

THE OAS AND ITS CRAFT NETWORK

CRAFT COURSES HAVE BEEN HELD IN COLOMBIA, ECUADOR, GUATEMALA, HAITI, HONDURAS, JAMAICA, MEXICO, NICARAGUA, URUGUAY, AND IN 1984 IN ARGENTINA AND COSTA RICA.

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WHO ARE THEY?

The Third World countries are characterized by a preponderance of people who work with their hands. There are multitudes of manual laborers and beginning craftspeople, who are known as "neo-artisans." However, there are few individuals or communities, mainly rural, whose traditions and mastery of the aesthetic expressions, technology, and interpretation of forms reflect the intrinsic cultural, social, and technological traditions of a people.

The term "traditional" frequently proves to be confusing. When discussed by finance experts or agency bureaucrats, traditional usually implies trades from the past era, activities that are obsolete in terms of today's society and its more pressing needs, and a product of people not of major concern to them.

But in its proper context, interpreted by those working closely

with the crafts community, "traditional" refers to the cultural characteristics which had been maintained through generational continuity and behavior.

These craftspeople, identified as the channel for the tangible expression of a particular culture, are not figures of the past. Perhaps we are simply describing them with inappropriate terminology: *They are very much a part of a present day reality*, representing a form of work and production, of self-sufficiency and personal self-expression in both contemporary urban and rural societies. Their trade is still of our times, a product of an evolutionary process. If we examine the roots of that process, it is at times difficult to recognize the prototype forms and techniques of manufacture. Yet, beyond the academic exercise of doing so, there is an important message for those of us involved as outsiders in technical assistance. Latent in these forms is the people's knowledge of their own appropriate technology, which should be focused on and encouraged through today's developmental policies and "innovative" approaches.

THE ROLE OF MASTER CRAFTSPEOPLE IN DEVELOPMENT

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Traditional craftspeople are today of particular interest to the Latin American and Caribbean countries. Although some students of society have singled them out as belonging to a sector destined to die, governments recognize them as bearers of a very special component of ancestral origins. In a sense these individuals provide crucial examples for the thousands of workers in dire need of training and inspiration in the craft trades. What more appropriate expression of regional individuality and uniqueness is there than the work of a master craftsman? Who can deny the importance of crafts and the master craftsman to cultural identity and pride, both historically and contemporarily? Yet, without the study, recognition, support, and marketing assistance for these masters, we run the risk of fomenting homogeneous aesthetic styles in which the same objects could be made in any country by any craftsman. Were this to happen, what is known to be special, regional, cultural traits and expressions would be diluted, and magnificent aesthetic traditions would be lost, as well as the sources of income for many.

It is a misconception of some marketing promoters in Latin America that buyers do not care about this regional individuality. When

the bottom line simply becomes “Who can make the most for the least:”, an unnecessary competition and confrontation is created among the craftspeople of different countries. Nobody can be oblivious to the fact that the cost: labor: raw materials ratio differs greatly from country to country.

Craft development agencies are responsible for assisting these craftspeople who are a source of national pride. They must be made aware that many of these craftspeople maintain only the minimum standard of living and that the possibilities for *their self-sufficiency and growth* and that of their families are unusre, at best. Master craftspeople’s success affects thousands of others who may follow in their footsteps and who may be able to develop their profession based on real models of quality and authenticity.

The multiplier effect of the master craftsperson is incalculable. His or her manual skills and phenomenal ability to create are the dominant features of their own production. They provide inspiration and concrete forms for those artisans who may or may not have the master’s talent. In the case of the Organization of American States, efforts in supporting craft production as a viable source of income are more specifically directed to the masters although other technical cooperation is oriented to the good, capable craftspeople whose success depends not principally on the uniqueness of their production, but on society’s reappraisal of their work and competitive pricing in a commercial market.

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Non-master craftspeople are in a depressed economic state today because of the low quality production and inability to enter a competitive market. Sooner or later, this unfortunate reality will be stronger than any attempts to rectify it, despite the efforts to incorporate the masters as models of excellence. At this moment, the OAS is not only concerned with the exceptionally good craftspeople, but also with those who simply need to earn a living through crafts. It would be doing a disservice to set our sights beyond the reach of these non-masters who are, after all, the majority. Therefore, policy makers and program specialists are concentrating their efforts on those who do have the potential for developing and contributing to a craft trade.

OAS: A CASE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

Since 1973 the Organization of American States has created an inter-American infrastructure and network of institutions and individuals to identify, design, and implement different types of projects to support national efforts towards crafts development.

The OAS Regional Development Program, which was established in 1969, organized a meeting of experts in México City in June 1973 to discuss these issues. A document entitled "Inter American Charter of Folk Arts and Crafts" came out of this meeting with recommendations for programs at the national and inter-American levels, consequently, and with the sponsorship of the respective governments, the Inter-American Center on Folk Arts And Crafts was established in Ecuador and the Regional Subcenter for Folk Arts and Crafts in Guatemala in 1975 and 1977, respectively. Those agencies have performed important work of technical cooperation with the member states in the establishment and strengthening of appropriate infrastructures and of the resources needed to develop folk arts and crafts programs which consider crafts expressions in their cultural context and as basic elements of the social and economic development of local and regional communities.

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Those projects, national or regional, have dealt with the various means of cooperation. Among the most important are:

- Basic research for the identification of human material resources available on a national level
- Cooperation for the organizing of national offices or institutions responsible for craft development as well as training for the technical and administrative staff
- Local training for craftspeople and/or technicians
- Experimental workshops dealing with raw materials, technique, design, and tool-making sessions

Adult education programs oriented to specific needs of craftspeople, such as literacy workshops, basic mathematics and accounting, management principles for small or craftsmanship business, organizational means and procedures

- Training for craft program directors within a socio-cultural and economic context

— Special training programs for designers or other professionals with a fine arts background who specialize in improving crafts production in terms of quality and authenticity in observance of local cultural identity and traditions

More than 200 craftspeople and 450 specialists from twenty-two member countries of the OAS have benefited from the crafts fellowships offered by the Organization during the past eight years.

