Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon:
Early Photographic Documentation of Uxmal

by

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Documentation of the Maya archaeological sites of Uxmal and Chichen Itza had its beginnings in the seventeenth-century with descriptions by the historian Diego Lopez de Cogolludo, and then early in the nineteenth-century with the drawings of the artist-
adventurer Count Frederic Waldeck in the 1830s, and the magnificent illustrations of Frederick Catherwood in the 1840s. Then in 1860, the French explorer Desire Charnay successfully made a number of photographic views of Uxmal. It was not until 1875 that detailed and systematic photographic recording was accomplished at Uxmal by Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon.

Augustus' photographic expertise extended back to the 1850s in San Francisco when he rented space on Clay Street for a studio. He was noted for his successful Daguerreotypes of squirming children taken "in good style in 2 seconds." Seeing new opportunities for a photographer in Peru, he opened a studio in Lima in 1862, and traveled widely in the Andean area photographing archaeological sites. A few years later he wrote in the Photographic Times, "Photography since I learned its first rudiments in 1852, has fascinated me, and has been to my mind a kind of enchanted ground" (1879:79).

Augustus' other fascination was the ancient past of the Americas. In the 1860s he read the theories of the French Americanist Brasseur de Bourbourg. Brasseur had proposed that world civilization began in the New World, and soon Augustus came to a similar conclusion based on the spectacular ruins he had seen in Peru. But it was after reading the works of the Count Frederic Waldeck who had worked at Uxmal and Palenque, and seeing the drawings by Frederick Catherwood of Uxmal and Chichen Itza that Augustus became intrigued with the idea that world civilization had its origin among the Maya of Yucatan. He then decided on an expedition to Yucatan "with the fixed intention of finding either the proof or denial of an opinion formed during my ramblings among the ruins of Tiahuanuco, that the cradle of the world's civilization is this continent..." (1879:69). To prepare himself for his work in Mexico he traveled to London in 1970 to investigate Mexican manuscripts.

While in London at the British Museum, Augustus met the well educated professional photographer Alice Dixon. Alice had learned photography from her father Henry Dixon, and she, along with her brother Thomas, assisted him. Dixon had begun his work in photography early in the 1860s, and Alice relates why he became successful: "One of the secrets of his success is that Henry Dixon learnt very thoroughly steelplate printing...to learn how pictures should look when rendered in black and white" (1890:648).

By 1875 he was one of the most important photographers in London, and received a medal from the Photographic Society of Great Britain for his expertise in photographing works of art. He then received a commission from the Society for Photographing the Relics of Old London to record the picturesque or historic buildings which had been condemned by the city for redevelopment. His photographs of London are today a priceless record of the old city and are held by many of the important photographic archives in Great Britain and the United States.

Drawn together by the bond of photography and an interest in ancient civilizations,
Alice and Augustus were married in London and soon sailed for New York. After preparations for their expedition to Yucatan during the spring of 1873 they sailed from New York in the early summer.

In the nineteenth-century the equipment required to make photographs was considerable. Augustus’ photographic knowledge led him to conclude that it would be unnecessary to use the large format glass-plates negatives preferred by most photographers since he could capture enough information for archaeological analysis with 4 x 8 inch stereo plates. The use of the smaller glass-plate negatives would have the additional benefit of considerably reducing the weight of their baggage. Years later, in a letter to Charles Bowditch of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, Augustus reasoned "I took stereopticon pictures of Yucatan in preference to single ones because they are more realistic when looked at with the proper instrument and they enable me to study the monuments as well, and sometimes better, than if I stood before them" (1902).

To carry all the necessary photographic chemicals and other materials to make wet collodion glass-plate negatives and Collodio-chloride prints, the Le Plongeons devised a box in which a portable darkroom and all the photographic paraphernalia could be carried.

Before going to explore the ruins in Yucatan, Dr. Le Plongeon invented a box in which everything could be packed in small compartments, and which could afterward be set up to serve as a darkroom, a sink and dark curtain also found a place in the box; and the apparatus could be put into working order by two people in less than five minutes. [Alice Le Plongeon 1884:302]

Their camera equipment, manufactured by the Scovill Company of New York, consisted of two view cameras for taking stereo images on 4 x 8 inch plates or single images on 5 x 8 inch plates. Augustus brought a number of lenses: "The expedition about to visit Yucatan has at its disposal Harrison's Globe Lenses - the same used during my explorations of the ruins of Peru and Bolivia; a pair of stereoscopic Harrison portrait lenses" (Augustus Le Plongeon 1873:133). Carefully testing his equipment before leaving for Yucatan Augustus noted "[I] have found the Morrison [wide angle lens] superior, with no ghost, perfectly achromatic, lines mathematically true, and a perfect focus in every angle in which the camera may be placed" (1873:133).

Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon arrived at the port of Progreso, Yucatan in the fall of 1873 amid an outbreak of Yellow Fever. They set up temporary quarters at the Hotel Meridiano in Merida, and soon after Alice contracted the disease. But, thanks to the constant labors of Augustus she survived after a severe, week long battle with high fever.
After a number of months in Merida learning to speak Maya, searching archives, and working with Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona and other local scholars they traveled to Uxmal to begin their field work. It was their belief that scholarship needed as its basis field documentation, so they decided to take photographs, make molds, and draw plans of all the important structures and motifs at Uxmal.

The trip to Uxmal was not a particularly long or difficult one in the nineteenth-century. In the 1860s, Mexico’s ill-fated Emperor Maximilian sent his Queen, the Empress Carlotta, on a diplomatic mission to Merida and Campeche. She spent two days at Uxmal carried about on a palanquin. To the delight of her entourage she marveled at the architectural and sculptural work of the ancient Maya--the guides had discreetly stripped phallic sculpture from the buildings to avoid offending her royal sensibilities.

The Le Plongeons traveled at a leisurely pace to Uxmal photographing the villages along the way. At Muna they made a lovely panorama of the main plaza from a position near the colonial church by placing their view camera on a tripod and taking four joining 5 x 8 inch plates. This was their first panorama, but it was a technique they would soon apply to their archaeological documentation at Uxmal and Chichen Itza.

After their arrival at Uxmal, the Le Plongeons quickly set up house
keeping in the center room of the Governor's Palace. It proved to be a cool retreat during the heat of the day, but not without insects. Alice reported, "The place swarms with life and perfect silence never reigns, for every tiny insect has something to say for itself" (1881:2). The Le Plongeons seemed to thrive in the tropical environment taking the annoyances of bats in their quarters, the heat and what Alice called "blood sucking, flying bed bugs" in their stride.

They photographed first from the platform at the north end of the Governor's Palace near the House of the Turtles by making two joining 5 x 8 inch plates of the Adivino Pyramid-Nunnery Quadrangle complex. This panorama was made during the late afternoon sun and is one of their finest works. Next they tackled the spectacular Governor's Palace, one of the most splendid buildings in the Maya area, by concentrating on the important east facade.

To make a photograph of the Governor's Palace using the wet collodion glass-plate method was not an easy task. It required preparation of each plate just prior to exposure by pouring a solution of collodion on it then sensitizing the plate by dipping it into silver nitrate. It then had to placed in a light tight plate holder and rushed to the camera atop a tall ladder for exposure before the collodion dried in the hot sun. After exposure the plate had to be immediately developed and fixed. To make matters even more difficult, the chemicals were often contaminated thus requiring a number of tests before they could be used with confidence.

The cameras were heavy and had to be mounted on a tripod. They had no shutters.
and little mechanical control was available to adjust the amount of light striking the plate. Exposures were made by the photographer's art of knowing the sensitivity of the chemicals and the quality of the light. Alice described the difficult camera work:

To make photographs of the ornaments on the edifices at Uxmal it was necessary to work from the top of a ladder...the ladder was so unsteady that, standing on it, breathing was enough to move and spoil the plate. So after drawing the slide [removing the slide to expose the wet plate] the doctor came down, and, by means of a long pole, uncovered and recovered the lens from below. The light changed during exposure, timing was impossible, and the plate was over exposed. Only after several attempts was a satisfactory result obtained. [1884:303].

The Le Plongeons photographed the entire 320 foot east facade of the Governor's Palace in sixteen overlapping stereo photographs and with single 5 x 8 inch plates. The work may have taken as much as two weeks since the sun angle to highlight the intricate motifs was correct for only a few hours each day.

In addition Augustus drew a plan of the building and made eighty-three molds of the important features on the facade. Those molds and others made at Uxmal and Chichen Itza, totaling 264, were deposited at the American Museum of Natural History in 1895, but have not been located in recent years.

From the top of the Adivino Pyramid the Le Plongeons made a second panorama, but this time with stereo photographs and covering most of the site--180 degrees in arc from the Governor's Palace to the Nunnery Quadrangle. They then began the difficult and dangerous task of recording the Chenes and Puuc style temples on the west side of the pyramid. To photograph the details on the Chenes Temple, Augustus devised a tall ladder and tripod on which to mount
his camera for a straight on, undistorted view.

