



**Michael D. Coe**

1929–2019

BIOGRAPHICAL

*Memoirs*

*A Biographical Memoir by  
Carl J. Wendt*

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NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

# MICHAEL DOUGLAS COE

May 14, 1929–September 25, 2019

Elected to the NAS, 1986

Michael D. Coe was a distinguished archaeologist best known for his work on the Olmec and Maya civilizations. His legacy includes over 60 years of active research and writing for both academic and public audiences. He had wide-ranging interests in prehistoric archaeology and published findings on research he undertook in Wyoming, Tennessee, Connecticut, Costa Rica, Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. Most of his research, however, focused on early villages in lowland Mesoamerica and on Classic Maya epigraphy and iconography. One of his most significant contributions on the origins of early settled life in Mesoamerica were his excavations on Early Formative period (1900-1000 B.C.) villages on the Guatemalan coast, where he discovered the Ocós, Cuadros, and Jocotal phases. Another was large-scale excavations at the major Olmec center, San Lorenzo, where he developed the first radiocarbon-anchored ceramic chronology for the Early Formative Olmec (1800-1000 B.C.). Both projects involved a cutting-edge ecological framework.

Coe earned a bachelor's degree in 1950 and a Ph.D. in 1959, both from Harvard. His career in academia started with a faculty stint at the University of Tennessee from 1958 to 1960. He then began a lifelong association with Yale University, rising from instructor in anthropology to Charles J. MacCurdy Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at his retirement in 1994.



Photography by Michael Marsland, Yale University

*Michael D. Coe*

By Carl J. Wendt

Harvard-trained and from a privileged background, Michael Coe—Mike, as he liked to be called—was among the last of the gentlemen archaeologists. With nothing to prove and no one to impress, he could take chances and engage topics with challenging, controversial ideas. He championed issues that often ran counter to popular thought on Maya writing, and he argued that the Olmec predated the Maya before that idea was generally accepted. From his graduate school days onward, Mike butted heads with some

of the top scholars in the field, including British archaeologist J. Eric S. Thompson, who at the time was considered the leading authority on Maya writing.

In his work on Classic Maya epigraphy and iconography, Mike can be credited with being one of the first scholars to study Maya polychrome cylindrical vases and was instrumental in facilitating the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing. Most of his nearly 20 books, hundreds of papers, and numerous talks were on the Olmec and Maya cultures. His publications included best-selling books written for academics, armchair archaeologists, travelers, and students, which ignited public interest.<sup>1-6</sup> Many of his popular books had multiple editions, and two—*Mexico* and *The Maya*—were in their 8th and 9th editions when he passed away.

Mike began his undergraduate studies at Harvard as a creative writing major, which certainly came in handy in making static archaeological data come to life. While most students of Mesoamerica know Mike for his popular books, he was first and foremost a true scholar and archaeologist.

After his retirement, Mike returned to some of his long-time interests in Colonial America<sup>7</sup> and tropical cities in Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> In his retirement, he also led (or co-led) many tours for the archaeological tour company Far Horizons, which took him to Mesoamerica and Southeast Asia on multiple occasions.

Mike's friends and colleagues often described him as energetic, curious, and enthusiastic. He was a very generous individual, teacher, and scholar, and his students remember him as being "fiercely loyal" and always promoting their research. He was not pretentious, and would correspond with most everyone who reached out to him. He would not allow his students to call him 'Dr. Coe,' but rather 'Mike.' Nevertheless, he did have very high scientific standards and expected arguments from his students and colleagues to be backed by data. He also had a passion for high-quality book design,<sup>9</sup> and he teamed up with talented artists and photographers, including his long-term collaboration with photographer Justin Kerr.<sup>10-13</sup>

While Mike often took positions that challenged accepted ideas, he insisted on solid arguments. Ironically, he was a fan of diffusionist ideas—that cultural elements spread between geographically distant cultures—inspired both by his first-hand observations and likely, also, by his love of adventure novels. He did not often publish on these ideas but would happily discuss them in a relaxed setting. He was open to changing his mind; as long as there was good evidence that he was wrong, he would concede. Moreover, he did not take academic disagreements personally.

