

White Male Pelican

Eating a Fish

**3-Dimensional
Copan Stone Sculpture**

Copan Sculpture Museum

Nicholas Hellmuth

February 2024



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Maya Sculptures of Copan,
Honduras, Publication Number 20

Nicholas Hellmuth

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely appreciate the permission from IHAH to photograph at night. You can get better photographs at night with a portable electric generator. We have donated these photos to IHAH.

Parque Arqueológico de Copán, the Museo de Escultura de Copán and museum in the town of Copan Ruinas, Honduras are all great places to visit; local people are hospitable and I have enjoyed visiting the park and the village museum in the town of Copan Ruinas in the late 1960's, 1970's, 1990's, and again when digital cameras became available, to return with higher resolution. We sincerely appreciate the assistance of the park rangers and local guides.

I also thank the capable team of FLAAR Mesoamerica who assisted with setting up the portable photo studio, lighting, etc.

We also appreciate the hospitality by the archaeologists working at Copan over decades.

The IHAH team at their headquarters initiated discussions with the FLAAR and FLAAR Mesoamerica team. We sincerely appreciate the initial reunion we had digitally with them.

The IHAH team at Copan provided cooperation and coordination. Manuel Espinoza was assigned to be with the FLAAR team each day; we sincerely appreciate his assistance.

During our early visits to photograph at Copan (1980's onwards), Oscar Cruz was the Regional Representative

of IHAH. He was very helpful on each of our field trips. He is now retired, but we went to say hello to him on our February 2024 field trip.

There are probably thousands of photos of this sculpture with the waterbird eating the fish. I would estimate that the various Copan projects have plenty of photos, perhaps including 3-dimensional scans. But to study details it helps to have photographs at larger size and in good resolution. In a peer-reviewed journal article the images are often never in color and tend to be very small. I recently was reading a book on Maya iconography by two capable epigraphers / iconographers and the illustrations were so tiny you could not see details whatsoever. This is the fault of the publishers, not the authors. So we prefer not to publish in commercial books; our goal is to show the Maya sculptures in good details (which starts with using good portable studio lighting and using a tripod so the camera is not vibrating). And publishing at full-page size in good resolution.

It will help children in Honduras and neighboring countries to learn about Maya cultural heritage.

One long-range goal is to "translate" iconographic, epigraphic, and archaeological documentation into Mayan Toons books by FLAAR (USA) and FLAAR Mesoamerica (Guatemala) to help school children around the world learn about the Classic Maya of Honduras with reliable archaeological and iconographic documentation (rather than copy-and-paste from normal websites).

Acknowledgements

The first step is to find all the photos, scan them if done before digital cameras; process them so you can see the details at high resolution, and provide references in a bibliography to help professors and university students and the general public. But it would be great if primary and secondary school children also had this information in a format appropriate for their early years.

Our material for university students and professors is on:

www.maya-ethnobotany.org

www.maya-ethnozoology.org

www.maya-archaeology.org

Our material for school children is

www.MayanToons.org

www.digital-photography.org shows our camera equipment over the years.

We sincerely thank the IHAH team in Copán for the cooperation and coordination provided

M.Sc. Salvador Varela, regional representative of the West.

Lic. Zoila Madrid, Head of World Heritage Site

Manuel Espinoza, Head of Security and Maintenance of the Mayan Site of Copán.

Hilario Vásquez, maintenance.

Rita Martínez, vigilant.

Credits

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David Arrivillaga

Lots of birds are found in Classic Mayan art

Hundreds of bird species are in Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and Honduras. The Classic Maya selected certain birds to feature in their art and cosmology:

- Owls and other raptors
- Baktun bird and Katun bird of the Maya Long Count calendrical hieroglyphs
- Parrots and macaws (especially macaws at Copan, Honduras)
- Vultures (also common in ballgame sacrifice scenes, El Tajin, Veracruz, Mexico)
- Hummingbirds
- Quetzals (there is a common quetzal hieroglyph)
- Toucan (rare)

And especially

- many kinds of waterbirds
- great white heron
- boat-billed heron
- spoonbill
- pelicans (two species, native, brown and/or migratory, white)
- and lots more waterbirds

