



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute
Volume XII, No. 1, Summer 2011

In This Issue:

The Celestial God of Number 13

by
Merle Greene Robertson
PAGES 1-6

A Celebration of Merle Greene Robertson

by
E. Wyllys Andrews
PAGES 7-8

A Notational Explanation for Maya Calendar Round Dates Such as 11 Eb 16 Mac

by
Victoria R. Bricker
PAGES 9-10

Morley's Diary: April 28

PAGE 11-12

Joel Skidmore
Editor
joel@mesoweb.com

Marc Zender
Associate Editor
marc@mesoweb.com

The PARI Journal
202 Edgewood Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94117
415-664-8889
journal@mesoweb.com

Electronic version
available at:
www.mesoweb.com/
pari/journal/1201

ISSN 1531-5398

The Celestial God of Number 13¹

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Adjunct Curator of Pre-Columbian Art, Fine Art Museums of San Francisco

Rare indeed is this beautifully carved jade sculpture, the Maya God of Number 13 (Figure 1). The seven-centimeters-high anthropomorphic representation is the only piece of carved jade sculpture depicting this god that I have ever seen. I am calling this god the Celestial God of Number 13 to distinguish it from the other representations of the God of Number 13 that do not have the crossed bands in the mouth, but may have all—or some—of the other diagnostics of this particular deity. I will discuss the other representations of this god—the Water Lily God form with the tied bow around the water lily pad on the forehead, the *uinal* (Maya month) headdress form, the *tun* (year) form, and the hieroglyphic forms—and their relationships to one another.

In order to clarify the role of the gods in the Maya world, especially during the Classic period (AD 300–900) and the Post Classic as well (AD 900 up until the time of the Spanish Conquest), I would like to point out the enormous pantheon of Maya gods. The people living in what are now the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, all of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, the Yucatan peninsula, and part of Honduras, regulated their daily lives by appeasing the gods. Their most important deity was Itzamna (*itzam* meaning “lizard”), and they believed that the world was supported on



Figure 1. Headband ornament, God of Number 13. Maya, central Peten, Guatemala, AD 600-900. Light green jade and red cinnabar. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

the back of this saurian creature. Actually, there were four Itzamnas, one assigned to each of the world directions. The Itzamnas were usually represented as two-headed reptilian creatures, often with the head of a serpent as the front head and the head of a god at the rear (Figure 2).

Four Bacabs, anthropomorphic beings with human bodies and reptilian faces, held up the sky, which was represented by a narrow band of celestial symbols—a “skyband”—separated by vertical bars.

¹ This article originally appeared in *Triptych* September/October 1990 © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. It is reprinted here in its original form.

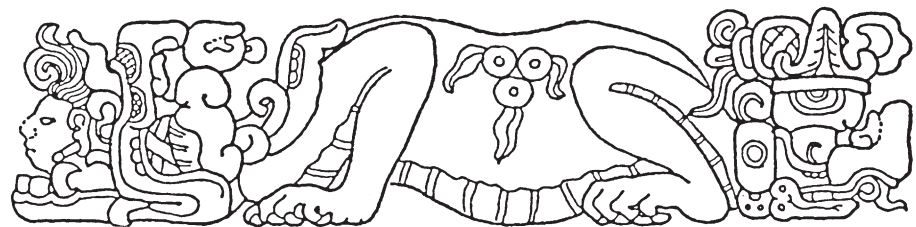


Figure 2. Itzamna. Two-headed reptilian creature upon which the world rested.

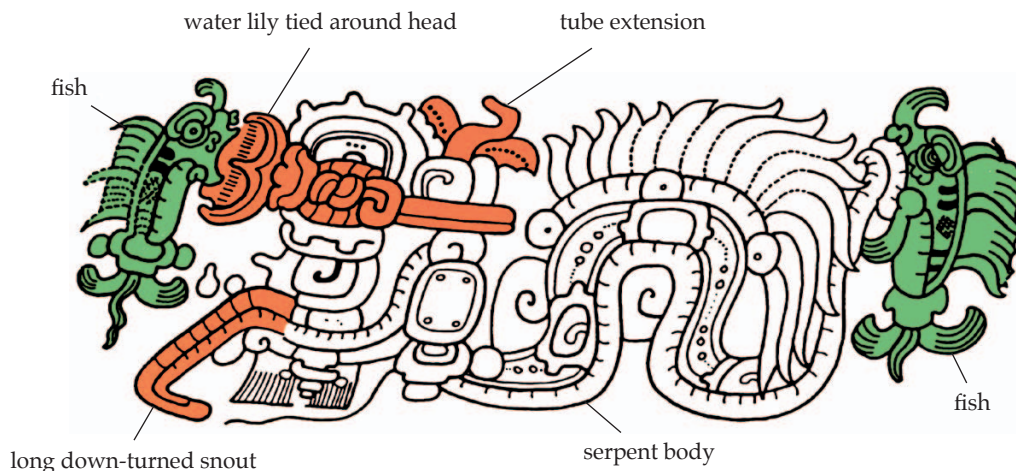


Figure 3. God of Number 13 with water lily headband.

