

TRADITIONAL CRAFT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: LIVING FOSSIL OR LIVING ART?

Rod Ewins

This paper was first presented as a Keynote Address at the First South Pacific Arts Conference, Suva, Fiji, 25-29 August 1980. It was published in the Conference Report, Suva, Fiji Ministry of Education, 1980, pp.42-56. Small sections of it may be cited, with appropriate attribution, in a scholarly context, giving either the Conference Report or this webpage as reference. It is copyright and may not be reproduced in full.

Preamble

Before launching into a topic with a title like that, I feel I'd better try and whittle it down to 'bite size', for my own sake at least, as I don't pretend to possess an encyclopaedic knowledge of all 'Developing Countries' or of their whole range of crafts.

I have used the term 'Developing Countries' in a very loose sense, thinking particularly of those countries presently dealing with the complexities of autonomy and selfgovernment, generally after a century or more of playing 'host' to a foreign colonial power of overwhelming financial, military, and industrial strength.

This definition, of course, fits most of the island countries of the Pacific Basin, that are the focus of this Conference. It is because I suspect that they share many of their concerns and dilemmas with other emerging countries (for instance those in Africa) that I didn't merely entitle the talk 'Pacific Countries'; I hope this won't drag me into a lengthy debate about the Third World, for not only do I not feel equipped to debate that, but nor do I think it is really necessary to this paper. I use the term, as I say, loosely.

My knowledge is greater about Fiji than about any other developing country, having family connections here for over 100 years, and having been born, raised, and educated to School Leaving here. My interest in Fiji persists, and I am currently engaged in independent research here. Thus I am really using Fiji as the basis for my generalisations, and many of my examples will be drawn from here. I hope those listening will take this into account, and where they feel my debate is irrelevant or incorrect for some of the countries of the region, will make allowance for my sincerely regretted, but unavoidable, limitations. I accepted the invitation to give this talk in the hope that I could provoke thought and debate, rather than providing information. I believe the matter is both relevant and urgent in all of the countries in question.

Traditional Crafts

The term 'Traditional Crafts' is one which is endlessly used by everyone from

academics to street peddlers. It probably means something different to everyone who uses it. It is self-evident that, for a start, tradition is something with a time-factor involved. What comprises a 'decent period' for something to have been practised, before it can fairly be called 'traditional'? In Fiji, for instance, there is a 'tradition' among many villagers throughout the group, of weaving hats, complete with brims and crowns, from coconut leaves. These look rather like European hats, and it seems very probable that they were an ingenious application of ancient skills of coconut leaf weaving, to produce a desirable object a hat with a brim to shield the eyes. They have been made for a long time, but are probably not pre-European. Are they, then, 'traditional'? To take it a little further, I have seen these hats produced in districts where there is a continuing craft of pottery, possibly directly descended from 'Lapita Culture' pottery, sherds of which have been found in the same district and carbon-dated to 1500 B.C. Certainly, then, the 'pedigree' of the pots is more secure, but are they therefore traditional, and the hats not? Neither one, after all, is unique to Fiji, yet both are characteristic of Fiji.

A tempting solution to this dilemma is to fix some sort of arbitrary 'date' to things, the way antique dealers do: if it's over 100 years old it's an antique, if only 95 years old it's not, and so on. One attractive date might be the date of first European 'culture contact'. Thus all crafts in existence at the point of impact would be traditional all those emerging since would not.

I'm sure the suggestion makes many of you uneasy. One thing it doesn't take into account, for instance, is the inter-cultural intercourse which was common prior to European presence. Again to quote the example of Fiji, it seems most probable that it was not settled in one migration from points unknown, but rather by successive waves of migration, perhaps separated by many hundreds of years. The impact of these 'new' cultures must have been profound, and probably much mixing of crafts occurred. Then too, trade with other island groups, especially Tonga and Samoa, was a normal occurrence. A piece of pottery has been found in the Marquesas Islands, dated as 3rd Century AD, and believed on the basis of its distinctive type of river sand inclusion, to have originated in the Rewa Delta of Fiji. An interesting example of artefact dispersal, if not of cultural diffusion. Perhaps, then, all 'Traditional Marquesas' should predate this??