Since most birds in Mayan art are misidentified in discussions of iconography, epigraphy or ethnozoology, there is no reliable count of how many of each kind of bird is found. Toucans are extremely rare in Mayan art, for example. The “Principal Bird Deity” is one of the most common, since it is present from Preclassic, Early Classic, and Late Classic. This mythical composite bird is

also found in stone sculpture, stucco sculpture, ceramic paintings, and murals. The identity of this bird is confusing, but in my PhD dissertation I pointed out that usually it carries a snake in its mouth so is the Snake Eating Hawk; its primary name is Laughing Falcon, *Herpetotheres cachinnans*. So a macaw is not necessarily always a likely model for the mythical bird of the Popol Vuh, despite the Seven Macaw character in the Popol Vuh and in the art of Copan’s ballcourt. Raptors are more likely to enjoy eating snakes than macaws!

Although I have never done a statistical analysis of bird classification of Mayan art, I would not be surprised if there were more waterbird species than owls and other raptor species (with the Principal Bird Deity being one exception. Keep in mind that the Popol Vuh mythical species has several variations (macaw in the Popol Vuh book and at Copan; Snake Hawk everywhere else), as is typical of variation within Mayan deities.

Since waterbirds are so common, especially on lid handles of Early Classic bowls and painted or incised on the sides of Late Classic bowls and vases, it is essential that more photographs are available of waterbirds of Mexico, Guatemala, etc. so that epigraphers, iconographers, and ethnozoologists can improve their identifications and avoid the popularistic misidentifications so common on web sites, articles, and even scholarly monographs. So far in 2024 we have had three field trips to find-and-photograph waterbirds: Monterrico area, Lake Atitlan area, and other areas where waterbirds are common.

Pelicans are native to much of the Americas

"Pelicans are almost everywhere there is coastal water" is the way I initially thought about pelicans. I associate them with resting on the posts which you find at boat docks on both coasts of many parts of the Americas. Thus I was rather surprised to find a happy brown pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis*, on a tree stump in Lake Atitlan, in the Highlands of Guatemala, Central America.

The nearest coast is a long way away! There is no salt water beach anywhere near Lake Atitlan; this lake is 100% fresh water.

It turns out that the other species, white pelican, is not listed for Lake Atitlan (FLAAR Mesoamerica list, 2017, based on all available information).

The white pelican is the one found commonly along both coasts. Yet it also relishes fresh water (or at least a mixture of fresh and saline water). The

Canal de Chiquimulilla has lots of white pelicans at certain times of the year. This waterway is fresh water but salt water flows in from the ocean during the dry season.

It is educational to continue doing studies of where each species of pelican is found in Guatemala to understand which Maya areas had these birds available as religious, social or mythical icons.

The Brown Pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis*

The brown pelican we have been studying and photographing in February and in March field trips in recent years to Rio Dulce, El Golfete, Canyon de Rio Dulce, and Amatique Bay (Municipio de Livingston, Izabal, Guatemala).



Our report on these brown pelicans, *Pelecanus occidentalis*, is already available as a download.

You do not need to register or pay; our goal is to make these photo essay reports and bibliographies available to professors, students, ornithologists, and bird watchers to document the potential of visiting Guatemala to study these birds.



Pelecanus occidentalis at Rio Sarstun, Livingston, Izabal, 2021. Photo by Haniel López.

Male white pelican, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*, has a raised area on its beak in mating season

Two species of pelicans are found in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras so would be no surprise to find them in Mayan art.

We have been photographing white pelicans for many years, especially in Izabal and around Canal de Chiquimulilla. But be sure to check with CECON guides to find which month white pelicans are present. We did a water bird field trip of the Canal de Chiquimulilla in late December 2017 and not a single white pelican (or brown pelican).

So far we rarely see brown pelicans in Canal de Chiquimulilla. So we were very happy to find a brown pelican out in the wild in the Highland Guatemala Lago Atitlan.

The white pelican male has a raised ridge parallel

to the middle of his beak in the mating season. This raised ridge is a crucial differentiation that we recognized only in 2020. So in the subsequent year we have been waiting for the mating season to accomplish additional photography.

So we drove to two different areas of Costa Sur of Guatemala to dedicate three days to finding and photographing wild white pelican males with the raised beak. Now that we have these photos we will publish the photos, including close-ups, to assist iconographers, epigraphers, ethnozoologists and archaeologists to more easily recognize the difference between beaks of pelicans. We had 200mm, 400mm, 600mm, and 800mm prime telephoto lenses to capture high-resolution of these birds and their beaks (plus all other waterbirds present that month).



