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Betty LaDuke

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# Women, Art, and Culture in the New Grenada

by  
*Betty LaDuke\**

Can straw, fiber, and wood, the basic raw materials of Caribbean arts and crafts, be reshaped to reflect the new consciousness that distinguishes 110,000 Grenadians from most other Caribbean peoples? During my visit to Grenada in July 1983, the answer to this question became apparent as I began to view and understand the role of art in relationship to history and the more recent social changes that have taken place in Grenada since their March 13, 1979, revolution.

Yvonne Palmer, the director of Grencraft and the Grenadian National Handicrafts Institute (GNHI), and Jacob Ross, a director of cultural programs within the Ministry of Culture, were my two principal informants. During our long discussions I realized how the arts became an effective arm of the people's revolutionary struggle, inspiring new form and content for the media of straw, fiber, and wood, as well as dance, poetry, and music. The art media now reflect the developing consciousness and pride of the people or worker-artists in their future. I also visited, interviewed, sketched, and photographed the teachers and students of GNHI and people of St. George's (the capital) and Gouyave, Sauteurs, and Grenville, who shared with me some of the daily aspects of their lives as well as future aspirations.

As exemplified by Jacob Ross's statement that "We are in the process of rewriting our history. It wasn't Columbus who discovered Grenada in 1498, but the Carib Indians who found Columbus standing on their shores," the "new Grenadians" are seeking to redefine themselves as a people and a nation free from their past colonial domination and the corrupt Eric Gairy dictatorship that followed.

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\*Betty LaDuke teaches in the art department of Southern Oregon State College. This article was written before the October 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada and was the result of travel and research partially sponsored by a Faculty Carpenter Grant in the summer of 1983. All photographs and drawings are by Betty LaDuke.

Today's Grenadians are also proud of their historical ancestors, the Carib Indians, the original inhabitants who fought off the early colonizing attempts of the English and French and who, when faced with the ultimate question of submitting to a future of slavery or instant death, chose the latter. The site where the remaining Carib population chose to leap into the ocean to their deaths is now commemorated in the town of Sauteurs.

Slaves shipped to Grenada from West Africa were used by the early French colonizers to develop their lucrative coffee and spice plantations. After the Anglo-French war in 1763, Grenada was ceded to Britain, with slavery legalized until 1838. Economic dependency on outsiders and exploitation of the Grenadian populace however, have remained constant factors, even after independence from British colonial rule in 1974. This is exemplified by the fact that even though Grenadian soil is extremely fertile, 40 percent of basic foods had to be imported, and the coffee and spices produced in Grenada were refined or processed in Europe.

In the 1950s Eric Gairy rose to prominence with the popular support of the agricultural workers. He became Grenada's first Black Prime Minister in 1974, but he manipulated his power for personal gain. In 1973 the New Jewel Movement (NJM), a coalition of several political parties opposed to Gairicism, was formed under the leadership of Maurice Bishop. In 1979, after an almost bloodless revolution (only three people were killed), Maurice Bishop became the new Prime Minister of the People's Revolutionary Government or PRG.

During the four years of postrevolutionary activity, extraordinary progress was made: The legacy of unemployment was reduced from 50 percent to approximately 14 percent, medical care for the poor was improved by government provision of 40 doctors and 7 dentists who offer free services to the people, and a program of home reparation was instituted (80 percent of homes lack running water).

Some of the basic changes that have reduced the high rate of illiteracy among young and old are the institution of free secondary education, the establishment of the Center for Popular Education which holds classes for adults in work places and community centers, and the improvement of teaching methods and curriculum through the requirement that teachers attend the Teacher Training Institute on Saturdays during the school year and for six-week summer sessions. The cultural aspect of the curriculum now incorporates such Grenadian historical role models as Fedow and Merryshow rather than those of Great Britain.

