BREAK-THROUGH ON THE

"LIENZO DE FILADELFIA"

By ROSS PARMENTER

Ross Parmenter discovered Mexico in 1940 when he was discharged from the U.S. Army. He returned to his work as a music reviewer for The New York Times, and in 1955 rose to be its music editor. But Mexico remained his great side interest. His work for his book Week in Yucatan took him repeatedly into the Mixtec Alta in northern Oaxaca. It was there that he got to know the Mixtec lienzos and became interested in exploring the villages and regions they map. In 1964 he left The Times and is now in Oaxaca, pursuing further Mexican studies. He was born in Toronto in 1913 and was graduated from the University of Toronto in 1933. Botany is another of his interests and in 1949 he published The Plant In My Window.

Research problems, in a way, are like log jams. For a long time they seem to present an unsudgeable wall. But let the water get through one little area by dislodging a few logs, and it is only a matter of time before the whole edifice gives way. Mixtec lienzos are a case in point. Until recently they have provided Middle American experts with some fairly formidable jams. But some water has been getting through them now that it is known that these lively sixteenth-century native records painted on cloth combine the features of maps, histories, and genealogies.

The people from the Mixteca in northern Oaxaca are not the only Mexican natives who, in the sixteenth century, made a point of working in their old artistic traditions to preserve their past on multipurpose sheets. But, try and large, the Mixtecs, having the greatest artistic gifts in this direction, have created the finest lienzos. And the Mixtec liensos in the University Museum provide a nice case study both of how these sheets have resisted decipherment and of how they are now beginning to yield their secrets.

The Museum acquired it in 1942, published it the next year, and has long had it on display on its main floor. Yet only recently has there been a significant break-through in its reading. It has been made by the great Mexican scholar, Alfonso Caso. Actually, Dr. Caso brought his formidable interpretative powers to bear on the liensos some time ago, but it was only towards the end of last year that he published an article on it that loosens some of its key logs.

Fig. 1. "Lienzo de Filadelfia," a Mixtec document painted on cloth, about 42 inches high, in the University Museum.
Look, for instance, at these two figures (2 and 3). The one on the left shows a couple from the Museo’s lienzo; the other shows a couple from page 16 of Codex Nuttall. The lienzo pair face each other in front of a temple, while the codex pair are stacked, one above the other, in front of a white tree. But thanks to Dr. Caso’s sharp eyes, we can now see for ourselves that each document shows the same couple. How do we see it? By studying the motifs attending each. With the woman it is an eagle’s head linked by a line to a disk; with the man it is a form like the lower jaw of a skull, also linked to a single disk. The disks are numbers and the motifs are primarily calendric day signs, but they reveal the persons’ names, for it was the Mixtec custom to name a child for the day on which it was born; a custom, incidentally, which explains why male and female names are undifferentiated. In this case, the woman is Lady 1 Eagle. The man is Lord 1 Grass, for the mandible-like form is the Mixtec sign for grass, and the logic of this can be seen more clearly in the Nuttall version where the blades of grass wave above the teeth.

Bringing to our attention that this couple in the Philadelphia lienzo is the same couple as in Codex Nuttall is an example of the sort of log-loosening that Dr. Caso has done. What makes this move so important is that for the first time it securely links the Philadelphia sheet, which is probably a post-Conquest document, with the great pre-Conquest Mixtec pictorials painted on deer-hide. Before, because of its artistic style, we could assume it was related to those pictorials. But now we know it is.

This proof is going to let a lot of water through the lienzo’s problems. For one thing, it will make possible to bring to it the considerable historical information that Dr. Caso has unlocked in the course of deciphering the pre-Conquest codices. For another, it will also allow us to study the lienzo with geographical insight. The nine people-attended glyphs drawn on the lienzo (five are shown with single cuips and two with double cuips) are all places. And sooner or later we will know where those places are located; for we know from the study of comparable lienzos that such glyphs represent towns that in many cases still survive.

Dr. Caso tends to move gingerly where geography is concerned, but his paper also makes geographical points. Caso. While they are by no means conclusive in determining the place the lienzo came from, they hold out the promise of ultimate solution. And, in a fascinating way, they link this lienzo still more unshakably with the codices in which Lord 1 Grass and Lady 1 Eagle play their notable part.

Again, let us look at figures that reveal relationships that Dr. Caso’s paper has brought to our attention (Figs. 4, 5).

As before, the detail on the left is from the Philadelphia lienzo, but in this case the one on the right is from another of the deer-hide pictorials, Codex Vindobonensis (p. 45). What do the two place glyphs have in common? Clearly it is the checkered field. Note that in the Philadelphia lienzo the reigning couple of this place are Lord 5 Flower and a Flower wife, for again the little circles are numbers and the fleur-de-lis motif beside each is the Mixtec sign for flower. Because of a hole in the cloth, only eleven circles can be seen of the wife’s name. But we can surmise she is Lady 13 Flower because two more circles could fit in the space taken out by the hole, and the segregation of the last three dots suggests a division made for the sake of readability from a row of five. Besides, there is evidence that she is 13 Flower, as we will see when we discuss how five men seem to turn into women.

