

FLAAR

FLAAR MESOAMÉRICA

Skulls and SKULL RACK

Copan, Honduras

Nicholas Hellmuth

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FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 26
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 18



FLAAR Reports
FLAAR (USA) and
FLAAR Mesoamerica (Guatemala)

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 skull sculptures at Copan. 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.

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.

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We sincerely thank the IHAH team in Copán for the cooperation and coordination provided
Ms.c Salvador Varela,
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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 Martines, vigilant

Caption for Front Cover Photograph:
Diagonal view of part of the skull rack of the façade of Copan Temple 16, in the Copan Sculpture Museum.

Caption for Title Page Photograph:
Wide frontal skull at bottom corner of Copan Temple 22, Copan Sculpture Museum. The temple itself also exists out at the site, but the original sculptures are in the Copan Sculpture Museum.

The Skull Rack of Copan Temple 16
is rarely compared with the tzompantli of Chichen Itza or Tenochitlan

Most skull racks have the skulls held in place with sticks. The two most infamous tzompantli are of Chichen Itza (Maya/Toltecs) and Tenochitlan of the Aztecs. But I would like to suggest adding the monumental Copan sculpture of the stairway of Structure 16 that shows horizontal rolls of frontal skulls. No sticks are visible piercing each skull but they are in a row. What is different is the variant of a goggle-eyed Tlaloc in the center (are these skulls offerings to a Copan-ized version of Tlaloc?). But what is important is that we have dedicated time and effort to photograph these frontal skulls with good lighting.



I am curious whether this skull rack (Copan Structure 16 stairway) is included in the Virginia Miller article. This is the original sculpture reconstructed by the Copan Sculpture Museum, first floor, near front corner.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, 6:32 pm, Feb. 3, 2024, Nikon D810, FLAAR Photo Archive.

Yes, Virginial Miller does mention and discuss skulls and crossed bones at Copan. But there is not one single photograph of the skull rack of Copan in the Miller article. However she also mentions human long bones (but again, not showing any photo or drawing) (1999: 349):

> *At Copan, a small three-room vaulted annex (Structure 10L-230) to the temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway pyramid (Structure 10L-26) was once decorated with reliefs of fleshless human long bones and skulls. While no bodies were found, a broken eccentric flint on the floor of the central chamber hints at a possible sacrificial function (Fash 1991: 149). Dated to the mid-eighth century, this structure may be the earliest in Mesoamerica to display the skull-and-bone motif that becomes so prominent in the Postclassic. Echoing the war and death themes of both Structure 10L-26 and 10L-230, the later Structure 10L-16's facade was decorated with tenoned stone skulls (Fash 1991: 169).*





Copan Temple 22 also has a row of Skulls



This is one of two identical frontal deep-relief skulls of Temple 22 in the Copan Sculpture Museum. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, Nikon D-810, Feb 2, 2024. Since our project was in cooperation and coordination with IHAH we had permission to photograph in the museum at night since often you can do better illumination at night. But this view is with 5:18 pm sunlight plus portable studio lighting.

Temple 22 has been brought into the sculpture museum and reconstructed (what you see outside is a copy; the original is in the Copan Sculpture Museum so it is protected from wind and rain storms).

In the row of hieroglyphs below the doorway into Temple 22 is another skull



Even though eroded from over a thousand years of tropical rain storms and tree roots growing around it, this skull is still staring directly at you with its death eyes. This 3-dimensional skull is in a row of hieroglyphs underneath the doorway into Temple 22, reconstructed in the Copan Sculpture Museum.

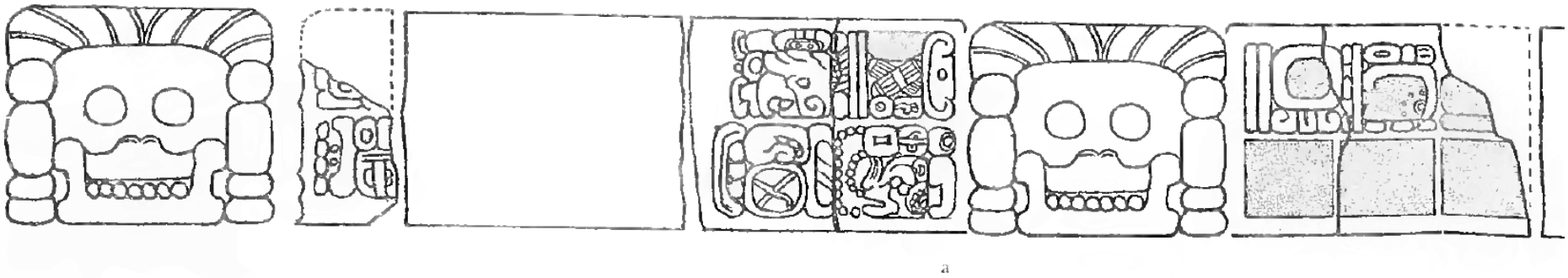
Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, with portable photo studio lighting (to make the skull stand out); Nikon D-810, 5:23pm, Feb 2, 2024, FLAAR Photo Archive.

