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**Piecing Together the Past**

*Tracing cultural development through objects and figurines*

If art reflects culture, it follows that one should be able to trace the development of culture from a region’s art. Rhonda Root, chair of the Departments of Art & Design and Digital media & Photography, Stefanie Elkins, assistant professor of art history, and Brian Manley, assistant professor of art, are trying to do just that—piece together the cultural development of the Transjordan region. Working in conjunction with the Madaba Plains Project and Jordan’s Department of Antiquities, the researchers sketch, document and date each piece of art, from tiny figurines to whole pots, in an effort to trace the great and little influences of culture in the region. Great traditions are influences in art that can be traced to major civilizations throughout time, such as Greek, Roman and Egyptian culture, while little traditions are local, non-professional styles and influences in art and architecture. By carefully sketching each object, recording its location, use and date, and cross-referencing it with other known artifacts, the team hopes to demonstrate the history of the region through its artwork.

The team spends six to eight weeks in the summer in the Middle East, visiting various countries and making sheaves of sketches. Their research parallels the archaeological research being done at the various dig sites of the Madaba Plains project, but they will often remain traveling for several weeks after the archaeologists have returned home. At each city and site they visit, they study the area’s architecture, observe and record the local culture, and sketch samples of local art and artisanal pieces, as well as sketching any ancient artwork they may uncover. During the rest of the year, the research team travels to museums all over the world to study their collections of antiques, so their own finds can be properly dated and understood.

Often in their travels, various team members will have to research or sketch findings on the personal property of locals. The local cultures are often suspicious of people coming to dig, particularly people with cameras, because they believe the archaeologists are looking for gold, and cam-

eras are tools for espionage. Root has found that her artistic abilities have enabled her to sketch an entire region from memory for reference, as well as helping her to establish trust with the property owners by sketching their families.

Wherever they go, team members form close connections with the local residents, often asking for their help in digging, spending time in the homes, and bringing family members along to observe the digs. “We have found them to be very hospitable and gracious and open…they open their homes to us, and have us drink tons of tea,” says Root. Along with family members and Jordanian researchers, the team is often accompanied by at least one representative from Jordan’s Department of Antiquities, which Root believes further helps erase preconceived boundaries between the two cultures. Root and her team have discovered that the Jordanians not only willingly allow them into their country, but welcome them in, as well as working in partnership with them to preserve their history.

The Jordanians involved with the project have found these researchers are helping the country preserve its history without exploiting or taking objects without permission. Although many of the major artifacts are studied in the United States, all are returned to Jordan except for a few the Jordanian government graciously allows the United States to keep, some of which are displayed in the Andrews University Horn Archaeological Museum.

Over the years, the team has found some very interesting artifacts. In the summer of 2008, their first season, the archaeologists unearthed a strange Bronze Age building with high ceilings and figurines of gods that lacks any indication of a domestic building. The team is still trying to understand the use of this building, but they believe it was most likely a shrine or temple. Root has completed a conceptual painting of the building that provides archaeologists with a possible visualization of the building’s use. “It’s very unique in the history of archaeology to find such a complete Bronze Age building of this particular type…You never know what you’re going to uncover when you start digging in the ground,” she says. The team also finds the usual seals, beads, pottery, clay figurines and coins that help them pinpoint a culture’s influence, as well as bones that can indicate the diet of ancient residents. “There are things that we find that come only from Egypt. There are things that we find that come only from Greece, and so those objects and bones, and even the shape of a pot gives us connections to the greater cultures,” says Root.

The team expects the project will extend five years or more, based on research results and opportunities, and after the project draws to a close will come a flurry of presentations at conferences, galleries and exhibitions (they are artists, after all), and quite possibly a book for either a scholarly or general audience.

Several students have helped with the bulk of the on-campus research for this massive undertaking. During the 2007–2008 season, Jennifer Montero and Kelsey Curnutt compiled a comprehensive amount of reference material; and Keri Friestad and Chantelle Allen created a three-dimensional display that details the progress of the Madaba Plains Project, as well as drawings of archaeological objects. Lauren Popp and Tommy Greene did preliminary photographic work for a Little Traditions book that will outline the project’s results, and Ashley Peterson created a website for the team’s grant in the 2008–2009 season.