Now contrast the next figure on the left (Fig. 6) from the lienzo with the one on the right (Fig. 7) from page 7 of Vindobonensis.

Here the obvious feature in common is the series of concentric circles subdivided by crosses which Dr. Caso identifies as a cobweb. And here the parallel is strengthened by the fact that in each instance the cobweb is shown on a flat area between two hills. Dr. Caso shows this place also occurs in Codex Nuttall—twice, in fact, on pages 38 and 57. Note that in the lienzo the rules of this place are shown as Lord 6 Reed...
and Lady 8 Monkey. Here the pictorial evidence of the woman's motif is so directly representational the logic is plain. In the case of the man, we know the arrow signifies Reed because arrow shafts were made of reed. Note, too, that in this instance, as in the two previous details shown from the lienzos, the man and wife are seated in front of a temple, which anyone who has been to Mila will recognize as such.

Getting back to Lord 1 Grass and Lady 1 Eagle. Caso provides another happy geographical insight into the Philadelphia lienzos. Namely, that this Hill of the Circle is not the only city-kingdom this important couple dominated. As already shown, he found them at the Place of the White Tree in Nuttall, and on page 16 of Vindobonensis (reproduced as Fig. 8) he found them at what he calls the Round of the Ashes, because the hill of periods and black spots is an ash and cinder covered hill rising from a lake.

Dr. Caso adds another attention to the fact that elsewhere in Vindobonensis (pp. 33 and 34) the couple is shown at still another place, which he calls petitions to the eagle (Regnum and God Xipe).

A place in the lienzos to which Caso pays a good deal of attention is the one he calls Cerro de la Haza because of the head on top of it. It can be seen related to Lord 2 Reed and has two men seated at it. The man at the back is Lord 8 Flint (the lens-shaped object is the Mixtec symbol for the skull knife). The one in front is Lord 11 Wind (the bearded, out-shooting lips with the exposed tooth, being associated with the wind god, is a sign for Wind).

Caso places heads with hands on them in Nuttall, Vindobonensis, Codex Bovley, Codex Selden and another lienzos (Seler II). We cannot be sure that the places in the other documents are the place of Philadelphia's lonzo, for they do not share a feature of the Philadelphia glyph and Caso does not point out the one that raises above her in a reversed, upside-down ell. That she comes from the Hill of the Head by the Closed Eye is shown by the footprints that depict her journey. Undoubtedly, she was the daughter of Lord 12 Wind. Dr. Caso cites the other figure of the hill town as Lady 8 Flint, and claims her as the bride's mother. Because of the curious changing of sex that appears elsewhere in the lienzos, he may be right. But 8 Flint's short hair and cloak knotted at the shoulder are clearly the signs of a male figure. This researcher prefers to think that in this case only the bride's paternal forebears are shown and that the 8 Flint depicted is the grandfather, rather than the mother of the bride.

And now that the attention has been centered on the bride, one can point out Dr. Caso concludes that the place where she is seated is the principal place of the lienzos, and probably the place where it came from. Because of the consistently depicted curving serpent that grows in the hill just under the bride, he calls the place Cerro del Maz (Cort Hill). He notes that in the days of the lienzos the hill was assumed 13 times, too, had its temple—and a larger one that at the other places. The back profile of it can be seen at the seventh edge of the cloth. Knowing these lienzos are genuine as well as histories, Caso makes us the point that on the other Horn of the Circle Lord 11 Wind had two men seated at it. The man at the back is Lord 8 Flint (the lens-shaped object is the Mixtec symbol for the skull knife). The one in front is Lord 11 Wind (the bearded, out-shooting lips with the exposed tooth, being associated with the wind god, is a sign for Wind).

