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Artists as Ambassadors

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I love it when an obligation becomes an opportunity. When I was asked to speak at a recent gathering of FAPE (the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies) the obligation became just that: an opportunity. An opportunity to think about American art and artists abroad in the world.

FAPE is an organization that connects our artists to American places abroad -- to our embassies and sometimes to other sites. FAPE commissions visual artists to provide work for the walls and gardens and environments of our places away from home. The artists contribute their art and FAPE raises funds for the making and movement of the work, working always with the U.S. State Department. Open-hearted artists and donors and state department officers cooperate so that American art can be seen and felt everywhere, influencing and inspiring the citizens of so many other countries. Right now, forty new embassies are being built or have been built around the world; from mainland China to Manhattan island FAPE's work is more intense than ever.

Why, I wondered, does FAPE's work mean so much to so many people? What ideas, what values, what traits are communicated by American artists whose work is sent to far away places? What are we saying to the rest of the world? How important is it?

What I realized, thinking about these questions, is that there are fundamental ideas manifest in the work that artists make for FAPE. We Americans think a lot about the importance of the arts for strengthening our communities and inspiring individual growth. FAPE projects convey that conviction. We talk about the power of the arts to make connections across cultures; FAPE artists design projects that do just that. We see in the arts great expressions and firm defense of our diversity. These are ideas that our artists are communicating in the pictures and sculptures and installations and images that light and delight and enlighten other places in the world.

Connecting art to community is basic in our thinking. FAPE projects speak directly to this ideal. A new FAPE installation for the embassy in Kingston, Jamaica was actually created at the Queens Museum in New York where it inspired the creativity of a group of inner-city school children. Dorothea Rockburne, the artist, created at the Museum a 41-foot-high painting of the sky over Jamaica as an homage to Colin Powell, who was born on the island. A group of high school students who were teaching art to local children at the museum began to experiment with their own art -- drawing on new media resources, looking into place and into space as Dorothea was. They generated their own striking computer art reflecting the far away places they found on the internet, taking inspiration from Dorothea's innovations. The lessons in geography, in collaboration, in community, that these young people absorb speak to FAPE's goals, just as Dorothea's towering work of art does.

Connecting cultures is another principle, indeed a basic mission, of FAPE and its artists. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, this mission was complicated. The U.S. Embassy building there was destroyed by terrorists in 1998. When the embassy was rebuilt, sculptor Elyn Zimmerman was commissioned to provide a work for it. Elyn took the dark shadow of

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

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the past and made it into a sculpture. She formed the piece out of local granite; she imbued it with traditional African shapes. The work groups six tall, emblematic figures around a reflecting pool, poised as though to interact with each other. Called "Assembly of Friends," the piece is well understood as a reference to the past and to a peaceful future. Many of FAPE's projects speak to real history and to seminal artistic traditions as this one does. It is a project that connects.

And the expression of American diversity? The arts create awareness by exposing us to so much we might not otherwise know. From posters to portraits, from clay to crayon to canvas, art springs from its makers, who are themselves endlessly diverse. The FAPE project in the new U.S. United Nations (USUN) building in New York City is full of art from every American population. The interior of the building, like the interior of the U.S. itself, is home to our full diversity -- foreign-born artists, artists from immigrant populations, Americans of every color and code. Each floor of the structure reminds us of the mix, the medley, that is art and that is us. This attention to who we are and how diversely we express ourselves as Americans is a mainstay not just of this project but of FAPE itself.

Thinking about FAPE, thinking about these projects, and, most of all, thinking about the American ideals of community, connection, and diversity, I see how very important it is to share the work of our artists around the world. Through the spirit and the strength and soul of what they create, we transmit what we believe and what we hope for. Our artists express our aspirations and our empathies for others. We should be inspired to enlist more and more of our artists -- visual and performing and media artists -- in international engagement. With FAPE as a model, we can create more of the public-private partnerships that make this possible. **AGNES GUND**