

# WHY ART?

## PROJECTS IN CHILE AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

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When we think about service, we generally and easily accept that basic education, human rights, housing, access to water, and conservation of natural resources benefit humanity. Art seems like a luxury. The Defiance College academic dean asked me “why art?” Why should it be an academic area included in McMaster program offerings? I was involved in two McMaster projects during the 2005–2006 academic year that focused on art as an area of service. Although they both involved training potters and seemed very similar to me going in, they ended up being quite different, and those differences gave me a new perspective on the power of art.

### CHILE

My first project, training potters at *Bodegón Cultural de Los Vilos* in Los Vilos, Chile, was several years in the making. I believe it is a first for the McMaster School because it involved a financial collaboration with another organization, the Ohio Arts Council. The OAC has had a longstanding relationship with arts groups in Chile. The OAC contacted me through Ohio Designer Craftsmen—an organization I have had a more than thirty-year relationship with as a member, board member, and president.

OAC Creative Director, Betty Talbott, had traveled to Chile twice before for OAC to curate exhibitions for the Riffe Gallery and the Ohio Craft Museum, both in Columbus, Ohio. She was asked to find a ceramist who knew the RAM process, which is a mechanical clay-forming method used to enhance production and quality in an industrial setting. At the least she needed to find someone who had experience as a mold maker. This person would assist the potters at *Bodegon* as they put into operation a RAM press they had been given by the First Lady of Chile. Successful operation on this press would increase the productivity of the training center, bringing in more income and increasing the quality of production. This in turn would allow more Chileans to be trained at the center, providing jobs and economic stability to an impoverished region in this country.

Talbott initially called me to consult on finding a potter to take on this task. After reviewing the names of several Ohio potters, we were drawing a blank. I volunteered that I had been interested in this process for years and had contacted the RAM factory years ago, inquiring about buying a press for my own studio. I then sought out Charles Warren, the dean of the McMaster School at that time, to see if technical training would fall within the scope of McMaster funding if OAC covered travel and lodging costs. Warren was very excited about the possibility of furthering economic development at the mission of *Bodegon* and encouraged me to pursue the project.

Then we ran into road blocks. First there was an administrative change in OAC, which put the project funding in question. Then the RAM factory postponed the second scheduled training date. The OAC finally gave the green light, and the RAM plant found dates that would work in their schedule to train me in the RAM process just a week before my flight to Chile on March 10, 2006.

In the midst of the scheduling problem, I was emailed photos of the press, and—surprise!—it wasn't a standard machine. I realized I was going to have to do a lot of retooling and building from scratch. Emailing through interpreters is frustrating, and my last Spanish class was over thirty years ago. Fixtures to hold dies to the press bed had to be fabricated by me in Ohio. And all the supplies and equipment had to fit into my limited luggage space. I had been warned the village of Los Vilos was small and remote, and not to plan on finding any materials there. In addition, there would be no time for shipping supplies, so everything I would need, other than plaster and cement, I would have to carry in with me.

Finally, we were off. Our team included Talbott, who had good contacts in Chile from her two previous trips. Upon our arrival, we were met at the airport by Daniella Muller, the former cultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy, who was to be my Spanish interpreter. Her younger brother, Martin Muller, a jeweler trained at the University of Tennessee, was to be my technical interpreter.

After a day of general sightseeing, we were driven to the village of Los Vilos, two and a half hours north of Santiago. We were met by architect Jorge Colvin and environmentalist Fernando de Castro, founders of the center. We toured *Bodegon*, its workshops and galleries. I met my class, which consisted of three men of varied backgrounds: Elmer Gomeró, a Peruvian national of Mayan descent, who was the head teacher, thrower,

and modeler; Raul Contreras, enameller, thrower, and finishing assistant; and Hubert Ysenbaert, a Belgian national who was the studio's general hand and who would become the press operator.

The goals of *Bodegon* were to train up to eight potters a year, most of whom would go off to work in their own villages or farms. They would produce pots as an income enhancement during the slow seasons of farming or herding. Others would take up potting full time as a viable income source, producing standard ware to be sold through the *Bodegon* gift shops or one-of-a-kind pieces to be marketed on their own.

My main job on the project was to teach the staff how to build molds for the press and find substitutes for the materials that were readily available in the states but not in Chile. One reason the OAC sent me to Chile was because of my skills in scavenging materials and creative problem solving when it comes to making tooling. The arc welder I was given to use would only weld about an inch before blowing all the fuses in the center. For our compressed air, we had to borrow a small portable air compressor from a gas station. Instead of using traditional air line fittings, we used a lot of duct tape, but we made it work. Ysenbaert was also a skilled scavenger and proved to be most helpful. Instead of industrial-grade plasters, we substituted molding plaster mixed with Portland cement to bring it to the required hardness to withstand the pressure of a ten-ton press.

My formal classes consisted of reviewing mold-making technical manuals for the press and going through the process of making fixtures and finish molds. Most of the technical information had to be translated from English to Spanish, and all standard measurements were converted to metric. Gomero proved to be a natural at mathematical conversion.

