audited the course that year, and took it one other year. That was the only course that I have ever taken in Pre-Columbian art. And then I was already collecting. I discovered that most people were not very much interested in Pre-Columbian things, and not sure what they were. And having taken George Kubler's course, I had a pretty good idea of what they were. So I was able to begin to assemble pieces that bespake the civilization that they came from, and sort of illuminated that.

My older brother had been killed in the Second World War and he had been in the Air Force. My parents did not want me to fly. It was the last thing that they had, last child they had. And so until they died, and they both died in 1961, I couldn't go to Mexico. But I was encouraged to go at Christmas holiday. I spent ten days in Mexico with a good friend of mine, a student. And saw more of Mexico in ten days than I was ever able to see again in months. We got to places like Tajin and Monte Alban and Palenque. We

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flew into Palenque. In those days the airport in Villahermosa was a thatched roof hut, as I remember, and for \$12.50, one could fly into Palenque, about an hour, hour and a quarter. There'd be a couple of jeeps there. You take one jeep up to the site and it would drive you back to the town. The town had no electricity. Had one generator for the hotel. You were put up in the very inexpensive hotel, called the Leon, which is octagonal with pie-shaped rooms and one kerosene lamp, but with plumbing. And then the next day you were flown back to Villahermosa. All for \$12.50. And so the first times one went to Palenque, there was no road to Palenque at all. And, one would find oneself being the only person there except for somebody cutting grass or whatever. And it was a wonderful experience to be alone in a site that moving.

Q: You began going regularly to Palenque. Over a course of time you met Merle Robertson and eventually Linda Schele?

**Gillett Griffin:** Yes.

Q: Could you talk about the-- who you began to meet associated with that area.

**Gillett Griffin:** I've forgotten exactly when I met Merle, but we became very good friends. And I was fascinated by what she was doing. And then a film group in Princeton-- it was Susan Johnston. And she wanted me to be an advisor on a film on the Maya. And they needed a subject. And I said, "Well look at the faces on Jaina figures. Look at modern Maya faces." And they said, "Gillett, that's all right for maybe one or two minutes. But you can't, you know, our film's going to be at least half an hour, maybe an hour. And we need a theme." And I had been working with Mike Coe, on a guidebook to Archeological Mexico. And I got into a place where I couldn't find one site called Temple B at Rio Bec. And I asked Mike about that and he said, "Well it was found in 1912. People found it on Easter Sunday in 1912. And they went out early in May and nobody's been able to find it since. And there were two major expeditions looking for it in 1930s and other people have made a hobby of going back to that area. They found buildings around it, but they've never found the building." And Mike said, "You know, you and I could easily find it. Probably in 20 minutes. You know, people don't know how to use maps. People don't know how to use compasses and that kind of thing. We could find it easily."

Well, I tucked this in the back of my mind, knowing that that was a little bit simplistic because the jungle is the jungle and going through it, one can't see very far. Anyway, they had never been to the Maya world, Hugh and Susan Johnston. And we took a trip, going first to San Cristobal de las Casas to see Maya up there. And then we took a six-

hour trip down this really rocky *brecha* road, to Palenque, and down probably 7,000 feet or whatever to the hot Plains. You know, the hot Tabasco Plains. Got into Palenque very thirsty and very hungry and very tired and dusty and went to La Cañada, which is a restaurant. And we're having a beer and suddenly a southern voice at the next table said, "Well, yesterday I was in Rio Bec." It was a woman. We jumped her. It was Linda Schele. And we said, "You've been to Rio Bec?" And she said, "Why, yes." And we said, "Well how do we-- how'd you get there?" "We drove there." "You drove to Rio Bec?" And here I was thinking about all these years that people have been searching the place and, "Well, who took you there?" And she told us and I knew the man. And so anyway, the next day we went to see him at Becan. And he said, "Well, I can take you there any time except if it rains." Well, Hugh Johnston had stomach problems. So, anyway it took us two years but we did find the Temple of Rio Bec.

