

## MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

*Interviewed April 23, 2005 at her home in San Francisco, California*



Artist and art historian [Merle Greene Robertson](#) has devoted most of her life to the documentation of fragile and fast-disappearing Maya art in the field. Her media have included photography, drawings and the creation of over two thousand rubbings of Maya relief sculpture. For many decades the primary

focus has been the site of Palenque, where her home and library have proven a catalyst for more than one generation of Mayanists. She created the Mesa Redonda, an influential annual conference at Palenque, and is the founder of the [Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute](#), which has conducted major research at the site of Palenque and produced a broad range of publications in Mesoamerican studies.

*In this interview she discusses:*

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### Interview transcript

#### Building her home at Palenque

Q: Let's talk about when you moved to Palenque.

**Merle Green Robertson:** I had been working in the jungle in the El Petén in Guatemala. And we were deciding where we were going to have a permanent place. It had always seemed to come back to Palenque. So, actually we started working at Palenque before we even built the house. And then when we decided we would do it, I drew the plans and

had the fellow who had all of the equipment and could do the building and everything come over, and so then the next day we left for Yaxchilan, thinking, well you know, I just took it for granted that they'd have it done.

Well, by the time we got back three months later, why sure enough, they had it up to the windows in the house. So, we were happy about that. And then we took my mother to Hawaii. And all the time we were there we were thinking, "Oh, I've got to see what's going on at Palenque." So, we took one of my grand-daughters, Carolyn, and went back to Palenque. And sure enough by that time they had the house all done except they had not finished the La Selva building. And they hadn't put any of electricity in or the water in. So we couldn't stay in the house. So, we stayed in a little house across the street. And we had our dog and so the dog had a hammock and dog sat in the hammock and so that was fun. Then when we moved there permanently was when my husband Bob retired from the dean at Robert Stevenson School. Why, he had never done anything like this before. He was always in administration. And he just loved it right from the very beginning. He was great at sizing people up. I was working on the Princeton volumes of the *Sculpture of Palenque* and working in the library. And so when someone would come to the door in the morning and wanted to know if they could talk to me, why then, he was used to sizing people up because he had to do this at school, so if he thought we'd like them, why then he'd invite them back for cocktails at 5:00. If he didn't, he'd say, "Well, no. We're just too busy." So, that worked out just great. So, we actually lived there, Palenque, full time for seven years.

## **The process of photographing the temples of Palenque**

Q: Can we talk about how the photography project got started? <overtalk> You were doing rubbings.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Yeah.

Q: How did you decide you wanted to do all this photography in Palenque and how did you decide to do that?

**Merle Green Robertson:** I wasn't thinking of publishing anything when I did this. I was so interested in the art of Palenque, and all the other sites as far as that goes, that I just wanted to record them so they'd be there for posterity for future scholars to study. So I was using my own money and everything for all of this. And so when Princeton wanted to publish it, a lot of photography was already done. And I did the rubbings before that.

Q: How did you work on the photography project? Could you describe going through it...

**Merle Green Robertson:** Yeah. I'll talk about, for instance, doing the photography in the Inscriptions tomb. Linda worked with me, and Malcolm Cleary worked with me, and Alfonso [Morales] worked with me. [about photographing the lid of the Inscriptions tomb:] I calculated it mathematically first to see if it could be done-- I could use my SWC Hasselblad camera, anchored at the top of the vault beams. And believe it or not, we had a ladder on top of the sarcophagus lid. Of course, we had it protected at the bottom with blankets. And then we built a box up there that would fit at the very bottom of these huge vault beams so that it would take in the sarcophagus lid. We used Reflectasol lamps and everything on the sides. So that's how that got recorded photographically. But it took a long time because we had to do it over and over.

And the sides, the figures on the sarcophagus itself -- there's very little space between there and the edge of the tomb. Especially the two center figures on the east and west sides. And so I had to ask them to take the Hasselblad camera apart and just calculate the distance and then just punch the plunger when it got to the right place. So -- it turned out fine.

Q: Could you talk about -- on it the Temple of the Inscriptions and then the palace, could you talk about how and why you ended up building the scaffolding and how that...

