

## FRANS BLOM, 1893–1963

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THE DEATH of Frans Blom on June 23, 1963, brought to an end the career of a man who was probably the last of the great explorers in the Stevens manner.

Blom was born in Copenhagen, August 9, 1893, the son of well-to-do parents. At home all members of the family spoke English, German, or French, each for two days in the week, and their native Danish only on Sundays. This early training gave Frans an idiomatic command of all three languages, which stood him in good stead. A gentleman's training in the Fine Arts at the Museum of Applied Art in Copenhagen offered Frans a golden opportunity to paint the town red. To this day a Dane will speak with some awe and respect to one who knew Blom. His escapades were the cause for a somewhat forced departure from Copenhagen. Equipped with enough money to pay his passage home if he could not find work, Frans was urged to find his place in the New World.

Accounts of his early years in Mexico vary somewhat, but all agree that he worked for *Compañía Petrolera El Aguila* in Chiapas and Tabasco. He soon took advantage of the opportunity to visit ruins, including Palenque, El Encanto, and others. Thanks to his training in art, his drawings were excellent. Eventually he sent a drawing of Stela 1 at El Tortuguero, together with notes on the site, to Sylvanus Morley, who was able to read the inscription. This drew great praise from Morley, and his subsequent correspondence with Blom drew Blom inevitably into the field of archaeology. He worked for the Mexican government at Palenque, under Gamio's aegis, and for the Carnegie Institution at Uaxactun and other sites. Realizing his need for more training, he went to Harvard to study under Tozzer. During his days in Cambridge he cut a wide swath and made many friends, among whom was a quiet student named La Farge.

In 1924, Frans Blom joined the Department of Middle American Research, then under the leadership of William Gates, and set about making plans to return to Mexico to continue explorations. Just as soon as La Farge could complete his first half-year of graduate school at Harvard, Blom brought him to Tulane to be ethnologist on the First Tulane University Ex-

pedition. The itinerary of this trip was based on reports that Blom had heard during his stay in Mexico or on tantalizing accounts that he had read.

Their route took them by train from Mexico to Vera Cruz and then toward the Tuxtla Mountains. Their account of a reconnaissance of this area on horseback includes references to great stone heads at Tres Zapotes, Indians hunting with bow and arrow, a word list, ethnological observations, and notes on a number of archaeological sites. At Puerto Mexico they chartered a sloop — horses had been taken by the De la Huerta revolution — and from it they discovered La Venta, probably the only waterborne expedition to discover a ruin in Middle America in the last century. Next they came on Comalcalco, with its tomb where eloquent stucco figures mourned the departed. At Macuspana, Lazaro Hernandez joined the party, and there they once again picked up animals. Lazaro became their guide, guardian, hostler, informant, and envoy plenipotentiary who opened the gates of many an Indian town along a road that took them through the big forest to Palenque, and then to Encanto, Bachajon, Ococingo, San Cristobal Las Casas, Comitán, and across the border into Guatemala at Gracias a Dios. At every opportunity the party collected a word list and information from the best available informants, so that *Tribes and Temples* contains much ethnologically important material. A chance word dropped at Comitán led La Farge to ask in Jacaltenango for the Jacalteca word for "year-bearer." In astonishment at La Farge's knowledge, the man spilled the information that was the key to La Farge's work there two years later.

Their road led them ever higher, through Todos Santos and the pass which Stevens had found every bit as cold and windy nearly three-quarters of a century before, and down the precipitous drop to Chiantla and Huehuetenango, 1200 miles of trail behind them. After the party returned to New Orleans, Blom was made head of the Department of Middle American Research, following the resignation of William Gates.

If the First Tulane Expedition staggers the present-day archaeologist, the John Geddings

Gray Memorial Expedition, in 1928, is an even more impressive accomplishment. Blom started from Tapachula on the Pacific Coast and led his party to Chichen Itza by way of Comitán, the Lacandon country, Yaxchilan, Altar de Sacrificios, Tikal, El Cayo, La Hondradéz and Bacalar, and thence to Chichen Itza — nearly 1500 miles across almost unknown trails without serious difficulty or delay. And to cap it all, Blom sold his mules for more than they cost him in Tapachula!

Traveling with Blom was an experience. He was meticulous in his attention to every detail. Notes were always made with indelible ink on Lefax notebooks with a carbon that was mailed home from the first town with a post office. His pack outfit was the acme of efficiency, allowing room for only a few supplies, for his parties lived off the land. His hammocks were slung with hammock hitches of the Danish Navy, and he ran his parties with a certain amount of naval discipline. As leader, he demanded the liver of every chicken, whether young or old!

He spent the 1930 season at Uxmal, working on a reproduction of the *Monjas for the Century of Progress Exposition* in Chicago. During the course of this work, he discovered approximately 20 new stelae and demonstrated the great superiority of night photography for capturing bas-relief.

In 1932, he married an heiress who shared none of his enthusiasms but was determined to bring him into her world. This marriage ended disastrously. It is likely that Frans then fell victim of the stockmarket collapse, for he was no longer able to raise funds to support his grandiose plans for the Middle American Research Institute. *Maya Research*, published with the support of the Alma Eagan Hyatt Foundation, lived a short but useful life from 1934 to 1937 and then collapsed for want of financial support. Frans had a sharp tongue and a temper, both of which were well controlled and concealed behind his very charming exterior. When things began to fall apart around him, he sought comfort in rum, and on some occasions his charm fell away and his rapierlike tongue hit home. He began to lose friends and to make enemies. Ultimately he sank deeper into the clutches of the demon rum,

neglected the Middle American Research Institute, and then resigned. He had lost his job, his apartment, his furniture, and most of his friends. He went to Mexico and what became of him for a time is not known.

There he met Gertrude Duby, a Swiss anthropologist. She started him on the road to self-respect, and by their marriage kept him there. With support from various sources, including the government of the State of Chiapas, the Secretary of Health, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, La Compañía Euskadi, and the Viking Fund, Blom continued his work in Chiapas and among the Lacandonés. In 1950, Frans and Trudy moved to San Cristobal Las Casas, a town with which he had fallen in love when he first saw it in 1925. An abandoned seminary in which they took up residence was gradually transformed into a very beautiful home. It was called "Na Bolom," and its insignia, an ocelot; a neat play on mayance *balam*. Frans conceived the idea of turning their home into a center for research. There he built up a library and provided facilities for students who soon came. His great interest in the Lacandonés and the Indians of Chiapas made this a true center for research on linguistics and ethnological matters.

On occasions they took in paying guests, especially people who wanted a trip to a place that was not tourist-ridden. They enjoyed "Na Bolom." They enjoyed the Indians. They enjoyed the charming company of Trudy and Frans.

Frans became a citizen of Chiapas, known and loved by the Indians and those of Spanish ancestry. He was awarded the Chiapas Prize in 1954. At his funeral was a throng of mourners, from the Governor of Chiapas to Indians come down from the hills to pay their respects. A mountain of flowers covered his grave, tribute from the humble people whom he loved.

Eric Thompson has paid him touching tribute in *Estudios de Cultura Maya* (Volume III, Mexico, 1963). I have relied on this to refresh my memory. Thompson has compiled an exhaustive bibliography, to which I refer the reader.

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