### **His friendship with Linda Schele**

Meanwhile, every time I went back to Palenque, which was as often as I could, there was Linda Schele. And Linda Schele-- we'd go bathing in the cascades and climbing around the jungle. She was mapping the city. And we enjoyed each other hugely. I had no idea that that would be the greatest mind I'd, would ever, come in contact in my life. I mean, I used to have dinner with Albert Einstein, but as far as I'm concerned, Linda Schele was a mind that is with no equal. And we became very good friends.

Q: Could you describe a little bit of what Merle was doing, and I think you began to help Linda and Merle out on that project somewhat. And also just a little bit more of a description of what Linda was like as a person. How she came off. If you could repeat what you said about her and Albert Einstein? I'd like to get that. We're just cutting for sound.

**Gillett Griffin:** Okay. Well, Linda was big boned, looked a little bit as if she took a bowl and put it over her head and cut everything below the bowl off, sort of ring of hair. Big, thick glasses. She was a big-boned girl with a southern drawl and great sense of humor. And we actually had a lot of fun together. As I say, going into the cascades and skinny-dipping and just exploring buildings often in the jungle. She was actually mapping the city of Palenque. She would take local kids and a compass and a few things and they would go out, and nobody had ever done this before. The central part of Palenque had been mapped somewhat, but outside there were huge areas that were really unknown.

And Linda had a wonderfully bawdy sense of humor. And just she was lots of fun and I didn't realize that this woman was one of the most brilliant people I will ever have met, and I have told people again and again that I'm the only surviving friend of Albert Einstein. But as far as I'm concerned, Linda had the more remarkable mind of the two. Einstein was a dreamer. Linda was also a dreamer. But she made the dreams a reality. She was really an extraordinary person that way.

Merle was trying to record everything on the site. She began to realize the elements were tearing away at the site. And there were lots of pieces of stucco on the buildings that needed to be recorded so that maybe they could figure out what had been there. What the decorations of roof combs had been and so forth. And I helped her by buying a lens at one point that was a long distance lens for shooting roof combs, and roof decoration. And Linda was helping as she could. They were trying to cover the whole site and save it before it melted into the jungle.

### **Michael Coe's seminal exhibit *The Maya Scribe and His World***

Q: Let's talk about the Grolier show and how that came about and what its impact was, what its importance was.

**Gillett Griffin:** In the Princeton University library there is a man named -- well he's just retired -- Alfred Bush. Alfred Bush came from Mormon stock, is very much interested in American Indians, brought American Indians to Princeton University actually for the first time in two centuries. And the Grolier Club is a very, very old book collecting club in New York, founded by JP Morgan and other very important people, Lennox, and for years they had had exhibitions of the members' collections and very often these things would be published in very elegant volumes, with type designed by Bruce Rogers and handmade paper and all kinds of things, and they never sold any of their exhibition catalogs out. And Alfred decided he wanted to have an exhibition of American books, and the ideal thing would be to get the three Maya Codices, the Dresden, the Madrid and the Paris together. And the Grolier Club is one of the few places in the world where places like that would be willing to lend, except the Dresden Codex had disappeared after the Second World War and nobody knew where it was. And if you got one of the other codices how can you have an exhibition of one book?

And so he came up with the idea of why not exhibit anything with glyphs on it as a book or as, you know, sort of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Well, he presented this to Mike Coe and Mike was thrilled. He said, "Well that would be a great idea, and let's pursue it."

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And so, we had I think three weeks to get things together and I was partly responsible for getting the ceramics together. And, I went to all kinds of dealers and friends and people and almost the day before the show was to open and a dealer came in with three Maya pots, and one of them had a little rabbit painting a book on it, and he wanted the insurance value for that. He figured for all three it was \$8,000. Then Mike Coe said "That's got to be the greatest piece of American painting, ancient American painting in the world" and so the insurance price went up to \$20,000, then \$40,000, then \$60,000, I think finally \$200,000.

