

# Current Comments®

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## "Woman of the Earth" by Lark Lucas Epitomizes the Universal Female Experience

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Some years ago, when contemplating the themes of the murals at ISI®'s headquarters, I decided that we should have a work that dealt specifically with women. The idea seemed appropriate, considering that approximately 80 percent of ISI employees are women and that women outnumber men in the information professions. Through my friend Bill Granizo I met Lark Lucas. After considerable discussion and time I asked her to create a work on a theme specific to women. The result is her remarkable mural "Woman of the Earth." This ceramic-tile work now occupies the second-floor landing of the stairwell here at ISI. Like Granizo's "Cathedral of Man," which I described recently,<sup>1</sup> "Woman of the Earth" is a large, eye-catching creation. It can be seen not only by visitors inside the building but from the outside as well, through the stairwell's large picture window. And, I hope, the murals in the stairwells encourage employees to forgo the elevators in favor of some simple exercise walking the stairs.

In contrast to "Cathedral of Man" and its boisterous, colorful celebration of intellectual progress, however, "Woman of the Earth" is a more subdued, reflective work. Earth tones of brown and turquoise predominate. The mural depicts pain and loss as well as joy. All of these emotions, according to Lucas, are central to the work's main theme, which is, quite simply, life. More specifically, she notes, the mural deals with "the voices

of women...mothers, daughters, sisters, teachers, voicing their hopes, fears and dreams, from birthing to dying.... Although locality, dress and customs may differ, a strong bond unites these women through their daily lives. Among their common passages are birth, children, courtship, ceremonies, celebrations, working, the arts, social status, education, aging and death."<sup>2</sup>

In "Woman of the Earth," Lucas conveys the universality of these themes by depicting women from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Clearly, though, her empathy reaches out to subjects from the Third World and various minority groups. The mural is dominated by three central figures: an Oriental woman, an African woman, and a North American Indian woman. (See color insert in the center of this issue.) Their open, outstretched hands not only symbolize love and friendship, but also communicate an entreaty for peace, equality, and human dignity. The scenes surrounding these central figures depict some of the life experiences common to women around the world.

The cycle of life begins in the mural's upper left-hand corner, where pregnancy, birth, and infancy are depicted. Scenes of maturation and growth progress along the mural's top section, which depicts a young African girl undergoing a puberty rite. Other important events and stages in this section include marriage, symbolized by a young woman

wearing a wedding veil, and motherhood, represented by a peasant woman nursing a baby. An athlete, an airline pilot, and a student represent education and career, while a folksinger symbolizes the importance of women in the arts.

To the left of the three main figures, two Hopi Indian girls embrace, illustrating the theme of friendship. Other themes, which recur throughout the mural, are the importance of family and the role of the woman as a nurturer. These themes are demonstrated in several scenes in which women interact with children. In the bottom center of the mural, for example, an Eskimo grandmother carries a small child in a backpack. To the right, a Guatemalan woman hugs a child. In this lower section the inevitable process of aging is depicted as well, both by the Eskimo grandmother and the nearby image of an elderly woman making pottery. Next to this woman is an antiwar statement, a reminder that life can bring tragedy and loss as well as joy: a mother and child pray over photographs showing young victims of war. This darker theme of sadness and loss is continued in the lower right-hand corner of the mural, where death is represented.

As stated earlier, a dominant quality of the mural is the diversity of the women who are shown. This diversity is evident in the ring of small figures surrounding the three central characters. Some of these figures are based on Lucas's own travels and observations, while others are composites gleaned from the research she did prior to beginning the mural. Clockwise from the upper right of this circle, one can see an Eskimo girl, a Dutch woman, an American Indian woman grinding corn, and, below her, a young Indian girl from the Arapaho tribe praying. At the bottom, next to the large figure of the Eskimo grandmother, a

woman, her attire suggesting a religious sect, plays with her child. Behind her a woman in a wheelchair is shown holding flowers. Completing this clockwise circle are an Oriental girl, a black girl with a hand mirror, a Samoan girl, and, at the top, an Afro-American girl eating a hot dog.

Another important design element is the mural's patterned border. Several of the figures, such as the Eskimo grandmother and the folksinger, overlap the border, giving the mural a feeling of depth and drawing the viewer in.

In addition to the images, Lucas uses words—short phrases and poetry written by herself and others—to augment the various experiences and themes in "Woman of the Earth." In the section on childhood, for example, these words of Lucas's appear: "Let us look upon the world with the eyes of a child and keep in our hearts a song of joy." This phrase seems to sum up one of the mural's main points: despite sadness and hardship, life can be a source of joy and celebration.