The migratory white pelicans had no raised areas of their beak in February 2018 nor in other years. This raises the question that their mating season is elsewhere on the migratory route (so they do not mate in Guatemala?). This needs to be studied by professional ornithologists. (White pelican photos by Nicholas Hellmuth).



Again, no raised area of the beak on migratory white pelicans. But the same month, residential white pelicans, had raised areas on their beaks (as we show in the following photograph)



The raised area starts off as a few millimeters, then grows to several centimeters.



Once it is grown to several centimeters, the area then begins to wane and the raised area will gradually disappear completely. Whether it lasts more than a week is probable (needs to be studied by ornithologists). But at least we show photos of it beginning, full size, then falling off.



All these birds with the raised areas are residential at AutoSafari Chapin. None are migratory. They are residential because the lake here is perfect for them all year long.

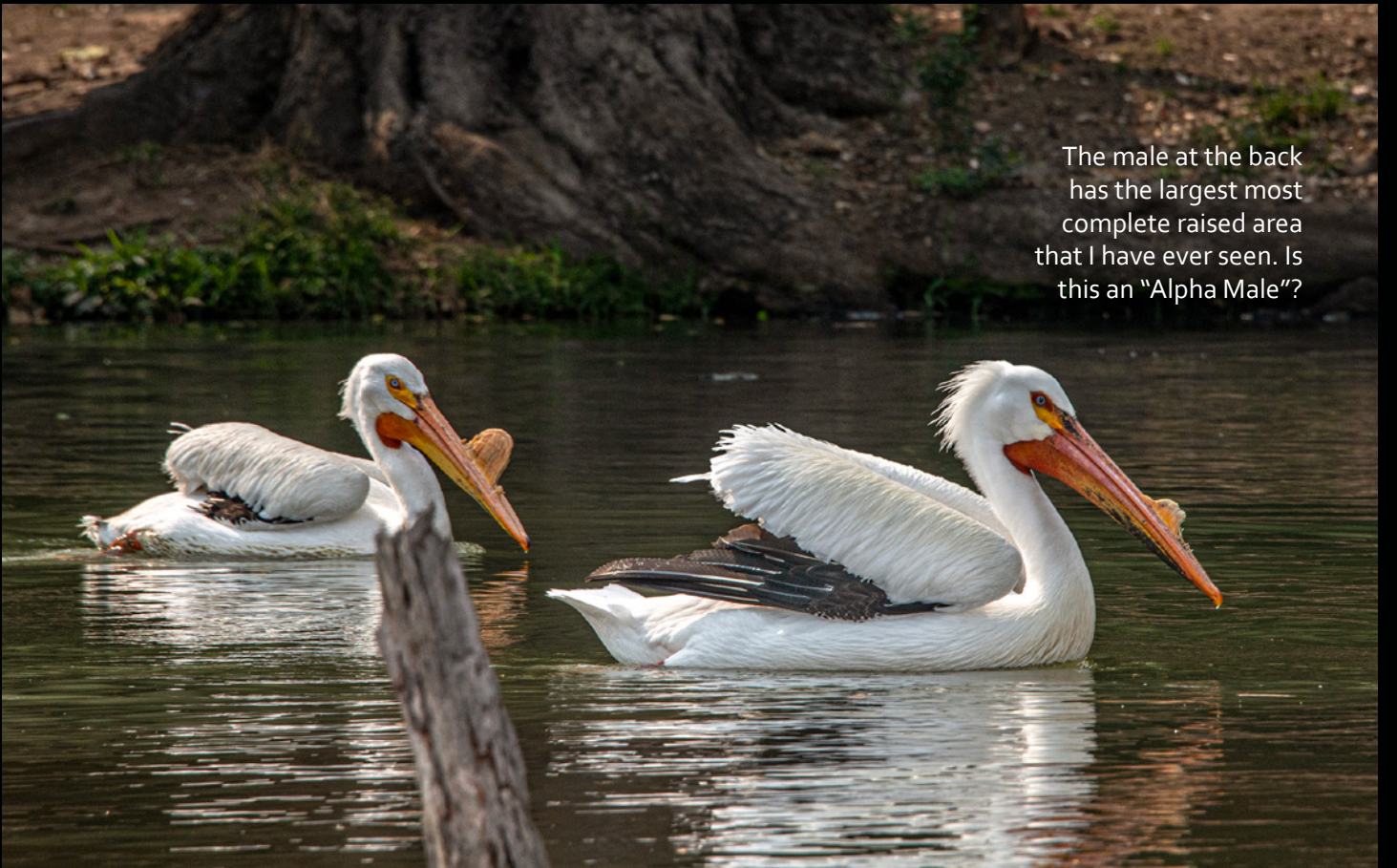


A good example of the raised area on its initial days; just getting started. January 15, 2021.

The raised area falling off, just the stub remains.



The male at the back has the largest most complete raised area that I have ever seen. Is this an "Alpha Male"?





One with full size; middle with barely a few millimeters remaining, and the third bird may be a female.



Great view of the largest raised area photographed so far. The date is April 28, 2015, so much later than in other years. Would be a helpful MA thesis or PhD dissertation to have a student keep track of both the residential birds at AutoSafari Chapin and the migratory white pelicans that are only about 50 kilometers south and southwest (in the Monterrico wetlands).

Best place to see white pelicans in Guatemala is Auto Safari Chapin

There is an open air lake in Auto Safari Chapin. This is a private zoo open to the public six days a week all year. There are several ponds, lagoons, creeks and one good-sized lake on the extensive property of AutoSafari Chapin. The largest lake is filled with happy groups of white pelicans. To zoologists and ornithologists this bird is known as the American White Pelican, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*. You can take a boat ride to see all the pelicans. The owners of this private nature preserve allow the FLAAR team also to come accomplish field work the day the park is closed to the public. So we can spend many hours in a boat out in the open lake.