In short, it would seem rather naive to try and pick a datum point for tradition, even when such a well-established and massive influence as European entry into the Pacific presents itself. When I was a youngster growing up in Fiji during and after World War II, it used to be common to hear my elders speaking of 'before the War' as if it was some kind of 'golden age' in Fiji. I remember having the distinct impression that a whole range of things, including cannibalism and cheap pineapples, had ceased with World War II! What I am suggesting is that we humans are prone to measure things in terms of such dates, but their importance is relative to our viewpoint, and there are many of them. So a 'time' definition, I suggest, is unsatisfactory when speaking of 'traditional craft.' Yet I use the term as freely as anyone, and I'm sure it has some validity. But if I can't say it is what people have 'always' done, or even what they've done 'since so and so', perhaps it could throw a little light on the matter to look at the converse, and speak of what they have 'never done.'

Here at last, it is possible to be definite. Craft which at no time in the past has been practised by a people is not one of their traditional crafts. This sounds so obvious as to be fatuous. But perhaps it's not such a trivial thing to realise. In the market in Suva, one will find woodcarvings of birds, of what I think of as 'Hollywood native' masks and shields, and so on. These are devoured by tourists (especially if given a glossy coat of estapol') since they fit their fantasy ideas of 'native' craft . But these have no relationship to any type of carving ever created by the Fijian people. Whether they are made by Fijians or Eskimos in Fiji, they are not traditional crafts. Will they, though, ever become so?

This leads us, I think, toward the concept which really may allow us to form a worthwhile definition of 'traditional'. That is, that the objects we accept as traditional are not things merely 'made for a long time.' They are, rather, things which have been for a long time related to aspects of the broader social and cultural life of the people concerned. They have meaning to the life and thought of the people themselves, and are not merely 'turned out' as a commodity for the consumption of others. The functions of these objects, the way in which people use them and relate to them, as well as the tools, materials and methods used, are the things which bind them to the people and place of origin, give them their distinctiveness, make them traditional.

By this definition, the carving of tourist masks would never become traditional, even if (and God forbid!) every Fijian craftsman were to turn his hand to their manufacture. The tourist demand which has generated this activity has absolutely nothing to do with any of the factors of race, history, or culture of the Fijian people. It might be charitable to say that these things 'do no harm, and bring in a needed cash income.' But even by absorbing the talents of those capable of carving wood, they divert energy which could be more profitably employed. And they are such a debased form aesthetically that they offer nothing in that direction either, as perhaps a genuine 'foreign' art form might do.

Tradition - Shackle or taproot?

Whether or not all the foregoing is a reasonable definition of 'traditional craft', let us agree that such a thing as traditional craft has existed, in most cases does still exist, and provides for the people concerned some outward evidence of their distinctive identity. Then the question arises, should these things be preserved, or should they, along with other traditions, be let to slip quietly away to make way for other things?

It is probably 'trendy' to say that we should 'Preserve Traditional Culture', but this statement is often made Without deep thought about its implications. Most people that do say this seem to feel sufficiently virtuous just for having said it, and assume that with sufficient saying, the slogan will become fact. This does, certainly, save the effort involved in learning (or deciding) what 'culture' means, what is 'traditional' and what isn't, and most difficult of all, what has to be done to preserve it. Assuming, of course, that it is possible to preserve, and that its preservation is desirable.

There is, however, another view, much voiced by a 'new generation' in the countries concerned. This view is that tradition has had its day, the old must make way for the new, what's needed is a complete shake-up of the system, and so on. Again we are dealing with slogans.

They often sound a little like typical adolescent 'parent rejection', and are based on the premise that it's better to 'do it my way.' Which is probably, all in all, a good idea provided the judgement brought to bear is sound. But it overlooks, or fails to recognise, just how rare a commodity true originality is. What normally happens is that the rejected set of values is replaced by a set of values far from new or original, but belonging to a different group or society which seems at the moment to be more appealing or successful.

Against a background which keeps other options open, this type of experimentation is probably both inevitable, and healthy. The difficulty in the case of cultural traditions, particularly oral traditions and handed-down skills such as those of traditional crafts, is that their existence is fragile. It takes only one generation of neglect for them to cease to exist. Their rejection, even briefly, destroys them as one of the options available for consideration. For this reason, the need to provide future generations with options, if for no other, I feel we have no choice other than to attempt to preserve these traditional activities. It is not an 'old good, new bad' type of value judgement.

