

FIELD TRIP

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...A couple of days later he called to tell me he'd made an appointment at the British Museum to look at a copy of the Dresden Codex; one of the three Mayan books that had survived the burnings of Bishop Landa in the 1560's.

We were ushered into the reading room and the facsimiles were placed before us with great ceremony. There were two versions: a large folio edition of hand colored tracings, and a shallow, 11 by 5 inch cardboard box containing actual-size, black and white, line drawings. The original had been a continuous piece of parchment folded accordion style. These pages were separate. The box was tied with ribbons.

The codex comprised seventy-four vertical pages in all, usually divided into three horizontal sections. Like a miniature comic book. A series of cartoon characters accompanied by narrative glyphs, formed of abstract patterns and symbols. Closer inspection however revealed it to be far from comic. There was nothing fanciful or arbitrary about the designs. Each line and shape had purpose and intent. These were *instructions*. Information conveyed by the smartest mathematicians, astronomers, biologists, sociologists and spiritual luminaries of their day. Given the remarkable accuracy of Mayan calendrics and astronomical computation, the product of

extraordinary intelligence and sensibility. Smart as they were though, it seemed unlikely they'd done the drawings themselves. The eye-hand coordination and design sense necessary to make these pictures suggested individuals trained- or born – to the purpose. These guys were good. As any designer could see, the quality of the line and the decisions made in the orchestration of the characters was the work of competent draftsmen. People who could draw. People who could draw *out* the ideas of others. Here was image/word collaboration at its best, working toward the ultimate goal: *to make it happen*. Much of the direction contained in these books referred to events yet to occur. Planetary configurations, which would determine social ritual and civic behavior in the years, decades, even centuries to come. Here was the system of Control unique to the Maya.

I wondered about the process of creating such books. These were government textbooks after all. Was there a bureaucracy involved? A bevy of middlemen passing things along? Studio bosses, creative directors, art directors and designers all handing it off to the guys who actually did the work? The 'wrists' as they're called. Lots of- "I think what the boss really wants here is..." etc. being passed down the line. These books were probably the result of years of such delegation. But what about the original process? The moment when the images were first conceived? Surely that was a more intimate arrangement. A back and forth between word and image directly. A wise old man sitting at home maybe - in a jacket and tie even - imparting his ideas one-on-one, to an eager young artist.

Like its Paris and Madrid counterparts, the Dresden Codex, is partially destroyed. Much of its content has since been deciphered, but thanks to the good bishop and his cronies, the essence of Mayan culture has been lost forever. The experience and intellectual strivings of millions of human beings, accumulated over centuries, reduced to less than a handful of battered, incomplete books.

For an hour or so, we looked at the pictures and made notes, punctuated from time to time by Bill's trips outside for a Senior. As we were leaving we ordered a photocopy - an enormous undertaking in those days, especially in England where everything takes that much longer*. A couple of weeks later Bill called to say it had arrived.