

DEVELOPING THE ART AND CRAFT SECTOR IN A MODERN BARBADOS

The Second Edition Collective Art and Craft Exhibition
Pelican Craft Centre
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This evening, it is my pleasure to participate in this the Second Edition of the Collective Art and Craft exhibition. I must thank Sister Ireka Jelani of Jelani Consultancy Service, for having extended the invitation to me to be here and to afford me the opportunity to make a presentation on the theme 'Developing the Art and Craft Sector in a modern Barbados.'

Before proceeding further, let me take this opportunity to congratulate the organizers of this annual event. I take it that Sister Jelani is the driving force behind this initiative. She is to be commended and encouraged. Let's us by our applause show our appreciation for her efforts.

Let me at the outset state that I lay no claim to being an authority on the subject of 'Art and Craft' in Barbados. However I can tell you that I hold an interest in the subject, if only for the reason that within my household, the younger of my two sons is current pursuing studies in visual arts. Only a few weeks ago he graduated from the Barbados Community College, with an 'Associate Degree' in Applied Visual Arts. He is currently pursuing a Bachelors Fine Arts Degree – Visual Arts, at the Barbados Community College.

This evening is not my intention by any stretch of the imagination to lecture you on the subject of 'Art and Craft'. That I will leave to the more eminent scholars on the hill, at the

University of the West Indies. I will however endeavor to share with you some of my observations and opinions on the how I see the growth and development of the sector in a modern day Barbados.

I start by drawing your attention to the view that the art and craft sector plays second fiddle to other high profile cultural industries such as the performing arts, music, theatre, television, visual arts and book publishing.

Following on this point of view, it leads me to focus on the extent to which the Art and Craft Sector in Barbados is seen as a developing industry, as well as what are the factors that constrain its development.

The view that art and craft plays second fiddle to other high profile cultural industries, in my judgment, raises questions over its viability, sustainability and contribution to national economic development. I put it to you that if we accept that art and craft can play a crucial viable role in the economic development of the nation, where it directly leads to increase economic activity in terms of jobs, sales and revenue, then the question of it being a viable industry in Barbados, is one that is cannot be disputed. From what we know, the art and craft sector is economically important to warrant economic development support from Government.

The demand for unique crafts products by visitors to our shores, and their growing interest in accessing art markets and galleries, suggest that these are factors that will more than likely stimulate growth within the sector. If the sector is to establish itself, it would seem that there is a need for a more aggressive approach to be taken by those within it, as they work towards increasing its viability and sustainability.

I contend that these goal are to be achieve, there must be recognition that the sector is not about individuals, but more so

about institutions and organizations functioning as businesses that are interrelated with other local and regional businesses. There is no denying that art and craft is a popular field in Barbados and beyond. The startling reality is that there are too many amateurs and hobbyists in the sector.

This phenomenon is one which in my opinion constrains the development of the sector. If a change is to be realized, then it requires a whole new outlook and attitude on the part of all interest. It requires that a greater sense of professionalism and business acumen is reflected by those operating in the sector.

There is the suggestion coming out of the 2006 World Economic Forum, (Davos), that art and craft will be a major force in economic development.

If this is to be reflected in the context of Barbados, then there is a need for improvements to be made regarding how business is currently done within the sector.

It is important that a consciousness is developed of what is happening at the global level. The indicators point to the fact that the so-called creative industries are emerging as the largest sector of economic activity in many countries. As it currently stands, the craft industry is the driving force of the large economies of India, China and Korea.

It is imperative that more than a superfluous change is to be made to face of this sector, if it is to take off, and its viability and sustainability is to be assured. The sector is challenged to move to the point where it can be credited is an avenue for full time employment. As it stands now, when it is compared with other occupations, full time paid employment in the sector is currently low, if not rare.

The art and craft sector in Barbados as we know it comprises of small and micro businesses. This to some extent significantly contributes to the low profile of the sector. The low profile nature of the sector also serves to obscure the

substantial economic and cultural contribution of artisans and craft markets.