That there have been such value judgements, but of the 'new good, old bad' variety, exerting pressure on these islands ever since European arrival, is obvious. The spirit of this is said better than I can say it, in the following excerpt from the journal of a visiting missionary (from the Chairman of the Wesleyan Missions in New Zealand and Polynesia, called Walter Lawry, in his 'Visit to the Friendly and Feejee Islands, 1850 (p. 111). The passage is sub-headed 'Feejeean aversion to Change':

'I contrast the civilisation of the Friendly Islands now, with the state of things which I observed a quarter of a century ago; and certainly the Christian 'Kolo' (sic.) or village, is far advanced above its former Heathen State. But the difference is far more mental than physical; the mind is changed, while the outward circumstances are only slightly improved. The same is the case in Feejee, after a few years' residence of the Missionaries. In both cases the natives' houses remain just as they were, notwithstanding the erection of a Mission-house with stone walls, and an upper storey; and another of wood, with a large verandah. These, the natives say, are very excellent houses; but 'why cannot they live in houses such as their fathers lived in?' Their canoes are the same: our vessels are here, and are better than their own; but still they will be contented with what they have. Their mode of dress, or shameless undress, will also do for them; 'they are as the former generation was, and why should they depart from the custom of their fathers?' They taste a piece of beef, and say, 'It is very good. 'Then why not keep some cows?' the Missionary asks; and they reply, 'Because we can do with what we have; and the cows would eat of our vines, and our sugar-canes, and we are not fond of fencing in our cultivation. We prefer to lie down and talk, or sleep, or smoke.' It is in vain that you urge upon them the very great advantages of our calico over their

mere paper garments: they say at once, 'we will have your calico if you will give it, but otherwise we will do as we have ever done.' If you say to them, 'Your land is rich; you can cultivate arrowroot, coffee, tobacco, cotton and indigo, which grow here; and you can make cocoanut oil, and preserve fruits without end; your cordage, tortoise-shell, and sandal-wood, would sell in the Colonies at a good price. Your beche de mer, and other fisheries, might be very productive to you, and you might have ships of your own, and dwell in houses, and wear clothes, as white men do, and live on better food and more peacefully than you have ever done aforetime' : to all this they will generally yield their assent, but make no effort to improve. They praise our own superior habits, but continue to practise their own.'

This remarkable piece of ethnocentric arrogance would be laughable, if it were not so possible to review it and find that his will, and that of other Europeans, finally imposed every one of the changes the 'natives' were so 'stubbornly' resisting. It is of course pointless to note that he never refuted one of their responses, nor answered one of their questions, which were irrefutable and unanswerable. It was a time for convincing the islanders that their way of life, their religion, indeed the very fabric of their existence, was evil and worthless. A time for selling them your commodities at the expense of their own, in exchange for the sandalwood and beche-de-mer, and a time for bringing to bear an incredible arsenal to convince them that whether it was all true or fair, Might was Right, as it usually is.

The sad thing today, is to see that in more subtle ways, the rot continues. And today many islanders have bought the bill of goods Lawry and his cohorts were pushing, and actually believe their own artefacts and customs to be inferior. It is not necessary even for this to be the case, however, merely to make something available is to invite people to covet it, and notwithstanding the strength of tradition in island societies, change of overwhelming proportions has occurred in even the most remote settlements, in the years since first contact was made. It was then, and is now, inevitable. And if it is inevitable, it must be better, surely, to accept it and 'go with it'?

It is conceivable that I might be persuaded to this view, if I did not feel that most of the change, from the islanders' end of the deal, has been 'short-change.' With no exceptions that I can think of, the conversion to a cash economy has left the indigenous population at the bottom of that economy. The conversion to Christianity has left the converts devoutly supporting a religion massively ignored by the descendants of the Missionaries. The change from traditional dwellings, functional and handsome, has been to a fairly standard (or rather, sub-standard) type of bungalow which is neither very functional nor at all handsome. But the worst impoverishment, inevitably, occurs in the area of culture. For once destroyed, the rich traditions, the superb arts and crafts, have simply not been replaced by anything which relate to the people's own unique background and experience, or offer them anything to 'go on with.'