Many of the details in this brief memoir are based on an autobiography Mike published in 2006,<sup>28</sup> as well as a number of obituaries and remembrances written by friends and colleagues.<sup>29-34</sup> An exhaustive bibliography of Mike's work compiled by Payton Phillips Quintanilla of the Getty Research Institute was an invaluable resource while preparing this memoir.<sup>32</sup> This essay is organized into five chronological sections: (1) early years, (2) Yale years, (3) field research on early settled life in Mesoamerica, (4) Maya iconography and epigraphy, and (5) later years.

### **Early Years**

Mike was born into a family of immense wealth. His great-grandfather Henry Huttleston Rogers (1840-1909), one of the richest men in the world at the time, was a co-founder and executive of Standard Oil. Rogers helped finance the Virginian Railway, where Mike's grandfather (William Robertson Coe) was on the Board of Directors, and his father (William Rogers Coe) was a vice president. Mike was raised on his family's 400-acre estate, called Planting Fields, on Oyster Bay in Long Island (now a state park). Mike attended the Fay School until 7th grade and went on to St. Paul's school in Concord, New Hampshire, which is considered one of the most elite boarding schools in the United States.

In 1949 Mike entered Harvard College as a creative writing major but quickly became bored. After his first year at Harvard, Mike traveled with his family on a vacation to Cuba. On the way home, he and his older brother, William Coe II, visited Yucatan and the Maya archaeological site of Chichen Itza. This experience was transformative. He fell in love with the Maya. When he returned to Harvard, he met recently retired Alfred Tozzer, who steered him from English to Anthropology. Tozzer, along with other Harvard faculty (such as Alfred V. Kidder), were major influences and mentors to Mike.

In these early years, Mike worked alongside his older brother at Nohoch Ek, an ancient Maya site in what is now Belize. He later wrote his senior thesis on their excavations at the site. Both brothers went on to become prominent Mesoamerican archaeologists, with William directing the Tikal project in Guatemala. Early on, they published a few papers together, but their collaboration was short lived. They had a falling-out in the early 1960s and never spoke again. Neither was ever very forthcoming about what had caused their rift.

Mike graduated with his B.A. from Harvard in 1950, shortly before the Korean War began. Medical reasons prevented him from enlisting in the armed forces, but Harvard



Lunch in Taipei while serving in the CIA, 1950s.

(Photo credit: estate of Michael D. Coe.)

anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn enticed him to join the CIA. After his CIA training, he was stationed in Taipei, Taiwan, from 1952 to 1954 and worked as a case officer at Western Enterprises, a U.S. front organization attempting to subvert the Communist regime in Beijing. While in Taiwan, Mike learned Mandarin and studied the ethnography of Formosa (a pre-20th century common name for Taiwan). He thought working for “the company” was a waste of time, yet later he would reflect on the experience as providing him with the confidence and independence to plan his future—in his own words he “grew up.”

In early 1954, his two years of service overseas

with the Agency were up and he was due to return to Washington for reassignment, which most likely was going to be a desk job. He despised the thought of that and before he left Taiwan he had made up his mind that he would resign when he got home and would go back to Harvard to pursue his Ph.D. He traveled through Southeast Asia to visit Angkor Wat, another powerful experience that solidified his interest in tropical civilizations.

When he returned home Mike entered Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology under the direction of Gordon R. Willey. It was here that he met many people who would become lifelong friends, as well as his future wife, Sophie Dobzhansky, a Radcliffe anthropology student. They met in a physical anthropology class in 1954 and were married a year later. Sophie’s father, Theodosius Dobzhansky, a Russian-American geneticist, was a central figure in the field of evolutionary biology known for his work in shaping the Modern Synthesis (Mendelian genetics in support of Darwinian theories of natural selection). Mike and Sophie eventually had five children—Nicholas, Andrew, Sarah, Peter, and Natalie.



Sophie & Michael D. Coe at Hadrian’s Villa, Tivoli (Italy), 1990. (Photo credit: Natalie Coe.)

As a graduate student, Mike was already publishing, not only with his brother, but as sole author on a number of subjects, including Formative Mesoamerica<sup>14</sup> and Cycle 7 monuments.<sup>15</sup> The latter was especially significant in that it was a boldly deliberate rebuke by him, a mere graduate student, of the formidable J. Eric S. Thompson and his 1941 argument that certain Gulf Coast monuments postdated the Classic Maya (A.D. 250-900). Thompson was regarded as the leading authority on ancient Maya writing.