Alice, working closely with Augustus on the edge of the precipice, recounts the risks:

The pictures of the west facade of the Adivino Pyramid at Uxmal were made at the risk of my husband's life. The foot of the ladder, which was about twenty feet high, was attached to two tree trunks just over the edge of its almost perpendicular side 100 feet high. The ladder was supported by two forked poles and held by ropes tied up in the room to two stone rings that once served to hang a curtain. The ladder was secure, but the danger to the doctor was consisted of any false motion or vertigo. Twice one day he was nearly sun struck and only able to continue by keeping wet cloths on his head. [1884:303].

A bas-relief of two crouching figures high above the door to the Chenes Temple, shielded from view by a large Chac nose, presented an even greater challenge to the Le Plongeons. It was out of reach of their twenty-five foot ladder!
Proud of their success in photographing the figures, Alice described Augustus' dangerous work:

For one particular picture even the ladder was not high enough. After it was placed almost perpendicularly on the brink of the precipice, its top was not yet on a level with the object. A long pole was cut and planted at the base of the ladder. Then the doctor carried up his tripod, and tied the lower extremity of the legs, two to the top of the ladder, and one to the pole he had planted. It took a half hour to arrange it, and was a perilous and exhausting task, depending altogether, as the doctor did, upon standing steadily on a round stick, while his hands were busily employed. Owing to the dust and other petty annoyances, he and to make eight plates to obtain one to our satisfaction. He worked bare to the waist in order to have freer movement, and his shoulders were baked brown when he finished. \[1884:303\].

Using the portable darkroom devised by Augustus, the Le Plongeons processed their negatives within the Chenes Temple, but the water required for processing had to be hauled up the ninety foot pyramid. Augustus also made forty-three molds of the Chenes facade, and drew a plan of the Adivino Pyramid and each temple.

Northwest corner of the East Building of the Nunnery Quadrangle, Uxmal. Pic: Le Plongeons. ca 1875.

The Nunnery Quadrangle to the west of the pyramid soon occupied their attention. Augustus surveyed and drew a plan of the four buildings, made twenty-seven molds of
important motifs, and they photographed each interior facade in detail. Alice was intrigued by the carved serpents on the West Building and reported to readers of the New York World: "the most noticeable objects are two large feathered serpents that extend from one end to the other of the facade...at regular intervals they intertwine" (1881:2).

As their work at Uxmal continued the Le Plongeons soon realized that human intervention, more than nature, was the real cause of destruction to the ancient monuments. One of their photographs of the South Building of the Nunnery Quadrangle shows clearly the center wall where stones had been removed for use as building materials. Where the great corbel arch penetrates the center of the building Alice noted an "ugly crack" that ran from the base to the top and back down the other side. The arch had been seriously weakened, she said, by "the removal of the stone facing by means of crowbars" (1881b:2). Again writing for the New York World, Alice reported: "The Peninsula of Yucatan is strewn with fragments of departed grandeur; silent, deserted, fallen cities. Some are not approachable without danger, lying as they do within the territories of hostile tribes. Others--and these are the worst treated--are in the power of the whites" (1881:2). Incensed at the destruction to Uxmal, Augustus wrote his patron Stephen Salisbury, Jr. at the American Antiquarian Society that the owner of the Hacienda Uxmal had a "fury for destruction of the handiwork of the ancient inhabitants of this peninsula" (1881).

Finally, in the summer of 1881 the Le Plongeons spent their last field season at Uxmal. During their two month stay they filled in gaps in their photographic documentation and refined their plans (1). Soon they were off to Chichen Itza, again, to finish their documentation there, and then in 1884 retired from the ardors of fieldwork and returned to New York to write and lecture (2).

(1) One hundred and fifty-six of the the Le Plongeons photographs Uxmal have survived and are archived in three collections: at the Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles, the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. Their plan of the Governor's Palace is at Tulane University's Latin American Library, and their original plan of the Nunnery Quadrangle-Adivino Complex is lost, but a photographic copy was made by the Le Plongeons and is in the archive of the Philosophical Research Society.

(2) A Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in 19th Century Yucatan, a biography of the Le Plongeons' lives and work by Lawrence G. Desmond and Phyllis M. Messenger, was published in 1988 and is available from the University of New Mexico Press.

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