

Editorial Note:

We would like to dedicate this first edition of the newly relaunched *Arara* to the memory of Dr Tim Laughton, a former lecturer in the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex, who specialized in Mesoamerican art and architecture and who died just over a year ago. The choice of the mainly pre-Columbian and Central American related material that constitutes this issue reflects this wish and we would like to begin by presenting the following tribute to Tim's memory:

Dr. Timothy Laughton

Suzanne Nolan¹

Dr. Timothy Laughton was a long-standing member of staff of the Department and an internationally acknowledged expert in Mesoamerican (and especially Mayan) art. His death in February 2009 came as a shock to all who knew him. Tim was a friendly, charming man, who was popular with staff and students alike.

Tim came to the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex to study for a BA in Art History in October 1979. He later completed his MA in Art History in 1984, submitting a thesis entitled *Evelyn de Morgan - A Neglected Victorian Artist*. It was during this time that he developed an interest in Mesoamerican studies, inspired by the teaching and enthusiasm of Gordon Brotherston and went on to write his PhD entitled *Sculpture on the Threshold: the Iconography of Izapa and its Relationship to that of the Maya*, which he submitted in 1997.

¹ The editors would also like to thank all Tim's former colleagues and students who have collaborated with the production of this text, through comments, suggestions and additions, including Libby Armstrong, Valerie Fraser, Iris Baliija, Saikrishna Banerjee and Michael Aakhus.

His innovative thesis offered a rich and detailed interpretation of the narrative content of the stelae at the ancient site of Izapa in Chiapas, Mexico, which he first visited in 1992. Using astronomical evidence relating to the appearance of comets, Tim suggested the stelae date to within just a few decades of the 2nd century BC, and that many of the scenes depicted were versions of narratives described in the much later Quiche Maya text, the *Popol Vuh*, which dates from the 16th century AD. Crucial to understanding the sculptures as referring to mythical or cosmological action, rather than historical events, was the presence on many of the stelae of the so-called Mesoamerican “sky-band”, which represented a portal between natural and supernatural worlds, signalling the magical and sacred nature of the depictions. In turn, the likely implication of understanding the monuments as constituting a total narrative was suggestive of their use within annual ritual processions around the Izapa site lead by rulers, the principle shamans of the community. A summary of the thesis was published in 1998 in the *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures* under the title *Izapa: a preclassic codex in stone*.

1998 also saw the release of Tim’s extremely popular book *The Maya: Life, Myth and Art*, first published by Duncan Baird. This beautifully illustrated volume is a thoughtful and accessible introduction to Mayan culture and history, and has sold over 111,000 copies in nine languages.

Tim started teaching to both Latin American Studies and Art History students in the late 1980s and his classes in Pre-Columbian Art and Architecture proved extremely popular with undergraduate and post-graduate students alike. He enjoyed describing the form and content of Mayan pottery in particular, and relished pointing out to students the contrast between the exquisite elegance of the brushwork and the repulsive nature of much of the subject matter: the gods of Xibalba, the Mayan underworld, represented surrounded by vomit and excrement, guts and eyeballs, and what he vividly used to describe as ‘foliated farts’.

Tim also taught a unique course on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing at post-graduate level, which was attended by members of staff and students from

across the University, as well as by interested scholars from around the country. His teaching was accessible and interesting to all, and by the end of just 10 weeks, students were able to read the most complicated dating sequences of the Maya – a particularly impressive feat.

The author of a number of exhibition and book reviews, including for the Burlington Magazine, Tim was one of the Mesoamerican experts invited to lecture as part of the Royal Academy of Arts' public programme during their blockbuster Aztec exhibition in 2002-3. He also delivered papers at various conferences in the UK and abroad, and it was an appearance at such an event in the US that led to a collaboration with artist Michael Aakhus. "The Stones of Izapa", was a series of 15 prints based on the Izapa stelae with accompanying texts written by Tim. The edition was made as a screenfold edition and a loose leaf folio, copies of which can be found in the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex. Aakhus, now Associate Dean at the University of Southern Indiana said of Tim's death, "This is such sad news and a loss to all who admired Tim. I met Tim while he was presenting a paper at a conference organized by Gordon Brotherston at Indiana University. I was fascinated by his work on the Stones of Izapa in the southern State of Chiapas, Mexico. His insight into the narrative content of these images as a retelling of the Popol Vuh was a remarkable interdisciplinary crossing between archaeology, science, literature and art history. It sparked an exchange between us that led to the creation of the artist book "Stones of Izapa" which was completed in 2006." Three extracts from the "The Stones of Izapa" are reproduced at the end of this article along side their respective images.