I taught for one semester recently in the Art Department of the University of Hawaii. I saw amongst student work, the occasional 'Hawaiian myth' imagery, executed in etching, lithograph and oil paint. I saw one Hawaiian man in the sculpture section

produce a coconut-palm drum - a replica of those in the Bishop Museum. But these were random individual actions, neither encouraged nor discouraged, and judged by their 'success' as American Art, I guess. Hawaiian culture exists, but as a course which is theoretical and which deals with its subject matter rather as an historical phenomenon. As well it might, for tragically little by now remains of Hawaiian culture as a living entity. The short-changing in Hawaii has proceeded to the point of virtual bankruptcy.

There were two very different responses to this that I noticed, from the ethnic Hawaiians. The first, and by far the most prevalent, is anger, total hostility toward the 'Haole' (European), and aggressive and often lawless behaviour. It is futile, aimless, counter productive, and absolutely understandable. The other response is a positive one by groups like the several 'traditional hula' groups and the Hale Naua art and craft group. These are both trying to not only study in depth their rich traditions, but also to practise them, and give them significance for Hawaiians today, and new impetus.

But my concern was in part, at least, with the lack of any involvement in traditional Hawaiian art, by the Art Department. Its history is long enough that its active participation in fostering these might have saved many from the extinction that has now overtaken them. But there has been no such fostering that I could find evidence of, at least not in a major and practical way. True, many of the faculty have been, and are, very sympathetic toward Hawaiian culture. But they are appointed to the University on the basis of their qualifications, which traditional craftsmen never have. And probably no-one but traditional craftsmen are competent to teach these crafts. Perhaps that's one of the problems just sheer lack of expertise, due to the type of staff employed. But the syllabi and media are all western-based, and as far as I know, always have been. Perhaps the deep down reason for this is the view expressed to me by one staffer, that it is not desirable to deal with Hawaiian traditional art as an artificially separate thing, but rather to merely encourage people to 'be themselves', and to use whatever elements of their various backgrounds they wish, resulting in a richer, less limited, art. Which is plausible in a way, but the only means taught, either of imagery or media, are Western. (Or I should really say, American, for the one or two Europeans, and I myself, taught sufficiently 'differently' for students to comment on our 'foreignness' compared with other Staff.) But even if it were possible to include traditional media, I doubt if that is enough to save traditional art. And if it is merely a component of the art produced, it loses virtually all its validity I think. It is, then, like saying that ultimately all cooking should become stew.

Living Fossil?

Of course there are many people who do recognise the need for, or at least the desirability of, preserving crafts which are traditional, and which perpetuate the values, experiences and skills of the people. The next question then is, how?

No activity will persist without a reason. The reason these crafts were a regular activity for the people concerned is that the products were in demand in the various pursuits

that were at the time normal from the domestic requirements for cooking pots, tapa clothing, and woven mats and baskets, to the warfare which required canoes, clubs and spears, to the ceremonial and ritual life which demanded carved objects, bark cloth, kava bowls etc. Some of these things were displaced by substitution, such as iron pots for ceramic ones, calico clothing for bark cloth. Others disappeared because the thing that gave rise to them disappeared, or was perhaps 'legislated' against, such as non-Christian religions, and warfare. There is the case of the extraordinary legislation introduced in Tonga last century, which gave a 3-year time limit for the cessation of all tapa production. The reasons given were questionable, the analysis of the whole thing in retrospect does none of those involved credit, but fortunately the legislation was rescinded before the period was up. Today Tonga is probably the largest producer of tapa, by volume, in the world and mostly for domestic consumption.

The traditional crafts which have survived are those for which a demand has persisted. This has often been a clue to the persistence of a strong social custom. For instance in the case of Tongan tapa, or 'gatu', it is the custom to spread this wherever the King (or before that, the Queen) will walk a local version of red-carpet treatment. It is largely the use of tapa in ceremony that has preserved it where it does survive in other countries also. The more complete the devastation of traditional customs and lifestyles, the more completely the crafts have disappeared. Thus in many island states few traditional crafts survive, even those of house-building and mat making.

