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Toys Selected from my Folk Art Collection

*Establishing Common Ground*

My life-long passion for traveling has taken me to distant lands that can be fascinating, senses stimulating, idea generating, and at times, intimidating with regard to learning to negotiate. A common denominator for most world cultures is the idea of the market as a gathering place, or the *agora* like in Ancient Greece, and forum for exchange of good, services, and ideas. I always head for a market or fair after arriving in a new or even a familiar place. I at once get a sense of the culture from the items being sold like the food, household goods, and especially seeing handmade folk art items.

Toys or toy-like objects are particularly revealing. Children are highly valued in all cultures. The objects made for them are infused with love and concern while they also serve as cultural educational tools. For example, a doll that is hand sewn from local textiles or carved from native wood. The toys I collect are “big-boy toys” in that they are often loaded with social and political ideas, reactions, or are like small agents of change. Over the years, this has worked in tandem with the art I have collected.

For example, during the time I was making research trips to Cuba (between 1997-2000), I discovered objects made from spent Coca Cola cans which I later discovered in numerous other places around the world. In Cuba, Coke is considered imperialist so it is not available – except if you have US Dollars and are guests in hotels and resorts and tourist restaurants. Coca Cola is imported from Mexico for this purpose, in a sense bypassing the US-Cuban embargoes. Artists gather Coke and other beverage cans from the garbage cans of these establishments and then fashion them into objects which are sold at small fairs in a capitalistic manner. This ingenious creativity is revealing, amusing, and poignant for me.

In 2004, on my first of over twenty trips to Brazil, I met Rio de Janeiro-based artist Getúlio Damado who, many years before, left a secure government job to be his own boss creating objects from detritus. His studio is in the shape of the Rio de Janeiro *bonde* or street car that is strategically placed under large trees in the bohemian neighborhood of Santa Teresa. He is prolific in producing objects with underlying themes of protecting the environment, equality among people, and responses to political actions or events. He personalizes most of his creations with proper names while also adding his name with a marker pen. He has raised and educated his children with the sales of his art works.

People’s folk art toys and objects help to form cultural bridges between peoples which is the overarching theme of art projects I curate and produce. We establish common ground, find out what we have in common first. For me, I respond to art works that are idea-driven, tell a story, are well-crafted or ingenious, and which can sometimes be beautiful and something to constantly enjoy. I live with my art collections. When asked how I can live with all these objects, I respond that I can’t imagine living without them.