Why Arts and Crafts?

by Douglas George

In September of 1972, Carl Soderberg first proposed to Jim Hall the idea of a craft festival. He maintained that encouraging persons to develop creative pursuits leads to a “greater personal awareness of life and a sensitivity to the human potential.” The program and the gathering of people around the crafts would be an opportunity to meet and share in “a common ministry.”

In some respects Carl’s arguments were direct contemporary responses to developments of the early 70’s—a period of “creativity” explosions as reactions to depersonalized computer-regimentation; rapid increases in income and alternative or spare time; and serious considerations of expression and life style. He had his own personal reasons as well. His work in wood with the Minnesota Woodcarvers had been a discovery of personal renewal in a community of friendships.

The 1972 proposal was for a week’s work in limited craft fields, particularly those chosen from Southwest cultures using the special resources of the ranch. The groups were to be small, encouraging self-pacing and participant discussion. The instructors were to become involved in the craft community, in Carl’s words, “willing to live with the entire event.” Clay, metal, fiber, and paint were materials to be explored.

The Festival began in 1973 with Carl and Fritz Messinger. Messinger ran it in 1974, Lenore Haber was “facilitator” in 1975, and Carl picked it up again in 1976 to complete a decade of successes last summer.

Statistics have a certain banal aridity to them, but advertise certain truths that otherwise go unnoticed in a sort of forest-for-the-trees illusion. The first three years of the festival were one-week programs: from 1976 on, two-week programs were filled. The Folk Arts Festival was added in 1978. Since 1973, some 3000 people have participated in the Festival Programs! That statistic must be some kind of a record, or, better, testimony to the vitality of the crafts community within the mission of the ranch. Jim Hall has been heard to say that he could fill the summer with ten weeks of Festival of Crafts.

Other media of expression—including calligraphy, the fabric arts, photography, stained glass, mosaics—have been included in the summer programs. I became a member of the crafts staff three years ago when Carl and I discussed including an early morning session for the entire Festival group together in Longhouse. At 9:00, these informal presentations of 20 minutes or so would concentrate on the formal drier vocabulary of the visual arts—line, form, light, color, composition. All my examples of line, to take just one, would be chosen from Southwest artistic traditions. From rock art, painted or incised, I used the outlines or contours of the Sun Dagger or Kokopelli to exemplify the nature of expressive line. My hope is that such discussions would encourage a group awareness, inform an individual artisan’s work, and help in the appreciation of New Mexico’s visual arts.

Over the decade, the Festival has enabled people to be in touch with significant New Mexico artists—Max Roybal, the Santero; the Kozikowskis and their “woven tapestries,” Roger Wilber, the silversmith; the pottery of Willard Spence and Jim Kempe; Judith Roderick’s batik and painted silk, to focus on only a few. The Festivals also have given the groups an understanding of Southwestern cultures, pushed some folks to explore new careers or add new jobs, expanded the individual skills of many—in addition to what these weeks have done for the ranch program.

Carl’s proposals ten years ago
• the concept of orienting a ranch program on discovering individual creative expression
• a program scheduled to allow full participant involvement
• a leadership cadre with the abilities in group processes to bring the many pieces of the event together—
have been realized over the years in the lives of thousands, providing a common ministry of the church involved in encouraging creative pursuits.

Last year at Jim Hall's Monday evening introduction of the forthcoming week's programs, the staff for the Crafts Festival, in front of the assembly, held up an almost extemporaneous card display—"ART, the only Game worth Playing." Of the many justifications for artistic production—to express a great idea, as in the Sistine ceiling or the Statue of Liberty; to serve as an historical chronicle, as in the Arch of Constantine or the Bayeux Tapestry; to exemplify standards of beauty, relative, of course, to time, place, culture, even social class; the human species, the art-makers, homo ludens, may be defined as the game-players. The resources of the cerebral hemispheres—reason or memory—may not represent our most basic impulses. It is a remarkable fact that image-making preceded literacy in the cultural evolution of humanity. One stimulus for art, on the most basic level, seems to be the play impulse. Surplus energy is released and this release is experienced as pleasure. As it becomes organized, it assumes content, rules, form. Many activities—dancing, singing, drama, sports—as well as art—develop from play. They are apparently "useless", with no obvious practical purposes. They may serve as wish-fulfillment or may imitate life situations, or amount to a comment, or serve as a poem on life.

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EXPANDING HORIZONS OF THE SELF
by Janet Stang
with Photos by Paul Stang

Developing parts of oneself, never before developed, and connecting with persons, media and times outside of one's experience, are two ways of summing up what happens for the participant in Folk Arts or Festival of Crafts each summer at Ghost Ranch.

For eight summers I have traveled to Ghost Ranch to involve myself in a craft and in the fellowship of people who gather at the ranch from all over the country and sometimes from abroad. In those eight summers I have done dyeing and spinning of wool, Navajo weaving, tapestry weaving, calligraphy, built a mountain dulcimer, and caned in a small frame. Just to say these have been my craft experiences would be far from the truth.

Within Longhouse there are usually at least six different crafts going on at the same time. It is impossible to limit one's attention only to one's class. The excitement that pervades Longhouse as the work progresses is irrepressible. Moving back and forth to the coffee pot

*Janet Stang, weaving*

*Pomona Hallenbeck, demonstrating a water color technique.*