

Adela Breton, a British artist in Mexico

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Adela Catherine Breton was born in Bath, England, in 1849. She died in 1923 in Kingston, Jamaica. She spent 14 years (1894-1908) in Mexico out of the 74 years of her life. During this period, in addition to making extensive journeys—mainly on horseback—she returned to the city of her birth at least 14 times in order to take care of personal matters and build her archive. Here in Mexico she wrote, drew and painted the things she saw.

Her work was divided into two currents: an artistic one, which



Pyramid of the Niches in Tajin. This is one of the most interesting pre-Hispanic constructions in Mexico. It is made up of seven superimposed bodies made of "tablero" or frontage and "talud," including sections terminating in flying cornices. Each body is decorated with niches, which add up to 365, including those under the steps. All this identifies the monument with the calendar that rotates around the water god. The sculptures that appear in the foreground were jambs or columns that supported the original upper temple. These are exhibited today in the local museum of Tajin.



During her stay in Chichén Itzá, Adela Breton made watercolours of several buildings, such as the Church and a small part of the east annex of the Nunnery. The Church has a façade decorated in Puuc style. This consists of a smooth section, a frieze and a roofcomb adorned with stone mosaic work. Projecting from the front of the frieze are three masks of the god Itzamna and two panels with four carvings of seated gods with animal masks. These have been identified as the four Bacabs who carry the heavens on their shoulders. The façade is topped by a roofcomb decorated with grecas surmounted by masks. The exterior of the eastern annex of the Nunnery is rather different, being entirely decorated with stone mosaic work in what is known as the Chenes style of architecture. The lower part is limited by an elegant but fragmented moulding which frames the entrance, representing the mouth of the Earth Monster. On each side are eight masks of the god Itzamna, one above the other. Above these carvings in the center is a ring of carved feathers framing an important individual—Kukulcan, flanked by two masks on both side. Close by, the back section of the Church can be seen.

required great perception; and a scientific one, which required study and dedication.

Her father, William Breton (1799-1889), was a naval commander. As a traveler he developed a great interest in learning about new places—an interest he passed on to his daughter. Her mother, Elizabeth D'Arch (1820-1874), dedicated herself to the education of her children in a very conservative atmosphere. Adela's education included learning to paint watercolors, which she did very well indeed.

Having devoted herself to her education and family matters, after her father's death Adela made a number of trips to the United States between 1889 and 1894. In the U.S. she decided to come to Mexico in order to verify facts and scenes she had learned about from the works of Daniel Thomas Egerton and Frederick Catherwood, as well as from reading Humboldt.

She arrived in Mexico in 1894, most likely having traveled by sea to Veracruz and from there—probably by rail—to Mexico City, soon moving on to the western part of the country. She

traveled to Michoacán, where she met an Indian named Pablo Solorio, from the town of Churumuco, whom she hired as horse groom, companion and valet.

At that time in Mexico, the extensive journeys she undertook could be made only through long and tiring rides on horseback. She traveled through fifteen Mexican states (the Federal District, State of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Veracruz, Morelos, Guerrero, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Oaxaca and the Yucatán) during the 14 years she stayed in our country.

She always carried notebooks, a camera and film, materials for drawing and for painting watercolors. We know that she spoke Spanish fluently, and even learned some Indian languages so as to be able to communicate better with the people she met.

Her landscape work is detailed and beautiful. At times she added human figures to give an idea of proportion and size. Her architectural drawings, while not so numerous, are just as precise and meticulous.

The study of archeology was a second stage in Adela Breton's career. Her works on this subject bear witness to her vigorous interest in presenting what she saw, just as it was. She made her paintings genuine documents on ruins or pieces which have now disappeared or been seriously damaged. She also used a camera for studying the details of what she observed. When she took an especially representative or interesting photo, she made a watercolor of it, always copying the original piece's real colors.

She personally met, or contacted by letter, the most prominent archeologists of her day: Auguste Le Plongeon, Alfred Tozzer, F.W. Putnam, C. Bowditch, Zelia Nuttall, Alfred Maudslay and Eduard Seler. She maintained a voluminous correspondence with all of them, first in

order to follow their recommendations, later in order to compare what they had seen previously with what she was able to observe herself.

It was Alfred Percival Maudslay who awakened her interest in visiting the Maya region of the Yucatán, asking her to verify the correctness of his own drawings and photographs of Chichén Itzá.

She began her trip to the Yucatán in 1900. She must have traveled from Veracruz to Progreso by coastal trading ship, accompanied by Pablo Solorio and her two horses, El Chico and El Moro. Her main objective was to see Chichén Itzá, which had been purchased by the American consul in Mérida, Edward Herbert Thompson. An avid archeologist, owner of the Hacienda of Chichén and the ancient ruins, Thompson considered the area to be his personal property and found any interference highly disagreeable.

