Discovering Ghana’s Tremendous Art and Cultural Resources

SIT alum and artist Andrea Bergart describes her experience learning from Ghanaian artistic communities while studying on the Ghana: Social Transformation and Cultural Expression program. A few years ago, Andrea was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to return to Ghana to continue research begun during her time studying abroad with SIT.

I discovered during a college African art history class that Ghana has an extensive bead and textile history. As an artist, I wanted to experience this first hand. I chose SIT because my brother had such a positive experience studying with SIT in Nepal. And I wanted a program where I could independently work and focus on art, as well as spend time in homestays, in the field, and on excursions.

Once in Ghana, I learned to speak the Ashanti language, Twi, and to “read” the symbols of beads. I fell in love with a small village called Krobo Odumase, the largest bead-producing village in West Africa. Krobo is full of bead vendors, traders, wearers, and artists. I was completely immersed in this community.

During my Independent Study Project (ISP), I collaborated with bead makers, visited weekly bead markets, interviewed bead traders from across the Sahara, and attended rites of passages and ceremonies involving new and old beads.

A major highlight of the semester was visiting remote villages for interviews with the eldest women in a community. Known as the Queen Mothers, these women are usually the holders of hundred-year-old trade beads. Each bead has a story and a special role within the community.

I was honored to meet these women and more importantly honored that they trusted me, an “obroni” (Westerner) whom they had never seen or met before, with their coveted beads, which were of tremendous value to them. In some cases, one bead could be worth six goats!

At the end of my ISP, the village of Krobo “enstooled” me as an honorary Queen Mother of the local bead society. This was far more than I could have ever asked for and further cemented the idea that I wanted to return to Krobo and continue the relationships that I had started. I became very aware of the cultural uniqueness of each community I visited.

My entire experience in Ghana would not have been possible without SIT’s foundation and introduction to the country. Within the first few weeks in Ghana, I was able to negotiate taxi prices, navigate the Accra trotro (bus) system, play football with the neighborhood kids, order plantains on the side of the street, and master the daily “bucket bath.”

In addition to all the hard skills I learned from SIT, the most valuable lessons I learned were how to be open-minded and how to engage with Ghanaians.
My experience studying abroad in Ghana has had a huge influence on me since, including influencing my paintings in graduate school and inspiring me to apply for a Fulbright fellowship so I could return to Ghana to recharge creatively. SIT provided me with an incredible foundation for the application. I knew exactly what, where, and with whom I wanted to study.

It is my goal to share the power of international education with others and continue my relationship with Ghana. I am currently planning my third trip to Ghana and hope to start an exchange program between American and Ghanaian artists.

For more information about Andrea:

- Watch a video in which Andrea describes her Fulbright project in Ghana
- Click here to visit Andrea’s painting Web site and jewelry Web site