

***“What I want to be”*: children sketching their future careers in pencil**

A children arts contest organized by the Gambia National Museum and Taiwan Embassy, Banjul, The Gambia

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Abstract

Since 2000, The Gambia National Museum and the Taiwan Embassy in Banjul have jointly organized an annual arts contest for primary school children on various themes to nurture artistic skills and talents in school children between 7 to 13 years. The contest started with a limited coverage of schools in Banjul (the Gambian capital) and surrounding areas only, but has now become a countrywide project involving thousands of school children. The entries to the contest are eclectic; they come in various forms of media including pencil drawings, water paintings, sand paintings, collage, beadwork and even pottery.

The contest could rightly be seen as a programme that fosters the arts and associated creative cultural activities that illustrate opportunities for cultural careers. The winning entries are usually exhibited for two weeks at the gallery of the Alliance Francaise, Banjul, with full media coverage, and visited by hundreds of people from all walks of life.

This contest has helped dozens of school children to kick start careers in the arts, and at least two previous winners have gone to study fine arts overseas in the past years. In addition, the contest has empowered children by giving their artistic talents more visibility and putting children’s ideas and concerns in the limelight for attention by decision makers.

The National Museum benefits from this annual event because its displays, especially its Gambian History section, have served as source of inspiration for many of the entrants; also, the museum premises and personnel are used as support in the contest. Therefore, through the contest the museum has become closer and more relevant to children. The Taiwan Embassy enjoys a high degree of respect and appreciation for sponsoring this contest.

The contest illustrates the power of the museum to assist in the discovery, honing, and exposing of artistic talents in young people. It also underscores the importance of collaboration between the museum and other interested parties in the promotion of artistic development of the youth for national development.

Introduction

The Gambia National Museum was created in 1985 to be a repository of the material heritage of The Gambia, including its craft, arts and folklore. Its pioneers also intended the new cultural institution to play a leading role in promoting education through object based learning, art classes and audio-visual shows. Consequently, in 1988 the museum

“took the initiative to sponsor the first national student exhibition of art and craft”¹ for school children. The objectives of the exhibition were to bring together, on a national scale, a selection of some of the most outstanding art works produced by secondary school art students; to expose the general public to the talents and accomplishments of secondary school students; and to act as an incentive to talented students who may want to choose a career in an art-related profession. These were indeed lofty ideals for a new museum with a skeletal staff; however, due to partnership and collaboration with stakeholders such as The Gambia Art Teachers’ Association, the activity was an unqualified success.

Sadly, the momentum created was not upheld and soon after the National Museum was unable to hold any more children’s art contests or exhibitions due to funding and staff constraints.

Art in Gambian Schools

Art and Craft is an important subject in the Gambian Schools Syllabus. It is taught in Primary, Middle, High School and College level. It is an examinable subject in the West African Examination Council (WAEC) School Leaving Certificate Exams for Grade 9 and 12 school leavers.

Since 1960, The Gambia Teacher’s Training College in Brikama has taught arts and craft to aspiring teachers. However, art is yet to become a popular subject in our schools due to many reasons.

First, many parents and pupils look upon the subject as the remit for pupils who fail to do well in more academic subjects. Second, the country does not have enough qualified art teachers. Presently, there is no Gambian graduate art teacher! The College-trained teachers did not have the chance to major in art until 1993; this has a severe impact on the teaching of the subject in schools. Third, the high cost of art materials such as paper, colour, crayons and so on makes the subject too expensive for many schools to teach properly. Teachers usually have to improvise local art materials for their practical lessons. Although this is innovative and therefore commendable, it poses problems of quality in students’ work.

Enter the Taiwanese

In 2000, The Taiwanese Embassy in The Gambia approached the National Museum and suggested the latter assist in organizing a children’s art contest². You can imagine the enthusiastic response the Taiwanese diplomat got from the National Museum curator, and a series of planning meetings followed. Within a year, all was set for the first edition of the contest.

¹ “Secondary School Art and Craft Exhibition” (brochure), The Gambia National Museum, October–December 1988, p. 3.

² It was largely due to the personal interest in children’s art by the then Taiwan Ambassador Dr Lin, and his personal ties with the then Curator of the National Museum, Hassoum Ceesay, that the discussions sped to a positive conclusion.

Objectives

The objectives of the contest were:

- To promote the visual and plastic arts in Gambian schools
- To optimize the role of the National Museum in sharpening the art and craft skills of children
- To strengthen the educational role of the museum through children's activities
- To promote ROC - Gambian cultural and educational ties
- To give children an opportunity to express their true feelings about their daily life experiences.