All these birds are completely free to fly wherever they want to, but they stay here at Auto Safari Chapin year round since they have plenty of water and food. And they are protected here. I estimate that the majority of the white pelicans here are not migratory. But only one hour away, in the Monterrico area, all white pelicans are migratory.

Waterbirds obviously like to eat fish

White pelicans are wading birds; they wade in the shallow water near the edge of lakes, marshes, swamps. They also swim (but do most of their fishing in shallow water). But they travel en masse over deeper water but that is to reach other shallow areas. They do not normally do much fishing in deep water.

Copan 3-dimensional stone sculpture of white pelican enjoying capturing a fish.

Copan Sculpture Museum. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, August 3, 2013, FLAAR Photo Archive. We have done photography with IHAH permits in past decades, plus returned to Copan with new IHAH permit in February 2024.

Pelicans and other water birds also eat all other creatures that are in the shallow water area. But in Classic Maya art, it is normally a fish that is pictured in their mouth.





If you were doing a PhD dissertation on white pelicans in art of Mesoamerica, surely you could find several more examples with the raised beak. By coincidence I found this Monte Alban, Oaxaca, example in my thousands of miscellaneous files. It's out of focus since it comes from the Internet. Not even Google Images could find the source!



**Polychrome Maya
vase with male white
pelican with raised
beak area.**

Fundación La Ruta Maya,
registered collection.

We thank Fernando Paiz and
Sofia Paredes for access to this
collection of vases and other
artifacts.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth,
May 9, 2008.



Photos page 15 to 21 by Nicholas Hellmuth.
Taken with Nikon D810 and studio lighting.
Feb. 2, 2024.

















Appendix A

Hijole Structure

The Hijole Structure is buried beneath Structure 10L-26, the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Excavations in past decades uncovered the three tenoned sculptures now exhibited in the Copan Sculpture Museum.

Fash and Fash 1996: Figure 5a shows where the anthropomorphic monster head was found intact and the bird headdress fallen off. It was carefully and expertly restored (Figure 5b). The restoration work by Barbara Fash has been amazing.

FASH, William and Barbara FASH

1996 Building a World-View: Visual Communication in Classic Maya Architecture
RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No. 29/30, The Pre-Columbian (Spring - Autumn, 1996), pp. 127-147. Published by: The President and Fellows of Harvard College acting through the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.





