

Case study: Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Awards

“Before the visit, my view of art and the world was quite limited, but now I feel like I have broadened my horizons and I am now looking at both art and life in a new and different way. This visit has developed confidence in myself to do whatever I want with my art and to travel anywhere in the world if the opportunity arises. I am also more confident to conduct my own dealings with people, make arrangements for future travels and to have my own exhibitions.” – Ligikoni Vaka’uta from Tonga/Fiji Islands, Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Awards winner who went to New Zealand in 2003.

Background

The Commonwealth Arts and Crafts Awards is funded and organised by the Commonwealth Foundation. It aims to increase mutual understanding between people from different cultures through artistic exchange, and to help young artists and craftspeople – the scheme is restricted to the under 35s – to extend their practice and acquire new artistic and organisational skills.

The scheme has run since 1987, since which time over 80 artists from more than 30 Commonwealth countries have received an award. The programme runs over a two year cycle. In the first year, an application and judging process is held. In 2005, around 300 entries were received, from which 11 award winners were chosen. In the second year, the winning artists are financially supported to undertake a residency in another Commonwealth country, usually in another region of the Commonwealth. The residences typically last between three and six months, with the visiting artist usually attached to an education institution, artist-run gallery or individual artist.

Selection process

The selection procedure places emphasis both on artistic merit and personal qualities. Slides or photographs of recent works are submitted, and the judges look for technique, originality, a creative voice and potential. They also try to make an assessment of the personal qualities of the applicant. The residency is intended to be self-managed and the experience can be a tough one. The Foundation tries to provide no more than minimal support to the award winners, as it believes the experience of organising their own international residency is something valuable that the award winners gain. Judges therefore consider the CVs and personal statements of the applicants, and try to identify people who will be self-reliant, outgoing and capable of rising to challenges. Award winners are also expected to share with as well as learn from their hosts in a two-way dialogue, so people who are good communicators and seem willing to share with others are sought.

Impact

The following is based on evaluation of the 2002 award winners, who undertook their residencies in 2003 and 2004. Winning artists reported that they had:

- Learned new techniques and practices
- Discovered new materials and ways of working with them
- Learned about ways of working with limited resources

- Learned to work in new media
- Discovered different ways of designing
- Gathered new inspirations for design
- Gained objectivity about their practice
- Learned how to organise an exhibition
- Gained in resourcefulness and adaptability
- Gained in confidence and personal skills
- Broadened horizons

All the artists reported the development of new techniques and new influences in their work, and many worked in different media for the first time. They also reported the development of increased confidence and personal skills, often as a result of having the main responsibility for managing their programme.

Pax Jakupa Jr, a self-taught painter from Papua New Guinea, was based at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture, University of the South Pacific, Fiji Islands. He commented "I learned that when I was left to sort out my own arrangements, not only was it a learning experience, but it also gave me confidence to deal with and meet people in any country regarding my art and exhibitions."

The Foundation has in recent years particularly stressed that the award should bring two-way benefits, to both the winning artists and their host communities. With the 2002 winners, the Foundation explicitly asked them to undertake activities with local communities. Artists reported that they had:

- Worked with local producers and rural craftspeople, and helped them develop a business plan and catalogue.
- Contributed a storytelling session for host students
- Ran classes in painting and drawing for local children
- Undertook a design and manufacture project with home country beads and host country techniques
- Taught students on beading and African history
- Passed on techniques in a rare area of print-making
- Ran a batik workshop for people from the local community which led to the founding of a batik enterprise

"I have been able to bring some principles on costing materials and labour and estimating profit margins to the people I worked with. I have been able to take them through the various planning phases of product design and development, and demonstrated when the 'art' and 'business' aspects can be integrated or separated as necessary." – Lesley-Ann Noel, Trinidad and Tobago, visited Tanzania and Mozambique, 2003.

Lessons

- A rigorous selection process is critical. By placing emphasis on identifying personal as well as artistic skills, the Foundation chooses people capable of undertaking a successful residency.

- While constituting a tough assignment for a young, not well-travelled artist, the emphasis on a self-managed scheme helps to develop personal and organisational skills in the winners, as well as giving them a fuller sense of what life in their host country is like.
- Artists are natural community workers, and there are many ways in which they can bring benefit to their host country, particularly when working at a community level, if encouraged to do so.