Mike earned his doctorate in 1959. His dissertation was on the excavations and analysis of materials from La Victoria, a small early village on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. He published that important excavation a few years later.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Yale Years**

After a brief turn teaching at the University of Tennessee (1958-1960), Mike took an instructor position in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University in 1960. He was quickly made an assistant professor in 1961, then associate professor in 1963 and full professor in 1968. Mike often commented that Yale was good to him because they left him alone. However, judging from his service to the university, he must only have been left alone after his first ten years. He served as the Curator of the Anthropology Collections at Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History between 1968 and 1994 and then curator emeritus until his death. He served as chair of the Anthropology Department from 1968 to 1970, chair of the Council on Archaeological Studies in 1979, and Director of Graduate Studies for one year. Upon his retirement in 1995 Mike was awarded the endowed Charles J. MacCurdy Professor Emeritus of Anthropology.

### **Field Research in Mesoamerica**

Now a Ph.D., Mike continued his research on early settled life in Mesoamerica for the next 15 years. In 1962 he collaborated with Kent V. Flannery in excavating Salinas La Blanca near La Victoria, where Mike had earlier done his dissertation fieldwork. In many ways this was a continuation of his human ecology focus, which moves beyond studying artifacts to also investigating the interrelationships between people and their microenvironments. Together, Mike and Flannery published their human ecology research at Salinas La Blanca,<sup>17</sup> which had been preceded by a source analysis study on an obsidian quarry and workshop at El Chayal, Guatemala.<sup>18</sup>

These projects were groundbreaking in Mesoamerican archaeology for a number of reasons. They were the first to define the earliest ceramic phases in lowland Mesoamerica, a finding that was anchored by a series of radiocarbon dates. Their work laid the four-



dition for later ecological projects in Mesoamerica. They took a regional approach that included careful and detailed analyses of, among other finds, ceramics, chipped stone, plant remains, animal bones, and shells. With radiocarbon dating they developed a ceramic chronology that is still used today.

After their work at Salinas La Blanca, Flannery urged Mike to investigate the beginnings of settled life in the Olmec region. He suggested the site of San Lorenzo.<sup>9</sup> In 1966 Mike initiated a three-year, intensive and extensive archaeological research effort he named the Río Chiquito Project. Like his work in coastal Guatemala, this work combined archaeology and human ecology, culminating in a comprehensive study of the San Lorenzo Olmec and the modern inhabitants of the area. As part of this project, he conducted archaeological investigations at the neighboring sites of Tenochtitlán (a village site, not the Aztec capital below modern Mexico City), El Remolino (another village site), and San Lorenzo.

Mike invited then graduate student Richard A. Diehl to join the project as assistant director (for the first two seasons). Diehl co-authored a number of publications with Mike, including the significant two-volume boxed set (including 4 fold-out maps) on their archaeological, human ecology, and ethnographic work.<sup>9</sup> The human ecology aspect of their work involved the collection of ethnographic and environmental information,

including data on soils, agronomy, botany, geology, agriculture, and human-animal, human-land, and human-plant relationships.

They employed technologies relatively new to the field at the time, including aerial photography for mapping (photogrammetry), magnetometer surveying to locate basalt monuments, and source analysis to determine the source of the stone used for carved monuments. Additionally, they conducted a study of modern potters to gain insight into Olmec pottery production. Their ethnographic work remains valuable today because it provides a look at a traditional rural, lowland village (Tenochtitlán) and a way of life in the late 1960s—a time when the area was less affected by outside influence than it was subsequently.



San Lorenzo team (including Dick Diehl on far right).

(Photo credit: estate of Michael D. Coe.)

To complete this human ecology study, Mike hired George Krotser to create a series of maps. Krotser, working with Mike's data, produced a topographic and archaeological map of the site core and three maps of the 77-square-kilometer area surrounding the San Lorenzo plateau—a topographic map, a vegetation and land-use map, and a soils map. These maps, along with their study of contemporary peasant land use, were cutting edge at the time and have inspired other archaeologists to follow in their footsteps.

