

JUSTIN KERR

Interviewed January 8 2006 in the Kerr Studios, New York City



For almost fifty years, photographer Justin Kerr and his wife Barbara have devoted themselves to the documentation of Maya art and writing. Kerr's photographs of Maya objects are featured in many books, including *The Blood of Kings*, *Painting the Maya Universe*, *the Art of the Maya Scribe* and many others. His rollout

photographs of thousands of Maya painted vases, available to all on the [Mayavase](http://www.mayavase.com) web site, is now the largest single archive of Maya writing and art available anywhere.

In this interview he talks about:

- [The Study of Maya Vases, 1900-1960](#)
- [The flood of vases that emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970s](#)
- [The exhibit The Maya Scribe and His World and the origins of the rollout camera](#)
- [The development of his vase archive](#)
- [The mythical content of the imagery on Maya vases](#)
- [Evidence within the vase paintings of scribal techniques, methods and status](#)
- [The identification of individual scribal schools and artists, including "The Master of the Pink Glyphs" and the "Fantastic Painter"](#).

Interview Transcript

The Study of Maya Vases, 1900-1960

Q: Can we talk a bit about what the situation was with Maya vases in the early part of the 20th Century? How were they regarded, how did Thompson think about them, how did archeologists and scholars generally think about the vases and their importance? Were there many around and so forth?

Justin Kerr: Most of the vases, around the turn of the century, seem to have come from the northern part of Guatemala in the Highlands and were studied essentially by a number of German archeologists. There were very few vases available and there was scant understanding of their content and meaning. Some of these vases were brought to Europe and one, the Fenton Vase, landed in the British Museum.

One of the fascinating things that I've learned recently is that a rollout of the Fenton Vase was made by Ian Graham. When I asked him what had happened to the camera, he said, "Oh, I took it apart and used the parts for some other projects." And so that particular rollout camera no longer exists but to me, this was a fascinating discovery. When we were trying to uncover any information about the Fenton photograph, we simply couldn't find anything and here was direct communication from Ian Graham himself.

It really wasn't until the late '60's and early '70's that vases started to appear in any quantity. Prior to that, the University of Pennsylvania's catalogues, in which there were maybe 50 vessels (I don't remember exactly how many there are) were drawn by Louise Baker. Quite a few of them came from the Ulua Valley in Honduras and they were dispersed among many different institutions. Collectors at that time were not terribly interested in this material, with the exception of a few collectors in Guatemala. The collectors in Mexico had no convenient access to Maya vases and therefore didn't show much interest. The major Mexican collections were comprised of Western Mexican and Vera Cruz material.

Q: Talk a bit about Thompson and other scholars--.

Justin Kerr: I believe there is a line in one of J.E.S. Thompson's books where he dismisses the hieroglyphs on Maya vases as being merely decorative. I believe he goes so far as to say that these were illiterate artists and that they had no idea of what they were doing. And the probability is that he was thinking in terms of the calendric inscriptions that he knew from the codices or stele. He thought that these hieroglyphs were merely copied and used as decoration. However, I think I came across, probably in his last book, a sentence which suggests he was beginning to change his mind; maybe it was his contact with Proskouriakoff's and Berlin's work-- but particularly Proskouriakoff, who was viewing Maya hieroglyphic writing from a totally different aspect than was known before. And so there is that tiny element in his thinking that says, well, maybe there's something there. But nothing really happens until Michael Coe publishes the *Maya Scribe and His World*, which was the catalogue for the Grolier show.

The flood of vases that emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970s

Q: Tell us about the way in which, and the reasons for, the appearance of this flood of vases in the late '60's and '70's. Why all of a sudden did this happen, and what happened?

Justin Kerr: Ah, I'm trying to think of that period in the very early '70's, when a number of Guatemalan collectors decided to -- if I can use the words -- "cash in" their collections and they started to put objects out on the market. Prior to 1972, one of the most famous, or infamous, of these dealers often had two vases that were very similar - (it was not uncommon for the Maya to make "editions" of certain themes) --he would often sell the better of the two to another dealer or collector and keep the lesser one for himself, perhaps to be given to a museum or sold at a later date. And so there was this great flurry of available vases. Also, there were a number of individuals from the United States who had begun to travel to Guatemala in particular and make it known that they were interested in obtaining Maya vases. Just as, many years before, most collectors were interested in obtaining Jaina figurines or West Mexican figures.

And so there now was a sizable mass of available Maya vases, although it was really not very well known at the time. It wasn't until Michael Coe put together the Grolier show that the first accumulation of a substantial body of material appeared on the scene and was catalogued and written about. Michael Coe realized that the texts on the vases were sentences, and it was then that he began to explore the texts with that particular logic in mind. I believe Michael Coe said at the time he thought that the opening phrase of the text was a paean of sorts, possibly a prayer or a chant and I think he was not very far from wrong. The Grolier show, for anyone who was interested, of course, was an eye-opening event.

The exhibit The Maya Scribe and His World and the origins of the rollout camera

Q: Talk a little bit about how you came to be photographing Maya objects and meeting Michael Coe and getting involved in doing the Grolier show.