Since the laws on archeological property had not yet been enacted, Thompson—with a subsidy from Harvard University's Peabody Museum—dredged the *Cenote Sagrado*¹ and sent the objects he found to the United States.

It is easy to understand why there was a clash of personalities upon the arrival of Adela, who devoted herself to drawing and describing the things

Cholula, Great Pyramid and Church of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. Although it seems to represent a hill with a church on top, built during Colonial times, it is a large pyramid built by the Toltecs and superimposed on previous pyramidal constructions. Recently, important excavations around the pyramid have revealed other pre-Hispanic constructions resting on the sides of the old pyramid.



Adela Breton with horse groom Pablo Solorio.

she saw. Conflicts erupted between her and Thompson, and each of them complained to foreign archeologists about the other's interference. The horse groom Solorio kept an eye on what Thompson was extracting from the *cenote*, running to tell Adela. The scene turned into a real farce.

Adela Breton's other great contribution to Mexican archeology was in the so-called Upper Temple of the Jaguar, in Chichén Itzá's Ball Game area. This ruin consists of two high walls, each of which holds a hoop made of engraved stone. Adjoining one of these walls is a two-story building. The first floor has been named the Lower Temple of the Jaguar, since it features the image of a jaguar in carved stone. The second floor, built on top of the broad wall and consisting of a temple with two naves, covered with a pyramidal roof, is known to us as the Upper Temple of the Jaguar.

One of these naves had collapsed, but the other contained a profusion of fresco paintings representing scenes of battle in which the warriors of Itzá are always victorious. The interior featured an altar consisting of a stone bowl held up by fifteen Atlases, vividly-painted warriors in a series of different outfits.

¹ *Cenote Sagrado*: Natural well considered sacred by the Mayas, who threw holy objects and sacrifices into the pool. (Editor's note.)

When Adela arrived, these warrior figures had been removed by the archeologist Le Plangeon, who hid them so as to be able to remove them later. However, Le Plangeon had left the country and was unable to return. Adela found out about the hidden warriors, but did not know the location of the hiding place. She told the story to the Yucatán educator Pablo Bolio, who accompanied her to the site and noticed a place on top of the broad Ball Game area wall, where stones had been clumsily piled one atop another. They started digging, and soon enough found the fifteen Atlases.

Adela made drawings of them, filling in the original colors exactly, despite having little time to do her work, since Bolio decided to send the figures to the National Museum in Mexico City. Unfortunately, when the statues were lowered by rope, they were scratched. Then they remained on the dock at Progreso for six months, exposed to the weather, before being shipped to Veracruz, where they remained in the customs house for

more than a year. As a result they lost their coloring; today, only Adela Breton's drawings remain to show us what these figures once looked like.

Another of Adela's wise moves was to meticulously copy the interior paintings of the Upper Jaguar temple; with the passage of time and mistreatment these have disappeared entirely. Adela's watercolors, some of them full-sized, others of reduced scale, are all that remain to us as testimony to what existed in this site. They portray the colored stucco door jambs and the battle scenes of Itzá warriors in attitudes of victory over the peoples they conquered.

In 1904 the horse groom Pablo Solorio fell ill in the Yucatán and had to travel by boat from Progreso to Veracruz, where he contracted yellow fever and died, without being able to return to his native Michoacán.

Adela remained without news of the state of Pablo's health. She wrote several letters complaining that she did not know the whereabouts of her faithful companion. When she later found out


the sad outcome of the illness, she lost her desire to stay in the Yucatán, but the work she had begun there was too important to leave unfinished. When she returned to England in 1908 she continued her work on Mexico, but never returned here.

Adela Breton presented a professional study on Mexico to the Congress of Americanists, writing a series of articles. She also traveled extensively through Asia, the Near East, South America and the United States.

In 1922 she was invited to the meeting of the Congress of Americanists in Rio de Janeiro. During her stay in Brazil she fell ill — she had reached the age of 73 — and decided to return to England. She did not succeed in doing so; while passing through Jamaica on her way home, she was so sick that she had to disembark. She died there the following year.

During the trips she made to her native city of Bath, she proposed to leave her work there so it could be studied. Unfortunately this idea met with little interest, leading her to make the same proposal to the Museum of Art in Bristol, England. The museum authorities there were interested and, although all her paintings, photos and other materials were kept under lock and key for many a year, an exhibition on her work was finally organized in 1985.

In early 1993 a selection of her work was brought to Mexico to be exhibited at the National History Museum in Chapultepec Castle. The Prince of Wales inaugurated the exhibition. The curator responsible for promoting Breton's work was Sue Giles.

With this history as background, the Smurfit Cartón y Papel company of Mexico published the book *Adela Breton, artista británica en México* (Adela Breton, A British Artist in Mexico) in late 1993. The book was not sold commercially but was distributed free of charge by the publishing house to its clients and to public libraries 

TLaxcala. Capital of Tlaxcala state. The view is taken from the Church of San Francisco.