#### The Artist

Lark Lucas was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. She began drawing at around age five and demonstrated sufficient talent to begin private art lessons in second grade. After graduating from high school, she spent a year at the Chouinards Art Institute, Los Angeles, California, where she studied dress design. Returning to Salt Lake City, she attended the University of Utah, receiving a BS and a teaching certificate in art in 1957. From then until 1972, she says, she spent most of her time as a housewife, raising five children.<sup>2</sup> All the while, however, she was involved in arts and crafts, exhibiting at Utah fairs and festivals and conducting and attending classes in papier-mâché, macramé, pottery, stained glass, and other crafts.

It was tragedy that impelled Lucas toward pursuing art as a full-time career. In 1972 her husband committed suicide. After a difficult period of grief and adjustment, Lucas realized that she would have to support herself and her family.<sup>3</sup> She chose to make her living as an artist and teacher. In the next few years she taught art in schools in Salt Lake City and also became involved in art therapy for the handicapped. She continued to work in various media, including painting, sculpture, and weaving.

A new artistic direction was revealed to her when she met muralist Bill Granizo, who introduced her to ceramic-tile painting and encouraged her to pursue the medium. Exhibitions of her tile paintings followed, as did public and private commissions for her work. In 1978 her 5' x 10' (150 cm x 305 cm) tile mural of children at play was installed at the Children's Center in Salt Lake City. Lucas's involvement in that city's "Artist in the Schools" program allowed her to execute several murals in area schools, usually with scores of students participating. In 1983 we commissioned her to do two small murals for the Caring Center here at ISI. "The Arts Festival: A Celebration of Life" and "The Children's Art Yard" will be described in a future essay, along with two murals by Granizo.

I will not dwell in this essay on the aspects of Lucas's personal life that strike a familiar chord in my own. We both shared the grief of losing teenage daughters. "Woman of the Earth," I believe, has special meaning for both of us.

Like some of the characters in her mural, Lucas has confronted tragedy and adversity. It is a testament to her spirit that she has been able to find wisdom and growth in her experiences and has shared this self-knowledge with others. "Woman of the Earth" was completed during a particularly difficult

time, when Lucas was involved in a rehabilitation program for alcohol dependence. Some of her children were also having severe problems with substance abuse. After the mural was finished, Lucas did not paint for nearly two years. Now, however, she is at work again, creating a series of tile paintings for an exhibit to be called "Art Cry," which will deal with her recovery from alcoholism. A documentary film about her life is also in the works. She hopes that "Art Cry" will eventually be exhibited across the country and will help increase awareness of drug and alcohol abuse as diseases that affect the entire family.

### Ceramic Murals

In creating her murals, Lucas uses individual tiles made of kiln-fired terracotta clay. The tiles are typically 6" x 12" (15 cm x 30 cm) or 12" x 12" (30 cm x 30 cm) and are combined to form 4' x 8' (120 cm x 245 cm) panels. These panels may in turn be combined to create murals of virtually any size. Lucas first draws her designs on paper, later transferring the drawings to the tiles by way of a "black line" applied with a small paint brush. Once these outlines are in place on the tiles, she uses a syringe to apply the glazes that give her murals their vibrant colors. This process is complicated somewhat by the nature of the glazes, which do not achieve their ultimate colors until the tiles are fired to high temperatures in a kiln. Lucas has devised a labeling system for her five-gallon buckets of glaze so she can keep track of the colors she's using. By varying the thickness of the glazes as she applies them, she can achieve different lusters and textures on the finished work.

Once the glazed tiles have been fired, they are fireproof, impervious to temperature change, and virtually inde-

structible. For Lucas, in fact, one of the major attractions of working with the tiles is their permanence. She also notes that this kind of art allows her to combine artistic media. There is not only the design and drawing, but the more tactile, sculpture-like satisfaction of working with the tiles themselves.

"Woman of the Earth" was completed in the studio that Lucas was then sharing with Granizo in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California. The mural was then transported to ISI and installed in the second-floor stairwell in the fall of 1984. At 12' x 16' (365 cm x 490 cm), it is the largest work that she has done to date.

It was not only the size of the mural that made "Woman of the Earth" a challenge. In addition to the year spent designing and executing the mural, Lucas spent a year beforehand doing research on the writings and experiences of women from all over the world. Lucas says that she has always identified strongly with women of other cultures, particularly those of Mexico and the Indians of

the American West.<sup>3</sup> What she discovered in the course of her research, and what she tries to convey in "Woman of the Earth," is that although appearances may differ from culture to culture, the underlying emotional experiences for women are basically the same. The completed mural, with its depiction of women from many cultures, expresses this admirably. For me, the mural is a daily reminder of the special role that women have played, and continue to play, in my own life. But as I said at the outset, it is a special tribute to the many women who have joined the information revolution—indeed, who have made it a reality, both here at ISI and throughout the world.

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#### REFERENCES

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2. Lucas L. Personal communication. 12 February 1986.
3. Funk N. Lark Lucas: using the passages. *Salt Lake Tribune* 22 May 1983. p. E1; E12.