Justin Kerr: Barbara [Kerr] and I had visited Mexico for the first time in 1959 and became enamored of Mexican archaeology. When we returned home, we enrolled in some classes that were being given by the Museum of Natural History and we started to accumulate a library. Then later we realized that there were artifacts, small things,

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chicitas -- things that cost a peso or two in those days, that you could take home as souvenirs, and they were readily available almost all over Mexico. In New York, we saw a collection of rather expensive objects and commented to the owner, "I'll never be able to afford these but would you allow me to photograph them?"

And that's sort of how it started. I made photographs of every Precolumbian object I could get my hands on. I would make triple sets of prints, one set for myself, one set for the owner, and another set I would bring to the Natural History Museum to give to Dr. Gordon Eckholm, who was at the time, their Precolumbian curator.

It was during those years -- as a matter of fact, it was on a fashion shoot, and we were using a friend's gallery as a dressing room for the models to change clothes, when we were introduced to a young man who was looking at a stele that was lying on the floor, and this was Michael Coe. I remember getting shivers up my spine because I couldn't really believe that this was *the* Michael Coe; I was meeting Michael Coe. It was a very fascinating time. Barbara and I attended every single one of Dr. Coe's lectures that he gave in the New York area. And so we became more and more interested in the field. All of our assistants in our commercial photography days in the studio knew that no matter what we were working on--- unless there were models, of course--- but whatever we were working on would come to a halt if a Precolumbian object arrived at the studio.

Around that time, I got a call from Mike Coe, who said, "Would you make the photographs for the Grolier catalogue?" I was delighted to do so. We spent some time at the Grolier, photographing the vases and eventually the Grolier codex itself. At the reception for the introduction of this book to the world, I told Mike that I had been exploring the idea of a rollout camera. And Mike said, "Yes, there is such a camera in England that photographs the earth cores from oil drilling wells."

I continued to pursue the idea. The problem was that I was making a whole series of still photographs of each vase, probably 12 and sometimes 14 views, turning the vase a few degrees for each exposure and making a still photograph of each view. You could either then publish four of these photographs so you could see the various sides or turn the photographs over to an illustrator or an artist who would then make a rolled-out drawing of the vase.

One of our clients, a gallery, asked us to make a rollout photograph of a vase to use as a promotion piece. So again, we made a number of photographs and Barbara very carefully cut them out, pasted them together to make the rollout, then hand-painted the completed paste-up and it was sent to the printer. It was designed with tabs at each end; you put tab A in slot A and tab B in slot B and you had yourself a cylinder. And to this

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day, in certain museums in curators' offices, you'll still see that paper vase on shelves, pretty well faded by now. But that was, in a way, the beginning of the rollout process.

We continued to photograph the cylinders of course, but without a rollout camera. Eventually I put together enough parts -- I cannibalized some parts from cameras, found other spare parts -- I machined a couple of strange looking devices to make my concept work and balanced it all on a bunch of 2' x 4's lashed together with C-clamps, and all of a sudden -- there was a rollout photograph of a coffee can. Gillett Griffin, curator at the Princeton Art Museum, brought me a sphere, an Olmec spherically shaped pot, to photograph, with the implication that if we could capture the information off that shape, then we could capture the information off anything. It worked beautifully. I think it's number 102, or 201, in the series, published in the first volume of *The Maya Vase Book*. It's the imprint of a bird claw that was revealed when we saw the pot flattened. But by no means was our camera perfected.

We found out that a company in Chicago, the Deardorff Camera Company, had made a peripheral camera. I wrote to them and asked if such a camera was available and could we buy one? And the answer was that the two men who made the peripheral camera had died and they didn't think they were ever going to replace them; so "no", I could not buy a peripheral camera from them.

We then found out that the Restoration Museum in Virginia had a peripheral camera, and they would use it from time to time to make rollouts of tankards when somebody's initials were engraved on them. And so we went down there to see their piece of equipment. It was, I have to say, a clunker. It was quite complex but I could see that as the back of the camera moved, it jiggled, and so you really weren't going to get a sharp image. At that time we already had made a number of our own rollout transparencies, which we showed to the people there and they were amazed at the quality we were able to achieve.

It must have been about that time that the Art Museum at Princeton acquired the superb vase now known as the Princeton vase, a truly magnificent vessel. Mike Coe had published it and I believe he called it the best piece of aboriginal art from Mesoamerica. I'm paraphrasing; I'm not quoting him exactly, but it was something to that effect. And it was true. It's a big vase; it's absolutely fascinating, but we really didn't understand the scene at the time.

Princeton was going to make a catalogue and an exhibition to celebrate the acquisition of this vase. Mike called me and said, "We're going out to Princeton to a meeting", and he added, "We're going to have this catalogue in color." I said, "No, my understanding is

that it's to be in black and white. They don't have the money to produce it in color." On the day of the meeting, we sat at a long table with lots of people, Gillett Griffin, Allen Rosenbaum, and a number of others, and I passed the rollouts around the table -- the color rollouts, now mounted transparencies. And everybody was sitting there, holding these transparencies up to the ceiling at and oohing and aahing. And then I believe it was Alfred Bush who said, "Excuse me" and he got up and he left the room. He came back five minutes later and said, "Okay, we have the money, we're going to do the catalogue in color." And that's how the catalogue known as *Lords of the Underworld* came to be; the first volume anywhere that had photographic -- not painted -- but photographic rollouts. I think there were 20 vessels that were shown. The book itself won a prize for design. All of these rollouts were foldout pages, very big, very spectacular -- a beautiful volume.

