

A CULTURE IN PAPER

Papelera di Chimbote: a winning humanitarian bet "on paper"!

Peru is the third largest country in South America for size, after Brazil and Argentina. It occupies an area that can be divided into three zones: the coast, the Andes mountain chain and the Amazon rain forest. The economy is mostly rural: a flourishing and diversified agriculture, abundant fishing and a widespread stock-breeding activity, above all in the mountain zones.

Paola Pellegrini

As quoted in geography books and encyclopedias, the most developed sectors of this country are the textile and steel industries, but also very important are the cement and tobacco industries, foodstuffs, the chemical and paper fields - the latter not yet exported. Peru is very rich in mines and is the number one world producer of silver, number two of copper and zinc, sixth but first in South America of gold. Unfortunately, however, as can be easily imagined, this wealth is not within reach of the majority of Peruvians but rather constitutes the business of foreign multinationals and the benefit of a small portion of the country's population. Miners earn little and most people work in the artisan craft field. Surely many of us know this country for its colorful hand-crafted items, comprised mostly of textile articles and wooden objects.

THE CHIMBOTE PROJECT promoted by the Italian Onlus Association "Carta a mano nelle Ande" (Hand-Made Paper in the Andes) may look like one of those development plans designed behind the desk of entrepreneurs to strengthen an industry - the Peruvian paper industry - that seems to have strong potential but that cannot succeed in taking off, as data on exports confirm. But that's not so. This is a project born from the heart of some people who, focusing on the "artisan" skills of this country's population, have come up with an idea to make them profit, optimizing results and teaching them the expert technique of processing hand-made paper - something that in Italy has very deep roots.

BUT LET'S TELL THIS BEAUTIFUL STORY IN MORE DETAIL. A few years ago - precisely in 2006 - Mr. Angelo Moncini, a paper converter close to retirement with almost 40 years' experience in the field, got acquainted with Operazione Mato Grosso (O.M.G.). O.M.G. is a solidarity movement founded in the 1960s by Father Hugo De Censi - who, despite his 88 years, is still its active charismatic chief - to try and help the poorest in a concrete way, offering youngsters in communities the possibility of making important life experiences by helping the neediest. Work is the best way to teach the fundamental principles of life such as the value of things, the need for effort and hard work and the concept of exchange. Working together learning group spirit, respect and collaboration with others. The activities of South American missions in the O.M.G. compounds are supported by adults and by the generosity of many people: paper, scraps and other materials are collected; agricultural work is performed, cleaning jobs, roads are built and construction work is done. Today, O.M.G. is present in almost 80 communities spread in all of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Brazil and each year several groups of people leave Italy for a few months and live the unique experience of these camps.

OUR PAPER ENTREPRENEUR, CURIOUS ABOUT THIS ORGANIZATION, FLEW TO PERU. During this trip, seeing how O.M.G. put the activity into practice, he thought that he could dedicate himself to these people, teaching them what he knew best, putting his entrepreneurial skills and his technical expertise on hand-made paper production at their disposal. Thanks to him and to the collaboration of some Italian friends - freshly into retirement, too - and the support of Samuele Fattini, a young priest at the head of these communities, as well as some colleagues from O.M.G. who have for years been living a portion of their lives in Peru, the Papelera Don Bosco project was born.

THE "CARTA A MANO NELLE ANDE" ONLUS, constituted for this purpose in 2008, has been working on this project for some years now, looking for collaborators, collecting funds and finding machines, usually second-hand. Finally, at the

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beginning of 2009, construction work on the paper mill facilities in Chimbote - a port city on the central-north coast of Peru that counts over 330,000 inhabitants - was begun. Starting in the 1950s, the city witnessed very fast growth, with no rules attached, its endless outskirts paved with shacks built with wooden poles and mats. Most of the people do not have a fixed job and literally live day by day: they get up in the morning and look for a way to earn a day's pay for food. A small paper mill can take lots of kids off the street, helping them to build a good honest life for themselves. It is the hope for those who have none (www.cartaamanonelleande.org). These are the reasons for the existence of the Onlus project aimed at Chimbote's youngsters who often live critical situations, abandoning - or in some cases never even attending - school, looking for a way to make a few Euros (2 or 3, tops!) since the age of children, begging on the streets or shining shoes, selling candies or washing windshields on street corners. The street is certainly not the best place for a child to grow up in, or to turn these children into honest adults: dangers, degradation and violence mark their childhood experiences and draws them into more drastic situations.

In June 2009, the first of two floors of the Papelera was inaugurated, and the second is almost finished. Production has begun thanks to the machines that have been generously donated through the involvement of Mr. Moncini, who made them come directly from Italy or even built some himself! For several months, expert Italian technicians took turns in Peru to teach the young workers the different production phases of hand-made paper. Here, youngsters of both sexes and of all ages can work. Those having the required age work full time and receive proper compensation that allows them to live honestly and to support their families; smaller, school-age kids collaborate from time to time in the afternoon so that they do not leave school, and earn the same amount of money that they would make if they were out on the street.

The Chimbote paper mill processes cotton cellulose, currently imported from Italy, but with the intention of being able to use local raw materials. The mill refines, dries and spreads the sheets, transforms them by cutting, gluing and embellishing them with a whole series of processes, from collage to quilling. Furthermore, watermark, converting and printing laboratories are being set up. Today, Papelera Don Bosco is able to produce a unique quality paper in South America, ecological cotton paper that could well challenge the best papers produced in Italy in places like Fabriano and Amalfi.

EVERYTHING IS IN PROGRESS, JUST LIKE IN MOST YOUNG AND GROWING COMPANIES! After having benefitted from the initial funds available and having invested in people and earned what is needed to self-support the initiative through its own proceeds, now the focus is on positioning Papelera Don Bosco in the highest segment of the market, just like these precious hand-made items deserve! For this reason, also water-color paper productions have been started up, elegant wedding invitations and high-quality letterhead produced in watermark and dry embossing. Also, sale of these productions began last year and, taking advantage of the Christmas period, greeting cards were sold on-site or in Italy. Proceeds from this sale will go to the school of papermaking and converting in Chimbote, which already seems to reap great harvests, and we hope it will continue to do so!

The creation of a flourishing artisan organization - similar to many present in other countries where industrial activity is still not very developed - within which youngsters can work, receiving appropriate compensation and learning a specialized trade, is really a winning bet "on paper"! And, who knows? - maybe in the not-too-distant future, it could help raise exports of Peruvian paper! •

AN ANCIENT CRAFT GOES HAND-IN-HAND WITH MODERN TECHNOLOGY: WWW.CARTAAMANONELLEANDE.ORG

The Association has been on line for some years now, and the site counts over 1.000 supporters and sympathizers who regularly receive the newsletter, and their number is rising every day. Since last May, the site has a totally new look as far as contents are concerned. A descriptive section on hand-made paper, on the company and its activities, as well as videos and images that tell about these developments. Of course, also an e-commerce section is present for those who want to buy these prized articles, among which wedding invitations with the couple's watermarked initials. Dry, gold or pearl printing, and watermarks also for letter paper, of which one can order even just 100 sheets, Christmas greeting cards and cards for every occasion... Take a virtual tour of Peru to buy the paper that's just perfect for you!