Personal tributes came from many who knew Tim, including from Alister Neher, now teaching at Dawson College in Canada and a former postgraduate in the Department: "I was Tim's lodger and my concern when I arrived was that he would be a decent landlord. It quickly became evident that he was much more than that. I was struck by his kindness and the concern that he showed for the well-being of others. While somewhat reserved in public, at home he was warm, witty and expansive. We had many dinners that turned into conversations that lasted the whole evening."

Doctoral candidate Saikrishna Banerjee, who is currently completing her thesis and worked closely with Tim, described him as “one of the nicest people I have ever met in my life”, and spoke of his influence as a supervisor: “Having returned to academics after a 9-year break, my confidence was not at its best. Tim was always very reassuring and helped me get a sense of direction with my research. He was very gentle with his criticism, and although a bit cautious with praise, he always made me feel positive about my work and helped me to stay focussed. His wonderful sense of humour and his love and passion for the Maya was very infectious. I owe my present fascination and understanding of the Maya world entirely to him. He encouraged me to travel to Mexico last year but unfortunately I never got the chance to share my experiences with him. I still miss him immensely and I hope to make him proud by completing my thesis this year. I am sure the legacy of his work will go on.”

Before his sudden death on the 7th February 2009, Tim had been due to give a paper at the JISLAC seminar at the University of Essex, on the subject of the jaws motif in Mesoamerica. The use of jaws as the visual threshold between the natural and supernatural realms had intrigued Tim since his doctoral studies, and his most recent research had focused on the way in which, in the majority of cases, although supernaturals may be manifested into our realm through this portal, we humans are not allowed admittance to the otherworld, although on rare occasions, jaws may be employed as a means to allow us to see into the supernatural.

As it happened the event became an opportunity to celebrate Tim’s life and work, and for both students and staff to pay tribute to him as a passionate and committed teacher and valued colleague who will be sorely missed. His work was highly regarded by other scholars in the field, and the work he published was well received. His death means that the Art History Department has lost a unique feature of its teaching programme – its expertise in Mesoamerican art and architecture – which the University has no plans to replace. That no UK

institution currently offers a course in Mayan Hieroglyphic writing testifies to the unique and irreplaceable value of Tim's knowledge.

Bibliography of the works of Tim Laughton

Sculpture on the Threshold: the iconography of Izapa and its

relationship to that of the Maya, PhD thesis, University of Essex, 1997

Izapa: a preclassic codex in stone, Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures, no.13, 1998, pp17-23

The Maya: life, myth and art, Duncan Baird, 1998

Exhibition Review: The Maya, Venice, in The Burlington Magazine, Vol.141, No.1152, March 1999, pp189-191

Recreating the Sacred Landscape: the Function of Meso-American

Pyramids, paper delivered at the Encounters with Ancient Egypt conference, University College London, London 16th-18th December 2000

Exhibition Review: The Aztecs, Royal Academy, London, in The Burlington Magazine, Vol.145, No.1200, Centenary Issue, March 2003, pp233-235

Stones of Izapa: a collaboration between Michael Aakhus and Tim

Laughton, Michael Aakhus intaglio prints, texts by Tim Laughton, 2006

Editorial consultant for Robert Nicholson, **The Maya**, Two-Can, 1993

The Tim Laughton Scholarship and the Tim Laughton Travel Fund

Thanks to the generosity of his family, the Department is able to offer a new MA bursary in memory of Tim. The award is for £5000 for candidates studying any field or period of art history at Masters level, and will be tenable during the 2010-11 academic year.