An example of the skyband being held up by four Bacabs can be noted on the reconstruction drawing of the roof comb of the Temple of the Sun, Palenque.²

Other Maya gods were the Sun God; the Moon Goddess; Chac, the rain god; the corn god; the death god; the Palenque Triad who were the offspring of the ancestral Goddess; and a myriad of gods who were the patrons of every conceivable subject.³ These gods did not take on only one aspect. They could become benevolent gods or evil gods. They had the aspects of youth and of old age, as well as many other opposite characteristics.

There were gods of days, months, years, and other periods of time, and of numbers as well, such as the God of Number 13. From Diego de Landa and other colonial books we know that the number permutation series in the 260-day calendar never went above 13, a very propitious number for the Maya.⁴ Kelley (1976:96) sees the deity of 13 as a reptilian monster who sometimes has the *uinal* glyph in his head.⁵ Thirteen in Maya arithmetic is a combination of two bars, each standing for 5, and three dots, each standing for 1; or a deity with a long snout (lip? nose?). In portraiture, Thompson (1960:131-137) sees 13 taking two forms: the blending of the profile of the God of Number 3 with the bared jawbone, which is the insignia of the death god (deity of number 10); or a fantastic head with a long pendulous nose (snout, lip, beak?). The museum's example (Figure 1) would fall into the latter category. In all Mayan languages, 13 is composed of the word for 3 followed by the morpheme for ten (Macri 1985).

As we will see, the God of Number 13 often wears a tied water lily pad and blossom around the forehead (Figures 3-4). One personification of the water lily god is shown on the lower border of Pier F of House D of the Palace, Palenque.⁶ Here, the god is associated with the watery underworld and the plants growing in it. Water lily flowers are represented by the *imix* glyph (the first day of the Maya almanac, often represented by a water lily blossom), thus signaling all of the manifestations of

an aquatic realm and the underworld, as well as its earth functions.⁷ Schele (in Schele and Miller 1986:46) sees the Water Lily Monster as the "symbol of standing bodies of water, such as the ocean, lakes, swamps, and agricultural

² Palenque is the name of what many refer to as the most beautiful of all the ancient Maya sites that were at their prime from about AD 300-900. Palenque is located in what is now the state of Chiapas, Mexico, at the base of a rainforest mountain range. The author has spent 20 years recording every piece of art in the city and is the author of *The Sculpture of Palenque*, Vols. I, II, and III; Vol. IV is at press and there will be five volumes in all.

The Temple of the Sun has the best preserved roof comb at Palenque. There is ample evidence of the skyband bordering the roofcomb and continuing on the cross bars. Arms of bacabs are *in situ* holding up the skybands as indicated in the reconstruction drawing in Robertson 1979.

³ The Ancestral Goddess of Maya mythology was born in mythical times in 3121 BC. The Great Father, known of as GI 1st was born in 3122 BC. The triplet children of the Ancestral Goddess, Hunahpu (GI), Xbalanque (GIII), and Smoking Mirror, God K (GII) were born in 2697 BC of cosmo-mythological times. The Mother Goddess was 424 years old at the time of birth.

⁴ A friar from Spain, Diego de Landa came to Yucatan in 1549 and later became the first bishop of Yucatan. Trying to rid the Maya of their pagan religion, he ordered all of the Maya books burned, thus destroying incredible evidence about their language. He was recalled to Spain and jailed; upon his release, he returned to Yucatan and spent the rest of his life writing about the people, their way of life, and their language, in his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan*.

⁵ A glyph (hieroglyph) may be made up of numerous combinations of individual elements which are placed at specific places about the main sign: prefixes which are placed before it, suffixes below it, and superfixes above it. There may be several glyphs making up one glyph block, designating names of persons, places, relationships, action, events, periods of time, and many other pieces of information.

⁶ The bases of the piers of House D all have watery underworld connotations. The personified Water Lily God is shown on Pier F (see Robertson 1985:Figs. 221-223).