Motivation and encouragement for young people to attend schools is promoted by the National Youth Organization and the National Women's Organization and contrasts sharply with the past when it was reported that

*You had a lot of children pelting mangoes in the street and a state of mass truancy. Children left school early to sell postcards to tourists, or to dive for the money they threw into the harbour from the tourist boats . . . you would see children climbing dangerous trees with a bunch of bananas or flowers on their heads so the tourists could photograph them and say: "What a lovely monkey you are!" (Grenada Bulletin, 1980: 14).*

In a 1981 speech at the First International Conference in Solidarity with Grenada, Maurice Bishop envisioned the "New Grenada" as a "glorious chapter in the history of man: the construction of a just and equal society by the poor, for the poor and with the poor."

Women and the National Women's Organization, which has about 7,000 members, or one-third of the women in the country, is considered by Jacob Ross to be

*the most dynamic force in the country. Women have benefited much from their own participation in the revolutionary process, not through talking, but through practice. Before the revolution women were defined by a colonial mentality limiting them to their homes and seeing after the husband and children. Only now are they breaking loose.*

The Minister of Human Development is a woman and reports that some of the specific gains affecting women's lives are equal pay for equal work, two months of maternity leave with pay, and the opening up of numerous creches (nursery centers). Women have also formed cooperatives to raise money to sew school uniforms for their children, and there is also a free milk program for children.

After the revolution many of Grenada's professionals and intellectuals began to return from countries such as the United States, England, and Canada where they had gone to seek education and better opportunities to enable them to contribute to the New Grenada. Among those returning was Yvonne Palmer, the director of Grencraft and a graduate of a Fine Arts School in London, who stated; "Before the revolution the craft industry was virtually dormant, and women just took to selling their spices to earn some money." Along with the agricultural workers, "craft producers were the lowest paid." The few artists that survived directed their creative efforts to "appeal to the



Photo 1: Billboard en Route to Gouave

desire of the tourists who viewed the 'natives' as an exotic subhuman species vegetating their lives away under the fronds of the coconut tree, or dancing and singing their cares away in gay abandon to the pulsating beat of calypso and reggae while heavily influenced by the intake of alcohol and marijuana" (Hodge and Seale, 1981: 78).

Since their 1979 revolution, the stereotypical view of Grenadians has been dramatically altered. In St. George's tourists are now greeted by graffiti proclaiming such things as "1983 Year of Political and Academic Education," which summarizes the concerns and new self-image projected by Grenadians. Although they remain a warm and friendly people, subservience to tourists has now been replaced with tours to view their newly established agro- or fishing industries, spice processing factories, or to visit Grencraft—all proud accomplishments since the revolution.

Grencraft, a government store in St. George's opened its doors in September 1981 and is now the largest retail outlet for exclusively national handicrafts in the Caribbean. An enormous, inventive variety of straw, fiber, and wood craft products are sold there as well as home furniture fashioned from a combination of native tropical hardwoods and bamboo. Grencraft, in conjunction with GNIH, has goals that encompass quantity and also quality production of crafts, and promotion of sales to an international competitive market. Not only are craft items produced, but also a creative attitude within the work process is valued and developed.

In 1981 representatives of the Organization of American States (OAS) came to Grenada's Handicrafts Center in order to research the potential for strengthening the craft industry. Subsequently, the center's name was changed to Grencraft, and OAS became helpful in establishing its current program and goals.

The sign announcing the location of Grencraft and GNHI reads "Helping the hand to build the land." Grencraft and GNHI are staffed by a group of 20 people, 17 of whom are women. With a minimum budget and the use of one small pickup truck, they have organized all aspects of the industry, including the following:

- (1) the selection, preparation, and purchase of raw materials;
- (2) the workshops in all six provinces to train many of the unemployed young people and women. (The government now provides some of the transportation costs and nursery centers to facilitate participation.);
- (3) the facilitation of home employment, by regularly transporting the raw materials to isolated village producers and picking up their finished products;
- (4) the promotion of new markets in rural and village areas by making craft products available to the people at reduced rates, and in hotels and public places by aggressively marketing native crafts for use instead of imported items such as place mats, floor coverings, furniture, wood bowls, baskets, etc.;
- (5) the extension of the marketing potential by participation in craft exhibits and fairs throughout Latin America. (Mexico has been very supportive of the Grenadian craft industry by placing major orders.);
- (6) national art festivals or Festival of the Revolution that includes all the arts: dance, music, poetry and theater, as well as art and crafts;
- (7) promotion of individual creative initiative by having semi-annual design competitions with monetary awards; and
- (8) research and incorporation into craft designs of images from petroglyphs and other sources based on their pre-Columbian, Carib heritage.

Since many women are single parents, they prefer to work at home. Therefore, Grencraft in its development of the handicrafts industry, which involves 3,000 people (mostly women), reaches out to them in their rural as well as urban homes. Throughout Grenada's six provinces, training programs, workshops, and cooperatives have been organized by GNIH, giving people an opportunity to develop skills for economic benefit as well as a sense of pride in their work and creative potential.

The current organization of the craft industry contrasts sharply with the past when there was no government support for the arts; craftworkers were isolated producers that could scarcely earn any income, and many of the traditional skills, especially in straw weaving, were beginning to vanish. Through the GNHI program there is not only a revival of the traditional craft skills coupled with a new sense of pride in their cultural heritage, but also an encouragement for workers to develop new designs and motifs while maintaining disciplined quality control of their production work. On the local level Grenadians are also being encouraged to support their craft industry by purchasing many of the utilitarian products instead of imported plastics for daily use.

Yvonne Palmer emphasizes the fact that most of the women craft producers have had no formal training or art education, and at present they rely on women like Miriam Samuels for design and production methods. However, "more and more we have people coming up with their own designs as they are becoming aware that they have the potential to do it themselves."

Miriam Samuels is a young woman who has evolved with the craft industry. She was first trained in design and production in 1979 by a U.S. Peace Corps worker. When Grencraft opened about two years after the revolution, Miriam was given the responsibility of developing the straw and needlework sector of the craft industry by designing products and training workers. One of the special crafts that Miriam has developed is the making of burlap applique wall hangings. These wall hangings incorporate visual stories of the new Grenadian rather than the former tourist view of the "natives" sitting under a palm tree. The themes of Miriam's wall hangings reflect the daily life activities and concerns of many Grenadians: the grinding of cocoa, collection of coconuts, transportation of potable water, care for children, public transportation, and folk dancing by fisherman. These visual stories are created with careful observation and reflect pride in her cultural heritage. New motifs are continually being incorporated.

