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Palencar surprise guest on 'Expedition Unknown'

By ELIZABETH SABO The Post contributor Nov 2, 2019

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Josh Gates, of the Discovery Channel's "Expedition Unknown," and fellow treasure hunters gather around John Jude Palencar painting and Byron Preiss' wife, Sandy Preiss, at the Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn, N.Y. to celebrate the discovery of a third treasure from Byron Preiss' "The Secret: A Treasure Hunt." The group includes: (left to right) Cleveland treasure finders, Brian Zinn and Andy Abrams; Boston treasure finder, Jason Krupat; "Expedition Unknown" host and executive producer, Gate artist Palencar, who had 12 detailed paintings featured in the book; Sandi Preiss, who is holding the Boston casque key; and Chicago treasure finders, Eric Gasiorowski and Rob Wrobel.

Photo courtesy of THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

MEDINA/BROOKLYN, N.Y. – John Jude Palencar’s journey with “The Secret: A Treasure Hunt,” created by his friend, Byron Preiss, began almost 40 years ago when Preiss hired him to paint the intriguing illustrations for the book, which held clues to 12 treasures in which Preiss buried all over the country.

It continued with a surprising twist last month.

Popularity in the book and the elusive treasure kicked up again when Discovery Channel’s “Expedition Unknown” featured an episode on it in January 2018. Josh Gates, who is the host and executive producer of the show, as well as “Secret” fan himself, went on the hunt with other “Secret” enthusiasts, but to no avail.

“I’ve been making travel/adventure television for over a decade and I’ve never experienced more passionate viewers as our episodes on ‘The Secret.’ I’ve received thousands of letters, emails and mad ramblings from people all over the world who are convinced they know where the next box is buried,” Gates said. “This game has that effect on people – once they start trying to work out the puzzles, they get hooked.”

Gates said Palencar’s one condition for appearing in the episode was to give Palencar the opportunity to tell the world he does not know where the remaining keys are hidden.

“Byron kept the locations of the dig sites a well-guarded secret, so while John’s enigmatic and beautiful paintings help unlock the location of the boxes, he doesn’t actually know where they are,” Gates said. “In some ways, I think that’s the genius of the puzzles and why they’re so hard to solve. The paintings offer clues, but to hit the target, you’ve got to get inside the mind of Byron himself – and he was one clever puzzle maker.”

Gates said getting to meet Palencar at his home in Medina and see his paintings up close and personal was a thrill.

“There’s no question that John’s paintings are a big part of why ‘The Secret’ endures. There’s something about the illustrations that really ensnare you. They’re filled with clues (and misdirection) and it’s so easy to get lost inside of these beautiful, mysterious and maddening paintings,” Gates said. “I always tell people, be careful when you open ‘The Secret’ – you might never close it again.”

“The Secret’s” cult following also inspired “Expedition Unknown’s” eighth episode of season seven, in which no other treasures were located.

The first casque and key were found in Chicago by then-teenagers Eric Gasiorowski and Rob Wrobel in 1983, followed by a second by Brian Zinn and Andy Abrams in Cleveland in 2004. Preiss died tragically in a car accident in 2005 and the whereabouts of the remaining 10 treasures passed with him. Now, Preiss' family keeps watch over a trust set up to reward any other treasure hunters with the prize jewels, if found.

And that exact thing happened mid-October when Boston resident Jason Krupat and his family contacted Gates to share that they believed to know the location of a third casque and key.

While Gates was in Boston unearthing the casque with the Krupat family, Palencar received an unexpected phone call and announcement from the show's producers – a third treasure had been found and they wanted him to be a surprise guest on what would be season seven's finale Oct. 30.

Palencar said it was quite amazing how quickly they put it all together despite it being a last-minute affair.

Shortly after accepting the invitation, Palencar said he crated up the corresponding "Secret" painting and shipped it to the Brooklyn Historical Society in New York, where the end of the finale was filmed.

There, Krupat and his family met their fellow treasure finders, as well as Byron's wife, Sandi, and their two daughters. Sandi presented the Krupat family with the peridot gem as their reward for finding the Boston key and the other treasure hunters "inducted" the Krupats into their treasure-finding club with Gates being named an honorary member as well.

During the meeting, Palencar revealed more unknown clues within the painting, including the spelling of "Boston" along the bottom, the shape of the baseball diamond within the women's hair and the home plate on her sleeve cuff.

Palencar said it was nice to see Byron's family and finally meet the other treasure finders.

"It was a really neat and heart-warming experience and it made me realize how much of my work is still being followed because of 'The Secret,' despite it being a job I did right out of college almost 40 years ago," Palencar said.

Palencar also shared that it was touching how Byron's work is still being acknowledged after so long and that the episode was a neat way to honor his friend's memory.

"Byron was like a big brother to me, showing me around New York City in the '80s and helping me

meet new people," Palencar said. "What he wasn't able to give in payment for my paintings, he far surpassed in our friendship and the connections he shared."

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