Mike and Diehl's excavations had varying objectives, including the collection of stratigraphic, household, and architectural data. Similar to Mike and Flannery's work on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, Mike established a complete ceramic sequence for the site of San Lorenzo, anchored by 17 radiocarbon dates. The excavations and dating confirmed Mike's long-held belief that the Olmec predated the Maya, and that the Olmec were among the earliest societies in Mesoamerica. He and some of his colleagues have even maintained that the Olmec were Mesoamerica's first civilization, although villages from the coast of Chiapas have proved to be earlier.

Mike and Diehl documented 16 stone monuments that date to the later Early Formative period (1450-1000 B.C.), based on their stratigraphic context. Some of the monuments excavated (for example, Monuments 34, 40, 41, and 43) were found on prepared floors or platforms. Though none of the visible mounded architecture excavated during the Río Chiquito Project dated to the Early Formative period, Mike and Diehl used 200 low mounds mapped on the plateau to hypothesize that, at its height, 1,000 people lived in a 52.9-hectare area atop the San Lorenzo plateau. Subsequent testing and excavation by Ann Cyphers and her colleagues have indicated the site covered 775 hectares, with an estimated peak population of between 7,920 and 12,907 people.

Mike and Diehl's excavations revealed that in certain areas of the plateau, culturally sterile subsoil lay more than six meters below the surface, and in other areas sterile subsoil lay less than two meters below the surface. Using results from excavations and mapping, Mike and Diehl inferred that the Olmec undertook massive removal and filling operations to construct the plateau into a bilaterally symmetrical architectural pattern, perhaps depicting a huge flying bird.



Excavating Monument 34 at San Lorenzo, circa 1967.  
(Photo credit: estate of Michael D. Coe.)



Mike and Diehl's investigations were of paramount importance. They were the first to develop a chronological sequence for the San Lorenzo region, which dated the area's first occupation to the Ojochi phase (1800-1600 B.C.) and the regional florescence to the San Lorenzo phase (1400-1000 B.C.). Remarkably, the ceramic chronology still holds up, to the present time! Using data from their human ecology study, Mike and Diehl proposed that the Olmec elite gained and maintained their economic power through control of levee lands, as well as through control and distribution of scarce resources, such as obsidian, ground stone, hematite, ilmenite, magnetite, and green stone. They went on to argue that the elite's control over economic resources allowed them to motivate their followers to transport and carve the basalt monuments, as well as undertake large public construction endeavors, like the cutting and filling of the plateau.

### **Maya Iconography and Epigraphy**

Beginning during graduate school, Mike was active in Maya iconographic and epigraphic research. As mentioned above, to J. Eric S. Thompson's chagrin, Mike's position on the primacy of Cycle 7 monuments and the Olmec proved correct. However, Mike's most influential work on Maya iconography and epigraphy was *The Maya Scribe and His World* (1973), published two years after the opening of an exhibit entitled *Ancient Maya Calligraphy*, which he curated at the Grolier Club in Manhattan. This publication is considered by many Mayanists to be the most important publication of the 20th century, and it attracted a number of young scholars to study with Mike at Yale. Many of these students went on to become noted experts, themselves, in Mesoamerican epigraphy and iconography.

One of the most important items put on display at the Grolier Club was a Maya codex, now known as the *Códice Maya de México*, an 11 (originally 20)-page bark-paper codex with images of Maya death gods and symbols, and hieroglyphic text that is an almanac charting the movement of Venus. It was previously known as the *Grolier Codex* or the *Sáenz Codex* after its first owner/collector Dr. Josué Sáenz. The codex was purportedly found in a cave near Tortuguero, Chiapas, Mexico, by looters, who sold it to Sáenz in the mid-1960s. Its authenticity was doubted by Mexican experts due to how it was acquired and to the fact that it was different in style from the other three authentic Maya codices. In August 1968 Mike was invited to Sáenz's home in Mexico City, where he was given photographs of the codex. Mike brought the photographs back to New Haven where he and a colleague, Floyd Lounsbury (a linguist specializing in Native American languages), determined that the codex was authentic. Based on the style of the script, they dated it to the 12th century A.D.<sup>19</sup>

Mike asked Sáenz to lend him the codex for the Grolier exhibit, and Sáenz agreed. This later angered government officials at Mexico's *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH). The codex was displayed at the Grolier exhibit, along with nearly 100 Maya objects from private collections, most of which were polychrome cylindrical vases painted with scenes, iconographic elements, and hieroglyphic inscriptions. This exhibit began Mike's foray into working with dealers, museums, and collectors to publish and authenticate Pre-Hispanic objects. It should be noted that Mike was also a member of the Commissioner's Art Advisory Panel, Internal Review Service, working with IRS officials to identify archaeological fakes.