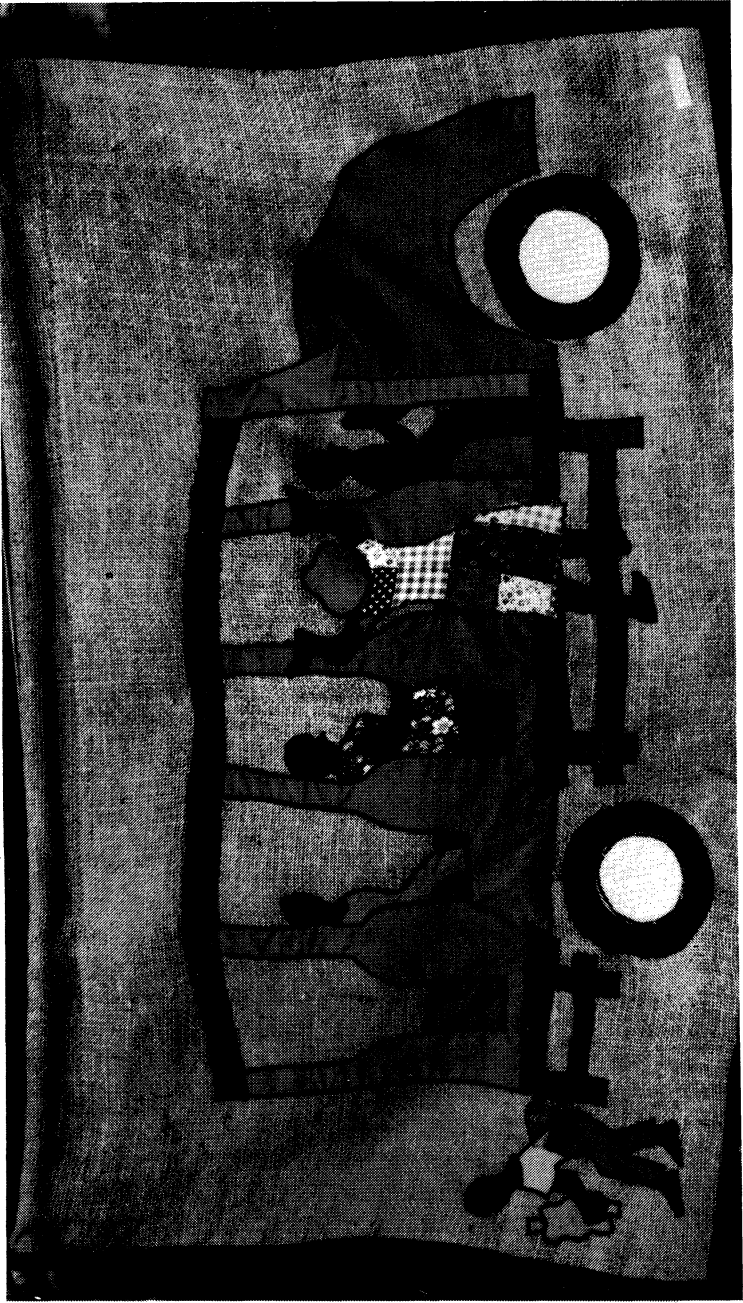


Photo 2: Wall Hanging of Local Bus

Most of the original wall-hanging prototypes or patterns are created by Miriam and delivered to the women who are "home producers." They decide themselves which colorful fabric scraps to cut, combine, and machine stitch to the burlap backing. Each burlap image is then outlined with a contrasting border or edge, and a wood dowel is inserted at the top. Since multiple copies of each fabric image are made for the local tourist trade as well as for export, the women have to be trained in their sewing-machine skills in order to maintain consistent technical control. Now they are encouraged to create and submit their own ideas for production work, especially through the semiannual competitions that offer monetary awards. The change from being a subservient people to gaining skills, confidence, and the initiative to create new form and content in crafts or any other art form is a dynamic process that needs time to mature, especially after four hundred years of colonial rule.

Miriam graduated from high school but never had any formal art training. The proportions of her applique figures are sometimes awkward, but they are expressive and compositionally well organized in relation to the environmental objects that illustrate her various themes. Particularly appealing are the colorful renditions of the all-encompassing mother with her child, the daily chore of transporting potable water, and the applique depicting the older style of public transportation, that is, the brightly painted, wood buses with people climbing aboard.<sup>1</sup>

In the establishment of the Grenadian craft industry, much systematic research, experimentation, and documentation are taking place with Miriam's staff of 12. They are leading the production of samplers of an enormous variety of utilitarian straw products such as hats, bags, baskets, table mats, floor rugs, and smaller items such as dolls, slippers, napkin holders, stationery organizers, and so on. Miriam showed me some of the fiber samples of cotton, silk, sisal, and straw that involve not only distinct weaving patterns but also natural color-dye experimentation. I was able to photograph some of her staff, whose work was in various stages of production. After the initial training period during which the women develop their skills, they are paid for the work they produce.

I received a different view of Grenadian students from their woodcraft teachers, two Cubans, Flori Mollinedo and Tomás Franquo. Flori's skills are primarily limited to technical production work, whereas Tomás is a professional sculptor. They both expressed frustration with some of their Grenadian students' lack of discipline related to hours of study and technical control.