Arguably, the potential growth of the sector and the kind of support that it receives from government may be constrained not only by the perceptions that is held in some quarters, but by the small scale nature of the sector itself. This factor obviously makes it difficult to create and sustain business or industry association in the sector.

There is no denying that art and craft community in Barbados is diffused and loosely organized. The fact that individuals can design and make products without the support of any organization, serves to clearly highlight the problem the sector faces. There is obviously a need for a semblance of consolidation within the sector. Should this unhealthy state remain, it will continue to inhibit the potential for large scale marketing.

In as much that marketing is recognized as a shortcoming that plagues the sector, a case is to be made for specific programmes that are directed at training persons in the business of selling works of art and craft. The traditional practice of individuals walking around hotel plants in searching for a sale is really a thing of the past. The broader point to be made here is, that if our products are of a high quality, then efforts should be made to sell them on the international market. If the Chinese, Columbian and other can find a market in Barbados for their art and craft, surely the untapped potential on the open market awaits Barbadian entrepreneurs.

It is important that those in the art and craft industry develop a consciousness that innovation in design makes a difference to the capturing of a market share. If there are two concerns that I can be voiced about locally produced products, these would be the close similarities in design that they share, and the repetitive imaginaries that are presented. Sometimes the only

difference to be found between products on local shelves, would invariably be the selling price, and the label of the manufacturer or producer.

Apart from this, it is my contention that the industry basically lacks local support. Arguably, when it comes to the support of local art and craft, there seems to be little sense of nationalism. I challenge you to as you move around Barbados, to see how many places of businesses in the private and public sector, including our hotel plants, display pieces of local art or prints that are hung from their walls, or even pieces of craft. What we do see are prints that depict some scene from some foreign land. I must agree with Susan Mains, who in writing on the subject of Visual Art in Grenada commented that, "At some time we need to consider nationalism. We suffer from the common misconception that anything from anywhere else is a better quality and more valuable than what can get here."

Following on this, it seems to be a given to me that for any serious growth to take place within the sector, there must be a cultural shift that reflects a change in perception and attitudes of art and craft. It first must start with the often low priority it is given on the curricula in our primary and secondary schools.

In support of this assertion, I refer to a 2006 study commissioned by Professor Anne Barnford, of the Wimbledon School of Art, London. "The study showed that 94 % of countries include art and craft as part of their education policy, yet despite this high level of international acceptance of the value of the arts, and willingness to pay lip service to its place within core education, the cultural provisions receive by many children around the world is of a very low quality."

This revelation is apt in the context of Barbados, and it could well be the reason why it would appear that many local

students are not driven in the direction of developing a career in art and craft. It would seem to me that all is not lost, for in the wave of the technological changes that appear to capture the imagination and interest of today's student, the art and craft sector is strategically placed to continue to be an integral part of the island's economic development.

If this is to be achieved, it is imperative that Barbados moves with haste to effect programmes that are in line with what is happening in the global environment. It now requires that apart from focusing on the core subjects of drawing, painting and craft, which are considered to be the nucleus of the curriculum, there should be a move to embrace film, photography and digital art.

In as much as this is the ideal, the fact remains that for it to be carried forward, it hinges on the availability of qualified and trained teachers. Currently there is some training of teachers in arts and craft, but at the same time it is fair to say that for the most part, teachers in this area remain untrained..

In closing I suggest to you that if there is significant development to be reflected in art and craft sector of Barbados, then it requires that:

- Craft activities need to be more attractive to generate a greater level of interest amongst citizens of Barbados.
- There is need for consolidation of the sector, for the purpose of moving it beyond the realm of individualism.
- The sector is revolutionized by way of embracing technology within it.
- That training in the sector is pitched beyond skill development, to include specific business development principles, such as marketing.
- Efforts are directed at identifying both regional and extra regional markets for Barbadian art and craft.
- The traditional perception is eliminated, where the involvement in art and craft is seen as a sphere of

activity, which is limited to persons of lesser academic ability.

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