This exhibit began his collaborations with photographer Justin Kerr, who went on to develop a rollout camera that produced flat images of cylindrical vases, which resulted in a number of catalogs of Maya artifacts (mostly vases inscribed with glyphs) from museum and private collections.<sup>11-13,20</sup>

The authenticity of the *Códice Maya de México* was questioned for years by many Mayanists, including J. Eric Thompson. Mike and three of his former students published a study of the document based on photographs.<sup>21</sup> However, it was a project of international scholars initiated in 2016 and organized by INAH that sealed its authenticity. In 2018, just a year before Mike's death, the codex itself was exhaustively studied by a multidisciplinary team and ultimately accepted as authentic by INAH and renamed the *Códice Maya de México*. It is now considered to be the fourth surviving Maya codex; hundreds of others were destroyed by the Spanish. This fourth surviving codex is now considered the oldest of the Maya codices dating to circa AD 1000-1150. The three other existing codices take their names from the European cities where they are located—Dresden, Madrid, and Paris. This validation of his long-held belief of the codex's authenticity was gratifying to Mike. He reviewed the 2018 study for the journal *Latin American Antiquity*; this review was published the same month he passed away.

Mike was instrumental in one of the most important breakthroughs in Maya epigraphy. In the Cold War years, Mike backed the findings of Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, a Russian linguist and ethnologist. Mike and his wife,



At his farm in Heath, MA, around 1994.  
(Photo credit: Natalie Coe.)

along with David H. Kelley and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, brought Knorosov's important advances in Maya epigraphy to English-speaking audiences. Knorosov argued that Maya writing had a phonetic component—another view doubted by Thompson. Mike's wife, Sophie, bilingual in Russian and English, helped translate some of Knorosov's works in which he argued the Maya writing system had phonetic elements. Up until the mid-1950s, Maya writing (including that on cylindrical polychrome vases) was believed by most Mayanists to be logographic. Mike championed Knorosov's view that Maya writing was partly phonetic, and included syllables that could be spoken and read out loud. Mike documented the story of this remarkable proposition in a book, *Breaking the Maya Code*, that he published in 1992, and which was short listed for the Pulitzer Prize and adapted for a documentary by NOVA in 2008.

### Later Years

Following his retirement from Yale in 1994, Mike remained active, mostly in collaborations with other scholars, working on projects that had interested him for years and updating his popular books with new editions. Almost immediately after his retirement, Sophie was diagnosed with cancer and died several months later. Her death was devastating for Mike, but he managed to stay focused on his research. He finished the manuscript of a book she had been working on about chocolate, which was published a few years later with Sophie as the senior author.<sup>5</sup>

Angkor Wat and the Khmer civilization had been an early fascination of Mike's, going back to the trip he took before he entered graduate school. At Angkor Wat on his way home from Taiwan in 1954, he was mesmerized by the ruins and by the urbanism of the tropical Khmer civilization. He published a paper in 1957 that compared settlement patterns of Angkor Wat to those of the ancient Maya,<sup>22</sup> and he made comparisons between Maya and Khmer temples.<sup>23</sup>

As an "armchair archaeologist," Mike published a popular book on Angkor Wat and the Khmer civilization in 2003, which was reprinted two years later. He then joined with Southeast Asian scholar Damian Evans in putting out a revised edition in 2018. Mike continued his involvement in Southeast Asian archaeology (alongside Mesoamerican archaeology), leading and co-leading small tours for an archaeological travel company, Far Horizons.

Although he did not publish much on possible interactions and influences across continents, he was always intrigued with diffusionist ideas. These included two-way interactions

between Mesoamerica and Asia,<sup>19,24</sup> as well as interactions between Mesoamerica and South America.<sup>25,26</sup>

Mike took advantage of his retirement to write up his fieldwork on excavations he conducted in Heath, Massachusetts, in the early 1970s. Historical archaeology had always been an interest of his, and when he and Sophie bought a hilltop farm in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, he became interested in a line of Colonial-era British forts built to hold the line on the northern frontier during the French and Indian War. This publication provided important insights into 18th-century life in the American colonies.