Flori received her training in a unique accelerated program that existed in Cuba from 1965 to 1968 and was offered to five hundred students shortly after their 1959 revolution. The objective was to train designers and production wood-carvers for the creation of official government gifts, and objects for tourist sales within Cuba and for export. After Flori's training she worked in a Havana craft shop until coming to Grenada two years ago to live and teach. Her husband works in the Cuban Embassy.

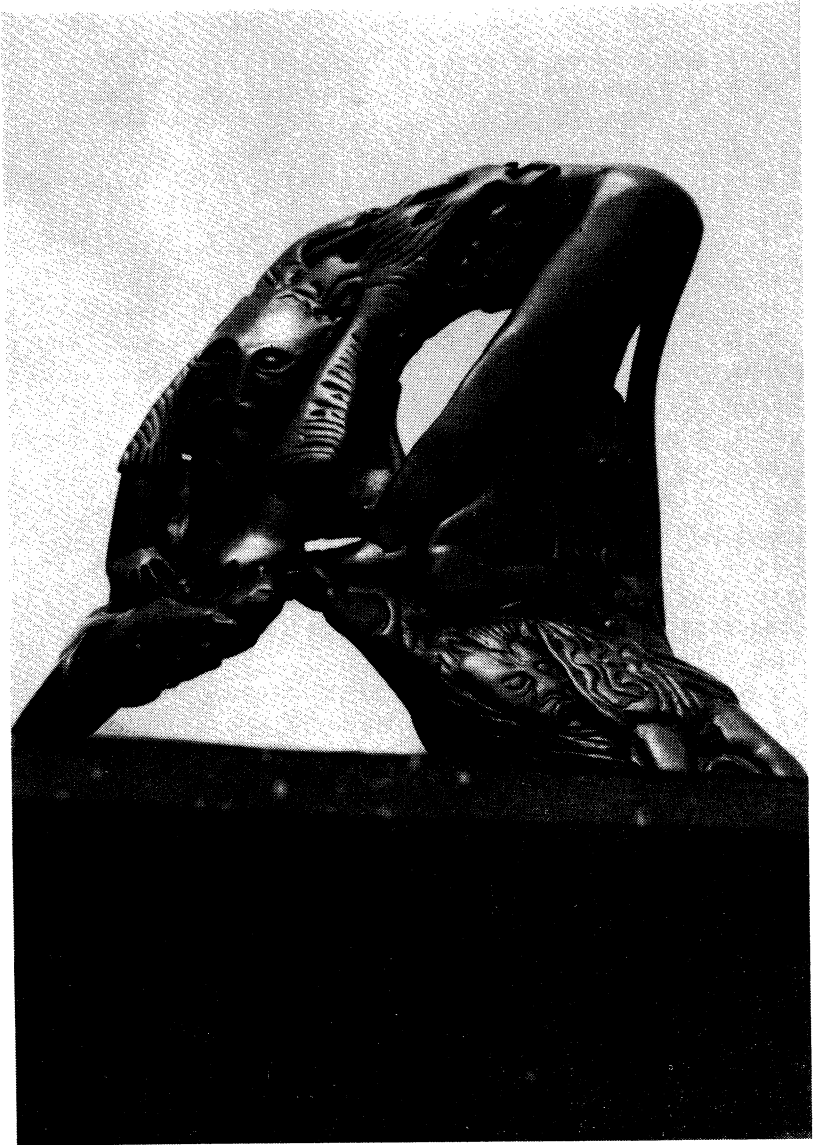
Tomás, on leave as a Professor of Sculpture from one of Havana's fine art schools, has come to teach in Grenada for only six months. From his photographs of the wood and metal sculptures created for his last Havana exhibit in 1982, I was surprised by his abstract forms emphasizing texture, rhythm, and movement especially in his assemblage pieces. This contrasts sharply with a project he is now doing in his spare time in Grenada—a realistic, wood relief sculpture of Fidel Castro commissioned by the Cuban Embassy.

