ENCHANTED BY GLASS

Resurrecting art treasures in a mountain town in Thailand has brought together an artist, an abbot and a businessman. Denis D. Gray *explores the matrix*

Photos: Gray & Judy Jensen

Wat Chong Klang in central Mae Hong Son adjacent to Wat Chong Kham, built in the 1860s, enshrines the Buddha Sihing image brought from Burma in 1857. Near the main altar are nearly 200 paintings in glass of the Phra Vejsandorn Jataka tales of the previous lives of the Buddha. ©Nathapon Triratanachat (Dreamstime)

Sacred glass paintings reproduced by artist Judy Jensen

Another view of Wat Chong Klang and Chong Kham monasteries

What has brought together a Thai businessman from a remote mountain town, an American artist from a Texan metropolis and the abbot of a 19th century Buddhist monastery?

A rather unlikely trio to be sure but with a shared goal, a still hard-to-verbalize mystic pull and doses of pure chance they have teamed up to save a unique collection of art works from the ravages of earthquakes and neglect.

The scene is the Chong Klang Monastery gracing the banks of a little lake, a shimmering interplay of water and temple spires that form the iconic image of Mae Hong Son. Tucked away in the northwest corner of Thailand, the town was once the country's Siberia, the place to which errant officials were banished. And to this day it has been spared the downsides of mass tourism, thanks in part to an approach road laced with 1,864 curves and local initiatives to preserve the town's rich heritage.

On her first trip to Asia in 2000, artist Judy Jensen chanced upon brief mention of a monastery housing reverse glass paintings, which happened to be her own lifelong passion. So she and her husband Emil, now a retired super-chef, serpentined their way to Mae Hong Son.

"When I walked in I was overwhelmed. I was honestly blown away by how much I loved these paintings. I could hardly believe what I was seeing," says Jensen. Before her, displayed on three of the temple walls, hung 180 paintings depicting the life of the Buddha and stories from his ten previous lives. They had been brought from Myanmar's port city of Mawlamyine in the mid-19th century and donated to the monastery by rich local merchants.

Initially she viewed them with an artistic eye, enchanted by the narrative sweep and the bold, active portrayals of soldiers, princesses and the holy. Jensen had also always been attracted to religious imagery, although at that time knew little of Buddhism or its enveloping culture. To this day she finds this intense, immediate attraction hard to fully understand. And being a woman she could not even ascend a males-only platform to examine the paintings up close.

"I had a Thai friend tell me that I must have been a Thai princess in a former reincarnation," she muses.

On a whim during their first trip the Jensens booked at the Fern Resort and have since always stayed at this eco-sanctuary of quiet and greenery ("my favorite place in the whole world"). There, at the bar, she met Tawatchai Natipakorn, the resort owner – and it changed her life.

Educated as a lawyer in Bangkok, he had come to Mae Hong Son by accident as a 25-year-old, instantly fell in love with the place and set up a practice. "I have a feeling that I was here in a previous life," he says. But he soon discovered that the crime rate was so low that there was not enough business to go around among the lawyers already in town.

So he ventured into real estate, opened up a restaurant and the resort, and arguably became the town's most prominent businessman. He is also an ardent environmentalist and bent on preserving a culture of the majority Shan people who had migrated from neighboring Myanmar a few centuries earlier.

To this day he challenges those who want more tourists, more profits, outsized buildings, less of the old ways, having won some battles and lost others along the way. "I tell them to keep it small, to keep it as it is and then you won't have to sell Mae Hong Son," says the 59-year-old Tawatchai. "If you don't you will kill it."

Like-minded and becoming fast friends, Tawatchai and Jensen went together to meet Phra Khru Jitta Thana Thammo, the open-minded abbot of Chong Klang Monastery because a number of the glass paintings were dealt a mortal blow by an earthquake which unleashed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami killing a quarter million people across the region.

Shattered paintings were held together with Scotch tape, others were missing large pieces of glass, the paint was peeling. Some crude attempts were made to reproduce them but the one person versed in this style of painting was too old to carry out the work.