To speak, however, of trying to preserve the way of life and social values which lend patronage to the crafts, is futile. It is not possible to dictate to people how they should live, or whether or not they should seek change. Even decisions at a Government level are extremely difficult in this area; for instance, to withhold the building of a road to a village because it will hasten the demise of traditional life there, is simply indefensible. Such a patronising, presumptuous control over people is not either desirable or workable.

But if patronage of some sort is required, and traditional patronage cannot be relied upon or ensured, then alternate forms of patronage must be found. Otherwise the crafts will become aimless and meaningless fossils indeed, which no-one would continue to produce.

The decision about this new patronage has never been taken consciously, that I am aware of, although patronage of a scale quite unanticipated did emerge in many of these countries. Its name is Tourism. It is very easy and glib to blame tourism for all the ills that beset countries where it is extensive, and the accusations are often wild. But while it has certainly fostered a great amount of activity in the craft area, it has many drawbacks which must be recognised. These lie in the demand for unprecedented volume production from craftsmen geared to high quality low volume output, in the demand for certain types, shapes and sizes of objects which relate more to tourists' luggage allowances and coffee-table sizes than they do to any wish of the craftsmen, and in the requirement for low unit cost. Under these types of pressure, the island craftsmen have neither the incentive to pursue excellence or tradition, nor indeed even

the chance to do so. For to do so would mean working at a loss.

Now no-one, anywhere, will work at a loss for long, unless they are unbelievably dedicated or incredibly stupid. And sophisticated technology, which can permit volume production while maintaining standards, is simply not available to village artists even if such technology were acceptable within the definition of 'traditional craft', which it probably isn't.

So we find two things happening:

1. Less often, things are re-designed for quicker, easier production. This however inevitably changes the form of the traditional art, and probably the spirit too. For complexity of design and minuteness of detail were two of the most remarkable and distinctive characteristics of such work.

2. More often, corner-cutting is the course adopted. A bit less care here, a bit cruder design there, a piece left out for the tourist won't know the difference, and will be gone tomorrow. I have had potters in Fiji admit to me that the clay used for some tourist-ware was inferior, and would make the pots much more fragile than the normal domestic ware. In Samoa a shop I saw was selling so-called 'siapo' (Samoan tapa) which was painted with acrylic house-paint instead of traditional vegetable dyes and pigments. Most tourists don't bother to do any advance reading before they buy, so know little or nothing about the traditional arts, and few have more than a very rudimentary aesthetic awareness, and so are not critical. Their principal yardsticks then, are whether they 'like it' and how cheap it is.

The harm in all this is not, however, to the tourist, who very possibly gets what he or she pays for. It is to the craftsman. For art and craft are activities that require the constant exercise of critical judgement, aesthetic awareness, and of skill kept at its peak by exacting demands. It is simply not possible to produce 'tourist junk' five days a week, and 'fine art' one day a week. The reflexes, if I can call them that, simply aren't up to it. One might just as well expect to be able to use a racehorse for pulling a cart all week, and have them win the track meet on Saturday. I guess it's not impossible, but I don't think the 'smart money' would be on it!

There is an example of this effect in Lau, in the Fiji Group. In these islands, there remains a strong traditional demand for many artefacts in ceremonial use. The fact that not many of these are any longer of the importance to daily life that they once were, has undoubtedly affected their quality adversely in any case. But in those islands where there is a large, low-cost tourist production, their 'private' art deteriorates still further.

Part of the problem is the small size of the village communities and the existence of very few craftsmen. In most Western societies, while there are a number of 'potboiler' artists producing work of various types, there are also 'serious' artists dedicated to producing work of excellence, in the best traditions of their artistic heritage. This group has had centuries to evolve, and is self-perpetuating through art schools, galleries etc.

But the traditional crafts of the developing countries were not produced in this type of stratified way, and in any case the heavy demands of the present market place tend to require the activity of all of the small numbers of craftsmen. This has also happened relatively quickly, and the countries concerned haven't had time to develop the system which 'breeds and feeds' Fine Artists. Assuming this should happen, by the time they get around to it their rich traditional crafts may have been replaced by counterfeits. If that is so, there is no point in attempting to perpetuate them—one might just as well produce the plastic Mickey Mouse toys of Disneyland.