⁷ The water lily form of the *imix* glyph can be seen on Pier F of House D (see Robertson 1985:Fig. 233).

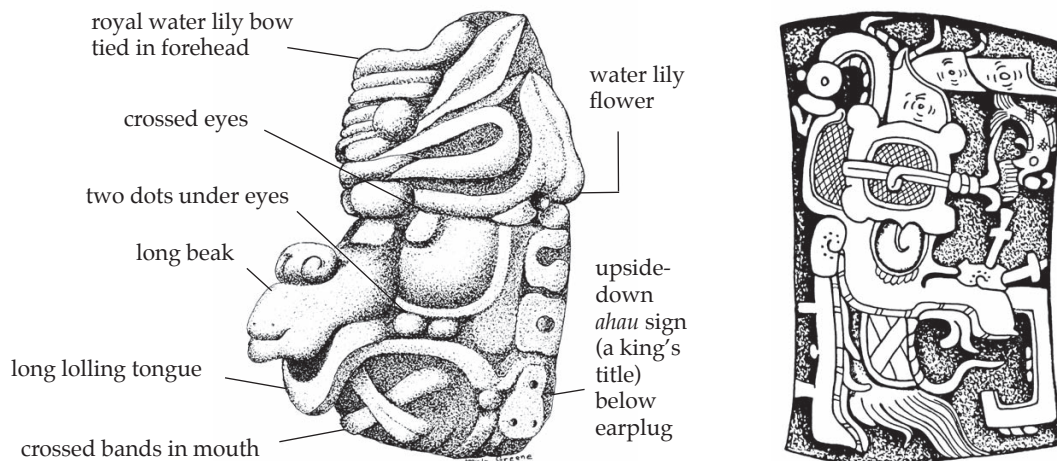


Figure 4. Celestial God of Number 13: (left) Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco jade (drawing by Merle Greene Robertson); (right) Chochola-style bowl (from Parsons 1980:Fig. 314).

canals,” the latter being the habitat of water lilies. It is this water lily pad that is tied around the head of our God of Number 13 and is one of its most significant diagnostics. The Maya Lacandon Indians believed that gods descended from the mating of the red and white plumeria flowers (Thompson 1970:202), while others, in referring to Lacandon Maya mythology, say that Kococh was the remote creator, and that he created the water lily flower from which are descended the other gods (Bruce 1967). In any case, the water lily has played an important role in Maya religion and mythology.

It has been suggested that the God of Number 13 is also represented by *xoc*, a mythical fish, again a creature of watery depths, but at the same time it is noted that the head of the god is that of a serpent or creature capable of transmuting itself into a dragon (Thompson 1960:136). Serpents or saurian creatures were the forms upon which the world rested, between the underworld and the heavens. The God of Number 13, then, has affiliations with both the world of the living and the world of the dead, as well as association with rain, large bodies of standing water, running water, and, by extension, blood (sacrifice).

The crossed bands of the sky sign are a celestial symbol and have been related to a Yucatec word meaning “crossed in the middle,” as well as something transverse (Kelley 1976:152-155). They appear sometimes on monuments, as on the serpent segment. The museum’s piece is the only instance of portable sculpture I know of where crossed bands are shown in the mouth of the god.

In some glyphic representations of 13, Martha Macri sees the head variant as a muan bird, the Yucatecan screech owl, as did Schellhas (1904:41) and Berlin (1944). It is the number followed by the sky sign. This translates as “full moon, moon in opposition,” which literally would be “13 sky.” The name of the muan

bird is almost exactly the same as the Yucatecan phrase for “full moon.” Macri has discovered that the Maya apparently meant that the head variant of 13 signified the full moon. The half moon, or first quarter, occurs seven days before the full moon. Counting back seven days from 13, we arrive at six. The head variant for six has an axe in its eye which may have been motivated by two factors: there is a word for “chop, break,” which is similar to the word for six; and the sixth day of the lunar cycle, counting from the first day of visibility, is the first quarter, the half moon.

Macri (1985) suggests that “before the ritual calendar existed, before there were 20 day names, some groups of Maya speakers considered the 13 days beginning with the new crescent and ending with the full moon to have been specially significant. With time, each of the numbers came to have an individual identity”; and “by the time of the Conquest they were all referred to as gods. The cycle of 13 has had an existence quite apart from its meaning as a lunar cycle, but the glyph for muan bird and the colonial Yucatec phrase for full moon indicate that the original significance may not have been entirely forgotten.”