**Merle Green Robertson:** We did a lot of the photography at night, because there'd be a shadow coming from the overhang of the building in the daytime. So we had this scaffolding built on the Inscriptions Temple. It would go way, way out, and it had to be anchored way down. And then there'd be a board maybe a foot wide that we'd go out on so we can get the camera all set up and everything. And no railing or anything to hang on to. And we get out there on this platform where we set up the camera.

And so then we'd have to wait until it was dark to do this. So, Linda and I would sit there, and every night we would argue about all the things that people didn't know about Palenque and we'd have all the answers. Then the next night we'd change our mind and the answers would be different, and sometimes Linda would agree with me and sometimes we would disagree. So this went on day after day.

\And then, of course, the scaffolding had to be change for every pier because we were directly in front of every pier. And then when we did the angle photographs of the Temple of Inscriptions, we had a pier built way out so we could shoot the whole thing at an angle and see all the piers at once.

Q: Could you talk about how you were recording all the paint on the palace walls and using the Munson color books and, you know, different paintings.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Oh, yes, I had two grants from *National Geographic* to record the color so I was using the Munson color book and so actually I have a book probably about two inches thick with every single speck of color that's in the palace recorded so we could actually reconstruct everything if we wanted to. Every bit of color in the stairs recorded according to the Munson color book.

### **Her early collaboration with Linda Schele**

Q: Could you talk about when-- your memories of when Linda first came to Palenque, when you first met Linda, what she was like and how did she get involved with working with you?

**Merle Green Robertson:** The first time I met Linda was when she and David came down to Palenque and they had one of their students from Mobile. Linda was teaching in Mobile. And she was getting photographs of all the different Maya sites to take back to school. She just loved Palenque. And we became friends right away. They were only there for a day; then they left and they got as far as Uxmal. And that evening who should be knocking at the front door but Linda and David. They had to come back to Palenque!

So they stayed for a few more days. Then Linda came down and helped me, so she stayed at our house. She eventually built a little house behind our place. But she never got to live in it because there was always somebody else living in it. So, Linda lived in our house all the time with us while she was helping me. And Peter Matthews was living there also at the same time.

Q: What was Linda like in those days? How was it you guys took to each other?

**Merle Green Robertson:** Oh, we got along just fine. We became very good friends right off the bat. And we would be discovering things out at the ruins that nobody else knew about yet. We were learning ourselves really. And so it was just great fun.

Q: Let's talk about shooting at the Temple-- when you're doing the photography at night.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Well, we did a lot of photography at night and then it was especially interesting over on the west side of the palace. We would have the scaffolding built way out there and I'd be out there with the camera taking the pictures and Gillett

[Griffin] would be holding a light on one side, Ben would be holding a light on the other side, John Bolles would be holding another light, and we had this halogen bulbs in there, and every time a moth would hit one of them the bulb would blow. I don't know how much they are now, but we paid \$35 a piece for them! That was a lot of money. Because we could lose a lot of bulbs in one night. So, every time we got too many moths coming around Gillett would yell, "Stop. The moths are here! The moths are here!" So, we got a big kick out of that. But that was the way we had to photograph at night.

Q: How has the site changed since you took those photographs? Since you did that documentation?

**Merle Green Robertson:** There's been a number of changes at Palenque on the sculpture. For several different reasons. When El Chichón Volcano erupted there was more ash that fell at Palenque than came even at Pichicalico. And it acted just like a scouring powder. The ash fell for three days and it was pitch dark at Palenque and it covered everything at the ruins, this white ash. It was just like talcum powder. No rain came for three weeks and then when the rain did come, especially on the east side of the east court where the figures are, they're at a slant, so as it rained, it washed the rain down and it just acted like scouring powder. And so it took all the red paint off of those figures. So the only proof that we have that there was red paint there was on my photographs.

Then, also people would be coming along and they would invariably pull beads off of things. Especially like in House B on the step fret; they were pulling beads off there all of the time. And sometimes these little birds that are on there. I kept telling INAH, you know, you just must do something about this. Finally after it was too late, they had already gotten too many of the beads off, why then they put a metal fence up there.