Anyway, the codex came in from Mexico City and --we'll tell that story another time -- and the show opened at the Grolier Club for at least six weeks. And Mike said "Would people be interested in having a catalog" and everybody raised their hands. Mike said, "We'll have a catalog in a couple of weeks." Well, two years later, out came a magnificent book on the Grolier Club exhibition with rollouts of all of the pots shown, hand drawn, and photographs of the pots, and he believed that the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the top were probably from a book of the dead like the Egyptians had and that they were some sort of incantation that people would memorize, and this would be helpful in going into the underworld or going into the afterlife. And, that was the Primary Standard Sequence that he discovered.

It was the first time 71 pots were in the same room together and it was a deeply inspiring show and exciting and wonderful. Anyway that's one part of the story. Should I describe how the codex got--

Q: Yeah, go ahead and tell that \_\_\_\_\_.

**Gillett Griffin:** Well, I had met Josue and Jackie Saenz. They came from a very, very wealthy family and they had their own bank.

Josue and Jackie Saenz were very wealthy Americans. The Saenz's as I understand it really were the people who controlled sugar in Mexico, which meant the Coca Cola industry and everything else. They had their own bank. The father had his portrait painted by Siqueros and they were the first people, outside of painters, that looked at ancient Pre-Colombian art as really great art.

They decided they would go after great pieces of Pre-Colombian art and establish a museum, and establish an endowment on that museum which would see that nothing went out the back door, that the air-conditioning and lighting and heat control and so forth, and they let it be known to all dealers that they would probably pay highest prices

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anywhere in the world for great things. And they had an expert, Jose Luis Franco, who was a very neurotic individual, a very bright but neurotic individual who had all kinds of nervous twitches and stuff, and everything they were contemplating Franco looked at and approved or disapproved.

One day, Josue Saenz got a call in his office from a voice he didn't know saying "Dr. Saenz, we understand that you are willing to pay good prices for important things and we have some very important material from the Maya world. And, if you're interested, I'll call again next week at exactly the same time."

One week later, the telephone rang and the same voice said, "You have to trust us. Come to the corner of Nisa [sp?] and Landres [sp?] and we'll pick you up." And he went there and a little car picked him up, took him to the airport and he got on a small biplane. They blindfolded him. They flew around in figure eights to disorient him and took off.

He had been a pilot himself. He had the feeling that they were flying towards Chiapas. And then it started to rain. He could hear the rain on the windshield and the windshield wipers going. And then the plane was losing altitude and all of a sudden it was landing and it was a great sort of bouncing around. They took his blindfold off and he was in champa, a clearing. It was a champa off in the distance, people running towards the plane with umbrellas. And they escorted him into the champa and there on a bamboo table were several things. One was a little wooden mask with mosaic on it, a Post Classic mask, a tiny wooden box in classic Maya style, a sacrificial knife with a hand on it and pages of a codex, a book.

Everything he bought before, Jose Luis Franco had looked over and approved and Franco was not there. He asked how much they wanted and they wanted something like \$60,000, which in those days was a huge amount of money. And, they said "We'll give you 20 minutes to make up your mind" and 20 minutes later they came back and he said, "Well, how about \$30,000" and they laughed at him and they pushed all kinds of auction catalogs under his face with marked prices. So he paid the money and they flew him back to Mexico City and he wildly tried to find Jose Luis Franco. And Franco is a character who did not have a telephone and who was eccentric and so forth and everywhere they turned Franco was not there. So, it was a day and a half before they found him and he looked at all the material. He thought the mask, which was the most important thing, was fake. He thought the dagger was real. He wasn't sure at all about the codex, and Saenz was furious. He sent the little mask to New York where Gordon Eckholm spent eight days looking at it with loupes and it turned out to be all right. It's now at Dumbarton Oaks.

