

Empowered to Inspire: Craftswomen Rise Up Through Artisan Co-ops Around the World in ‘Women Empowered’

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Photo caption: Textile artisan Kakuben Jivan Ranmal at home in her village, India, 2010. Photograph courtesy of SEWA.

Women are in focus at the University of Washington’s Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture.

The Burke’s current exhibit, “Empowering Women: Artisan Cooperatives that Transform Communities,” also offers special tours, events and an artisan market where visitors can purchase handcrafted basketry, printing and weaving. Lace Thornberg, the Burke Museum exhibit coordinator for the “Empowering Women” exhibit, reports that this exhibit dovetails with her other work at community-based museums.

“Learning the incredible stories behind the ten cooperatives showcased in ‘Empowering Women’ has reminded me and deepened my own awareness of the difficult issues that women around the world face on a daily basis,” says Thornberg. “I am personally thrilled to have the chance to meet so many of the incredibly strong and smart women who founded these artisan cooperatives when they come to Seattle for our Artisan Market on July 20 and 21.”

Thornberg worked with Suzanne Seriff, the original curator of “Empowering

Women” in New Mexico, who herself had collaborated with numerous others to develop this exhibit. “Empowering Women,” which opened for a 10-month run on July 4, 2010, and began its national tour in 2012, was the inaugural exhibit in the Museum of International Folk Art’s (MOIFA’s) newly shaped ‘Gallery of Conscience,’” Seriff reports. “This exhibit – and this Gallery – grew out of collaborative discussions between MOIFA staff members and their partners at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market.”



Middle: Baskets created by the members of the Gahaya Links Cooperatives, Rwanda. Photo credit: Judith Cooper Haden, 2009.

The Gallery of Conscience was developed to serve as a forum to engage folk art communities around issues of contemporary social justice, human rights, health and market issues affecting their communities, and with “Empowering Women,” the focus quickly became international.

The exhibit itself, plus the Folk Art Market in Santa Fe and the Burke Museum’s Artisan Market, are all intended to provide a place not only for artists and artwork, but also for their stories.

“Many of these co-ops had started with a single vision of a single founder and five or 10 artisans, and developed into a nationwide organization with micro-financing structures, educational initiatives, health and human resources and global

marketing skill development programs,” says Seriff.

“I interviewed each of the founding members of these ten co-ops in the planning phase of this exhibition’s development,” Seriff says. “I was not prepared for the strength, brilliance, vision, humor, and power of these 10 visionaries — many of whom had literally changed the face of women’s economic and social opportunity throughout their countries.”

One of these stories arises out of India.

“If I tell my story of struggle, it starts with the days when I had to leave my nine-month old child behind in the hands of my in-laws when I went in search of casual work,” says Kakuben Jivan Ranmal, artisan and member of India’s SEWA Trade Facilitation Center. “But today I work and earn a livelihood from home and — at the same time — take care of my family.”

Many other participating artists from Asia, Africa and Latin America voice similar motivations and stories, including those stories of great tragedy. “Janet Nkubana, of Gahaya Links Women’s cooperative in Rwanda, brought gallery visitors to tears when she told the story of one of her genocide-surviving basket weavers, Ephigenia Mukantabana, who lost 65 members of her family during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda,” says Seriff.

Seriff reports that Ephigenia wanted to create a legacy of peace.

“A well-recognized artist in her village, Ephigenia began to heal from her loss by training women and girls — both Hutus and Tutsis — in the art of basket weaving,” Seriff says.

“She is the first artist in her group to forgive the killer of her family, an imprisoned man whose wife, Epephania, is her neighbor and member of the basket-weaving cooperative.”

Seriff quotes Ephigenia as saying, “Art heals hopeless souls, and through interaction, you reduce trauma while weaving is hope for tomorrow.” But Janet Nkubana did more than simply share Ephigenia’s story.



Middle: Baskets created by the members of the Gahaya Links Cooperatives, Rwanda. Photo credit: Judith Cooper Haden, 2009.

“When Gahaya Links was invited to be one of the 10 participating co-ops in this exhibition,” Seriff says, “Janet went to every village and every co-op throughout Rwanda whose women had previously participated in the Folk Art Market (by having one of their baskets sold there) and invited each woman to contribute a stitch to what became the large 4-foot ‘peace basket’ that is currently on display in this exhibit. Janet said that she wanted every woman’s stitch to literally be a part of this exhibition because that is the key to women’s empowerment — stitch by stitch.”

It was inspiring stories such as these that led the Burke Museum to agree to host the “Empowering Women” exhibit, including the related outreach projects and artisan market.

“Perhaps the most interesting challenge for the Burke came in sourcing the fair trade goods that we would carry in our own gift shop to go along with the run of the exhibit,” says Thornberg. “Working through the logistics of pricing, ordering and shipping from multiple countries and cooperatives gave us a real-life lesson in the difficulties of selling and marketing fair trade goods.”

In short, the Burke gained practice in the very artisan cooperative processes it is exhibiting to the public.

“Of course, the challenge was more than worth it, as we have an incredible selection of unique goods in the store, and we are proud to be providing a new venue for these artisans to showcase their work,” says Thornberg.

But the most important aspect of hosting the “Empowering Women” exhibit is to provide a platform for global outreach and connection.

“To help us ensure that this powerful show would reach a broad audience, the Burke brought together a number of community partners,” Thornberg says. “These partners include local fair trade retailers, fellow museums, community organizations, women’s organizations and global health NGOs.”

The enhancement of community has been rewarding for those involved, and Thornberg recommends that interested individuals participate by visiting the exhibit, and then shopping, volunteering or providing a microloan for one of the hosted women’s cooperatives.

“Some of these groups are networking with each other for the first time as a result of being brought together as community partners for this show,” Thornberg says, “and I wouldn’t be surprised to see some new partnerships coming out of this exhibition.”

“Empowering Women: Artisan Cooperatives that Transform Communities” runs through October 27, with the Artisan Market on July 20-21 at the Burke Museum, on the UW Campus at 17th Avenue Northeast and Northeast 45th Street, Seattle. More at www.burkemuseum.org/empowering.