It was so exciting to at least one collector that he immediately asked us if we would produce a catalogue of his collection, and Mike Coe agreed to write the text for it. Barbara designed the book and Elizabeth Benson was the editor. It was published by the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem with the title *Old Gods and Young Heroes*. So now we had these two hard cover books with the very beginnings of a corpus of rollout photography.

Q: Let me take you back for a moment to the Grolier Show. Could you talk a little bit about when you went to the opening of that show? What was the impact? You're seeing the vases for the first time all in one place and what do you think the impact of that show was for Mayanists? What importance do you think that show had in the history of Maya studies?

Justin Kerr: My sense is that the physical show did not have as much impact as the eventual catalogue. In other words, I think the viewers were much more interested in objects such as Jaina figurines, whereas the cylinders are motionless and difficult to understand. You have to develop some knowledge of the iconography before you can begin to appreciate the beauty and the excitement of what is painted on them.

Q: What about your personal "take"? Do you remember seeing the show for the first time?

Justin Kerr: I do remember seeing the show for the first time. I was very excited because I thought I recognized certain characters that I knew from my reading of the *Popul Vuh*. "Amazing", I thought -- "these are the actual stories". I was extremely elated; for the first time I was seeing illustrations of ancient Maya mythology, of ancient Maya deities. I guessed -- I didn't know -- that here was the possibility of seeing ancient Maya life itself, in the real world, and that very concept was exhilarating.

Q: Going forward again to the Princeton Show. Was that the show when Gillett asked you to do a paper for the first time? Can you talk about that and how you're beginning to see the hand of individual artists.

Justin Kerr: Actually, that first symposium was some time after the Princeton Exhibition. The first symposium was in 1982.

The development of his vase archive

Q: That was later. Okay. Let me take that in order then. Could you talk some more about the books that came out? Eventually you began to put out *The Maya Vase Book* and began making more and more rollout photographs. Could you just give us sort of a very brief overview of how this had developed and the scope of how many vases there are now and how many have been photographed and how they've gotten out there into the world, over the years.

Justin Kerr: By '89, perhaps it was later, I had begun attending Linda Schele's workshops at the University of Texas in Austin. I remember carrying with me six large loose-leaf books. It caused mayhem -- nobody had seen so many Maya vases before; people were xeroxing the photographs and in the commotion, lots of the photographs were lost. One night someone left the books out and the roof leaked and they all got wet. It was a horrible situation. Fortunately, at that particular time people like Linda Schele, David Stuart and Nikolai Grube were extremely supportive of my efforts.

At one of the *Mesa Redondas* in Palenque that Barbara and I had attended, we ran into George Stuart, who said, "Oh, I'm so glad to see you. Nikolai and David are getting together this afternoon in Merle's house. Why don't you drop by?" We went there that afternoon and there was David and Nikolai sitting on the floor, surrounded by many photocopies of the rollouts. I mean, there they were, just all over the place. I thought "Where did they get them?" And then I remembered that David and Nikolai would come to the studio and just go through the books of rollout prints and make xeroxes.

I began to realize there really might be a demand for these images and suggested to Barbara that maybe we should produce a book. The book had to be in a price range that a student could afford. But we wanted to have at least 100 to 125 rollouts in it and also a few essays related to Maya vases. We decided not to publish any of the vases that had been previously published as they were already out there. So vases like the Princeton

Vase and most of the codex vases that Frances Robicsek had published, were not in that first volume because we wanted to keep pushing on, further and further.

Barbara used her design skills and that first book was done with traditional paste-ups of actual photographic prints. We had just acquired a computer so we were able to supply the type for the captions and text ourselves. We realized that if we did all the work, maybe we could publish the book at an affordable price.

Happily, the first volume, Volume 1 of *The Maya Vase Book*, was almost an immediate success. We were mailing out a dozen to 20 books a day. The entire production of 1200 books, by the beginning of the second year was already out of print, and we started to work on Volume 2. Altogether we produced six volumes. Scholars were extremely generous. Mike Coe, Mary Miller, David Stuart, Linda Schele, Karl Taube, Steve Houston, Dorie Reents and many others all contributed essays to the books.

I was becoming more expert in the use of the computer and soon found we did not have to make darkroom prints but could produce hi-res illustrations with the computer. Also, we began to realize that most of the people who had bought Volumes 1, 2 and 3 were satisfied with that. But for us, it was truly only the beginning -- there were still so many more vases out there.

By the publication of the sixth volume, we had published around 750 rollouts. This gave us a very large corpus, but vases continued to arrive and to be recorded. We soon became aware that the Internet was the place to go. And so, through a series of circumstances, we created the Online Maya Vase Database at www.mayavase.com under the sponsorship of FAMSI, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican studies.

There are now more than 1800 vases recorded and online in the database. Along with the rollouts of the vases, there are also “still” photographs of many of the vases. Essays by scholars from around the world accompany some of the vases and are linked to them. Having a large sample to study became more and more important.