Similarly, a Travel Fund has also been set up in Tim's memory. Generous donations, again from Tim's family and also from the artist Michael Aakhus have enabled the department to offer the £500 annual bursary, which will be awarded to the undergraduate or postgraduate student in the department who submits the most promising proposal for travel to Latin America for research related to their BA, MA or PhD dissertation.

To help raise money for the fund, Michael Aakhus has donated a set of the limited edition prints produced for "The Stones of Izapa" book published in collaboration with Tim in 2006. These prints, two of which are reproduced here (pages 7 & 9), are now available to buy from the Department of Art History, at £375 each. For more information, please contact the Departmental Administrator, Libby Armstrong, at libby@essex.ac.uk.

3 Extracts from "The Stones of Izapa - A collaboration between Timothy Laughton and Michael K Aakhus", 2006.

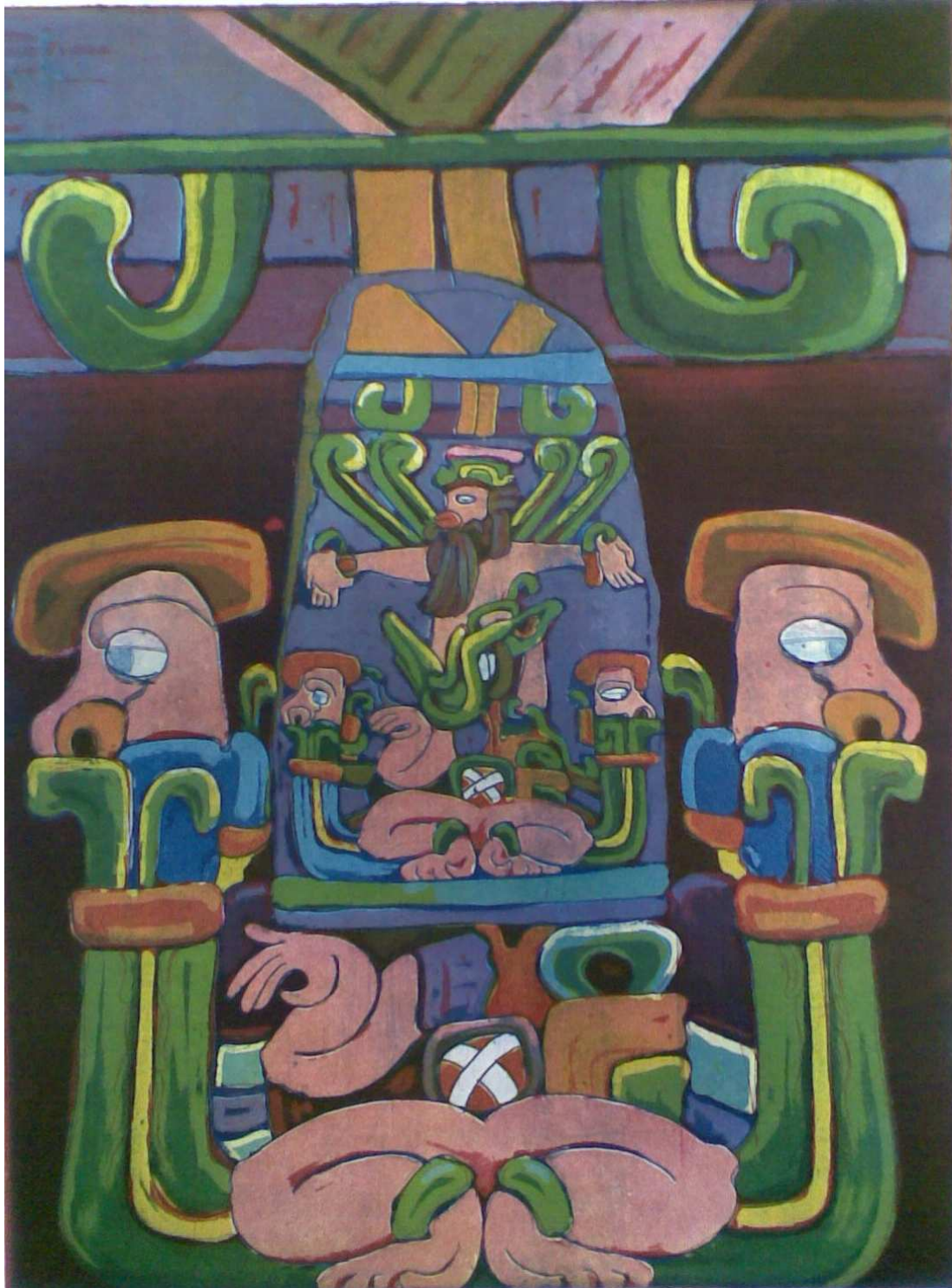
The following extracts from the "Stones of Izapa" are Tim's Introductory text, and his descriptions of Stela 11 and 23 alongside their respective images, intaglio prints by Michael Aakhus, which were made after the Izapan Stelae.