We now see that the diagnostics of the God of Number 13 include

- a long, down-turned snout
- the water lily pad tied around the head
- fish in association
- one or two tubes issuing from the head
- long tongue or sometimes a stingray spine in the mouth
- crossed eyes
- dots under the eyes
- upside-down *ahau* element under the earpiece
- crossed bands in the mouth

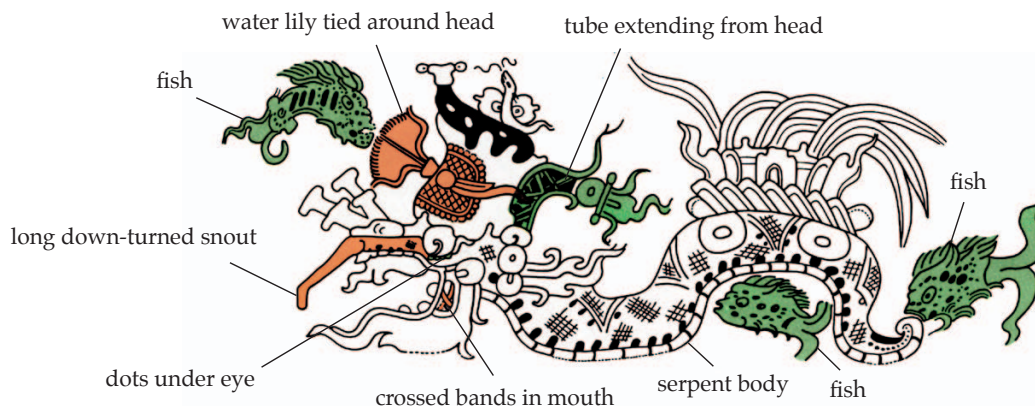


Figure 5. All diagnostics are present on this Celestial God of Number 13.

It is not necessary that the god of Number 13 have all of these characteristics but it must have at least the tied water lily pad around the forehead, the long snout, and the tubes coming from the head. It is the crossed bands that determine the celestial aspect of the de Young Museum piece (Figure 4).

Representations of this god appear on ceramic vases, a bone carving, in the codices, on at least one building as part of its stucco decoration, on headdresses of figures represented on stelae,⁸ in graffito on the floor of a Maya structure, and on the museum's jade sculpture.

An excellent example of the Celestial God of Number 13 appears on a Chochola-style, Late Classic carved incised bowl (Parsons 1980:203, Fig. 314). Two Gods of Number 13, one being our celestial version, face each other on this polished black-brown earthenware pot. Both exhibit the long down-turned snout, the tied water lily bow headpiece, the tube in the head, crossed eyes, and long tongue. The one illustrated here (Figure 4, right) also has the crossed bands in the mouth and the fish association.

A line drawing from a polychrome Maya vase shows a beautiful example of the Celestial God of Number 13 (Figure 5). All of the diagnostics are present, including the crossed bands in the mouth. The body of the creature is a serpent. Little fish nibble at its body and at the water lily in the headdress (see Hellmuth 1987: Fig. 322).⁹ A decorative tube issues from the head. This example also represents the personification of the *tun* in Maya Long Count dates.

Other manifestations of the God of Number 13 are shown on Stelae 4 and 7 from Machaquila, Guatemala (see Graham 1967:Figs. 51, 57). Stela 4 is a good example

of the way Maya sculptors worked the personified God of Number 13 into the headdresses of stela figures (Figure 6). The tied water lily pad and blossom form the headdress, while the identity of the god is taken by the person on the stela. In other words, the person being honored has taken the identity of the god by having