Then just the wear and tear and the dry depositions in the air, landing on the monuments, the Temple of the Foliated Cross is a good example, Temple of the Sun too, but Temple of the Foliated Cross especially, if you go in there and you start trying to tell somebody something or pointing out a glyph and what it means and so forth, you can't even see the glyph. Because it's so eroded now just by dry deposition being on there and just the wear and tear. And also there's these little infinitesimal animals that eat into the limestone and bore into it. And then the outer part comes off. We've tried everything that we can think of to alleviate that but nothing seems to work. They're so small, the holes they make are so small.

## The 1973 Mesa Redonda

Q: Thank you. I wanted to talk about how the first Mesa Redonda came about. Gillett and David Joralemon were down visiting I believe....

**Merle Green Robertson:** We were sitting out on the back patio of our house at Palenque, there was Bob and I, and there was Gillett, and David Joralemon, and Linda. We were having such fun just discovering so much at Palenque that we thought, we'll get a hold of a lot of other scholars and see if they wouldn't like to come and just talk about Palenque, the art and architecture of Palenque. So we sent letters to a lot of people. Well, when I got home in September, I opened the door and the telephone was ringing. It was Mike Coe. And Mike Coe said, "Well Merle, let's have it this December." Well, this was already the middle of September. So, okay. So, we called everybody up and sure enough everybody wanted to come. There was Floyd Lounsbury, and Will Andrews, and Don Robertson, Mike Coe came with his two kids. They slept up in the hammocks upstairs in our house. And Don Robertson's two kids slept up there too. They stayed over Christmas and the kids decorated the Christmas tree. And they all had their own way of doing it. They all thought theirs was the best way.

We had the meetings in our house, and we went downtown and we bought all the black cloth they had. So we put black cloth all over the windows and we had a coffee pot on the stove. So if anybody wanted coffee, they helped themselves. Everybody paid their own way, made their own arrangements -- there was no charge for coming. Pretty soon all of the Mexicans heard about it. So by that night we already had all of the guards coming, and the second night, why, the governor showed up from Villahermosa. And they came from the University of America, and some from the University of Mexico. So they were all coming. They heard what it was. So then we had to move down into Carlos' Champa. Our place wasn't big enough for that anymore.

Q: Could you talk about Moises Morales? He was coming to it, was he not? And also some of the local Chol were coming to the meetings I believe.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Oh, yes. Also one of the people that attended the Mesa Redonda was Fray Secunda Ramirez, a Chol Indian from Tumbalá, and he came in his brown gown. And he became very good friends of ours. And, of course this was later, but he's the one that came, performed the Chol ceremony when Bob passed away.

Q: I would like to talk about some of other people who came. I believe Peter-- that was the first time you met Peter Matthews?

**Merle Green Robertson:** Oh, Peter Matthews came to the first Mesa Redonda.

Q: Could you talk about calling David Kelly, inviting David Kelly and then David suggesting Peter and then you know, meeting Peter and what he was like.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Yeah. Yeah. Well at the first Mesa Redonda we invited David Kelly but David couldn't come. So he sent Peter Matthews, this student of his. So Peter comes and this is the first time I got acquainted with Peter. Well, we became very good friends over the years. And so he's been down there a lot with me, he spent one whole summer with us. And he and Bob used to play this crazy game every morning after breakfast.

Q: Let's talk about the last day of the conference when Peter and Linda Floyd came up with that dynastic sequence.

**Merle Green Robertson:** Actually this wasn't the last day of the conference. This was at the beginning of the conference when Floyd Lounsbury and Linda Peter Matthews and Jeffrey Miller went out to the ruins and were getting all the glyphs and came back and so we put all these drawings up on the wall of our house. And gave them [the Palenque kings] names then. We knew that that's probably not the way the Mayas called them. But at least that was what we had interpreted from the glyphs. However, Pacal's name, according to Mike Coe and Floyd Lounsbury and a number of other people, actually was the name that he was called in ancient times. So then the names that everybody was suggesting were in English and I think Moi says, "Well this is Spanish speaking country. Why don't we have them in Spanish?" Then Frey Secunda, the Chol Indian from Tumbala said, "Well, they spoke Chol here. Seems to me it should be in Chol." So that's what we did. So that's why the names were given the way they were at that time. Of course, a lot of them are changed now. The epigraphers keep changing them all the time.