Introduction

"Izapa is situated so that from the site on the morning of the summer solstice the sun appears to rise out of the largest volcano in the region, Tajumulco, and this event is depicted symbolically on one of the Stelae. This is the climax of the story but it is not the only celestial event to be depicted at Izapa. Many of the scenes in the Popol Vuh may be interpreted in terms of movements of the stars in the night sky. Imagine the ruler of Izapa on the night of the summer solstice leading a ritual procession around and between the plazas. As the Popol Vuh story unfolds on the sculptures they pass, so the narrative is echoed by the stars. As the ruler reaches the end of the procession and takes his place on the grand stone throne in the centre of the main plaza the sun rises out of Tajumulco, the cone of which was considered to be an entry and exit to the dread underworld. It is as if the ruler himself is the embodiment of one of the Hero Twins, and indeed the sun itself, here on earth. The sculptures of Izapa not only relate the story of the Popol Vuh but they are also a statement of the power of the ruler and his semi-divine nature."

Stela 11

"The procession now proceeds to the Group B Plaza. Group B is the oldest, and most important part of the site, and is placed in front of what was once a large stepped pyramid. The ruler's throne provides the focal point of the plaza and it is here that he would have reinforced his position of power through various rites and ceremonies. A measure of its importance is shown by the fact that after the centre of the site was abandoned in the first century AD for another site to the north, the people still continued to return here to place important burials and ritual offerings.



Michael Aakhus, Stela 11, intaglio print, from "The Stones of Izapa - A collaboration between Timothy Laughton and Michael K Aakhus" Copyright the Artist

A series of three stelae are placed in front of the western mound facing towards the eastern horizon. The first of these is Stela 11. An elderly figure is

shown being swallowed up by a highly stylized toad which crouches within a double-headed serpent. The figure has a long beard and has scrolls emanating from behind him. These scrolls curve inwards at their tips and have cross hatching on them.