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Anyway, I was invited over to the Saenz's one day and they brought out the codex and asked me what I thought of it. Well, I had never seen one and so I couldn't say much. But the next time I was visiting the Saenz's was with Michael Coe and Betty Benson and I suggested, I said "Why don't you bring out the codex and let Mike and Betty see it?" And, they brought out the codex and Mike and Betty looked at it and the more Mike looked at it the better he thought it was. He said, "This is really, I think this could not be a fake at all. I think it's real and it's very, very important, and it's a Venus table." Well, when the Grolier Club show was being put together, somebody got the bright idea why not have that one codex that had never been seen by anybody. And, at that point, Echevarria, the president of Mexico, had turned against the Saenzes. Madam Saenz, Jackie Saenz and Madam Echevarria had gone to school together and they figured that this would be overlooked, and it wasn't and Saenz fled, I believe to Costa Rica for a while, and he was in no mood.... He was very unhappy about the president of Mexico and so forth. And so he was delighted to send along the codex to the Grolier Club.

The first time it actually appeared publicly was in "The New York Times" the day of the opening of the show and it was on the front page of "The New York Times." It was there for I believe six weeks, and the show was quite popular. People came to see it and the day after it closed, people from the Mexican embassy came and they were told that it [the codex] belonged to an American collector and it had been already picked up. Anyway, it went back to Mexico finally.

Jose Luis Franco pronounced it false, but there's no way that manuscript could be false. I mean everything about it, the material was not known at that time that is known now. And it was Carbon-14 dated at about 1300 or 1320 A.D., so that's a sort of fascinating story.

### **His experience of the First Mesa Redonda at Palenque**

Q: Moving to a different topic, let's talk a bit about David Kelley, what he was like, what he contributed and about how Peter Mathews became a student of-- how he got Peter Mathews into Maya.

**Gillett Griffin:** I don't know David Kelley that well, although I've seen a lot of him. He's a wonderful sort of earthy, nice, nice person and brilliant with glyphs. Peter Mathews was born and grew up in Australia. His father was a professor. He decided he wanted to become an Egyptologist and then he realized that to be an Egyptologist he'd have to read demotic and hieratic and he'd have to know Greek and Latin and probably

Italian and German and French and he realized the field was small and pretty well explored and there would be very little new material appearing. But in the library of the university his father worked for was a copy of Maudslay and a copy of--

Q: Kingsborough.

**Gillett Griffin:** Kingsborough, yeah, sorry. A copy of Kingsborough and he poured over these and decided he wanted to become a Mayanist. Then he had to figure out where he'd get a free education in the British Empire and at Calgary he could work with David Kelley. And he went to Calgary and he was so shy that for the first whole year he didn't go to see David Kelley. And he finally went to Kelley's office and Kelley said, "Well, have you read Thompson?" "No, sir." "Have you read" -- you know he went through all the current textbooks and the answer was always no and finally he said, "Well, what have you read?" And he said, "Kingsborough" and--

Q: Maudslay?

**Gillett Griffin:** Maudslay.

Q: Yeah, start that again.

**Gillett Griffin:** So, anyway he said to David Kelley, "Well, Kingsborough and Maudslay" and Kelley couldn't believe it because Kelley couldn't afford those books, didn't have them in the library. And so David Kelley was invited to the Mesa Redonda but he had another meeting in London I believe at the time and couldn't make it. And so, Peter Mathews decided to go anyway. He'd never been to Mexico before. It was the first time for him and he was very shy but suddenly here he was with Linda Schele and they were unfolding this great, amazing, dynastic history of the rulers of Palenque.

Q: Let me go back, because I'd like to get the story of how the Mesa Redonda came about.

Well, I was there [at Palenque] one time with a student of Michael Coe named David Joralemon who was an Olmec expert. And he had never been to the Olmec heartland, and so I took him to the Olmec heartland. He had been, just the year before, working in a class with Michael Coe, on the gods, the Maya Gods. And the two sites that had more depictions of gods than any other sites were Copán in the east, and Palenque in the west. Maudslay had photographed and drawn all of these images, and so they used Maudslay's books for that class and they found all kinds of-- they were very strange gods like God K, and -- who I always refer to as Special K. And this was a guy that we now know as

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Kawil. And he was a god with one human leg and one serpent leg and he had in the middle of his forehead a cigar or torch coming out and a mirror. And anyway we were-- we got to Palenque with David Joralemon and Linda was there and Merle was there and so we went out into the jungle.

