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THREE PERFECT DAYS LONDON | POSTCARDS FROM THE PAST | LEAN MEAN CLEAN MACHINES

A newly restored 19th-century mansion in Mexico's Yucatán houses a glimpse of the Maya world's magical ruins before they became the cultural monuments that visitors see today. / By Judith Fein

postcards from the past

Copán. Palenque. Uxmal. Chichen Itza. Tulum. Today, lovers of Maya culture wander among these ruins, conjuring images of Maya lords adorned with feathers and jade and of mighty empires that created architectural masterworks out of stone. But back in 1839, the magnificent stone terraces, temples, palaces, and carved stelae were hidden, having been swallowed up by the jungle.

They were submerged in foliage, tree roots, and rot. ¶ In that fateful year, an American diplomat, adventurer, and writer named John Lloyd Stephens was sent to Central America by President Martin Van Buren on a government mission. He was accompanied by Frederick Catherwood, ►►►



an English architect, artist, and explorer. The two men traveled on horseback, scaled mountains, slogged through mud, slept in hammocks, fell sick, got lost, found themselves in the middle of a civil war, and relentlessly sought evidence of forgotten Maya empires.

With the help of local Maya, they literally hacked their way into the jungle, rediscovering the lost civilizations and revealing them to the Western world. By the dim light of flickering oil lamps, they penetrated the interiors of buildings that had been unseen for centuries. They were awed by art and architecture which rivaled that of the most sophisticated cultures of Europe. Stephens took notes, and Catherwood made evocative, meticulous watercolor drawings of the ruins, often including tender portrayals of Maya people. From these watercolors, he made lithographs.

In 1841, Stephens published *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* and, in 1843, after the duo undertook another trip to the Yucatán, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*. The two books, with richly textured illustrations by Catherwood, are considered by many Maya archaeologists, aficionados, scholars, and travelers to be the bible of Maya ruins. In 1844, Catherwood published 25 colored lithographs in *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*. A scant 300 copies of the folio were produced; today, perhaps in testament to the beauty of the artwork, 282 still exist, mostly in private collections and the rare-book rooms of museums.

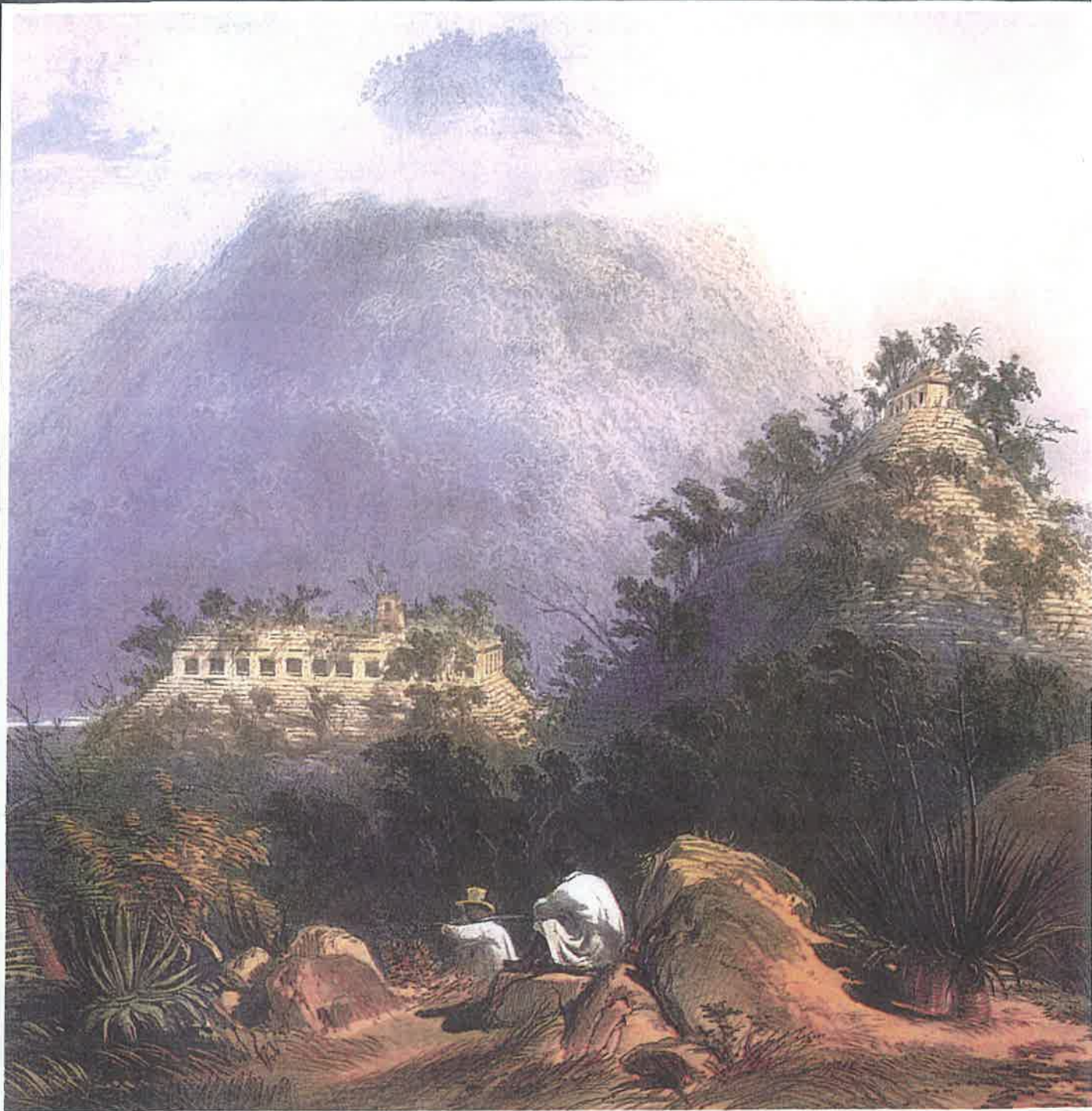
Growing up in the 20th century, Louis Varela Nevaer read Stephens' books and gazed with wonder at Catherwood's drawings. Like many young boys, he longed for adventure, and he wanted to be an explorer when he grew up, voyaging deep into dense, uncharted jungles and unearthing ancient pyramids. Instead, he went into finance and publishing, but he never forgot the two 19th-century discoverers. Nevaer decided that he wanted to own one of Catherwood's original folios, and he put out the word to art collectors and antique-book dealers. Finally, in 1982, he hit pay dirt: A folio was available for purchase in New York City.