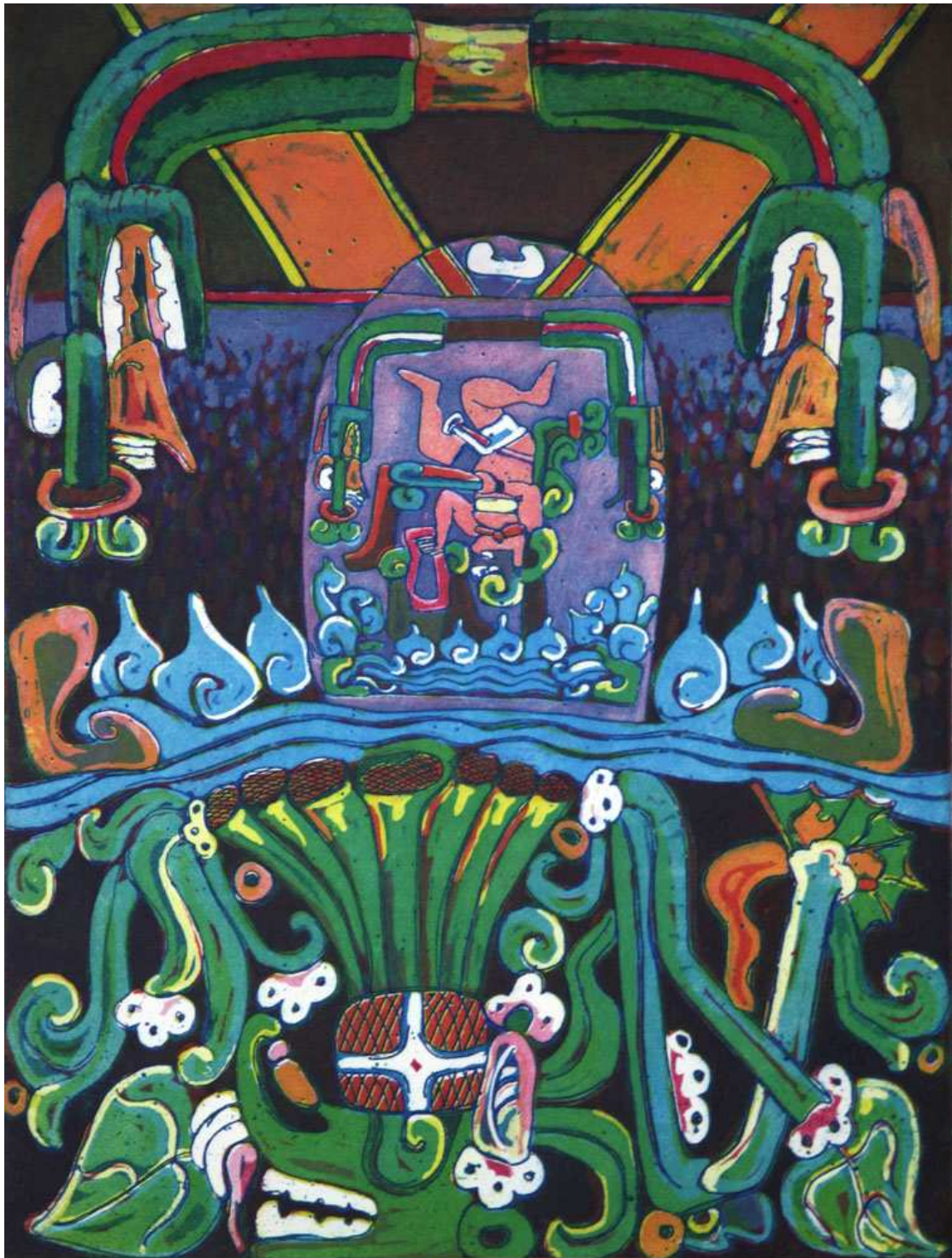
Toads appear several times at Izapa. Four altars are carved in their shape, two of them are placed in front of Stela 1 and 3, which is appropriate given the watery associations of these monuments. The other two were moved when the centre was abandoned but would also have been associated with stelae. A pot-bellied toad also appears on Stela 6 in Group A and it is swallowing something, in this case a crescent shape. It is much more naturalistic than the one on Stela 11 and the venom glands are clearly visible on its shoulder. It has a deity head attached to the base of its back denoting it as a supernatural entity. If one looks carefully at the same position on Stela 11 toad it is possible to make out the nostril and upper lip of the same deity, although again it is highly stylized. This supernatural toad persisted in Mesoamerican mythology for a long time, it is depicted on a Maya painted vase of the eighth century AD.

Stela 11 may be interpreted as the setting of the sun at dusk. The sun is shown as a man growing old during the course of the day. The sun's rays are growing feeble, curling over at the ends, their darkening indicated by the cross-hatching. The sun is descending into the underworld, it is literally being swallowed up by the toad earth monster. As it does so the Milky Way, presented here as a double-headed serpent, becomes visible. The toad on Stela 6 is swallowing the crescent moon."

Stela 23

"Stela 23, which is the pair to Stela 21 in the Group D corridor, shows a figure diving from the sky wielding an axe. Although it is in the same pose as Seven Macaw on Stelae 2 and 4 it is not him, it does not have wings or any other bird characteristics. It seems to be diving towards water, perhaps the Rio Izapa. Above it is a double-headed serpent. This is a difficult image to

interpret but, given that it is paired with Stela 21, it may be that it has an astronomical meaning.



