

Preserving Mayan History

By MARY JANE CLINTON
Women's News Editor

Joan Patten is an American citizen who has a rare gift for the people of Guatemala. She is preserving the country's Mayan history for them.

Joan, a former San Franciscan now living in Guatemala City, is the only person authorized by the Instituto de Arqueologia de Guatemala to make reproductions of steles. They are the large stone shafts, usually decorated, that are found at the site of Mayan cities. And because many of the steles have been stolen or are being stolen, Joan Patten's work is of special importance.

Spending from two to six weeks in the jungle, Joan makes molds of latex rubber with a Fiberglass sleeve. The mold pulls off the stele somewhat like a tight-fitting stocking or vinyl boot. "It's not that easy to remove," said Joan, during a recent interview, "especially if the cast is 20 feet tall.

This is only the first step. Then, the mold has to be transported from the jungle by whatever means possible. "We've had to literally chop some molds out of the jungle. In the jungle, I do everything myself and I am ultimately responsible for the outcome of the project."

From the latex molds are made the concrete casts which Joan Patten hopes will be at the Instituto and at each site tourists visit. Her home in Guatemala City has 90 such reproductions. "It's pretty hard to make concrete sculptures and have your house look like anything," she confided. "I was once a sculptress, now I'm a stonemason."

Joan's sculptress days were in San Francisco. When her husband moved to Guatemala she became interested in archeology because "I was so darned tired of being a golf widow."

To make expenses, Joan sells rubbings taken either from the original or the cast. It was the rubbings she brought to the Bay Area en route home from Eugene, Ore. where she had had an exhibition at the University Museum. And as if to demonstrate the durability of her rubbings (done

in oil and completely washable) she walked across them as she described the technique of making them. She left samples with a friend, Timmie Will of San Mateo, and they will be on exhibit June 8 at the art benefit sponsored by the Headstart Auxiliary.

As a sculptress, Joan already knew how to make the castings, but she learned how to make the rubbings by herself. "I had to," she confided, "particularly since I started doing them illegally. I'm doing this work as a gift to the government. My ultimate purpose is to make enough money to put the real steles in the museums and to put representations in their place in the jungle."

The artist's work has taken her to many areas of the country.

To Tikal, which is one of the oldest sites and one of the largest and most important.

To Dos Pilos (two wells) where she interrupted thieves in the process of carrying off artifacts. "They left. That's better because sometimes they shoot."

To El Baulisher where she cast the Herrera Jaguar, her pride and joy.

Her travels are on record in a handsome and weighty brochure that she has made up.

Joan's rubbings also illustrate "Lords of the Maya," a book by Francis Robicsek for American Indian Museum Publications. The author is a heart surgeon whom Joan met when she was coming out of the jungle on her first expedition.

It was pitch black, she recalled, and she and her crew had traveled by river and horse, but mostly on foot. "There was no lodging when we got to the village," she remembered, "so we stayed on the floor of the inn."

"I never was a Girl Scout. I had never even camped out before.

At first meeting, Joan Patten hardly seems like the type of woman who spends so much time in the jungle bossing crews of laborers. But after talking to her, you come away with the idea that she can handle anything she comes up against.



JOAN PATTEN

Joan Patten, a former California resident now living in Guatemala City, is the only person authorized by the Guatemalan government to make stele casts and rubbings. Her rubbings will be on exhibit at the Headstart Auxiliary's art show on June 8 from 2 to 5 p.m. at Dr. and Mrs. Norton Benner's Hillsborough home.