

**'I couldn't see in the dark. It was the mating season for snakes and the workers were worried'**



**A**s a New York debutante, Joan Patten lived on Park Avenue, attended Miss Hewitt's School for girls and learned to curtsy in case she ever met royalty. "I wasn't a Girl Scout," she recalls. "I never slept out of my bed one night—and here I am going off to the jungle again."

Now a 50ish divorcée and two-time grandmother, Patten is known in Guatemala as "Jungle Joan" because of her regular treks into that country's steamy interior. Braving snakes, jaguars and tarantulas, she has spent nearly nine years searching out pre-Columbian stone carvings done by Mayan and Pipil Indians some 2,000 years ago. She makes latex molds of the stelae, or giant inscribed slabs, on the scene, then later casts reproductions in concrete weighing as much as 15 tons and standing 22 feet high. At the turn of the century an Austrian archeologist, Teobert Maler, charted most of Guatemala's thousand-odd archeological sites, but many of his records were filed and forgotten. Patten is re-

**Fabric rubbings of the stelae fill Joan's Guatemala City home and are sold to help finance her expeditions.**

discovering the art treasures.

Her trips into the jungle last two months and sometimes produce more aggravation than art. "On one expedition I took two dugout canoes, 10 workers, two horses, a guard, his children and three dogs," says Patten. "The workers shot a wild boar that turned out to be a mother, so we had to adopt her baby. Then I had to pay the workers for three extra days because the baby pig couldn't walk fast enough to keep up with us. They refused to carry it."

On another occasion "my car was stuck in the mud for 14 hours with the mold of a stela tied to the roof. I couldn't see anything; it got dark. It was the mating season for snakes and the workers were terrified."

Patten expects few comforts on her expeditions. Although she packs a portable toilet along with her art supplies, she has yet to use it ("The workers put it to use as a chair").

Joan got interested in the giant carvings after her ex-husband, a marketing consultant, was transferred to Guatemala in 1965. Since "there wasn't a thing to do but shop or go to tea with other bored American wives," she began traveling into the jungle to make stela rubbings. Patten's life is now dominated by her artistic mission. In the garage of her Guatemala City home are a Mustang, an MG convertible, an altar and a mask. The backyard is so filled with stelae that it looks like a private cemetery, while the hallways inside the high-ceilinged house are covered with rubbings done on colored cotton cloth. These prints sell in Guatemala and San Francisco for as much as \$1,000.

Patten would like to see the original Indian carvings removed from the jungle and put into museums for safe-keeping—away from erosion, natural disasters and art thieves. In their place, she says, could go her copies. Chances are, no one would notice the switch. Already 120 of the counterfeits stand in and around the capital. Recently, one of them was stolen from the Guatemala City airport by thieves who apparently thought they had the real thing. Says the feisty artist: "Imagine what the poor bastards thought when they found 'Joan Patten' signed on the back."

DEBRA BEACHY



**Patten and troops strain to remove a mold. It also requires a deft touch as a stela may be cracked by centuries of weathering.**