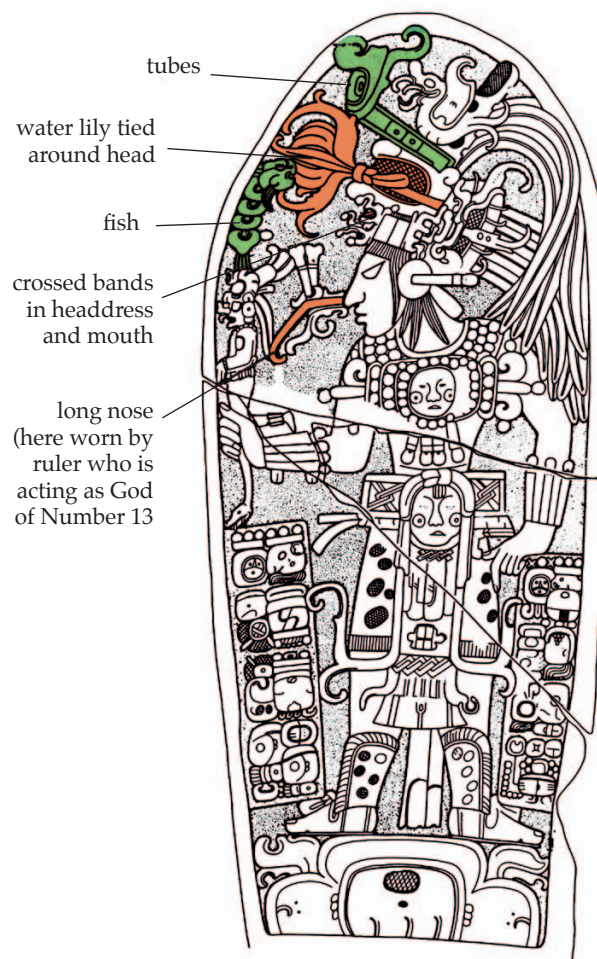


Figure 6. On Machaquila Stela 4, the human figure is represented as the God of Number 13. Drawing from Ian Graham (1967:Fig. 51)

⁸ A stela (plural stelae) is a free standing, large, monolithic stone slab that the Maya erected in front of buildings in many of their cities. Some are plain, but most are carved on one or all four sides with portraits of elite persons and hieroglyphic inscriptions announcing dates, events, and periods of time.

⁹ Hellmuth (1997:161) notes the figures on this Merrin Gallery bowl as being the deity of number 13, god of the day Muluc, "water."

