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CRAFTS AND POPULAR ART

Over the years CIDAP has accumulated sufficient experience to permit us, without boasting, to propose a series of concepts and criteria, which we believe to contribute to an understanding of the complex situation related to crafts and popular art in american countries.

97

To begin with, for us crafts are part of daily experience and shared tasks; they are charged with meaning for many thousands of people. This group of people includes not only craftsmen but also those who regularly use crafts to satisfy daily needs. For such people, these handmade objects make work and the surrounding world comprehensible.

Without pretending to offer a novel definition, by crafts, we refer to those artifacts in which human labor is the fundamental ingredient endowing them with particular characteristics. Simply stated, are handmade objects. Artisans are not manual laborers but rather manual producers, and the product of their efforts is a tangible, real measurable good. By this definition, those who work with their hands but do not make artifacts are not artisans.

In addition, a handmade object should satisfy a real need of the social group to which the artisan belongs, and should conform to models recognized by the group. In other words, it should correspond to a recognizable category of objects and one accepted by the group as its own. It should be a product made solely by an artisan or a workshop, and produced with an understanding of its final form and use. These elements are characteristic of traditional crafts, as distinct from museum pieces, works that are static, belonging to the past, or lacking in creativity. On the contrary, crafts satisfy group needs in socially sanctioned ways, they respond to accepted ideas at a given moment and allow producer and user alike to identify shared values.

Crafts thus relate directly to the social world through producers and users who know each other as individuals in non-specialized societies. As a specific object, as a useful artifact, a craft may not be disconnected from the context of its producers and users. Only in its connectedness does it acquire its true meaning.

Traditional crafts occupy an important place within the total production of most of our nations. Without doubt, these objects constitute the majority of objects used in rural communities and marginal urban neighborhoods. In contrast, middle and upper class urban groups use more industrialized products, although crafts are not completely absent among them.

It is important to recognize the value of new crafts as a creative activity that is culturally and economically significant. This is particularly true for products of individual creativity or collaboration within a small workshop. New artisans must not lose contact with traditional ones if we hope to conserve some of the characteristics identified as intrinsic to craft work. Traditional artisans have much to teach new artisans from whom they may also learn, given that they are open to new and possibly valuable influences.

Crafts should be seen as having multiple facets and varied

possibilities. Of particular importance is the manner in which their character as cultural objects combines with their worth as economic goods of exchange and consumption. A craft, as a material object, must not be confused with its human creators and users, but neither is possible to cleanly separate these elements. It is misleading to isolate crafts from their complex social, cultural, and economic contexts.

As previously suggested, a craft is a good connecting producer to consumer by way of a communications system. This statement does not imply an idealistic approach which, even if comprehensible, would be absurd. A communications system gives meaning to the use of an object of a given form, such that a “thing” is transformed into an appropriate combination of form and function, and which is refined over and over again in each act of creation.

María Tucumbi has four sheeps which she grazes on the high grasslands, and each year she gets a little wool which she is always spinning as she walks. This yarn will be given to a master weaver to be made into a belt for her skirt, and then María will wear, sometimes proudly, the clothing woven from her own sheep’s wool. She knows Mateo Sinchi, the weaver, and knows how his hands make white yarn into a multicolored belt, using the grass that dyes or the fruit that colors. Later, her relatives and friends will admire her clothing and they will see that María Tucumbi is a woman worthy of bearing any “cargo” that might come along.

99

Nevertheless, it is already difficult, and getting progressively more so, to imagine that this system maintained by a few groups throughout the Americas will be able to stand up against the ever-increasing advance of the market system which is impossible to ignore; rather, it is a reality to be confronted.

To continue with this global treatment of crafts, it is worthwhile to briefly refer to the characteristics of “popular art”.

Every people is able to create certain forms, objects, designs, and motifs which may be called "art". It should entail certain characteristics such as creativity, individuality, permanence, aesthetic pleasure and other attributes which allow us to recognize art wherever it may be found. When we try to apply these concepts to "popular art" we find ourselves confronted with art usually identified as "primitive", "ingenous", "repetitive" and "infantile". But, stop! Why should we apply ideas and concepts to objects created for ends utterly different from those of "art objects"?

Up to what point is it correct to conceive this form of universal art, and apply this conception to objects created for purposes distinct from those of "art" in the usual sense of the word?

00 It would be more appropriate to look at these creations from the perspective of their creators in order to understand how and why these objects may, of themselves, be considered art. In this way, they may be seen as people's art, not in the sense of being for easy consumption by and uneducated mass, but rather truly "popular art".

In this sense, we may suggest that some, but not necessarily all crafts, are "popular art". From this perspective, the concept of "art" is adjusted to include those objects having aesthetic appeal, objects that are moving and useful to those who need them in the real sense of having a direct and vital relation to them.

Unfortunately, these suggestions concerning crafts and popular art refer to a nearly fictitious reality, because we usually surrender to the violent and varied attack of mass production and consumption. Crafts, together with their producers and users, represent merely minor obstacles to be easily overcome by this force. In spite of the gravity of this situation, it might come as a big surprise if we refuse to fall into the trap set before us.

