
ARTS & LETTERS

*A Chinese
Connection*

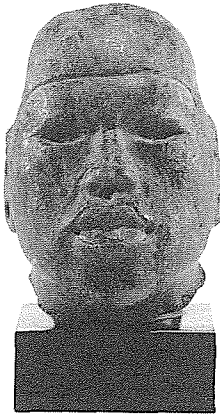
"Mystery of the Mayas" by Pat Fleisher, in *Artmagazine* (May-June 1979), 234 Eglinton Ave. East, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 1K5.

The highly sophisticated Mayan civilization of southern Mexico flourished from about 1500 B.C. to roughly A.D. 1200. Advanced in mathematics and astronomy, the Mayas developed, among other things, an accurate calendar and an 850-character system of hieroglyphics. Then, for unknown reasons, its leaders and priests abandoned their temple cities and disappeared.

Today, farming like their ancestors, the Mayas' descendants on the Yucatán peninsula number 2 million—making them the "largest single group of American Indians north of Peru."

Where did the Mayan culture originate? Early European settlers attributed their splendid stone cities to the Egyptians or Phoenicians, to the Minoans of Crete, or the Lost Tribes of Israel, notes Fleisher, editor of *Artmagazine*. Indeed, Mayan writings contain accounts of "mysterious seafaring invaders" from the Atlantic. Mexican anthropologists generally believe that the Mayan culture developed in isolation.

But there is evidence, says Fleisher, that the Mayan culture came from China—from the pre-Buddhist Shang and Chou dynasties (1600 B.C. -256 B.C.). Fleisher speculates that Chinese seafarers sailed to Mexico's west coast and there encountered the Olmec Indians. (The Olmec culture, most anthropologists agree, is the "mother culture" of the Mayas and the source of most native Mexican religions and iconography.) The Chinese, Fleisher reasons, introduced the Olmec to many of the advanced ideas and skills adopted from their trading partners in the West, including the Egyptians and Sumerians.



The oriental features of this Olmec sculpture lend credence to the theory that Mexican cultures were influenced by Chinese adventurers who settled on Mexico's Pacific Coast.

Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

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The Olmec, Fleisher notes, "were the first Mexicans to build temple cities, great basalt altars, stelae, and sarcophagi," common achievements of many other ancient civilizations (e.g., the Egyptians and Chinese). The Olmec also revered jade, carved rock figures with "decidedly narrow, oriental eyes," and fashioned stone axes like those of China's Shang Dynasty.

Fleisher's tentative conclusion: Partly inspired by their Chinese visitors, Olmec "priests, artists, architects, and astronomers set the pace for later people (probably the Mayas) who conquered them and developed the culture further."

They Wanted a Lovely War

"Tennyson's Crimean War Poetry: A Cross-Cultural Approach" by Michael C. Adams, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* (July-Sept. 1979), Temple University, Humanities Bldg., Philadelphia, Pa. 19122.

Modern critics of Alfred Lord Tennyson's Crimean War poetry ("Maud," "The Charge of the Light Brigade") find the verse troublesome. Many fault its bellicose tone; most rank it well below the English poet laureate's more idyllic works. The problem, says Adams, a historian at North Kentucky University, is that today's scholars are examining the mid-19th-century poems from a late-20th-century, anti-war perspective.

The British industrial revolution and the rise of the merchant class frightened many contemporary English intellectuals; they saw the traditional values of duty and honor symbolized by the gentry as being overrun by the commercial values of avaricious businessmen. Charles Dickens, in *Hard Times* (1854), for example, noted the decline of the upper classes. Tennyson shared Dickens' concern but looked to war as a rejuvenative force that could restore England's spirit and verve.

The impoverished hero of "Maud," disgusted by a society "consumed by money lust," was forced to flee abroad after killing his girl friend's brother (a "co-opted aristocrat") in a duel. In Tennyson's view, he can regain his sanity, self-confidence, and sense of purpose by joining the fight in the Crimea against Russian expansion. The cavalrymen in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" dutifully followed a botched-up order to attack the wrong guns, thereby sacrificing themselves for the sake of their fellows. This act, portrayed in heroic terms by Tennyson, fired the imaginations of their countrymen.

Similar attitudes enjoyed a vogue in the United States. Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell, among other Americans, welcomed the Civil War as an antidote to the greed of Northern merchants and the cruelty of Southern slaveowners. The opening attacks on Fort Sumter, S.C., by Confederate forces was greeted by poet W. W. Howe with the lines: "A nation hath been born again,/Regenerate by a second spirit." Not until the slaughter of World War I, Adams concludes, did American and British intellectuals' romantic ideal of war begin to fade.