



TATIANA PROSKOURIAKOFF¹
1909–1985

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Tatiana Proskouriakoff, honorary curator of Maya art at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on August 30, 1985, at the age of 76. In the course of 50 years of activity in the field of mesoamerican archaeology, she made important contributions to the study of Maya art, architecture, and hieroglyphic writing.

She was born in Tomsk, Siberia, where her grandfather taught natural science (and wrote articles on Siberian archaeology) and where her father Avenir Proskouriakoff, a chemist and engineer, also worked. Tatiana's mother Alla Nekrassova, the daughter of a general, had met him in Moscow and eloped with him to Tomsk. She was a physician, who had graduated from the first class in any Russian medical school to accept women.

At the entry of Russia into World War I, her father found himself unable to enlist because of a weak heart; instead he was appointed inspector of ordnance, and late in 1915 was sent on a mission to the United States to supervise the manufacture of arms for his country. The Proskouriakoffs and their two daughters took ship from Archangel but had gone only a short way when ice closed in. While in this ship, stuck fast in the ice, the two girls contracted scarlet fever and diphtheria—Tatiana's sister also came down with measles—and they had to be carried back across the ice. Eventually the family was reunited in Pennsylvania the following spring, and there, after the Russian Revolution had occurred, they elected to stay. Her mother resumed her career as a physician in her adopted country, and her father taught chemistry.

At Lansdowne High School Tatiana—or Tania, as later she was universally known among her colleagues—acquired the nickname “Duchess,” by no means bestowed for hauteur or pretensions, but for the Rolls Royce quality of her mind, and by this name her sister and friends from those days continued to call her. After graduation, Proskouriakoff enrolled in the School of Architecture of Pennsylvania State College, though one academic year was spent at the University of Pennsylvania. Upon graduation in 1930 she found that because of the Depression, building was practically at a standstill, and some dismal years were spent job hunting. For a time she worked at Wanamaker's store. Then she took on a small job which involved copying drawings at a scale suitable for needlepoint, and for this purpose was given access to the University Museum. Having met one of the curators, she volunteered to make drawings for him—mostly to stave off boredom, she later said—and was accepted. The pay was poor, but at least she could use the library.

Soon after, Linton Satterthwaite, impressed by the quality of her work, invited her to join the 1936 expedition to Piedras Negras, with travel and expenses paid but no salary. On the way to the site they visited Palenque, and there, on seeing the elegant Temple of the Sun, Proskouriakoff knew she had found her vocation.

Unfortunately, the Depression showed no signs of letting up, and after another season at Piedras Negras, Satterthwaite was threatening to fire her (as he put it) because he could not agree to go on employing her without salary. Just then Sylvanus Morley, on a visit to the museum, was shown a drawing she had done as a pastime, one showing the Piedras Negras acropolis as it might have looked in its heyday. Morley immediately encouraged her to do a series of such drawings; in addition he secured funds to send her in 1939 to work with the Carnegie Institution team at Copan, and later at Chichen Itza.

Proskouriakoff traveled alone to Copan, and once there, found life at the staff camp distinctly wild. Having been brought up in a very proper European household, she was surprised considerably by the battery of bottles displayed on a table in the camp *sala*, and more so on finding how much the consumption of their contents enlivened the nightly games of poker, especially on Saturdays. One Sunday morning, annoyed with the men for sleeping so late, she opened the door of Gustav Stromsvik's room and let his parrot in. Soon there was a duet of squawking, the parrot having gotten Stromsvik by the mustache.

Proskouriakoff continued working on the series of reconstruction drawings in her spare time, and it was published by the Carnegie Institution as *An Album of Maya Architecture* (1946). It was Morley again who provided the stimulus for her next major work, even though this time it arose out of a friendly disagreement they had over the dating of a certain monument. Stimulated as ever by disagreement, she started on a bold attempt to establish a method of dating monuments on the basis, not of aesthetic values (on which Morley tended to rely) but of morphology and sculptural

style. Through her systematic and laborious analysis of the known body of Maya monuments datable by their own inscriptions, she was able to provide a method of dating any monument lacking an inscribed date to within 20 or 30 years. Since this important work, *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture* (1950), was compiled, a large number of new monuments has been found, and a new edition incorporating them is needed.

In 1943 Proskouriakoff had been promoted by A. V. Kidder, then head of the Carnegie's Division of Historical Research, from draftsman and illustrator to staff member, and it was as a surveyor and excavator that she took part in the Institution's last archaeological work, at Mayapan (1950–1955). At its end, all staff members were to be retired. Kidder, however, managed to persuade the Institution to retain on a permanent basis the three youngest members of the staff, of whom Proskouriakoff was one, at a reduced salary.

Now free of all assigned duties and established as a research associate in the Peabody Museum, Proskouriakoff could turn to the study of Maya hieroglyphic writing. From the beginning this had fascinated her and it had been the subject of her first published contribution (1944). Within a very short time she was to produce a paper, modest in presentation but of surpassing importance, entitled "Historical Implications of a Pattern of Dates at Piedras Negras, Guatemala" (1960). At one blow, this short paper freed the study of Maya writing from a lengthy stagnation, which largely was due to the generally accepted idea that monumental inscriptions contained exclusively calendrical and astronomical matter. Proskouriakoff's demonstration that they contained instead records of the principal events in the lives of historical personages was truly liberating. In 1962 it won for her the fifth A.V. Kidder Medal (she herself had been designer of the medal), and it continues to underlie much of today's greatly increased epigraphic activity.

