

Nov 04, 2016 by [Wendy Luers](#)

Soft Power of Art: Lifelong Cultural Commitment Pays Diplomatic Dividends ^[1]

The power of culture can often be underestimated as a diplomatic tool, but cultural exchange can not only serve as a universal icebreaker, it can tear down walls and build bridges between the most hardened of enemies. It may not turn foes into instant friends, but it does allow nations to find points of commonality that transcend politics.

As a young Stanford University graduate working as a journalist with San Francisco Magazine and Time in the 1960s and '70s in San Francisco, I quickly realized the prevailing counterculture was having a profound effect on my worldview. For five years, working for Amnesty International, I engaged prominent cultural figures such as singer Joan Baez, playwright Arthur Miller and novelist Kurt Vonnegut to work closely with politicians, music publishers and activists to help free political prisoners (such as Czech dissident Václav Havel) and denounce repressive governments. It was a time when artists, musicians, playwrights, writers and intellectuals actively shaped the discourse of world politics.

This spirit of cultural engagement would remain a powerful force throughout my life after I married William Luers, the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela, and started the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE) in 1986.

When my children and I first joined Bill in Caracas in 1979, America's relationship with Venezuela was of the utmost diplomatic importance because of oil. Conversely, many influential Venezuelans went to the United States regularly for education, culture, medical attention and shopping. As a result, relations between the two nations tended to be narrow and one-sided. Bill, a seasoned career Foreign Service officer, and I, having served on various theater and museum boards, worked as a team to bring prominent American cultural figures to visit Venezuelans in their fascinating country.

Arthur Miller, photographer Inge Morath, playwright Edward Albee, novelists John Updike and John Cheever, as well as artists such as Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Stella and Larry Rivers all came as our guests. During their stay, we actively hosted gatherings and organized trips to connect them with the Venezuelan political, cultural and economic establishment, including numerous media appearances. These events were an invaluable public diplomacy effort that showcased American culture and belied the image of the United States as merely a commercial and military heavyweight. In fact, after one such event, a euphoric leftist Venezuelan journalist remarked, "Mr. Ambassador, after tonight, you can say anything you want about the price of oil."

However, cultural diplomacy wasn't simply about gatherings and press. While at post, we actively showed how we, as Americans, had a deep-rooted respect for Venezuelan culture and traditions. We often traveled deep into the Venezuelan Amazon jungle to visit the Yanomami, Makiritare and other tribes. As we were leaving in 1982, an exhibit of our

extensive collection of folk and tribal art was televised. Our respect for their culture underscored for Venezuelans the richness inherent in their country, and our appreciation of it.

Our next posting to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was very different. When we moved to Prague in December 1983, the warmth, vibrancy and freedom of Venezuela seemed light years away. It was the height of the Cold War and the atmosphere was austere and closed to outside culture — especially American. No Western television, print publications or radio were allowed inside the state-controlled country at the time. The U.S. ambassador's residence, Petschek Palace, was enormous and extraordinarily beautiful, with spectacular paintings and rugs as well as exquisite antique furniture left behind as the Jewish homeowners fled in 1939. The only problem was that the residence was completely bugged, and all the staff had to go to "spy school" before they were hired.

To address this repressive climate we, again, turned to cultural diplomacy. We invited many of the famous American writers and artists who had come to Caracas, plus others such as poet Galway Kinnell, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, diplomat George Kennan and many others. Using the residence to bring prominent Americans together with their counterparts, often dissidents, was extraordinarily gratifying and compelling.

On one occasion, we hosted a preview of important American paintings we had borrowed. The authorities withheld the mailed invitations until Bill had the embassy drivers hand-deliver them, and suddenly they were in everyone's mailbox. Several hundred people braved being photographed by the secret police to come. Knowing that most contemporary artists were not deemed "official" by the state and therefore could not see foreign publications, we gave away hundreds of contemporary catalogues donated by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

I then began to write a history of the residence, which ultimately led to my interest in embassy preservation — and the founding in 1986 of the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE) with Leonore Annenberg, Carol Price and Lee Kimche McGrath, then director of the State Department's Art in Embassies loan program. FAPE, an educational nonprofit (now called the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies), was formed to assist State in its various programs designed to exhibit and preserve fine and decorative art in U.S. embassies around the world.

