

# Michael D. Coe:

## Distinguished Professor of Mesoamerican Studies

By Forrest D. Colburn

One of the world's most accomplished scholars of the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica is Michael D. Coe, Charles J. McCurdy Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University. He has had a long and distinguished career. He began his work in Mesoamerica with an archaeological excavation on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, an area rich in Early Formative sites. His great "dirt work," as he puts it, was at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, on the East Coast of Mexico, near the city of Veracruz. Among other accomplishments, with his bare hands he dug out of the earth one of the most prized Olmec stone sculptures, Monument 34, all the more familiar after its iconic inclusion in *Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in late 2010. Coe also was a significant contributor to the decipherment of Maya glyphs. Unusual for anthropologists, Coe has also contributed to the field of art history, willing—even eager—to see ancient artifacts produced by such civilizations as the Olmec and the Maya as significant and beautiful works of art.

Coe is a prolific and distinguished author and has written everything from academic monographs to art museum catalogs to overviews of the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. His publications include *The Jaguar's Children: Pre-Classical Central Mexico* (Museum of Primitive Art, 1965), *Lords of the Underworld: Masterpieces of Classic Maya Ceramics* (Princeton University Press, 1978), *In the Land of the Olmec* (with Richard Diehl, University of Texas Press, 1980), *Breaking the Maya Code* (Thames and Hudson, 1992 and 1999), and *The Art of the Maya Scribe* (with Justin Kerr, Thames and

Hudson, 1997). Of late, Coe has been drawn to the great ceremonial site of Angkor in Cambodia, thinking about the strong similarities between the civilizations of Southeast Asia and those of the Americas. This interest led to *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (Thames and Hudson, 2003).

On a cold winter day, Coe came down from New Haven to visit with me in New York. We chatted in my apartment before venturing off for a sumptuous lunch at a French-Vietnamese restaurant.

**Forrest Colburn:** *Looking back on your long career, what for you are the highlights? Of all that you have done, what today gives you the most satisfaction?*

**Michael Coe:** I am proudest of my teaching at Yale, of the students I was able to attract to the field and whom I helped train. I had a hand in producing some of the finest scholars today who work on the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec civilizations. We had many memorable seminars together. I feel like a parent to them: protective and proud. And many of my students now have trained scholars themselves, so I feel like a grandfather as well.

In my own work as a scholar, I am proudest of my work on the Olmec. The two scholars who I have always most admired are Miguel Covarrubias and Matthew Stirling. Covarrubias, unfortunately, I never met; Stirling I did know. Like both of them, I am—and always have been—interested in "beginnings." I have studied Aztec cosmology and poetry, and I am fascinated with the Aztecs, but I really am drawn to the other end of the time horizon. What are the origins of civilizations? In Mesoamerica, the Olmec are the beginning. They are, as Covarrubias said, the "mother culture."

Stirling said he was "hooked" on the Olmec after seeing a small jade artifact on exhibit in a German museum. I suppose he wondered, "Who made such a beautiful object?" After working on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, I was intrigued by the thought of working on the marshy areas of southeast Mexico, where the colossal Olmec heads had been found. Archaeological

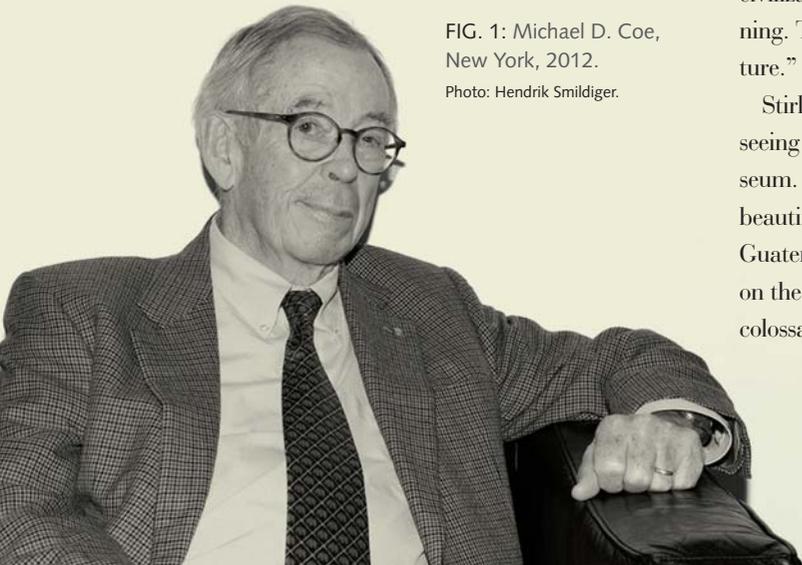


FIG. 1: Michael D. Coe, New York, 2012.  
Photo: Hendrik Smildiger.

