The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Palenque

By 1965 Palenque was headquarters for going back and forth to sites in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Bob Robertson and I were married in 1966 and built our house Na Chan-Bahlum in 1970. Before that I was living by myself in one of Moises Morales’s small rooms in La Cañada but spending all of my time at the ruins in our quarters at the campamento where Robert Rands and Ed Sisson hung out. Ed would come to pick me up at six in the morning—no breakfast that early. As Rands wasn’t interested in eating, all Ed and I had was coffee and bananas that grew by the campamento.

Robert Rands initially was interested in Maya art, as can seen by the things he wrote in our book *Maya Sculpture* about the art of so many of the monuments (Robert Rands and John Graham were co-authors with me). But it turned out that Rands’s life work was to be ceramics. His work has become the “Bible” on Mexican ceramics. Working with him at Palenque, I was initially supposed to be illustrating ceramics half of the week and doing rubbings of Palenque art the other half. This arrangement didn’t quite work out, so it resulted in my doing ceramic illustrating one half of the summer and rubbings the other half (Figures 1 and 2). This worked out fine. When illustrating ceramics I would work all day, and I mean all day, then Rands would spend all night going over my work. If I was off just the width of a fine pencil mark, it was wrong—I had to do it over. It didn’t take many times doing it over before I became very proficient at it. You can bet I became an expert under Rands’s supervision. As a matter of fact, later when I was doing ceramic illustrating of Dzibilchaltun for Bill Andrews (E. Wyllys Andrews IV) in Merida, he said he wouldn’t even bother correcting my work, as he knew what a perfectionist Rands was. Bob Rands, although a perfectionist, is the most gentle man I have ever known. I have never heard him raise his voice or get angry at anyone. Really, he is one of a kind.

Before Bob worked with me—or rather, I worked with Bob—at Palenque, I worked for him in a large mansion with no heat in the Lomas district of Mexico City. I remember when I first was welcomed at the door and walked inside, the first thing I saw was this huge circular stairway with bags on every step that said “For Merle.” What was this all about? Well, all of the potsherds in those hundreds of sacks had already been analyzed by other scientists, and now they were waiting for me to draw them. The reason Bob had rented this particular house was that it had a large tower on top with windows all around, so I could work, with natural light, at illustrating no matter what kind of weather it was outside. I did work there all the time in freezing cold—no heat in the building—until finally I got pneumonia. Result: get better and back at it. Wouldn’t do that for anyone except Bob Rands. Bob got pneumonia also, so we were both in the American Hospital.

Na Chan-Bahlum, on Calle Merle Greene in Palenque, was built mainly as a place to come back to after working in dense jungle with no conveniences such as hot water, a change of food (no more freeze dried), and a comfortable place to sleep. It turned out to be much more than that—a gathering place for all of our friends who were working in Chiapas, Tabasco, or the east coast of Belize: Eric Talladoire and Claude Baudez from Paris, working at Tonina; Annagrette Hohmann from Austria; Paul Gendrop from Mexico City; Karen Bassie-Sweet and David Kelley from Calgary; Ursula Jones and Andrew Weeks from London; and Hans-Jürgen Kramer from Germany, to name a few. Most of them came to do research at Palenque. With our good stove and refrigerator we could cook gourmet meals to share with all of our friends, both in Palenque and those passing through. Good food and drinks, as well as good conversation was always welcome. Bob, my husband, who had been a school administrator all of his life, immediately took possession of the Cuisinart my son David had given to me for Christmas. He became a chef. Just like that. His crepe suzettes with their flaming brandy were the very best. I could just stay out of the kitchen—he was the chef. We had so many banana trees on our property that Bob made banana bread almost every day, way more than we—or even all of our neighbors—could eat.

Na Chan-Bahlum at first consisted of one large room that was a cooking and eating area as well as a sleeping area, plus a very large bathroom. We soon knew that we needed more room where we could carry on with writing, drawing pictures of the sculpture, and pasting large rubbings together. So a large library was built with mahogany bookshelves on two walls, built-in tables for...
drawing, and a comfortable place to sit and read. For this last, we bought a davenport, three chairs to lounge in, and a coffee table. We put in air conditioning and a dehumidifier to keep the books safe. Many pleasant evenings were spent there with our dog Chinkultic and our cat Cele curled up beside us. We added a small bedroom and storage room to the house at the same time, as well as large screened-in rooms up above. The roof was thatch, the most expensive kind of roof there was at that time, as a fee had to be paid to the village that had good thatch, another fee had to be paid to the workman who carted it, and yet another fee had to be paid to bring it into Palenque. Also, only certain men knew how to correctly put on the thatch so small animals wouldn’t crawl under it or water seep through. I have a whole set of video prints, done by Kathryn Josserand, showing every step in the process of putting up this thatch roof. Later, we built another bedroom and bath with small porch, off the large porch at the rear of our house, that we called “La Selva.”

Figure 1. Rubbing of full-figure glyphs from the Palace Tablet (“11 Tuns” of the Initial Series), an example of what Merle did with the “other half” of her time at Palenque.
Figure 2. Rubbing of Intaglio Stone from the Palace.