Michael Aakhus, Stela 23, intaglio print, from "The Stones of Izapa - A collaboration between Timothy Laughton and Michael K Aakhus" Copyright the Artist

Comets have been recorded several times in Native American sources. To the Aztec they were known as *citlalimpopoca* or “the stars that smoke”. The Quiche Maya referred to them as *uje ch’umil*, “tail of the star”; and meteors were called *ch’ab’i q’aq’*, “flaming arrows”. In both cultures they were seen as bad omens whose portents included death, sickness and warfare. In the latter case this may have been due to the fact that the most lethal material used as a blade on weapons was obsidian; a material which was considered to be formed as a result of either lightning, or meteors and comets, hitting the ground.

The Chinese made very careful records of astronomical occurrences, especially the appearance of comets, including details not only of the dates of their arrival and departure, but also of their brilliance; the presence or absence of tails, and their length; and their position in the sky with regard to Chinese constellations. This may seem to be irrelevant to Mesoamerica but comets that would be visible in China were also visible in Mexico and Guatemala. The period from 148 to 134 BC, which falls within the phase when the stelae were carved, was particularly active as far as comets were concerned.

In 148 BC there was a single comet recorded. It appeared in the north west from the end of April to the 27th of May. However in 147 BC three comets arrived, variously on the 13th May, 6th August, and the 12th of October. Of these, the October comet is recorded as appearing in the north east portion of the sky. The August comet manifested itself in that part of the sky known to the ancient Chinese as *Fang*. The sky was divided by the Chinese into various “lunar mansions” or *hsiu*, which have a roughly similar function to our zodiacal constellations. *Fang* occupied the 4th *hsiu* which incorporates most of Libra and parts of Lupus.

The comet which appeared on the 13th of May 147 BC is the one pertinent to Stela 23. Its description is provided by a manuscript from the Han dynasty entitled the *Chhien Han Shu*. Although it was written by the scribe Pan Ku

around AD.100, it includes information taken from an earlier text, the *Shih Chi* written between 100-90 BC:

“On a *ting-yu* day in the third month of the third year of the Chung-Yuan reign-period a (*hui*) comet appeared at night in the NW. It was of a white colour, measuring 10ft (1 chang) and was found at the *Tsui-hsi* (20th lunar mansion). It moved away at dawn and became smaller. After 15 days it went out of sight”

The location given for this comet, *Tsui-hui*, is the area which would be identified by western astronomers as that immediately above the shoulder of Orion. The intervals between the lunar houses are precisely defined, the next lunar house being just to the right of Betelgeuse.

On the 13th of May, just after sunset, Orion would have been visible in the west for about an hour as it gradually sank below the horizon, following the sun into the underworld. The comet was placed precisely at neck level and would thus have appeared to cut off the head of the figure represented by the constellation Orion. The Milky Way, which changes its position throughout the night, was at this time lying in a low arc across the south western sky framing both the comet and the descent of Orion. This is represented on Stela 23 by the double headed serpent. Thus the diving figure on Stela 23, unique in the Izapa corpus, is a personification of the 147 BC comet which appears to slice through the neck of the Hero Twin on Stela 21. Stela 21 itself is a representation of the night sky at the moment when Orion reappears on the eastern horizon after the decapitation, which would take place about a month later just before the summer solstice. The two stelae stand in front of a low broad platform and it is possible that this decapitation was re-enacted on it as part of the ritual procession.”

Some Information about the prints

The images are in the medium of intaglio and are etched on copper plates. There are three plates for each image and each plate is printed in a different colour. The colours are red, yellow and blue, often referred to as primary colours. When the yellow plate has etched areas that intersect with etched areas on the blue plate the colours mix on the page and you have green. To get the darkest tones all the colours have to intersect and the plates are etched very deeply in these areas. In this way all three colours mix to make black. The images are printed on the French made paper Arches Cover White and the paper is softened prior to printing by placing it in a water bath. While still damp the paper is run through the press on the yellow plate, then the red and finally the blue. The images are given time to dry and then the text is added to the page and the screen fold artist book assembled. The edition has been done as a loose leaf folio as well as in the screen fold methods for presentation.