

The Pottery of Raqchi, Peru:

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(Ms. deBardelaben has traveled the world to study different cultures and their varied, creative techniques for working with clay. She has visited China through a five-week course with the University of West Virginia; conducted ethnographic research in Kuli Village in Ghana, West Africa during the summers of 2011 and 2008, and was an APT summer grant recipient to study at La Meridiana, in Italy. Last summer her adventures also took her to Raqchi, Peru. Over the years her students have benefited greatly from her international pursuits and passion for learning.)

The universal path toward maintaining a cultural and economic system of sustainability is dependent, in large part, upon our interconnectedness as peoples to our environment. Clay is one such material that has helped to underscore the message of social justice and individual and collective action.

The Andean people have a saying in Quechua (the language of the Inca nation), which loosely translated means, “We live by the law of Reciprocity,” or that everyone cares for the next. Global learning, sustainability, and culture are synonymous, intricately entwined, and invariably lead to profound transformation.

Our often marginalized and under appreciated indigenous brothers and sisters are often the unspoken keepers of cultural practices, suppliers of commercial utilities, and purveyors of pottery traditions. The constancy of these cultural practices brings



The students then create small prototypes of pots to learn the process and think about design.



The Raqchi process begins with the collection, grinding, sifting, and reconstitution of the clay.

awareness of the need for a revival of these fundamental, skill-developed practices and processes of technical acquisition. Expressed gratitude for their contribution of authentic artistic expression and influence on the mainstream use of clay has been overlooked and is long overdue and can start in our classrooms. Learning how these communities have responded to and survived global changes can offer our students a new and heightened awareness of the changes politics, technology, and economics can bring to man our our environment.

Global economics, world trade, the quest for energy resources, and free market enterprise have made remote locations and communities not previously receptive to outsiders more accessible. These environs were once limited by and dependent upon the transference of generational knowledge to people who exclusively resided within the confines of stringently observed boundaries. Now no longer hidden, these communities have exposed their way of life to make the knowledge obtainable for preservation by people who share a common interest and commitment. Accordingly, documentation through the use of audio and video recording devices, and bringing these practices into our classrooms, will inform future generations of the methodology and mechanics of art styles and practices that are centuries old. Today’s technology and new media is helping to prevent the loss of the ancient techniques and wisdom of indigenous people as they struggle to preserve their creative expression and identity. Our interest in creating sustainable art demands a redirection of focus from individual notoriety to the collectively produced art of ancient civilizations. Fundamental, global technical teaching methods worthy of artistic merit are quickly becoming forgotten and might wither into extinction.

Raqchi, Peru elucidates the constant strife that exists between communities whose survival depends upon the daily use and creation of sustainable resources

Teaching Students About Sustainability, Economics, and Cultural Change through Global Art Forms



Ms. deBardelaben works individually with each student throughout the process to guide and help them realize their designs. The pots on this page are entering the final stage before the application of paint.

and those that are hyper dependent upon the interface of those resources with technology to be produced. The industrialized over consumption of machine-made, utilitarian-manufactured objects has reinforced the globalization of goods, but does very little towards the preservation of tradition, culture, and microeconomic ventures that support and maintain small communities.

Raqchi, which today refers to a big vase or jar, means “clay” in Quechua. The Raqchi pottery cooperatives’ adaptation to change offers insightful solutions to universal problems confronting pottery communities everywhere.

A fertile mountain range offers its most sustainable and natural resource to the residents of Raqchi. Large composites of unearthed clay shards reveal that the two story adobe structures once occupied by the Aqllas for weaving, were also used as workshops for the production of ceramic crafts. Regional typography as early as the Qayula-Marcavalle (B.C.) through the Horizonte Tardio, Chuchito, and Tarca is ideal for mining clay deposits for mass production of Salmanca (pouring vessel), bowls, jars, and plates.

In Raqchi clay objects were once created in an energy efficient practice. The vessels were made and collectively fired in one central location. However, as the demand for individual household chores increased, such as

farming, care of livestock, food storage, and meal preparation, collective firings were no longer a viable alternative. Gradually, individual household workstations emerged and assumed increased responsibility for the formation of the ceramic object. Ultimately, site specific studios replaced the necessity of transporting green ware for collective firings, which increasingly yielded inefficient results due to the rise of chipped, cracked, and damaged ware. Shifting lifestyle challenges continue to inform the transformation of Raqchi ceramic artisans and the way they operate today. Engaging cultural wisdom by listening to the community elders has equipped modern day Raqchi residents with the resources to run small businesses within the confines of the cooperative.

Bringing the ancient techniques of various world cultures into our classrooms helps today’s technologically-inundated students learn how to bring the world to a stop, take a deep breath, reflect, and have some time to think, problem-solve, and design. Working with their hands connects them to their Earth and each other, and gives them a better understanding of the true nature of the creative process.