We're taking a jungle walk with Linda and she would point out things, pieces of sculpture and all, and David Joralemon, for instance, at one point said, "Well there's God K." And she said, "Well, it looks like God K but we call it the Jester God. Cause it has sort of little like jester cap and bells and it's different than God K." And by the time we got back to Merle's house, Linda was a foot and a half off the surface of the earth, steam coming out of her ears. She was all excited. Really excited. We're sipping plantation punch or something and Linda said, "Why can't we get everybody really interested in Maya glyphs here. Get Knorosov from Moscow. Get David Kelley, get Mike Coe, get Tania Proskouriakoff. And have all these people in Palenque itself, and when there's ever a question we walk out into the jungle and look at the piece, maybe with drawings and photographs or books or whatever and a flashlight. And we discuss things there on the spot. And I said, "Let's have a round table." And David Joralemon said, "Let's have a Mesa Redonda." And Merle said, "Well, we'll have it. We'll have it next June. A year from now."

Well, it turned out that Michael Coe couldn't make it in June but could in December, the December before. And so in six months, Merle sent out hundreds of invitations. Many, many to Mexicans, only two of whom showed up. 30 people showed up for that first Mesa Redonda. And it was an amazing moment. It was as if the ancient Maya had decided that we were the people that should unlock the history and so forth.

I was there at the opening cocktail party at Merle's house and sitting in the corner was a very shy kid with long hair, sort of hippy hair, and a hand painted t-shirt and a mustache. And that was Peter, Peter Matthews. And I think he was 20 or 21 at that time. But very shy. He said, "Do you think that Professor Coe might have a word with me?" And I said, "Of course. Mike's a wonderful, very warm person." "Do you think Dr. Lounsbury would have a word?" And I said, "Well, he's like a grandfather. He's a very nice person."

Anyway, somewhere during that week Mike stood up-- say Wednesday or so, Mike stood up at the end of a morning session. And said, "Two people here have exceptional qualifications. Linda Schele knows every carving, every work of art in Palenque. Peter Matthews has four notebooks full of copies of Maya glyphs from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on.

## BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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And why don't you two kids get up and put together a dynastic history. We have all the things we need to do that kind of thing but it's just never been done."

We went off to look at the site of Tortuguero, which we didn't find. We came back sweaty, mosquito bitten, testy and these two kids stood up and said, "We have six rulers for you. And the man who's buried in the Temple of Inscriptions, his name is Lord Shield." At that point, Moises Morales, a local guide, beet red with anger, veins standing out of his forehead, jumped up and said, "Why is it that when important discoveries like this are made, the name was given in English, Lord Shield, or *Escudo*, Spanish. These buildings-- this city was made by Chol Maya. And we have a Chol sitting right- right there. And pointed to this Indian, and his Mexican anthropologist. And he has a dictionary. Well--

Q: Before you get there, what was the week like? What was going on? Where were you and what was happening?

**Gillett Griffin:** We were staying at La Cañada, which was I guess sort of a hotel with a restaurant and different houses and we were having the meetings at La Cañada and at Merle's house, Merle Greene Robertson's house, and it was all very informal. One of the great things about that was that Michael Coe every day had a hearing with townspeople, the local guides and townspeople about what was going on. And very often in conferences like this, things were kept sort of secret and things are only for the inner circle and Mike realized that the guides and the people in town felt this was theirs. And so, he would give a Spanish version of what had taken place and the townspeople really were thrilled about this. They got extraordinarily excited about what was going on.

I think it was a Wednesday at the end of the morning session, Mike stood up and said "Linda Schele knows every stone in the forest and Peter Mathews knows every glyph and he's copied, he has four sketchbooks with every glyph ever copied, a copy of that glyph. And why don't you two kids get together and put together a dynastic history?"