The exhibit in the Copan Sculpture Museum shows three 3-dimensional stone sculptures that were found in the collapsed Hijole Structure of Copan. Two are "cascading waterfalls"; the other is the 3-dimensional white pelican with fish in its mouth. Photography by Nicholas Hellmuth, December 24, 2008; FLAAR Photo Archive.

My focus is entirely on waterbirds so during the February 2024 photography we put black cloth on both sides of the waterbird so the cascading water sculptures did not get into all the photos (90% of the photos of the waterbird have the

water sculptures in the background, including ours of previous years). But we went to the store of Profesor Oscar Cruz and found a soft black cloth that was perfect to use as a background for the bird. Plus we have black paper sheets and black cardboard sheets for background (especially for the bottom of sculptures). We come with complete portable photography studio and over 50-years of experience (each decade we improve our photography, so the February 2024 photography had brand new equipment that did not exist in the previous decade).



Taken with Sony A7C and studio lighting. Feb. 3, 2024.
Photos pages 23-24 by David Arrivillaga.

References Cited and Suggested Additional Reading on Copan Sculpture

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2011 The Copan Sculpture Museum, Ancient Maya Artistry in Stucco and Stone. Peabody Museum Press. 216 pages.

As with most other published photos, the waterbird sculpture has the two other sculptures also from Hijole Structure occupying the same space in the photo (Figure 100, page 87); we prefer to show just the waterbird so you can see the details.

FASH, William L.

2001 Scribes, Warriors and Kings, The City of Copan and the Ancient Maya. Thames & Hudson. 192 pages.

Waterbird sculpture is pictured on page 121, Fig.76, Hijole Structure, buried beneath Structure 10L-26.

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ESCOBAR, Bárbara

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EISERMANN, Knut

2006 Evaluation of Waterbird Populations and their Conservation in Guatemala. Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ornitología. Waterbird Conservation for the Americas. 74 pages.

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2007 Áreas propuestas para la designación como IBA (Área importante para la Conservación de Aves) en Guatemala, con una priorización para la conservación adentro de las IBAs y una evaluación de las IBAs para aves migratorias Neárticas-Neotropicales. Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ornitología. Guatemala Ciudad, Guatemala.

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2001 Brown Pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*. Florida Natural Areas Inventory. 2 pages.

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1974 The near-shore avifauna of the middle American West Coast. *The Auk* a Quarterly Journal of Ornithology. Vol 91. No. 4. 19 pages.

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2003 Notes on Autumn Bird Migration in Coastal El Salvador. Department of Zoology, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio. The Neotropical Ornithological Society. *Ornitologia Neotropical* 14:39-46 pages.

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2004 *Birds of Belize*. University of Texas Press. 317 pages.

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2011 Caracterización de los Sitios de Nidificación de Aves Acuáticas del Orden Ciconiiformes en la Costa del Pacífico de Guatemala. Facultad de Ciencias Químicas y Farmacia. Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. 115 pages.

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1958 *Remains of Rare and Extinct Birds From Illinois Indian Sites*. 8 pages.

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2010 Avifauna de Sitios Asociados a la Selva Tropical en la Depresión Central de Chiapas, México. *Acta Zoológica Mexicana (nueva serie)*, vo. 26, num. 3. 539-562 pages.

VALERIO, Ana and César, LAURITO

2013 First record of fossil birds (Pelecaniformes: Pelecanidae and a probably Odontopterygiformes: Pelagornithidae) from the upper Mioocene of Costa Rica. *Revista Geológica de América Central*. 49: 25-32 pages.

VASQUEZ, Marco

2014 *Aves, personas y culturas. Estudios de Etno-ornitología 1*. Red de Etnoecología y Patrimonio Biocultural, CONACYT. 356 Pages.

WORLD ANIMAL FOUNDATION

n.d. Pelican Fact Sheet. World Animal Foundation. *Get active for Animals*. 2 pages.

Web pages on Pelecanus

www.marinespecies.org/aphia.php?p=taxdetails&id=137052

http://speed.conservation.org/hotspots/species.php?page=451&ipp=25&taxa_spec=class&user_text.

The present photo album on the male white pelican eating a fish is one of a dozen works-in-progress on Copan.

Below is the list on the other sculptures and architecture and artifact photos that we are working on to make available as high-resolution photos albums.

