This book sets out to address the ways in which the Maya conceive(d) of and interact(ed) with the world around them; using an art historical perspective, it focuses on the intersections of “space” and “art,” broadly construed. The volume’s nine chapters and epilogue consider contexts ancient and modern, in Chiapas and the Yucatan, the Peten and the Guatemalan highlands; they assess space as rendered cosmologically, iconographically, architecturally, and ceremonially. With a wide net cast around “Maya space” as a unifying theme, this book introduces the reader to the diverse ways scholars can think about and approach the topic of space in Maya society.

The book begins with a 105-page introductory chapter, written by editors Werness-Rude and Spencer, meant as an all-encompassing handbook that orients the reader to the contributions of art historical approaches to the understanding of Maya spatiality. Themes include Writing and Artistry; Cosmology and Directionality; Sight, Vision, and Visuality; Architecture; Monumental Sculpture; Visual Hierarchies and Conventions; and Agency and Activity, among others. For the sake of readability, all references have been removed from the text; instead, the authors provide extended commentary in a bibliographic essay at the end of the chapter, which lists sources consulted for each thematic section. Though this approach renders the text readable and approachable, it also imparts a superficial and incomplete quality to many sections. Nevertheless, readers whose interests are piqued by the chapter’s topics will find the bibliographic essay a helpful starting point for exploring the literature further.

The chapters that follow provide crucial insight into Maya belief and practice through critical contextual and relational analyses. Steinbach, Bernatz, and Werness-Rude (authors of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively) focus on “space,” in its multiple framings, in Maya iconography. They take different iconographic elements and programs—the three avatars of the Jester God, the imagery of God K, and isolated bust scenes on Chocholá-style vessels—and highlight their spatial attributes within single scenes and comparatively across scenes. In foregrounding the spatial and contextual relationships codified in art and image, the authors demonstrate the deliberate choices Classic Maya artists made in practicing their craft, and how these choices can help scholars better understand ancient worldview and politics.
forward, these authors could situate their arguments concerning iconographic space within the broader spatiotemporal contexts from which this art emerged. That is, how do these arguments resonate in certain places, at certain times, and in certain contexts of use, in certain occasions, by certain people?

The next four chapters shift the focus of the volume to spatial analyses of Classic Maya architecture. Clancy (Chapter 5) and Wren, Nygard, and Shaw (Chapter 8) assess architecture from a diachronic perspective, discussing the political, economic, and environmental changes that at times spurred and other times were spurred by modifications to plazas and site plans. Classic Maya builders, as these authors make evident in their respective analyses, could be both adaptive and proscriptive in creating space. In Chapters 6 and 7, Spencer and Olton each review an architectural setting—Palenque’s East Court and Tikal’s Temple I, respectively—as they existed in particular moments in time. They elicit the evocative nature of these settings by evaluating them and their sculptural programs as they would have been experienced in situ. All four of these chapters remind the reader of the active role participants play, in engagement with art and architecture, in making space meaningful. This notion is brought to the fore in Taube’s contribution (Chapter 9) in which she describes an annual festival in the modern-day Guatemalan highlands that creates sacralized space through activity: processing, dancing, and tree-raising. This chapter evokes the multivalency of ritual space: dancers draw on vibrant traditions of great longevity while, as Taube thoughtfully notes, they remain in constant dialogue with an ever-changing, globalized world.

The varied approaches and frameworks utilized in the preceding chapters are married in the volume’s Epilogue. In this, Carrasco considers the sculpture and inscriptions of Palenque’s House E as situated in its three-dimensional space, reimagining the structure as the cosmos made manifest and enacted in political accession. The volume’s conclusion demonstrates once more the multitudes of meaning that can be drawn out by a scholarly perspective attentive to art, architecture, and space. Each chapter, embracing this perspective, has contributed a penetrating assessment of Maya spatiality; the book as a whole stands as a testament to the potential in considering Maya space as a concept.

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