

# Bhutan: VAST Difference



*Music and fun in the evenings at the VAST studio*

**Virginia Henderson** visited Bhutan last year for the 20-day 'Snowman Trek' through the isolated Lunana district which borders Tibet, and returned with these contributions to SPAFA Journal

**B**hutanese art today is alive and growing, thanks to VAST (Voluntary Artists Studio of Thimphu). Guided by Bhutan's leading artist, the inventive Kama Wangdi and charming cartoonist Rajesh Gurung, young artists in this tiny secluded country are rapidly developing their artistic talents and channeling them towards valuable social causes at the same time.

Conceived in 1997 by Kama, Jigme Lotay and Purba Thinley Sherpa, VAST initially planned to organise youth development activities and give vocational training to 40 artistically-inclined students for one year. At the end of that year, the students refused to go. VAST now has over 150 active participants aged between 7 and 25 years, and each week there are one or two new students. "It's hard to stop," says Kama.



**Zhana (Black Hat Dance)**  
Sonam Tshering (VAST)  
*This sacred dance is performed by monks during religious festivals*



*Guiding members of VAST: Purba Thinley Sherpa, Rajesh Gurung and Kama Wangdi*

**All photographs by Virginia Henderson**



*Community awareness-raising art exhibition at the Black Neck Crane Conservation Centre in Phobjikha Valley*

The VAST team started creating their projects at a friend's office and outside in the streets. After an American friend donated \$200 and the Canadian Cooperation Office made a contribution of Nu.30,000, they hired their own space and have recently moved into a four-roomed roof-top studio which is a base for the members and practicing artists.

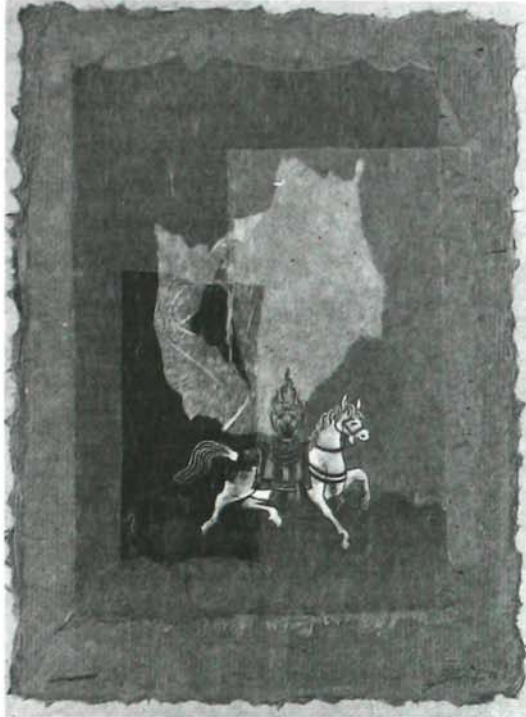
At VAST, weekends are busy with classes in sketching, watercolour and oil painting, design and art discussions. Traditional skills such as thangka (wall hanging) painting are practised, and subjects such as the 'eight auspicious signs' are apparent, but the accent at VAST is on experimenting with new forms of expression. Video and photography workshops are given by visiting specialists, live music performances are popular and collaborative exhibitions, such as one with the local university art club are encouraged. Frequent picnic day-trips and camps take

the young artists out to investigate places of natural and historic interest, stimulating creativity, awareness and appreciation of the environment.

In VAST's early days, Kama's wide-ranging artistic abilities and his seemingly magical way of gathering youth energy was recognised by Save the Children Fund International (SCF). A mural project was commissioned for the pediatric ward of the Children's Hospital and within ten days, 30 members of the VAST team had transformed the entire compound with colourful images painted by children for children. VAST volunteers also collected and recycled cardboard into eight chairs for disabled kids which they donated to the hospital. Since then, projects haven't stopped growing.

VAST has regularly volunteered and actively participated in helping the local community

in Phobjikha to set up and run the annual Crane Festival. Each winter, Black Neck Cranes migrate from Tibet to shelter in the marshlands of the Phobjikha valley.



*Wind Horse Prayers  
Kama Wangdi (VAST)  
Swift horse with miraculous power and strength; carries flaming  
jewels; capable of fulfilling all wishes*

As farmers drain more land to grow crops, the habitat of the cranes is being threatened. The VAST team takes along art materials and camps out. They hold painting classes for the locals and put up a painting exhibition to promote community awareness of the issue. An eye-catching permanent exhibition of information boards, maps and mobiles of the endangered birds has been installed at the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) Observation Centre.

Another project initiated by the students led to a series of environmental clean-up campaigns around the Thimphu valley. The

students first approached the monasteries to discuss with monks their suggestions for valuable projects, and then reported back to VAST. The team then set about cleaning up temples and track routes in outlying areas, digging garbage pits and restoring and painting the broken or overgrown small religious monuments (chortens) which feature on the top of all hills in Bhutan. Technical experts advise the group on preservation techniques and approval for the work is obtained from village leaders and the heads at the Dzongkhags (provincial centres).

In October 2001, UNICEF commissioned VAST to organise the exhibition of children's art "Voices of the Youth of Bhutan" which was a festive two-day outdoor event showing laminated artworks in the central clock tower park.

The focus in the following year was a pottery project to revitalise the creation of traditional Bhutanese pots. These pots have largely been replaced in Bhutanese homes today by cheaper aluminum pots mass-produced in India. The aim is to restore an ancient kiln and help the few remaining potters gain recognition as artists rather than under-rated crafts people.

VAST has also been commissioned by government bodies to construct models for educating the local people with regard to healthy water management systems in houses and on farms and for communicating plans for dams to the public.

