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Author/s:

YEATS, L;PATERSON, F;Sloggett, R;Danabere, I;Simaun, M

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Building legacy in contemporary art programs in Timor-Leste

LISA YEATS*

The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne VIC, Australia
lisayeats@gmail.com

FRANCES PATERSON

The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne VIC, Australia
franpateron@hotmail.com

ROBYN SLOGGETT

The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne VIC, Australia
rjslog@unimelb.edu.au

ILIWATU DANABERE

Arte Moris
Dili, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

MONG SIMAUN

Arte Moris
Dili, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

*Author for correspondence

Culture has played an important role for the people of Timor-Leste, offering identity and stability during a long history of conflict and foreign occupation. They have a rich history of cultural practice, tais weaving and music. This research project set out to understand how traditional oral and material culture manifests in contemporary culture, and what frameworks exist for the sustainable development of cultural product in a future Timor-Leste. Historically, traditional Timorese knowledge is not expressed in tangible form but passed down generation to generation through established systems of oral communication. It has been argued that the Portuguese and, more recently, the Indonesian occupation helped destroy cultural values and undermine traditional knowledge with the enforcement of their own governing systems. In fractured family and community groups – still bearing the scars of war – opportunities for young people to interact with older role models in a meaningful way can be lacking. Lack of intergenerational communication can contribute to a feeling of disconnectedness in the community. Youth-oriented art programs can provide wide-ranging community benefit and promote intergenerational knowledge transfer. The project was able to leverage off the 2012–13 Myths and Murals project, which saw the successful rollout of 1500 copies of the book *The Boy and the Crocodile* (published by Affirm Press) in 13 districts in Timor-Leste, also in conjunction with a mural-painting project (managed and delivered by Arte Moris). Arte Moris is a free art school and non-governmental cultural centre in Dili managed by Iliwatu Danabere. In January 2013, Lisa Yeats and Frances Paterson – two recent graduates from the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne – travelled to Timor-Leste with associate professor Robyn Sloggett to meet with Arte Moris artists. In preparation for this visit, a review of the literature regarding traditional and existing arts and culture programs in Timor-Leste was undertaken. The resulting framework document substantially informed the questions for the informal interviews with Arte Moris artists, Iliwatu and Mong. This dialogue engendered a unique understanding of the philosophy of the Arte Moris movement. Arte Moris values art and creative education as a powerful tool for youth and community empowerment and for what it contributes to the maintenance of cultural heritage. The information obtained through this research was used to inform papers written by the researchers in collaboration with Arte Moris artists. (These papers are yet to be published.) Additional outcomes include the development of increased capacity for cross-cultural research by students and the potential to leverage further funds for research into intergenerational cultural capacity building in the future. This research was successful in its aims in that it identified youth-oriented art programs as an effective framework for building cultural and educational product in a future Timor-Leste. Arte Moris is a model for the benefits of arts/non-traditional education in Timor-Leste and helps to restore the moral and social fabric of this post-conflict nation by developing artistic skills, empowering Timorese youth, encouraging intergenerational dialogue and, ultimately, maintaining cultural identity through contemporary art practice.