The artisan, just as any other productive, creative human being, faces this attack from a position so weak as to suggest that

he might as well forget about his work and instead contemplate the advance of mass production and consumption.

In fact, we have failed to recognize that the place of artisans in the world has become progressively smaller, more enclosed. We have failed to clearly see the need for aggressive action to counteract the aggressiveness of the system. We have limited ourselves to the passive contemplation of how, by all available means, artisans work is attacked and devalued, their culture denied.

Artisans require the means with which to improve their expressive abilities; they need self-confidence; they need to know how to use their own traditions, not for tying themselves down to a negative past, but to become creative and secure individuals. They need design and cannot afford to wait for the polish that years bring. They must resist the lure of beautiful objects that appear instantaneously. All of this could make artisans into individuals having worthwhile, well-paid, and satisfying professions, rather than having them try to flee this troubled world and give up to the pressures against them.

101

But, of course, improvement in artisans' living conditions would not come solely from their own efforts. At this point, the above-mentioned aggressiveness must be brought to bear. We are through with timid methods. Let's go to the schools, to the streets, to the offices, to the factories, and let's try to show a new image of those crafts and popular culture which were getting lost in the fog. Let's use whatever means we have, including those such as the schools on one hand, or television on the other, which have been the worst enemies of our own forms of expression.

It is not yet too late for this counterattack, although it would have been better had we begun yesterday. What is happening now in America to artisans and their crafts shows that the task has already been undertaken and is continuing to expand into an ever broader and deeper campaign.

At CIDAP we believe in these ideas and concepts, based on years of contact with artisans and their reality, and we are sure that this First Seminar is a great opportunity to join together

within a new perspective and fresh reality, nourished by the skillful hands and depth of culture found everywhere in the Caribbean.

SOME CIDAP ACTIVITIES

The Interamerican Center for Handicrafts and Popular Arts, with offices in Cuenca, Ecuador, has undertaken a series of tasks designed to deal with the problems of crafts and popular arts. Among the most important tasks are the following:

Training: One of the Center's fundamental goals is training with an international scope. Based on experience and analysis, it was found that training is needed to strengthen such areas as craft design and knowledge of popular art for future applications in education and artisan preparation.

102 To attain these goals the Center sponsors courses in Craft Design, Informative Seminars on specific topics, Interamerican Courses for craftsmen, and seminars and workshops dealing with the incorporation of popular culture in education. Technical assistance regarding various aspects of handicraft work is offered upon a nation's request, and other training-related projects are carried out.

Research: Research on the realities of craft work and popular art, provides a basis for planning concrete programs designed to improve artisans' skills. Research is also carried out on the basic socio-economic parameters of crafts communities, and specific plans of action are suggested. Extensive studies aimed at obtaining ample knowledge of popular culture have been done for future integration into formal educational programs. Monographs on techniques, design, and artisan problems have been published to offer basic information on these topics. A photographic registry, video tapes, and a file on techniques, designs and crafts communities, and specific plans of action are suggested. Extensive studies aimed at obtaining ample knowledge of popular culture have been done for future integration into formal educational programs. Monographs on techniques, design, and artisan problems have been published to offer basic information on these topics. A photographic registry, video tapes, and a file on

techniques, designs and craft processes are maintained for archival research and other uses.

Publications: Research provided valuable material for publication. CIDAP edits and publishes these materials in special series and in its own periodical. The magazine "Artesanías de América", fifteen issues of which have come out on a regular basis, is intended to disseminate research findings. A low cost, widely read series entitled "Cuadernos de Arte Popular" is also published. Monographs on crafts, popular arts, and bibliography are published, as a series on popular arts, and bibliography are published, as a series on popular culture in Ecuador for students, researchers, and teachers. Additionally, special publications such as student workbooks and Informative Notebooks for primary and secondary school teachers will be available. Finally, CIDAP prints exposition catalogues, study cards and information sheets for its museum.

Museum and Expositions: For CIDAP, expositions are not merely an end in themselves, but rather an educational tool for the promotion and reevaluation of crafts. For this purpose, there is a Museum of American Popular Arts, and CIDAP sponsors periodic and itinerant expositions for national and international showings. Attempts are made to bring children into the world of crafts by encouraging them to use their hands in creating their own crafts. Hundreds of school children are brought to the expositions. In addition, low cost museographic tools are being studied for use in rural and urban schools.

Handicraft Promotion: Concrete projects intended to revalue crafts are undertaken, such as courses in natural dyes and dying, and National Craft Meetings.

Community Museum: This is a special CIDAP project established in the village of Chordeleg, as a means of encouraging artisans to revalue their work and to obtain increased compensations through group organization. The experience has been a positive one and similar projects are underway in other Ecuadorian communities such as Colta in Chimborazo province.

Other Activities: Two fundamental services provided by CIDAP

are its Interamerican Crafts Library and its Documentation Center, both of which are intended to provide information and bibliographic references to artisans, designers and students.

Audiovisual programs are made for specific audiences, and there is a collection of video films in the archives for public showing. Audiovisual programs made especially for use in primary and secondary schools are planned, as are video shorts on handicraft techniques and processes.

We are most interested in interinstitutional cooperation in order to achieve shared goals for the benefit of artisans.○