Cauac Monster, Cosmic Monster with Quadripartite Badge Headdress, Crocodile, Deer and God N, Copan CPN 25, Altar of Stela M

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 1,

Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 1

Scorpion, Venus, Moon Goddess with Rabbit Companion, Celestial Deities on Sky Band Motifs on Copan Structure 8N-66C Bench Front

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 2,

Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 2

Copan Ceramic Incensario Lids, Local adaptation of Teotihuacan Style

Volume I, Photos in full-page Height, Vertical Format

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 3,

Maya Ceramics of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 1A

Copan Ceramic Incensario Lids, Local adaptation of Teotihuacan Style

Volume II, Vertical Format

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 4,

Maya Ceramics of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 1B

Full-Figure Personified Maya Hieroglyphs on front of Bench in Copan Str. 9N-82, House of the Bacabs, Sepulturas Group

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 5,

Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 3

Beards on Kings and Deities at Copan

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 6,

Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 4

Paddler God Faces and Hieroglyphs at Copan

FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 7,

Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 5

Cauac Monsters at Copan, especially in Stacks on Corners of Palaces and Mythical Structures
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 8,
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 6

*Copan Maya Ballgame Players,
Maya Outfits: Chest Protector & Deflector and Thigh Protector
Mexican Ballgame Outfits: Yoke, Hacha and Ballgame Handstone*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 9,
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 7

*Copan Maya Ballcourt Architecture & Scarlet Macaw Logo Goal Stones
Stepped Areas were as important as Playing Field down the Center*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 10,
Maya Architecture of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 1

*Maya Ballcourt Architecture
3-Dimensional Architectural Reconstruction Drawings by David Morgan*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 11,
FLAAR Drawings Archive Segment, Publication Number 1.

Toads, Iconography as Bufo Toad, Epigraphy as Uinal Hieroglyph of Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 12,
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 8

Bats in Sculpture and Hieroglyphic Inscriptions of Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 13,
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 9

Samples of Classic Maya Ceramics of Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 14,
Maya Ceramics of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 2

*Jade and Greenstone Craftsmanship of Copan, Honduras
Finished Jade Ornaments plus Documentation of Jade Working on Raw Stone*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 15
Artifacts of Jade, Obsidian, Flint (Chert) and other Materials of Copan, Honduras, Publication
Number 1.

*Full-Figure Personified Maya Hieroglyphs: Bench Front of the "Harvard Bench" inside Copan
Structure 9M-146 of Group 9M-18*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 16
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 10

*Iconography of Incense Scattering and Maya Hieroglyphs,
Face-Variant Long-Count Glyphs on Nim Li Punit Stela 15, Belize*
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 17
Maya Sculptures of Belize, Publication Number 1

The Story of the Blom Plate: a Masterpiece of Mayan Iconography and Primary Standard Sequence, PSS, Hieroglyphs, Chetumal, Quintana Roo, Mexico
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 18
Iconography of Maya Ceramics of Mexico, Publication Number 1
Primary Standard Sequence, PSS, Maya Hieroglyphs in the FLAAR Photo Archive, Publication Number 1

Tlaloc, Yearsign and other Teotihuacan Motifs in Classic Maya Art at Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 19
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 11

Full-Figure Personified Hieroglyphs, Tlaloc, Yearsign, Calendrical Deities, Birds, Mammals, Copan Structure 26, (Temple 26, façade overlooking the Hieroglyphic Stairway below)
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 20
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 12

Full-Figure Personified Hieroglyphs on Copan Stela 63,
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 21
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 13

Copan Stela D, CPN 7, Full-Figure Personified Hieroglyphs
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 22
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 14

Crocodiles in Stone Sculpture of Copan: Altar T, CPN 25 (Altar of Stela M), Los Sapos
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 23
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 15

Loincloth Apron Face on Stelae, Bench Fronts and other Sculptures at Copan, Honduras and Profile/Half Frontal Deity Face on Altars at Copan, Honduras; Hieroglyph T1017
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 24
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 16

Quadripartite Badge Headdress and Cosmic Monster at Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 25
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 17

Skulls and SKULL RACK, Copan, Honduras
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 26
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 18

Theobroma cacao Pods on Copan Stone Sculpture, Copan Sculpture Museum
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 27
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 19

White Male Pelican eating a Fish, 3-Dimensional Copan Stone Sculpture, Copan Sculpture Museum
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 28
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 20