As we all struggled with language and math, we did a lot of laughing. Gomero, Contreras, and Ysenbaert soon became not just students but comrades in clay. We were pushed to our limits by all we had to learn, but early failures were followed by major successes. In four days we produced two sets of molds for the press, got the press running for the first time, and produced our first bowl. Since Ysenbaert was to be the press operator, I asked him to sign the bottom of the first bowl. Because of his low social status in that culture, he felt that he shouldn't. I convinced him that it could not have been made without his help and said we would all sign the bowl, to be kept at *Bodegon*.

On my last day, we had a farewell luncheon in downtown Santiago. Afterward, we walked next door to an art gallery and Colvin was excited to see that two of the artists represented in the gallery were former students of *Bodegon*.

### THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

My second McMaster project was to Palestine in June, 2006, where I worked with International Center of Bethlehem, a facility that houses many arts and cultural programs. My job was to present a workshop on basic ceramics and help the staff develop college-level courses with the goal of being the first accredited art school in the Palestinian Territories.

I went into the project believing that helping Palestinian artisans increase efficiency in the studios would have some impact on their profitability and in turn give them some economic power. In the course of the first three days I discovered that the students were more concerned about changing lives through actions than with economic power.

My first responsibility was to present a lecture open to the artists surrounding Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The room for my presentation was full. At that time I didn't know some of my audience had stood in line for hours, going through social humiliation at ID checkpoints just to hear an outside creative voice. Most were Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians.

My first feeling was to wonder why these people would come to hear me speak about my work and that of my friends, colleagues, and students. What was more surprising to me was that they would come hear an American, when the U.S. has recently turned its back on the Palestinians. But they were hungry for art, creativity – and full of questions: How did I make my work; what recognition did I have for my work; could I support my family? They wanted to know all about my family. Too often in political situations, we forget families, but in the end, they are all that really matter. Most only spoke Arabic, so we stopped often for joint translations and laughed at our shared clumsiness. One of my prizes from that night was a catalog from a Jerusalemite Palestinian painter, Taleb Dweik. He presented it to me as a gesture of friendship. I hope my slides and lecture were worthy of his long ordeal at the Separation Wall checkpoint.

The next day, my workshop began. My class consisted of five Palestinian women, Muslim and Christian both, and Karin Brown, an American who had recently graduated from Juniata College in Pennsylvania. Born and

raised in the Middle East, she was invaluable to me as translator and guide. My workshop was on basic decorating, molding, and firing techniques.

By the final evening, we understood each other's personalities, humor, and focus. I asked one of my students, Laurice Mattar, why she wanted to make



pots and go through the expense of finding space and equipment and setting up shop since she reported that the Israelis had destroyed the tourist economy in Bethlehem? How would she make it pay? Her answer was pure human wisdom, pulled from a life of oppression. She saw hope in pots, not to earn financial security,

but to create a workshop that would allow children who are born into war and hate a refuge from violence and a rest from fear.

If you listen more than you speak, if you don't allow your limited expectations to limit your goals, but let the vision of the oppressed blossom in the arts and hope, you can hear peace. In the midst of strife and poverty, why art? The arts provide a voice for those without one.

Why is censorship of the arts one of the first acts of a totalitarian regime? Because art is dangerous. Art should be feared by those who seek to oppress. When you give a two year old a crayon, she will create. She will tell a story of family, home, hopes, and dreams. How dangerous is a crayon, spray can, or a ball of clay in the hand of someone who has something to say about the human condition!

In the U.S. with our Puritan work ethic, creating something nonfunctional is viewed as a waste of resources. Unless we are able to make wealth, a product to sell, or food, art is considered decadent or wasteful. I say it's not. If it brings joy or sadness, if it causes one to think, have a tactile experience, or see the world differently, it is valuable enough.

One major observation from travel outside the U.S. is how important the arts are to other cultures. In Florence, Venice, and Amsterdam, the galleries,

both public and commercial, are full, with residents and tourists alike. When you walk down a side street and catch a glimpse inside apartments, you find art. On most street corners in Santiago, there are sculptures. Expression surrounds the cultures of other peoples. On my first foreign trip to the Soviet Union in 1974, I was amazed to find the ballet, concert halls, and art museums packed with people of all classes. It was an important part of resistance and the quest for freedom. If you are living under oppression, whether cultural, political, or economic, it becomes more important to see expression of human feelings.

Throughout human history, art is what archaeologists have as primary evidence to look into other cultures. Art is what cultures leave behind. We often judge the wealth of ancient cultures by how decorated their tools were. Does the decoration make the tool work better? No. But because of effective tools, basic survival was easier, allowing more time for relaxation or increased production. One of the results was to carve, engrave, paint, and embellish the tools, not to make them more effective, but to make beautiful objects to give the user joy, pride, and status.

When the Nazis came to power, the artists and intellectuals were among those they gathered up first because the free human voice and its expression are dangerous to those who are afraid of new ideas and diversity. Back to Dean O'Connell's question: Why art? Because it is a basic human need to tell a story, to make something beautiful, to find pleasure in life's experiences. The arts are the voice of humanity.