We went off to find a site called Tortuguero and we couldn't find it, came back testy, sweaty, mosquito stung and people gathered for the evening session. And these two kids had all kinds of charts and things. They said, "We have six rulers for you and the man in the tomb, his name is Lord Shield." Well, out from the bunch of people in the audience rose Moises Morales, a local guide. Moises was furious, veins standing out in his forehead, flushed with anger. He said, "Why is it when great discoveries like this are made the names are given in English, shield or in Spanish, *Escudo*?" He said, "These

people spoke Chol Maya and we have a Chol sitting there with a dictionary.” And so, everybody was terribly embarrassed and anyway they looked up the word for--

Q: Shield.

**Gillett Griffin:** -- shield in Chol and there was no word in the dictionary for it and they discovered in all of the 24 languages or whatever, the Maya languages, there were only two words for shield. One was chimal [sp?] and the other was Pakal. Chimal is Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs in Mexico, so they decided to use the word Pakal. So, suddenly we had history. Suddenly here was a name of a person and his mother's name was Lady Zak-Kuk and his son was Chan Bahlum or Kan Balam and et cetera, et cetera. And there was living history and there were portraits and architecture could be identified. It's as if the Maya had decided that this group was the group that should unveil their history. It was an incredibly exciting time.

And then on December 21st, somebody decided this was the winter solstice and they should go out to the site and see what was going on. And there was a triple rainbow to the north and there was something like nine planets in conjunction above the Temple of the Inscriptions. And, as the sun set, we noticed when we climbed up to the Temple of the Cross and realized that the sun would have come through a portal at dusk and hit the old god L on the right hand side of the sanctuary and probably on June 21st the sun would have come from a different direction and hit Chan Bahlum, the person. And so it was an incredibly thrilling time. And suddenly the ancient Maya began to have a real history. It was just one of the most moving times of my life.

Q: Thank you.

**Gillett Griffin:**

Betty Benson was so thrilled at what had happened in the first Mesa Redonda that she decided to invite Linda over to Washington, to Dumbarton Oaks to give a talk. Well, Linda, very often she enjoyed being mistaken for the janitor. She wore sort of old Levis, a plaid shirt sort of out and that hairdo and big glasses and all, and she'd sort of come onstage and people would be wondering-- she'd be told not to be there until the speaker gets on or whatever. Anyway, I heard she was going to be talking at Dumbarton Oaks, so I called her up and said, “Would you be willing to speak at Princeton?” And she said, “Yes, I'd love to.” And I said, “Very, very good.” Well, anyway it was less than a week and I went to the university and found out all the halls were taken at the time she'd be here. So, I decided to have it in this house. As you know, the house is small and the

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room, there's not very much room and I contacted as many people as I could, some 40 people I think showed up. People were sitting on radiators, on stairs, on the floor and in chairs and chair arms and whatever and Linda started with what I thought was going to be a nice little travelogue, pretty pictures of Palenque and cascades and stuff. And she got to the photograph just taken by Merle of the sarcophagus lid and something like an hour later she had totally described what the iconography was on the sarcophagus lid. And afterwards people who had babysitters fled but everybody else stayed, big applause and stuff. Well, three or four days later I went down to Dumbarton Oaks to hear her speak and she shuffled on the stage and said, "Well" she said "Last Monday I was giving a talk at Gillett Griffin's house and I put on the slide of Merle's, Merle's slide of the sarcophagus lid and it all came to me." And she had stood up here and absolutely decoded that sarcophagus lid bit by bit. And every time she came here she did something like that. It was the greatest mind I've ever encountered in my life, just extraordinary.

Q: Can we talk about how you would stay out all night talking?

**Gillett Griffin:** Well, then very often she'd come back to speak at Princeton and we'd be down on the floor maybe drinking bourbon or scotch and chatting and suddenly we'd hear birds twittering and it would be dawn and she wouldn't have prepared her talk and she'd go up and get an hour or two sleep. And whatever she gave at Princeton was always something that she had never given before, an extraordinary insight into something brand new.