## **The 1974 Dumbarton Oaks miniconference**

Q: Right. Betty Benson was at the conference. Can we talk about her and how she decided to go on and have another conference afterward?

**Merle Green Robertson:** Betty and I've been a lot of places together. And she's the one that started having the mini-conferences. And the first mini-conference, there was Tatiana Proskouriakoff, and George Kubler, Dave Kelly, Mike Coe, and Linda, Peter Mathews and me.

Q: Let's talk about the first day of that conference... when Tania was there and Linda was there...

**Merle Green Robertson:** Well actually at the mini-conference in the first day there was a lot of tension between Proskouriakoff and Kubler. And that was where the big tension was. It really wasn't between Linda and Tania. Linda didn't say anything. She kept still. But it was a little difficult. But the next morning-- Linda and I were rooming together and the next morning Linda and I went down and the only one in the breakfast room was Proskouriakoff. So we sat down with her for breakfast and when there was just the three of us there, it was fine. We got to know her for the first time and she was a very nice person but she was not a person that could deal with a group and everybody insisting on their own ideas and things.

Q: So on the second day, a lot of people took off. And you guys-- a lot of people left and you guys were left there. Could you describe a little more clearly about having the-- you had brought the rubbing with you of this sarcophagus. Could you describe what that was and about rolling it out. How they came about. Do you remember that all at?

**Merle Green Robertson:** The first night after the meeting, Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Mathews, Dave Kelley, Betty Benson, Linda and I went down to the lower room and spread out the full-size rubbings of the sarcophagus lid edge and the ancestors. We all got down on our knees to study the rubbings. Then, for the first time seeing the glyphs by the figures, it was evident what we were reading. We jumped for joy! So that was quite a night.

## **Memories of David Stuart's childhood**

Q: Let's talk a little bit about David Stuart. Can you tell me some of your early memories of him of when he came down with Linda when he was 10 years old?

**Merle Green Robertson:** George Stuart's been a friend of mine for many years. We've had many, many good experiences together. And he used to come down to Palenque so many times that I can't even remember how many it was. But one summer he was there and Jean, his wife then, was there, and David was there. David was supposed to be studying hieroglyphs under Linda. Jean and Linda and I would be sitting out on the back porch. And Jean was writing, in the heat, a book about Alaska polar bears or something. So we were always feeding her crazy things that she should say. And David would ask some question, yell it through the window from in the library where he was working and Linda would yell, "Go figure it out yourself David."

Q: Do you have any memories of David during that early time?

**Merle Green Robertson:** Oh, David-- it was one of the very first Mesa Redondas that he gave a paper. He was 12 years old. And I remember George sitting in the front seat and biting his fingernails off while worrying about what young David would say. And David was unperturbed. He was just nonchalant. Sure of himself. Just did perfectly. His dad didn't need to worry about him at all.

<crewtalk>.

### **Her first visit to Mexico in 1961 and how that led to her life work in the region**

**Merle Green Robertson:** When I first went to Tikal in 1961 -- I was going to school in San Miguel Allende there at the University of Guanajuato working on my MFA. A friend of mine and I had never been to Tikal so we thought we'd go. So we go, But when she gets off the plane she sees a snake. So she gets right back on the plane. Doesn't even go to look at Tikal but I stayed. Little snake wasn't going to bother me any!

Well, they needed an artist. So I stayed. I could finish school some other time. The main thing I was doing then was working on scaffolding up on top of Maler's Palace doing all the drawings of friezes of the buildings and so forth. I had brought a lot of my art materials, so I had oil paint and I had watercolors and I did some watercolor painting there. But I also already knew about Chinese rubbings because Gordon Eckholm from the American Museum of Natural History had shown me some Chinese rubbings that were hundreds and hundreds of years old. And he said they would last forever. So I thought, "Well I'm gonna try this."

Peter Harrison was going into Guatemala City so I said, "Peter, see if you can get a couple of bed sheets." Because it's a big altar. And so he came back with some and we fastened these across Altar 5 and then I did this in oil paint, first with a brayer just to set the tone of where the edges were and then, of course, the rest had to be done with my thumb. So it took forever. But a rubbing could not be done like that today because that altar stood out in the sun and rain for so long that when you see it today in the museum at Tikal it's very difficult to even get a halfway decent photograph of it.