The mythical content of the imagery on Maya vases

Q: Let's switch to talking about the content of the vases. What did the vases show primarily? The place to start would be talking about the underworld concept. Take us from the beginning of that.

Justin Kerr: Michael Coe pointed out very early on, that he recognized that many of characters on the vases were characters from the *Popol Vuh*. As I became more involved in studying the iconography, I saw that it went beyond that. Numerous characters, other than the ones mentioned in the *Popol Vuh*, were portrayed on the vases in a variety of guises. Of course, at that time, hieroglyphs were not yet being read, and so it was a matter of recognizing the characters themselves. I felt that the artists had created a language of their own; a language of pictures that was just going to take time to figure out, whether or not there was any text.

We soon recognized that there were what we called “power scenes” that included a high ranking individual and his court. These were generally some sort of celebration by elite persons. It seemed, in a number of cases, celebrations have to do with the victory or defeat of an enemy in battle, as we distinguished many captives as well, on the vases. We saw captives tied, we saw captives being decapitated, beaten, all of these terrible things --- if I may go back for a moment, J.E.S.Thompson suggested that this kind of conflict never happened amongst the Maya; these were peaceful people. As I studied the paintings, I began to understand that these ancient Maya were not much different than our own civilization and that they had all the same foibles and faults as we have.

As we tied together the images from the vases with the archeological and the ecological work that was going on, we were able to explore other aspects of what we were learning from the vases. As far as the “Other World” – I prefer to use the words “other world” rather than “underworld”. I get a sense from looking at the vases that what the artists created was a very similar world to the real Maya world. The thrones that the deities sat on were exactly the same as the thrones that the rulers sat on. There seemed to be a kind of a one-to-one relationship between these two worlds. It's not, I felt, an *underworld*, although its entrance was through caves and lakes. It was not the *Xibalba* that the Spaniards referred to as “hell”-- that's not a Maya idea. It was more like the Greek concept of Olympus, where the gods simply lived in a duplicate world.

We learn from the *Popol Vuh* the gods invited the Hero Twins to come to *Xibalba* and play ball in their ball court. There has probably been more written and discussed in reference to the ball game than of almost any other facet of Maya life. There are quite a few Maya vases that depict the ball game, but it's a very different ball game than the one in the accounts of the Spaniards who actually saw the ball game being played. It seems the classic game was much more one-to-one combat. As we saw more vases, we realized that there were other kinds of combat.

There were fisticuffs; perhaps famous warriors were pitted against each other, sometimes using conch shells on their hands, on their fists -- you know, the result can be a pretty bad smashing. There were teams of players and other forms of combat, such as boxing and hand-to-hand combat with sharpened bones. Again, the vases are revealing to us much more than a ball game.

In looking at the vases we understood that a Maya warrior didn't throw his spear -- if you threw away your spear, you wouldn't have anything to fight with. Then we noticed that there were individuals who were carrying three and four shorter spears and they held something in their other hand, which of course, was the atl-atl. And so, here was yet another bit of information that came forth from the vases. There is a vase on which an atl-atl is being used in combat. That was contrary to the common belief at the time. "That's a hunting weapon, not a war weapon". Well there was the picture and you couldn't argue with it. It was what the Maya saw and did -- that's been my focus over the last many years. What did the Maya see? What did they record? What are they revealing to us in the pictures?

Evidence within the vase paintings of scribal techniques, methods and status

Q: Great! What do the pictures tell us about scribes? About their role in the society? About what they wore? What are the clues that someone is a scribe if he's not writing? What were the tools that they had?

Justin Kerr: If I could talk for a minute about costume, which is another feature of the images on the vases that we don't see on the stele and stone monuments. For example, on stele, most rulers are dressed "to the nines" with enormous head dresses and other accoutrements -- their bodies heavily laden with jewels. And yet, when we see the ruler on a vase, most often he is wearing nothing more than a loin cloth, some ear flares and a jade bracelet or two and a pendant around his neck. Here is a totally different picture of "the ruler in his palace" or "the ruler on his throne." Sometimes he's wearing a cape and headdress of a kind to signify his identity, but it's not the elaborate costume on the stele.

What we learn from the vases about scribes is that in almost every instance, the scribes are supernaturals. This gives one the immediate sense that writing is of itself a holy thing, a supernatural thing. It had to have been a gift of the gods.

Who are the scribes? The Maize God, for example, is a major scribe. His sons, the Hero Twins, are also scribes, as are their half brothers, *Hunbatz* and *Hunchuen*. The half-brothers are usually portrayed as monkeys and the story of their transformation is told in the *Popol Vuh*.

Throughout all the vases that we have recorded, when we see the scribes portrayed, there's only one instance where we can specifically identify a scribe as a human being. All of the other scribes are supernaturals, which convinces me that writing was something very special. Eventually, we learned that there was text that elucidated this.

There are other characters that seem to be involved with books but are never shown typically seated with a brush and a codex. Of course, the one oddball, (I should say oddity), is the rabbit on the Princeton vase who is sitting under the throne at God L's feet, writing in his codex. It is the only instance where we see an animal represented as a scribe.