There are also frontal bas-relief skulls at the end of stone sculptures of Altar B’ (Bprime) near Altar O

The most obviously skull rack is of Copan Temple 16, reconstructed in the Copan Sculpture Museum. But there is a fragment of Copan Altar B, outside, at the base of the steps leading around up to the acropolis that also has a frontal skull (and a nicely preserved Copan bat Emblem Glyph). The drawings below are from Sylvanus Morley (1910: Plate 22) and they show all four frontal skulls (the sculpture fragment out in the ruins has just the one).

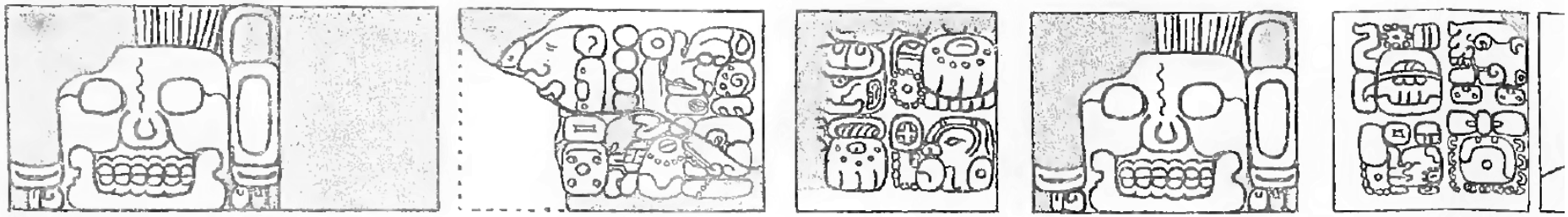


Smiley-face frontal bas-relief skull at end of Copan Altar B’ (Bprime), outside, near Altar 41 and Altar O. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth, 7:55pm, February 6, 2024, iPhone 15 Pro Max and portable studio lighting (which is why the Copan bat emblem glyph at the left is well illuminated as is the frontal skull). FLAAR Photo Archive. All these photos we donated to IHAH the day before we left.



a

Altar B′ Front, back and sides. Drawn from the original.



b

Altar C′ Front, back and sides. Drawn partly from the original, and partly from a cast preserved in the Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

There are several reprints of Morley's 1920 monograph on Copan. But none are really reprints. The one we made the mistake to buy was a reduced page size book that was not worth even the cost of postage. You can get the entire original Morley monograph on-line as a download; so at no cost you have the original book on your computer monitor.

Suggested Reading on Skull Racks
(and Crossed Bones) including Copan

MILLER, Virginia E.

1999 The Skull Rack in Mesoamerica. Chapter 15 in *Mesoamerican Architecture as a Cultural Symbol*, Edited by Jeff Karl Kowalski. Oxford University Press.

Easy download: https://www.academia.edu/1298934/The_skull_rack_in_Mesoamerica

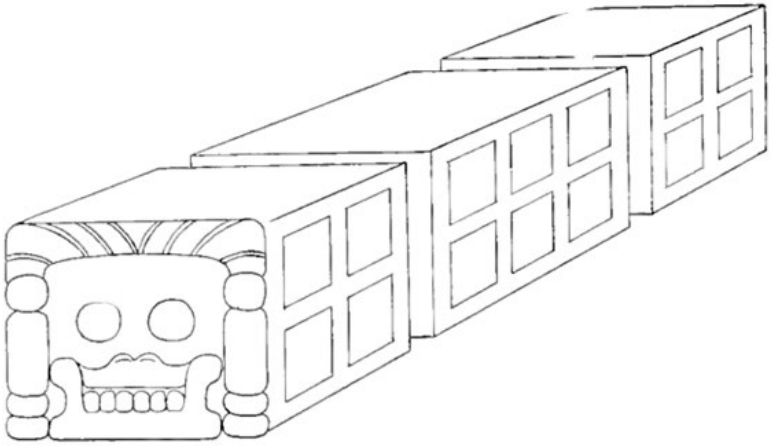
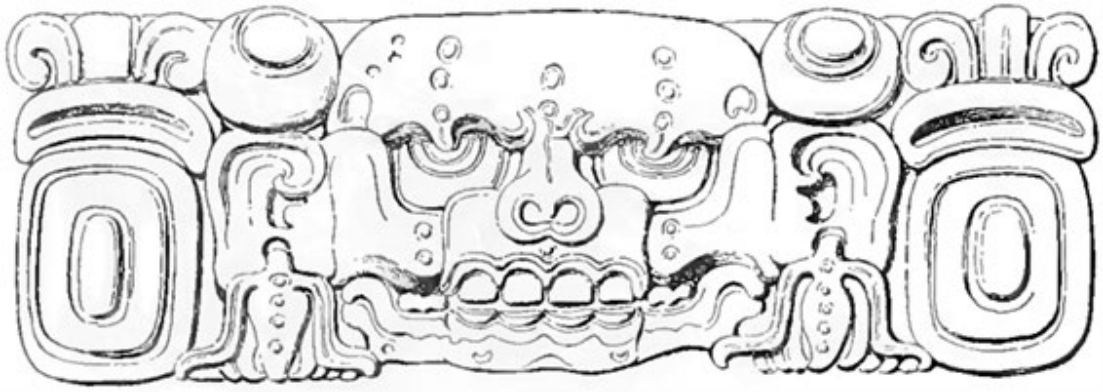


FIG. 44.—Drawing showing assemblage of the several sections of Altar B'.