When I first met three of his seven students, they were all carving and copying the same three-dimensional image, based upon Tomás's model portrait of an African chief. However, I was much more interested in two of their own independent projects—intricately designed, large, and complex cedar-root carvings based on their Rastafarian or Ethiopian religious beliefs.

Kerran Nedd, age 25, told me that it took him over a year to complete his piece symbolizing "Knowledge." He began carving only three years ago, encouraged by his brother who had returned from Canada with some woodworking experience. Kerran joined the GNIH program because he lacked tools at home and felt that Tomás could teach him technical skills, which he might later use to earn money. At present he says, "I have to hustle for survival." He does agricultural work and is responsible for the care of his mother who is crippled.

Sylvester Augustis Holder tells me that "good as opposed to evil" is the theme of his carving. The Lion, King of Kings, symbolizes the tribe of Judah, and the gun is related to "people's revolutionary struggles." He is 29 years old and began sculpting on his own five years ago, because, as he puts it, "I feel that I should do that." However, he supports himself and his family by agricultural work.

The lack of consistent student discipline that concerns both Flori and Tomas is primarily economically based—both Sylvester and Kerran often lack the money to pay for the transportation from their villages to GNIH. Although the Grenadian government has provided them with a monthly stipend for this purpose, there is often a delay in receiving the



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Photo 3: Sculpture by Kerran Nedd



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Photo 4: Sylvester Augustis Holder with His Sculpture

funds. Also, their present need to continue with agricultural work does not permit regular workshop attendance, which delays their ultimate professional goal: to work as full-time sculptors.

The high level of personal expression and technical skill manifested by these two self-taught young sculptors causes me to speculate about the untapped creative potential of other Grenadians in the visual arts media. Although the current level of technical training in woodcraft offered by Flori and Tomás is adequate for most of the students enrolled in the GNIH program, one wishes that exceptionally talented students could be encouraged beyond commercial objectives toward the production of unique sculptural pieces. According to Jacob Ross, plans are currently under way to establish a national art school that would provide workshops in rural areas for encouraging and developing the latent talent of young and old in the media of painting and sculpture. Considering that the former dictator, Gairy, was “anti-culture and demanded subservience” and that “people were inhibited from giving full expression to their creativity or from exploring social and political themes in music, dance, poetry or the visual arts,” much progress has already been made during these past four years.

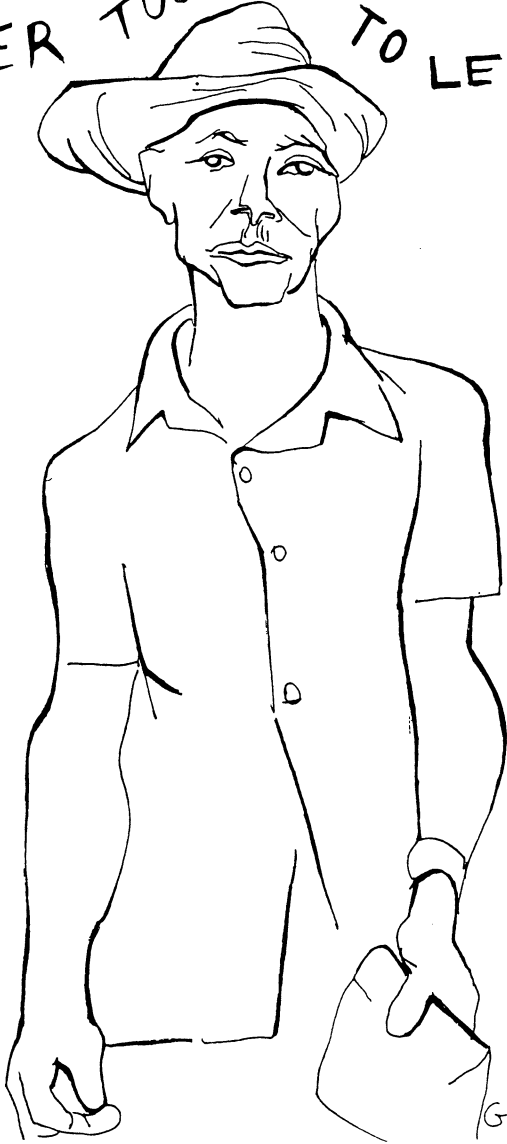
At present there is only one small commercial art gallery in Grenada, and from Jacob Ross I learn that

