Introduction

For many people, a museum is a place whose interesting "things" can be accumulated, displayed, and stored. In the case of The University Museum, the range of items collected and cared for is particularly diverse. As a museum of archaeology and anthropology, it contains weaving tools from pre-Columbian Peru, bricks and drainage pipes made by the ancient Sumerians, wooden drums from central Africa, and images of Buddha made in 20th century Japan. As this list implies, the artifacts are of interest for many reasons. A few are great works of art, assuming importance because of their aesthetic qualities. All are of value as tangible records of human history and achievement they help to document the development of technology, of social and economic systems, and of belief systems. The full significance of each object can be understood, however, only if it has a context. This context is provided by ethnographic and archaeological research that relates an artifact's manufacture, use, and meaning to the society that produced it.

In the case of ethnographic materials, such records are in the form of interviews, diaries and notes of observers, historical documents, drawings, photographs, and video tapes. When the ethnographic record is relatively complete, the cultural context of artifacts may be obvious. For example, the ethnographic sources for the objects in the Museum's newest exhibition, "Raven's Journey," are unusually rich. Within the exhibit, these artifacts from Alaska can be looked at in two different ways: as superb pieces of craftsmanship they can be appreciated in themselves; through photographs and labels, they can be understood as pieces of equipment being used by the Indians and Eskimos who created them.

In the case of archaeological materials, two steps are needed to supply a meaningful cultural context. An initial record of associated materials is obtained during excavation in the form of field notes, photos, and scale drawings. An artifact is thereby placed in context within the "site"; its relationship to other artifacts, debris, architectural remains, and any other features, such as hearths or pits, is defined. The second step, the reconstruction of cultural context, relies on principles derived primarily from anthropology but also from other social and natural sciences. These principles specify the relationship between characteristics of the artifact (e.g., form, use, archaeological context) and patterns of human behavior. Understanding the function and meaning of archaeologically recovered artifacts may be relatively simple. For example, the presence of an iron spear next to the body of a child in a city destroyed in warfare communicates a message to every member of modern society. With less familiar kinds of artifacts, however, interpretation may be difficult. Archaeologists studying our remote ancestors disagree as to whether it is even possible to know the way in which specific kinds of stone tools were used.

In each of the articles in this and the next issue of Expedition, the author describes an artifact (or group of related artifacts) from the Museum's collections, traces its history, and discusses its role in the society that created it. They serve to remind us that a museum consists not only of inanimate objects and the building that houses them, but also of the scholars who bring the artifacts and their documentation together to interpret them, thereby making them meaningful to you, the visitor.

Robert H. Dyson, Jr.

A Ruler in Triumph

Christopher Jones

At times the lack of a published line drawing will prevent an exquisite piece of sculpture from receiving the attention it deserves. Such is the case with Chocolá Monument 1 (also known as Stela 1), a large fragment of a relief carving from Guatemala (Figs. 1-2). The piece has been on display at the University Museum since the 1930s and has been published several times in photographs and descriptions (Kidder and Sarnyaya 1959:fig. 91; Miles 1985:255-256, fig. 3d; Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1985:fig. 3.11; Parsons 1946:70-71, fig. 17b). The high quality of relief carving and incision has long been recognized by these and other scholars, but the form and strength of the composition are not brought out adequately either in the published photographs or in the glass case in the Mesoamerican gallery of the Museum where the piece has been displayed for at least 30 years.

The drawing by Carl Beetz which accompanies this article (Fig. 3) is the first line rendering of the surviving carving. It should help to establish Chocolá monument as one of the best examples of Maya fine-line relief known. A photograph is also included (Fig. 4), which differs from the drawing in showing questionable elements of plaster restoration done in the 1920s and still in place.

1 Carving on the front surface of Chocolá Monument 1. (Drawing by Carl Beetz.)