It would be unjust to blame tourism alone for the decline. Even countries without tourism are subject to cultural erosion, and in many countries (such as Hawaii) the process was virtually complete before the advent of tourism. But in its worse aspects, tourism is a very rapid agent of destruction, and even when viewed as a patron, it is simply inadequate, for as pointed out earlier, it does not patronise the full range, not the higher quality, of craft activity. The level at which it operates is called commonly, and probably with some accuracy, 'handicraft.' If this is the only level at which patronage exists, the art of these countries is doomed to the level of tapa place-mats, toy canoes, and shopping-baskets. And the loss this implies can be gauged by a five-minute stroll through the Fiji Museum, the Bishop Museum, or the 'Pacific' sections of virtually any major overseas museum.

To return to the question of 'what to do?', it seems to me that most of the responses to the problem fall into three types:

1. The first tangible response has been to start teaching traditional crafts in schools. This is a very important step and some excellent work has been done in several countries in this area, particularly at an introductory level. Ultimately, this type of programme will generate the type of interest that will result in an aware and discerning public, and provide the very necessary local patrons as well as those actively involved. However, to reach this full potential, and to allow school-level education to advance beyond a preliminary, technique-oriented, introduction, it will be necessary that the teachers are very well versed in the significance, traditions and procedures of the craft forms, and that the forms about which they are teaching are not already debased or corrupted. If they are, the very act of teaching reinforces this state in the minds of the pupils, and makes an appreciation of the truly traditional form harder, not easier. Yet it is extremely difficult for teachers to avoid this. For a start, this sort of knowledge of traditions has, in most cases, simply not been assembled. And if it has, few teacher training programmes can devote the amount of time within a general training course, that is required to produce specialists.

The dangers here are quickly apparent. I was speaking to one teacher from American Samoa who spoke to me of how hard it was to get Samoan children to stop producing the sort of geometric designs of Samoan tapa, and start producing free, child-type, drawings. I am not equipped to judge whether the traditional designs or the 'child-type' designs are the 'learnt' form for these children. But I was filled with misgivings about the difficulty of making such judgements, from a background of teaching Western children,

or even from a background of learning educational method from a Western textbook. It is so easy to make assumptions and so easy to be wrong.

It seems to me that unless study of traditional crafts is being done in a very complete way, and unless teachers are learning about more than merely the techniques of these, there are very real dangers that extensive school-level instruction might be seriously counter-productive, if what it is striving toward is a renaissance of the high levels of achievement once known.

2. The second response is to approach the craftsmen themselves, and to try to impress on them the need to not introduce new or foreign elements into their work, and to be very neat and tidy with it. Again, the effect can be counterproductive. Most craftsmen in the Pacific are working in a village context, with no access to old examples of their medium, so it is virtually impossible for them to know what is 'foreign' and what is not. The best they can do in trying to comply, then, is to add nothing new, to change nothing, and this is a savage restraint to put on any creative individual. The demand for neatness, too, can result in rigid and mechanical work, since neatness as an end in itself is never a virtue in art. This can be seen today in Fiji in some 'tourist-tapa', which is often so 'tight' that it appears quite lifeless. Its attractiveness is the attractiveness of a perforated paper doily—pretty, perfect, and soulless.

3. The third reaction is to encourage craftsmen to imitate old artefacts. This is a time-honoured method of training artists and craftsmen. Certainly Michelangelo and Rembrandt did their time of copying their masters' work. And if the purpose of this copying is to gain understanding, it is entirely appropriate. But it is important to remember that Michelangelo worked with his master, who was able to explain, to discuss reasons, to impart philosophy. The artefact copying was one aspect of a total art education, not imitation in isolation, and without understanding. The old apprentices were expected, too, to work on new projects first with the master, then on their own. The period of copying was finite, and was working toward personal creativity.

Viewed in this way, the imitation of old artefacts can teach much about quality and technique, and can help the craftsman develop great skills. But persisted in past that point, it can ossify creativity. While there is a place for 'reproduction' clubs and oil dishes, they are not, today, 'living art', for the social infrastructure which gave them purpose and meaning, has vanished. It is important for the would-be contemporary artist to study them, understand them, learn to think in terms of their forms, beauty and craftsmanship, and then apply this understanding to his own work.

Living Art?