Proskouriakoff's next major undertaking, if less remarkable for originality, was notable for the great perseverance it called forth. This was preparation of *Jades from the Cenote of Sacrifice* (1974), an illustrated and descriptive catalog of nearly 1000 complete or restorable jade pieces (besides innumerable other fragments) that had lain nearly 70 years in the Peabody Museum. Identifying and sorting the shattered components of incomplete plaques, and then to the best of her ability supplying the missing portions of the designs in modeled plaster presented a tremendous challenge—one that exploited to the full her visual memory and unrivaled knowledge of iconography.

That task occupied a good part of her time for 15 years. During some of that time she also was engaged in an analysis of design motifs found on pottery. This project must be counted as her one failure. Having amassed a large amount of data, she came to realize that little of value could be extracted from it. In her brief description of this work (1968) she still expressed hopes of completing a monograph; in fact she abandoned work on it at about that time.

Early in 1973, with work on the jades completed, Proskouriakoff began her last major work, a review of historical material in Classic Maya inscriptions tentatively titled *Maya History*. Peter Mathews currently is overseeing its completion. Characteristically she had chosen an extremely difficult and time-consuming study. The dynastic histories and intersite relations for most of the larger sites had to be studied, along with inscriptions from many smaller ones as well. In this process endless photographs had to be pored over, and hieroglyphic passages copied onto working sheets. Though her eyesight and energy began to fail, she battled on and was able to complete the work in its essentials before the onset of her final illness.

According to family anecdotes Tania's independent spirit and high intelligence were evident in early childhood. As she grew up, a facet of that independence grew into a dislike of arbitrary rules, one of which she became aware of soon after arriving in New York. When her mother lit a cigarette in a restaurant she was immediately informed that smoking by women in public places was prohibited. "But," the eight-year-old asked her mother, "isn't the United States a free country?"—and on turning 16 she did not forget to take up smoking!

As an adult, this tendency to swim against the current settled into the healthy skepticism that underlay her scholarly judgment. Sometimes it came to the surface as a propensity for lightly but almost automatically contradicting her colleagues, a habit that most of them regarded more with amused indulgence than irritation. A lively example of this slight contrariness and disdain for the expected response is found in her reply to a questionnaire concerning the suitability of the term

“primitive” in the expression “Primitive Art.” In her short comment (1965) Proskouriakoff had nothing to say about “primitive,” but attacked “art” as a really ambiguous and poorly defined term, listing five of its connotations.

As friends and old Carnegie hands have described her, and on the evidence of photographs, Tania as a young woman was distinctly attractive, and quite feminine—there was nothing of the tweedy bluestocking about her. Decided in her opinions she may have been, even at times a little formidable in conversation, yet socially she was shy and retiring; but here again there was a contradiction in that she enjoyed giving parties and had a way of making them go. In the field, she has been described as good company and quite unperturbed by the horrible accommodations she sometimes had to endure. Friends she had, and a few of her close friendships meant enough to have stirred occasional yearnings for a more social or companionable existence, as against the cloistered life of the scholar.

Later in middle age, she began to feel a certain alienation not only from a world imbued with violence and greed (her heroes had been Gandhi and Franklin Delano Roosevelt), but also from the newer trends in archaeology. As a scholar who was self-taught and preferred to work alone, she had a romantic streak appropriate to the lone adventurer. It seldom showed, but it was this side that felt the appeal of boats and steamships, and the novels of Joseph Conrad, which she read and reread, partly for the sake of improving her style (and she did write very well). There also is a hint of that side in a note to the editors that accompanied her contribution to the *Codex Wauchope* (1978): “If you read between the lines [of my contribution], you will probably see it as a nostalgic retreat from contemporary methodologies, and a plea for old-fashioned hit or miss logic, which is more fun, and once in a good while pays off.”

“Hits that paid off” she undoubtedly scored in her life’s work, and she had some fun. Her achievements gained her, in addition to the Kidder Medal, Pennsylvania State University’s nomination as their Woman of the Year for 1971; an honorary Doctorate of Laws from Tulane University in 1977; and in 1984 the Guatemalan Order of the Quetzal. For her successes she always was ready to pay tribute to her early mentors, especially Satterthwaite, Morley, Kidder, and Tozzer; it was her hope that she might pass on to the next generation something of their tradition. Through her work, at once adventurous and meticulous, that ambition has abundantly been fulfilled, and through her friendship, example, and scholarly counsel, she left a small band of students and many others forever indebted to her.

IAN GRAHAM

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NOTE

¹ A complete bibliography of Proskouriakoff's work will be found in an album preserved in the Tozzer Library of Harvard University. It is entitled "Tatiana Proskouriakoff: A Scrapbook." Her photograph is from a Carnegie Institution group picture taken at Telchaquillo, Yucatan, in 1952, and appears courtesy of the Peabody Museum.