As mentioned earlier, the same year *The Line of Forts* was published, Mike published *Final Report: An Archaeologist Excavates His Past*, a more personal account of his life and work that had a heavy emphasis on his family, upbringing, and “behind the scenes” stories from the field—details seldom included in scholarly publications. It is a fascinating read and documents the life of a privileged academic in a time now long gone in American academia.

For his entire academic life, Mike was intellectually curious and managed to stay front-and-center in debates and controversies. In his retirement, he collaborated on a number of projects with other scholars. One example is the publishing of the Cascajal Block – an inscribed block discovered in 1999 near San Lorenzo<sup>27</sup> that some scholars argue is the earliest example of writing in the Americas. Another collaboration was with scholars in a series of back-and-forth debates in the mid-2000s on whether the Olmec represented the first civilization in Meso-

america (the “Mother Culture” perspective) or was simply one of a number of politically equal polities (the “Sister Culture” perspective). It is not surprising that Mike took the side of the Mother Culturalists.

Mike’s principal legacy would have to be the many students and colleagues he trained and inspired and who continue his research trajectories. His groundbreaking advances in the archaeology and culture history will live on and be built upon by current and future scholars. Among his two highest honors were his 1986 election to the National Academy of Sciences and receiving the *Orden del Quetzal* in 2004, Guatemala’s highest honor. Mike died on September 25, 2019 in New Haven, Connecticut, at the age of 90.



With Mary Miller at his 90th birthday party at Justin Kerr’s NYC apartment. (Photo credit: Steve Houston.)

**CHRONOLOGY**

- 1926 Born May 14, 1929 in Miss Lippincott's Lying-in Hospital on the east side of Manhattan, New York.
- 1945 Entered Harvard College to study creative writing.
- 1946 Changed major to Anthropology.
- 1950 B.A., Harvard College 1945-1950.
- 1952 CIA, Taipei, Taiwan. 1952-1954.
- 1954 Fieldwork in Central Formosa (Taiwan) (Jan-Feb).  
Visited Angkor Wat on his way home from Taiwan.  
Entered Harvard University; his advisor was Gordon R. Willey.
- 1955 Married Sophie Dobzhansky.
- 1957 Fieldwork on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, dry season.
- 1958 Fieldwork on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, dry season, La Victoria.  
Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Tennessee, 1958-1960.
- 1959 Ph.D., Harvard University, Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.
- 1960 Instructor in Anthropology, Yale University, 1960-1961.
- 1961 Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Yale University, 1961-1963.
- 1962 Editor, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, 1962-1974.
- 1963 Associate Professor of Anthropology, Yale University, 1963-1968.  
Advisor, Center for Pre-Colombian Studies, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., 1963-1979.
- 1966 Began the Río Chiquito Project (1966-1968).
- 1967 Associate Curator of Anthropology, Peabody Museum of Natural History, 1967-1968.



- 1968 Professor of Anthropology, Yale University, 1968-1994.  
 Chair, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 1968-1970.  
 Curator of Anthropology, Peabody Museum of Natural History, 1968-1994.  
 Mike and his wife Sophie visit Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov in Russia.
- 1971 Grolier Club, Manhattan. Exhibit of the Grolier Codex said to be from Tortuguero, Mexico
- 1979 Chair, Council on Archaeological Studies, Yale University.
- 1980 Director of Graduate Studies, Council on Archaeological Studies, Yale University.  
 Visitor, Department of Primitive and Pre-Colombian Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 1983 Member, Commissioner's Art Advisory Panel, Internal Review Service.
- 1985 Organizer, 1992 Exhibit of Art of the New World, Columbus 500th Anniversary, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1985-1992.  
 President and Chairman of the Board, Planting Fields Foundation, 1985-2019.
- 1986 Elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.
- 1994 Charles J. MacCurdy Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, Yale University, 1994-2019.
- 2006 Documented the Cascajal Block, Lomas de Tacamichapa, Veracruz, Mexico.
- 2008 *Cracking the Maya Code*, NOVA documentary aired April 8, 2008 on PBS.

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