I may seem, in all the foregoing, to have been carefully eliminating all argument in favour of 'traditional craft.' Perish the thought! I am myself a Printmaker. My art is that of the copperplate etching and engraving, and the stone lithograph. These are 'traditional crafts' of Europe, and have today as much industrial application as cannon-making. Yet they are widely practised by artists, and are used for the expression of ideas from the

most traditional to the most avant-garde. They are healthy by reason of this flexibility, for they are able to meet the demands of contemporary artists while still achieving levels of excellence in keeping with their traditional standards. The tools, inks and procedures would be quite recognisable to a 16th century colleague. But the themes and concerns are, quite properly, those of the 20th century.

It seems to me that this must happen in the case of the traditional arts of the developing countries, if they are not to become misplaced fossils or tourist nick-nacks. There will probably always be a demand for tourist souvenirs, and there will also always be craftspeople whose inclination and ability is at that level. Similarly, there is a huge, largely untapped market for reproduction artefacts, and these can command very high prices if correctly marketed through mail order selling. The highly skilled, but not highly creative, craftsman can find a lucrative career here.

But a population the size of Fiji's will contain at least a small number of people capable of and interested in, becoming more than either of these. It is highly skilled and creative individuals, ultimately, who will be able to prevent traditional crafts from disappearing, and can even bring them to a new flowering. These people will work with the traditional media, symbols and forms of their heritage, but express, through these, current values and concerns.

To expect this group to emerge by themselves from among village craftsmen is ridiculous. Such craftsmen are simply unaware of the potential for such development. It requires education, and education of a very sensitive nature. I am unaware of any real precedent for it, but it seems to me that it would require the teaching of the history and culture of their people, and above all a recognition of and respect for the uniqueness and excellence of their 'traditional art and craft'. And finally, it would need to equip the students with a range of skills, and to set them very demanding standards of achievement to meet.

I don't feel that it is possible to make sweeping prescriptions which would suit every situation. It would require careful thought and discussion of the specific background and current state of each of the countries. Ultimately, it is up to the people concerned—those already working in the countries, perhaps, or at least those with sound knowledge of the cultures in question, of education and of local conditions.

The list of 'requirements' I have given above might read like a description of a 'normal' art school programme, but I do not think a normal art school is the answer. The introduction of large, Western-style colleges, with curricula based on existing models, and with the philosophies and media of other cultures, could prove finally and conclusively fatal to these traditional crafts. Besides which, the cost of establishing and running such schools would doubtless be out of the question for the developing countries.

What is needed is some original thought on the whole range of possibilities concerning

facilities, curricula, and staffing, to produce a new solution for what is a special problem, probably unique in the history of Art Education. Certainly I am unaware of suitable existing models.

To give an example, if it is a reasonable view that, at least for the early life of such a school, it will need to utilise existing traditional craftsmen for some (or most?) of its instruction, this poses immediate problems to a traditional art school concept. These people are often widely scattered and village-based. The infrastructure of village life contributes significantly to their art, and even if it were possible to persuade them to leave their villages and come to a central location, this could have a damaging effect, introducing an artificial element. And for many, their other commitments to village and family could prevent their removal anyway. So it may be necessary to think of taking the students to the craftsmen possibly even dispensing altogether with the concept of one central school or college, and introducing a concept of taking a group of students around the appropriate sources for various lengths of time. On a large scale this would be difficult, but I do not think the scale need be, or should be, large. Very possibly one might be talking of 5-10 students a year, for one or two-year programmes. It is very probable that the employment of one suitably qualified co-ordinator could handle such a programme, and the craftsmen, museum staff, and any other 'resource people' could be considered 'part-time staff' and remunerated appropriately.

I don't really put this forward as the model it may not even be a viable model. What I am trying to show is that there are alternative methods of educating in art to those commonly used.

But if any of this is to succeed, it must be done very soon, while there still is living art which is distinctively original, and while perhaps the ashes of some of vanished arts still have sparks which can be fanned into life. They are disappearing, not yearly, but weekly throughout the Pacific.

Piecemeal Government or other Institutional financial assistance to a range of random projects is not the answer for preserving traditional crafts. The need is for planned and coordinated action, on at first a modest scale with small numbers of participants. But it requires this action now, before traditional crafts become not even fossils, but merely nostalgic memories.

Rod Ewins © August 1980

