

News & Articles

Hand Made, Fair Trade:
Protecting the Handicrafts Tradition in Palestine
World Fair Trade Day 2008

Palestinian Handicrafts: A Brief History

For thousands of years now, pilgrims have been coming to the Holy Land because of the vital religious significance it holds for Christians, Muslims and Jews. Many Christian pilgrims, of course, come to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and their desire to take home locally made items as remembrances of their visit has, through the centuries, encouraged and sustained indigenous traditions of craftsmanship.

The carving of olive wood into religious objects (Nativity scenes, crucifixes, rosary beads, etc.) has been a central part of these traditions for centuries. Mother-of-Pearl was introduced to the area by Franciscan monks who came to Bethlehem in the 14th century, adding beautiful jewelry and other richly decorated household objects to the artisans' repertoire. Vibrantly painted ceramic, hand-blown glass, and delicately embroidered cloth all also became, and remain, popular hand-made souvenirs of Palestine.

The handicrafts industry has been passed down from generation to generation and is strongly rooted in contemporary Palestinian culture and society. It has become a crucial part of our identity and of our artistic self-expression.

Current Issues for the Craft Industry

In our area—Bethlehem and its neighboring towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jalla-- traditional crafts are under increasing threat. Many workshops are on the verge of closing. The artisans cannot afford to live here anymore and many are looking into emigrating abroad to find a better life. Some of the biggest difficulties that we face are the following:

Competition between workshops

- Workshops are always trying to undercut each others' prices to gain more customers.
- There are no copyright protection laws, so workshops steal ideas and products from each other.

Lack of Tourism

- Many tour companies do not include trips into the West Bank or Bethlehem area because of the political situation.
- The 30-foot concrete Wall which the Israelis call a "security fence" and the large checkpoints intimidate tourists.
- Many tourists are reluctant to come into the Bethlehem area to visit the Holy Sites because of the propaganda spread about how dangerous it is in the West Bank and the myth that Palestinians are terrorists. Few people realize that Bethlehem has a dynamic, well-educated population, many of whom are Christians.

Cost of raw materials

- In recent years, the cost of certain raw materials has skyrocketed. High quality mother-of-pearl, for example, has nearly tripled in price, which has made it difficult for MOP shop owners to purchase large quantities. Therefore they pay high prices and receive a low profit.

Exporting Internationally

Over the last 10 years the exportation of handicrafts from the Holy Land has increased tremendously, which has been very beneficial for communities devastated by the drastic decrease in revenue from tourism. However, this has also had a detrimental effect on many local workshops that do not have the means or the contacts available to export internationally. This has hugely divided the handicraft industry between very wealthy workshops and very poor workshops.

Many larger workshops have family living abroad who buy very cheaply from small local workshops and sell with huge profit margins to westerners. Those who sell reap the benefits but those small workshops do not; they continue to suffer, often barely making ends meet.

The Benefits of Fair Trade for Palestinian Handicrafts

- Helps maintain fair and stable prices
- To maintain a Fair Trade certification, workshops are unable to engage in cutthroat, price-slashing competition.
- Artisans benefit, since they are properly compensated for their hours of labor, their skills, and their creativity.
- Tourists and international clients know that the people who produced the products that they buy are compensated fairly for them.
- The local community benefits, since if its citizens are assured of a more stable income they are much less likely to be tempted to emigrate.

Helps decrease discrimination within the community

Fair Trade principles mandate that all our artisans and producers be treated fairly, regardless of religion, race, or gender. For us, primarily, this signifies not favoring a particular workshop or its products simply because the artisans are Christian or Muslim. Working together to advertise, produce, and sell our products helps us overcome endemic discrimination of this kind.

Fair Trade also emphasizes the role of women within the workforce. In our more traditional communities, women's role is usually seen as restricted to the domestic sphere, but economic pressures have created opportunities (and sometimes pressure) for women to work outside the home. Fair Trade ensures that their work is equally valid and respected, and fairly compensated.

One of the workshops that partners with our Cooperative focuses on training local handicapped people, who would not otherwise have opportunities for work, let alone for their personal artistic development, to make beautiful greeting cards. Our communities, unfortunately, sometimes view the handicapped as a burden rather than as full and potentially productive members of society. Fair Trade encourages us to address these inequalities.

Environmental Issues

- Fair Trade emphasizes sustainable, environmentally friendly products. We try to address these issues in many different ways:
- In environmental terms, handcrafted items are much more sustainable than those which are mass produced.
- The materials that we use are natural, organic, and whenever possible, local, like our olivewood.
- The workshop mentioned above creates their greeting cards out of recycled paper, and we all work to keep packaging to a minimum.

Conclusion

Fair Trade has already had many positive influences on our businesses and our local communities, and has helped prevent the decline of our artistic traditions. But we still have a distance to travel in terms of preserving the knowledge and skills embodied in the handicrafts industry for the future. The world community can help us by learning about, telling other people about, and perhaps even purchasing our products—helping to keep these traditional and environmentally-friendly ways of life alive and thriving. We thank you all for your interest and wish you all a Happy World Fair Trade Day 2008!

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