*there are no full-time, ivory-tower artists. An artist is also a farmer, factory worker, or housewife, and must transfer all of his or her knowledge experienced by his or her body, the sweat of his or her muscles into an art form, an art for the people. Artists now have to redefine their roles, since before the revolution they created pleasant landscapes for tourists, and had no sense of pride or individual identity.*

Ross, also a poet, believes that “it is extremely difficult to disengage art from the political process, as art is a reflection of oneself, one’s reality.” He describes art as an “instrument for development, an arm of the revolution.” Under Gairyism and previous colonial rule, Ross continued, “there was no serious policy to promote art or artists, and the culture that existed was Eurocentric, elitist art for a select few.” Since the revolution the government under Maurice Bishop established a Department of Culture for the promotion of all the arts, with one of its major goals being the creation of employment for artists as well as a network all over the country for teaching art—an “art for the people” that will reflect the values of the New Grenada.

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NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN



GRENADA

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EDUCATION  
IS  
PRODUCTION  
TOO



GRENADA

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Numerous examples of wall graffiti, murals, posters and billboards interspersed among the homes and churches in both rural and urban areas present a view of some postrevolutionary goals and aspirations: "Never too Old to Learn" "Every Worker a Learner," "Education Is Production too," "The People, Builders of the Revolution," "The People Must Be in the Decision-Making Process," and "Women, Committed to Economic Construction."

Volunteer work on the part of young and old through the community brigades is one way some of their revolutionary goals are being achieved. In a rural district near the capital of St. George's I observed that after the Sunday church service (Catholicism is the dominant religion) clothes are changed and volunteer work begins. After the earth is leveled, gravel and hot tar are spread in order to construct a road that will link some of the interior villages with the main road that encircles Grenada. The government provides the equipment and building supplies. In this way, many projects, including community centers (where many art programs have been initiated), day-care facilities, and schools, have been completed since the 1979 revolution.

Of extreme importance to Grenada's future and the promotion of tourism is the construction of the new international airport, backed by financial assistance from the Common Market. It is located closer to St. George's than the old airport and will accommodate large jets. At present, tourists arriving in Grenada via the small inadequate Pearls Airport built in 1943 or by ship to St. George's are greeted by vendors selling their crafts. Tourism (since the combination of Grenada's beaches and tropical weather are almost perfect for year-round vacationing) is the nation's second largest income producer, exceeded only by the export of spices. Approximately 140,000 tourists, mostly Americans, visited Grenada in 1980. Therefore, the connection between Grenada's significant and growing craft industry, tourism, and the new airport is clear.

Throughout the country the manifestation of Grenadian solidarity with Prime Minister Maurice Bishop's government is visible in the spontaneous paintings on brick and rock walls and sides of houses. These paintings are often strikingly beautiful, and to the uninitiated observer, they could simply be considered good abstract art. They represent much more, however. The use of red dots on a white background also has a symbolic meaning. The red dots symbolize the solidarity of the Grenadian people with their revolutionary government. This expression of solidarity leads me to agree with Jacob Ross that

“since the revolution, many people are now for the first time beginning to realize their creative potential.”

### NOTE

1. A prime aspect of Grenada's public transportation system, consisting of buses and station-wagon collectives, is the reggae music featured by each driver. Bob Marley's lyrics are most often heard, bringing a consciousness of “Where we are, where we have been, and where we must go” . . . “get up, stand up for your rights.”

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