Each square area is a glyph block, but not all are preserved. Drawing in monograph by Sylvanus Morley on *The Inscriptions of Copan.*



Also pictured by Maudslay 1889, Volume I, Plate 94, labeled as Altar B. So there are frontal skulls of diverse sizes and shapes. Plus the three-dimensional skulls (deep-relief) of the stairway of Temple 16 that we show on the front cover

Books that show Sculptures
of Copan, Honduras

AGURCIA-Fasquelle, Ricardo and **Vito VELIZ** (editors)

2010 Volumen I: Los Monumentos de la Plaza Principal – Peter Biro y Dorie Reents-Budet. Vol. I of Manual de los Monumentos de Copán, Honduras. Asociación Copán, Copan Ruinas, Honduras. 387 pages.

So far I have found on-line only this helpful Volumen I. I have not yet found:
- Volumen II: Monumentos de la Acropolis
- Volumen III: Monumentos del Valle

BAUDEZ, Claude-François

1994 Maya Sculpture of Copán: The Iconography. University of Oklahoma Press. 300 pages.

FASH, William

1991 Scribes, Warriors and Kings. The City of Copan and the Ancient Maya. Thames and Hudson. 192 pages.

Figure 17 shows the drawings of Barbara Fash in full-page size (so better size than in other books). But to study the iconography of each hieroglyph (so more than just the linguistics and epigraphy) it is essential to see each individual hieroglyph at full page width.

FASH, Barbara W.

2011 The Copan Sculpture Museum, ancient Maya Artistry in Stucco & Stone. Peabody Museum Press.

Drawing of all the glyphs of Stela 63 is shown on page 105, but with gray background the details are not visible whatsoever. This (and the tiny size of the font) is not the fault of the author.

MAUDSLAY, Alfred P.

1889 Archaeology, Biologia Centrali- Americana. Volume I covers Copan.

The reprint by Francis Robicsek is terrible print quality on dark paper (so you can't read the wimpy font on some pages whatsoever). But at least the report allows you to see the basic illustrations.

MORLEY, Sylvanus

1920 The Inscriptions of Copan. Carnegie Institution of Washington. Publication No. 219. 643 pages.

https://ia800905.us.archive.org/32/items/inscriptionsatcooomorl/inscriptionsatcooomorl.pdf

Shows several full-figure Uinal hieroglyphs in Long Count dates

- **Copan Stela 2, CPN 40,** Uinal (Bufo Toad) as full figure (Morley 1920: 140 and Plate 18 on page 155). Baudez shows no illustrations of either side or back, only front (1994: Fig. 49,b). The Manual of Monuments of Copan stela shows photos.
- **Copan Stela 12, CPN 61,** Uinal (Bufo Toad) as full figure (Morley 1920: 140). Baudez shows no illustrations; only mention, page 249.
- **Copan Stela 15,** the Uinal (Bufo Toad) is full-figure (Morley 1920: Plate 12), but others are face variants. I have not yet found this stela anywhere in Baudez 1994.
- **Copan Stela 24,** CPN 76, the Uinal (Bufo Toad) is full-figure, but others are face variants (all shown by Morley 1920: Fig. 13 but no mention of it being full-figure in the caption, only later in his text). Baudez has no drawing; only mention: 1994: 251.

ROBICSEK, Francis

1972 Copan: Home of the Mayan Gods. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. xvi + 168 pages.

Has helpful photographs of lots of sculptures and the enthusiasm of Francis Robicsek. But the books by Baudez and Fash are more recent and focus more on archaeology, epigraphy and iconography.

Here are the other sculptures and architecture and artifact photos that we are preparing to make available as FLAAR Reports with high-resolution photos

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 of 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 and/or Frogs in Art, Iconography; as Hieroglyph, Epigraphy 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

Scarlet Macaw Maya Ballcourt Goalstones In the Copan Sculpture Museum
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 29
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 21

Tlaloc and Yearsign, Copan Stela 6
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 30
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 22

How best to Show Modeled-Carved Vase and Bowl Scenes? As Rubbings? As Drawings? As Rollout Photos Cleaned?
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 31
Iconography of Maya Ceramics, Publication Number 2

Copan Stela H, Male Ruler wearing Beaded Skirt Beaded Skirt is usually worn by Females (at El Peru-Waka', Naranjo, Piedras Negras)
FLAAR Photo Archive Publication Number 32
Maya Sculptures of Copan, Honduras, Publication Number 23