Nevaer held on to the prized originals for many years and then started looking for a place to exhibit them to the public in Mérida, Mexico, a colonial city that is the gateway to the Yucatán Peninsula and where Nevaer had spent part of his childhood. It would be the only place in the world where a full set of the images was on view. "I wanted to showcase them in a place that would be recognizable to Frederick Catherwood, a proper context for the place he had in mind when he created these lithographs," says Nevaer, who now lives in New York City. "In our time, having bare floors, poured concrete walls, and white fluorescent lighting—a SoHo or warehouse gallery that's minimalist—is what we're used to, but





Englishman Frederick Catherwood, a 19th-century architect, artist, and explorer, revealed the mysteries of the Maya to the Western world through such illustrations as *Idol at Copán* (previous page), *Castle at Tulum* (above), and *Idol and Altar at Copán* (left).



Traveling with John Lloyd Stephens, Catherwood scaled mountains, slogged through mud, and beautifully rendered *General View of Palenque* (above) and *Ornament Over the Principal Doorway, Casa del Gobernador, Uxmal* (right). Both are among the works at Casa Catherwood.

that would be completely alien to a mid-19th century person. So it took quite a while to find the proper belle époque manse in Mérida and then restore it."

The results were worth the wait. Nevaer has brought the mansion back to life, preserving its 18-foot ceilings, original paste tile floors, tropical-wood doors with etched-glass panels, antique crystal chandeliers, exterior fountain, and garden. "If Catherwood were to come back to life and walk in, he'd instantly recognize and be familiar with the place," Nevaer adds proudly.

Just a few months ago, the restoration was completed, and Casa Frederick Catherwood opened to the public in Mérida's historical district. "In a way, these images, hanging in a European building but set in the heart of the Maya world, become 'postcards' of the Maya seen through benevolent Western eyes," Nevaer says. "Catherwood's portrayal of Maya people in the lithographs was quite a leap of faith for a person living in a world where slavery existed and where 'white man's burden' was the conventional wisdom."

Visitors to the museum often stop by on their journeys to Maya sites that have been painstakingly restored by archaeologists and are heavily trafficked by tourists. They express amazement at a precious glimpse of these famous ruins before they become a cultural phenomenon. In Catherwood's lithographs, there is a palpable feeling of stillness and calm. The sites are permeated by the unknowable secrets of ancient civilizations. The stones of the pyramids are crumbling, and trees poke out from majestic stairways that point heavenward. The ground is littered with intricate carvings—a stela here, a serpentine head there. Native people hack at trees with machetes, play with dogs, converse, amuse their children, and relax and lounge among the ruins. The scenes create in modern viewers the ache of nostalgia for a world they never knew, a world that is gone forever ... except in Catherwood's breathtaking art.

Details, Details, Details / Casa Frederick

Catherwood is at No. 572, Calle 59, between calles 72 and 74, just a few steps west of the Church of Santiago. The entry fee is MXN43 (US\$4). Besides the upstairs gallery of Catherwood's work, there is a terrace café and a gift and book shop. A full set of reproductions of Catherwood's lithographs is available for MXN969 (US\$90) on-site at Casa Catherwood or at casa-catherwood.com. Tel: 917-880-8587 (from the U.S.) or 999-925-0358 (in Mérida) or info@casa-catherwood.com ■

Judith Fein has written for more than 70 publications, was a regular travel reporter on public radio for six years, and makes travel films. Her Web site is globaladventure.us.

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