The rabbit seems to have any number of supernatural functions. He's a companion to the Moon Goddess or as I believe, the rabbit is the Moon Goddess's child. There is a vase in which we see the Moon Goddess delivering herself of the rabbit.

Q: Could you talk about what the vases tell us and what we know from other objects that have been found, what are the scribe's tools? What do the scribes' use? What are the costume details and insignia that identify him? What is he wearing and what kind of headdress does he wear?

Justin Kerr: One of the most beautiful portrayals of the scribe is the statue excavated by Bill Fash at Copán. It's about three feet high and shows a scribe seated cross-legged in a position like that of Egyptian scribes. He holds a brush similar to a Chinese brush in one hand and his paint container, which is made from a conch shell, in the other hand. One of the attributes of the supernatural scribes is an ear-like element worn behind the ear, sometimes behind both ears. The Copán scribe wears that element behind his ear. He's also wearing a net headdress and a *tun* glyph on his arm. Putting all of that together, *pawa*, net and *tun*, the sound for stone, you come up with the word *pawatun*. Scribes are called *pawatuns*, and they are the supernatural beings we also see in the codices, writing or reading from a jaguar-skin covered codex.

Now here's an aspect which we don't hear very much about, but I have a feeling that in some of the images of scribes with their codices, they are not writing, they are reading. Possibly they are divining or prophesying. They sometimes hold an implement in one hand, which could be a long bone object which ends in a pointing hand. There is a

particularly wonderful one from Tikal. I believe that the instrument was used to carry the scribe's eye across the page of the codex and because I'm sure that if he put his sweating finger on it, it would blur the paint, so he used a tool to aid in reading the codex.

The element behind the scribe's ear, which was originally described as a deer's ear, turned out not to be that at all but in fact is a representation of his paint container. It's a kind of a long argument, but here is the short version -- a vase was brought to the studio to be recorded and I recognized that the individual on it was wearing this "earlike" element in his head dress. But this element was marked with the word *sabak*, or ink. And so here was the first clue. There is a wonderful ceramic object, excavated in Tikal of a scribal paint-container bearing the same word, *sabak*, ink and *kuch*, the container.

In numerous instances, there are images of scribes on vases carving their paint containers -- they are seated, holding a conch shell and carving it to make a paint container out of it. Fortunately, a number of these shell palettes have survived, still containing pigments, so we have a very good example of what they looked like.

Q: Could you talk about the brushes or pens they used? What is the archeological base regarding those, and also what they're wearing in their hair and so forth?

Justin Kerr: Yes. What we see mostly on the vases are brushes, or an implement that looks like a brush, and we see it in the hand of the Copán scribe statue as well. However, I think on at least two vases from northern Yucatán, there is a word which Nikolai Grube has translated into Spanish as *pluma* or pen. There are some people who believe that the Maya scribe may have used something akin to a quill pen, in other words, cutting the quill end of a feather into a point and slitting it. However, the evidence doesn't seem to bear up that theory as the great majority of images we see display an instrument that looks like a brush. One speculation had the artist writing with the fine edge of a turkey feather. More likely, the brushes were made from the soft hairs of certain animals' tails.

There are people called *ah k'u hun*, or keeper of the books, keeper of the holy books. They are never shown actually writing, but an artifact appears in their headdresses that seem to be either a bundle of brushes or small sticks. There are a number of elite women who wear the *ah k'u hun* headdress, which seems to be either a bundle of brushes or a bundle of sticks of some kind. It's been pointed out that if you chew the end of a stick you can dip it in ink and write with it. But the women who are wearing the *ah k'u hun* headdress also have a couple of brushes stuck into the front of their head dress, which suggests to me that certainly elite women were probably literate and could have been painters of some of the vases. It's within the realm of possibility. We don't know; we weren't there.

We think in the Classic period, for example, the artisan, the painter, the scribe, did not create the vessel. It was created by a potter. The scribe or painter painted on a slipped vessel once he acquired it from the potter. There may have been as many as three firings of an individual vase, one for the background color, one for certain other colors, and yet another for the text and outlines in black. There is still ongoing research as the subject is very complex.

Q: In general, from all the evidence, what's your sense of what the role of the scribe was in Maya society? Were they elite persons or were they commoners? Were they in workshops? Were they part of the court? Were they princes?

Justin Kerr: There is one vase where the artist specifically says that he is of the royal house of Naranjo and his mother comes from Yaxha. It's beautifully drawn. There are other artifacts also belonging to this individual such as two delicate bones, one of which is inscribed with tiny glyphs that say "his jaguar bone" and the other with his name and a pattern of jaguar spots. He refers to himself as the artist, so we conclude that he is the elite person who created the objects. I suppose the possibility also exists--I always like to look at the alternatives -- that he is the sponsor of the work.

But it indeed seems to be true that on vases the scribes are supernaturals and that the probability is that in real life, it was an elite profession. Certainly the Sepulturas compound in Copán, with the beautifully carved scribes' bench, is a very elite place. Scribes may not have been royalty, but they were surely were high-ranking, a cut above the common folk who spent their time in the fields farming.

Q: Were there other things that you would say about scribal costumes, scribal insignia? We spoke about where these were not for use, but were simply indicating profession.