Linda had a great sense of humor but she thought in different ways. I mean her thinking – she resisted for a long time looking at the stars and people like Floyd Lounsbury and David Kelley were trying to convince her that they were important. When she finally discovered they were, she dove into astronomy and became an expert in all kinds of things. She was just remarkable in her, the curiosity that she tried to solve and use. I can't understand why people have denied her in a way. I can't explain that in a credible way but I find that not only was she an inspiration, I think she-- well, maybe with some people she was difficult. I'm not sure. But I saw a very wonderful side of her and I saw no other. To me she was the person that really launched the reading of Maya glyphs like nobody else.

Q: That's good. That thing you said about her sucking up of astronomy that happened with a lot of different fields with her.

**Gillett Griffin:** Yeah.

Q: Looking ahead to the Blood of Kings show. Did you go to the Blood of Kings show?

**Gillett Griffin:** Oh, absolutely.

Q: Tell me what the impact of that was and when you saw it and what you think the impact was --.

**Gillett Griffin:** The catalog is dedicated to me.

Q: Oh!

**Gillett Griffin:** Mary Miller was a student of mine, and one of the great things about Linda was that she never wrote a book by herself, always with somebody else and sharing, completely sharing with somebody else. And it was amazing that two women Mayanists could get together and produce something like Blood of Kings. And I think it's one of the great catalogs. I think still it was a thing that moved decipherment along further than anything else.

They wanted me to come to it. I had bought tickets and Linda called up and said, "Well, you get here on Friday instead of Saturday or whatever" and I said, "Well, I've got my ticket." She said, "Well, put them back. We'll get tickets for you." And I arrived sort of late in the afternoon and there was a party in progress and we went to a Mexican restaurant and everybody was chit -chatting and people were scurrying about with the book and stuff and finally somebody clanked on a glass and they brought this book over to me and it was the Blood of Kings with a dedication. And, I was astounded and apparently the edition was printed in Japan and they just had five copies with my name spelled right. They had several hundred copies with my name spelled wrong. Anyway, that book is still an incredibly moving book. And one of Linda's great attributes is her drawings, like Miguel Covarrubias she could take things and draw them and make them come to life, make them clear and that's a tremendous gift. And her hundreds and hundreds of drawings are a great international treasure.

### **His experience as a collector and the moral issues involved in collecting ancient art**

Q: There was a period when there was some stress and strain between archaeologists and epigraphers between those who were going to show and exhibit and analyze unprovenanced material versus those who would have nothing to do with it.

**Gillett Griffin:** Uh huh.

Q: And I know it's an area which you have written about and had some things to say about it. Could you talk about that?

**Gillett Griffin:** My feeling has been that if things are in museums, these works of art belong to the world, that every great site should have its own museum with the very best things in that museum, and the best things also in the national museum of whatever country. But then I think there are things that are multiplied, great numbers of objects that are secondary or are duplicated and those things I think should be traded around the world to educate other people, to open civilizations to other people. And in my own case in collecting, I don't feel I own anything. I'm a temporary curator and things will go into a museum. But, well anyway.

Q: On the other hand you have people who would say if you talk about these things then you're giving them credence and you increase their value and people will pay more for them and it encourages more looting. It's a tricky business.

**Gillett Griffin:** Well, there are all kinds of sides to this. Very often the people who are actually doing the looting were trained by archaeologists, and very well trained, and when the archaeological work ends they still need money and many of them look upon these things as the seeds left by their ancestors to harvest. It's a very complicated kind of thing. There's no way of controlling things like this but I do believe that things that are well taken care of and that are open to the public are part of the world of art and are things that are beneficial. And very often archaeologists will dig things up and put them in *bodegas* and they're not seen by the people. They're not published. Very often the *bodegas* become rotten. The material gets broken. It's ignored. It's no good for anybody. On the other hand, if one of those pieces were in the hands of a respectable collector, it would go to a museum. It would be published. It would be put on exhibitions. It would be enjoyed by the populace.