The inter-American exchange through these courses has also been considerable since the location of the center offering the training changes country every year. Thus far courses have been held in Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haití, Honduras, Jamaica, México, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and in 1984 Argentina and Costa Rica.

In general, the concern of the OAS has been the training of the necessary human resources at the national level. Aware of funding limitations for a better and more permanent support, the Organization concentrates its efforts for cooperation towards the regional and national networks and infrastructures to facilitate and promote the horizontal cooperation among countries and dissemination of any available and relevant information. This is the case of the *Inter-American Directory of the Crafts Sector* that after two years of compilation and constant updating is finally available for those interested or working in this field.

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There is a great diversity of national projects depending on the specific circumstances of each country. Different approaches have produced positive learning experiences in countries like Argentina, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haití, Honduras, Jamaica, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Saint Lucia, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Argentina, for example, will be the headquarters for the Sixth Training Program in Crafts Design. Fifteen participants will attend from Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay. It is expected that these professionals will later serve as consultants for craft groups in their own countries.

From the one hundred fellows already trained in these specific courses, twenty-one are from the southern countries and will assume the monitoring responsibilities during the training. In this way, they

will gain experience and will be encouraged to promote similar programs at the national level.

In Colombia, the OAS had been focused on supporting one of the projects of a National Foundation: The Colombian Association for the Promotion of Folk Arts and Crafts. This entity through its Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions has developed an extensive library and collection of folk art and crafts from all over the country.

OAS contributions have been channeled towards the design and implementation of a system incorporating the traditional folk culture into the formal education curricula. This project, initiated in 1982, will continue with the OAS support until 1985 and it is hoped that will become a pilot experience for the region.

00 Costa Rica was the scene of one of the most significant meetings in inter-American folk cultural relations. For the first time in the hemisphere, master artisans from twenty-two member countries of the Organization came together to analyze the various problems that now affect their sector, which is one of the most important in the process of development, and based on their knowledge and experience to propose the most suitable actions.

The First Inter-American Meeting of Master Artisans was the principal event of the commemorative program to celebrate the 1982 Inter-American Year of Folk Arts and Crafts, promoted by the Regional Cultural Development Program of the OAS, by mandate of the General Assembly of the Organization.

Ecuador and Guatemala as host countries of the Inter-American Center for Folk Arts and Crafts in Cuenca, Ecuador and the Subcenter in Guatemala have been the site of several important multinational encounters of the craft sector. These activities cover a wide range of topics from the community delegates and their experiences to the academic brainstorming which has produced during the last eight years important guidelines for craft development policies.

Parallel to the regional programs these two Centers and the

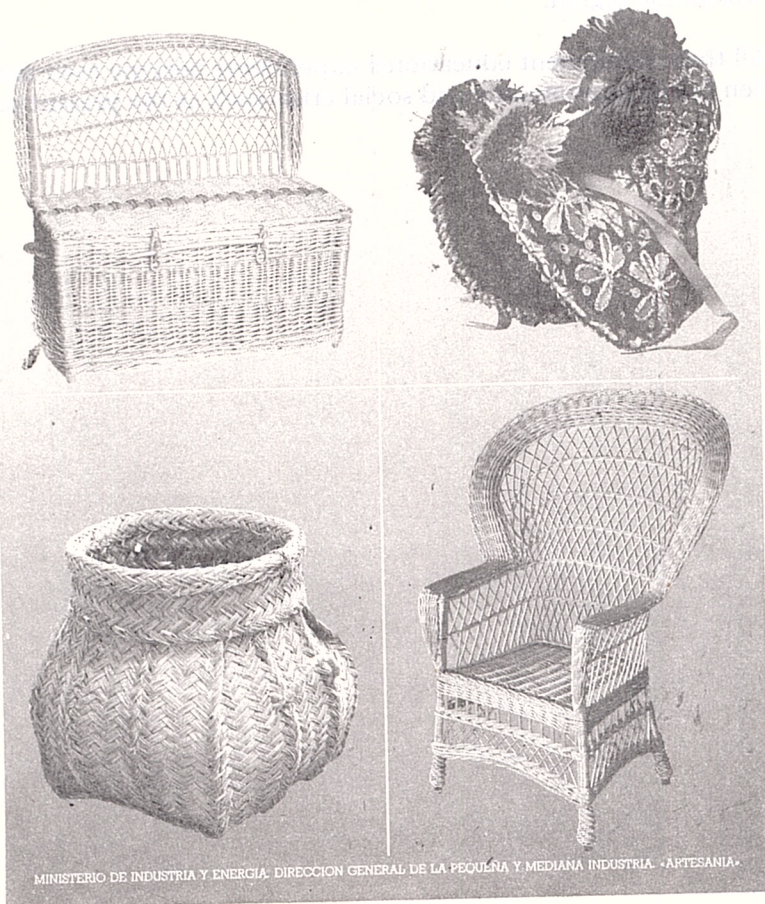
Institute of Ethnomusicology and Folklore in Venezuela carry out very important projects at the local level.

The Crafts Museum of the Community in Chordeleg, Ecuador is an excellent example of a local effort and community participation in the implementation of a pilot experience that not only serves the national needs of a specific group but illustrates the possibilities for others within the region.

All these permanent educational experiences become even more vital when facing an economic and social crisis such as the present one.○

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