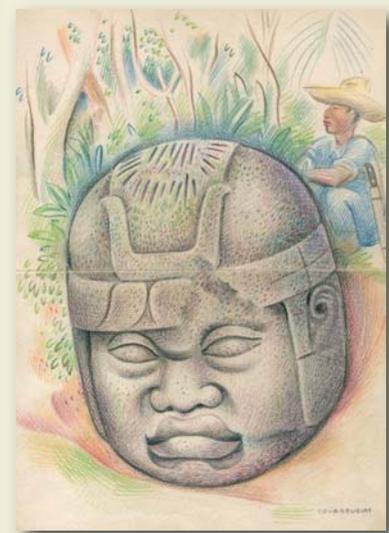


FIG. 2: Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957), *Untitled* (colossal Olmec head being discovered in Vera Cruz), c. 1940.

Colored pencil on paper. 35.6 x 24.5 cm.  
Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, New York.

work had been done at the sites of La Venta and Tres Zapotes, but I had a hunch that something significant existed at the then largely unexplored site of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán. I had good intuition and I had good luck. Archaeology is just like fishing. Technique is important but fortune also plays a part. I knew a Mexican archeologist, now no longer living, who had fabulous training in France and impeccable technique, but he didn't have a "green thumb"—he never found anything.

At San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, I found the first capital of Mesoamerica, a city dating back to 1200 BC, perhaps even to 1400 BC. I had a great team; we had fun. I am proud, too, that I published in a timely fashion, with my collaborator Richard Diehl, the fruits of our excavations—and of our fieldwork in the zone. One of the first questions that intrigued me was why did civilization begin in such a place—a swamp. I came to appreciate, though, that this region had the richest agricultural potential. It was not unlike the fertile riverbanks and deltas of Egypt.

**FC:** *What drew you to early civilizations?*

**MC:** I was always interested in pre-Columbian civilizations. Years ago the Museum of Modern Art had a show titled *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. For some reason, my grandfather had a copy of the exhibit catalog at his ranch out in Wyoming. I was fascinated by the book and its many images. As an undergraduate at Harvard, I studied English literature because I wanted to be a writer. But on the mantle of the fireplace in my dorm room, I had postcards of pre-Columbian artifacts, including, I believe, a stone *hacha* from Veracruz. And I remember being impressed with pictures I saw of the Bonampak murals. In my sophomore year I visited Yucatan during the Christmas break and was able to visit the Maya site of Chichen Itza. Back at Harvard, I tired of English literature—the professors just wanted

us to be able to identify random passages from texts. I decided I wanted to be a Maya archaeologist, but there was no such major. Instead I majored in anthropology. But then along came the Korean War and it “nixed” everybody’s plans. Fearful of ending up washing out garbage cans as an ordinary soldier, I accepted an offer to work in intelligence for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). I loved it. I was sent out to the Chinese coast and posted on an island held by the Nationalists. When the war ended, I was accepted into Harvard’s doctoral program in anthropology but I took my time returning to the United States. I traveled throughout Southeast Asia, where I was most taken with a visit to Angkor. I concluded—and I still believe this today—that it was the greatest ancient city of the world. Indeed, I thought of shifting my interest to Asia, but I am fortunate I did not—Cambodia soon fell sway to thirty years of hell. I also enjoyed traveling through India and visiting Sri Lanka. From Asia, I returned straight to the United States. The Middle East never “hooked me.”

At Harvard, I had a great teacher, Gordon Willey. He prepared me for studying the Olmec civilization—and off I went. Still, I already had, as I have hinted, an interest, too, in both the Maya and the Khmer.

**FC:** *How do you feel about the divide that has come to exist between archaeologists—indeed anthropologists in general—and art historians?*

**MC:** It exists, and it is unfortunate. Archaeologists always used to have collections of artifacts, although from areas other than where they themselves worked. As an undergraduate at Harvard, with a budding interest in early civilizations, I had a roommate, Stuart Cary Welch, who collected art. I was inspired by his example to collect material from the pre-Columbian cultures of Peru and from the Indians of the Northwest Coast (of the United States). I long ago gave these works away, including to the American Museum of Natural History,

FIG. 3: Cover of the catalog for *20 Centuries of Mexican Art* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1940.

Private collection.

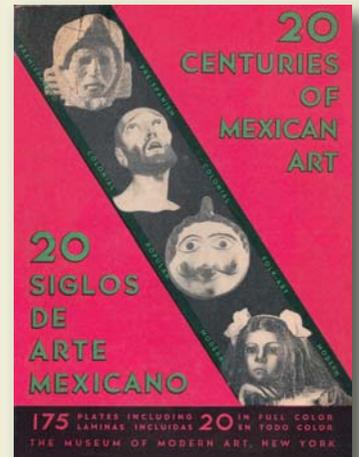


FIG. 4: Hugo Brehme (1882–1954), *Chacmol*, c. 1920.

Gelatin silver print. 9.2 x 14.3 cm. Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, New York.





FIG. 5 (above): Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957), *Untitled* (collage of three gelatin silver photographs and three ink drawings of an Olmec ceremonial stone knee-cover), c. 1940. Photographs and ink on paper. 20.3 x 27.7 cm. Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, New York.