Q: Okay, thank you. Are there other, you know, those were sort of the list of questions that I had. Are there other things that you would looking back on your involvement over the last 30, 40 years of the history of the decipherment, are there things that you see where it's come from, where it's going, any particular stories or aspects of that that you can talk about?

**Gillett Griffin:** My successor, John Pohl, feels that the people who depend entirely upon deciphering inscriptions are very often missing certain points and that -- epigraphy is

very, very important, but -- for instance, we know the Primary Standard Sequence. We know now it tells you that it's a cup that was made for a certain reason and owned by a certain person. It doesn't tell you anything about the mythology in the cup or whatever. The great tragedy is what Landa did, the burning of so many books, and we don't know what those books were. The only ones left to us are tables and things to do with divination and we don't know if there were things like plays written out, or poems written out, and so forth. I think there must have been, with inscriptions like the "96 Glyphs", and all. And who knows? There is so much yet to be found and one always hopes that one day they'll find a dry cave with a whole lot of codices in it.

### **The role of writing in ancient Maya culture**

Q: One other thing I've forgotten that I did want to ask you about is your sense of the role of writing in Maya culture, the role of scribes compared to what was going on and what had gone on. What was going on in Europe at the same time?

**Gillett Griffin:** One of the interesting things, David Stuart was I think ten or 12 years old when he asked Linda to teach him Maya glyphs and he lived a lot of that time in places like Cobá and Palenque and he worked very hard and he became what Linda considered the greatest glyphicist in Maya studies. He came -- at the age of 17, he was at Dumbarton Oaks at the age of 17, dropped out of high school and he came to Princeton. We had a seminar, a symposium on early Maya iconography and he gave a paper called Blood of Kings, which absolutely astounded the world. He suddenly talked about blood scattering and it was the first time people had ever thought of it that way. And several years later he got into Princeton. I believe he was 18 or 19 years old. He got into Princeton and he said at the time that he came to Princeton because he had to learn how to ride a bicycle. He had to learn how to swim before he could graduate. And his freshman year he gave a course in Maya glyphs, and I sat in on the first part of it. I went off to Turkey, so I missed part of it. But, anyway, he was a wonderful teacher, very patient, very refined, and at that point Mary Miller and Linda Schele were going to produce the Blood of Kings show and he was going to give a talk. And I asked him what he was going to talk on. He said, well that he had deciphered a glyph meaning "painted by" and they had about 30 names of painters from Maya pots. And later on he discovered the glyph "carved by" and so forth.

He was going to give a talk in Texas and the second part of the talk was that there were three or four pots by an artist named Ah Maxam, and Ah Maxam on one pot, this [pot]

was in Chicago, said that he was the son of the Queen of Naranjo, born in Yaxha, and the King of Naranjo...and both those names were known. And I thought to myself, my Lord, in the jungles of Central America you had the people of royal lineage being proud to have painted pots, and in Europe my ancestors were bashing each other's heads in with shillelaghs. And no king could read or write. Charlemagne couldn't read or write. And what a contrast between Europe of that time and Central America!

Q: Great. Thank you. Last time we talked you mentioned that in Europe they were painting themselves blue.

**Gillett Griffin:** It occurred to me that here in the jungles of Central America you had princes of royal blood being proud enough to sign their paintings on their pots and doing the pots in different styles, while in Europe my ancestors were painting their bodies blue and bashing each other's heads in with shillelaghs and no king or noble could read or write. And only the people in monasteries could do that. Charlemagne couldn't read or write. And in the jungles of Central America, you had a civilization that had literacy and poetry and so forth.

Q: Great.

**Gillett Griffin:** Okay.

Q: Thank you very much. I think we're done.

**Gillett Griffin:** Done.

<applause>

**Gillett Griffin:** It's Scotch time. It's Scotch time.