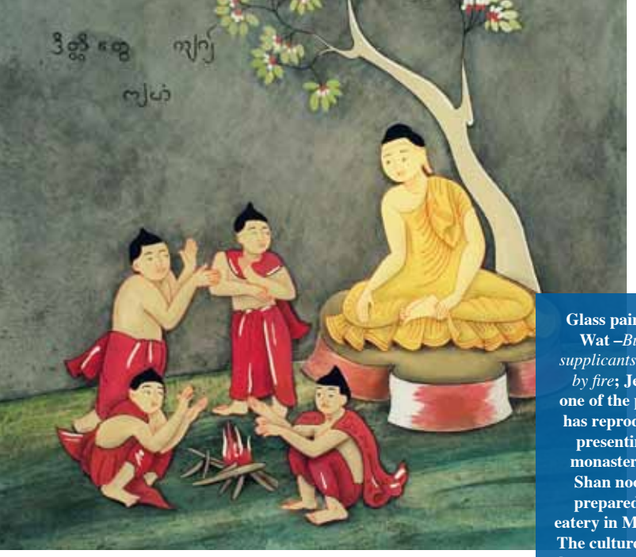
"Mae Hong Son was so far off the beaten track that it might not get done," Jensen says. "I did realize that nobody else could do it and I knew I could."

Therefore she has come back every year since 2011. A year later she returned with samples of her work to show the abbot and he pointed out the paintings which needed to be totally replaced. Taking them back to the United States was a non-starter but she was given permission to mount the platform and take photographs of the paintings along with hundreds of colour swatches that might match the originals. Despite the heat and discomfort Jensen said she spent some of the best days of her life in the monastery. The abbot picked out an initial 16 to recreate and offered compensation. She refused to take any payment.

Back at her studio in Austin, Texas, her artistically vibrant hometown, she went to work employing a technique that dates back to Medieval Europe when it was often used for religious painting. It requires an artist to paint an image in reverse onto the back of a piece of glass, with the final image viewed by turning the panel over and looking through the glass. If properly executed reverse glass paintings exude a unique enchantment.

Jensen first drew on the glass in pencil or India ink, then used India ink for outlines before applying colours. Each of the 30-centimetre square paintings took about three weeks to reproduce.

Back in Mae Hong Son, she had initially met some skepticism: why would a 'farang', a foreigner, come out, year after year, to such a far-flung place and even work for free? Being such an important monastery it was also under the



Glass paintings at the Wat –*Buddha with supplicants* and *Heretics by fire*; Jensen holds one of the paintings she has reproduced before presenting it to the monastery last year; Shan noodles being prepared at a small eatery in Mae Hong Son. The culture of the Shan, long ago migrants from Myanmar, still permeates Mae Hong Son

control of the government's Fine Arts Department and its bureaucratic ways.

"It could never have happened without him," Jensen says of Tawatchai who guided her through the cultural minefields and solidified their ties with the abbot. After each delivery, they displayed the reproductions on a board to be viewed by the local people and VIPs. Four monks and 17 novices blessed the gifts. And before the first such ceremony, Jensen was utterly surprised when the Thai community in Austin took up a collection to help with her expenses.

To continue her project, she sold some of her past paintings to prominent personalities and friends and also received a US$5,000 grant from The James H.W. Thompson Foundation, a legacy of Thailand's 'silk king' Jim Thompson. The city of Austin in 2014 designated her creative ambassador to Thailand.

Jensen says she started painting on glass in 1980, getting a big break when some of her pieces were exhibited at New York's Heller Gallery, the premiere showcase in the world of glass art. Since then her work has appeared in scores of places from New Delhi to Sapporo to major American cities. Some of her creations have sold for up to US$20,000.

But in recent years she began to feel that her life was running on a treadmill, always having to produce for the next exhibition or satisfy yet another customer who had commissioned a piece.

"As I started working in Mae Hong Son, I lost interest in the art world," says the 65-year-old Jensen whose income now comes almost solely from her past collections. "It doesn't mean anything more to me, to be part of the exhibiting art world. It's an odd, cold world."

One evening, overlooking a rice field and a brook that meanders down Tawatchai's resort, she delves deeper into why the sacred paintings have meant so much. They helped her, she says, identify the malaise that had beset her career and realise that the monastery project was not about her and her artistic expression, not part of any competitive world, but something deeper and more selfless.

Jensen also learned more about Buddhism. "It feels to me that painting on glass is a perfect metaphor of the Buddhist recognition of the impermanence of all things," she says. Glass paintings deteriorate over time and like earthquakes it was not a matter of if but when her work would fade.

As of late last year, Jensen has delivered more than 30 paintings which were placed over the originals and can now be viewed by the faithful and tourists to Chong Klang Monastery.

"There are still a few left. I'm dragging my heels a bit and trickling it out because I don't want this to be over," she says. "To some degree I felt like it was in part my responsibility, because I could do it. But it has also been the privilege of my life."