Organisation

The contests were organized by the ROC Embassy, the National Museum, and the Department of Education and primary schools nationwide. The ROC Embassy provided the drawing materials, cash prizes and certificates for the winners, venue for the award ceremonies, cost of publicity on radio and the newspapers. The National Museum staff coordinated the dispatch of drawing materials to the schools, collected the entries from all participating schools, selected judges to choose the winning entries. The Department of Education through its Regional Education Offices helped to spread the message to the schools in all the corners of The Gambia. The participating schools held preliminary contests among their pupils and chose the best three entries for submission to us. All the seven administrative regions were covered, making the contests truly nationwide.

Themes

In 2002, the theme chosen by the organizers was "My Dream"; in 2003, "My Village"; and in 2004, "My Role Model". Children between the ages of 7 and 13 could explore these themes in any artistic expression.

Submissions

A team of persons from the National Museum, School Heads and the ROC Embassy drew up the guidelines for the contests as follows:

- Submissions could be made in all media such as paint, paper, sand, ink, crayon, pencil, charcoal in drawings, paintings, etchings, sculpture etc.
- Works must be original and morally acceptable
- Entries that are three dimensional must be mounted on paper, metal or cardboard
- Entries should carry the personal details of the entrant

Ecstatic response

The contest received a huge response from children all over the country, despite the poor information flow with some of the schools in farther parts of the country. In 2002, 1000 entries were received; in 2003, 1200 entries; and in 2004, 800 entries were received³. It must be stated that long after the various deadlines for submission had passed, entries from schools up country were still trickling in to the National Museum.

³ The drop was attributed to the inability of many schools to meet the deadlines due to the Muslim fast month of Ramadan, and the Christmas holidays.

The entries received defied our widest expectations. The children dared experiment with all kinds of artistic medium including calabash, beads, fruit, seeds, stone, timber, rags, etc. Entries came in the form of pencil drawings, charcoal etchings, paper collage, photos montage, paintings, pottery, etc. The eclecticism of the children was indeed astounding.

Prizes

Following vetting and adjudication by the judges⁴, prize award ceremonies were held. These were attended by winning pupils, teachers, parents, the Minister of Education, UNICEF Country Rep, Director of National Council for Arts and Culture, museum staff and the press, who always gave adequate coverage of the events. In addition to cash prizes, which ranged from USD 45 for the overall winner to USD 10 as consolation prizes, certificates of merit were also awarded.

Unfinished business

While the three editions have received critical acclaim, there is still business to be done to cap the success of this story in collaboration: exhibition of the winning entries. It is hoped that funding shall soon be available to mount such an exhibition in the National Museum.

Conclusion

The contests benefited all the stakeholders. The National Museum was able to strengthen its educational outreach activities by having to deal with dozens of schools countrywide. The contest has also given the museum a new image as relevant and responsive to children's needs more than ever before, while the ROC Embassy has also enjoyed excellent publicity from its participation. The contestants and the winners have garnered experiences and honed their art skills, making art education stronger and more popular in the schools.

Appendix 1

Art Education in The Gambia

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Since 1960, The Gambia Teacher's Training College in Brikama has taught arts and craft to aspiring teachers. However, art is yet to become a popular subject in our schools due to many reasons.

First, many parents and pupils look upon the subject as the remit for pupils who fail to do well in more academic subjects. Second, the country does not have enough

⁴ In all the three consecutive editions of the contests, judges were drawn from respected Gambian art educators, museum staff and teachers.

qualified art teachers. Presently, there is no Gambian graduate art teacher! The College-trained teachers did not have the chance to major in art until 1993; this has a severe impact on the teaching of the subject in schools. Third, the high cost of art materials such as paper, colour, crayons and so on makes the subject too expensive for many schools to teach properly. Teachers usually have to improvise local art materials for their practical lessons. Although this is innovative and therefore commendable, it poses problems of quality in students' work.

The Gambia does not have an art school; a few Gambian artists like Comrade Ebou Sillah and Ruth Carayol have trained at the famous *École des Beaux Arts* in Dakar, Senegal. Only few Gambia's top painters or sculptors have had any training in art beyond the Secondary School level.

However, there is hope. The new University of The Gambia will be able to offer degree programmes in art soon as it expands its curriculum. The National Council for Arts and Culture, NCAC, also plans to establish an art and craft school in Brikama, 42 km outside Banjul. A few private individuals have also started initiatives towards establishing art schools in the country.

Yet Gambian school children have artistic talent, hence their ability to draw such beautiful work as those being presented with this write-up.

A lot could be done to promote art education in the country including holding of regular art contests for children, provision of art materials and the training of teachers in the subject.

Appendix II

Photos

Winning Entry, 2004

