

Beauty Is In the Hands of the Beholder: Jewelry-Making in Udaipur

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After trekking up the six flights of stairs to Guddi's rooftop home, we were greeted by an anxious group of girls. They quickly began dismantling our supply bags, excited to transform Guddi's home into a workshop. For three days, a small jewelry-making workshop was hosted in Bhuwana, Udaipur. Guddi, Mamta and I brought waste materials, such as coconut shells, paper, clay, and bottle caps, from which to make jewelry. Our intentions with the workshop were to open up another creative space within a neighborhood, more deeply understand and play with the versatility of the natural materials that surround us, and explore a different sense of aesthetics and beauty than what is given by mainstream media. The workshop sought to challenge some deeply ingrained habits held by the children. As the workshop unfolded, it was particularly interesting to see the behaviors that schooling had conditioned the children with.

The first day of the workshop turned out to be our most successful. The group consisted of ten girls that varied in age, from 5-15. The small group size allowed us to spend time learning from one another, trying out the different tools and processes, and experimenting with technique and design. Often times, in school, time for projects is limited and students are rushed to complete their work. The outcome of such a system was clearly demonstrated by the girls' anxiety to finish many pairs of earrings very quickly. Fortunately, we didn't bring all of the materials necessary to complete the earrings, so they could slow down and focus on one piece at a time. Doing this allowed them to think about the quality of what they were making, and we emphasized that they would have adequate



time to complete their item. We tried to stress the idea that this sort of jewelry-making was not dependent upon the materials we brought, but something that they could reproduce in their own homes. Overall, the atmosphere was full of curiosity and excitement.

The second day of the workshop had completely different dynamics. The first day, boys were apprehensive to make jewelry with a group of girls, but the second day, we had a number of boys anxious and willing to participate. The two biggest contributors to the madness of the second day were the doubling in size of the group and the introduction of plastic beads. We began by playing some name games and dividing everyone into three groups: those who would work with clay beads, paper beads, or coconut and bottle caps. With the items they had created yesterday, I foolishly brought out the box of plastic beads (gathered from old broken necklaces). I attempted to show them how they could mix a bead or two with the natural beads they had made yesterday to create earrings. The group almost instantly discarded

their natural materials and began making earrings with just plastic beads. A number of them recreated the earrings I was wearing that day in an attempt to impress me.

After encouraging them a number of times to use the things they had created the day before, we eventually put away the plastic beads and returned our focus to the natural materials. The girls

weren't sure how to make their natural earrings measure up to their sense of aesthetics and became discouraged. The energy of the group plummeted.



We went into the third day of the workshop with good attitudes, optimistic that the energy of the first day would be revived. A mixture of people from the first and second days showed up. People were beginning to know what sorts of materials interested them, and they divided themselves into groups. Some of them were disappointed to find the same materials as the day before and didn't believe that the things they were making were 'beautiful'. Some girls asked my permission to go home. The workshop wasn't a compulsory or mandatory activity like school; it was for the kids of the neighborhood who wanted to learn, to connect with their own sense of creativity and with each other in a new way. The kids who remained finished up their projects and seemed to be pleased with their creations.

The most energizing part about these workshops was the reciprocity involved. The participants and the hosts of the workshop always seem to take away equal amounts of knowledge. Though

I wasn't learning how to roll a paper bead for the first time, I was learning how to make it easier and experiment with the quality. The kids spontaneously thought up new ways to make jewelry, teach one another, and combine materials. I came away with more new designs and ideas than I went in with. For example, the majority of the girls' sense of aesthetic of jewelry, especially the older girls, is strongly geared towards anything elaborate or shiny. Many of the earrings they made from paper beads were simply the bead combined with another plastic bead at the end. After experimenting with the wire, we found we could construct very elaborate paper earrings that the girls actually desired!

Furthermore, I gained a lot from brainstorming how I could give better demonstrations, give better help, and stimulate more creativity. The first day I came prepared with bottle caps already hammered and shaped so that the kids wouldn't have to deal with the hammers. The second day, I couldn't keep up with the number of kids that attended, so I began to show them how to use the hammers and shape their own



bottle caps. This proved to be a good idea because the kids were more proud of their product, even if it wasn't as smooth or shiny. It reiterated to me that there is an important connection that happens between someone and something they make with their own hands. Although the kids were constantly seeking positive affirmations for their work, I tried to not fall into this 'reward' or 'praise' mode, and instead asked the kids if they were having fun, if they were learning something new and exciting, and if they wanted to extend their experience making natural jewelry.

The workshop was an incredibly lively and local activity. Children were helping one another and excited about creating. This alone was reason enough to have done it.

For future workshops, we should consider a few ideas. The size of the group does matter! Maybe it would be limiting to put a cap on the number of people who may attend, but their experience will be much richer if the group remains small. There was also some confusion on what it was they were to be working on day to day. A simple reminder stressing quality over quantity and that they would have three days to complete their project, would allow the kids to relax about finishing.

Another important aspect to consider is the convenience of tools. We need to experiment with items that are common in every household so that the kids can carry this creativity beyond the workshop. Along with this, we should not even introduce plastic beads in this sort of a workshop and shouldn't wear jewelry that isn't made of all natural materials. Both of these reinforce that plastic and shiny are what's beautiful and they can only be had if you buy them. Redefining one's aesthetic is an extremely difficult task to take on in three days. We need to find more ways to question and challenge the way we interpret beauty.

There is also an issue with repetition of the workshops. We should continue the workshops in the same area so that kids can continue to improve on the potential of the materials, while simultaneously we don't want the kids to think that since we will be coming regularly, they don't need to spend the time creating things at home. The number of materials we supplied was appropriate for having only three hosts to assist the kids. More materials either means we need more people to demonstrate the use of the tools or better organization where the kids are introduced to all of the tools in one session. We should continue to encourage the workshop participants to bring waste items from home and experiment with new materials.

Days one through three of the natural jewelry workshop presented new dynamics and challenges, but we were overall able to adjust to the changing needs of the group. Hopefully the workshop challenged the children in new and invigorating ways, like it did for the hosts. The workshop still faces some challenges, but it is a step in the right direction. They provide us with the sorts of spaces we need to create a new type of learning environment.