The bride, as everyone knows, is the chief attraction at a wedding. But for a dynastic family to come into being there has to be an important groom. Thus it behoves us to take a look at the man Lady 10 Wind came to marry. His day sign, too, is realistically explicable. He is Lord 3 Dog. Shrewdly, Caso notes there are no footprints to indicate he came to Corn Hill or to which of the other couples he is related. But it is Caso's guess that the parents of the group might have been Lord 12 Reed and Lady 11 Reed, since they are the couple closest to him. Their temple, in fact, almost abuts Corn Hill. Under Corn Hill there is an A interacted with an O that makes us to recognize the existence of a Mixtec date at the incomplete edge of the lienzos. Enough of the object piercing it to diagonally can be discerned to see the year in question is A Reed year. Three of its dots are visible. Caso believes it is the year of the wedding of Lords 3 Dog and Lady 10 Wind. He places it around A. D. 1100. He reaches this figure by making two assumptions suggested by comparable lienzos. First, that the lienzos was painted in the middle of the sixteenth century; and second, that the last man and woman of the dynasty were alive at the time of the painting. (If in the preceding to prove the titles and land claims that they had the lienzos made.) Allowing twenty years for each of the twenty-four reigns, Caso gets a total of 480 years. This rough estimate is assumed for the painting, lands near 1100; or, as we would be inclined to think, not long after the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Caso has worked out a marvelously useful correlation of Mixtec and Christian dates. The two years in the lienzos' years was assumed 13 times are 1067 and 1119. But he concludes the possibility that, because of incompleteness, the year might be a Reed year of larger enumeration, perhaps in 8 or 19 or 39 years, or 49 years, or 59 years, or 69 years. Because of the example of other Mixtec documents, Dr. Caso believes that the generations Lord 3 Dog has enjoyed have birth to the one with the realistically depicted curving serpent, which is complete down to the meticulously observed gold teeth. And to the north, that it is this place glyphs of the serpent (coatl) in the hill (tepel) that led a member of the museum to christen the document Lonzo de Coatsepe. But Caso rejects this designation on the grounds that the Serpent Hill is not so important as two of the other places on the lienzos. He prefers to call this document Lonzo de Felipe because of the city in which it has found a well-guarded home. Recognized on any other pictorial that has yet come to light. Perhaps the references to a curious changing of sex piqued the reader's interest. If so, let us turn to it. This requires looking first at the three of the men among them seated near the lienzos' second highest hill in the lower left corner. They can be found readily enough by the lines of footprints. Looking at the second line from the bottom, one finds at the end of the left side the line another representation of Lord 1 Grass. And note the name of the male companion seated behind him: another familiar name, 1 Eagle. Well, what happens when 1 Grass migrates? Following the line of his footprints, one sees him at the Hill of the Circle with a companion of the same name as at the old place, 1 Eagle. But here 1 Eagle is clearly a woman. Besides her long skirt and out-hanging blouse, she has ribbon-braded hair.

Now look at the fifth footprint line. At the left extremity, Lord 6 Reed is seated in front of his male companion, 8 Monkey; at the right extremity one sees the same Lord 6 Reed seated with a companion of the same name as at the old place, but here again the sex is different. Now 8 Monkey is a woman. The fourth footprint line, the very short one, suggests a similar story. The migrating Lord 5 Flower, once he gets to the Cheekered Place, has a female companion whose name appears to be the same. Lord 6 Reed is seated with a companion of the same name as at the old place, but here again the sex is different. Now 8 Monkey is a woman.
teresting sidelight of this place ruled by 10 Lizard is that it is the only one of the five new homes that has an arrow driven into it, signifying conquest. Perhaps it was not gained peaceably, like the other four.

The problem of the changing sexes, which has long puzzled Linton Satterthwaite, the curator of the Museum’s American Section, is also a puzzle to Caso. He abandons before it, saying it is not possible to say what the native artist meant to convey.

Of the five migrating couples, we know Caso has found Lord 1 Grass and Lady 1 Eagle in other pictorial manuscripts. But he has not been able to find any of the other four. This augments the impression that the lienzos deal with rulers either in an out-of-the-way place, or in a place whose other documents have been lost.

Where is that place? Dr. Caso admits it has not been established, but he states, very cogently, that he believes the lieno comes from what he calls the Coixtlahuaca-Tlaxcoa-Tejupan zone. And one refers to his caution because, although Coixtlahuaca and Tejupan are close together, Tlaxcoa is quite a long way from them both. By phrasing matters the way he did, Dr. Caso allowed himself almost the whole of the Mixtec Alta as a possible provenance. This writer does not know where the lienzo came from either. But he would like to bring forward the suggestion that it comes from near San Esteban Atlautlauca, which is south of Tlaxcoa and therefore a considerable distance from Coixtlahuaca.

The suggestion is based on the evidence in Figure 9, which shows most of the central portion of the traced version of the lienzo which Antonio Pefiñel published in 1914, and which William Gates, not knowing of the Pefiñel publication, republished as Abraham Castellanos in 1931, also in traced form.

As can readily be seen, it is like the Philadel- phia lienzo in that it shows three large hills. And when one looks more closely one sees further sim- ilarities. Not only are the three hills disposed toward- wards each other in a very much the same way, but the hill on the right has a conspicuous element in the common, the meticolously observed rattlesnake. Then look at the lower hill. In both cases it has a rank of six men along the top (the seventh figure in the Pefiñel lienzo is a woman). And although Philadelphia has four men on the left, this one resembles it at least having two. Both lienzos depict migrations. Both are approximately the same size, and as Pefiñel, who saw his in 1905, tells us, his lienzo is like Philadelphia’s in that it is made of three strips of cloth sewn together vertically. Most significant of all, the two lienzos share the same date at the hill of the migration. It is the day 9 Lizard of the year 9 Flint.