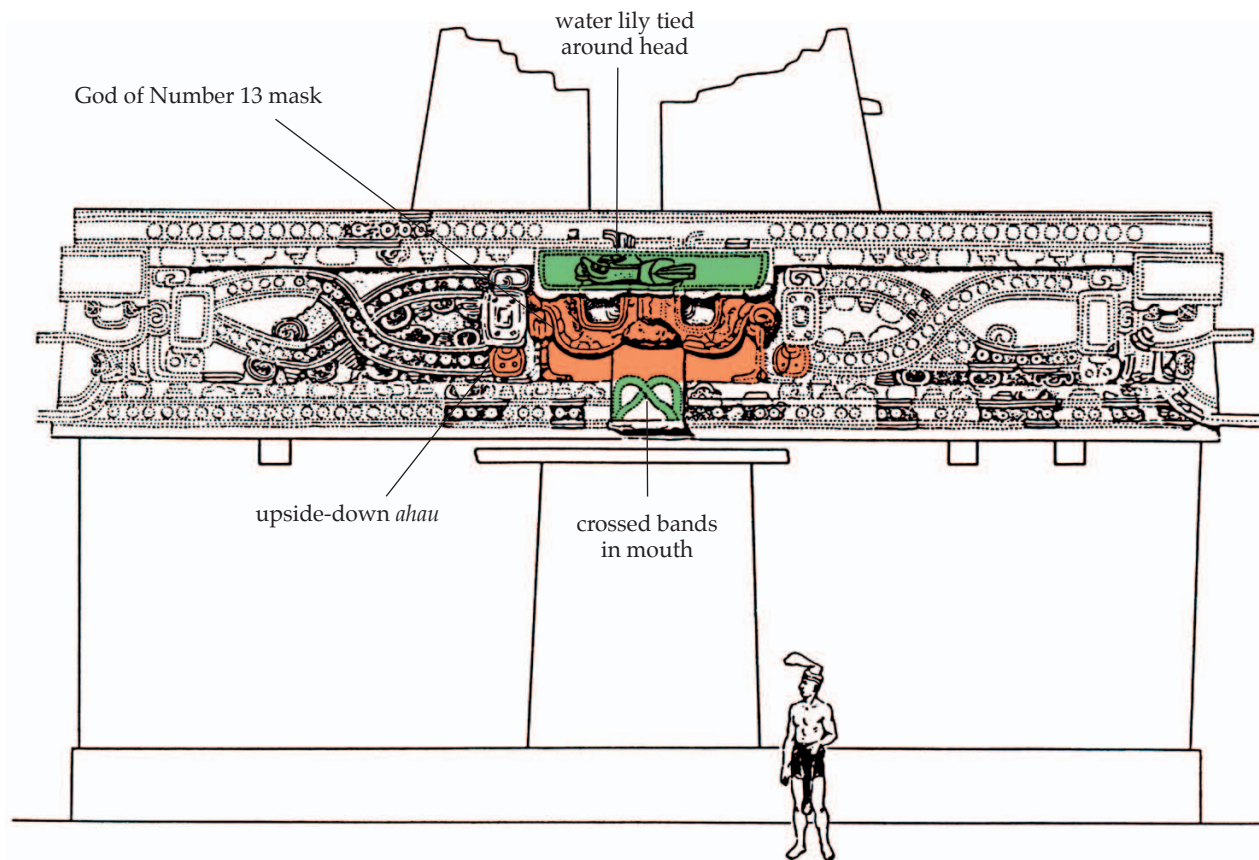


Figure 7. House of the Dolls, Dzibilchaltun, Yucatan. The Celestial God of Number 13 is in the decorative stucco façade. Drawing from Coggins (1983:Fig. 8).

the long snout worn as an extension of his human nose. In this instance, a little jester god appears at the front of the headband while a shell dragon perches atop the tube extension on top of the water lily pad. A little fish with a rattlesnake tail nibbles at the *imix* blossom. Water symbols abound.

One of the most beautiful, and by far the largest representation of the Celestial God of Number 13 appears on the stucco decoration of the upper zone of the south facade of Structure 1-sub of the Temple of the Dolls, Dzibilchaltun, Yucatan, Mexico (Coggins 1983:8-14; Taube 1986). Taube first called my attention to this mask, one of four which once adorned the four sides of this temple. The best remains are on the south facade, where portions of the tied water lily headband, as well as the squared cartouches framing the crossed eyes of the god, remained visible at the time of uncovering. Upside-down *ahau* elements extend from the rectangular earpieces and remnants of the crossed bands in the mouth are shown on a drawing made at the time of excavation by the staff artist (Figure 7). Coggins remarks, in discussing the stucco decoration on this building, that no remnants of these bands remain visible, but that the artist must have had some way of determining that they were there when the building was excavated.¹⁰ The

crossed bands were in position on the mask on the north elevation, which is supporting evidence for the crossed bands on the south and probably on all four sides of the structure. Jade symbols appear regularly within the band, and five-stack water symbols are along the edges, reinforcing the watery underworld symbolism of the upper zone.

On the floor of this same structure at Dzibilchaltun, there is a 38 cm graffito of the Celestial God of Number 13 (Andrews 1980:101).¹¹ This depiction, obviously done

¹⁰ The author has found that it is often possible to determine where the elements of stucco had been by examining the first coats of stucco that were applied. The edges of these coats often remain after the piece has been destroyed.

¹¹ Graffiti are fairly common in Maya buildings. These informal incised cartoons were probably done by neophytes who wiled away their time incising images on plaster walls and on the floors of temples. There is no plan as to how they are presented, and they may face in any direction. Some are indeed beautiful and depict ritualistic scenes, sacrifices, and portraits of persons, as well as diagrams of a patolli board, a game played much in the same manner as parcheesi. We know that the graffiti on Maya temples were done by the ancient Maya themselves and not by early explorers or present-day people because they appear all over on walls of buildings that were buried for centuries, even on those that the Maya buried and built over.

by a neophyte, is clearly a depiction of this god with the water lily tied bow on the forehead, the tube extension from the head, the long down-turned snout, and the crossed bands in the mouth. This leads me to believe that the god with the crossed bands in the mouth was well known by everyone at the time.

As in all the pantheon of Maya gods, the God of Number 13 has many manifestations. This is not at all unusual. One god's duties and diagnostics overlap onto a god of another form. We have seen how this one god is, at the same time, many gods who take on the manifestations of the day Muluc, the day Imix and its water lily attributes, the *uinal* (month) sign, *tun* (year) sign, the earth and the sky and the watery underworld, as well as the moon. However, with all of the different manifestations and aspects of the God of Number 13, there are very few examples that carry the celestial aspect shown by the crossed bands in the mouth. The Celestial God of the Number 13, as I suggest calling the one in the collection of the de Young Museum, is the finest representation of the god that I have seen anywhere.

[The following credit appeared with the original article:]



MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON (above), Adjunct Curator of Pre-Columbian Art at The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, is a distinguished scholar of Mesoamerican art and art history and the director of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute in San Francisco and in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. She is a Research Associate of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University; the California Academy of Sciences; and the Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley; she has published widely on Palenque, Tikal, and other significant Pre-Columbian sites. Working for the museums in an advisory capacity, Dr. Robertson assists with the Pre-Columbian collections, exhibitions, and scholarly programs of the Africa, Oceania, and the Americas Department.

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