

## **The Psychological Impact of Art When Confronting War and Terrorism**

One of the very nice aspects of being an American ambassador is that the State Department will borrow significant paintings and other artworks which will then be displayed in his/her ambassadorial residence. While I understood the decorative and educational value that such art could have in a foreign setting, it was only during my time in Cambodia that I would come to learn the powerful, psychological impact it could have when facing a crisis or severe threat.

But I am getting a little ahead of myself.

Shortly after I was approved by the president in 1995 to be the new envoy to the Kingdom of Cambodia, I was invited to visit the Office of the Art Curator in the bowels of the State Department. It is there that interviews are held to determine what type of art new ambassadors might wish to have for their new residences.

Not being especially knowledgeable about the art world nor having any strong preferences, I posed something of a problem for the assistant curator who was interviewing me. Finally she noted that in my biographical resume, every other line seemed to include a reference to Iowa. She then mentioned that she knew of a collection of paintings that had been newly commissioned by the Brunnier Gallery at Iowa State University. It was about the Loess Hills in western Iowa.

I stopped her and said "I don't need to hear anything more. I want to have that Iowa art in my residence in Phnom Penh." A visit to Ames allowed me to have my one experience in life as an art mogul as I walked through the exhibit saying "I'll take this one" and "I'll take that one." In total, 17 separate artworks were carefully packaged and shipped by air to Cambodia where they were then hung throughout my house where they could be observed by all the foreigners who came there as guests of my wife Le Son and myself.

It is important to note that this was the first time that the Art in Embassy Program had made a placement in Cambodia following the devastating war and genocide in the 1970's which had taken the lives of 2 million of the 7 million people who inhabited the country. But by the time I arrived in 1996, a U.N. run election and a new coalition government seemed to have produced a lasting peace.

The feeling was that it was now safe enough for the art to be displayed. That façade was shattered a year later on June 17, 1997 when a B-40 rocket hit the side of my residence shattering the windows and coming close to wounding or killing my entire family. This incident led to a protracted period of renewed civil war with shooting in the streets and people fleeing the capital. All American citizens were evacuated from the country and only a skeleton staff remained with me at the embassy.

It was an incredibly depressing period as the fragile new democracy and the climate of improved human rights that we had so carefully built was shattered and lying in pieces. My family had all flown out of the country, so each night I would travel along darkened

and deserted streets back to my now empty residence. But as I walked in the door, I would be greeted by those pieces of art, those reminders of home. They uplifted me. Like old friends they were there each night to radiate hope and the prospect of a brighter tomorrow.

Then, as the warfare deepened, a message came from the State Department instructing us to pack up the art so that it could be sent out by emergency shipment. The thought of losing those friends was absolutely devastating. Standing there in my living room, taking one last look at all of the art works, made me realize just how important they had been in helping me get through this terrible period. They had played a role of psychological reinforcement far beyond anything I would ever have expected.

Thankfully, the crisis broke the next day and peace was restored to the city. It would be a long process to try to pick up all of those broken pieces of democracy and put them back together again. But the art did not have to leave, and I would have it there to encourage me and keep me going during the very difficult months ahead.

One of those paintings now hangs in my office. I bought it so that it would always be a reminder of that difficult time and the unexpected but very significant role that the art played in maintaining my own psychological balance during this crisis.

I want to end this story with one additional lesson which can probably apply to a diplomat, an ambassador or a physician. Often when there is a violent incident and the life of the ambassador or other embassy staff members are endangered, the next day a message would come from the State Department expressing the hope that no one was injured or relief that everyone had escaped harm.

The day following the rocket striking my residence, a message did indeed arrive. But it did not make any reference to me or my family. It simply said "Was any of the art damaged?" The lesson was clear: you can always get a new ambassador! But, original art is irreplaceable!