Then the second year I was there I had brought more material, and I brought large sheets of rice paper. These large sheets, one meter by two meters, and all the material and sumi [ink] to do it. In the meantime I'd been practicing all over. I developed a technique of my own that seemed to work really good. Eventually I did all of the rubbings at Tikal. One of the most interesting was when I was doing Stela 31, when it was still in the

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temple. And they had a board plank that you had to walk across to get out there. So I had to walk on this plank. And it didn't enter through the opening. And it was dark inside so I had to get my eyes adjusted to the light and to keep my back to the opening so that I wouldn't have my vision distorted. So I did that rubbing in there. And I also did a painting in that temple before it was taken down. Peter Harrison has the original of that painting today. And that's the only painting that's ever been done of that building before it was taken down. So then I did rubbings of everything at Tikal.

Alfred Kidder came in one time and he said, "Well, Merle, now that you're done everything at Tikal, why don't you go up and down the rivers and do the rest of the sites in Guatemala?" "Oh, sure. That's okay. I'll go up and down the river. I've never been up and down the river. But that's fine, I'll do that."

The first grant I had was the American Philosophical Society for \$1,000. And that \$1,000 covered my whole summer's work, my plane fare on Pan Am to Guatemala City and into Tikal, and the two Maya natives that worked with me that would carry my stuff and all that, and all our food, everything for the whole summer. Now, it would cost that much just to go on the plane to get there. So I eventually worked up and down all of the sites, Dos Pilas, Aguateca, Seibal. Seibal was a great place to work with Ledyard Smith. That was quite an experience.

Q: Could you give an idea of the scope of the rubbings project? How many rubbings you've done over the years, and how many sites you've done, and also what do you think is the significance of having these rubbings, you know. There's photographs, you know, how do rubbings and photographs work together? You know, what's the point of having the rubbings? What is their significance for the future?

**Merle Green Robertson:** I haven't got them counted exactly but I've probably done close to 5,000 rubbings. Most of them are at Tulane University in the Merle Greene Archives. I've worked at a hundred different sites where I have done the rubbings.

Now, photography does one thing, and drawings have a place, and rubbings also have a place. All three are necessary really to really understand what it is. But the advantage of the rubbing is that you have a full-scale representation of this monument and it's always in the right direction. Because there are a number of books that have-- well for instance Bonampak Stela One -- One of the early books has the head facing the wrong direction. And so that's been repeated in a number of other books just because it's on that one. But you can prove that that's not right by the rubbing. And it's the same way with everything else. I know Bob Rands was getting some things ready for a book and he called me and he said, "Merle, can you look up and see which direction this particular monument really

was?" And so, sure, just like that you could tell which way it was. Also, you can pick up all the little tiny details that might be lost in a photograph unless the photograph is done at different angles so you can see where the shadows go and everything. And a drawing has a tendency to be someone's interpretation of something. And it might be a little bit different.

Q: When you did the photography project, you decided to do the sculpture of Palenque, not the hieroglyphs, not the architecture. Can you talk about why you decided to tackle the sculpture and sort of the scope of the project, and what you think that project accomplished?

**Merle Robertson:** Well, when I was at Palenque, and every place else as far as that goes, it was the art that I was interested in, and the art at Palenque is so good that in a number of cases you can even tell which person it is just by the shape of the head and of the lips or the face, or when they might have six fingers or six toes. Some people were more interested in doing the hieroglyphs, but for me it's the art, and I'm sure that the Maya were looking at the art also, because it is so good and the composition is so good.

It's better in some places than others. Palenque is so very, very different from the work done at Chichén. I know I had a hard time at first getting used to Chichén because Palenque was so refined, as were a lot of the things in Guatemala, like Dos Pilas and Tikal, Seibal, but in Chichén it seemed crude at first, but now I've worked so much at Chichén that I've gotten to really like that too. So I've probably done actually more single rubbings from Chichén than anyplace else because there's more sculpture there than anyplace else.

Q: Okay. That covers it.