Caso does not refer to Pefiñel, but, in specu- lating about that year in Philadelphia’s lienzo, he says it might be the year 926 because of a migra- tion of that year shown in Codex Nutall. But he thinks it is more likely to be a later 9 Flint year—namely, 1112, a date falling closer to the one he calculates for the founding of Lord 3 Dog’s dynasty. He also feels 1112 is suggestive because it is so close to the destruction of Tula in 1116.

The Pefiñel lienzo is influenced by European art styles in a way the Philadelphia one is not. (Witness the inclusion of the church and the three-dimensional manner of its drawing.) In fact, the Mixtec style has been so debased in the Pefiñel document that the manner of indicating Mixtec names has been all but forgotten and one cannot be sure of the names of the two men. Neither of the chief liezudos—7 Dog and 11 Alligator—appears as such in Philadelphia. So the common date and other similarities do not prove conclusively the two lienzos are from the same region. But they suggest they might be. And we have the advantage of knowing where Pefiñel’s came from. Javier Córdova, who showed the lienzo to Pefiñel, told him where he got it. It was the town I mentioned, San Esteban Atlautlauca.

A small negative indication that it comes from this area rather than from around Coixtlahuaca is that there are six known lienzos from the Coixtlahuaca basin, and surely if this lienzo came from that region it would appear in the many documents we have from there. Clearly, there is still a lot to be done for the Museum’s lienzo to be fully intelligible. But it is equally clear that it tries to yield its secrets. Caso, by publishing the notes he has long held, has put us all further in his debt. We have come a long way since George Vaillant bought it for the Museum in 1942 from the New York dealer, John Wise, who likes to joke how he bought it for a song as a "Peruvian curtain."

Actually, he bought it as "probably Egyptian," for that was the identifying note that went with it when William Randolph Hearst displayed it to the public for the first time when he included it in the sale of his accumulations which opened on the fifth floor of Gimbel’s in New York on February 3, 1941. However, the catalogue of the Hearst sale was a little more accurate than the note. On page 305 it listed the lienzo as "Primitive Latin-American Painted Linen Panel, framed (611-206)."

"Hearst, unfortunately for our purposes, was
THE TWENTY-FOUR RULING COUPLES
OF LORD 3 DOG’S
DYNASTY

Column I

[Table]

Column II

[Table]

Column III

[Table]

Column IV

[Table]

Column V

[Table]

In the list given above, the corrections of typographical errors in Caso's printed list are as follows: in the first column it is 10 (not 11) Eagle who is married to Lady 10 Rabbit; in the third column, 8 House II is married to Lady 11 Reed (not 4 House) and 8 Water is married to Lady 9 Reed (not 2 Monkey). Note that two of the lords have the name 8 House and three have the name 10 Rain. But that these are five men, rather than two, is evidenced by their belonging to different generations and being married to different women. With regard to Lord 6 Tiger, the seventh man in the first column, it should be noted that the native artist originally called him 9 Tiger. Apparently this was a mistake the artist could not erase, so he took the alternative of blacking over the three incorrect dots.

an unsystematic, impulsive, voracious collector who tended to buy things in great lots, careless as to their history and often equally careless in recording where, when, and from whom he made his purchases. According to C. C. Rounds of the Hearst Corporation, the Philadelphia lienzo was one of the many things Hearst had that no one knew anything about until 1931 when a vast accumulation of stuff was moved from the Hearst garage on Eighty-fifth Street to a warehouse in the Bronx, which had been bought so the objects could be sorted and catalogued. It was then that the Philadelphia lienzo was discovered, photographed, and roughly classified.

The Lienzo de Santiago Ihuítilan Plumas, now in the Brooklyn Museum, was discovered among Hearst's things at the same time. This Ihuítilan lienzo was stolen from its home village in 1900, and thereafter, through surreptitious hands, made its way to the United States. Probably the Philadelphia lienzo went through a similar shadowy journey. Being smaller, it would be still easier to smuggle out of Mexico.

The dimensions are worth noting. To the casual observer it is a little more than a yard high and only a small bit wider. Two of the strips are 15½ inches wide; the one on the right is 13½ inches. So if any one has a strip of old cotton with Mixteco paintings on it—mostly in black and white—will he please come forward? He will be especially welcome if his strip is about three feet, six inches long, and has vestiges of a date and a frayed, incomplete temple on its left side. For what he has may well be the segment of the Philadelphia lienzo that was cut away in less scrupulous days. If his strip is narrow, it may only complete the date and the temple. But if it is wide, it may have information that will illuminate the whole lienzo, to say nothing of his own holding. Let us keep our fingers crossed.

SUGGESTED READING