Justin Kerr: One of the things we sometimes see are scribes wearing shell pendants. I have seen a shell pendant in the form of a miniature hand that has holes drilled for wearing; it's similar to the full-size shell palettes that still contain pigments. I think that this is a pendant that a scribe might wear to announce his profession. This was something that proudly proclaimed his literacy and that he was a painter.

Q: Do we get a sense that the scribes were the people who were transmitters of text? That they carried on the oral tradition, that they were the ones who read aloud?

Justin Kerr: Well, if we think in terms of the *ah k'u hun*s and observe their body language on the vases, it seems that they are carrying messages. They often seem to acting as intermediaries, and even more than royal messengers, as ambassadors. So these

are also elite people. In one case, there is a dwarf standing between two battle groups and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he's acting as an intermediary between the two groups in his capacity as an *ah k'u hun*. At present, we don't have any images of the *ah k'u hun* writing but it would make some of us very happy if at some later date he had recorded this scene and a vase showed up with such a depiction on it. But at this point, we haven't seen one.

Q: Talk about the movable type.

Justin Kerr: One of the most unusual things we've seen recently is that in the Late Classic period, the Maya were able to use movable type. Two vases showed up at the studio, both had unusual shapes, both seemed to come from the same workshop and both examples had a rim text made of molded type. When I examined them carefully I realized that the glyphs, which were in the form of the dedicatory text or the primary standard sequence, were made up of individual molded glyphs --- which therefore suggested to me that the Maya might be using movable type.

When the same molded glyph appears twice and each is identical to the other in every detail, you can assume that they were made in the same mold. It appeared that after the entire sentence was made as separate glyphs, an artisan pressed them, glyph by glyph, onto the rim of the vase while the clay was not yet hard.

But in this case, the individual who was finishing the vase found that there was bit of excess space and so he just picked up an extra glyph at random and stuck it into the wet clay to fill the space. That indicated to me that although this individual knew what the sequence should be, he was not particularly literate; a literate person would not have stuck in that extra glyph where it made no sense. This was a fascinating development. The Maya had reached the point where they were making the glyphs in molds and then, as with movable type, simply positioned them on the vase.

The identification of individual scribal schools and artists, including “The Master of the Pink Glyphs” and the “Fantastic Painter”

Q: Talk about the point at which you began to realize that you could identify individual scribal styles and some of the styles you began to identify and what their characteristics were.

Justin Kerr: When Gillett Griffin asked Barbara and me to give a paper at the 1982 Princeton Symposium, we wracked our brains for a subject, and then realized that one of the areas that we had been studying was the hand of the artist, and we could actually determine that a vase, or a group of vases, was perhaps made by the same artist. And so we chose a group, starting with the Princeton vase and examined it for differences in the brush strokes and line, the shape of the eyes, the hands, the construction of the ears, hair, fingernails, jewelry, etc. Using these criteria, among others, we were able to say, for instance, that this group of four vases was painted by the same artist. We constructed a chart for comparisons and entered the similarities we found and we were pleased to find an extraordinary group of likeness which confirmed our thinking.

We then looked at a series of polychrome vases and again found other identifying characteristics, so we were able to say, for example, these three vases are all by the same artist. Since then, over the years, we realized that aside from individual artists being recognizable, workshops as well could be recognized.

For example, in a certain group of “Codex Style” vases, which we nicknamed the Liner School -- this group of artists painted a pair of parallel lines just below the rim of the vase and then painted the glyphs between those lines, much the same as a schoolbook with lines.

Then by examining the specific handwriting of the glyphs themselves we were able to make determinations, not necessarily about individual hands but certainly about individual workshops. There also seems to be cases where there are two objects, one a vase and one a plate, or sometimes two vases, a larger one and a smaller one. One is very skillfully painted and the other one seems to be done by a lesser artist, possibly a student who is copying the master. Perhaps that’s the way the head of a workshop would teach his apprentices the details of the story, particularly in the realm of mythology.

In a scene which we call “The Dressing of the Maize God,” the action takes place before the Maize God is resurrected. He is being dressed by beautiful, naked, young women who hover about him, draping the jade adornments on him that are brought by his sons, the Hero Twins. He wears these when he finally comes forth. We see the same scene over countless years. He can be resurrected from either the Turtle Carapace or the Ball Court or the Maize Flower. This concept of rebirth seems to begin with the Olmec abstraction of the place of birth being a cleft.

One of the more exciting happenings of course, was the discovery of the San Bartolo murals, where this scene is portrayed. When you compare that scene, which is dated somewhere around 100 BC, with a vase painted 700 years later, it's still the identical

scene; different in style but the iconography is identical. It's the Maize God, the beautiful, young, naked ladies and the Hero Twins, his sons.

Q: Talk about the Master of the Pink Glyphs, what were the characteristics of that one?

Justin Kerr: The Masters of the Pink Glyphs seem to be from a workshop coming from a specific area which may be the site of San Jose de Motul. One of the characteristics of these painters, aside from the fact that the colors they use for writing the glyphs is pink or red, is that they appear to be the only group of painters that allow objects from the scene itself to break into the rim text. In other words, you might see a dancing figure and the feathers from his headdress pop up into the rim text and hide some part of the text. But since we're assuming that the reader knew what the sequence meant, it wouldn't matter that this portion of text was being hidden. The other likelihood is of course, it really didn't matter, since it's conceivable that the vase was never designed to be read by a human, but only designed to be read by the Lords of the Other World -- that's a possibility.