FIG. 6 (below): Monument 34 (half-kneeling figure). San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz, Mexico. 1400–1000 BC. Basalt. H: 77.7 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (10-81348). Photo: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y Las Artes – Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia – Mexico Javier Hinojosa.



and I never collected material from the area that I worked on myself—in Mesoamerica. However, yes, I admire the aesthetic abilities of early civilizations. Olmec and Maya artisans produced sophisticated works of art. They are right up there with Rembrandt’s paintings. There is nothing “primitive” about the material culture of the Olmec and Maya. Great art is by definition not primitive. Nonetheless, it was a long struggle, beginning with European artists in the 1920s, to acknowledge the aesthetic value of pre-Columbian material culture. In the last few decades there have been stunning exhibits of pre-Columbian art at major museums here in the United States and elsewhere, where the sophistication of the early cultures of the Americas was readily apparent and openly acknowledged.

Archaeologists—and anthropologists—have had a change of heart, though. Most “dirt archaeologists” today don’t like art. For them, material objects from ancient cultures are just artifacts. They have joined the cause of the “new nationalism,” where countries, fragmentary as they may be, are held to be the rightful owners of whatever is found—or was found—within their contemporary borders. The present stricture of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) against publishing artifacts without an archaeological provenance is ridiculous. Should the Rosetta Stone not have been studied because it did not emerge from a “scientific” excavation? Members of the AIA argue that ninety-five percent (they like the figure ninety-five) of the information available from an artifact is lost if the piece has no provenance. This claim is without merit. Everything depends on what kind of artifact is at hand. Perhaps with arrowheads picked up by Boy Scouts most information is lost that could be otherwise gleaned. But a Maya vase with a long text—it always “speaks,” regardless of where it is and how it was found.

Today, in an age where there is such a tendency for a “flattening” of culture and where “contemporary art” nearly smothers all other forms of art, we are at risk of losing the hard-won gains in acknowledging ancient Mesoamerican material culture as replete with sophisticated works of art. The narrow-minded attitudes of archaeologists have seeped into many museums, including even art museums. There are of late fewer majestic exhibits, which—ironically—can help fuel interest in archaeological projects. In some museums, display cases haven’t been altered for decades. One almost expects to find dead flies. Even in Latin America there

FIG.7: "One of Fifty-Three Towers in the Structure Known as the Bayon."

Plate From Gilbert Hovey Grosvenor, ed., *Scenes from every land: picturing the people, natural phenomena and animal ...*, National Geographic Society, Washington, DC, 1912.



FIG. 8 (below): Hugo Brehme (1882–1954), *Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacán, Mexico*. C. 1920.

Gelatin silver print. 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, New York.

has been, I am afraid, a loss of public interest in pre-Columbian cultures. Children are paraded through museums on school trips, given lectures about science and “our” heritage, but they do not return when they are older. We are at risk of returning to where we started so many years ago: of pre-Columbian objects being appreciated, studied, admired, and collected by only a small group of aficionados. The high-handed efforts of archaeologists to protect cultural patrimony, with only themselves as the rightful custodians, have unwittingly led to a withering of interest in past civilizations.

**FC:** *What are the frontiers of research in Mesoamerican studies? What’s next?*

**MC:** It will depend, overwhelmingly, on what is discovered. And, as I have said before, such discoveries depend in large part just on luck. I do believe, though, we are likely someday to discover a dry cave in the Yucatan Peninsula with at least a few Maya codices. Caves were sacred for the Olmec and the Maya, and Yucatan is riddled with them. I also expect there will be important discoveries along the coastal areas of Colombia and elsewhere, including discoveries that might shed light on the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas throughout the Americas. I hope too that we learn more about how early civilizations such as the Olmec influenced later civilizations, all the way to the Aztecs.

**FC:** *How has your recent interest in Angkor and South-east Asia in general shaped your view of the Americas*

*and of your own work on the early civilizations of Mesoamerica?*

**MC:** Basically, I see the Americas as an extension of Asia. The peoples who settled here were all Asiatic. I am convinced that there is more of a tie between the civilizations than is commonly supposed—especially given that most still believe there was no relationship between the development of civilizations in Asia and those in the Americas. Everyone keeps citing the lack of material evidence. The prevailing view is people came, naked and empty-handed, walking across the former land bridge in the Bering Strait. I suspect most came by boat. How long have humans had and used boats? Australia was never connected to Asia, but it was settled 50,000 years ago, I am sure by people arriving in boats. In northern Chile a settlement site was found, dating to 1100 AD where chicken bones were found. DNA tests showed the chickens came from Polynesia. The real evidence of an important cultural link between Asia and the Americas, though, is not material: It is in the realm of ideas, of beliefs, and of concepts. Similarly, no Indian artifacts have been found in Cambodia, yet it is clear that the early Khmer knew everything about India. Looking at such subjects as calendars, conceptions of the four cardinal directions, shamanism, and even the shared appreciation for blue and green stones lead to the conclusion that there was an important, if incomplete, cultural link between Asia and pre-Columbian America.

It is a mistake in archaeology—and probably in everything else—to say everything is known that can be known. There are always surprises.