Our work with FAPE coincided with many of our adventures in Prague. As strong believers in the power of the arts to affect diplomatic relations, we invited the jazz musician and then provost of Tulane University, Fred Starr, to give a concert on the only venue we could — our lawn! More than 1,000 people came to hear American jazz, all photographed by the secret police as they entered. In 1985, we took writer Kurt Vonnegut to a distant union hall where a group of creative Czech students transformed "Cat's Cradle" into a brilliant play using a rolling cart made of plumbing pipes. Kurt was astounded — it influenced every play that he would write after that.

In fact, we saw so much of dissidents like Václav and Olga Havel, writer Ivan Klíma, translator Jaroslav Koran, rock star Michal Kocáb, and journalists Michael Zantovsky and Jiri Dienstbier that the communist Czechoslovak government filed a formal complaint with the State Department. In a meeting in Washington, the Czech ambassador said, "You have to choose between them and us." Bill replied, "Don't ask me to choose." As the world now knows, following the Velvet Revolution in 1989, these dissidents went on to become president, foreign

minister, ambassador and political leaders of a free Czechoslovakia.

A career diplomat, Bill has always believed that effective, intelligent diplomacy is conducted on many levels: official and non-official. Getting to know people and their culture, while representing the best of the United States, by no means is limited to trade and security issues. Whenever we represented the United States abroad, we always employed the arts as a means to encourage mutual respect, cross-cultural understanding and friendship among people. We returned to New York in 1986, when Bill was named president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and we have never lost our belief in the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy.

When we founded FAPE in 1986, we sought to engage the enormous philanthropic private sector and artistic community in America's representation abroad. Thanks to the ongoing support of presidents, first ladies, secretaries of states, ambassadors and many individuals, FAPE's collection now includes work by more than 180 of America's most celebrated artists — all donated to U.S. diplomatic facilities abroad. The organization has raised more than \$56 million in art and monetary contributions to date.

FAPE's current focus, as it heads into its 25th year, is on providing permanent site-specific works of art at the various new U.S. embassies being built around the world that, given security requirements, unfortunately look like fortresses. Since 1999, FAPE has completed 12 such projects, and five are currently under way. Artists in this worldwide collection include: Lynda Benglis (Mumbai); Louise Bourgeois (Beijing); Ellsworth Kelly (Beijing and Berlin); Maya Lin (Istanbul); Dorothea Rockburne (Kingston, Jamaica); Joel Shapiro (Ottawa, Canada, and Guangzhou, China); Michael Singer (Athens); and Elyn Zimmerman (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania).

Recently, the State Department asked FAPE to tackle its largest project to date — the new U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York, which opened in August 2010. Besides contributing three site-specific installations by Ron Gorchov, Sol LeWitt and Odili Donald Odita, works by more than 50 artists have been placed in more than 180 spaces throughout 19 floors.

The USUN collection is a manifestation of our philosophy on cultural diplomacy. Given the large international presence in New York, FAPE wanted to provide a collection that represents our country's diverse culture, including artists born abroad but who have since become U.S. citizens. For example, we've acquired works by Shahla Arbabi of Iran, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov of Russia and Julian Lethbridge of Sri Lanka.

Time and again, cultural diplomacy offers a way to interact with people all over the world, underscoring that the United States is a multidimensional power, known as much for its artistic, intellectual and political freedom, as for its economic, military and political might. As members of the diplomatic corps as well as political appointees, it is not only a privilege but also our obligation to present a holistic image of the United States — one that showcases our fundamental respect for pluralistic beliefs, diversity and world culture.

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