An interesting feature is the way the body is portrayed. For example, we see a figure wearing a full jaguar suit costume which Michael Coe describes as the "x-ray" costume; the face of the animal is cut away so that we see the human face inside, which suggests to me that these are true portraits of individuals who want to be identified by the audience.

It was from this group of vases that we realized that one individual, the obvious ruler, an obese man with a jutting chin, who we nicknamed the "Fat Cacique", seems to be predominant. One of the things we now know is that there was any number of workshops connected to this site. There are vases of different shapes and styles, and there are painters who don't use the pink glyph technique, but they are working with the same set of identifiable individuals.

Q: Could you talk about the Fantastic Painter, what the characteristics of that group are?

Justin Kerr: "Codex style" vases are essentially cream-colored vases painted with a dark brown or black line, we find that almost all the subjects are supernatural in nature. One painter stood out who we nicknamed the "Fantastic Painter" because his vision of the same scene painted by other painters was so abstract, so "far out". The exaggeration and movement of the figures are extraordinary, and the design and drawing of his glyphs perfectly mimics the style of his incredible characters. Barbara and I are somewhat at odds in that I see some vases which I believe were painted early in his career, before the full flower of his abstracting became apparent, but Barbara doesn't agree with that. In

any case, there are at least two examples from the “Fantastic Painter”, which are in fact like fantastic dreams.

Q: Talk about the schools of vases, that there were entire schools we probably lost. Why do you think that is?

Justin Kerr: In terms of schools, it is unlikely to have only one example from an individual painter or school, but there's one vase which is unique; it is the only example of this particular painter's style that we have. The glyphs are extremely unusual. They appear to have distorted faces with lots of added decorative details. Then you realize that these glyphs are completely recognizable and entirely readable, just in his inimitable style; the only example of that style that we know.

Q: There clearly was a whole development leading up to that, that we're missing, which we don't have now.

Justin Kerr: Yes, well we don't have any examples of the development that went before that one. There are other vases in the corpus which show that although a specific style exists, we may not have found anything with its particular characteristics. But when it is so unmistakable, it is very easily recognizable and I look forward to seeing others.

Q: Talk about the importance of vases in the decipherment.

Justin Kerr: One of the very first glyphs to be interpreted was read by David Stuart. He recognized that the glyph, which was in two parts, read “*tzib*,” or “*tzib*,” and David realized that the word “*tzib*” in most Maya languages meant “to write.” Often the prefix of this glyph was “*u*,” which is the possessive. and so this sentence now had something to do with “his writing”. The rest of the Primary Standard Sequence was, shortly after, interpreted by David Stuart, Steve Houston, Nikolai Grube and Barbara MacLeod and others.

David Stuart read the word for chocolate, *ka ka wah*, on a vase found in the site of Rio Azul. This then sparked a revolution in the reading of the hieroglyphs on the vases, because we then had a sentence which essentially said something like “It is written on this drinking vessel for chocolate,” that was the basic reading. Unfortunately, in my view, this changed the concept of the vase from a sacred object that was in the tomb, to a mere serving vessel, a drinking vessel and very quickly it seemed, some of the world assumed that the Maya were running around holding polychrome vases filled with foaming chocolate liquid and slurping it down every chance they got.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE
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In a way I think that interpretation somewhat spoiled the significance of the vessel -- the concept that chocolate was not an everyday drink, but was in essence, the food of the Gods, and that it was a very precious substance that the Maya reserved for the elite and probably used only on very special occasions.

The texts on the bodies of the vases have taken much more time to decipher and will still take even more time because many of the passages are very difficult to understand as they don't follow the same sequence as the texts on monuments, which of course is a kind of standard way of writing... a date, events and so forth and so on. The text on the vase is quite different.

It was assumed early on that the rim text would tell us something about what was happening on the vase itself, but in most cases it did not. There are some rare rim texts where it does, such as where the word "dance" or "to dance" is written and that is exactly what we see on the vase.

On the codex vases however [in the text on the body of the vase, as opposed to the PSS rim text], there are passages which name the animals. David Stuart recognized that a glyphic passage near a monkey read "*max*". It is a word in many Maya languages meaning "monkey," particularly the spider monkey. Even today in the highlands of Guatemala, during certain dance ceremonies there are people dressed as monkeys, behaving like monkeys and they are called "*max*".

The names of other animals also became evident; the name for the deer, for the toad and any number of other supernatural creatures. All of these passages were accompanied by a glyph that was called the "Half-Spotted *Ahaw*" and had not been interpreted until David Stuart and Steve Houston published its meaning and also, almost simultaneously, a letter was circulated by Nikolai Grube, which translated that glyph as "*way*." The *way* is your animal spirit, it's your *nahual*, it's your other-worldly shadow. It can also mean to transform, it is that sense of transformation from human to animal spirit.