Independent and informal, VAST has no rules or management system, claims Kama. However, with the obvious growth of the

group's activities and subsequent funding requirements, some shape of organisation seems to be evolving. In the beginning, VAST members joined free and materials were provided. Now there is a membership enrolment form, and an annual deposit of 150 Nu (\$3) for juniors and 300 Nu (\$6) for high-school students is requested. VAST recently received a donation of four computers from the Liaison Office of Denmark and in the student-run library, second-hand books donated by Idea Books, an international art books distributor in Netherlands, are carefully catalogued for short-term loan. Other individual patrons and international funding agencies have responded to requests for donations of \$200-\$500 to sponsor projects and cover overheads, but there are no steady donors. Through his



*VAST members painting colourful murals at the Children's Hospital*

bers which sell at the Karma Art Gallery, generate a 30% commission for VAST.

Reluctant to get caught up in the administration of the group's finances and seeing it as a way to develop arts management skills in the young, Kama has handed over the management of VAST's accounting to a responsible group of 14-year-old members. Computer training in Excel is being arranged for them, so they can keep the books in order. Murals and commissions help to generate funds and they are all invested in projects. VAST sets nothing aside for hard times.



*Young novice enjoying the Thimphu Tsechu festivities*

connections with a local travel agent, Kama gives occasional talks about Bhutanese art to visitors and invites them to give donations for VAST activities. Artworks by VAST mem-

During the International Year for Volunteers 2001, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) made a TV programme about VAST which was broadcast several times to rural districts during the daily two hours of television in Bhutan. However, the group has become known for its innovative art-related activities largely through word of mouth.

VAST's 'Uncle' Kama, 43, is well-known in the country, and was the art director responsible for Bhutan's award-winning pavillion at the Hanover Expo in 2000. He participated in the 1999 group exhibition "Art in Nature" in the Netherlands and has collaborated on a children's book in Japanese about the yak song. In Bhutan, he set up the National Exhibition of Antiques and Cultural Treas-

tures in 1993 and the 50<sup>th</sup> UN Anniversary Photo Exhibition in 1996. He also initiated redesigning the clock tower gardens in the centre of Thimphu. In 1991, after working as a traditional painter for ten years, Kama received a scholarship to do a BA Hons in Communications Media at Kent Institute of Art and Design, Maidstone, University of Kent, majoring in art direction and exhibition design. On his return to Bhutan, he worked for two years designing and producing communication

materials and audio-visual teaching aids for government health and environment campaigns. Since 1996, he has supported himself as a freelance artist doing commercial design work and helping his sister run the Artshop Gallery, the first outlet for all artists. His extensive portfolio features commissioned graphic designs (logos, medals, mandalas, greeting cards, whisky labels, lottery tickets, etc.) as well as graphic work from an early study of Bhutanese musical instruments, dance masks and traditional offerings. He has also done research on fringe cinemas in London and designed a handmade paper shop.

The charismatic artist's enduring fascination is the Wind Horse, a well-known symbol in Bhutan, on which he has done a series of



*Novices Praying  
Phurba (VAST)*

modern variations of the ubiquitous prayer flags.

Long-term, Kama dreams of building commune-like day-schools for small children, combined with homes for the elderly; places where the young and old are cared for and interact in healthy arts and crafts recreation. "These days, VAST activities take up a lot of my time and energy, but they give back more. There's nothing like working with inquisitive young people," says Kama.

Another key mentor at VAST, Rajesh Gurung, 28, sees his role as the practical joker in charge of boosting spirit. "When I grew up, I was interested in sketching and painting but there was no one to guide me and no facilities. It's children's right and if we can

drawings, collages and paintings he plans to show in an upcoming solo exhibition. Kama is currently conceptualizing a group exhibition of Bhutanese contemporary art that he would like to see travel internationally. The theme looks at Bhutanese traditions in a modern context and breaks away from the usual focus on the traditional and religious art of Bhutan. In a refreshingly alternative treatment, the exhibition may include a mandala distorted through layers of glass and

give it to them, we should. Functioning as a platform for friendship, VAST brings together children of different ages from different schools. The 'big family' atmosphere at VAST is a result of relating to each as an individual, not taking them collectively. It's like dealing with your own children," says Rajesh. "When students at VAST have anything to talk about, they feel they can. They often comment 'We wish we had teachers like you in our school.'" Rajesh says VAST is not really about management. "There are no big plans, we just let it happen, let it grow. It's in the hands of the young, we just guide them."



*Wind Horse Payers  
Kam Wangdi (VAST)*

Among other international not-for-profit art spaces, VAST distinguishes itself in the way 'it really works'. It's largely youth-driven, actively powered by young spirits seeking encouragement to create and opportunities

to spend their free time doing fun artistic projects that can benefit society. Time and skills are shared willingly and the bonding between VAST members of all ages is warm, genuine and healthy. The atmosphere is truly extraordinary. One of VAST's great strengths is the way it brings together students and nurtures a team spirit. Plans and deadlines are made collectively and everyone pulls together, no one backs out. Members teach newcomers and students enjoy learning in an alternative way that is outside formal schooling. As well as fun, students and members get counseling and support in building their portfolios for professional studies, art-related vocational training and small income from occasional commissions.

VAST hopes to expand the network to include artists in more remote parts of the country. Already visits have been made to communities outside the capital to present the VAST model. The enthusiastic group is also pushing for the establishment of a National Art Exhibition, which as yet does not exist in Bhutan, and it would like to see more Bhutanese artists participating in international exhibitions. The group recently received an invitation from India to participate in a children's art competition, but Bhutan's relative isolation has meant little awareness or attention from the world to date. But all this will soon change when word about VAST gets out.

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