These *way* glyphs then provided us with a whole new interpretation to the meaning of the animals on the codex style and polychrome vases as well; now we had a world of supernatural creatures who were the *ways*; the alter egos, of the Lord – such as the Water-lily Jaguar, who is the *way* of the Lords of Seibal. Unfortunately there are some situations where an animal is the *way* of a certain Lord and yet on another vase he may be the *way* of someone else. Obviously when that happens, it points up regional differences. But little by little, this is being worked out and the epigraphers are constantly readdressing the messages on the vases.

We recently read, for example, an interpretation by Eric Boot of a passage on a vase showing a carver or a maker of masks, and his reading is “he is shaping”, “it is shaped”, or “the shape”, and this of course, would describe the action perfectly. An alternate reading would be that he is a worker in clay or stucco.

In certain instances, on some of the vases, particularly the vases from the site of San Jose Motul, the names of individuals are actually written. As a result, there are a number of Maya Lords who now have specific names. However, these names rarely appear on stele. Nevertheless, we do have one vase excavated at Tikal, on which a figure wears a headdress that iconographically identifies the person as “Curl Snout,” the famous ruler whose name appears on Stele 31 of Tikal. So in rare occurrences, these historical personages also show up on both vases and stone monuments.

Q: What about the first person speech on the vases; you have these passages with what appear to be speech, and first person verbs in some cases.

Justin Kerr: On at least one vase there is an instance of first person speech; the particular scene has to do with God L, who has been defeated by the Hero Twins and his garments have been taken from him. The most important thing that’s been taken from him is his iconic hat, which seems to be the seat of his authority. The hat is being held by a rabbit, and God L is asking “Can I have my hat back?” This is one of the few instances of first person speech. There may be others but as yet they have not been interpreted.

Q: Beyond first person speech there are a number of passages which seem to be spoken by the person, who may be saying something, but not in first person. They happen to be the speech scrolls.

Justin Kerr: Yes, but they haven't been interpreted yet. So yes, we think for example there is a vase where the baby Hero Twin is showing a parrot that he's caught to Itzamna, and there is a speech scroll emanating from the twin’s mouth; that passage has not yet been interpreted. The only word that’s been readable is the name Itzamna.

One of the marvelous things about the vases is that there are still so many mysteries to be solved. In my book it's still the greatest mystery story that exists, and that there will hopefully be years and years of study before, if ever, all of the mysteries are solved. Without a large body of vases to study, this work would have been impossible.

Q: Beyond the vases or not just specific to the vases, talk about the aesthetic quality of the Maya writing, and the creativity.

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE

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Justin Kerr: Over the years, in studying the vases we have come to realize that there were spectacular artists as well as mediocre artists and sometimes, very bad artists. Some of the vases seem to be dashed off, maybe to fulfill a deadline. I think we must share our aesthetic sensibilities with the Maya. The really beautiful vases to our eyes were probably beautiful to Maya eyes as well, judging by their exquisite design and craftsmanship. Because of the artist's abilities, one has the feeling that many of the scenes were not laboriously worked over, but quickly painted with great assurance, to preserve the freshness of the composition and line. There was great talent at work, writing and painting.

How this talent was found, how it was trained, how long it took to train someone, we don't know, it's such a very speculative area, but it's certainly within the realm of possibility that young people, not necessarily of the royal families but probably of elite families, were sent to workshops and trained in drawing, painting, carving, and those with the greatest talent and ability were then allowed to produce vases for the royal tombs.

Generally speaking, and this is a very general statement, the vases that are found in the royal tombs are usually very beautiful, with an exception at Tikal where a large number of vases were found in the tomb of a very important Ruler. They were apparently made very quickly, all with exactly the same theme, but by a number of different artists. We concluded that this Ruler died suddenly and a whole bunch of vases were needed quickly, to put into the royal tomb. So they called together five or six available artists and said "Okay, here's the scene --start painting!" This group is now in the Morley Museum at Tikal.

In studying the vases, one of the real pleasures is observing the spectacular handwriting that we often see. Writers and/or scribes in workshops developed specific styles of their own, so that although they were writing the same glyph, you could appreciate the individual techniques; the flourishes, the thick and thin lines, the calligraphic line that was produced by the famous scribes. This sometimes translates to the stone monuments, where we also see magnificent carved calligraphy. On vases as well as on stone, there is beautiful handwriting which runs the full gamut of talent and skill.

We have noticed that writing skills, over time, seemed to deteriorate, and the writing in the post-classic period is less fine than the earlier writings. Some of the most beautiful writing is on the early classic carved or stuccoed vessels; there are passages with the names and titles of individuals that are done with great originality. Some of the text that is incised into stone vessels, particularly on travertine or onyx vessels, is extremely fine

BREAKING THE MAYA CODE
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and it is difficult to determine what kind of control and tools the scribe had in order to produce this exquisite writing.

In studying the vases over a long period of time, the one essential thing that we have found is how necessary it is to return to a vase countless times because at times a very small detail will have absolutely eluded us. Then invariably, I'd exclaim "I didn't know that this was going on!" -- as for instance, when a detail is buried in some very obscure place where you wouldn't think to look, and a whole new direction opens up. I find revisiting the vases is incredibly exciting and enormously rewarding.